

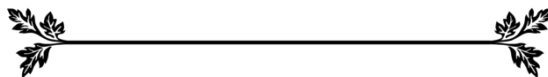
The Dragons We Keep Fighting

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



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It was thirty-seven years earlier, on that day when Jacob Wells received his true second chance in life. On that day, he saw for the first time something he never even imagined would become his. Something so extraordinary and so precious, that for many nights since that fateful day, he had wondered how was it possible that he, an outcast forced to exile with all his mistakes, was given such a treasure to light up his life and give it a new meaning. Something that turned a bitter man, wallowing in self-pity, into one who began to appreciate life and its wonders anew.

Standing in the chamber of his adoptive son that morning, Jacob couldn't wipe the smile from his ageing face. If he had to leave the Earth on that day, he knew he would go happily, proud of one of the greatest achievements in his life - raising an

extraordinary child into an extraordinary man. This child whose life was not meant to be, had grown to be the bravest, kindest, wisest and most empathic human being Jacob had ever known.

His smile widened as his eyes found the vintage toy carousel on the small table in the middle of the chamber. Where had all those years gone? They had flown by like restless birds, floating in the air on their journey towards the sun. Jacob's fingers gently caressed the carousel, and his heart fluttered with happiness.

"Thinking of me?" A strong voice from the chamber entrance woke him from his reverie. He saw two tall figures standing there and watching him fondly.

"Oh, Devin," he said with a smile. "I was thinking of you both."

"I hope only of the good times, Father," Vincent spoke softly.

"You two cost me more than a few grey hairs with your adventurous escapades." Jacob chuckled. Then he smiled fondly at both of his sons. "However, I wouldn't change a single moment."

"I'm glad of that, Father, for I brought the man of the day. I was hoping you would take care of him while I deal with my best man speech," Devin said, amused. "You know, I've played so many different roles in my life, but I've never been a best man at a wedding."

Vincent tilted his head and embraced his brother with one arm around his shoulders.

"However, you shall be a great one; of that, I am sure."

All three of them smiled warmly, and Jacob's eyes glistened.

"Well, I better get going," Devin said then. "I really don't want to mess this up."

He glanced at Jacob and patted his younger brother on his broad back. Then he left the chamber with a contented smile on his face.

Vincent turned to his father and his inquisitive blue eyes noticed the melancholy on his parent's face.

"Are you all right, Father?" he asked.

Jacob flashed a smile and scratched his grey head. "Yes, Vincent. I was just lost in memories, I guess. I keep thinking that despite all the sadness, pain and troubled times, how lucky I have been to have all of this in my life."

Vincent nodded, knowing perfectly well what Jacob meant. His father's words mirrored his own feelings.

"We have been both blessed," he said softly.

"We have, indeed..." Jacob agreed, and his mind surrendered to memories...

37 YEARS EARLIER - JANUARY 12

On that cold evening of January 12, the coldest day of the year, the young Anna Pater walked the streets and dark alleys Above. She had just had another argument with her husband John and needed some fresh air to clear her head.

Only two months before that night, Anna had lost their child in the third month of her pregnancy. She and John had been trying for a baby for a few years, but unsuccessfully - until that happy occasion, which sadly took a turn for the worse and destroyed their dream, probably forever. The loss of their miracle hit them both very hard, but John especially.

Anna's husband couldn't get past the unfortunate reality. He blamed her for having been unable to carry their child to its full term birth. In truth, it was John who had always been the problem. Once his wife got pregnant, she could feel the pressure put on her, which eventually led to the unfortunate end of the pregnancy. In his blind desire to father a son, John started losing grip of his own sanity. A once good and honest man, who had helped to found the magnificent world Below, turned into a moody one, filled with bitterness, envy and anger.

The icy breeze was biting her pale cheeks; snowflakes started dancing in the air, descending on her raven black short wavy hair, and Anna decided it was time to return to the Home Tunnels. On her way to the nearest Tunnel entrance, her half-frozen feet carried her past St. Vincent's Hospital. Suddenly, she heard a soft mewling sound from the snowed-in alleyway outside the hospital.

She stepped closer a bit hesitantly and saw movement in a cardboard box, something wrapped in old rags. Unable to see what it was, she assumed it was a baby because the mewling sound repeated itself.

How can people be so cruel? To leave a helpless child to die like this... Anna thought.

She took the tiny bundle in her arms and carefully unwrapped the area of what she expected to be the baby's head. When she uncovered the face under the rags, her eyes widened. It was *not* a face of a human being...

Anna was passing people in the tunnels, holding the tiny bundle protectively and close to her heart, hiding the foundling from the eyes of others. There was only one place she could go - she had to see Jacob. He would check the baby out regarding the condition of its health.

When she reached his large multi-levelled chamber, he was reading a book at one of the tables.

"Jacob..." she spoke quietly with hesitation.

"Anna, come in, please," he replied worriedly, seeing the distress in her face.

Suddenly, a soft cry came from the bundle she was holding, and Jacob understood immediately. He frowned.

"I found it at St. Vincent's Hospital," Anna explained, tears filling her warm brown doe eyes. "They just left it there among the garbage, in a box... Oh, Jacob, how could anyone do such a thing?"

Jacob stepped closer to her, ready to inspect the little one. He reached for the rag, concealing the baby's face, but to his surprise, Anna stopped him.

"It's..." She was struggling to find the right words. "Please, it needs your help..."

Only then, she slowly revealed the baby's face.

Jacob's face was an image of absolute astonishment. The baby's face resembled one of a young lion, with deep-set blue eyes, honey-coloured eyebrows, tiny soft facial hair on his cheeks, a flat nose and, unusual for a newborn, fine golden hair on his head that reached down to touch his shoulders. When one of his little arms escaped from the confines of the rags, Jacob noticed soft ginger hair on the back of the child's hand as well. His tiny fingers ended with little sharp-tipped nails.

The founder of the Tunnels world opened his mouth and glanced stunned at the young woman by his side. Then, he looked back at the most unusual little face, and the doctor in him put his shock aside.

"I will just get my bag. Put the... baby on the table," he said and walked away quickly to get his medical tools.

After a proper examination, Jacob frowned more when he looked at Anna.

"It's a boy. Apart from... the unusual features, he appears to have the anatomy of a human being. However, he is very weak, his breathing is shallow, and he has high fever."

"Will he live?" Anna asked anxiously.

Jacob sighed and shook his head.

"The next twenty-four hours will be crucial. If he makes it past those, there is a chance. If not..." He paused, seeing the fear in her eyes. "Whatever happens, I will do all I can to save him."

His little smile gave Anna hope, and she smiled as well.

Jacob looked back at the boy, who was quietly crying. In fact, it was the strangest baby's cry Jacob had ever heard in all the years of his medical practice - neither an ear-piercing unsatisfied one, nor a loud one, trying to catch the attention of people nearby. It was a quiet, persistent, restless cry of despair...

He couldn't understand why, but something was drawing him to this boy, whose eyes were the bluest he had ever seen, like the clear summer sky he hadn't beheld in years. Despite the crying, the child was watching him in a tired, yet very inquisitive way. Jacob felt as if the little one was looking right into his soul.

"I will stay with him," Anna said suddenly, resolved.

Deep down in her heart, she had already developed a fond attachment to the foundling and was hoping to be able to look after him if he survived.

Jacob was about to reply, but he was interrupted by a very tall, dark-haired man entering his private quarters.

"I thought I would find you here, Anna," he said with a deep resounding voice.

"I am sorry about earlier, I just---"

He stopped mid-sentence when he saw the bundle in his wife's arms.

"John... Anna found an abandoned baby Above. He's very weak, and I am not sure he will make it, but we're hoping for the best," Jacob explained, seeing the puzzled look on his friend's face.

John Pater didn't say anything but walked over to his wife. When he looked at the baby's face, his big dark eyes widened, but not from horror. As he was staring deep into those most extraordinary blue eyes, something clicked in John's head, and a myriad of expressions crossed his face - shock, awe, amazement, opportunity...

"We will look after him when he gets better," he spoke, his eyes never leaving the child's face.

Jacob was surprised, but only for a moment. Somehow, it all made sense. John and Anna have been trying for a baby for so long, and now, after their own personal tragedy, they had a chance for one, albeit an extraordinary one, but still, a baby indeed.

A thought crossed his mind - *could the child become something dangerous?* But he waved it off immediately. With a proper upbringing, the boy could grow into a good and honest man.

"We shall see how he fares over the next few hours," Jacob spoke. "But if he does well, once he gets stronger, I don't see a reason why you couldn't."

He smiled, though upon seeing the strange expression on John's face with an almost disturbing grin, an unsettling feeling crept into his heart. Suddenly, he couldn't shake off the notion that something not right might result from this situation.

"The boy needs a name," Anna said softly, lovingly observing the foundling in her arms.

"How about Vincent?" Jacob asked, remembering where the boy was found.

"Yes, Vincent...," Anna's husband repeated slowly.

John's almost menacing smile made Jacob shudder. The unsettling feeling within him was growing stronger...

FOUR MONTHS LATER

Jacob's intuition proved correct. Vincent not only survived, but he was thriving in his new underground home. The first three days of his life had been a real test for him; he cried uninterruptedly, unable to settle or sleep, fighting the fever with all the resilience his tiny body could manage.

Jacob could feel his inner strength, and something told him this child wanted to live and beat all the odds the world has set against him. Vincent's will to live astonished not only Jacob but all the other tunnel dwellers who saw him soon after Anna brought him Below.

At first, some were hesitant about the strange foundling being there, not really knowing what he was. Some even shouted, "Throw him out! He's not our problem. Leave him to the Topsiders!" Those words hurt Jacob's ears, for they were the opposite of the principles upon which he and John had founded the world Below - refuge, acceptance and love for everyone who had been wrongly persecuted Above.

But despite his animal face and clawed little hands, there was something warm and human in Vincent's eyes and an inexplicable serenity surrounding him. Soon, even those who refused to accept him as part of their community, changed their mind and grew fond of the miracle baby. From a very early age, Vincent managed to melt hearts and bring people together.

Anna was a doting surrogate mother to the extraordinary child. She saw a true son in him, not paying attention to his differences, but embracing his uniqueness as a gift - to her and John. If they couldn't have their own child, they would raise the foundling, this special boy and love him as their own so he could grow into an honest and kind man.

Very soon, though, Anna noticed that her husband's attachment to the boy grew in unhealthy proportions, even to the point of obsession. John kept talking to Vincent even while the child was sleeping, but the words frightened her. He spoke to the boy the same way he used to speak to their unborn baby. It seemed that her husband was losing the grip of reality and his own sanity.

John kept telling the boy what great things he would do when he grew up, that he would be the greatest man in the world and everyone would bow to him. He even called him Vincent, the Conqueror... With each passing day, his wife found his words more disturbing, and soon, she knew she had to make the hardest decision of her life. For his own good and safety, Anna had to give her foster son, the only son she ever had away...

It happened on the day when John was helping some other men to hang old tapestries in the Great Hall. He'd found the antique pieces on one of his ventures

into the deeper parts of the Tunnels. No one knew how they got down there. They were in perfect condition, which led to the birth of numerous legends about the tapestries' origin.

The Great Hall was a large chamber with a high ceiling, at the end of the Chamber of Winds, that John wanted to turn into his and Anna's chamber. But after considering the distance from the main living area of the tunnels, and a much colder temperature due to the strong wind just outside of the chamber, John acknowledged it would have better use as a communal area for special occasions.

On that day, Anna sensed the moment had come to do the right thing.

She reached into the wooden cradle and took Vincent, pulling him close to her heart. Tears wetted her cheeks, but she knew this was inevitable.

"It will be all right, my dear... All will be well," she whispered into the baby's golden hair.

"Are you absolutely sure about this?" Jacob asked with a bewildered expression on his face.

"There is no other way, Jacob," Anna replied. "You've seen John with Vincent, you've heard how he talks to him. Tell me you think it's a healthy relationship..."

Jacob's wise grey eyes met hers in understanding. "No, I don't think it is either," he admitted and sighed.

"You know what people think," Anna continued. "Yes, they accepted the boy, but no one would want to look after him. If there is anyone who can raise Vincent into a decent and wise man and give him all the love he deserves, it is you, Jacob."

She stepped closer to her friend, her eyes pleading with him.

"I know you will be a good father to him. Please..."

Jacob felt torn. He knew how much this would hurt John, who had been a dear friend to him for years. At the same time, he remembered the many occasions where he had witnessed John's parental love mirroring obsession. Jacob had noticed the man's changed behaviour over the last few months. There was a reason for the unsettled feeling he had when Anna and John decided to take care of Vincent. John wasn't suitable to raise such a special child, or any child, come to think of it.

"All right," he said with a heavy heart. "I will look after him. Of course, you are welcome to take part in his upbringing any time you wish."

Anna breathed a sigh of relief, smiling with gratitude, her eyes filled with tears.

"Thank you, Jacob. You won't regret it... I can feel it..."

When Anna returned to her chamber, she found John standing at the empty cradle, staring into the empty space where just that morning his new son was sleeping.

“What have you done?” His deep voice was icy cold, trembling with a threat.

Anna felt a shiver run down her spine at his words. She didn't dare to move; fear struck her as never before. Nevertheless, she found her voice, quiet and unsteady, though.

“The only thing that was right...”

As John turned to her and pierced her eyes with his look, Anna froze, scared to death. These were not the eyes of the man she loved. They were the eyes of a madman, flashing darts of anger at her, nailing her to the spot as with a curse.

“You had *no right!*” he shouted, and with one swing of his hand, he overturned the cradle, breaking it in the process.

“He is *my son*, and no one can take him away from me!!”

Anna was shaking like a leaf. She tried to find safety at the wall, looking for protection from the man she no longer recognized. John was in a fit of rage, smashing and throwing things around him. Eventually, he ran out of the chamber without a single glance at his wife.

When John Pater ran into his long-time friend's large chamber, he found Jacob already awaiting him. A few other men were standing alongside him. John's eyes were searching for the baby, when suddenly he spotted Mary on the upper level, keeping watch over an antique cradle standing next to Jacob's bed.

“Give me my son,” he hissed slowly, stressing each word.

Jacob's worried eyes observed his friend, trying to understand his grief and lessen it.

“John,” he started. “Maybe you should leave him here for a while, until you...”

“Until what?” John snapped. “Until he starts calling you Daddy?”

Jacob sighed and shook his head, finding the situation more difficult than he had imagined.

“Until you can recover from your... grief of losing your own child.”

“Who gave you the right to play God?” John's voice sounded threatening. “My child is lying up there next to your bed, and I want him back.”

Jacob's eyes narrowed when he looked into the eyes of his friend. His heart was breaking, seeing how John's heart hardened and filled with hatred, turning into a block of ice. He saw any attempt for reasoning with his friend would be to no avail.

“I am... truly sorry, John,” he whispered.

The tall man opposite him grew taller as he raised his head high up, his dark eyes full of hatred. The other men were standing firmly and blocking the stairway leading up to the higher level of the chamber. John's lips formed a thin line.

"You will regret this," he hissed. "All of your precious people, your precious world will be gone one day when I'm done with you."

Then, after one more glance toward the cradle above, John turned on his heel and left.

Jacob exhaled loudly and covered his face with his hands. He just lost his friend forever.

Anna was standing among the ruins of what was once a happy place for her. The chamber in which she had spent the last five years of her life used to bring her comfort, warmth and happiness. Now, its state was perfectly mirroring her inner world and her marriage - shattered to pieces.

She abruptly turned at the sound of quickly approaching footsteps. At the sight of her husband's eyes, still blazing with anger like a wildfire, she shivered.

John walked over to her in a slow but terrifying manner, almost like a wild animal approaching his prey. He remained silent for a moment, just staring at his wife with eyes that reminded her of the eyes of evil - his obsession had brought out the worst part of him, one that had been buried deep inside.

Then, he spoke. A single phrase, but it made Anna shudder.

"You traitor..."

A heavy silence followed his words. John grabbed his long coat, and after one last hateful look, he left the chamber again.

Anna fell to her knees, all her strength deserting her. She buried her face in her hands and cried.

A few days later, Anna had just returned from Father, where she spent a little time with Vincent. The boy was getting stronger every day, enjoying his new home to the fullest. With the help of his young friend Mary, who was looking after little children in the nursery, Jacob was doing a great job in his new role.

John was not in their chamber; he hadn't been there since that day when he called her a traitor. His absence filled Anna with sadness and worry. After everything that had transpired between them, she still loved her husband. It was impossible to forget about a love that was once so strong and felt so unbreakable.

She missed the man who used to be kind, loving and caring, the man she had fallen in love with years ago. And despite the dramatic scenes between them a few days before, she still hoped that once his sorrow passed, John would be able to put aside his rage, and they could start over again.

She had little time to linger more on her thoughts, when her husband returned unexpectedly. To her surprise, he looked much calmer, though his eyes were still not as bright as they used to be, and there was not a shadow of kindness in them. However, there was a smile on his face - a sneaky, unnatural and misleading one.

"I'm glad you're back, John," Anna said with some hesitation in her voice.

"So am I," he replied, raising his eyebrow, that disturbing smile still on his face. "I had a lot time to think. All the disturbing events have caused too much pain already. I decided it is time to move one and start over."

The tone of his deep voice was calm and it seemed that his anger had passed. Anna rejoiced at this, but something still didn't feel right. His eyes were as cold as ice.

John walked to the table, and only then she spotted a bottle of wine in his hands. He poured the red liquid in two copper chalices, his back turned to her. Then, he turned back to face his wife and returned to her, offering her one of the chalices.

"To a new beginning," he said, raising his chalice, his dark eyes fixed on her.

Anna hesitated only for a moment before accepting her chalice and seeing how John started drinking his wine, her lips touched the chalice, and she swallowed its content in one long gulp. John's smile widened at this sight, but he remained silent.

A few seconds later, the young woman started feeling dizzy and suddenly couldn't catch her breath. Her throat felt as if an invisible hand was strangling her. She tried to reach out her hand to him, but in her last moment, she finally found the right word for the expression in his eyes - merciless...

Staring in horror into his black eyes and with her life slipping out of her, Anna understood the bitter truth. She fell to the cold ground, and her last thought belonged to the child that she wished to have called her son...

"It was the hardest thing I've ever done..."

Jacob listened to the man he once called his friend with a horror-stricken face and a heavy heart. Once John told him he had poisoned his wife, Jacob slumped into his chair in disbelief. He held his head in his hand, unable to accept the reality. His throat went dry, and only one word found its way out of his mouth.

"Why??"

John finally turned to him, ignoring Mary and a few men standing shocked nearby. His eyes suddenly seemed free of the menace that had haunted him for days, weeks, months. At that moment, they were only full of grief, deep pain and tears.

"There was no other way. She took away *my* son..."

Jacob's tear-filled eyes narrowed, and he understood John Pater was a lost cause. There was no going back to sanity for him. His obsessive desire cost him his chance to be an adoptive father, as well as his loving wife, but it cost him much more - his own humanity.

"May God forgive you one day..." Jacob whispered; his heart was breaking all over again.

"God has no place in *my* world," John replied coldly, wiped away his tears, and the last trace of his humanity vanished under the mask of hate and hurt pride once more.

Both of their heads turned up towards the space above them, hearing the sound of a soft cry reaching them from the cradle in the sleeping area. It was the same cry that Jacob had heard before - desperate, mourning for something lost but never forgotten.

Five days later, after Anna's Parting Ceremony and burial and John Pater had left the Home Tunnels, moving to the deepest, uninhabited parts of the underground world - the Tunnels Council exiled him forever.

Jacob was sitting in his antique chair, feeding his newly adopted son. Little Vincent was already reaching for his bottle fearlessly, enjoying his dinner and observing his new father eagerly.

"Good," Jacob encouraged him with a smile. "If you grow as quick as you eat, I'll be out of my job soon." He chuckled.

Suddenly, in his peripheral vision, he spotted a shadow moving nearby. He looked up but couldn't see anyone. The corners of his lips turned upwards, though, and looking back at the baby in his arms, he spoke firmly.

"Have you escaped Mary again?"

There was a shuffling sound behind the chair. Out of the shadow, the 4-year-old Devin appeared in the candlelight. The boy looked a bit ashamed, though his mischief amused Jacob, and he ruffled the child's thick dark hair fondly.

"He's kinda cute," Devin said, observing Vincent curiously.

"Yes, he is," Jacob chuckled, watching Vincent suck on his bottle contentedly.

The eyes of the children suddenly met, and they were unable to look away. Vincent stopped drinking, and his little exotic mouth with a cleft upper lip stretched into a smile. Devin returned his sign of affection and stroke the baby's

hand. Vincent immediately grabbed for the hand that touched his, and with all the strength in his tiny fingers, he squeezed it tight. Devin giggled.

“Don’t worry, I have your back, little one,” he said with a high-pitched voice. He carefully caressed the golden hair of the baby with the little fingers of his other hand.

Jacob was watching the exchange between his two sons with a warm smile. He couldn’t help but feel grateful deep inside. Maybe this special child would bring something very special to their world. Something that would bind them all together in a way they were not bound before. In the end, Vincent may become a conqueror after all - *the conqueror of hearts*.

12 YEARS LATER

I shouldn’t have been so harsh; I should have listened to him more; I should have...

Jacob was sitting in his chair, head in his hands; he was utterly devastated by Devin’s disappearance. True, the boy had run off for a day or so lately, without telling someone where he was going, but it had been five days since anyone had seen him...

Jacob was very upset about the unfortunate incident between Devin and Vincent in the Chamber of the Winds. He had been protective of the lion-faced boy, ever since he'd been entrusted to Jacob’s care, that anything that upset the boy hurt him personally.

Devin and Vincent were like two peas in a pod. They were true brothers, without actually knowing that Devin was Jacob’s biological son. They spent all their free time together, shared the same chamber, dreamed together. They even found the gorgeous stained-glass window together, the jewel in the crown of their chamber. They'd found it on one of their adventurous trips in a hidden cavern in the lower levels of the Tunnels. But as all brothers do, sometimes they fought.

Mostly, it was Devin who initiated an argument, for Vincent was a very calm and respectful child. He wasn’t a stranger to fun or mischief, but not any that might have harmed someone. And so, when Devin accused his brother of betrayal and slapped the younger boy, for the first time in his life, Vincent felt the need to strike back in his own defence. The reality of having injured his best friend in doing so, broke his spirit. When he saw what he had done, his shame knew no end, and he ran away, tears escaping his eyes. That was the last time he saw Devin (for many years anyway).

Jacob’s distress was even greater than Vincent’s. He had just had a big argument over the incident between the boys with Devin. He was sure that was the real

cause of his biological son's disappearance. The Tunnels dwellers had searched for him for five days, but to no avail.

Someone suggested he might have slipped and fallen into the Abyss. It was a place he used to enjoy going to, even though the children were not allowed to. But Devin was sixteen years old. It meant that for some time already, he had refused to be treated like a child. The occasional jealousy over Jacob's seemingly stronger affection for Vincent wasn't helping either.

The Tunnel leader suddenly remembered that he hadn't seen Vincent for hours. He knew his adoptive son was in distress and decided to check on him in his chamber he had shared with Devin since he was four years old.

When he reached his destination, he found Vincent sitting on the large bed, holding the toy carousel Devin had given him for his last birthday, after having found it on one of his secret trips Above. One of the Tunnel handymen helped him repair it. Vincent's clawed fingers were gliding over the colourful, smoothly polished figures of horses. His eyes were full of tears. The once blue crystals, full of joy and twinkle, seemed lifeless and empty.

Jacob entered the chamber silently and sat down to the boy, stroking his golden-haired head fondly. For twelve years, this boy had brought him nothing but happiness. All the love he shared with the extraordinary foundling, he received back in equal measures, if not more. Vincent respected and loved his adoptive father, as no one else did or could. The bond between them was stronger and more fulfilling than Jacob could ever have imagined.

"I drove him away; he hates me," Vincent whispered, his gentle voice with a touch of gravel was shaky.

His father embraced his shoulders.

"No, you didn't," he contradicted eagerly. "Vincent, look at me."

Vincent lifted his eyes to Jacob. They mirrored the shame he was feeling inside.

"You know Devin very well. He's always been someone who doesn't like having to live by the rules, or do as others tell him. He ran off because of the argument I had with him." He paused and sighed, closing his eyes for a brief moment, for they were burning.

"But I hit him and hurt him, Father." Vincent refused to let go of his guilt so easily.

"He knows you did not mean to. Sometimes we do or say things in the heat of the moment, when we are angry, frightened or know injustice. Those things can hurt others, although we don't mean to do so. But Devin knows you did not mean to cause him pain. As we grow older, many things change for us, in our relationships with others, even with the people who are the closest and dearest to us. However, Devin loves you, Vincent, and *that* will never change."

Tears were running down the boy's slightly stubbly cheeks, when he leaned into the frame of his father and embraced him. He let himself be cradled, feeling the same comfort he had felt since he was a baby, in the arms of the man who took

him for his own son. When he felt calmer, he pulled back again and looked into Jacob's eyes.

"Even if I could, I would never leave you," he spoke softly, resolved.

Jacob's eyes got misty all at once. He shook his head in wonder and smiled.

Vincent's powerful empathy was reaching a new level lately. Jacob noticed that the boy was very perceptive in regard to people's feelings, their emotions... much more than any ordinary person would, or ever could. It was as if he had a connection to people's subconsciousness, tapping into it every time they behaved in an unusual way, searching for and finding the answers to unasked questions in people's minds. This discovery didn't frighten Jacob; it made him admire and respect his son even more.

Vincent was always a kind-hearted, empathic, respectful and loving child. As he was growing up, his kind and generous nature, and willingness to help whenever needed, impressed the Tunnel dwellers greatly. They took him to their hearts, and all the initial fears or doubts, from the time when he'd come to them, disappeared completely.

Vincent's words at that moment confirmed to Jacob even more what he had sensed for a long time - his adoptive son could *feel* when others were hurting. And at that very moment, he could feel that his father was hurting and needed support. No matter how much his own pain and guilt was eating at him, his deep concern for others prevailed. What an extraordinary child!

"You know," Jacob said, "someone told me once that I won't regret becoming your father." His eyes were glistening. "They were absolutely right..."

Vincent smiled shyly, and in his eyes, Jacob could see far greater wisdom and intelligence than his twelve years of age should have displayed.

When Jacob was falling asleep that night, his heart was still heavy from the loss of his biological son, and the uncertainty of not knowing what had happened to him. And yet, a ray of light was breaking through the dark veil of his grief - the light surrounding the shape of a child with long golden hair, gentle blue feline eyes and a heart that could hold the whole world.

APRIL 12, 1987

"Father!"

The familiar gravelly baritone interrupted Jacob's regular late evening reading. "Vincent! Is anything wrong?" he asked worriedly, for the voice of his adoptive son sounded very strained and urgent.

"I was Above on my walk in the park, and I..." Vincent hesitated slightly. "I found someone... someone very badly injured... I'm afraid she was left to die, so I brought her down here."

"Vincent, my God! How could you??" Jacob shot up from his chair in shock. "You know it's against our rules to bring someone down here before the Council agrees to it?! Why didn't you take her to a hospital?"

The moment he asked the question, he understood his foolishness.

"The closest hospital is further than our home. Besides, there is no safe route around that hospital for me not to ---" Vincent's voice trailed off.

Jacob sighed, understanding immediately... *for him not to be seen.*

"I couldn't just leave them there at this late hour."

"Is she conscious? Has she seen you?" Jacob asked anxiously.

"No..." Vincent replied quietly.

Jacob had the feeling Vincent had not told him everything but the patriarch decided a human life was at stake, and there was no time to lose. He grabbed his medical bag.

"All right, let me see her."

When they reached Vincent's chamber, Jacob stopped in his tracks. On the large bed under the characteristic stained-glass window lay the small figure of a woman whose ugly, bleeding facial wounds had already begun swelling. The sight of her face made Jacob almost lose all faith in humanity. He then understood Vincent's evasiveness.

Even despite the terrible injuries, he could see she was a beauty, or she used to be at least, for whoever did this to her certainly wanted to change that fact. Hurriedly, he dropped to one knee beside the bed and checked the woman's vitals. He found out she had a weak pulse and her breathing was shallow.

"I need hot water and clean towels. I can clean and disinfect the wounds with what I have in my bag, but I will need you to run to the hospital chamber and bring me needles, thread and bandages, as well as my gloves and medical mask. And bring Mary, please."

"The hot water is on the brazier." Vincent spoke, while taking out clean linen towels from his dresser. "Here are the towels. I'll be right back with what you need."

When Jacob raised his head from his patient to acknowledge his son's words, Vincent was already gone. The doctor sighed and shook his head. His heart was breaking at the sight of the woman on the bed, broken and seriously wounded. At that moment, he was more than glad that Vincent was such an eager student of

everything, including his father's medical skills and knew exactly what was needed and where to find it.

Yet, a strange feeling crept into his heart while he carefully cleansed the cuts on the woman's face. Something was telling him that Vincent's discovery that night would shape the course of his whole future. He shuddered but couldn't shake off the feeling that it might shape the course of the future for them all. The question was whether it would be a good or bad one.

Jacob cleansed and carefully stitched the wounds, and with Vincent's gentle help, he bandaged his patient's head. After that, Mary relieved Vincent of his assistance and helped with changing the woman into a clean and warm nightshirt. For that part, Vincent stepped out for obvious reasons; he didn't want to trespass on the patient's dignity. But when Jacob glanced at his son just before he left the chamber, he could see the unusual flush on his exotic face. His gaze wasn't leaving the woman's face, and there was something in it that made Jacob narrow his eyes.

But Vincent disappeared before his father could dwell more on the meaning of that look. He turned to Mary and spoke while carefully taping the woman's bottom ribcage because she had two broken ribs.

"Thank you, Mary. I'm sorry we woke you, but it was necessary, as you can see."

His dear friend of long years, the grey-haired older woman with a kind face, smiled.

"There is no need to apologise, Father. Do you know who she is?" she asked.

Jacob raised his eyebrows and sighed.

"No, Vincent found her in the park already unconscious."

"Do you want me to stay with her? I don't mind; she will need someone to watch over her."

"I will watch over her."

They both turned their heads to the voice. Vincent was standing not far away from them again.

"I found her; she is my responsibility, and I will watch over her."

Jacob wanted to contradict, but then remembered why he had thought to place bandages over the woman's eyes as well, despite them being unharmed.

"All right. I gave her the first course of antibiotics. She will need to receive the next course in the early morning. I'll bring them to you then. I don't have any more on me."

"I'll come to pick them up in the morning," Vincent replied.

"Where will you sleep? Maybe you could stay in the new guest-chamber nearby..." Jacob suggested, but his son interrupted him.

"I'll sleep in the chair. She needs constant care. Don't trouble yourself, Father, I will be all right."

A small smile on his face should have reassured Jacob, but it failed to do so.

"I'll go and get some extra blankets for her. She might need them," Mary said and walked out of the chamber.

Vincent joined his father at the bedside. They were both looking at the woman sleeping on the bed. Yet, their thoughts were heading in different directions.

"Let me know when she wakes up," Jacob spoke after a moment and then looked into his son's eyes. "And Vincent, don't tell her anything."

Vincent nodded in comprehension and watched his parent turn around to leave.

"Father?" he said suddenly.

"Yes?"

"Thank you..."

The gentleness in his gravelly voice and the gratitude in his deep blue eyes softened Jacob's facial features. He flashed a smile and silently left the chamber.

The Tunnels patriarch was trying to read in his chamber that afternoon. 'Trying' was the correct term because he kept re-reading the same line of poetry, now for the fifth time. His mind was preoccupied with thoughts about his son. He had changed so much over the last ten years, and Jacob realised he almost hadn't noticed it. Or maybe he didn't *want* to notice. To him, the most exotic inhabitant of the Tunnels would always remain his little golden-haired boy.

Vincent had grown into a real man; tall, with a powerfully-built, though slim figure, broad shoulders, a graceful walk and majestic presence. His unusual face was radiant; his sapphire-blue eyes were deep, engaging and always caring. His long golden hair was as bright as the rays of a setting sun. Jacob had to smile at the thought that he would describe his beloved son as handsome - he was pretty sure most people Above would think him crazy.

His smile faded. It wasn't fair, none of it. Vincent was a bright, intelligent and wise man, whose kindness and generosity knew no boundaries and yet, he was sentenced to life in the underground forever. He was buried in his tomb alive.

There was something else about him that Jacob had noticed some time ago. Whenever Vincent was around couples, his eyes were full of melancholy that was painful to see. He dearly loved every member of the Tunnels, and they truly loved him, but there was a part of his heart and soul that Jacob knew would always

remain unfulfilled. The fate of the man with the heart so big that it could embrace with love the whole planet, was to remain alone forever, eternally denied the joy and hope that only the love from a kindred soul could bring. Anything else wasn't safe, not for Vincent, not for anyone. And yet...

Ten days earlier, when his son brought the badly injured woman down to their world, the light in Vincent's eyes was suddenly brighter, like two flames flickering in the shadows of the Tunnels and spreading warmth wherever they could reach. His melancholy was gone, replaced by tamed but undoubted joy. He barely left his chamber, keeping watch and tenderly looking after the woman, to whom he had formed a strong attachment.

Jacob watched him with worry, for he knew the end would be painful for his son. Yet, he did not have the heart to prevent Vincent from spending time with the woman, looking after her, feeding her, reading to her.

Catherine... She had a lovely name, and its Greek meaning 'pure' corresponded with what Vincent shared with his father about her. Catherine may have been battered and bruised, bitter about the world that treated her so harshly, but she seemed to have been of a pure heart and liked Vincent's gentle presence, from what Jacob could witness.

That would all end, though, once she sees him...

He sighed, feeling again sorry for his adopted child. Catherine was recovering well, and soon the time would come for her to return to the world Above. And Jacob knew it would break Vincent's heart. But it would be for the best, though, he thought... There was no other way...

While he was deep in his reverie, Jacob suddenly noticed the cloaked figure of his son standing at the entrance to his chamber. As always, he appeared silently. His footsteps were so soft that they were almost inaudible. He was unusually quiet, and the expression in his eyes had changed back to melancholy, to pain even.

"Vincent..." Jacob stood up worriedly. "Are you all right?"

The younger man closed his eyes, and a long sigh echoed in the chamber.

"Catherine took off the bandages..." He spoke with a voice full of pain.

It was more than just understanding that hit Jacob. He felt heartbroken for his son, more than he had any time before.

"Has she...?"

"Yes..."

The silence was deafening around them. Even the ever-present tapping on the pipes went quiet for a while, reflecting the austerity of the moment.

"Did she run away?" Jacob then dared to ask.

"No," Vincent replied quietly, looking into space ahead of him. "She screamed when she saw me, but then, I saw the strangest thing..."

He paused, and his eyes narrowed, reliving the moment of a few minutes earlier.

"I felt so... devastated, so ashamed of myself that my only thought was running away and yet... Just before I left Catherine, I saw the look in her eyes change. Fear turned into shock and... shame..."

Jacob was struggling to find the right words.

"Did she... say anything?" he asked.

"No... She tried to run after me but then stopped."

The older man sighed and ran his hand through his greying hair. What was he supposed to say? *I'm sorry, son, but I told you that you shouldn't have brought her here?*

No, that would bring no good. It wasn't Vincent's fault that his compassion always got the better of him.

"Father," Vincent continued. "I can *feel* her shame... it hurts..."

Jacob lifted his eyes to his son again.

"Maybe she is ashamed that you saw her with her scarred face."

"No... that's not it," Vincent contradicted quietly and sighed.

Then, he straightened his slightly hunched back again and put his hand on his father's shoulder. His eyes were clear again, still touched by sadness, but back in the reality that he had to face every day.

"Could you check her face, please? If you say she's well enough, I will take her back."

Jacob was a bit surprised at those words, but then he understood there was nothing surprising about it. Catherine couldn't stay Below forever, and the longer she stayed, the more difficult it would be for Vincent to let her go when the time came.

"Of course, I can. I'll do it right away."

"Thank you, Father," Vincent replied with a bittersweet smile and very slowly walked out of the chamber.

I wish I could make it easier for you, my son, Jacob thought, watching him leave. Then, he grabbed his medical bag and went to look at his patient.

Jacob hesitantly entered Vincent's chamber, where he found Catherine sitting on the bed... hunched over, with her head down, her hands in her lap, lifeless. She appeared as if all strength had deserted her. At the sound of Jacob's footsteps, she lifted her head.

The wet cheeks and the pain in her big emerald eyes made Jacob wince - she was devastated. He walked over to the bed and put down his medical bag. Catherine

didn't say a word, and yet he knew she was aware of his knowledge about what had happened between her and Vincent.

His hands were gently checking the wounds on her face, looking for any signs of infection. When he saw none, Jacob sighed and dared a half-smile.

"It's healing nicely. That's good."

Catherine didn't react; it seemed as if her mind were somewhere else. She was staring aimlessly into Jacob's thick vest right in front of her. The look in her eyes betrayed her inner turmoil, though.

After Jacob finished his examination, he contemplated what to say. The deep sadness coming across from his patient was almost unbearable to witness. At first, he thought it was because she was afraid of people seeing her scarred face. But then, the young woman surprised him when she finally spoke, looking into his eyes at last.

"Is... Is Vincent all right?" Her big eyes were glistening, fixed on his, waiting desperately for an answer.

"Yes," Jacob answered, attempting a half-smile. "He is all right."

Catherine bowed her head, and Jacob understood what Vincent meant with her feeling of shame.

"He didn't deserve that," she said quietly, her head still bowed low. "I wish... I wish I could undo what I did, how I reacted..." She was shaking her head; her eyelashes were wet with silent tears.

Jacob suddenly felt for this woman, and without thinking about it, he carefully stroked her head.

"He will be all right. Vincent is a strong man in every way."

Catherine looked at him, surprised by his gesture, gratitude reflected in her eyes.

"He is, indeed," she agreed with a sad smile. "And so much more..."

Jacob was stunned by what he saw in her eyes and face. It was affection and warmth, stronger than he had before, with anyone, when speaking about his son.

Unsure of how to react and what to think, he smiled and reached for his bag, prepared to leave.

"Father?" Catherine stopped him on his way out.

Jacob turned around, looking at her expectantly.

"You look just like I imagined you." Her sad eyes were glistening again, but her smile warmed his heart. "Thank you... for everything."

His grey eyes stayed with her for a while, then his look softened, and he smiled before leaving the chamber.

Step by step, his mind was getting more and more confused. He was glad and relieved that this woman was about to leave their world, and everything would go

back to normal. Yet deep inside, somewhere at the very core of his heart, he felt something warm, like a dying ember, suddenly desiring to burn brightly again.

The look on Catherine's face when she spoke about Vincent was one of genuine fondness. Jacob couldn't help but feel grateful for that. He knew what he wished most for his son would never be possible, but just the fact that this woman could feel so fond of Vincent was more than enough.

Although he was sure they would never see each other again, and that it would probably break Vincent's heart, the genuine care and worry in her eyes made him believe that this woman would carry a part of his son in her heart forever. And for some strange, inexplicable reason, it made him smile...

"Father?"

Vincent's gentle voice made Jacob return from the past back to the present, and he chuckled.

"I am sorry; I think I got lost in my memories," he said.

"They must have occupied your mind quite largely, for you have lost the game... again," Vincent remarked with an amused smile.

Jacob looked amazed at the chessboard where his King was in a no-way-out situation yet again. He frowned.

"Remember, Father, do not think of yourself as a bad player, only--"

"Only as a good teacher, I know," Jacob finished with a laugh.

Vincent regarded him fondly with a little smile.

The Tunnel patriarch noticed the twinkle and joy in his son's deep blue eyes; the contentment in his heart was radiating from every pore of his body. Jacob was looking at a grown-up man, yet, he also remembered the boy who became the sole reason for his joy in life, and who was capable of mending his broken and disappointed heart in a way no one else could.

"I think it's time to get ready," he remarked, glancing at the vintage clock on the mantelpiece as both men stood up. "You do not want to miss the most wonderful day of your life."

Vincent smiled, and his eyes dreamily wandered to a small black velvet box on the dresser.

"Thank you for giving me Margaret's wedding ring. I know it means a lot to you."

"It does," Jacob spoke fondly. "However, it was *she* who asked me to give it to you when the time came. Margaret could see well ahead, much more than I could." He shook his head bemusedly.

Vincent took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment.

“So much pain and suffering...” He spoke with a trembling voice. All the dramatic events from the past unfolded before his mind’s eye.

“And so much love,” Jacob added with a smile.

Melancholy left Vincent’s face, that lit up again.

“Yes, always...”

“You believed in the power of that love, even at times when I did not, and it led you right up to this very day, to this very moment,” Jacob said with a voice full of emotion. “Forgive me, Vincent... for doubting it when I shouldn’t have, for not seeing right from the beginning what was so clear - that you and Catherine *belong* together. She is a wondrous woman, and though it may seem quite surprising to hear it from me, I truly bless the day you two crossed paths.”

The younger man’s smile reached his blue eyes when he affectionately squeezed his father’s arm.

“Your love for me was stronger than your doubting, and for that, I will forever be grateful to you, Father.”

Jacob tenderly stroked Vincent’s cheek, a habit he could never wean himself from, even once his son grew up. Then he sighed as his eyes wandered around the space.

“I look around this chamber and see the boy, playing with his carousel and wooden toys, reading about Huckleberry Finn, drawing dragons, dreaming about faraway places.... I look at *you* and see the extraordinary man you have become; wise, brave, kind, generous, graceful, fearless, utterly devoted to people, life and love.”

He paused for a moment, taking in the image of his beloved child.

“And I look into *myself* and see that this boy and this man filled the biggest void in my heart with joy, warmth and love. You taught me more about life than all the books in the world could. Vincent, you put the real end to my aloneness, and I will *never* be alone again, no matter what path you take from this day on.”

Vincent felt his eyes burning. The gratitude and, above all, deep love he felt towards the man who saved his life, and raised him like his own son, transcended any boundaries set to men.

“Thank you, Father, for helping me to become that man,” he said, his gravelly voice charged with emotion. “And for allowing me to follow my heart, no matter how difficult it must have been to watch.”

Jacob wiped the stray tears from his eyes and chuckled.

“It surely was an experience.” Both men laughed. “But as I said before, I wouldn’t change a single minute. And I can’t wait for the next chapter!”

He reached into his pocket and produced something small wrapped in a piece of cloth. His face turned more serious when he passed it to his son.

“Anna wanted you to have this one day; she gave it to me when she left you with me.”

Vincent’s eyes narrowed. Suddenly, he felt a lump forming in his throat. Anna Pater - a woman who could have been his mother, but ill fate took that joy away from her.

He felt great sadness and mourned again for a life that was gone too soon.

When his long fingers unwrapped the small object in his hand, he gasped. On his palm lay a small golden pendant - beautifully carved in the shape of an open rose, almost identical to the one hanging from a cord around his neck at that very moment.

“She hoped one day you would find someone who could wear it, someone you would be bound to as they would be bound to you,” Jacob added, and a heartfelt smile appeared on his face anew.

Vincent shook his head in disbelief. It seemed to him as if this was the completion of a circle. However, he knew that, in a way, it was only the beginning.

“Happy birthday, Vincent,” Jacob said quietly, a smile never leaving his face.

Vincent’s arms enveloped him in a bear hug.

“Thank you, Father,” he whispered.

When they pulled back from each other, Vincent smiled and reached for his festive clothes, hanging on the massive antique wardrobe. His favourite ruffled white shirt, a newly-sewn, emerald-green vest and black pants. It was still difficult for him to accept that he might call himself “good-looking”, but he had to admit the outfit was a favourable one. He especially liked the vest, for its colour reminded him of Catherine’s eyes.

Vincent knew his bride-to-be was the inspiration behind Mary’s choice when she was picking a colour for his festive vest. Catherine helped to provide the fabrics, and Mary was more than eager to work her magic with it. She wanted to contribute as well to the special day of her beloved Tunnel child.

His fingers gently caressed the soft velvety garment, and he smiled.

“It is almost unbelievable, but Mary’s skills are improving each year,” Jacob commented, admiring the embroidered white-coloured rose on one side of the vest.

“It is beautiful,” Vincent agreed. He could only smile at the symbolic placement of the white rose right over his heart. That was where Catherine would always be - right in his heart. Dear Mary...

“Well, I better leave you to it,” Jacob spoke then and turned around, limping across the chamber. “Devin will be here soon. He was supposed to leave little Jacob with Diana and Joe until the beginning of the Joining ceremony. I seriously hope he managed to put together something decent for his best man speech,” he added, with a slightly nervous expression.

Vincent’s chuckle calmed him down, though.

“Apart from talking to you, Devin has never had problems saying what he wanted the way he wanted, even without rehearsal.” The bridegroom smiled. “And my son is doing well. I can feel he is very content,” he added, beaming with fatherly pride.

Jacob looked at his adopted son once more. All those years earlier, he would have never even imagined becoming a parent to this wondrous human being. And yet, it happened. Moreover, thirty-seven years later, he was not only his father but was about to watch him get married to the woman he loved with all his heart and soul. And their child, the miraculous result of that almost otherworldly love, would share that day with them.

“I am going to see how Peter is doing,” he said with a smile. “I know he gave away his daughter already, but Catherine is like his own child to him too. I don’t think I have ever seen him more ecstatic than when he found out about your engagement. I thought I would never hear the end of it.”

Vincent chuckled, remembering the bear hug he received from his dear friend back then.

“It means the world for Catherine to have someone she has known all her life by her side on this special day.”

“I think pure and undisturbed happiness has finally found its way into our world again,” Jacob spoke, his eyes glistening. “And I, for one, could not be more ecstatic about *that*.”

The patriarch smiled warmly at his son - taking in the younger man’s almost regal features and a fond look - his heart almost bursting from pride. Then, he turned around and, supported by his walking stick, Jacob walked out of the chamber.

Thirty-seven years earlier, he was given a second chance in life and all those years later, he knew grasping it was the most rewarding thing he had ever done. As he was making his way through the Tunnels, he couldn’t wipe the smile from his face when he remembered a few lines from a book he had read a long time ago.

“Happiness is like one of those palaces on an enchanted island, its gates guarded by dragons. One must fight to gain it.”¹

Jacob thought of Vincent and Catherine, but also of Devin, and eventually, of himself, as well. They all had their fair share of fighting dragons to battle their way through to happiness. Yet, in the end, they came out victorious. Life would surely put more dragons in their path in the future, but Jacob was sure of one thing - whatever would come their way, they would fight it... *together*.

1 A quote from ‘The Count of Monte Cristo’ by Alexander Dumas

