

## *The One Thing That Never Changes*

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



“No!!!”

His cry pierced the silence of the night as he sat up feverishly on the bed. It took a few seconds for his breathing to calm down when he realised it had been a dream.

“Vincent?” he heard a slightly deeper but soft voice behind his back and felt a gentle touch of a hand on his shoulder.

“The same dream about the rooftop again?” the voice asked carefully.

“The same nightmare, every year on this day,” he whispered with a broken voice. “Almost thirty years on, and I still can’t let it rest...Why?” His voice trailed off, shadowed with sadness.

He felt an arm embracing his shoulders gently and pulling him closer.

“Maybe to keep reminding you that life is precious; it can change any minute, and nothing can be taken for granted.”

He looked at the face next to him, illuminated by the only candle burning in the chamber, and spoke with a quiet but resolved voice.

“I never did and never will take anything for granted, most of all you.”

“I know; neither have nor will I,” the voice replied, and a beaming smile set on a glowing face.

Vincent embraced her tightly as they laid back again, and he kissed the top of her head before he whispered into the night.

“Catherine...”



She stood in front of the small mirror in a silver ornamental frame in their chamber, lit by the warming glow of the candlelight. Catherine studied her face in the mirror and slowly explored it with her fingers, deep in thought.

*Sixty-two years old today...*

Yes, there were wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, but there was still that vivid, bright light in her big green eyes. Yes, she was dying her hair dark-blonde to cover the grey (more out of habit than of vanity), but otherwise, she let age catch up with her naturally. A hint of sadness and uncertainty flashed in her eyes at that moment, though.

Catherine was so engrossed in her thoughts that she hadn't noticed him entering the chamber, until she saw his reflection in the mirror. He was standing right behind her. The feel of his warm body close to her back was unmistakable - and as irresistible as ever. His still strong arms snaked gently around her.

“Yes...,” he whispered into her ear, looking at her reflection in the mirror, his cheek pressed close to her head. “You are still as beautiful as the day I met you,” he answered her unasked question.

Catherine smiled gratefully and turned around.

“That bad?” she teased him, remembering the terrible scars her face was marked with when Vincent saved her life on that night, many years ago.

He chuckled, looked at her fondly and kissed her forehead.

“It's not fair, Vincent,” she sighed, standing with his arms around her, hers resting on his broad chest.

“You have barely changed in all those years.”

She smiled at him with a look full of love, a love that hadn't altered a single bit, even after over thirty years of sharing her life with him. As unbelievable as it may have seemed, it still grew stronger day by day.

*We are large; we contain multitudes!* The thought made her smile.

Even in his late sixties now, Vincent still had only a few wrinkles around his deeply set feline eyes. And his long mane was still mostly as golden as the first time she'd seen him, with only a few silver streaks here and there in it. *Years have left very few*

*traces on his face, probably because of his partially different genes,* Catherine thought. He was still as beautiful, majestic, and almost as strong, as when he was a young man, and the deep, sapphire-blue of his eyes was as clear and expressive as always. The only difference was that they mirrored even more wisdom than before - life and its perils had brought him here.

“We all grow old, some of us age more than others physically, but time doesn’t spare anyone,” Vincent said calmly, in his gravelly voice, looking deeply into her eyes.

“The important thing is how we feel, taking each day as a miracle, enjoying every moment of happiness, making the most of what was given to us.”

Catherine smiled again and laid her head on his chest, close to his heart. She could hear the regular heartbeat of the man she had loved for thirty-three years. And she knew that his heart was still beating for her the same way as it had at the beginning of their journey.

Suddenly, there was a sound of footsteps stopping at the entrance of their chamber.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t want to disturb the domestic bliss.”

Catherine’s face lit up in excitement as she ran to embrace the young man standing there with a smile on his face.

“Jacob, you made it!” she exclaimed and couldn’t hold back the tears in her eyes as she hugged their son.

“Did you think I would ever miss your birthday and spending Christmas with my three most beloved people in the world?” Jacob said teasingly, but affectionately, when he got free from her arms and kissed her cheek. His voice was almost as velvety and deep as his father’s.

"Charlie will be over the moon seeing you!" Catherine said with unrestrained excitement and happiness, referring to the other beloved son, two years junior to Jacob, who decided to dedicate his life fully to the world Below. Charles was helping his father wherever he could, in dealing with the daily life and needs of the tunnel dwellers - inadvertently being prepared for the role of the next Tunnel leader.

Vincent took a few slow steps forward, looking at his firstborn with pride and quiet happiness.

“Father...,” Jacob said with a heartfelt smile and wrapped his arms around Vincent, bathing in the shimmering warm glow of the bond they shared.

They held each other tightly and Catherine couldn’t help but feel moved at the sight. She clearly remembered the day when "Dad" had changed to "Father" - the day when Vincent took over the role of the tunnel leader. The respect Jacob Junior always had for his parent only intensified when he fully understood that Vincent had overnight become a father to the whole Tunnels. He was many things, but this was how everyone had seen him in the first place; that's how his own children saw him.

Although Jacob hadn't inherited his father’s leonine looks, he was so much like him in height, physique, his graceful walk, calm demeanour, kindness, and wisdom beyond his years.

Vincent was truly the best father, teacher and role model he could have ever had, even at times when they had to deal with difficulties that life brought upon them.

She knew how deeply fond the two men were of each other, not only because of their bond.

Jacob's hair had a colour of a sea-caressed, sandy beach, like Catherine's used to be, just about touching his shoulders in waves. His lips were full like hers, but he had his father's deep blue eyes and strong cheekbones, though there was a gentleness in his features, which he inherited from both of his parents. As with them, one could see the kindness of his heart right on his face.

"It's so wonderful to see you, Jacob," Vincent said quietly, his hands still on his son's shoulders.

"I sent a message to Mouse that I'll be coming - the hospital granted me an extra holiday week for all the overtime I made in the last few months. I asked him to keep it a secret; I wanted to surprise you."

*Good old Mouse, Vincent thought, amused. At least once in his life, he managed to keep a secret from anyone in the Tunnels.*

"I was hoping we could finish that chess game we started on Thanksgiving. You know I still have a chance to beat you," Jacob said with a grin.

It was still nigh on impossible to beat Vincent in chess. For a brief moment, the older of the two men fondly remembered how he used to drive his beloved adoptive father crazy for so many years, by barely giving him a chance to win.

Vincent chuckled and put his arm around Catherine, who just approached them with a smile.

"We were just contemplating the blessings of our ripe age with your mother," he said teasingly, sharing a loving look with Catherine.

She pinched him gently under his ribs and giggled.

Jacob smiled at them and felt as warm around his heart, as always when seeing his parents together. No, age could never change the pure magic between them.

"It's great to be back home again," he said and felt truly blessed.

