

Thirty-five

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

Dedicated to the wonderful Kevin Barnes for his magical BATB artwork over the years;
this story was inspired by his beautiful painting “Thirty-five Years Together”.
Also dedicated to all the writers and creators of the BATB show and its fanfiction writers,
who over the 35 years since it first aired have been keeping the dream alive.
And last but not least, dedicated to all the incredible actors on the show
for without them, there would be nothing...

*“Blessed are the storytellers, because they can bridge oceans, marshal great forces,
inspire and instruct, transcend all limits, transform hearts and minds. They can
break down barriers and be the common thread for disparate humanities,
reaching across distant borders.”*

- Ron Perlman -



ALL QUIET ON THE TUNNEL FRONT

On that April afternoon, the Tunnel leader was sitting in his favourite high-back chair, bending over the small vintage table that had been his companion since he was a child. His eyes, framed by the reading glasses, focused on the thick, black-covered volume that looked like a journal. Usually, he had no trouble reading without glasses, but he had been writing a lot lately, and his eyes felt they needed a little help at times. His fingers, holding his favourite fountain pen, elegantly glided on the paper, immortalising his thoughts on it. Now and then, he looked up with a smile and pondered.

The peaceful silence in the chamber was interrupted by the sound of shuffling feet.

”Vincent!” the word caught up with the sound as Mouse entered the private space of his best friend. In his eagerness, he clumsily dropped a couple of maps he was carrying.

Even after decades, the Tunnel master tinker hadn’t dropped his habit of entering people’s private quarters unexpectedly and in a very audible manner. The only difference was that he didn’t run anymore, but rather walked in hastily. Not because he couldn’t (despite his mid-50s, Mouse was still in great physical shape)

but because his mind was always too occupied with a hundred things and had no time to think about running.

“Come in, please,” Vincent invited him in, smiling, and put down his glasses.

Mouse didn’t need any more encouragement, and after he picked up the maps, he walked over to his friend.

”Found new maps, must show you!” He glanced at the table. “Writing in the journal?” he asked, curiously eyeing the open volume.

The lion-man hesitated for a moment. The Tunnel tinker had never been one for keeping secrets well. However, he decided to answer anyway.

“I’m recollecting memories, events that had happened Below and Above since the day that I met Catherine for the first time, thirty-five years ago.”

“Is Mouse in it, too?” came the eager reply, along with the excited eyes of his friend.

”Of course,” Vincent tilted his head, his mouth twitching with amusement.

”And Jamie, too?”

”Jamie, too,” Vincent confirmed. “How could I omit her amazing journey around the States back then?” he teased.

”Oh...” Mouse shuddered at the memory. “Told her it’s a bad idea; lots of danger for a girl alone out there, but she wouldn’t listen!”

”She wasn’t alone, though, was she?”

”Yeah, with a Helper,” the tinker waved his hand, rolling his eyes. “Still not safe enough,” he said stubbornly.

Vincent chuckled. “However, the journey silenced her long-time craving for adventure. And children love listening to her stories about what she experienced. Her Geography lessons are very popular also because of it.”

It seemed that this argument had some effect on Mouse’s opinion. “Okay, good,” he mused. “Okay, fine! But still better when Jamie helps me with gizmos.”

”Common interests solidify any relationship,” Vincent remarked with amusement. An image from years ago resurfaced from his memory: Mouse desperately trying to repair something, while Jamie running around their chamber, trying to catch their two girls in the act of stealing their father’s tools...

”Anyway,” he continued then, “she certainly has a place in my memories. Her courage - and stubbornness - saved mine and Pascal’s lives once.” His blue eyes grew sad.

”But not Winslow’s,” Mouse remarked quietly.

”No, but it wasn’t her fault,” he whispered. Some cuts leave deep scars, even after many years pass above one’s shoulder. “Sometimes things just... happen.”

The eternal boy adjusted the thin-framed glasses on his nose – decades of endless tinkering left their mark on his eyes, though their steel blue colour was as rich and friendly as it had always been.

”Winslow came to me with a broken tool one day. He said, *‘Mouse, I need a working pickaxe by tomorrow. And when I mean tomorrow, I mean tomorrow. I don’t care what you’re fiddling about with at the moment, whatever crazy invention of yours. I’ll be here the first thing in the morning!’*”

Vincent chuckled at Mouse’s imitation of the grumpy version of his childhood friend.

”Tried everything to fix it, no good. Winslow was a hard worker. A *very* hard worker. Broke many pickaxes, but this one...” He shook his head, frowning. “Killed it for good. Impossible to repair.”

“What did you do?” Vincent asked, amused.

Mouse put his hands in his trouser pockets, wriggling, his eyes pinned to the ground. “Winslow said he needed a pickaxe by tomorrow, so... Went up top and got him one,” he pouted, still not brave enough to look his best friend in the eyes.

After a few seconds of absolute silence, Vincent’s heartfelt laughter reverberated in the chamber. Mouse finally looked up through his glasses and dared a shy smile. His boyish charm always reappeared every time he smiled.

“Not angry?” the tinker asked with relief.

The man in question put his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “How many years back did this happen, Mouse?” he inquired, raising his eyebrows. When he saw his companion frown as he was trying to figure out the exact number, he nodded and smiled. “Exactly, too many years ago. You’ve learned not to steal since then.”

The master of invention grinned. “Well... as for that...” He pinned his eyes to the ground again.

”All right,” Vincent interrupted him, taken aback. “After a proper consideration, I don’t think I need to know everything that happens in these Tunnels.”

He raised himself from the chair, closed the volume on the table and carefully wrapped it into a piece of cloth. Then he put it in the old wooden chest with his (and his children’s) old toys.

“I think it’s the right time to go and find out what delicacies William prepared for dinner today. He promised something special, trying out a new recipe, and you know how proud he is of his cooking,” he said then. “We can pick up Catherine on the way; she’s helping out in the nursery today. And then you can show me the new maps,” he added, leading his slightly embarrassed friend out of the chamber.

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THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

“You wouldn’t believe how I need this two-week break, Vincent,” said Samantha, sharing a table during lunchtime in the Dining Chamber with her friend and former tutor. “I love teaching ballet, but the girls in my class this year are getting more difficult to manage. They would like to become prima ballerinas overnight, and refuse to accept that you have to work really hard to even get a chance to move to the front of the stage from the back line.”

“The world Above moves faster these days,” Vincent replied. “Perhaps they think that progress is a short distance run as well. It seems life has not taught them a lesson yet.”

“Times have changed, that’s true, ” Catherine remarked. “But hard work still pays off. And with a teacher like Samantha, they have surely every chance to reach their goal.” She patted her young friend on her shoulder, smiling.

“Blame it all on Lisa; she was and still is my biggest inspiration in dance,” Samantha stated with a fond smile. “She has been with me all along the way, right from the beginning, when she prepared me for the admission exam at her ballet school. It wasn’t easy, but it was worth it. I can never repay her the time and kindness she has given me over the years.”

“I think Lisa found a new purpose in life after all her troubles back then,” Vincent pondered. “When she opened her own ballet school a few years later, it gave her new motivation. And when you made it into the school, she was very proud of you.” He shook his head, remembering with pride of his own. “Odette...”

”And Odile,” Samantha corrected him teasingly.

”Yes... I never thought anyone could dance more beautifully than Lisa... until I saw *you* on stage.” He lifted his eyes to his friend with a heartfelt smile.

The astonishment on Samantha’s face warmed his heart. “You never told me that you saw me on stage!” she exclaimed, excited.

Catherine chuckled as Vincent lowered his eyes, smiling. “There is a small observation chamber hidden below the first balcony of the Lincoln Centre,” she explained.

”Oh, Vincent... I wished so badly that you could have been there that night... I’m so happy you got to see it in person!” Samantha cried and ran around the table to embrace him.

When she returned to her chair, her warm hazel eyes were still smiling.

”Where is Geoffrey, by the way?” Catherine asked suddenly.

”Still at home with the kids; they still have school. He will come with them on Thursday afternoon when they start their Easter break. I thought I’d steal a few peaceful moments before the army barges in here,” Samantha replied with a conspiratory wink, making them chuckle. “Besides, he still has a couple of classes at the Art school before they break for Easter, too. By the way...” She reached into

her jacket pocket and produced a letter, passing it to Vincent. "For you, from Michael. He left it with me the other week."

As if stung by a bee, Samantha suddenly jumped out from her chair. "Oh, sorry, I just remembered I need to see Kipper! I managed to find that rare *Hellboy* comic his son's been dreaming about! See you later!" she exclaimed, excited, and ran to the other side of the Dining Chamber, where she spotted her old childhood friend sitting with his family.

"I bet even Superman would be impressed with that speed." Catherine laughed, watching the former Tunnel child run away. "I'll never stop being amazed how Geoffrey can keep up with her."

Vincent chuckled, and his eyes travelled into the distance for a moment, thinking of the once rather quiet and shy boy, sitting patiently in his classes, hanging on his every word. He remembered the thrill of discovering many years ago that one of his most beloved pupils was not only fond of, but also truly good at, drawing. And as Geoffrey grew older, his skills improved significantly, adding special depth and sparkle (one might even say magic) to his portraits, which he loved drawing, and later painting, the most. Graduating as one of the best students in his year at the Arts Academy, his name soon became a force to be reckoned with in the artistic world of New York. But Geoffrey was never one for great attention and decided on a quiet but happy life - one of an art teacher and a hobby artist. And a family man.

"Tell me," Catherine said softly, regarding him curiously. "What's that enigmatic smile about?"

Vincent lowered his eyes and took her hand in his, caressing it with his thumb. "I'm thinking about how even Kristopher would be proud of Geoffrey," he replied with a knowing smile.

In his mind's eye, he saw the large canvas with the image of he and his wife, from many years ago, hanging on the wall in their chamber. It had been hanging there for 31 years and still bringing as much joy to them as it had when the elusive and mysterious Mr Gentian gifted it to them. And then he thought of another painting, hanging in the bedroom of their brownstone home Above - Kristopher's second gift, from a Halloween night many years ago...

"One day, he'll maybe get the chance to ask him," Catherine remarked with a smile. "And as we know Kristopher, that *one day* might be *any day*."

She winked and leaned her head against his shoulder, the same way she had loved doing it since they'd known each other.

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OF MEMORIES AND MEN

That afternoon, Vincent found himself alone again in the chamber which had been a huge part of his life for almost seven decades. He took out Michael's letter from his cloak pocket, put his glasses on and started reading.

Dear Vincent,

I hope you and Catherine are doing fine, as well as everyone else. I know it's been some time since I have visited Below, but my editor has been chasing me for the past four months - my new book is due to be published in two months, but I am still not happy with it. That's why I spend most of my days at home, buried in my manuscript. At least I've got the laptop to work on. How did Shakespeare manage to do this with only paper and a quill?? Incredible...

Anyway, I'm fine otherwise; a bachelor's life is not too bad for my profession, as I can dedicate the most time to my writing and hopefully come up with something meaningful. When I write, I'm engrossed in the process way too much to pay attention to anything else.

My publishing house tried to steer me on the thriller path. I politely refused, arguing that I feel more useful and contented in the real-life novel, and that there are already too many Dan Browns out there for the world to need another one. Thankfully, they heard me - for now.

Last week, I bumped into Laura in front of the Argosy bookstore! She was taking her some children to the Central Park Zoo and promised to come and visit you with her family soon. I guess you know that she still teaches at the school for deaf children and loves it. I bet she's a much better Helper than I've been lately, with all the rush around the book...

I must go now; there are still five pages I have to revise today, and the scene I'm working on is a bit... well, dramatic. I love that although many of my novels deal with something that had happened in the Tunnels, our world is still safe and unknown. After all, people have the same problems everywhere, whether they live Above or Below.

I miss you all... I promise I'll catch up with you soon. Please, give my love to Catherine and everyone else.'

Be well and see you soon.

Michael

Vincent took his glasses off with a contented feeling. He folded the letter and put it into the wooden box for keepsakes, where he stored all letters from friends and family. All apart from Catherine's - those had their own special place... He shook his head, smiling. Was it possible that there was a time he thought he wasn't worth her love?

Thirty-five years after they had first crossed paths, she was as passionate about him as she had been when they fell in love with each other. And yet, there were times

when his conviction wavered, and his heart ached immensely. He glanced at the box containing letters again and thought of Michael, who had been only a boy back then, barely an adult. And yet, for a brief moment, he awakened the greatest doubt and painful emotion in Vincent - jealousy. He was the second man ever to do that. Deep inside, Vincent knew that Catherine loved him, but how could his self-doubts and lack of confidence be ignored when he found himself next to a truly fair and (almost) perfect knight? Back then, he was only slowly building up his confidence in matters of the heart. Catherine was helping him to build it. And she was successful in the end, even though she went through her own ordeal, and Lisa was not its only reason...

Vincent thought of that cold day just before Christmas when Lena came to the Tunnels. A girl of the streets, expecting a child, betrayed and belittled by her own world, a lost soul...

She opened her heart to him and offered him her love. The temptation was seemingly there - Lena wasn't thinking of going back Above and would have gladly shared her life with Vincent, without thinking of the potential consequences. And yet, there had been something more powerful preventing him from accepting her offer. It was love... His deep love for Catherine, but also a different kind of love that he felt for Lena - one that doesn't take advantage of weakness and despair.

Time heals all wounds, they say. And truly, it healed these wounds as well. Moreover, it helped them all to move on with their lives, reaching even higher and finding their happiness: Vincent and Catherine, withstanding the test of time and circumstances and sharing their lives in marriage for over 30 years now; Michael, becoming a successful writer Above who had enjoyed and found his purpose in life; and Lena, finding a love returned in the end, with a decent man from the Tunnels, and a new calling in becoming Mary's help at the nursery, eventually taking it over.

Dear Mary...

Vincent smiled, thinking of the woman who, for the greatest part of his life, occupied the place in his heart that only a mother would have. At 94 years of age, her energy and love for children didn't seem to have diminished. She was enjoying a happy and peaceful "retirement", and although missing Father greatly, she put all her remaining love into the youngest generation in the Tunnels even more. Her friends and the children visited her every day; her chamber was always open to everyone, just as it had been since she'd come to live Below those many years ago.

Vincent and Catherine's chamber was also opened to everyone, and that day was no exception, as the sudden sound of someone rushing to get in interrupted the lion-man's brooding.

"Oh, you're here, that's great!" Jenny exclaimed, trying to catch her breath, with her always-present dazzling smile on her face.

"Jenny, are you all right?" Vincent asked and stood up from his chair.

The woman in question giggled and waved her hand. "Sure! Sometimes I just forget how long these tunnels are and that I'm not 30 anymore," she explained. "I was rushing because I couldn't wait to give you and Cathy *this*."

Ceremoniously, she presented Vincent with a thick book. He took the volume from her hands, admiring its colourful cover, and his lips extended into a smile when he read the author's name.

"Fresh from the press. It won't hit the bookstores until next week, but of course, I got sent the first copy," Jenny remarked proudly.

"She hasn't written anything for five years, but apparently, she was just *collecting memories*."

Vincent, still smiling, opened the book and noticed the dedication printed on the first page.

"*To C. and V. for reminding me of all the colours of love and life. Brigit,*" he read out loud.

"I knew you'd love it," Jenny said, her small brown eyes sparkling with thrill. "Where's Cathy?" she inquired.

"In the nursery; it's the day when she helps Lena out," Vincent replied, browsing through the pages of the book in his hands. Then he looked at Jenny with a smile. "We can visit her if you wish. She will be delighted to see this," he offered.

"Marvellous! I can't wait to see her reaction; it's the first time Brigit dedicated a book to you two!"

Jenny's excitement was contagious, and Vincent had to chuckle when she grabbed him under his arm, dashing him away in the direction of the nursery.

"Oh, my damned knee!" she cried suddenly, making Vincent stop. "I knew that gym class yesterday was a bad idea..." She winced briefly. "It's all right; I'm fine. Keep going."

Vincent's lips twitched with amusement. This was exactly the Jenny Aronson he had met over 30 years ago. She hadn't changed in the slightest - a living ray of sunshine with only a few more wrinkles and fewer curls than back then, one of the warmest and most generous hearts, and yes... generally, as mad as a hatter.

"I can't believe she's been living in that house in the middle of nowhere in Ireland for the last twenty-four years," Jenny continued her conversation about Brigit O'Donnell.

"Peace has been restored in Ireland," Vincent remarked. "Brigit has no reasons for fear anymore. She is finally free and happy with her life."

"I know but... all alone on that farm? Since that tragic affair back then, she has never married again."

Vincent raised his eyebrows and tilted his head, glancing at his friend. "Not everyone is as lucky as us, Jenny. When you find the love of your life and lose it..." He sighed, remembering his own almost fatal loss once. "Some people can't bind their heart to another one. It remains bound to the ones they've lost."

"I can understand that," Jenny knitted her brows, musing. "If that unsuccessful artist of mine, that I call husband, ever left me, I think I would dump all the romantic novels from my bookcase to the nearest bin and never crawl out of my retirement armchair again." She looked up at him and burst into a laugh, making Vincent chuckle.

"No, honestly, I do know what you mean," she said then earnestly. "It's just a bit... sad."

"Perhaps for us, but Brigit fulfilled her dreams. She travelled the world and was finally able to...," he paused and smiled, "touch cities, walk their streets, meet their people and listen to their music... She found peace with herself at last, and that's all that matters."

Jenny eyed her friend from head to toe, then shook her head. "You know, they don't make them like you anymore." A mischievous but heartfelt smile decorated her friendly face.

"Do you still pose for your husband only in a bed sheet?" Vincent overlooked her compliment with an amused smile.

"Of course! That's the advantage of having no kids - no one to barge into the room when you're only half-decent," she giggled. "And you know what? It's really comfortable, especially on hot summer days. You should try it. Ever thought of... contacting Kristopher?" she teased.

Vincent's deep chuckle extended her wide smile even more before she had the cheek to add, "By the way, *I love* the beard..."



THE INVISIBLE MEN

Catherine walked into her and Vincent's private chamber with a spring in her step. "Jacob will join us in a few days, just before Good Friday. He took extra shifts at the hospital because many doctors have been off sick. But he'll definitely be with us over Easter. He called me while I was Above visiting with Lin," she said. "She gave me some more of that jasmine tea we love."

She took a small paper-wrapped parcel out of her handbag and carefully opened it. Putting it close to her nose, she breathed in the fragrant scent of the tea and offered Vincent to do the same. He followed her and smiled blissfully.

"Lin has a gift for choosing the right drink for everyone and everything," he stated, contented. "Jacob learned a lot from her medicinal knowledge. He's been giving several kinds of tea to his patients to ease their pains and other problems."

Catherine pulled a chair next to her husband and sat down. "He is so devoted to the people he looks after," she said with deep admiration for their older child.

”Yes,” Vincent agreed proudly. “His work ethic and devotion to his patients remind me of Father. He too would work tirelessly until his patients got better, even at the cost of his own physical exhaustion.”

The memories caught up with Vincent, and he became pensive. A melancholic smile appeared on his face when he glanced at his adoptive father’s old reading glasses in his hand.

“You still miss him, don’t you?” Catherine asked, her eyes full of compassion, remembering her late father-in-law fondly.

“Not a day goes by that I wouldn’t,” he replied softly. “Five years may seem like a long time, and yet, I can still feel his presence, his guidance. With every book I touch, every decision I make at the Council, every memory of him that I cherish...”

“You know I felt the same when my dad died.” She shook her head, smiling incredulously. “It’s been so many years, and still; though I know he’s somewhere else, he’s always with me. And Father will always be with *you*.”

She looked into Vincent’s still clear and warm sapphire-blue eyes and caressed his stubbly cheek. For a brief moment, her fingers absently played with the beard Vincent started growing not long ago and that Jenny admired so ardently. If his face was an image of dignity, kindness and wisdom when he was young, the wrinkles on his forehead, still only a few silver streaks in his long mane and now the beard added something more to the image - the experience of years. And she loved it more than anything.

An amused smile played on her full lips. “Do you think they... hang out... up there?” Suddenly, she couldn’t put the uplifting image out of her head.

Vincent chuckled, taking her warm hand in his. “That is something Mouse would say,” he remarked. “But yes, Catherine; I think our fathers do *hang out*, wherever they are and watch over us. And Father probably chases your father and Peter to play chess whenever he can.”

”And Sebastian performs his magic tricks to distract everyone from Father’s humiliation,” Catherine added with a cheeky grin.

The imagery drove the melancholy away from his eyes and brought a youthful twinkle to them. He laughed and shook his head, putting the glasses into an old leather case. Then he stood up from the chair and held his hand out to his wife, smiling.

“Come; Rebecca is waiting for us.”

Catherine gladly accepted his hand, hardened by long years of hard labour in the Tunnels. She stood up and wrapped her arm around Vincent’s before they walked out of the chamber to meet their old friend.

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THE LIGHT ALSO RISES

The spacious chamber of the Tunnel candle-maker was filled to the brim with her creations, as always. Probably even more that day because they were made for a special occasion, which was approaching fast. They formed a white sea around the space because that was their colour. The only detail that made them appear special was a small sprig of rosemary, fastened with a piece of string at the bottom of each of them. The subtle yet undeniable scent of the herb lingered pleasantly in the air.

“Here we are.” Catherine announced their arrival when she and Vincent entered Rebecca’s working space.

“Come in,” she greeted them with a smile, putting a stray, almost white curl away from her forehead. “Your candles are ready.”

Vincent slowly approached the woman who had been his dear friend since they were children and admired the white beauty around them. “Every time I enter this chamber, I’m in awe of the magic that a pair of hands can create,” he said with admiration.

Rebecca’s warm smile widened. “And every time you leave with a candle... or more.” She winked at him.

Lowering his eyes and turning his back to Catherine, Vincent tried to hide an enigmatic smile. However, his wife was engrossed in the beauty around them and didn’t notice their visual encounter.

“I don’t know which of them are my favourite ones,” Catherine mused. “The Winterfest candles are beautiful but so are the Remembrance ones! You are a magician, Rebecca. Every year you make the same ones, and still, they always seem like I’ve never seen them before...”

The candle-maker laughed. “*Your* candle-making skills are nothing to be ashamed of either; you could easily take over from me. Besides, Narcissa was the only magician in these tunnels. One of the candles will burn in her honour as well this year.”

The cheerful mood faded all of a sudden, and a brief silence descended upon the three friends. A small smile appeared on Vincent’s face when he remembered his last interaction with the spiritual legend of the Tunnels, a year earlier...

“You are restless, child,” Narcissa whispered, lying in a bed in the Hospital Chamber. “You shouldn’t be. You have everything you ever dreamed of.” Vincent smiled and lowered his eyes. “Yes,” he replied simply. “And yet...” Even at the end of her life, the oracle saw more than meets the eye. “And yet...” Vincent agreed sadly and took the hand of the old woman gently in his hands.

“I know what is bothering you,” Narcissa said slowly, saving her breath but smiling. “First Father, and soon the crazy woman.” She chuckled in her typical way. “Fear is no good friend, child. It helps sometimes, but sometimes it can break

you.”

Vincent’s eyes started burning suddenly. Even though he was pushing 70, she never stopped addressing him as if he was only a boy, the one that had been dear to her heart since their first encounter. After a while, he gathered his words.

”Whenever I was in doubt, when I didn’t know which path to take, what to do, I always had two people I could always turn to for advice - Father and you. Narcissa... who will I turn to now if I find myself at a crossroad again?”

The genuine sadness in his gravelly, now even deeper voice, touched the oracle’s heart. She smiled and squeezed his hands, holding hers.

”Yourself,” she whispered with emotion. “Your Catherine, your children, friends... your heart. You have been doing that for many years already,” she said knowingly, raising her eyebrows, her face radiating genuine pride in her much loved ‘child’.

For the first time, Vincent smiled; the images of his beloved wife, his sons and many friends appeared in his mind’s eye. “Yes...,” came his short reply, when he realised she was right.

”For a wise man, you still think like a boy sometimes,” Narcissa laughed quietly again, then spoke earnestly. “The past is there to teach us. Remember it... cherish it, all of it, the good and the bad... but don’t dwell on it, Vincent. The future is ahead. Keep your mind and heart open. You must keep moving...”

“Vincent?” Catherine touched his arm gently. “Are you all right?”

He smiled, pulling her close and softly kissing her forehead. “I was only... remembering.”

She didn’t have time to ponder on his temporary absent-mindedness because someone else entered Rebecca’s work chamber.

”I see I’ve come at the right time,” Eric remarked cheerfully when he joined them. Rebecca passed him a small, linen-wrapped package. “White-lily scent. I hope you’ll like it,” she stated, with a softened look.

”Oh, I’m sure Ellie will,” the younger man replied enthusiastically, nodding. Then he noticed the curious expression on Vincent’s and Catherine’s faces. “It would have been her birthday today,” he explained quietly. “Every year, Rebecca makes a special candle for me, that I light for Ellie in the evening. It’s her birthday present...”

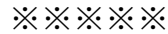
Memories... How bittersweet they can be. And yet, none of the people in the chamber would have wished to erase the memory of the golden-haired child who left the world way too soon.

Suddenly Eric smiled. ”She used to scold me for not doing my homework on time, chase me around our chamber with a notepad until I sat down and finished it.”

“Ellie would be proud of what you have become,” Vincent praised his former pupil. Eric chuckled, though. “I’m not sure whether the Tunnel children’s Maths teacher is

something she had in mind for me, but I do love it.” He paused and shook his head, amused. “And now *I* have to chase the children to do their homework!”

Bright laughter of four people echoed in the chamber as the mild scent of rosemary and white lilies in the air filled their senses with memories that would stay with them forever.



OF FRIENDLY BONDAGE

The calm, regular sound of the pipes rhythmically measured the time on that spring morning. Vincent’s feet carried him to the gate at the drainage pipe leading out to Central Park, as for countless times in the past. However, it wasn’t Catherine he was expecting.

He was leaning against the wall, patiently waiting, when a click of the automatic lever opened the gate next to him.

“A welcoming committee; how nice!” Joe exclaimed cheerfully, entering the tunnel behind the gate.

”I’ve got a Council Meeting later this morning, but I didn’t want to miss your visit, so I thought I would at least accompany you on your way to Catherine,” Vincent explained, shaking hands with his friend.

They walked for a while, spending time with a casual conversation when Joe suddenly chuckled.

“I remember the first time I saw you standing at that gate,” he said fondly. “I thought I must have eaten too many chocolate cheese nuggets... I’ve never seen anything more fascinating in my life.” He shook his head.

A humble smile appeared on Vincent’s face - he would have thought of himself as anything but fascinating. Joe’s enthusiasm pleased him, though.

”Your first reaction when you saw me was fascinating too,” he teased.

”Oh yeah? Well, I’m glad I could entertain you and make Radcliffe happy.” Joe grinned.

Vincent chuckled, then stated the obvious. “Always.”



“By the way, this is from Edie.” Joe passed a letter to Catherine. Then he reached for his steaming cup of strong coffee.

“Oh, great! We haven’t seen each other for almost a year,” she said. “She’s immaculate at her Helper’s duties, but we always miss each other somehow, and

phone or webcam is just not the same. I seriously need to get her over here soon, or to our brownstone Above.”

She eagerly opened the envelope before reading aloud.

“Hey, girlfriend!

I bet you won't guess where I am now – the man of my dreams took me to Las Vegas for our anniversary! Maybe he finally wants to tie the knot after 23 years! Anyway, the kids were beside themselves when they found out. They even bought me a sexy white dress (into which I just about managed to fit), just in case their father would decide that co-habiting and raising children wasn't enough anymore. You know he's no Fred Astaire, but check this out: He's taking me for a 'special' dinner tonight! I wonder whether he'll pop the question during the main course or wait until the dessert (you both know I can't miss a dessert, not after all those years on a diet Coke and salads that had seen better days)... I shall definitely keep you posted!

I hope you're all doing as good as you can. A proper catch-up is long overdue... Anyway, say hi to that hunk of yours, and don't do anything I wouldn't do, okay?

*Much love,
Eddie”*

Catherine couldn't help but laugh. “That woman better keeps her hands on her own hunk,” she said, raising her eyebrows, “or else I shall be sending her regular deliveries of diet Coke and salad for the rest of her life.”

Her ex-boss and friend threw his arms up. “Radcliffe! Did you really think that once Edie finally finds and keeps a guy, she would stop dreaming of others? Come on!”

”I don't care if she's dreaming of others,” Catherine replied with a cheeky smile, “as long as it's not *my* man.”

Joe grinned again. “If that is all you're worried about, I can assure you that even if she was, your *hunk* would rather get exposed on national TV half-naked than exchange you for some other woman.”

They both laughed, and Catherine laid back on the large bed, stretching the tired muscles in her arms and allowing Joe a view of the “domestic and relaxed Cathy”. Sitting in a chair nearby, he smiled, always happy to see her so contented with her life.

”When I gave my private legal practice over to my younger colleagues last year, I thought I'd slow down, read books until my eyes drop, and sleep as long and as often as I wanted,” Catherine said dreamily. “And then I realised that Mission Impossible doesn't even begin to cover this image. There's so much to do here that the only time I see a book is in the evening, when we read with Vincent. “

She laughed, but Joe saw in her emerald eyes and her still youthful smile that she wouldn't have traded this life for anything in the world.

The vintage clock in the chamber chimed at 1 p.m., and Joe's head jerked at the sound.

"I've gotta go. I'm picking Diana up from the police station; they asked her for advice in a case," he said and got up.

Catherine stood up as well, ready to lead him out. "She was always brilliant at her work and gained a great reputation. No wonder they drag her out of retirement now and then."

"Yeah... I thought we'd finally have a quiet, peaceful life once we both retired. You would think she'd have enough of murderers and psychopaths after all those years, but no, Mrs Maxwell has her own mind, as always," Joe sighed cluelessly.

Catherine leaned closer to him and patted his arm. "And that's why you married her," she added with a beaming smile.

"That's why *she* married me," Joe countered. "Can you believe there was a time when she totally resented even the notion of marriage?" His disbelief amused Catherine.

"Oh, you know that thing about love and mountains." She winked, making him chuckle (and pleasing his ego).

Suddenly, he turned to her. "By the way, Diana will meet you at the agreed time and place later today. She's got the thing you wanted."

Catherine's face lit up with excitement, and her mouth twitched, for she saw her friend was dying to know what all the secrecy was about. "Perfect, thanks! And don't worry, Joe. You'll find out what it was soon enough."

She ruffled his short, grey hair out of excitement, then put her arm around his shoulder, leading him out of the chamber.

"Gee, thanks; I feel honoured," he replied with sarcasm in his voice. "I don't suppose we're talking about tickets for you and Vincent for a private senior cinema showing of some flick after midnight."

Catherine pierced his chocolate-brown eyes, raising her eyebrows. "Joe, I told you a long time ago - no one says 'flick' anymore..."

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THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE KING

"I swear there is something magical about that place," Devin said with fascination, sitting leisurely in Vincent's chamber.

"You mean other than Rip van Winkle and the ghosts of Henry Hudson's men?" Elliot teased and glanced at Vincent with a cheeky smile.

Devin laughed. "Go ahead, just laugh, but you can't deny that there is a different kind of atmosphere there."

"Agreed. Catskills do that to you. They pull you in their emotional grip as you gaze over the vast masses of green hills and valleys," Elliot replied theatrically.

Vincent listened to their conversation with mixed feelings. He wished he could have shared the moment with them.

"We went there to remember Charles - by the way, thanks for offering to accompany me, Elliot," Devin continued, "- but it was so much more... It always is; the peace I find there always gives me a new lease of life." He paused for a moment, then laughed. "Charles had the same effect on me... Those almost two years we lived there when I was looking after him were among the most meaningful ones of my life. I don't know how to explain it better, but I felt very close to him."

"Perhaps because you were like him once, in a way," Vincent pondered. "Wounded, fragile, self-doubting... trying to fit in."

Devin looked at his brother and nodded with a sad smile. "If Charles was still here, I think I would have been still chopping wood, strolling through the forests and reading Dickens with him."

"Which would have been a tragic loss to the female world," Elliot remarked. "Especially for one member of it." He raised his eyebrows.

Devin's mood changed immediately. "Regardless of how much I relish in my other half's company, I must admit it was quite refreshing to spend a few days without a female presence." He winked, making the other two men chuckle.

"I'm not sure your *better* half would think the same," Vincent teased. Even after almost twenty years, it still warmed his heart to see his brother settled, finally having found someone to share his heart with.

"How about you, Elliot?" Devin inquired with interest.

"Oh, you know me." The retired real estate magnate scratched his immaculately-trimmed silvery beard. "I diplomatically blamed it on a friend's emergency to get a freedom pass for a few days," he answered with a grin, making the other two chuckle. Elliot leaned his head back against his chair and sighed. "I must confess there were times, though, when I did miss her. Single life is satisfying in many ways, but nothing compares to the feeling when you wake up to a new day, and your main reason for doing it is lying next to you."

Devin absently scratched his greying head, musing. Then he looked at his brother.

“And what about you, lion-man?” he teased. “Does Chandler keep you on a leash after all these years?”

Vincent smiled enigmatically, lowering his eyes for a brief moment. His hand touched the pouch hanging around his neck. It was slightly worn out after so many years but as meaningful to him as ever.

“She never had to,” he replied. “A marriage is a bond of souls, a bond of trust, in which one appreciates both, one’s own freedom as well as the freedom of the other. We always grant each other space when either of us needs it. Years cannot change that or the strength of our love.”

A deep sigh came from Devin’s direction. “Saint Vincent and his rulebook of love,” he said with a cheeky smile.

”And look how far he’s made it with it,” Elliot remarked, enjoying the fun conversation. His smile faded soon, though. “Love changed *my* life in so many ways I can’t even count them. Most importantly, it literally saved my life...”

Vincent’s eyes filled with compassion and his heart with sorrow. “Fortune truly stood by your side that day,” he said quietly.

”I often think back on that September day,” his friend mused. “I was supposed to meet a business partner that morning but I was late... In my entire life, I have *never* been late to any appointment, a business or a personal one, until that day.” Elliot briefly closed his eyes, shaking his head. “That morning, we just... forgot about time for some reason. We had our breakfast, talked for ages about our plans for that night, we laughed...” A gentle smile appeared on his face. “Then I suddenly realised what time it was, that I was already late and rushed out to get a cab. And then, while driving in one, I’ve heard the news on the radio...”

A moment of silence befell the three men as each got lost in their thoughts.

“We lost three of our Helpers in the World Trade Centre that day,” Vincent said quietly. The sadness still lingered in his heart, although many years had passed since. “Too many didn’t have such luck.”

”Yes,” Elliot agreed and sighed. “I owe my life to love.”

*“He knew enough of the world to know that there is nothing in it better than the faithful service of the heart,”*¹ Devin quoted with a smile, cheering them up again.

The three friends turned their heads to the chamber entrance, where a sudden sound of feet caught their attention.

”Oh, I’m sorry,” Pascal apologised hastily, then glanced at Vincent. “I only came to tell you that the pipe in the kitchen section is repaired now. Mouse lent me a hand.”

“Thank you, Pascal,” Vincent said, rising from his chair. “Would you like to join us for tea?”

¹Charles Dickens: *A Tale of Two Cities*

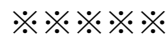
The pipe master smiled but shook his almost bold head. "Thanks, but some other time. That repair held me from the pipe chamber for too long; I need to check if everything is..."

"Still there?" Vincent teased, amusing the other men around him.

"Yes, that too," his friend replied, lowering his eyes and smiling. Then he nodded to everyone and backed out of the chamber.

"I thought I used to invest too much time into my work, but Pascal..." Elliot remarked.

"Yes," Vincent agreed, sitting down again and reaching for his teacup, amused. "As Catherine once said, Pascal and his pipes..."



LOVE'S LABOUR'S FOUND

The day had finally come. Thirty-five years later, he still felt the thrill he had felt the first time. Although, back then, it was fused with fear as well - fear for the life of a woman he had never seen before but who, with the strength and sharpness of a Cupid's arrow, pierced his heart and became an eternal part of it forever.

The festive dinner at their home Above was a quiet yet magical experience for Vincent and Catherine. They indulged in William's delicacies with the greatest pleasure, and Catherine had no objections against skipping cooking herself that day.

"He still got it, big time," she said blissfully, putting down her fork after finishing the luscious cherry cobbler.

"He never lost it," Vincent remarked with a smile. "Just as the rest of us, William can't stop the hands of time, but time can't stop William when he is in his Cooking chamber."

"I'm amazed I managed to retain my weight over the years. He can create magic from the simplest ingredients," Catherine gushed about the famous Tunnel chef.

"That's why he was more than happy to initiate you into the mysteries of his trade all those years ago," Vincent teased.

Catherine laughed, and with a contented sigh, she leaned back on her chair, closing her eyes. Vincent regarded her with tenderness and a gentle smile: he saw her smiling face, marked by time and ordeals of the past and yet still beautiful and radiant as ever; her emerald eyes glowing with happiness; her long, wavy, blonde-dyed hair, combed to one side and loosely braided. And he felt the gratitude, joy and endless love filling her heart.

Finally, she opened her eyes to him again. She couldn't get enough of the sight of his older and maybe even more majestic appearance: his long golden mane,

interwoven with strands of silver; the soft beard; the wrinkles on his forehead and the fine lines around the eyes, emphasising the years of experiences; the eyes, that were still the brightest, bluest, most honest and gentlest eyes she had ever seen...

"I think it's time for your present," she said, and her face lit up with the excitement of a little girl. She left the table but returned quickly, sitting down again and passing a small parcel to her husband. "Happy anniversary, Vincent."

His eyes twinkled as he opened his present, wrapped in brown paper and tied with a crimson-red ribbon.

"Catherine..." he breathed, and his eyes got misty at the sight of the title on a vintage edition of the book in his hands. "*Great Expectations*..."

"First edition," she added proudly, relishing in his joy. "I couldn't get my hands on one for ages, only the newer editions, but Diana offered to help me and finally found one in some hidden antique book store on Madison Avenue. I was thinking for months about what to give you on this special day. Then I realised that nothing else could say better what these last 35 years have meant to me than the memory of where it all started..."

Whatever Vincent felt at that moment, he couldn't find the words to express it - there were not enough of them. Especially when he opened the book and read the inscription on the front page:

*"You are in every line I have ever read..."*²

*Forever,
Catherine*

For once, the ultimate master of words was rendered speechless. His smile and the emotion reflected on his face told her everything there was to know, though. He leaned over and pressed a gentle kiss on her lips.

"Thank you..." he whispered then, resting his forehead on hers, still unable to say more.

Catherine wiped a stray tear from her cheek.

"You said you wanted to show me something after dinner," she said then.

Vincent interrupted their intense eye contact and stood up from the table, reaching out his hand to her. "You will need your coat; it's a bit cooler there at this time of the day."

* *

They descended under ground, not minding walking hand-in-hand for a good while until they reached their destination. When Catherine finally stepped inside, her face lit up.

"Oh... We haven't been here for some time..." she gasped, admiring astonished the colourful walls of The Painted Tunnels anew.

Vincent put his arms around her waist as they slowly walked on.

"I know," he agreed. "We haven't had much time for anything but reading recently."

"It's strange, but it feels as if Elizabeth was still here, waiting somewhere at the end of this tunnel and looking for an empty space to cover with another picture," Catherine mused, smiling. "I wonder what she would paint today."

"Life has given us countless new stories to paint since she's been gone," he remarked, his eyes travelling from one image to another. "She had great talent, dedication and passion for bringing stories to life with colours. It was her life, painting the chronicle of our times."

"I can't but think of the first time you brought me here," Catherine recalled a bittersweet memory. "It was a time of great distress that almost separated us..."

"And yet, we've endured all the hardship that life has thrown upon us, just like the paintings on these walls," he said, smiling. "They have cracks here and there, but their stories live on forever." At that moment, he stopped and pointed at a painting Catherine had never seen before.

"Oh, Vincent!" she cried, and her eyes filled with tears.

Four faces were smiling at them from the concrete wall in front of them: Vincent and Catherine in their younger years with both their children in their arms.

"How??" she couldn't hide her astonishment, and her fingers traced the outlines of the figures in the painting. "Who painted it? Elizabeth painted a lovely picture of us with Jacob, but she never got round to---"

Vincent chuckled and leaned his head against hers, regarding the image lovingly. "No, she didn't," came his enigmatic reply.

Catherine turned to face him, her curiosity piqued to the maximum. With her question in mind, her husband continued.

"Do you remember how Geoffrey asked you about the family photos Nancy did of us years ago? There are only a few, but there is one which had all four of us in it..."

"He said he just wanted to look at the light in the photos since it's different in the Tunnels; for reference for the latest painting he was working on..."

Vincent nodded and tilted his head, immensely enjoying her bewilderment. "He thought we might enjoy a special memory being added to these walls, because we are all a part of the Tunnel history."

"Enjoy?? It's amazing!" Catherine exclaimed with misty eyes. "Oh... Remind me to scold him for tricking me." She raised her eyebrows in a pretended insult. "Oh, it's... beautiful..."

Her excitement warmed his heart, and Vincent decided it was the right time for his turn. He opened the satchel hanging over his shoulder and took out a linen-wrapped parcel.

"A large part of the Tunnel history is embedded in these walls forever, but another large part is merely a shadow of what it truly has been. Therefore..." He passed her the parcel, watching her reaction.

Catherine unwrapped the linen cloth and revealed a brown leather-bound volume that looked like a journal, although it was thicker than his usual journals. She read the title on the cover, and her heart skipped a beat.

"*Thirty-five years of love...*" she whispered with a lump in her throat and traced the handwritten words on the jacket with her fingers. She would have recognised that handwriting in her sleep.

"Vincent..." She opened the book and shed another tear when she saw the first handwritten line on the first page.

"There are three volumes," he remarked, moved by her reaction. "I left the other two in our chamber, for practical reasons." He explained with an amused smile. "It took me almost a year to write, and it was one of the most emotional and rewarding experiences I've ever had... Everything is in it, our whole journey, our friends, our family..."

His voice was gentle again. His heart was beating for the woman by his side, with the same intensity as it had been for the past thirty-five years.

Catherine lowered her eyes, still smiling and slowly turning the pages of the precious gift. Then her bright eyes bore into Vincent's again.

"And that's only the beginning," she whispered, the conviction on her face denying anything else.

When her lips tenderly descended on his, he breathed in her scent, as he had done every time before. He didn't know whether it was the animal part of himself doing it or a simple feeling of elation and thrill, but he didn't care. She was there, had been there throughout the most beautiful years of his existence and if life was kind, she would still be there for and with him for many years to come...

* *

When they stopped at the entrance to their chamber, the only light breaking through the complete darkness was the soft, dim light coming through the fan window over their bed.

"Don't be afraid of the dark, Catherine," Vincent said with care.

"There's no darkness, Vincent, when you're with me," she replied with a dazzling smile and squeezed his hand that held hers.

Distant, yet such vivid memories flashed across his mind: their first Winterfest; Catherine's hair, fluttering in the wind; the Crystal, resting low on her chest, flashing like fire with every change of light illuminating it; their first dance...

Reluctantly, he let go of her hand, walked inside their private space and lit a candle on the table in the middle of it. Then he lit two more next to the first candle. And then he lit more, everywhere around - on the mantelpiece, shelves, bookcase, nightstand... One by one, with each candle lit, each year of the life they had shared flashed before their eyes like a firefly, warming up the cool spring night air. When Vincent finished, Catherine counted thirty-five candles that Vincent had lit.

"You kept Rebecca busy," she teased, but her smile was worth a thousand candles to him.

"One candle - one year of our journey," he explained, making his way back to join her. "Whatever happened, whatever came, we have always had each other. And we've always had our friends and family in the Tunnels and Above."

"For better, for worse... until death do us part," Catherine added, putting her arms around his waist and gazing in his eyes. "And I'm sure even after..."

There, the truth beyond knowledge again. It had never faded, never failed, always keeping them on the right path.

Vincent kissed her forehead, his lips lingering on the spot for a precious moment, his arms holding her in his safe embrace.

"Shall I read for you now, Catherine?" he asked softly.

"I thought you'd never ask," came the reply, along with a chuckle.

"Would you like to start *Great Expectations* again?"

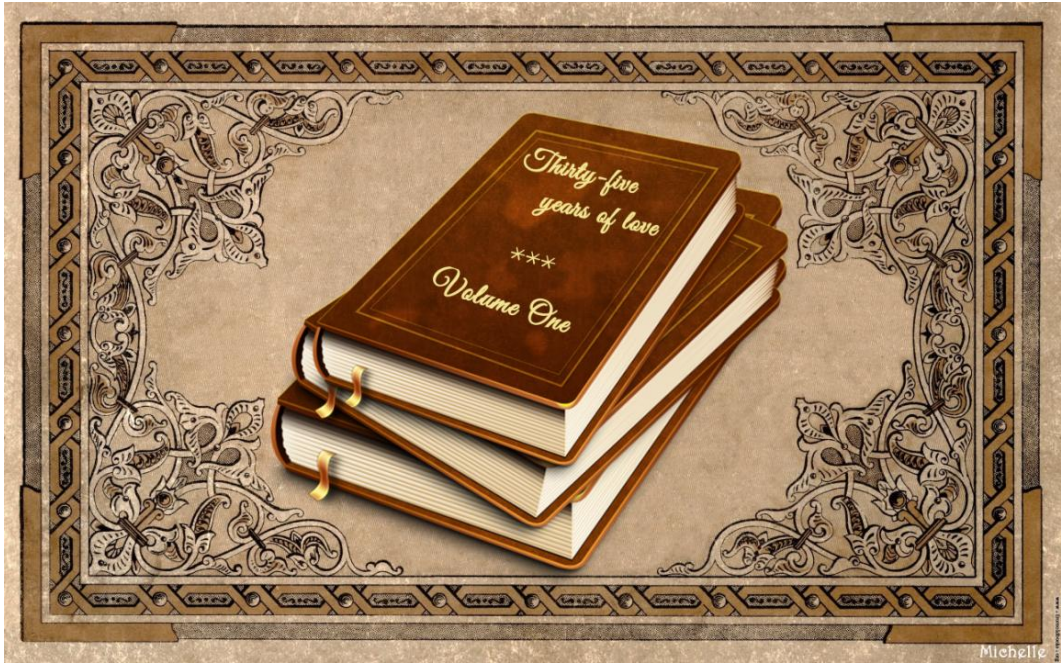
"We shall definitely get to it soon, but I would love you to read *your* book..."

Now it was his turn to put on a beaming smile. He led her to their bed and picked up the first volume of his memories before they laid down. They leaned against the headboard, Catherine resting comfortably on his chest. Her eyes were glued to the first page of the volume, admiring every word that Vincent had put on it, with precision, care and above all, love.

And as the light of the thirty-five candles around the chamber peacefully flickered in the mild breeze reaching them from the tunnels, his deep, velvety voice gently echoed in space as he began to read.

"*Once upon a time in the City of New York, thirty-five years ago, my life has begun...*"





Michelle