

Welcome To The Dark Side

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



Note: Certain lines were taken from the episodes 'The Rest Is Silence', 'Invictus' and 'The Reckoning' from the TV series Beauty and the Beast, written by Ron Koslow, George R.R. Martin, Alex Gansa & Howard Gordon.

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"Where once was light, now darkness falls..."
Gollum's Song (Fran Walsh)

Darkness... that's what he was most familiar with throughout his life. The darkness of the life he led since his childhood... the darkness of the deeds he had committed countless times; the darkness of his heart and soul. This darkness was different, though. The black nothingness gripped him with an iron hand, sucking the last remains of life out of him within seconds.

Open your eyes...

Was it only a blink of an eye since he had lost consciousness and had a whole lifetime passed him by? He didn't know. The only thing he knew was that something was urging him to open his eyes and see, although he had no idea what it was. His heavy eyelids made an effort and bit by bit, they revealed an unknown scene before him.

“You took your time.” A deep, resounding voice with a hint of sarcasm made him slowly sit up and focus. He blinked, protecting his sight from momentary dazzling light that was almost blinding him. When his eyes adjusted to the unexpected brightness, so much in contrast to the vast blackness from only a moment ago, he began to recognise the shapes of his surroundings.

The blinding brightness faded, and he found himself in something he would describe as a giant lair - a wide underground space surrounded by rough rocky walls reaching high up into the dark nothing, with damp and cool air and a soft mist rising from the ground, sneaking around him like a snake. Then finally, his eyes stopped at the tall, bony figure in front of him, with piercing black eyes and dressed all in black.

“Is this---” he started, narrowing his cold, hazel eyes.

“It is the place where you need to be,” his counterpart answered with a chilling smile.

“At least for the time being.”

“Could you be more specific? I am not used to incomplete answers, they irritate me.”

“I think you are clever enough to figure the answer yourself shortly,” came the smug reply.

“Who are you?”

The tall man straightened himself up in full glory, lifting his head proudly. “I am he, who brought despair and destruction to many. He, who killed the weak, standing in his way. He, who fought the strongest and the most powerful. He, who battled... and lost... I am he, who was his first real enemy.” He paused for a moment, contemplating, but then added. “I have been waiting for you.”

His face got distorted by a proud grin. “I am your guide in this place. The man who was born John Pater and later became Paracelsus. And I am truly pleased to have finally made your acquaintance, Gabriel...”

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The newly deceased man observed his self-proclaimed guide with scepticism. “Paracelsus? You don’t look like a Renaissance alchemist.”

“Unfortunately, I am not *the* alchemist, although I am no stranger to the secrets of alchemy. However, I carry his name with utmost respect,” Paracelsus replied with importance.

“An imposter then, how charming.”

“No mortal dares call me that! You are lucky you are not one of them anymore.”

Gabriel narrowed his eyes then noticed the sarcastic grin on Paracelsus’s face.

“Don’t you remember? You should. I must say the poetic justice in the manner of your demise was very intriguing.”

Gabriel suddenly remembered and grabbed his chest, then looked down at it. His snowy-white shirt was spotless.

“Yes, you were shot,” Paracelsus confirmed the fact.

“Is this a dream?” the crime lord asked, confused.

“No dream can bring back the lost ones, not even a nightmare.”

The former drug lord studied the man in front of him with a cold stare.

“Who *are* you?” he asked then.

“I already told you, I’m your guide,” Paracelsus answered, with a sigh.

“I don’t need a guide! I am no ignorant child!”

“Then you better stop behaving like one. Look around you and tell me if you can find your way.”

Gabriel’s eyes searched the space surrounding him. With great frustration and anger, he realised he didn’t know which way to go.

“Do you believe now?” Paracelsus raised his eyebrows with a mocking grin.

“The only thing I’ve ever believed in was my own strength and ability to make the world crawl at my feet!”

“Too much self-confidence and too little reality awareness has brought an untimely end to many men,” the man in black sighed and shook his head.

Gabriel wasn’t sure if he detected a hint of regret in his guide’s voice. “It was none of those that ended *my* life!” he remarked angrily.

“That is a matter of perception.”

Gabriel circled around Paracelsus with knitted brows, like a panther observing his prey, more curious about the mysterious man with each passing minute.

“Who *are* you?? Whose first real enemy were you?”

“You are beginning to bore me, but very well.” The former Tunnel dweller straightened himself up proudly yet again, grinning. “Who was your greatest enemy and your greatest obsession at the same time?”

An image of a furious lion-faced man attempting to strike at him flashed in Gabriel’s memory.

“Precisely,” Paracelsus said without getting a reply. “I am the one who led you to him. I am the one who paved the way... to your *death*...”

Gabriel’s icy glare was full of hatred.

”I was like you once,” the man in black started, “full of ambitions and dreams greater than anyone could ever imagine. I thought there was nothing and no one in the world that could stop me from achieving my goal.”

He paused for a moment, then his dark eyes turned cold. “Then came the disillusionment and betrayal from those I thought would understand. My life changed from one day to another. The need for revenge and retribution became my primary desire, even stronger than my hunger for power. And it all came to pass when *he* came.”

His companion raised his eyebrows. "He?"

"The most extraordinary being you and I have ever seen," Paracelsus replied, with mild sentiment that passed in a blink of an eye. "He was but a baby when he entered my life, yet I could feel his power, his will to survive, his potential..."

For the first time since the two men met, he looked on the verge of losing self-control, as if the effort of bringing his darkest memories back to life cost him much more than what he had bargained for.

"However, I was deceived... by my very own..." The anger in his voice was palpable. "That day, I swore I would get my revenge and emerge even greater than before."

Gabriel rolled his eyes. "This is all very dramatic, but could you cut it short?" he asked, his irritation growing.

Paracelsus pierced him with his look. "As far as I can see, you have nowhere to hurry off to." He lifted his chin, annoyed by the display of disinterest by the newly deceased. "I am here for a reason, so I will decide what to do and when."

"Very well." Gabriel waved his hand then folded his arms on his chest, waiting for more.

"To make it brief," Paracelsus continued, "the one I wanted to make great turned against me and in the end, he took my life, although not knowing who he struck at first. Ironically, it was the happiest day of my life, for at least once in his life, for a moment, he turned into what I always thought he could become - the most powerful and merciless being on earth... a being to my image." He smirked triumphantly.

"What does it all have to do with me?" Gabriel inquired with pretended disinterest.

"Nothing... and everything," Paracelsus replied. "You know of whom I speak, so you may as well learn that I knew about you long before I was robbed of my life. We used to trade in..." he paused and chuckled, "let's say, a *similar* industry, and your name had a ring in places of interest."

"How come I've never heard about you?" the crime lord inquired with suspicion.

Paracelsus smirked with pride. "I was excellent in keeping... private," he replied then returned to his original thought. "Anyway, I had heard that you were looking for the black book, so I decided it would be a handy instrument to lead you to Vincent."

Things were getting too confusing for Gabriel, and he frowned.

"Call me ignorant but just how did you expect that it would lead me to him? I mean... even with your intelligence, which I can see there are traces of, how could you have expected... *arranged* that it would lead me where you wanted me to be?"

It sounded all too incredulous.

Paracelsus raised his eyebrows and shook his head with a deep sigh. "I've always found it deflating to hear people doubt my skills," he stated. Then he continued, still mildly offended. "Before I walked into my death, I spun a web around Catherine Chandler and Joe Maxwell. Of course, they believed everything. They have always been full of justice and truth but always missing the point," he said with disdain.

"Justice is only good when it serves a good purpose, and truth can easily be bent to our convenience. Maxwell is luckily too transparent concerning everything, from his

work to his friends. It wasn't difficult to invent a way to attract him since he is not in for bribes and blackmailing. He is so moral it's sickening."

"Unlike his ex-boss," Gabriel remarked with a smirk.

"To my knowledge, Moreno always played on the side that suited him, traitor material of the finest calibre. Pity I had no opportunity to test his resilience. I'm sure I would have been highly entertained."

"You like playing with people, don't you?" Gabriel stated more than asked.

"I used to, but only if they were worthy opponents. Which, come to think of it, Moreno wasn't." He raised his eyebrows and grinned coldly. "That leads us to the maned man himself. I was sure my little charade would make a way for you to meet him at some point."

Gabriel's response was immediate and aggressive.

"Hell itself must have sent you my way..." he spat, with a despising look.

"That is another matter, which we are not here to answer," Paracelsus replied as a matter of fact, before amusement coloured his voice, "but if you are honest with yourself, you must admit it was the most thrilling experience of your life."

The crime lord's lips slowly extended into a satisfied, devilish grin, matching the alchemist's grin with equal satisfaction.

"So what happens now? Am I about to meet three ghosts that turn me into a saint?" Gabriel inquired then, with a challenging look.

"Don't ruin this moment of perfection." Paracelsus shook his head. "This is no Dickens."

"By no means," Gabriel agreed sarcastically.

"I will show you the past and..."

"I know my past. Thank you for the effort, but you can keep it."

"I will show you *the past* and you will look at it through the eyes of those that were affected by it," Paracelsus continued, resolved. "You will see the actions and their consequences. You will not judge with the eyes you had in your life, but with the eyes you have now."

Looking at the man in front of him, whose stare of a reptile silently observed him with a mixture of pretended boredom, curiosity and resistance, Paracelsus understood there was only one way to go forward. He turned his head to the right, peering into the dark distance. He raised his hand and pointed in the same direction.

"We better start," he said firmly, and the space ahead of them suddenly opened like a window.

Seeing the revealed image before him, Gabriel incredulously narrowed his eyes, and as if pulled by a magnet, he made a few steps closer to it...



*“We are lost! We can never go home...”
Gollum’s Song (Fran Walsh)*

The scruffy-looking small bedroom was cast in darkness. Only the moonlight from outside managed to faintly break through the window, illuminating the interior crammed with three children’s beds, a small desk with two chairs and an old, heavy wardrobe standing on the wall opposite the window. There was silence except for the sound of heavy breathing coming from one corner, suggesting the presence of someone.

In that corner, a small figure of a skinny, dark-haired boy, of about seven years of age, was crouching and shaking. He appeared as if he wanted to completely hide from the world, but the limited space of the bedroom prevented him from doing so. His haunted hazel eyes were open, but he was visibly holding back tears - he was afraid.

Suddenly, the creaky door opened with a slow and heavy motion, bringing a ray of bright light into the dark space. The boy turned his head in the door’s direction with horror. He saw the shadow of a tall, bony man appear in the doorway. He took two heavy steps to enter the room, coming into the moonlight so the boy could see him.

“Come with me, son,” the man said, sounding like a robot, after a moment of staring at his child with a stony expression on his face.

“I don’t want to,” replied the boy with a shaky voice, bracing his knees with his arms tighter.

The man was relentless. “It is not up for discussion. Come with me.”

“I said I’m not going!” repeated the boy, this time with more vigour.

Without a word, his father approached him and grabbed his thin arm, leading him with force out into the light of the corridor. Although the boy tried to resist with all his strength, it was useless. Suddenly, he stopped fighting when he saw another man standing nearby and waiting.

“Hello, Gabriel,” the man said, his ear-to-ear smile making the child cringe and shudder. “I’ve been looking forward to this moment for a long time. We are very happy that you will join us, young man.”

In the last attempt to change his mind, the boy cast his pleading eyes at his father, but the only thing he saw was a face of a stone - pale and lifeless.

“It’s been a pleasure making business with you,” the stranger said while shaking the other man’s hand and taking Gabriel’s little hand.

“Daddy, please!!” the child cried, but he was already being led away. Something in him cracked at once and he exploded. “I hate you!!! I will always hate you!!!” he spat screaming, kicking the stranger into his calves and trying to escape, without success.

The last image he had of his father was one he couldn’t define in all his years on earth afterwards. It resembled a soldier on a battlefield seeing his companions lying all around - speechless, helpless and beaten.

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“He sold me... *sold* me!” Gabriel hissed, ignoring the prickling in his eyes.

“Did he ever tell you why?” Paracelsus asked without a hint of emotion.

“My... *father* was never a man of many words. I’ve heard my brothers say that he used to talk much more before my mother died. I guess that’s why he chose me back then - so I couldn’t remind him that I killed his wife by coming to the world!”

“Is that why you strangled him eight years after this?”

Gabriel turned his head from the image that had faded into black and pierced his guide with an angry look.

“Do you know what hate is?” he asked, tilting his head. The sharp features of his face appeared even sharper.

“Of course, it was the basis of my existence for more than thirty years.”

“Then you must understand. That day, I swore to myself that I would pay him back one day, with interest. And I *did*, with pleasure.”

Paracelsus stated coldly. “He sold you because he needed money to feed your brothers and because he thought you would be well looked after by the man and his wife, who couldn’t have children.” He paused and sighed. “All he wished for you was to have a chance of a good life. He had no idea that those weasels only needed someone for free labour around their house.”

There were only a few moments in Gabriel’s existence that had ever surprised him. This was one of them. For a moment, he went numb, unsure whether to believe the words or not.

“What difference does it make?” he asked eventually, struggling to pretend indifference. He was trying to hold on to his pride with all his might. *No one will ever make me feel guilty. No one!*

“Maybe none. It wasn’t your first murder, after all. I have to say, you were quite proficient at your craft, for a teenager,” Paracelsus replied, then added. “I only thought you should get familiar with all the facts.”

Seeing that Gabriel stubbornly refused to discuss the matter any further, he changed the topic. “Anyway, your journey to the past hasn’t finished yet. There is more.”

He pointed to his right again, and the other man’s look reluctantly followed. And truly, the window in the space was still open, although veiled in black. However, it took only a moment before it revealed another scene...

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“*Where once was love, love is no more...*”

Gollum’s Song (Fran Walsh)

The amber light of countless candles illuminated a cave-like chamber. It was dominated by a large antique double bed, covered by an intricately hand-crafted colourful quilt. A set of nightstands on either side of the bed completed the picture of a cosy resting place. Not far away from the bed stood a wooden crib. It was empty.

On the opposite side of the rocky chamber stood a young woman, with long, dark hair, wearing all sorts of different worn clothes, combined in an unusual but tidy style. She was leaning slightly against the wall behind her. She looked forlorn, in need of physical support. Her eyes, dark but warm, were staring at the empty crib in silent and sorrowful contemplation.

“I’m sorry... I’m so sorry,” she whispered to herself, trembling. “Please, forgive me, my darling boy... but you’ll be safe now.”

She smiled and quickly wiped away a tear from her face, eager to look as composed as possible.

Her contemplation was interrupted when someone else present in the chamber approached her. He was tall and lean, clad all in long black clothes. When he stopped by her side, his oblong face came into view. Its features were very distinctive - dark, sharp eyes, long nose, dark beard, combed-back short hair... and a wide, almost disturbing grin.

“I’m glad you’re back, John,” the woman said hesitantly.

“So am I,” he replied, still grinning. “I’ve had a lot of time to think. All the disturbing events have caused too much pain already. I decided it is time to move on and start over.”

His voice was like honey - deep and smooth, almost liquid. It didn’t sound right. The icy look of his eyes only confirmed it.

John walked over to the large table in the middle of the chamber and conjured up a bottle of red wine. He poured some of it into two copper chalices, his back turned to her. Then he returned, offering one of the chalices. He was still smiling, but the woman’s eyes revealed suspicion.

“To a new beginning,” he said, raising his chalice. His dark eyes fixed on her, waiting for her to drink, but then he put the chalice to his lips and took a gulp.

Seeing this, the woman decided to follow him and she drank the wine he offered her. It took only a few seconds for her to start gasping for air. Her hands reached for him in a desperate attempt to get help, but when, despite her agony and horror, she noticed the merciless glare of his dark eyes and the disturbing wide grin on his face, she understood the truth.

Her already limp body fell to the ground and her now lifeless eyes stared into the distance...



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Gabriel was staring at the scene with confusion. The image of the woman lying dead on the cold stony floor lingered in the air in front of him like a tapestry.

“Who was she?” he asked curiously.

“Anna... She was my wife,” Paracelsus answered, his voice surprisingly quiet and less assured.

There was only one question that could have been asked. “Why...?”

Paracelsus sighed and chuckled in an attempt to cover a hint of melancholy. “Because she took away the thing I wanted the most. Something I could have led to true greatness and that would have helped me acquire the infinite power.” He pointed at the scene again. “Look into her eyes.”

Gabriel did as he was told and looked closely at the woman’s eyes, that suddenly became the sole focus of the scene floating in the air. They turned into a new window, flashing various images in succession.

Anna, running around what looked like tunnels, laughing and constantly looking back as if checking on someone...

Anna, with a sad face, walking down a dark, snowy alley, then suddenly stopping and looking at a pile of boxes next to the dustbins at a building with a large sign “St Vincent’s Hospital” ...

Anna, with a glowing face and a beaming smile, holding a small bundle in her arms, looking down at it with love...

Anna, with a disturbed and worrying look in her eyes, watching John fuss about and talk to the bundle in the crib - his face an image of obsession...

Anna, with teary eyes, passing the bundle to some bearded, frowning man with troubled grey eyes...

The bearded man, revealing the face hidden in the bundle - the face resembling a young lion...

Gabriel inadvertently took a step back, with a quiet gasp. He tilted his head, and his hawk eyes couldn't stop staring at the face of the unusual baby that started fading into the air until it vanished like smoke.

"Vincent?" he asked incredulously to get a confirmation of what was obvious.

"Yes," Paracelsus replied quite coldly. "The thing I wanted the most in the whole world... at least at that time."

The circle was closing; Gabriel only now began to truly understand why this man, with the eagle-eye stare, was sent to meet him on the threshold between Heaven and Hell. They had much more in common than just their criminal past, fun at manipulating people and desire for boundless power. They shared the potential ultimate weapon to that power. They shared Vincent.

Was Gabriel disturbed by the fact that Paracelsus murdered his wife in an act of revenge for taking away the thing he wanted and needed most to obtain his goal? Not in the least, so it seemed. After all, the alchemist wasn't the only one who ever killed a woman. *Isabelle...*

He was fourteen; she was sixteen back then. He had been living on the street for five years, after he escaped from his so-called new parents, having had enough of slaving for them for nothing, not even a single sign of human affection. That was when he met Isabelle, in the part of Lower Manhattan formerly known as Five Points (where the infamous Al Capone, one of Gabriel's inspirations, started his gangster career).

She was a breath of fresh air in his stale, polluted and miserable life, at a time when he had enough of being the poor, downtrodden boy without a single thing in his possession. She was fresh, cultivated, gentle, graceful and beautiful... as beautiful a girl as Gabriel had never seen before. He had to have her. He never had anything, but he swore he would have her and love her. His perseverance was rewarded... she fell into his arms almost too easily. But then, the realisation struck him.

Isabelle was too beautiful to remain unpolluted. Life had taught him that humans are susceptible to deceit and betrayal. Sooner or later, he would lose her to someone else, once his love wasn't enough for her. He had to preserve her purity and perfection so nothing could spoil it, and there was only one way to do it - he had to kill her. So he did.

"Yes, you beat me there," Paracelsus interrupted the train of Gabriel's thoughts. "I was eighteen when I took someone's life for the first time."

"How do you...?" Gabriel stuttered, uncomprehending.

"Oh, please..." His guide rolled his eyes. "Remember where we are. Are you truly still surprised by anything here?"

"No," admitted Gabriel after a moment, with a sarcastic grin, raising his eyebrows. Then his face grew more serious.

"Did you ever regret it? Did you ever think, *What if I hadn't done it back then?*" he asked the uncharacteristic question for a man who destroyed so many without a blink of an eye.

Paracelsus lowered his eyes for a moment. “Yes, I did ask myself that question once,” he answered truthfully, letting his guard drop for the first time during their exchange.

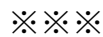
“And?”

“And I moved on and never asked it of myself again.” Paracelsus paused, his eyes unusually vulnerable. “*The war has ruined us for everything...*”¹

He blinked, and the expression on his face changed back to normal - cool and distanced.

“Well, then,” he said, shaking off the previous conversation topic. “Shall we have a look at your last stop in the past?”

He barely finished speaking when the floating window opened again...



“Don’t say - goodbye, don’t say - I didn’t try...”

Gollum’s Song (Fran Walsh)

The light of torches attached to the walls partially penetrated the darkness in the rocky tunnel. A blonde-haired boy of not yet twenty, dressed in seemingly randomly combined old clothes, was sitting near an entrance to another tunnel, listening. His face was distressed, worried... heartbroken. He was listening to sounds that surely had to remain hidden from the world of people. They were the heart-wrenching roars of an animal...

The sound of shuffling feet interrupted his pained contemplation, and he turned his head. He saw three people approaching him with worried looks in their eyes. Two were dressed in a similar style: an older man with grey hair and a grey beard, holding a makeshift walking stick, and a half-bold man in his late thirties. The third person was a woman - it was Catherine Chandler.

After the older man patted the boy’s head, the younger man stayed back with the boy, while the other two carefully crossed over to the other tunnel.

“How long do you think this will last?” the man with sharp and honest eyes on his eager face, asked the boy.

“As long as he needs,” the latter one offered. “Been through this before, remember?”

“Yes, but the first time, he was still a child, and the second time, he was drugged. This is different.”

“Everything different in his case. Mouse will stay here. Mouse will help if needed.”

¹Erich Maria Remarque: *All Quiet On The Western Front*

Catherine Chandler managed to take only the first step towards the dark cave where the roars were coming from when her companion halted her sharply.

“No! You can’t!” His eyes widened with horror.

“I must,” she replied firmly.

“Catherine, please!”

“Father, he is my life,” she insisted, desperate determination brightening her big eyes. “Without him, there is nothing...”

The man she called Father hesitated for a while, but soon realised there was no way to stop her. He briefly squeezed her hands, then reluctantly let her go, watching her taking step after step towards the terrifying unknown.

Catherine kept on walking, careful but resolved. Her eyes widened, her mouth was slightly opened, as if she needed extra oxygen to cope with the adrenaline that vibrated in her veins. When she finally reached the cave, neither apprehension nor the ever-louder growls could stop her. She dared to enter it, and her eyes searched for the source of the desperate animal sounds, focusing her look into the dark corner of the cave.

And then he appeared... suddenly running toward her, clad in ragged clothes, with an angry roar and wild look in his eyes, raising his right hand to strike, when...

“Vincent!!”

Catherine’s scream stopped the deadly blow as the lion-faced man’s features slowly relaxed, locking his widened, shocked eyes with the eyes of the woman he had just almost killed. His breathing slowed, and losing consciousness, he slid down to the ground, taking Catherine with him...

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“Oh, brilliant,” Gabriel stated with annoyance as the scene in front of his eyes dissipated like smoke. “Now that it was getting entertaining.”

“That was not the point of you watching it,” Paracelsus replied dryly. “Besides, you obviously know that Vincent didn’t kill her.”

The crime lord rolled his eyes, demanding more. “Come on, humour me. What was the outcome of this situation?”

Paracelsus smirked. “Oh, you *know* what. You held it in your arms.”

That silenced Gabriel for a moment. Then his eyes narrowed, and he absently scratched his chin. *Fascinating...*

“Interesting... She walked into that cave without hesitation, despite knowing she might never walk out again,” he said.

“A very resilient woman in possession of a great amount of strength and stubbornness, as you learned yourself. Foolish, really, but I admit, you have to admire that. I had the opportunity to witness it with my own eyes.”

“Do you care to elaborate?” Gabriel asked, more out of curiosity than real interest.

“No,” came the simple answer. “It would be of no more use to you than what you have already seen, and even less to me.”

Gabriel glanced back to the space where he had just watched the dramatic moment between Vincent and Catherine unfold.

“I wonder why he stopped,” he mused, his piercing eyes still seeing the scene from a few moments ago. “All that strength, all the power and ability... I never understood why he detested using that power to do whatever he could to become the greatest in the world.”

He turned back to his guide. “The world could have been his. I offered him a partnership, but he refused it. He refused to kill anyone without any other reason than defending lives, even when I provoked him.”

“The same happened with me,” Paracelsus stated. “Twice, he had the chance to take my life at our physical encounter, and twice, the annoying moral code his human part lives by prevented him from doing so.” He raised his eyebrows. “Foolish? Probably. Missed opportunities? Most definitely. Would he have missed the opportunity again if I hadn’t poisoned his mind with lies and driven him to the edge of insanity? Oh, yes, I sadly believe so.”

“So why didn’t he kill *her*?” Gabriel enquired.

”For the same reason you thought you *did*. Love.”

That confused the former crime lord more than anything before. “What in the devil’s name are you talking about?”

Paracelsus chuckled. “Love... that strange, often superfluous emotion... human’s greatest strength and weakness at the same time. It has many faces. Vincent didn’t kill Catherine for the love he holds for her, which, even in his insanity, he didn’t forget about. He would have rather died than harm her. *You* wanted to kill her because you love *yourself*. You were obsessed with the idea of having the ultimate weapon all in your power - her and Vincent’s child. She was of no use to you after giving birth, so she was to become collateral damage.”

He smirked. “Behold where it has got you.”

Anger flashed in Gabriel’s eyes. “I don’t need your preaching, imposter!” he barked. “You don’t appear exactly to be living happily either.”

Paracelsus chuckled. “My life is of no consequence here. I died reaching my goal, which is something you, unfortunately, can’t claim.”

A moment of silence interrupted their exchange. Paracelsus observed the newcomer with unfeigned interest. Only a few people had ever come close to equalling his ambitions and criminal skills. To see this cold man learning to cope with his new status and, unbeknownst to him, choosing his next path was a welcome distraction for him.

“So what now?” Gabriel asked when the silence stretched, unwilling to show any emotions or reveal his inner train of thought.

Paracelsus’s deep chuckle reverberated in his chest. “Now the time has come for the curtain to fall... After a little epilogue...”

His grin annoyed Gabriel, who was more irritated than ever, but he decided to humour the man in black and focused one last time on the imaginary window...



“So in the end, I’ll be what I will be...”
Gollum’s Song (Fran Walsh)

The amber candlelight and the subdued light of several hanging lamps with colourful stained-glass shades illuminated a rocky chamber. It was dominated by a large double bed, covered with colourful quilts, and right beside it stood a vintage wooden crib. A soft mewling sound came from the crib, a call for attention.

“I’m here, Jacob,” Vincent’s soothing voice reassured the baby after he carefully took him in his arms. “You are safe now, always.”

The child stopped fussing immediately, fascinated by the face of his father. Two pairs of blue eyes locked, and the boy’s little mouth turned into a smile.

“No one can tell me, nobody knows, where the wind comes from, where the wind goes.”² Vincent recited with enthusiasm to his son. “It’s flying from somewhere as fast as it can, I couldn’t keep up with it, not if I ran.”³

“But if I stopped holding the string of my kite, it would blow with the wind for a day and a night...”⁴

Catherine’s soft voice seamlessly took over from Vincent’s, as she appeared by his side, followed by a beaming smile and a kiss on the baby’s forehead. She was dressed in a cream-coloured, high-neck woollen dress. with long sleeves covering most of her hands. Its style matched in a way with Vincent’s multilayered woollen and leather attire. That could mean only one thing...

Catherine looked at the man now sitting in an antique high-back chair with the baby in his arms and shared a gentle kiss with him.

“How is he?” she asked then, unable to stop smiling, letting her hand rest on his shoulder.

Vincent looked back at the child in his arms, wrapped in hand-sewn swaddling clothes.

“Fearless,” he replied proudly. “Wonderful.”

“Such a miracle...”

He turned his head to see her face again. “The miracle of love,” he remarked softly.

² A. A. Milne: Wind On The Hill

³A. A. Milne: Wind On The Hill

⁴A. A. Milne: Wind On The Hill

Slowly standing up, he walked over to the bed and sat down, his eyes inviting Catherine to join him. She accepted immediately and sat down next to him. He passed her the baby, nesting it comfortably in its mother's arms.

*"And then when I found it, wherever it blew," she continued reciting. "I should know that the wind had been going there too."*⁵

*"So then I could tell them where the wind goes... But where the wind comes from nobody knows..."*⁶

Vincent's voice faded into silence as the boy closed his big blue eyes, happily falling asleep in the comforting presence of his parents...



*

Gabriel didn't notice his clenched fists until they started going numb. With gritted teeth, he watched the scene that wasn't supposed to be. *She should be dead! The child was supposed to be mine, mine only!*

The unbearable feeling of having lost what he thought was meant to be stung him like a thorn one can't get out. Just a few days ago, even the thought of failure was unimaginable, unacceptable... impossible! And yet it happened and all he could do was face it.

His body started to relax, his temper subsided, and his eyes turned from the raging fire back into ice. Once, he owned nations and had the world at his feet. Now he knew he was beaten, both in life and in death.

"Do you understand now?" Paracelsus broke the silence, making Gabriel jerk, speaking with his father's voice. "Violence can be satisfying, but it won't make you happy," he continued in Anna's voice. "Death... shall have no dominion," he added, impersonating Catherine.

⁵A. A. Milne: Wind On The Hill

⁶A. A. Milne: Wind On The Hill

Gabriel suddenly shivered. He was never afraid of anything, nothing had ever made him back off or doubt himself, but he looked truly shaken at that moment.

“Stop it!” he shouted. “I’m not playing this game!”

“The ultimate power lies in something quite different,” Paracelsus said, speaking with Vincent’s voice. His black eyes stared at the shook-up Gabriel with an intensity that made him very uncomfortable. “And I think you know now what it is,” he finished, speaking with his own voice again.

“If you’re attempting to turn me into a soft loser, I can spare you the time,” sneered Gabriel.

“I am not attempting anything,” Paracelsus replied dryly. “I am a mere intermediary. You choose your own path, in life... and death.”

“I think it’s pretty obvious where I am going,” Gabriel remarked with a snigger. “By the way, which path did *you* choose?” he asked. “Although looking at the colour of your clothes, I would say it’s pretty obvious, too.” A grin distorted his sharp features.

Paracelsus tilted his head, raising his thick eyebrows.

“Do you really think clothes make men? That thought has always been the greatest mistake of every man - appearances often deceive. Neither life nor death can be determined merely by what we see.”

“Life and death make a perfect circle, like a ring that has no beginning and no end,” Gabriel interjected. “A serpent eating its own tail forever. Violence eats on violence, murder on murder, vengeance on vengeance, century after century for all eternity.”

“And only you can decide - remaining a part of that serpent or letting go of it. ”

Gabriel’s eyes absently wandered around the space surrounding them, filled with dark rocks, mist and almost ethereal blue light. All his dreams, ambitions and desires emerged from his memory like a long sequence of flashbacks - his grand plans, his successes, as well as his failures. They all mingled in one fast filmstrip, haunting him and making his head spin.

He grasped his temples and frowned in pain, attempting to silence all the voices of the past in his mind. All the blame, the hurt and pain of losses, all the lies he ever told, the exhilarating moments of his wins, all the dead ones lining the path to his victories...

Gabriel’s breath became ragged, the headache was becoming unbearable. Unable to hold it within anymore, he let out a terrible scream.

“Enough!!”

Miraculously, like with a wave of a magic wand, the voices quieted, crawling back into his memories, where they belonged. His laboured breathing slowed, his hands slowly fell back down, and his features relaxed.

“The ghost of the past came to haunt you?” Paracelsus asked dryly, with a grin.

Gabriel’s icy glare was enough of an answer. Then he exhaled loudly, briefly closing his eyes.

“I... I’m confused,” he said then truthfully. His usual self-confidence was gone with the scream he uttered just a moment ago.

“So are they all when they come here,” Paracelsus stated. “Especially the truly evil ones. And frightened.”

The evil ones... Yes, he was evil, more evil than many of those he admired during his lifetime. He was never frightened, though, not since the day he was sold. Building thick walls of want and disturbing cruelty, he erased any chance of being afraid for as long as he could remember. But those walls crumbled into dust the moment he had crossed over...

“What happens with me now?” he asked, trying to sound and look unphased by the events that had just transpired.

“Two paths, two choices,” Paracelsus remarked, looking at two pathways that had appeared ahead of them as the mist suddenly lifted, one ending in blackness, the other in amber light. “Only one decision.”

Gabriel stared at the paths, one of which was to determine his fate in the afterlife. It seemed obvious; there could be only one place for someone like him. *But what if...*

“So, what will your choice be?” Paracelsus asked with genuine interest.

Gabriel glanced at his guide one more time, his face unreadable. Then he took a deep breath, lifted his chin and took the first step into the unknown.

