

REQUIEM

by A.N.D.

They watched in shared concern as the old man tossed weakly on his bed.

"Cold," he whispered. "So cold."

They bent to tend him, the younger man tucking the blankets closer while the woman gently placed a warm, wet cloth on his forehead. The man on the bed reached up and feebly grasped her wrist, pressing it once in gratitude.

"Catherine..." he breathed. "Thank you."

Diana didn't blink as she dipped another rag in the hot water and wrung it out, and Jacob marveled at her composure.

"He's a bit delirious," he said in apology for his father's error.

Blue eyes flicked expressionlessly at him. "It's actually something of a compliment, Jacob," she said calmly.

"Jacob?" whispered the voice from the bed. "Father?" A wandering hand encountered the stethoscope around the young man's neck. "Father? Is someone sick?"

Jacob swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. His grandfather and namesake had died decades ago, while he had still been in medical school.

"Everything's fine," he lied. "Try to get some rest now." The request was unnecessary, for Vincent had already faded into the light doze of the overtaxed elderly.

"How is he doing?" Diana asked quietly from across the bed.

"Not... not well," Jacob choked. "I don't think he'll last much longer."

She nodded and readjusted the blankets, then took Vincent's hand and simply sat, patiently waiting.

Jacob watched them in the flickering candlelight. The yellow glow stained his father's white hair back to its youthful blond, and the heaps of blankets padded the body beneath out to the muscular bulk it once had. But a closer look showed how sunken the blue eyes were, how withered and thin was the clawed hand that Diana held gently.

The years had treated her no more kindly. She was moving much more slowly than Jacob remembered, and her flaming hair had faded to a nondescript gray. Wrinkles intersected the faint scars of adventures gone wrong during her career with the police. But her face was serene and her eyes were dry as she watched by the bedside. Jacob found himself wondering if she had sat just that way 45 years ago, the night she found Vincent dying on Catherine Chandler's grave.

The thought of his mother sent Jacob's musings off in a different direction. "What do you mean, it's a compliment?"

The only sign of confusion was the blink. "Excuse me?"

"Why do you think Dad's calling you the wrong name is a compliment?"

"Because Catherine Chandler was the most important person in his life."

Jacob mulled that over, unsatisfied. "That's what everyone has always told me. But it doesn't seem real. It doesn't seem fair."

"Fair? How can it be fair or not? It's simply the truth."

"It's not fair to you!" Jacob blurted. "All I ever hear is how perfect Mother was, how much Dad loved her. Nobody could be that perfect! And she's been dead for years! You're the one who saved his life, who rescued me, who got me a start in the world Above! Not her! You!"

His rant cut off abruptly as a blue glare nailed him. Suddenly he felt six years old again, about to be called on the carpet for misbehaving.

"Look," he said weakly, "it's not as though I mean disrespect to the dead, but..."

"But having lived all your life without Catherine you can't imagine what losing her was like to those who knew her." It was a flat statement of fact. "And," she added with a faint smile, "you cannot see why your father only loved me as a friend when things could have been so much more... interesting."

Jacob felt himself blushing. Fortunately for him, she didn't wait for a response.

"You're very flattering. But you forget how your father and I met. Before I knew who he was, before I knew where he came from, before I even knew his name, I knew how much he and your mother loved each other. That love was as strong and unchangeable as the law of gravity. Death couldn't change that."

She settled back in her chair. "Nor will death change what Vincent and I have had. You don't have to be someone's lover to love them, you know. Friendship born in trial is also a strong tie, and I'm content with what I've had. I shared his life. Catherine shared his soul."

"And that never bothered you at all?"

She shrugged. "Does it matter? I learned early in my life that my feelings are of no particular concern. They don't change what happens. Sorrow never brought back anyone I was too late to save. Happiness never made anything good last longer. So I take what I get, and I'm grateful for what's good and I work around what's bad."

The fleeting half-smile briefly curved her mouth again. "What a pair we were. Vincent's life was ruled by his heart, and mine was ruled by my head."

As if responding to his name, Vincent jerked back to awareness. He stared blearily at Diana and whispered "Hello," before his attention was caught by something in the dark corner behind her. "Oh, it's so good to see you again!" he breathed fervently.

Diana patted his hand. "It's good to see you back, too."

Vincent went on, unheeding. "Oh, how I missed you! Wait, I'll come with you."

He strained to rise, and Diana and Jacob pressed him back down into the pillows, murmuring polite fictions about letting him up as soon as he felt better. The hand in Diana's twitched, extended...

... and closed warmly and firmly on Catherine's as Vincent rose to take his beloved into his

arms. Catherine's smile was blindingly bright, as bright as the sunlit park he could see behind her, the park she took his hand to lead him to.

While behind them in the tunnel darkness, Jacob wept as Diana pulled the blanket up to cover the still, white head.

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