

Tasting Victory...

Judith Nolan



"Patience ensures victory."

Hazat Ali Ibn Abu-Talib

Jacob opened the middle drawer in his desk slowly, and with care. He frowned, staring with rapt attention at the small wooden box he'd placed within, some months before.

He'd resisted the craving, until now. He was aware he should not touch it, but the temptation was too great, considering the stress he was under. He remembered how smoking a good cigar used to relax him after a long day.

He looked back over his shoulder. He was alone, the hour was late and most of the tunnel inhabitants were already in bed, or heading that way. The chatter of the pipes was almost non-existent. Surely he could not be found out. It had been too long since he had a reason to indulge an old passion.



He looked back to the box, and its illicit contents. It had been a Christmas gift from his very good friend, Peter Alcott.

The doctor had said he'd been in two minds about the gift in the first place. But he knew, from experience during their student days, about Jacob's love of the finest Cuban cigars. And he was aware of his friend's inability to obtain them, now. There were also the many other cares and concerns that prevented Jacob from pursuing his old habit.

Therefore, it seemed churlish not to share the unexpected bounty that had come Peter's way, through the gratitude of a long-standing patient. The fact that Peter did not smoke, only made the re-gifting of a box of the finest Dominican cigars all the more easier.

Jacob ran a questing finger across the lid of the box. If he closed his eyes he knew he could bring to mind the well-remembered scent of the cigars held within it. The sheer pleasure of drawing the fragrant smoke deep into his lungs was an illicit call to commit a petty sin.

There was appreciation to be found in running them slowly beneath his nose to inhale the odours. Also the feel of them rolling between his fingertips, the soft, almost leather-like sensation of quality leaves bound tightly, and expertly, together.

He shook his head. Of course, the legend that the cigars had been rolled on the tanned thighs of virgins was ridiculous. But the romance of the idea lingered.

Unfortunately, these were not the Romeo and Julieta Cuban cigars he'd been used to smoking in his youth. Thanks to John Kennedy and his Cuban trade embargo, they were no longer available to him. But these were the finest alternative money could buy.

“Getting them for free was a bonus.” Jacob leaned closer. *Surely one could not hurt...*

As a doctor he well knew the health risks caused by smoking. *But a man has to have at least one vice, surely?*

He glanced over his shoulder again, his gaze questing the shadows of his chamber. He worried that Mary might drop in and catch him. While he did not need her approval for anything, her well-honed look of silent disappointment was always hard to ignore. She worried about his state of health, more than he did.

And there was also the problem of his son...

Vincent had left his father alone only minutes before, his chagrin at losing six games of chess in a row evident in the defeated set of his shoulders. His usual, razor-sharp attention to the game at hand had been oddly lacking. And his father was only too well aware of the reason why.

“If only I knew what to do for the boy...” Jacob sighed, as he lifted the box out and placed it before him, on the desk.

Beside it was their last, unfinished game of chess. He stared at his son’s abandoned king, laid down in final surrender. The capitulation had been swift and brutal, the game barely half-complete.



“I cannot concentrate. I am sorry, Father...” Vincent had pressed a hand to the side of his head. “I need to take a walk in the park. Perhaps that will clear my thinking.” He had grimaced an apology.

Before Jacob could reply, his son had risen in one fluid movement, distancing himself from the disturbing scene of his unexpected defeat.

Jacob had been on the point of asking his son if he was ill, but the warning look Vincent's blue eyes had cut at him, stopped the older man's tongue, and only deepened his concerns.

"Please, do not worry about me, Father," Vincent had pleaded, before taking the steps to the upper level in two swift strides, and disappearing from view.

Of course, Jacob knew all too well the root cause of his son's ongoing distraction. The Topsider woman named Catherine had been gone from their lives for months now, but her presence was still tangible. Soft, ash-blond hair and clear, green eyes were guaranteed to cause disruption in an otherwise well-disciplined life.

And he was painfully aware his son was still thinking about the woman. He was obviously beset by distraction, and his work was suffering.

The loss of six games in a row, was also a clear indicator of how far Vincent had fallen into the melancholy of desires that could not be fulfilled. Could never be fulfilled. That way lay disaster.

Earlier in the evening, when Vincent had first appeared in the chamber doorway, carrying a first edition of *Great Expectations*, and a request for his father's counsel, Jacob had been appalled at the very idea of re-opening old wounds.

But he'd tried to be reasonable. "She can only bring you unhappiness..."

Vincent had risen from his chair in agitation. "Then I'll be unhappy -- but I can't forget her. We're still connected..."

Father had shaken his head sadly, unable to see his way in this deepening crisis. He was painfully aware of his son's growing misery.

Vincent had turned to stare into the middle distance, obviously seeing what Jacob could not. "I can feel what she's feeling. I know what she's thinking -- when she's frightened. When she's happy or sad..." His voice broke, and his great head dropped.

Father had seized onto that. “Vincent, your senses -- your empathic powers are quite extraordinary. It’s your gift. And these powers have been heightened by the concern, the love that you feel. But don’t let your act of kindness destroy you...”

Vincent had looked with sadness at the book he held in his hand. “Maybe, I have no choice...”

“Very well. I can see your mind is made up.” Jacob had looked away from his pain.

He could not bear to see his beloved son so unhappy. His eyes had fallen onto the chess board, and he’d suggested a game or two, before bed.

Vincent had reluctantly agreed. But it soon became apparent his mind was not on the game. His attention was certainly somewhere else. Jacob found beating his son all too easy, as two games turned to more, thanks to the speed with which Vincent lost. It rankled.

The joy of so many stunning victories over his opponent should taste sweeter. But Jacob could only shake his head.

“If only I could tell him I truly understand how much he hurts.”

He sighed, as he slit the binding around the edges of the cigar box lid with his thumbnail, and opened it. “If I could tell him about Margaret...”

He sighed as the scent of the cigars rose to fill his nostrils with welcome nostalgia. There had been moments, during his early days Below, where he’d craved a cigar. But the need had faded with time. *Until now...*

He selected one, and lifted it to his nose, going through all the time-honoured rituals. He imagined preparing his prize. It would take time to get it just right. There was certainty in such formalities.

He rose to his feet, anticipating the event to come. A nearby candle would serve as a lighter, and he studied the dancing flame. The taste of the cigar would be all he remembered, and enjoyed.

He could see himself, one hand placed on his hip, standing before his desk. He would put the cigar to his lips and inhale deeply. The ensuing smoke would wreath his head with fragrance.

Maybe he would enjoy a second, if the first went well. He could not see a reason why not...

Jacob knew he needed something to distract him from his other concerns, and he intended to enjoy the tobacco to the fullest. He lifted the cigar towards his mouth, the anticipation growing. He turned towards his desk, sure he still owned a cigar cutter...

But the cigar was destined to remain unlit, and unappreciated. As he turned, Jacob saw again the unfinished game of chess, and the abandoned king.

He lowered the cigar. The taste of victory was bitter, and the sensation of triumph felt very hollow.

The cigar returned to its fellows, and Jacob closed the box. He returned it to his desk drawer and pushed it shut.

His son needed him. Without regret, he hoisted himself up the steps to the upper level, and limped his way towards Vincent's chamber, where he intended to wait for his son's return.

All night, if he needed to...there was so much still to discuss...



"I've always believed that the only defeats and victories that matter in life are those you lose or win alone, against yourself."

Mihail Sebastian