

# *Safe Haven*

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



“Why did you stop?” Jacob Wells inquired, wrinkles of worry marking his face.

“We tried to remove as much and as carefully as we could, but the ceiling and the walls... When we reached a certain point, you saw it. The rocks started falling on us,” Pascal replied gravely, brushing off the dirt from his clothes. “As you know, these walls are saturated with groundwater, the same as in the Maze - that’s why we wanted to move the storage supplies to another chamber since we found out a couple of days ago. And that was also probably the reason why part of the ceiling collapsed in the first place. If we keep going, we might disrupt everything even more, which means... it might bury us, too...”

The pipe master sighed and bowed his head, afraid to look again into the patriarch’s eyes, and Jacob knew that the word problem could not encompass the true gravity of the situation. His hand went into his silvery hair, and fear gripped him for real this time.

*It can't be... This can't be the end, dear God...*

“You can’t just quit... You *can't!*” Catherine’s desperate voice echoed in the cavern. “He’s still alive... You can’t let him die there!”

The faces of her friends were the image of misery - and surrender. Their looks pinned to the ground, Pascal, Mouse, Kanin, Jamie... everyone present was trying to hide their tears. They were just about to lose their dearest friend. Yet there seemed to be nothing else to be done without endangering the others.

“Catherine, it’s been three days; we don’t even know for sure...,” Jacob started quietly, trying to prepare her (and himself) for the worst, but his voice broke.

“Father...” She grabbed his hands, squeezing them tight, and her big emerald eyes welled up as she was staring at him, panic seizing her like an iron fist. “You *must* believe me; he’s alive, and he needs us! I can feel it...”

He sighed, contemplating her words. He knew the strength of the bond; it had helped save lives many times before already. But what choice did they have? Risk many lives for one? Give up and live with the thought that they had condemned a man, a father, a husband, a friend, his *son*, to die alone, trapped in an oxygen-deprived stony prison? As long as there is hope, there is always a chance...

Seeing the devastating dread in Catherine’s eyes and listening to that tiny desperate voice within, there was only one thing Jacob could have said.

“What do you suggest?”

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### THREE DAYS EARLIER

The air at the Mirror Pool was very refreshing on that hot July day. It was much more pleasant than the stifling heat almost everywhere else in the Tunnels. Summer that year was extremely hot, and it affected even the subterranean world.

Vincent was sitting close to the pool ledge, enjoying the few moments before his day was about to start. His sapphire-blue eyes were dwelling on the water, observing the reflection of the rocks on the ceiling in it, creating an image coloured with different shades of brown. A portion of the pool glittered in a ray of sunlight, penetrating the large chamber through the chimney-like shaft leading Above.

Suddenly, Vincent’s heart fluttered when he registered a presence. His unusual lips extended into an affectionate smile. He turned his head to see Catherine walk silently toward him.

“I knew I’d find you here,” she stated, smiling. “The only place where it doesn’t feel like in a grill at the moment.”

When she approached him, she bent over and pressed a gentle kiss into his hair. Then she sat down by his side, joining him in observing the calm water of the pool.

“This is one of my favourite places in the Tunnels,” Catherine remarked dreamily. “It’s so quiet here, a perfect place for getting lost in your thoughts.” She turned her head to look at his face, smiling. “Or dreams.”

A knowing smile on Vincent’s face joined hers. Their eyes met, and he couldn’t help it - his hand reached for her cheek, tenderly caressing it with the thumb as if the last time he’d done it was years ago and not only that very morning.

“You can dream wherever you are, as long as your heart opens and doesn’t lose faith.”

*Impossible...* Catherine thought with a beaming smile, leaning into his hand. *Impossible for anyone to make me feel like this every day of my life; only you can do that...*

“Sometimes, I wish we could stay like this forever,” she said quietly. “At a place where it would be just you and me, together, where time stands still and each moment is ours... And then I remember Jake and Charlie, all our family and friends, and everything seems perfect as it should be.”

Vincent’s arm went around her shoulders as he pulled her close. The calm liquid surface in front was very soothing.

"Each moment *is* ours because we share a life together. And each moment is enriched with the presence of all those we love. Life may not always be perfect, but it is made of perfect moments, like this one," he replied and kissed her temple, breathing in her lightly sweet fragrance, mingling with the lavender scent of her hair.

The softness in his gravelly voice felt like a caress to Catherine’s ears. With a sigh, she closed her eyes, succumbing to his gentle power over her. *Every time you happen to me all over again...* (1)

“I don’t like ruining this bliss, but my literature class begins soon, Catherine. It’s one of the last classes before the children can enjoy their summer holidays. I have to go back,” Vincent said eventually, reluctantly pulling away from her, although remaining sitting.

“I know; that’s why I was looking for you before leaving for work. When I dropped Charlie off at the nursery, Mary told me that Geoffrey won’t come to the class today. He’s had some stomach problems,” Catherine explained.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if these problems had something to do with a certain young lady called Lizzie,” he remarked, amused. “Geoffrey is hopelessly infatuated with her, but he’s terrified of her finding out. I guess it is time I spoke to him.”

Catherine gasped. “Infatuated? He’s just a...”

“Boy?” Vincent raised his eyebrows. “Catherine, he will be 17 soon. That is barely an age where love eludes us on the false pretence of us being *too young*.”

The stunned expression on her face made him chuckle. She couldn’t resist and laughed with him.

“I guess I’ve been too busy with our boys and work here and Above to notice anything else lately,” she admitted, with a sigh. “My God... I remember Geoffrey when he was 10! He was so shy but so gentle and sweet...”

“He grew more confident with time, but he is still the coyest and most quiet boy of his age in the Tunnels. But if my eyes and sixth sense don’t fool me, I think Lizzie could do something about that,” Vincent said with a twinkle in his eyes.

Catherine leaned closer to him; a cheeky expression lit up her face. “You, fooled? Father would sooner let Mouse fix his bookshelves than such a travesty ever happened.”

They both chuckled. “Geoffrey has the best advisor in the matters of love,” Catherine added then. “*You.*” She kissed him on the cheek and stood up, waiting for him to follow her.

*And I had the best teacher,* he thought, regarding her affectionately. He made it to his feet, reaching for Catherine’s hand with a smile.

“Vincent! Vincent!!” A distraught voice broke the peaceful moment at the Mirror Pool.

“Mouse! What’s wrong?” the lion-man asked, worried, seeing his friend burst into the chamber.

“Fire! Fire in one of the storage chambers! William, Edward and Jonathan are trapped there... Must help, hurry!”

Catherine threw a terrified look at her husband. Vincent hastily released her hand, ready to leave. At the last moment, he turned back to her and took her face into his clawed hands.

“I’ll be back. I promise,” he whispered with determination.

His deep blue eyes focused on hers; the cold chill of fear that almost froze her heart reached him through the bond. Bending his head, he put a soft but lingering kiss on her smooth lips.

She had barely time to process what was happening when she found herself alone in the space, and the peaceful atmosphere of only a few moments ago seemed like a dream that had ended too soon.

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When Vincent and Mouse ran into the semicircular cavern bordering the storage chamber, they saw a long human chain passing buckets of water to several men at the end of the chain. They were led by Cullen, who was standing close to the fire. He was throwing water into the flames engulfing the neighbouring chamber and licking the rocky walls and parts of the ceiling. It was very convenient that there was an underground pool not far away from the chamber - there was an ample water supply.

The whole space felt like an oven and was clouded in smoke; most men had beads of sweat running down their faces and had a piece of cloth covering their mouths. They seemed to have the situation under control, but they were unable to extinguish the fire. It was still burning, threatening to spread out and consume everything in its way.

Vincent spotted his father standing at a nearby wall, surrounded by a group of men and holding some blueprints in his hands. The tunnel leader was pointing at something on the map, his eyebrows knitted with deep worry.

“There are only three small openings around the chamber, providing the ventilation. As you can see on the map, there used to be another entrance opposite the current one. But we sealed it many years ago because of the long distance to access the chamber from that side of the Tunnels. We found this way later; it is much closer to the Home Tunnels. I suppose we could break down the sealed opening from the other side. However, that would require some time to walk around the tunnels to get there. And drilling or a huge force to break it once we’re there...”

“How can we be even sure they are still... alive?”

If the nearby flames were not noisy in their own right, a dead silence would have fallen on the chamber as everyone lifted their eyes from the blueprints to Kanin, who had asked the dreaded question.

“I mean... we’re talking about *fire* here...,” he added with a shaky voice.

“About 20 minutes ago, shortly after the distress call on the pipes came, they sent out a message that they will hide in the cellar below the chamber. There is a trapdoor leading down there. We haven’t had any contact from them since then. There are no pipes in the cellar... If they managed to climb down there, they should be safe for a while, providing that the trapdoor stays intact and smoke doesn’t get into the cellar,” Jacob replied, scratching his grey head in a helpless gesture.

“How did they even get stuck there?” Jamie inquired, venting her frustration in anger. She was the only woman. “Why did they even go in when they saw the fire?”

“They were not sure how the fire started, but it was already burning when they came. They tried to put it out while it was still small and move flammables out of its way. When they couldn’t stop it, they tried to rescue some of the supplies, but one of the shelves near the entrance caught fire and fell down, cutting off their way out. They had to retreat to the back of the chamber. It’s mighty lucky there is a pipe, which they could use to call for help.”

“Mouse must have left his matches there the other week when we were checking the walls. I told him not to leave them lying about, especially in this heat!” Kanin exclaimed.

“Matches can’t ignite on their own; every child knows that!” Jamie defended her best friend angrily.

“So how did it happen then when there were no torches?”

“Pointing fingers won’t help anyone here; we are wasting time. It happened, and we have to deal with it,” Jacob stepped in vigorously.

“Let’s hope the trapdoor doesn’t burn down,” Kanin spoke again. “They won’t have much time until we make it to them...”

“Stop it! Don’t say such things; we can’t give up!” Jamie cried in sudden fury.

“I’m not giving up,” Kanin tried to reason with her. “I’m just saying...”

“*You* didn’t want to go there in the first place! William asked you for lending him a hand, and you sent Edward instead, just to play with Luke!”

“Jamie!”

Vincent’s deep and resounding voice put a halt to the brewing argument. Everybody’s head turned to him. He put his large hand on the young woman’s shoulder in a calming manner.

“There is no time to argue. We must stick together now and do everything we can to save our friends. Together...”

The anger vanished from Jamie’s pretty face, replaced by humility and comprehension of the truth. She nodded silently, trying to hide her embarrassment.

“Vincent,” Jacob breathed a sigh of relief when seeing his son. “I presume Mouse explained the main situation to you, and you heard the rest of it now.”

“Yes, Father. I guess we have only two choices - either wait until the fire is out and hope that our friends are safe in the cellar, or...” He looked directly into the older man’s eyes. “Someone tries to get in, checks on them, and if possible, breaks the sealed way out on the other side.”

Jacob’s eyes widened in horror.

“That’s impossible; it’s suicide! Now is not the time for playing heroes. I’ll send men to the other side; I can’t let you...”

“Father,” his son interrupted him gently. “This has nothing to do with heroism. You know that trapdoor is made of wood. What are the chances that it won’t burn down with the rest of the chamber? In this heat, it could take hours until the fire dies down, or until we reach the chamber from the other side. If not the smoke, it will be the lack of oxygen that will probably kill them... We *must* try it from here. *I* must try...”

Jacob opened his mouth to protest again, but no words came out - Vincent was right. As the community leader, he could have left everything to fate, let it decide about the life or death of a few of the community members. However, no matter how hard he tried to fight the feeling, his son made the decision for him. The only problem was that he was endangering his own life with it.

The patriarch closed his eyes for a moment, unable to look into the younger man’s eyes when speaking the words, very probably sentencing not three but four men to their demise.

“All right...” he exhaled and opened his eyes, giving his son a devastating look. He knew Vincent would accept whatever the decision, but he also knew this man wasn’t someone who could just stand by and wait for whatever outcome.

“You will need at least some protection, though,” he added, shaking his head as if negating his own words at the same time - there is no protection when one runs into an open fire...

Vincent didn't wait another moment and took off his cloak. He walked to the nearest person in the human chain, taking a bucket of water off their hands. He poured the cold water over his head, getting drenched within seconds.

"Kanin," he turned to his friend while wiping the water away from his face. "I need a board, a plank, anything flat and large I can use in front of me."

"You've got it," his friend replied.

Not even a minute later he was back with the charred remains of what used to be part of one wing of the storage chamber door, large enough to give Vincent some protection. He poured another bucket of water on the door and waited for his friend to pick it up.

"I had many nightmares in my life, especially while I was up top in prison, but never anything like this," Kanin remarked, deeply upset.

"Let's hope we can all wake up from this one soon." His friend patted his shoulder to comfort him. Then he tied a piece of cloth, ripped from his shirt, around his mouth.

Before taking his make-shift shield, Vincent turned around to his father. "The fire is not evenly strong everywhere, from what I can see. That should help."

He said the words without emotions, but his always expressive eyes told more than that. *That is my only chance...*

Jacob found it extremely hard to let his son go right into the eye of the storm. Vincent saw the older man was struggling to speak the words aloud when finally, he did.

"What shall I tell Catherine?" the patriarch asked anxiously, his voice coloured with despair.

The serenity and gentleness in his voice revealed a smile under Vincent's face mask. "Tell her that death shall have no dominion."

He kissed his parent's sweaty forehead, and after one last look and smile at him, he took his shield from Kanin and walked past the chain of men passing the buckets, right up to the entrance of the burning storage chamber.

All men stopped in their activity and stared at their friend - partially in awe, partially in horror, as he lifted the remains of the door and held it as a protective shield. He took a deep breath and ran into the flames of the burning chamber. And then the smoke swallowed him, and his figure vanished out of sight as if it never even existed.

No one was able to move, stunned by what they had just witnessed. Jacob stood frozen; some invisible magic wand cast a spell of terror over him. He kept staring into the flames where he had seen the figure of his beloved son last, begging for him to re-appear.

Just when he thought he would never see him again, a deafening roar echoed from the burning chamber, accompanied by the sound of something being demolished. Not long after that, the ground

beneath their feet started shaking. Only a few seconds were enough - the ceiling right behind the entrance to the storage chamber suddenly collapsed. As everyone ran back to safety, the falling rocks covered the whole opening, creating a massive wall of rubble.

When the dust settled around them, and they dared to get up and look ahead again, a spine-chilling silence fell over the place, filling the air with mortal dread. The only remains of the fire was the pungent smell of smoke lingering in the stifling air. And yet, it was the unknown behind the pile of rocks that filled the hearts of everyone present with terrible anguish.

*Dear God, what have I done?* Jacob felt something warm running down his cheek. He covered his face with his hands and felt as if the weight of the whole world had just crushed his heart...

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Catherine was helping Mary change bed linen in the nursery. The thought of going Above to her private practice seemed suddenly very unappealing. Luckily, she had no agreed appointments that day - she could easily catch up with her work on the case she was working on the next day.

Occasionally, she watched her two sons interact with other children. Little Jacob had turned six only two months ago and was already enjoying classes for the youngest children. Charlie had turned four, sharing a birthday with his older brother, and was still enjoying the relatively schooling-free life in the Tunnels; his days were mostly filled with plays and fun.

The children were laughing, playing together, totally unaware of the drama unfolding further away in the tunnels below them. But the adults present in the nursery could not hide their anxiety. The tension was palpable in the air.

“Do you think they have put it out by now?” Mary asked, her caring eyes reflecting worry.

“I’m not sure,” Catherine replied truthfully. *I would feel it if they did*, she thought. Her bond with Vincent was still vibrating with deep focus and determination - it was not over yet.

“Mum, I’d like to play chess with grandpa when he gets back.” Deep in her thoughts, she hadn’t even noticed how her elder offspring crept to her side. “I beat him yesterday, so it’s only fair to give him another chance,” the boy said with a proud smile.

Catherine chuckled. “Did you beat Daddy as well?” she asked.

“No,” the child answered, mildly upset. “I almost took his Queen, but he rescued her in the last moment and turned the game around.”

*Trust Vincent to imitate life even in chess*, Catherine smiled inwardly. “All you need is more practice to get better, sweetheart. And you have the two best teachers in the world to help you,” she said with a smile and kissed Jacob’s golden head.

“Now go and show Charlie how to draw a dragon.” She patted the boy gently on the shoulder and watched him run cheerfully to his younger brother.



Catherine smiled, feeling the warm contentment and gratitude that always filled her heart whenever she saw her children. She turned back to continue with her work, walking over to another of the small daybeds.

When she picked up another little pillow to change the cover on it, all at once, a freezing chill ran down her spine, making her drop the pillow and stare into the distance.

“Catherine?” Mary noticed the frightened expression on her friend’s face. “Are you all right? You’ve gone pale...”

But the younger woman was barely listening. A powerful force was painfully pulling a string at her heart. The pain was so intense that Catherine felt the string could snap at any moment...

“No...,” she whispered, and her hands started shaking.

“Catherine??”

Mary didn’t get any answer because the young woman grabbed her chest, shook her head in denial and not a moment later, she ran out of the nursery.

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Running... running through the tunnels like a wild deer, frightened by the headlights, not thinking rationally but acting by pure instinct... Not looking left or right, not minding the heat and the beads of sweat all over her body...

*“Each moment is ours because we share a life together... Life may not always be perfect, but it is made of perfect moments, like this one...”*

Following the torch lights, not knowing the way but following the bond... the still existing but weakened connection... Behind each bend, past each staircase, still breathing, still hoping...

*“This is truly the end of our aloneness. From now on, we walk only together, truly together, everywhere and anywhere, always...”*

Always... He promised he’d be back; he would never break his promise...

Catherine unconsciously found her way to the large cavern in the immediate vicinity of the storage chamber. Once she entered, she halted abruptly at the sight of the scene in front of her.

The massive pile of rocks had entirely blocked what used to be the entrance to the chamber. There was no sign of fire apart from the still lingering thin veil of smoke floating in the air. Once Catherine caught her breath, she looked around, noticing many familiar faces, including the one of her father-in-law. The expression on all of them was a mixture of shock, pain, disbelief and despair. She spotted Mouse wiping away tears from his face. Something else was off as well - the face she was looking for the most was missing...

Her feet made a few slow automatic steps towards the Tunnel leader, and when their eyes met, her breath caught in her throat. There are times when no words are needed to explain - the grief in Jacob's eyes was unmistakable...

"No..." Catherine whispered, staring into the old man's eyes with denial, with a quivering bottom lip, though. She closed her eyes and forced herself to take a deep breath. *Focus... Focus and find him...*

The thin thread of the warm, rich golden colour of the sun was tugging at her heart. It was faint but still there, vibrating with resilience and unwilling to let go.

"He's alive," she breathed and opened her eyes. The determination in her bright eyes made Jacob gasp and smile with relief.

"Thank God!" He squeezed her hands with gratitude. The hope he thought was lost forever returned to him like a boomerang and revived his spirit.

"He's alive!" Jamie exclaimed ecstatically, and all the men breathed a sigh of relief; some even embraced each other.

"If Vincent lives, the others probably are as well," Jacob stated, back to his rational self. "We need to clear at least some of those rocks to get through to them. We can't drill, though; the tremors might cause even more rockslide."

"Maybe he managed to break through the other side," Pascal remarked, thinking. "We heard the roar before the ceiling collapsed."

"That is a good point," agreed the patriarch. "We'll send a few men to check the other access to the storage chamber. It might take a while until they get there, but we must leave nothing to chance now; they might be injured and unable to move."

"I'll take care of it." Pascal turned on his heel immediately and left to get a few men to accompany him.

Catherine silently observed the wheels being put in motion at first. Then she leaned against the wall and slowly slid down. Her legs felt like jelly; she exhausted all the strength that kept her running before. Putting her head in her hand, she finally allowed herself to shed a few silent tears - the fear combined with the relief and hope was a powerful cocktail of emotions that needed an outlet.

A gentle touch of a hand on the shoulder made her lift her head. Jacob was kneeling by her side, his walking stick lying on the dusty ground next to him. Only then did she notice that the men started carefully moving rocks away from the huge pile in front of them.

"This might take a long time, Catherine," Jacob said with a caring voice. "You should go back and rest. We'll keep you updated."

The look in her eyes was one of denial. "I'm not going anywhere, I can't..." she said, resolved. Then her look softened. "The boys are with Mary. My place is here; I *need* to be here, Father..."

Jacob heard the pleading in her trembling voice, the refusal to leave the man who, albeit trapped in a stony prison, meant more to her than anyone could ever comprehend. Catherine wanted and needed to be as near to him as possible.

"All right," he nodded with a sigh. "We shall pray for time to have mercy on us."

A small smile on his face tried to conceal the worry and convince her and himself that hope was real and not just a word written on a piece of faded paper. They both knew that none of them would ever leave that place - not while their friends were in grave danger; not while the imminent threat of losing the man they both loved beyond measure was hanging above them like a heavy storm cloud...

Catherine returned his smile, wiped away her tears and got up on her feet again, helping Jacob to stand up as well. She looked at the working men and then back at her father-in-law.

"You rest. I'm going to help them," she said, briefly squeezed Jacob's arm and then walked away to join her friends at tireless work.

The patriarch didn't try to stop her. All he could do was smile and marvel at her energy and guts. "You are truly blessed, Vincent," he whispered to himself. "We all are..."

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Several hours later, a sudden commotion interrupted the removal works. Pascal and his men returned from their journey to the other side of the storage chamber, where they looked for any signs of Vincent and the others. Everyone dropped their tools and ran to greet them - and William, Jonathan and Edward, who appeared with them. They looked physically exhausted, were covered in dirt, and the smell of smoke lingering on their clothes was more than strong. Otherwise, they seemed unharmed.

"Thank God!" Father exclaimed when he greeted the group, but then he noticed there was still someone missing. His face grew weary.

"Vincent?"

That one word, spoken with a broken voice of quiet hope, cost him more effort than a whole speech in front of a medical committee.

The cheerful glee around faded when everyone present realised the obvious, especially when looking at the crestfallen faces of their friends. Eventually, William broke the sudden heavy silence - the words didn't flow easily, though.

"I honestly don't know how he did it, but he got to us just in time... The fire had almost reached the trapdoor, but Vincent got us out. He managed to break through the sealed door in the back of the chamber so we could escape, but... before he did... part of the ceiling collapsed and... he stayed there..."

Silence. Utter, disturbing and definite silence filled the stifling air; an invisible hand grabbed at

everyone's throats, choking them. After the first moment of shock, everybody's heads turned to Catherine. She was standing in the back, her eyes staring into nothing and everything. She shook her head very slowly, stressing the importance of what she was about to say.

"He is *not* dead... I can *feel* it..."

Her words echoed in their minds, giving them the straw at which they could desperately grasp. Especially Jacob, whose hand went to his chest as he tried to steady himself mentally.

"We need to keep on working," he said, sounding composed again. He reached for his medical bag and went to examine William and his friends.

That single sentence was enough to set the wheels in motion again. As if by magic, everyone returned to work, removing more rocks from the seemingly endless pile.

Catherine's head was pounding. She tried to massage her temples for a moment, closing her eyes. Whatever happened, Vincent was alive, of that she was sure, and nothing else was more important now.

"You seem to be all right," the patriarch concluded after the examination. "I think it's best when you have a proper rest now. Mary will make sure you get something to eat as well."

"We're fine, Father," William said quickly. "We'd like to help... It's the least we can do for Vincent after..." He seemed unable to finish the sentence,

The tormented expression Jacob saw in the tunnel cook's eyes was very uncharacteristic for William. He was a man of stature who never succumbed to fear, always prepared for facing the worst. Now, probably for the first time in his life, he seemed truly afraid - for his friend.

The older man bowed his head, understanding the cook's feelings only too well. His adoptive son was more than part of the community; he was the heart of it... Finally, Jacob nodded, and William, Jonathan and Edward immediately joined the others at work.

"Are you all right, Catherine?" the patriarch asked, noticing his daughter-in-law rubbing her temples.

"Yes, Father, just tired," she answered with a small smile - partially, she spoke the truth, but partially concealed the fact that the persistent mild pain she was experiencing was coming from somewhere else. From *someone* else...

"I gotta tell you, Radcliffe, the hiking in this labyrinth of yours will be the death of me one day."

Their heads turned towards the vibrant voice of the man standing behind them. He was accompanied by Kipper, one of the older boys in the Tunnels.

"Joe!" Catherine exclaimed and fell into her friend's arms. "What are you doing here?" she asked after pulling back, amazed.

Her former boss chuckled. "Pure coincidence. I finally got round to clearing some bits from my mother's house and found a bunch of old books that I thought might be useful here. I came here straight from work to give them to Father; that's how I found out. I thought... I might be of some use here..."

He tried to sound casual, but Catherine noticed the deeply concerned expression in his dark brown, caring eyes as he stared at the massive rocky mound ahead of them. The man imprisoned behind it was dear to him, too.

"Thank you..." she whispered with a faint smile, her expressive eyes glistening. "He... *We* appreciate it..."

The moment of genuine care and unguarded fear between them quickly passed as they understood the importance of keeping their heads straight. Joe, true to his pragmatic nature, rolled up the sleeves of his office shirt and spoke with determination.

"So, what can I do?"

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Another day had passed. Another long day of gruelling, relentless work on the rescue mission. The moving of the fallen rocks from the entrance proved a much harder task than it seemed at first. Mouse suggested drilling through, but Jacob was worried it might make another wall or ceiling collapse. And so the men and the only two women kept on moving the often heavy rocks away in a slow, painstaking manner. And yet, no one was complaining; they knew that time was of the essence, and every minute lost could have been costly.

They were taking turns, changing every few hours, to be able to eat and rest, recover their strength for more work. Jacob was reluctant to leave the place, too. Overlooking the scene, he was the moral support of everyone present, the driving force that kept everyone going, despite his faith in success fading with every passing hour...

"Father, you really should get some rest. You haven't slept for two days," Catherine said that evening when she was on her break. Seeing the rings under the old man's eyes, for a moment, she forgot about her own fatigue and aches all over her body.

"I am quite all right, don't worry," Jacob contradicted gently, though his voice sounded tired.

"She's right. You won't be of much a use if you collapse here," remarked Joe, sitting in a make-shift resting zone with them, leaning his back against the wall and chewing on an apple. He was trying to appear in good spirits, but he felt shattered - physically and mentally.

Jacob looked at him, then at Catherine and sighed.

"I know," he admitted, resigned. "But I just can't..." The rest of the sentence faded in his inability to express his anxiety about leaving his son behind.

Catherine reached for his hand, and when their eyes met, there was more than understanding in them - one of the things people are terrified of the most is leaving the ones they love behind...

No more words were spoken between them. Each immersed in their own thoughts, each got lost in brooding and their memories of the man the whole Tunnels were so fearlessly fighting for.

Catherine leaned back against the wall and shut her eyes. For a countless number of times, she kept reassuring herself that her bond with Vincent was still intact, though less vibrant than usual. Its colour and intensity faded slightly, but Catherine was still able to find their connection without problems. She was trying not to fall prey to panic, forcing herself to stay calm and sending Vincent as much strength as she had left.

Her mind was suddenly filled with an image of only a few days ago - an impression of a moment that stayed deeply embedded in her memory...

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*"It was at that moment that little Gerda walked into the palace through the great gate that was made of the cutting wind: but she said her evening prayer, and at that, the winds laid themselves down as it were to sleep, and she entered the vast empty cold hall. And there she saw Kay and knew him, and flew and caught him by the neck, and clasped him close and cried: "Kay! Darling little Kay! So I've found you at last!"*

*But there he sat quite still and stiff and cold. Then little Gerda wept hot tears, which fell on his bosom and pierced through to his heart and thawed that lump of ice and consumed the little bit of glass that was there." (2)*

*Vincent lifted his eyes from the book in his hands and stopped reading when he noticed his firstborn was deep in thoughts. His little hand was absently playing with the blanket covering his legs, his knitted eyebrows revealing thoughts beyond usual for a 6-year-old when listening to a fairy tale.*

*"What is it, Jacob?" he asked softly.*

*The boy glanced at his father with a curious expression.*

*"Gerda left her grandma behind to find Kay even though she knew the Snow Queen was dangerous. She got almost killed on the way, but she still went on... Why?"*

*Vincent tilted his head. "Because she loved Kay very much. When we love someone very much, we find the courage to do anything to protect or save them from harm."*

*"But if something happened to her... what about the grandma? How could she leave her all alone?" The boy was still uncomprehending.*

*"Gerda knew that her grandmother had friends, neighbours, good people, who would look after her," Vincent continued. "She loved her, too, and wanted to bring Kay back for her sake, as well, knowing how much he was missed by both of them."*

*Jacob looked at his younger brother Charlie next to him, contentedly snuggled up under a blanket and already sleeping.*

*"Would you do it?" he asked, still deep in thought. "If I... if mum or Charlie were in danger... Would you leave, too?" The question came along with clearly visible anxiety in his big, sky-blue eyes when he looked up at his parent again.*

Children, *Vincent thought*. They always have the wonderful ability to define things by their correct name and go straight to the point.

*His hand reached for Jacob's golden nest of hair, stroking it gently.*

*"Always," he stated without hesitation. "Because I love every one of you so deeply that I would do anything to bring you back home. And because I know that your grandfather, Mary, uncle Devin, all our friends would take great care of you and love you."*

*"What if something happened to the others? I know you helped before, but would you leave now that you have us?"*

*Jacob's clear logic made Vincent sigh. When he was alone, his extraordinary build and strength posed no problem for the leonine man to use them in the hour of need for the greater good. Even when he did it time and time again to save Catherine. But the responsibility that came with having his children changed the angle of assessing the possible situation a little bit. It hadn't altered his values and principles but made him stop for a moment and consider the possible consequences.*

*"You may not understand why yet, but yes, I would," Vincent answered truthfully, glancing at Catherine, sitting nearby, watching the scene unfold with interest. Then he focused on his son's eyes again. "You know I love both of you and your mother with all that I am; nothing will ever change that. But people living in this world have been my family and home since I was a baby. They are good people, who love me and stood by me in my worst times. To turn my back on them if their lives depended on my help would be not only ungrateful but also inhuman. When we have the ability and opportunity to change things for the better, especially to save lives, we must do it, even though it may hurt us. That's one of the things that makes us human.*

*Jacob remained silent for a moment, contemplating his father's words. Then he tilted his head, inadvertently imitating his parent's characteristic gesture, observing him for a little more. Finally, he spoke with determination.*

*"If it ever happens that you would need to help someone again, I want to be with you. I want to help, too."*

*The smile on Vincent's face was a perfect display of pride and deep emotion. He didn't need to do much but open his arms for Jacob to embrace him tightly, resting his head on his shoulder.*

*"When the time is right," Vincent whispered and closed his eyes, still smiling...*

\*

Catherine opened her eyes to the grey, uneasy reality again. The mild but persistent pounding in her head was still there, but she didn't complain. Where there is pain, there is life...

She wiped droplets of sweat from her face, smudging the dust on it. A spotless look was the last thing she was thinking of at that moment, though. With a sigh and ache in her limbs, she pushed herself off the ground and stood up to return to work, when a familiar sound made her turn around in shock.

“Mum!” Two perfectly synchronised high-pitched voices echoed in the cavern.

“Catherine... I’m so sorry, but I couldn’t hold them off any longer. They refused to sleep until I agreed to bring them here...”

Mary’s explanation was almost superfluous when Catherine scooped her sons into her arms. She knew them to the tee, correctly guessing how strongly they felt their father’s distress and their mother’s anxiety, making it unbearable for them to just sit and wait. Their young age was of no consequence here; the need to be close to their parents was overwhelming and could not be denied by anyone.

“It’s all right, Mary; I’ll take care of them,” Catherine replied with a smile, stroking the boys’ golden heads. Despite the place being utterly unsuitable for them to be there, deep inside, she felt the joy of having them close.

*“If it ever happens that you would need to help someone again, I want to be with you. I want to help, too...”*

Remembering little Jacob’s words again made her eyes go misty, especially when she saw the deep determination in his sapphire-blue eyes that reminded her so much of his father’s.

“Daddy will be all right,” the boy said without hesitation. “He will because he knows we are all here waiting for him.”

“Yes!” his younger brother agreed with the enthusiasm of a four-year-old, nodding in a manner that admitted no doubts.

Catherine shook her head incredulously, smiling. She knew she should have reminded her children that what we wish and what happens is not always the same thing, but their strong belief disarmed her. Unable to speak, she swallowed hard and embraced her sons tight, letting their energy and faith flow freely into her own veins.

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“What do you suggest?” the Tunnel leader asked, prepared for anything - or so he thought.

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief - all was not lost yet. She released her father-in-law’s hands and started pacing around, feverishly trying to come up with a plausible solution to the problem.

*Think, Cathy, think! What would Vincent do?*



Suddenly she stopped and closed her eyes, breathing deeply. Hoping against hope, her mind focused solely on the man on the other side of the seemingly impenetrable wall.

*Help me, Vincent... please...*

The eyes of everyone present were following her every move. They were begging for some kind of sign, anything that could give them a ray of hope in the darkest hour they could remember in a very long time.

Only when William was about to speak, impatient to wait any longer, did Catherine open her eyes, and her dust-covered face had gone pale. Yet, at the same time, there was a determination in her look, as well.

“Mouse,” she called her friend, who was patiently waiting nearby. The young man with the face and manners of a boy was immediately by her side.

“Vincent talked to Catherine?” he asked eagerly, wide-eyed.

She turned to look at him, and his enthusiasm made her smile.

“Yes, in a way.” Her soft voice sounded weaker than usual, but her eyes spoke of the resolve in her heart. “Do you still have any of the explosives Elliot gave you when you were working on that new chamber last month?”

“Sure! Lots of it. Lucky that the new chamber is in a more open space, with sturdy, solid walls; was much safer to use it. Elliot said to keep it for other time if needed...”

The young man sensed his opportunity to help, but suddenly he understood what Catherine was asking him to do. His steel-blue eyes grew larger, his mouth opened in shock. The danger was extreme considering the fragile condition of the water-saturated walls, and yet, Mouse didn’t say a word to contradict her. His trust in the woman from up top was absolute and unshakable. Slowly, he nodded in agreement and trailed out, heading to the Home Tunnels.

“Catherine, are you out of your mind?!” Jacob’s terrified voice echoed in the space. The stunned expression on the faces of everyone around was eloquent. No one dared to oppose her, though. In Vincent’s absence, his wife’s natural authority was even more impressive.

She turned back to the Tunnel leader, her face calm, though the eyes betrayed deep inner turmoil.

“It’s our only chance,” she whispered. “I know that’s what Vincent would do... You heard Pascal; we have no other option...”

”But the whole chamber might collapse, and then he will be dead for sure, and whoever blows it up with him!” he exclaimed, but immediately regretted his words. Despite a layer of dust, it was visible how his face turned white as a sheet; the terrible truth looming over them for three days finally started sinking in for real. “Dear God, I’m losing him...”

His whisper and the anguish in his eyes made Catherine take his trembling hands into hers and made him focus on her.

”No.” She shook her head in denial. “*Never* on my watch; you should know that by now.”

The patriarch wanted to believe her so desperately that he nodded involuntarily, in an attempt to regain composure. He was unable to utter a word, though, absolutely tongue-tied from shock.

Catherine released his hands with an encouraging small smile and started counting the minutes until Mouse’s return. On the outside, she was oozing strength. Inside, she resembled a house of cards - prone to collapsing at the slightest tremor. The clock of Vincent’s life was ever so surely ticking away...

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“Okay good, okay fine! Mouse is ready; you go and hide with the others,” the young man stated not long after. His face, covered with dirt and dust of the past three days, showed determination despite the hint of anxiety in his eyes. They had been in the same situation before, over eight years ago, and he had become much more skilled and precise with the use of explosives since then. However, he hadn’t forgotten the strange mix of fear and thrill from the time back then; there he was, feeling it all over again.

Catherine smiled wholeheartedly at her friend and put her hand on his forearm. “Not this time, Mouse, *you* go and hide,” she said calmly, dwelling on his excited eyes. “But first, show me what to do.”

After a brief hesitation, he did. When he finished, out of the blue, he hugged his friend and briskly walked away without looking at anyone, even Jamie.

“Are you absolutely sure?” Jacob asked with concern.

“You know that this is the only way, Father, you *know*...” Her whisper and intense gaze begged him to understand.

“But Catherine...” Words got stuck in his throat. “Vincent... You... The boys...”

“If anything should happen, the boys will be well looked after... I know that, and Vincent knows that, too. They have a big, loving family, and they will understand why I had to do this.”

His vision got blurry when he took hold of her hands, his stare pinned on them, unable to look her in the eyes. “I should be the one to do it,” he whispered. “My life is...”

“Still worth living,” Catherine completed his sentence with a smile. “He is the other half of my soul, of my heart... I *have to*... If this is my fate, I accept it, gratefully.”

She took a deep breath. Her eyes glanced at the stony barriers ahead of them; she raised her eyebrows with a soft chuckle. “Although I truly hope these walls will hold on. I would really love to

see Jake and Charlie in that Peter Pan play next week..." Diverting her look back to the patriarch, a faint smile appeared on her troubled face.

Silence stretched between them when Jacob took her in his arms and held her tightly. "They *will* hold," he whispered eventually. When he pulled back, he saw her eyes glistening, the reflection of gratitude and feelings far too complex to put them into words.

Catherine swallowed her tears and turned away from him. Her eyes met with Joe's - he was standing nearby, frozen on the spot. The expression of terror in his eyes was difficult to miss. And yet, he didn't say a word when his look pierced Catherine's. She saw it all, though, reading his face like a book.

*I knew you would understand, Joe, you always do. I have to do this alone...*

Her smile, the one full of warmth and fondness that he always loved so much, worked its charm as always - he smiled back at her and nodded. Nothing more needed to be said; they understood each other perfectly, even in silence, as best friends do.

At last, Catherine kneeled to her children, her eyes regarding their little faces, memorising every little detail over again.

"I want you to go with grandpa and hide," she said earnestly. "There is something I need to do to try to help Daddy. It would be dangerous for you to stay here."

"Won't it be dangerous for you?" Charlie asked, resting his little hand on her shoulder.

Catherine sighed but smiled. "It will, but I don't want to worry about you as well. It will be much easier for me when I know you're safe. That's how you can help me and Daddy the most."

It seemed a good enough reason for the younger of the Wells boys, since he put his arms around his mother's neck, holding tight to her.

"Okay," he whispered in her ear before pulling back. Catherine kissed his soft cheek and she turned to her firstborn's serious face.

"I wish there was another way," little Jacob remarked, worried. "I wish I could stay with you. I'm scared I won't see you again..."

"I know, darling, but this is the only way," she replied gently, desperately hoping for him to understand.

*"When we have the ability and opportunity to change things for the better, especially to save lives, we must do it, even though it may hurt us,"* Jacob quoted his father perfectly, astonishing Catherine as many times before.

"Yes... *That's one of the things that makes us human...*," she quoted as well with a smile. Vincent's words were engraved in both of their hearts.

The expression on her older son's face bore an uncanny resemblance to her husband's at that moment - not in the facial features, but in the sudden serenity and stillness in his eyes. They were radiating a deep conviction that everything would be as it should be in the end - hopefully, all right.

Catherine hugged him, kissing his cheek as well. "I love you both," she whispered when she pulled back again. "We both do."

With a smile, she gently stroked their heads and stood up, letting their grandfather and Mary lead them away to safety. She turned around and let out a sigh, feeling the eyes of everyone nearby on her back before they left the chamber.

"All right," she said with determination, already focusing on the detonating device in her view. "Let's get this over and done with." Her eyes wandered around the wall in front of her, dwelling especially on the ceiling. "Do me a favour and hold on," she prayed into the hot air, talking to the lifeless matter.

Catherine walked over to the detonating device a bit further away, behind a boulder further away from the fragile wall. She went down on her knees and took a deep breath. There was a sudden tingling sensation in her stomach - caused by a strange thrill but mostly fear. She raised her hands and noticed they were shaking.

*Now is really not the best time to let the fear rule over you, Cathy,* she reprimanded herself mentally. Focusing firmly on the task ahead of her, she managed to still her hands. "Okay good, okay fine," she encouraged herself, not noticing the involuntary use of Mouse's favourite line. "We've been here before. We *can* do it again..."

She leaned against the boulder with her back, seeking a poor shelter from the upcoming storm. With her thumb gently resting on the detonating button, Catherine closed her eyes, breathing deeply. The last thing she did before pushing the button was to check her bond with Vincent. The faded and fragile thread of their connection was still there, still resisting the pressure of snapping and vanishing into oblivion. A familiar line crossed her mind just before her finger moved.

A push of the button was all it took. A deafening explosion ripped through the silence of anticipation, tearing down rock and stone, destroying what just a minute ago appeared physically indestructible. Thick clouds of dust and dirt covered the whole space, obscuring any light penetrating the chamber from outside. And then... there was silence again.

It all lasted only a few seconds, but it seemed much longer until finally, the heads of the tunnel dwellers slowly started peeking through the setting dust as they dared to enter the chamber again.

"Can you see anything, Father?" Mary asked anxiously, squeezing his hand tightly.

The patriarch was desperately eyeing the space in front of them, hoping for any movement, any sign of life. Charlie and Jacob Junior appeared in front of him out of the blue, both eager to see their parents appear from the obscurity. They were the only ones from the folk gathered nearby now who seemed unphased by the occasion. Either their childlike conviction that everything would be all right or something deeper and much stronger was keeping them calm.

Jacob Senior watched the cavern with eagle eyes - and agonising hope. Suddenly, a cough interrupted the anxious moment, and Catherine emerged from behind the boulder remnants that offered her protection from the explosion.

“Mum!” both boys exclaimed, running to her. They almost knocked her over, clinging to her with all their might.

“I’m all right,” she assured them with a smile, rubbing their backs. Then she slowly stood up and shook off some dust from her hair.

“Where’s Daddy?” Charlie asked, his big emerald eyes fixed on hers.

By that time, Mary and Jacob had reached them, visibly relieved to see Catherine all in one piece. Joe, Mouse, Jamie and some others followed them. They were all skimming the debris ahead of them, looking for the man who had been the reason for their tireless effort for three days.

Catherine was suddenly transfixed by one spot on the place where the massive rocky mound stood only a minute ago. The explosion made it collapse but by a miracle, the already fragile ceiling and the nearby walls withstood the powerful blow. The dust had almost settled now, visibility was much clearer. And then, Catherine gasped, her eyes filling with tears. Everybody followed her gaze and stared at the same spot in awe.

There... literally risen from the ashes and debris was the silhouette of a tall figure, standing at what used to be the door to the storage chamber. The light penetrating the space behind him through the little ventilation openings illuminated him softly from the back, casting his face into darkness. A smoky haze was floating around his silhouette, giving it an almost ethereal appearance. And yet, there was no doubt about his identity...

He made a few shaky steps, crossing over the fallen rocks. Then he stopped for a moment, needing the support of the wall to hold himself upright. He was bruised and battered, exhausted and covered in dust and dirt from head to toe, but fortunate enough to have survived without any major injuries, it seemed.

“Vincent...,” Catherine whispered, tasting the salt of tears on her lips.

That gentle sound of his name, carried into his ears, made him raise his head and meet her eyes. *”Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will... To strive, to seek... to find, and not to yield...,”* (3) he breathed, unable to look away from the woman standing only a few metres away from him.

Finally, her feet moved in his direction, oblivious to anything and anyone, until his arms were firmly around her again.

“Daddy!” little Jacob and Charlie exclaimed, overjoyed. They were ready to run to their parents, but their grandfather halted them.

“Not just yet,” he said, wiping away a stray tear from his face, then looking back at the couple unable to let go of each other, amidst the rocks debris.

Joe, observing the scene by his side, incredulously shook his head. “That’s... a miracle!”

“No,” the patriarch countered with a smile. “That’s love...”

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When Catherine walked into their chamber a few hours later, bringing a bowl of hot soup and a loaf of bread on a tray, she was greeted by a sight that made her stop in her tracks.

Vincent was stretched out on their large bed with his eyes closed, smiling. But instead of a blanket, he was covered by two small bodies of their sons, happily sleeping in his arms, claiming the best resting place in the house. Whatever physical pain he was still suffering was forgotten completely - the tranquillity and contentment were written all over his unique features.

Catherine placed the food tray on the table and quietly walked over to the bed. Unwilling to disturb the scene, she sat down in the high-back chair nearby, watching the three men of her life with a smile, partially hidden by her hand. Images like this never ceased to fill her with wonder, but especially that night, this particular scene meant so much more... Her eyes shone even brighter when she heard quiet words.

“I know they should be in their bed, but I couldn’t push them away,” Vincent whispered with a smile and opened his eyes to her.

She chuckled and stood up, reaching slowly and gently for Charlie’s small frame to take him to his own bed in the smaller chamber attached to the main one. The boy was fast asleep, exhausted from the last few day’s events, and nothing could wake him up at that moment. Catherine brought him to the bed he shared with his older brother and laid him down. At that moment, Vincent entered the chamber and put his elder son next to his sibling. Catherine covered them and pressed a soft kiss on their foreheads.

“I wish I could take a photograph of every moment like this,” she whispered, gazing at her children resting peacefully. “To put it together with thousands of others in the family album to keep forever.”

“You do that in your mind,” Vincent replied with a smile. “Every moment is a memory, stored in the deepest part of your mind and heart. Those memories create your family album, Catherine.” His sapphire-blue eyes affectionately regarded her glowing face. “And mine.”

She finally averted her look from their children and found herself transfixed by her husband’s serene gaze. “Yes...” she breathed into the stillness, for even the pipes were silenced by the late-night hours.

With a radiant smile, Catherine led Vincent back to their chamber. “Do you think you will find out what caused the fire?” she inquired.

“I’m not sure. We never had anything like this happen before, but then again, we never had heat like this in the Tunnels before,” her husband mused. “That chamber was used to store spare tools, ropes, sacks, some metal parts of utensils used for carving rocks. There is no direct sunlight access... I’m afraid it will probably remain a mystery, even beyond Narcissa’s realm of understanding.”

Just as they were about to lay down to bed, Vincent's hand gently stopped her. She looked back at him curiously, noticing that his face had grown more serious.

"What's wrong, Vincent?" she asked, confused. "Are you in pain?" Her anxiety was back at once.

"No," he hastily assured her with a quick small smile. "It's... In those three days... I had a lot of time to think," he mused. "I was sitting or lying near the ventilation openings to get some air. The rockslide had extinguished the fire and spared my life of a horrible end, but still... And yet, although my body was bruised and slowly fading, I still felt a strong, inexplicable power holding me in its grasp. It kept me going on, giving me strength when I felt weak, gave me hope when I was slowly losing it. It was... my safe haven."

Catherine's hand reached for his cheek, caressing it with her thumb.

"I know," she said, and Vincent knew she didn't lie. He took her hand in his, pressed a kiss into her palm and sighed.

"How?" he wondered, tilting his head. "How did you *not* give up, Catherine? Defying all odds, defying doubts, which even I had at my weakest moments..."

She smiled, enjoying the astonishment in his face, making his features irresistibly beautiful, lighting up his tired eyes.

"There was something I kept telling myself over and over," she replied.

"What was it?"

*"Death shall have no dominion..."*

Her answer and the unwavering willpower burning in her eyes silenced him completely. The corners of his mouth turned slowly upwards. Almost unable to breathe, he cupped her face, suddenly craving physical contact with the woman gazing into his eyes, *his* woman. The only woman he would love and cherish for the rest of his life.

Catherine's breath caught in her throat, as she suddenly craved physical contact with him, too. However, the reason won the battle with her heart when she caught the lovely scent of the soup from the bowl on the table.

"Come," she whispered, dwelling on his blue irises that have suddenly turned darker. "That sandwich William improvised for you couldn't have been enough. You must be starving."

Vincent's smile widened and his direct gaze deepened before he replied with a rekindled fire in his eyes. "More than you can imagine..."

END



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- (1) Edith Warton: *The Age of Innocence*
  - (2) Hans Christian Andersen: *The Snow Queen*
  - (3) Alfred Tennyson: *Ulysses*