

Father's Big Night

By Nefereu

Wistfully, Catherine watched Father slowly retreating down the tunnel, his posture a study in dejection.

“Oh, Vincent,” she exclaimed quietly. “I feel so guilty. We’ve been spending so much time together lately. Maybe we’ve been neglecting Father a little. Did you see the disappointment on his face when we turned down tea?”

Vincent’s face was a mask of contrition as well. “I think you’re right, Catherine. I do believe he has been feeling a bit lonesome of late. I’ll drop by later while you’re Above and play a game of chess. Of course, his birthday is in two weeks and that also may be part of it.”

“I thought Father liked his birthdays,” she said with a frown.

“Usually, he does. Each year, we have a cake and many give Father presents. The children put on a presentation as well. But this year, he just doesn’t seem to have much enthusiasm for it.”

“Hmm.” The wheels in her head were already starting to turn.

Later that evening, as she was wandering around her apartment going through the last of the boxes, she couldn’t help feeling another wave of contrition. Since becoming husband and wife several weeks before, Catherine and Vincent had been spending every waking moment they could together.

Catherine had resigned her job with the district attorney’s office and gone to work with an old friend at a local non-profit agency that specialized in helping families. Right now, she was packing to move most of her belongings out of her apartment and into Peter Alcott’s brownstone. Though she actually lived Below, she still needed a place to use as a base for her life Above and as an office for her work. Peter’s brownstone was perfect for both. Oddly enough, Peter had been looking to retire and downsize at almost the same time Catherine had decided to buy a larger home of her own. Effectively, they were now trading residences. Frankly, it had solved both their problems.

She paused over one box and smiled at the picture she found there. It was a long ago photo of her and her father surrounded by several of Charles Chandler’s friends including Peter. Catherine’s face lit up as that memory gave her an idea. Quickly, she dialed Peter Alcott.

“Hi, Peter. How was your visit with Susan?”

“Fine, Cathy, fine. She and David are doing great. I’m glad they are moving closer so we will see each other more; but David’s job will still keep them pretty busy.”

“Was she upset about your decision to move?”

Peter snorted in reply. “Hardly; she’s thrilled! She loves the idea that we’re swapping, by the way. She calls it “keeping things in the family”. She can’t wait to come for a visit. But something tells me you called for a reason.”

On her end, Catherine smiled. Peter knew her too well. “Actually, I was calling about Father.”

“Jacob?” Peter replied, giving her his full attention. “Is something wrong?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure. It’s just an impression I’ve gotten recently. He seemed a little...down, I guess is the best word. I was wondering if you had noticed it as well.”

Peter sighed heavily. “To be honest, Cathy, I had. But I just figured it was his upcoming birthday. You know, we old men don’t age as gracefully as you ladies do.” He snorted in laughter.

It was Catherine’s turn to snort. “Speak for yourself. Anyway, I sort of had a half baked idea for something that might cheer him up and I was interested in your opinion.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Remember every third Friday night at our house before Mom got sick?” Catherine asked.

“Do I?!! Those were some of the best times, Cathy. You, me, Charles and the rest. It was wonderful.” Peter exclaimed.

“Well, I just couldn’t help wondering if Father ever...”

“Are you kidding? Jacob was a virtual terror at it in med school! He had all the undergraduates on the run from him. If he hadn’t become a doctor, he could have made his living at it; maybe even gone professional!” Peter replied.

Catherine smiled widely. “That’s all I needed to hear.”

Peter had laughed heartily at Catherine’s plan and readily agreed to participate. Now she had to enlist the other person she needed to put her plan into action. Unfortunately, her husband seemed less enthusiastic.

“Are you sure, Catherine?” he replied skeptically a short time later as he met her at the threshold to her apartment. “It hardly seems Father’s style.”

“Peter says he used to love it; besides, I want to do something nice for him.” She protested.

Vincent smiled quickly, his objections vanishing in an instant. “Then I’ll help, of course. When should we plan for - Father’s birthday perhaps?”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t want my idea to conflict with the plans of our tunnel family. How about the Friday before? I can get off early and you can help set up.”

“Sounds like a plan!” Vincent affirmed. “I hope he likes it.”

“Me too,” muttered Catherine right before Vincent captured her mouth for an ardent kiss.

Father sat in his chamber feeling distinctly sorry for himself. He knew had little to complain about. Truly, he was far better off than most men. He had a home, two loving sons, and many friends. Still, he couldn’t help feeling depressed and a bit neglected. Since Vincent and Catherine had been joined, his son had little time for his parent. While Father rejoiced for the two lovers, he couldn’t deny that it left him a bit lonely. It hadn’t helped that his best friend, Peter, had been away for almost two weeks visiting his daughter. His looming birthday only added to the melancholy. It reminded him that he was getting old. Sighing heavily, he reached for a nearby book.

Just then, a message came through the pipes calling Father to the library urgently. Mystified, Father made his way to the chamber as rapidly as his hip would allow. What he found there only confused him more. Peter, Vincent, Catherine, William, Sebastian and even Pascal were waiting. A large table had been set up surrounded by several chairs. On the table rested a large, overflowing plate and a deck of cards. Nearby, another table stood loaded with all the fixings for tea including a large pot and a wide variety of snack food, all within easy reach.

“What’s all this?” Father inquired in confusion.

“What does it look like, old friend? It’s a poker game, of course,” Peter boomed.

“Poker?!” Father exclaimed.

“Yes.” Peter replied. “Catherine thought it might be a nice idea if all of us got together and made a night of it playing something different instead of chess for a change. I’ve even brought some brandy, but I had to forgo the cigars. We doctors have to set a good example, you know.”

Father looked over at Catherine, his face a mix of emotion. While he appreciated the gesture, he wondered at the appropriateness of it all.

With his usual aplomb and wit, Sebastian broke the tension in the room. “See, Peter, I told you he was too much of an old stuffed shirt to try something new. Besides, if Jacob plays poker like he does chess, it will be a very short game.”

That raised Father’s ire. “Who are you calling an old stuffed shirt, you overblown popinjay?!! I’ll show you who’s old! Someone start dealing!” he announced as he moved to take a seat.

Everyone broke into smiles and went to join him. But, the large platter in the center drew a quizzical look from Father. “Cookies?” he asked, bewildered.

“Well, we didn’t think you’d approve of using real money,” Catherine explained.

“And using matches would be wasteful,” Vincent added.

“So, we came up with this!” William finished. “The oatmeal raisins are one, the ginger snaps are five and the chocolate chips are ten.”

“And the cupcakes?” Sebastian broke in.

“Those are a hundred. But go easy. I only made a dozen,” William added, much to everyone’s amusement.

As Peter began to deal, Sebastian turned to Pascal and Vincent. “Where did you two learn to play poker?”

“Where else?” Vincent chuckled. “Devin.”

“What about you, Catherine?” Pascal asked conversationally.

“Oh, my dad taught me the basics,” she replied casually, desperately trying to fight a smile.

Peter Alcott snorted derisively. “Don’t fall for that innocent act, Pascal. This girl could tell a straight from a flush before she could even write her own name. She’s almost as good as you used to be, Jacob.”

“We’ll see,” he replied enigmatically.

“Father, you were a card shark?!!” Catherine asked, heartily amused by the notion.

“Don’t you mean card sharp?” William commented.

“Absolutely not!” Father replied adamantly. “A card *sharp* is someone who cheats and I *never* cheated.”

“That’s true,” Peter interjected. “Jacob took all us other med students fair and square.”

The first few hands went well except for Vincent who was the first one out every hand. Surprisingly, it was Catherine who forced him call or fold each time. As he was dealt three jacks the next round, his face remained blank, but inwardly he crowed with triumph. Now he had her!

Across the table, Catherine lowered her eyes to hide her delight. Since becoming lovers, their bond had grown quite strong. She wondered how long it was going to take for Vincent to discover that he was unexpectedly virtually broadcasting to her his emotions each hand. While she couldn’t tell exactly which cards her new husband held, his level of enthusiasm let her know if his hand was strong or weak and she bet accordingly. Frankly, she didn’t feel the least bit guilty for making use of their bond this way. It was simply too much fun!

Vincent paused as a strange wave of enjoyment washed over him. Suddenly, he realized it hadn’t come from him! Astounded but amused, he looked over at the woman he loved as he comprehended the reason. “Catherine, you’re cheating!”

“What?” Father responded loudly. “That’s impossible, Vincent. How can you say..?”

Father’s spirited defense was cut off when Catherine, seated next to him, broke out into a peal of giggles. Soon, she dissolved into deep guffaws that left her helpless.

“She’s using our bond to bet against me!” Vincent stated acerbically.

“Catherine?” Father inquired.

Wordlessly, she nodded, unable to summon enough breath to speak as she continued to laugh. Vincent gave a playful growl and went around to her chair. Seizing her out of it gently, he promptly silenced her with a kiss.

When their embrace went on just a tad too long for propriety’s sake, Father slapped his hand on the table and pronounced. “That’s it! You’re both disqualified from this game; Catherine for cheating, and Vincent for trying to deprive another player of oxygen! Now, who’s bet is it?”

Nonplussed, Vincent pulled up a tufted love seat and he and Catherine snuggled together, content to watch from the ‘sidelines’. He retrieved their ‘chips’ for them to snack on as they watched with interest as things progressed. Pascal eventually begged off, needed to return to his pipes.

In the end, the game came down to a battle of wills between Father and the burly tunnel cook, William. By this time, both players had actually consumed all their so-called chips.

But that didn't make it any less exciting. Finally, after a dramatic pause, William called. "Two pair!" he boasted.

Father smiled slyly. "Full house, William," he countered. "Looks like I win!"

There was a bit of celebrating as the last of the snacks and tea disappeared and then the game began to break up. Satisfied and tired, everyone, except Vincent and Catherine decided to partake of the brandy for a nightcap.

"This was fun, Jacob," Peter pronounced. "We should do it again!"

"How about next Friday?" Father proposed, trying vainly to hide his enthusiasm.

The idea, however met with some resistance. Seeing Father's disappointment, Catherine put forth another idea. "Why not make it a monthly game? My dad and Peter used to do it a long time ago; how about every third Friday?"

"Say, that sounds a good idea. That's only two weeks away; I'll have most of my moving done by then," Peter agreed.

"And that will give me some time to plan ahead for meals. Maybe I'll even try that snack Mouse has been trying to get me to make: nachos," William added.

Everyone agreed to the plan and the group soon parted. Father pulled Catherine aside to speak privately to her. "Thank you, my dear. You can't know how much I appreciate what you did for me here tonight. You've made an old man very happy."

"I was glad to do it, Father. We're family. I want you to be as happy as we are," she replied as she glanced at Vincent who smiled back. "Anyway, I kind of like having someone take over my dad's tradition. It makes me feel closer to him in a way."

Father drew in a breath, fighting to hold back tears. "You know I've come to think of you as the daughter I've never had."

"Thank you." Catherine replied, fighting tears of her own. "Besides, now I've got someone to sharpen my skills on." Father chuckled as he bid the lovers a fond goodnight.

Alone at last, Father sat back and savored one last snifter of Peter's excellent brandy. It had definitely been a night to remember. Leaning back, Father mentally counted his blessings. Perhaps having another birthday wasn't as bad as he'd originally thought. After all, if tonight was any indication, by next year, he might actually be a *grandfather*. With that pleasant thought, Father rose and headed back to his chambers, oblivious to the new spring in his step as he jauntily walked down the tunnel.

