

A Braid by Any Other Name...

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"There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

~ Albert Einstein

“I can’t see how it’s such a problem for you, Vincent.” Catherine sat cross-legged on her lover’s bed, her linked fingers supporting the weight of her rounded abdomen where their child lay. She made a small moue of discontent. “It’s simply a request to do things a little differently. What could it hurt?” She raised both shoulders, helplessly.

“I understand that you may wish for some things to be different.” Vincent sighed, lowering the towel he’d been using to dry his thick, unruly mane of hair. “But this is what I am used to. Why change now?”

It was early evening, and he had just returned to their chamber from swimming below the Great Falls. But as usual, the result of his efforts with the towel were not satisfactory, and he knew it. There were days when he’d thought about Lou’s standing offer to cut his hair to a much more manageable style – much to Catherine’s evident horror.

Knowing his love’s mind on the subject, he had not mentioned the idea again. Besides, deep down in his soul, he really liked his hair as it was, full and magnificently untamed. He gave it an experimental shake, enjoying the feel of it moving against his skin. *Some things are better left alone*, he decided. As was Catherine’s sudden request.

He reached for his soft leather shirt and pulled it on. As his head emerged from the wide neck opening he smiled across the chamber, taking in the picture she made, and felt his heart leap as it always did when he looked at her.

Until she had come into his life and turned it upside-down, he'd been a wash, rinse, and flip-his-hair-around-until-it-dried, kind of man. No fuss and no worries. Let the unruly strands fall where they may. But that had often taken hours because it dripped everywhere. Time he couldn't always spare.

Most of the people Below did not need to take as much effort as he did to dry his hair. Even now, after more than half an hour of vigorous towel drying, dampness still lingered down in the roots. Left to himself he would have given up by now, and found something else to do with his time, letting the cool air of the tunnels do the work.

But Catherine's seemingly innocent request had perplexed and confused him. She had always been content with things as they were...*until now*...

It was a miracle she had come into his life, and made him into the man he was today. Someone able to face a bright future with certainty and purpose that he had not possessed before. She'd made him whole, surely that was enough?

"You're making a federal case out of this, and it doesn't need to be," Catherine complained, on a gusty exhalation of breath. "Don't you trust me, Vincent?"

"Always..." Vincent murmured as he dropped the towel over the back of his great chair, before sliding onto the edge of the bed. He nudged

her hip with his elbow. "Very well, I know when to concede defeat. Move over."

Gently, he pushed his love flat onto her back against the pillows, the rounded distension of her belly rising above her slender frame. He lay down against her knees, carefully leaning in to rest his cheek against the slope of her lower abdomen. A flutter of movement greeted him, and the solid poke of a hand or a foot against his cheek. He laughed softly, enjoying the wordless contact with the unborn child he already knew so well. The bond between them whispered back and forth.

"What's so funny?" Catherine dropped her chin to frown down at him. "And don't try to change my mind on this. It's made up already. I've given it a lot of thought."

"I would not dream of doing such a thing." Vincent rubbed his cheek against the contact with his child, and felt the baby's spirit link with his.

He placed one hand against Catherine's belly and splayed out his fingers. Again there was a contact, a solid punch against his palm. His son was awake and wanted to play.

"You're stalling," Catherine accused softly, watching the pair of them interact with misty eyes.

Her heartbeat quickened with the joy of it. Vincent had told her she carried their son, and she had no cause to doubt him. The bond that

linked all three was strong and unwavering, despite all they had faced and overcome together.

“I know you too well. It will only take a few moments to do,” she continued to press her point, refusing to be distracted.

Her love drew in his breath deeply, releasing it slowly through pursed lips. “You’re not about to give this up, are you?” he accused, without heat.

“Nope...” Catherine reached down to thread her eager fingers through the full glory of his mane, sifting and playing through the thick strands. “It would only be a little one. You would hardly notice it. Please, Vincent... let me. I know you will like it. Once you see it.”

“Very well.” Vincent admitted in grudging defeat, rolling over onto his back beside her on the bed, and closing his eyes. He reasoned if he didn’t look, then he wouldn’t see the inevitable result.

He felt Catherine rise to her knees beside him, her nimble fingers already threading deeper into his mane, dividing and fussing with the heavy strands. He opened his eyes briefly to see her produce a stout wooden hairbrush from somewhere close to hand. She began to wield it, determination evident in her face. She clamped the tip of her tongue between her neat white teeth, obviously intending to enjoy her work.

Closing his eyes tight, Vincent surrendered to the inevitable. He forced himself to remain still even when Catherine proceeded to run the brush

through his hair, teasing and forming what she had seen in her mind's eye. Some snags made him wince, but he ignored the pain.

Catherine began to hum a tune beneath her breath. She adored times like these, when she could be completely alone with Vincent and their unborn child. When there was no one to draw him away from her care, someone wanting him to go here, come there, see this or that. No one to ask his opinion on this project or another.

She did not begrudge those times, accepting them all with good grace. Now that she was living in the tunnels, through the necessity of avoiding Gabriel's deadly reach, she truly understood how much Vincent was involved in the day to day running of the community. And how much Father relied on his son for help and advice.

And, of course, there were endless chess duels the old man loved to indulge in, hoping against hope he would one day best his more skilled opponent. Jacob had even begun to teach Catherine the more intricate skills of the game, in the hope he could mould her into an opponent he could beat. But he had not bargained on the keen skills and subtleties of her legal mind.

"You're very quiet," Vincent queried, his eyes still closed.

"I'm concentrating," Catherine replied briskly. "I have to get this right the first time." She chuckled. "I doubt you will let me do it again."

“Mmmm...” Vincent murmured in disbelief. “You need to work fast then. I may be called away at any moment.”

“I told Father we were not to be disturbed tonight.” Catherine shifted her position for better access. “He said he would try to make it so. But he worried Mouse would not understand the concept.”

“You planned this.” Vincent opened one considering eye to study her. “I see Father’s chess lessons have had some benefit. I will have to sharpen my game.” He lowered his eyelid again, trying to remain quiescent under his love’s brisk ministrations. He let her do what she wished. He could see he had no opinion in the matter.

“There...” Moments later, Catherine pulled back, dropping her hands into her lap. “It’s done.”

“Dare I ask?” Vincent opened his eyes to watch her expression.

“It looks good to me.” Catherine smiled happily. “Do you want to see?” She leaned over to pick up the hand mirror lying face down on the bedside table.

“It is not for me. I don’t need to see it, Catherine. Not with the mirror.” Vincent placed a restraining hand on her wrist.

He raised his other hand to run his fingers down the single, perfect braid Catherine had created. It extended from beside his left temple to

the end of his mane. It felt strange to his touch, but not unwelcome. He guessed he could live with it.

“Well...?” he queried, tilting his head to various angles to gain her final approval.

“I don’t know. It still needs something...” Catherine frowned as she looked around. “That’s it!” Her gaze spied on a length of black ribbon seemingly lying at random on the bedside table.

“Ah huh.” Vincent rolled onto his side, accepting the addition of the ribbon being firmly attached to the end of his newly-formed braid.

“Better.” Catherine sat back, her expression full of triumph. She studied him minutely. “I could really go for this new look.” Her eyes narrowed. “Maybe we could add one of two more...since we’ve started now.”

“Not just yet. I have an idea...” Vincent sat up cross-legged, taking firm hold of her wrists when she would have reached for him.

They were now sitting facing each other in the middle of the bed. Holding her hands in her lap, beneath her rounded belly, he looked her over from head to toe. “I’m sure your hair is long enough for me to work with. I can see some potential...”

“What do you mean?” Catherine asked suspiciously.

“Whatever made you think this would be a thing we would not share in kind, Catherine?” Vincent purred, even as he lifted a hand to thread his fingers through her shoulder-length hair.

“Mine isn’t long enough.” Catherine struggled to be free of his grasp, but he held her easily.

“I think I could manage to make something of it.” Vincent smiled challengingly. “It would only be a small one. I am sure no one will even notice it.” He picked up the discarded hair bush and waved it gently before her disbelieving gaze.

Green eyes collided with amused blue, and Catherine huffed a long sigh. “Oh, very well.” She began to laugh, enjoying the sweet intimacy of the moment to its fullest. “*Touché*, my love.”

~FIN~

“But I love your feet only because they walked upon the earth and upon the wind and upon the waters, until they found me.”

~ Pablo Neruda