

# Impediments

by AND

*One of the disadvantages of a small society, Catherine thought ruefully to herself, is that every little happening becomes a Big Event because otherwise, people run out of things to talk about.*

Take now. Sam and Alex were only going to be gone for one day, two at the most, a simple little trip up the Thruway. Admittedly, it was a community event in that some of the helpers and tunnel dwellers had pitched in to try to provide funding and supplies. But now that the time had come for them to go, that very generosity threatened to keep them from being able to leave.

"Wait! Do you have a map? I got you a map."

"Yes, yes, here in my pocket, Samantha."

"What about a snack for the road? I can run down to the kitchen, get you some more if you don't think that will be enough."

"Enough? William, if we eat all that, we won't fit into our clothes by the time we get back!"

"Do you want a book to read while you're standing in line?"

"Thank you, Eric, but not this time."

A familiar throat-clearing silenced the general babble. Sam and Alex looked tentatively over at Father, who had that stern I'm-about-to-give-a-lecture expression.

"What you are about to do is unprecedented," Father started.

"We know," Sam said quietly.

"Do you also know that it won't change anything down here? It probably won't even change anything up there, either."

"Maybe not." Sam lifted his chin. "But no matter what happens, we'll know that we stood up to be counted."

"But why New Paltz?" Mary fretted. "If something happens to you so far away, we won't be able to help you."

"It's barely over an hour north," Catherine soothed her. "If anything happens, I can get there right away."

"Besides, it's a lot closer than Portland or San Francisco," Sam pointed out. "Not to mention cheaper to get to."

"If you wait," Father started. "Wait just a little while longer and see if something happens here in the city, see what the court rulings are..."

Alex, who had been quiet all along, lifted his head, his voice ringing out defiantly. "We've waited 20 years, Father. We're not waiting one day longer."

For a moment they stared at each other, Father and Alex, while the rest of the community held its breath and waited. This was not a trip that had been planned lightly, or even had the support of everyone Below. A word from Father could yet tip the uneasy truce back into bickering.

Father finally nodded his head, tapping his cane for emphasis. "Then go," he said, only a little stiffly. "Go and..." The words came hard, but did finally come. "Congratulations on your marriage."

There was a general cheer from most of the bystanders and, with a final wave, Sam and Alex were gone. The others began to wander back to their chores and chambers, until Catherine and Father were at last alone in his study. He dropped behind his desk, rubbing his eyes.

"The world Above has changed so much, Catherine, in just a few years."

"Homosexuality isn't anything new, Father."

Now she was on the receiving end of that blue glare. All these years she'd known him, been a part of this society, and he could still make her feel like one of the children with a single look.

"I know that," he said with acid dignity. "Who better? Back when this society was formed you couldn't even say the word up there. Couples then had to hide it, call themselves 'good friends,' or 'cousins' - anything but what they really were. And if they didn't hide it well enough, if they were caught... well, where else was there for them to go except Below? There have been people of the same gender living together down here since the beginning."

"Then why all the fuss when Alex proposed to Sam?"

"Because it is one thing to tacitly allow something, and another to have it flaunted." Father sighed. "Quite another to be asked to decide who is morally right - Alex and

Sam, who have been together for so long? Or Mary or Ruben, who are shocked to the core by gay marriage? As long as we could live and let live without discussing it, there was nothing to fight over."

"Nobody fought when Vincent and I married."

"That was different."

"Should it have been?"

Father smiled a little ruefully. "No, it should not. But people feel differently about it just the same." He looked around the empty chamber. "Speaking of Vincent, where is he? He's been rather moody the last few days, have you noticed?"

Had she? It had been like living with a hand grenade with the pin out. "I'll go talk to him. I'm surprised he wasn't here to see them off."

Father grunted at that. "If you're going to go look for him, I suggest the bridge in the Whispering Gallery or the waterfalls. Those are his usual sulking places."

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He was at the waterfall, plopping stones into the water with great concentration and scientific aim. This wasn't just moody, this was an industrial-grade funk!

But why? Vincent had been one of the loudest supporters for Alex and Sam's quest for one of the controversial gay marriage licenses; it was his speeches, his very presence, that had silenced the fighting and gotten the rest of the community to either help with or at least ignore the proposed trip. But now that it was happening, he was fouler tempered than anyone else down Below.

\*plop\*

\*plop\*

\*plop\*

She knew he knew she was there, but he didn't look up, not even when she approached, although he did scoot over in case she wanted to sit. She did.

\*plop\*

\*plop\*

\*plop\*

"They're gone. They'll be at the courthouse by the time it opens."

"Good." \*plop\*

"I pulled some strings. The license will be waiting for them, and they're guaranteed to get the court ceremony today."

"Good." \*plop\*

"There's no guarantee that it will be considered valid; we've already started hearing rumors that the licenses will be revoked. They may even try to arrest the mayor."

\*shrug\* \*plop\*

"I thought you were happy for them."

"I am." \*plop\*plop\*plop\*

Sometimes you have to take the direct approach. "Then why are you down here being a grouch instead of up in Father's study wishing them well? They were looking for you."

\*plop\*

\*plop\*

\*plop\*

"Because I didn't want to poison their wedding day with my jealousy."

Eight more stones went in and Vincent went looking for more while Catherine tried to process that statement. Finally, befuddled, she gave up.

"What do you mean, jealousy? They finally get to be married! Like us!"

"They were married like us." Vincent came back with what looked like a pound of gravel cradled in his large hands and went back to tossing stones as though his future depended on it.

The silence stretched out. Just before Catherine was about to ask him another question, Vincent sighed and continued.

"They were married like us, in a quiet little ceremony before their friends. Years ago, they had a handfasting, just a few people in attendance."

He took careful aim, dropping words and stones with simultaneous gravity.

"Just." \*plop\*

"Like." \*plop\*

"Us." \*plop\*

With another deep sigh, he lapsed back into silence.

"I don't get it," Catherine confessed.

With a sharp growl, Vincent threw the rocks back down to the ground, launching up to pace angrily.

"As long as their love was as forbidden, as unspeakable as ours, I felt that we were not alone. Someone else understood. Now, no matter what happens, no matter if their license is repealed or the mayor is arrested or even if the Constitution is rewritten, they will have had their chance to stand together, in the sun, in front of everyone and say 'We love each other. We belong together. We will pledge our lives to each other despite your objections'."

He whirled on her, his eyes wet and desperate. "Samuel and Alexis can take their wedding rings back off, shred their marriage license, and still go about together as friends. Still go Above together. Any night. Every night. We will never have that. We CAN NEVER! HAVE! THAT! One night Above a year, one night only, on Halloween, dare I show my face in your world."

He punched the wall, dragging his claws down the rock and leaving gashes behind. "I can't even go Above as they did, to earn money to give to the one I love. As soon as Canada allowed the marriages, they both went up and started working and saving to buy their wedding rings and make the trip. I couldn't even do that for you."

As suddenly as it came on, the fighting spirit left him and he slumped, head down and shoulders bowed, his back to her.

"I would give you all that I have, I would put the world on a silver platter for you, and yet I have nothing. Your diamond is your mother's engagement ring, not my gift, and you must wear it on your right hand." He spread his hands, looking at the hairy fingers and the tough claws, one now chipped and split. "I would gladly stand before all the world and say 'I am Catherine's' and yet I cannot even wear a wedding band."

He whirled back, stooping to regather the stones, dropping dejectedly back to his seat.

"I would give my life and soul to have the dream they will have today, even knowing as they do that it might be taken away tomorrow. My mind rejoices that another barrier is falling in the world Above, but my heart is poisoned with the knowledge that there will never be such freedom for me."

Catherine sat awhile in silence, stunned. There was nothing she could say that wouldn't be facile or even hypocritical. It doesn't matter? She had been arguing, fiercely, in front of the council for weeks that letting Sam and Alex go did matter. Our time will come? It wouldn't. Things will change? Not that much.

Wait, there was one thing that she could say. "I don't care."

Vincent missed his shot, bouncing a rock painfully off the toe of her shoe.

"Sorry. What?"

"I. Don't. Care. I don't care if we never get a license. I don't care that we can only go Above together once a year. I don't care that you don't shower me with expensive things. If I cared about things like that, I would have married Elliot."

Vincent raised his hand, lowered it, raised it, and finally tossed the rock. It bounced three times off the side of the gorge before hitting the water.

"He seems to be doing better financially these days. Winning the contract to rebuild Ground Zero and the memorial will make him the city's top architect again."

"Good for him." Vincent shot her a look out of the corner of his eye, but Catherine just took a piece of gravel from his hands and tossed it herself.

*Y'know there is something rather soothing about that plop!*

She tossed a few more, and although she could still feel his distress and now confusion, Vincent started to toss as well, patiently waiting for her to make her point.

\*plop\*plop\*

\*ploplop\*

\*pplopp\*

When he seemed a little calmer, she tried again. "What kept Alex and Sam together?"

\*plop\*plop\*

"Their love."

"Would they have broken up if they hadn't been able to get the marriage license?"

\*plop\* \*ploplop\*

"Who even dreamed of an American license before Massachusetts made headlines a few months ago?"

"So they would have grown old together with or without that paper."

He put his stones back down and turned to face her. "Yes, as we will." He reached for her, and she leaned into his caress, fur whispering across her cheek.

"I wish it were different too, Vincent," she whispered into the palm that cupped her lips. She kissed it and leaned back so he could hear her clearly. "I wish I could show you off too. Look, world, at my wonderful husband! I wish I could take you everywhere you've read about. I wish you could feel happy and not imprisoned. But I don't care half as much about any of those things as I care about being able to come home to you in the first place. As I care about having your heart and giving you mine, no matter whose diamond is on which finger. I am glad to trade 364 nights Above alone for one night Above with you."

Vincent snorted, but a corner of his mouth also curved up. Catherine warmed to her theme.

"To tell the truth, I don't think I see..." A frightening, warming, wonderful idea slowly began to dawn. "I don't think I see the spouses of some of my coworkers even once a year. Edie's husband hates parties. I've never met him, not once. His excuses for not coming get funnier every time. It's a joke with us all to guess what he'll come up with next. And Lewis, his wife hates having her picture taken, she's got this big port-wine birthmark. So he doesn't have any pictures of her in the office. And the new guy, Jim, he thinks that it's unprofessional to talk about personal life in the workplace. I don't know anything about his wife." She stopped to blink, think, and correct herself. "I don't know anything about his spouse at all - for all I know, he's just come from San Francisco. And they already know that there's someone in my life that I don't discuss at the office."

That idea was just getting bigger and better with every word. "Vincent, Halloween isn't considered a federal holiday. The courthouse keeps going on regular hours. They won't close until after dark."

He was staring at her, uncomprehendingly, so she restated it in very small sentences. "After dark. On Halloween. We could go to the county courthouse and apply..."

"For a license? A marriage license?" He sounded more disbelieving with every word. "For US?"

"Why not? No matter what the courts rule about Sam and Alex, I'm female, you're male, we're both over the age of consent - we should have a pretty easy time of it."

"Looking like this?"

"We'll tell them we're on our way to a party. Look, if Britney Spears could get married while she was three sheets to the wind, then we're already ahead of the game if we're sober but just in costume."

Vincent smiled, truly smiled, for the first time in days. "I thought you didn't care about a license."

"I care about making you happy."

Vincent dropped his rocks, dusted off his hands, and reached for her. "Then, Catherine Chandler, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife in the eyes of your world as well as mine?"

Her answer was a long, lingering kiss, followed by moving the diamond ring from her right hand to her left.

For a moment they sat leaning on each other, admiring her outstretched hand.

Suddenly Vincent laughed. "Mary worried that Sam and Alex would inspire more people to apply for marriage licenses!"

"So they have. We shall have to think of something to tell her."

"Shakespeare already did." He gathered Catherine into his arms as he began..."Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments..."

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