

Choices

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Note: Certain dialogue was were taken from the episode 'A Gentle Rain' from the series Beauty and the Beast, written by Linda Campanelli & M.M. Shelly Moore.

"Vincent?"

"In here," he replied, lighting another candle on the rocky wall.

Catherine entered the newly carved chamber with a joyous smile, a basket full of dried and fresh flowers hanging over her arm. She stopped abruptly at the sight of what seemed like a sea of candles all around her - in the nooks and crannies of the walls and a few shelves hanging on them. A lifeless rock had been transformed into an inviting warm new living space.

"Oh, Vincent..." She sighed, and he could feel her heart fluttering at the beauty around her.

"Do you like it?" he asked with a small smile.

"It's beautiful! It's perfect!" Catherine exclaimed in wonder, making Vincent smile even wider.

"How can Kanin carve something like this into a solid rock?" she asked, still looking around her.

"He had trained himself. I don't think he knows the meaning of the word impossible," Vincent remarked, bemused.

Catherine woke up from her daze and walked past Vincent, placing a bunch of flowers on a shelf ahead of her.

"That explains why he asked me to get lilacs this time of year." She chuckled.

She walked over to Vincent, placing another small bunch of lilacs into the recess on the wall.

"Was Olivia's first husband this romantic?" she asked.

"How should I know? I didn't know Kanin was this romantic," Vincent replied, amazed himself, making Catherine laugh.

"When he asked me to light a few candles I thought he meant four or five," he added with a small smile again. Then he pointed with his head at the entrance across the room leading to the second part of the chamber.

"Over there, too," he said to Catherine, meaning the flowers.

She understood straight away and walked in that direction in an almost childlike excitement of preparing such a lovely setting for Kanin and Olivia's wedding anniversary. Kanin had finally managed to carve a new larger chamber for them and their barely one-year-old son Luke, just in time for their anniversary, and had asked Vincent and Catherine to help him decorate it festively.

As Catherine walked in the bedroom part of the chamber, her breath caught in her throat. Amidst a sea of candlelight, her eyes rested on a beautifully carved large snow-white double bed, covered with fresh white linen, quilt and fluffy white pillows trimmed with laces around their edges.

Catherine's eyes got a little misty; the joyous smile on her face changed into a bittersweet one, as she sighed quietly.

Vincent's head turned towards her immediately. He could feel the unmistakable shift in her heart - the melancholy, the deep longing, the sadness at the slowly vanishing hope for something which was always meant to be for two people in love, and yet....

He walked over to the entrance to the bedroom and leaned against the edge of it, looking at Catherine.

"Do you think Olivia will like this room?" he asked, trying to ease the tension he felt in Catherine.

The woman in front of him woke from her reverie and looked a little over her shoulder in his direction, before casting a final glance at the bed. Then, she turned around and walked past him with just a fleeting glance at his face.

"Olivia will *love* this room."

Vincent stood still for a moment, feeling the melancholy within himself now, the weight of the unspoken words between he and Catherine hanging heavily over his head. It was he who stubbornly kept denying her this something. The last piece of the puzzle, the piece which would complete them both and which was getting harder and harder for Vincent to deny.

He knew her feelings very well, her dreams and wishes, for he shared them with her. Waking night after night covered with sweat, full of desperate longing, remembering the incredibly soft and warm feel of her body pressed to his in every embrace they shared. The light and loving expression in her eyes, when she looked into his own eyes. The way her look caressed his face and her lips curved into that dreamy smile, when she regarded him closely, trying to convey the whole depth of her love for him. The tingling in his hands and heat spreading through his veins, when she held his hand or stroke his hair or his back during an embrace. The way she never seemed to get close enough to him whenever she was in his arms, as if trying to melt into him. The sweetest torment he had ever known, when his own body fought a raging battle in order not to betray him, yet losing so many times...

He had tried so hard to push her away at the beginning. Deep inside, though, he knew already then that it was a pointless battle he was going to lose. Trying to push Catherine away was like Don Quixote fighting the windmills - she would never surrender.

Elliot Burch almost took her away from him, but even he had failed. Catherine knew what she wanted, and what she wanted was Vincent. After he finally accepted her choice, and ceased to fight to believe leaving was for her own good, he couldn't get enough of her. Vincent was like a man dying of thirst, revelling in each drop of water his dry mouth received. Those stolen moments on her balcony, or down Below, were those drops for him.

Whenever she was near him, he became alive. His heart was full of love and devotion, his body waking to its own life, responding to her every single touch with a feeling of fire burning him up, impossible to put out. With her, he felt strong, flying high, willing and able to do anything. Without her, he felt half-empty, as if every time they parted, half of him left his body, leaving the other half desperately yearning in wait to welcome it back again - to become whole again.

The platonic love they shared from the beginning was filling their hearts and souls. But the more time had passed, the more he could feel the rising feelings of suppressed passion in both of them. He knew how

Catherine was trying so hard to keep her desire for him at bay, away from him, in order not to scare him, but Vincent felt it anyway.

In the past year, they did get closer physically. They had spent many nights in an embrace while talking. Catherine loved resting her head on his shoulder and snuggling close to him while he was reading to her. More frequently, his lips had dared the lightest kisses on top of her head, or a nuzzle in her hair for the briefest moments. His hand now frequently reached out to gently stroke her cheek, to her great delight. And if he still found it almost unbelievable that such a woman as Catherine could ever feel anything like that towards *him*, he couldn't deny it. In fact, he felt a sense of pride and happiness that someone exactly like him could evoke such feelings in her.

However, he also knew that his own physical need for her was getting stronger day by day. Sometimes, it was reaching the point of pain, and yet... The years of preconception of what he was, and the fear of hurting her if they became intimate, were still keeping him stubbornly away from her.

Catherine was bearing it with courage, but many times Vincent caught her wistful look at him, full of longing and sadness as she quickly smiled, then turned away whenever he looked at her in such moments. It hurt him because he knew *he* was hurting her. She always gave him so much and asked for so little. He knew what she wanted most, and yet, Vincent was adamant in not offering it to her.

To surrender to your heart fully, without doubting, to let it guide your life...

Why couldn't he surrender to his heart fully and stop doubting the possible outcome of what they both longed for so much? The question kept burning in his mind more frequently as their relationship had evolved. He wanted to obey his heart so desperately, and yet, his fears were still keeping a tight reign over his reason. As the time was passing though, more and more he found himself wondering "*What if it IS possible?*"

They were standing outside the new chamber, waiting for Kanin, whispering casually, in order not to disturb Kanin revealing his newest work to his wife. They agreed they would take little Luke from him and take him to Mary for the night. The celebrating couple could then spend their anniversary night alone in their new chamber.

"Hey, Luke!" Catherine exclaimed with a beaming smile, when Kanin came out and passed her his little son.

"One of us will pick him up from Mary in the morning," their friend said, with a grateful smile.

"Don't worry about Luke, he'll be just fine." Catherine laughed, watching little Luke pulling at Vincent's hair and Vincent playfully kissing the baby's little hand, making him smile.

Kanin smiled, knowing his son was in the best hands and he put his hand on Vincent's shoulder.

"Vincent, Catherine... Thank you again," he said before returning to the chamber.

His two friends just smiled, then looked at each other and left happily for the nursery, where Mary was already expecting them.

As they were walking, Vincent was watching Catherine entertaining the child in her arms. He couldn't help but feel his heart warming at the thought that, if he wanted, it might be his child the woman walking next to him could be carrying...

No, it cannot be! But...

He sighed and shook his head lightly, trying to chase away the haunting thoughts.

“What’s wrong, Vincent?” Catherine asked, concerned after she stopped, noticing the shift in his mood.

“Nothing, just feeling a bit tired; it has been a long day,” Vincent smiled, not wanting to worry her.

Catherine gave him an observing look, then smiled gently and lifted little Luke closer towards Vincent.

“Why don’t you take over for the rest of the journey? Luke seems to love your hair.” *As do I*, she thought to herself.

Vincent returned her look with a smile, though only after a brief moment of trying to figure out whether there was a deeper meaning behind Catherine’s gesture. Of course, there was, it was Catherine, there had to be.

“I would love to...” he admitted shyly and took the boy into his arms.

When he looked into Luke’s eyes, the boy smiled back at him and his little hands went straight into Vincent’s golden hair. His still minute fingers were testing the smooth feel of it but without hurting the leonine man.

The corners of Vincent’s lips turned upwards.

“Just wait until you get to explore aunt Mary’s hair, little man, she will surely love having a new hairdo.” Vincent chuckled.

Catherine enjoyed this little moment immensely and her eyes glistened slightly. She'd seen Vincent with a baby before (after Lena gave birth to little Cathy), and though Luke was almost a year old, she saw the same beauty in the image of the man she loved the most in the world, in an almost magical interaction with a child.

All children loved Vincent, but it wasn’t just because he looked different. There was something almost otherworldly in him, an enormous peace and warmth radiating from him, which affected the little ones like no one else. And he could be playful too, in a more sophisticated way, but still. The children loved any game, any fun he created with them. He always paid his full attention to them and by setting an example in his behaviour, they were learning from him as well.

Oh, Vincent.... When will you realize this was meant to be for us as well? There is nothing to fear; there is only love...

Vincent lifted his eyes from Luke and looked at Catherine, sensing her emotional shift. Catherine smiled at him and in her eyes, he saw what he saw the day she asked him what it felt like to hold Lena’s baby in his arms - the look of longing for something they could one day share too.

He gasped almost inaudibly, his eyes burning into hers, desperately trying to hide his desire, his need and wish for what they both were longing for so much.

Catherine saw it though - they could never hide anything from each other. But she knew it would be too overwhelming to talk about it now, especially with Luke in Vincent’s arms. But maybe soon, hopefully soon, they could talk about it....

She blinked, took a deep breath and smiled cheerfully.

“Let’s bring the little big man to bed.” She started for the nursery with Vincent following her, and when he gently tickled Luke’s little foot, the boy giggled again.

An hour later, Catherine was putting little Luke to bed in the nursery, observed lovingly by Vincent, who was standing nearby. She was quietly singing a lullaby, a different one from the one she sang to Ellie once, but still beautiful, and her untrained but warm voice had a soothing quality to it.

“She’s marvellous with children, isn’t she?” Mary spoke quietly, touching Vincent’s arm softly.

“Yes... she is...” It was all he could reply, tenderly, still watching Catherine.

Mary’s smile widened when she looked up at him from aside and saw the enchanted expression on his face.

“You know, Vincent, sometimes what we fear can prevent us from doing what we wish the most and cause irreparable harm to our hearts.”

He looked at her surprised, her warm grey eyes mirroring understanding he seldom found in others when it came to the matter of his heart.

Mary had always been like a mother to Vincent, he had always found great comfort and support in her, and she had always made him see things clearer, truer.

Father was the man of reason, raising Vincent in strict ideas, claiming it was in his best interest, considering the restrictions his son had to live in all his life.

Mary preferred to use her heart when approaching her favourite child. She was trying to see things with his eyes, as well as her own, helping him to find his own way.

“What if that fear is too strong, Mary?” Vincent frowned in genuine worry. “And worse, what if that fear is justified?” The struggle within his own heart was written all over his unique features and troubled eyes.

Mary reached up, patted his cheek and smiled.

“We never know until we try, do we? Besides, sometimes the risk is worth more than lifelong regrets, Vincent...” Her smile faded for a moment, as if she remembered something from her own past.

She squeezed his arm, briefly looked at Catherine and then back at Vincent, before slowly walking to Catherine to relieve her of her babysitting duty.

Vincent’s eyes remained fixed on the wall for a moment, as he was digesting the thought he had just heard. Then he looked over to where the women were lovingly fussing over the boy he had held in his arms not so long ago. His eyes went immediately to Catherine, and he was rooted to the spot when he saw her regarding him with a look that needed no explanation.

Life was full of choices, but at that moment, Vincent knew there was only one choice he had to make soon - he had to choose between risk or regrets.

END

