

Promise

by Angie

Love comforteth, like sunshine after rain
- Shakespeare (Venus and Adonis)

Vincent knelt down by the Mirror Pool and gazed at the reflected night sky. The moon was a sliver, the thinnest he had ever seen it. Like the moon, he felt a darkness coming over him, a sadness. The New Year seemed to mock him.

He had left Catherine at her threshold after saying goodbye to Laura, who had returned to her life above and the man she loved. He and Catherine had walked slowly, hand-in-hand, but too soon she had parted from him, and he was alone again.

The depth of his aloneness depressed him sometimes, as now, after another dear friend had left the tunnels, probably for good. Devin, Lisa, Michael – and many others he had taught or cared for over the years - had gone above to follow their dreams. Some returned, but others did not.

Each parting had been difficult. They were going where he could not – dared never go. It wasn't jealousy he felt at that thought, he had never felt that. He knew what he was, and that there was no place for him in the world above. But the sadness was often almost overwhelming. He died a little inside at every parting, even from Catherine. They always seemed so final, and who knew what Fate might force them or he, to endure?

Vincent had to be honest and admit that he could not teach his students everything, that they had to go above to learn those things he would never know about personally. But even the ones who did not leave got married and had children, leaving him outside their world, just as surely as if they'd gone above. Of course, he would still see them and talk to them, but they had embarked on a journey he could not follow. They had a life apart from him, even in the tunnels, where everyone was family.

He felt something close to despair at his state. How many more cherished friends would he lose? Sometimes it was more than he could bear to think about. He had learned to school himself and show little emotion when he attended the special ceremonies - even tried to enjoy them. Of course he was happy for those being celebrated. But always, when it was all over, he came down here to the Mirror Pool, where the still waters calmed him and the reflected stars bespoke distant worlds and lives unknown. He was an unknown, after all, in all senses of that word. He could never truly fit anywhere.

Catherine kept him sane, but she could not be below often, and he could not burden her with his desperate need for comfort on nights like this. She had changed him, given him more than he could ever have expected from a woman – and yet, he wanted more. He was sure she wanted more too, but he was afraid to broach the topic, to even think about it much. That way lay madness - and despair. But he could not cease thinking about it this time. The pain was too real, too new.

Earlier, after Laura had left, Catherine had told him the deaf woman would find joy – and had implied that the sacrifice was worth it. She had said something similar not long before, when referring to their

love. Laura, he knew, had consummated her love. Would he and Catherine ever do the same?

What they had was so precious, so unexpected, so sweet – and gave him such joy - that he didn't want to risk losing it, just because he could now dream about what had once been unthinkable. Those dreams made him feel less alone, less different. But they were only dreams.

More substantial, at least for him, was the bond he had with Catherine. He could feel her emotional passage through her life above and treasured the insights she gave him into that life – a life he would never know firsthand. He knew very well that she thought of him often, and loved him. Yet he wondered whether he could truly give her enough in return for the blessing of her love, without consummating it.

Did he truly want a “pure” love, one that left both of them wanting something that neither dared speak of? No, that would be unfair to Catherine and seemed impossible, even from his perspective. Even though Catherine had said she would accept her fate gladly – meaning whatever form of love he gave her – he was not so sure of himself. He was a man, with a man's urges. He could not keep them under control forever, nor did he want to. But this was unknown territory for him. He could not move forward into that realm of love until he knew what to expect – for both their sakes. And how could he know that?

Vincent sat back on his heels and then sat down cross-legged on the sand. Perhaps the quiet of the pool would inspire a solution.

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Catherine was aware that Vincent was distracted as they walked back to her threshold. Ever since she had known he was in danger, when he and Father had been trapped by a rockfall, her sense of him had gradually improved.

She had not told him so. He did not seem to want to discuss their bond, perhaps because he thought it one-way, or because he disliked reminding her of his differences, or the extent of what he could feel from her. It no longer made her uncomfortable, and she hoped he knew that.

This time, it wasn't just what she surmised through their bond, but also his body language, which was as eloquent, in its way, as Laura's sign language. She knew he hated to see people he loved leave the tunnels. She wondered if that was something that harkened back to Devin's leaving, which had assuredly been devastating to him as a boy. On the other hand, Vincent made strong attachments to those he loved, as she knew well. Seeing them move to the world above, even though it was to live a different, perhaps fuller life, would inevitably make him sad.

She gave him a quick hug before turning to the ladder and clambering up it. She sensed he wanted to leave. Once in the storage room, she paused. She sensed he was not thinking of her. She wanted to be with him, to comfort him, to touch him. It was too soon in the New Year for such melancholy.

Immediately, she decided to follow him back. She carefully got her emotions under control and calmed herself, at least on the surface of her mind, so that he would not suspect, then returned down the ladder. Thankfully, she was still wearing pants and sensible footwear from that night's excitement.

She took off her gloves, berating herself for wearing them while they were hand-in-hand. There were too many barriers already – that was one she could remove.

She walked carefully and quietly, trying to follow her sense of him. She suspected he would not be going back to his chamber.

Catherine waved at the sentry as she passed and received a smile, a wink, and wave in return from Jamie. Well, there were no secrets in the tunnels, but Jamie wouldn't see any need to broadcast Catherine's passage, any more than she did Vincent's.

He was far enough ahead of her that Catherine knew even his sharp ears wouldn't hear her. He seemed to be heading downwards, and she thought she knew where he was going now, since he had passed

the bridge and Whispering Gallery.

She walked carefully as she neared the Mirror Pool and approached the chamber entrance, pressing herself against the dark wall and craning her neck to see the edge of the pool. He was kneeling beside it, obviously deep in thought. As she watched, he changed position to sit cross-legged.

Catherine now felt a little guilty at her subterfuge. Would he appreciate being spied-upon? Should she scuff the sand and announce her presence? She hated to see him brood and wanted to hold him close, to let him know she would always be available to him. Why hadn't he said something? It was a Friday night and she'd had no intention of being at home for any panic calls from Joe.

Okay, she was here now, so she had to think of a way to approach him. He was less reticent in showing her he loved her, so perhaps there was no need to have a reason. With a silent sigh, Catherine trod softly across the sand, intending to sit next to him. However, her eyes were not on her feet and a boot hit a rock. The next thing she knew, she was sprawled inches from the pool, dazed.

She felt strong hands turn her over and lift her into a more dignified angle and looked up to see Vincent's worried face. One arm was supporting her back.

"Catherine!"

"Umph," was all she could muster, then became aware that her hands hurt. "Ow!"

Vincent turned her hands over to look at them and grunted sympathetically.

"They're badly scraped, Catherine, and there is gravel stuck in them. I'll have to see to them quickly."

Before she could say any more, he picked her up and almost ran back the way they had come. He turned into the tunnel infirmary and carefully seated her on the examining tablet, then stoked up the brazier under a kettle. He then searched out some cotton pads, alcohol and unguent.

Catherine, watched all this, feeling more ridiculous and guilty by the moment. Her hands stung so much she doubted she could even hug Vincent. So much for subterfuge and taking off her gloves! She felt hot tears on her cheeks and rested her hands palm up on her knees. They looked as bad as they felt!

Vincent came back to her with a small bowl he had filled with water from the kettle, and a basket of assorted supplies. He pulled up a bar stool in front of her and sat down. He took one hand at a time and meticulously cleaned it with warm water then examined it closely.

"This is going to hurt," he warned her, as he carefully used tweezers to extract a piece of gravel embedded in the heel of her hand, and then another.

Catherine gritted her teeth and made no sound except some short intakes of breath. Eventually, Vincent was satisfied. He wiped her hand with alcohol, forcing her to gasp again, then spread on some unguent. He carefully wrapped her hand in a clean cotton strip, neatly tying it on the back. He repeated the process with her other hand. By the time he had finished, Catherine was sweating and miserable – but her hands did feel better.

"Thank you," she managed to whisper, not trusting herself to say more.

Vincent put the supplies away, extinguished the brazier, and then silently picked her up again and carried her to his chamber. He laid her on his bed and then sat beside her, his face carefully neutral. Catherine guessed he did not want to question her presence by the Mirror Pool, but was understandably curious. She didn't know what to say.

"Sorry, I ..." she began. Vincent distracted her by carefully taking her hands in his. His mouth twitched wryly.

"Catherine, there is no need to explain. You are always welcome here. I should have invited you. I did not think to."

Catherine relaxed and decided that she had to be honest or silent – and silence did not seem right this time.

"I knew you were unhappy, so I came back to offer my ... comfort, for what that's worth. Instead, you had to comfort me."

"Your ... comfort ... has changed my life, Catherine. I know you understand me, perhaps better than Father. He always worries like a parent, while you ... you see me as I am - and still care about me."

Catherine looked into his clear blue eyes. "Vincent, I love you. You know that."

"Yes," he whispered. "And I you. But Catherine, we have so many challenges to overcome. If I can make you happy, and comfort you, that is more than I ever dared to hope."

"Then we must overcome the challenges and dream on, Vincent. There is nothing else to do. As a wise person said once – *"Do or do not. There is no try"*."

Vincent chuckled. "Some of the children kept quoting that a few years ago. A helper took them to see the movie."

Catherine laughed in turn. "One either moves toward love or away from it. There is no other direction. You said that once."

"Yes."

His life was so carefully circumscribed. Although the tunnels and its folk were wonderful, surely he would ache at times to be able to see the world above in daylight, or do some of the things she took for granted. She wished with all her heart that she could give him everything he wanted – he certainly deserved it.

"Vincent, we've just begun a new year, as my world defines it. I want us to look forward to it with joy ... with anticipation ... and with love."

Vincent dropped his head and hid inside his hair, a sure sign that he was uncomfortable. Catherine sighed inwardly. What he said next would define the year to come.

He looked up into her eyes.

"There is so much I want to give you, Catherine, and so much I know that I cannot. We have so little here."

"Then perhaps we should focus on the possible, Vincent. I don't want you to give me anything material. I want you, only you ... all of you," she whispered that last, hoping he wouldn't shy away.

Vincent looked at his golden window for a moment and she saw his face in its light. Didn't he realize how beautiful he was? Why couldn't he believe it? Even Lena, a newcomer, had seen it. What could she do to convince him?

She sat up a little taller and reached for his face, lightly touching it with her bandaged hands and framing it. He didn't move, perhaps afraid that any sudden movement would hurt her hands.

"Vincent, this is the face that I love. It is all I see of you, besides your hands, those gentle hands that comfort and care for so many. Your differences don't make you less, but more. No one else could demonstrate love as you do."

"There is only me," Vincent said quietly, as if that said it all.

"Yes, there is only you. You are unique. No one disputes that, least of all I. I love that uniqueness. I feel privileged to know you, Vincent. You can't possibly know how much. Every day I thank the Fates that brought us together. There is not just you, though, not since that fateful night. There is you and me, joined through our bond, forever."

"Yes. I too thank the Fates for that night."

He was silent for long moments. She waited, knowing he was turning over what she had said in his mind. Perhaps he would not ignore her statement this time.

He looked in her eyes again, and smiled. Moving slightly, he gathered her into his arms and she sighed,

moving to get closer. He did not stiffen or prevent her from doing it.

“Laura has gone to the man she loves in the world above,” he said at last, almost into her ear.

“She knows what she wants. I envy that. I know what I want also, but am afraid to ... pursue it.”

“There is nothing to be afraid of, Vincent. Our bond tells you everything you need to know. I know you have fears. I cannot deny they are of concern to you. But you know they don’t concern me, or I would not feel about you as I do.”

“What are we to do, Catherine?” he whispered.

“I think we must go forward as everyone else must, to gain what is worth having. It is never easy, Vincent. All we need is courage. I know you have it, and I have learned it from you.”

“Yes. I agree, Catherine, but ...”

“No buts, Vincent. Trust is what we need now. Belief in our bond, in our love expressed in it. How can that allow any hurt of the kind you fear? You can feel everything I feel. I can often feel your emotions now. Think how much more we may gain if we ... continue on this path. Our bond is still flowering. We must not allow it to wither.”

“I cannot allow that to happen. I will not. I promise you I will move forward, Catherine. I know you will understand and be patient.”

He separated from her enough so he could look in her eyes. Before she could say anything, he planted a soft kiss on her lips. A thrill ran through her and she felt him shiver in response. But he did not move away, merely continued to kiss her, as if proving that he could.

His lips, both the lower and the unique feline upper, were soft and warm, so beautiful, she thought. She gloried in it. Then he pulled away, and looked at her.

“Now I know I can kiss you,” he said. “That is a step forward, is it not?”

“Yes, Vincent, and I hope I can count on more of them.”

“There is much to explore,” he replied, his mouth turning up at the edges in a smile. “It was ... extraordinary, to feel your lips on mine.”

“I think this year has started well,” she said at last, still a little breathless at this new development.

Vincent hugged her. The peace she felt along the bond told her more. He was happy. When they moved apart a little more, he gathered her hands into his own, carefully, as if they were injured birds.

“You must stay below for a day or two, Catherine. You cannot use these hands for a while. Can you do that? May I have the pleasure of your company?”

“Yes, Vincent. I would like nothing better. I am yours for the weekend - and forever.”

“Then you must stay here, in my chamber, where I can help you easily.”

That worried her slightly. Where would he sleep?

“I don’t want to deprive you of your bed, Vincent. I’ve done that too often already.”

“You will not deprive me of it, Catherine. I must be here to help you, so I will ... share my bed with you. It is more than big enough for us both. I cannot promise you more than that, but I do want you here with me.”

“I expect no promises, Vincent. Having you close is enough.”

“I believe dinner will be announced soon, Catherine. May I bring you some?”

“Oh yes. I’m starving,” she replied.

“Then so it will be. In the meantime, let me move you over a bit - you can’t do it easily with those hands. Then I’ll read to you.”

Catherine could hardly believe her ears. She looked at her hands. Such a stupid and clumsy accident, yet it had changed everything.

She said nothing as he put one hand under her legs and another at her back, and shifted her sideways. She looked in his eyes when he stood up and gazed at her. Something had definitely changed. She could see the love and passion in his eyes as never before. He did not try to hide it from her now. He had decided to move towards what he wanted - what they both wanted.

Catherine smiled at him and waited. He turned to find a book and rummaged around his table. She decided she didn't care what he read. The sound of his voice, and his presence on his bed next to her, would be more than enough to make her happy.

But what he read, confirmed her happy anticipation.

*Alas! 'tis true, I have gone here and there,
And made my self a motley to the view,
Gored mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear,
Made old offences of affections new;
Most true it is, that I have looked on truth
Askance and strangely; but, by all above,
These blenches gave my heart another youth,
And worse essays proved thee my best of love.
Now all is done, have what shall have no end:
Mine appetite I never more will grind
On newer proof, to try an older friend,
A god in love, to whom I am confined.
Then give me welcome, next my heaven the best,
Even to thy pure and most most loving breast. **

"Shakespeare knew everything," she whispered.

He smiled at her. "Yes."

What came next would happen in its own time. She now knew the wait would be worth it. A new year had begun.

(* Sonnet 110)

END

