

MASQUERADE

by Gloria Jones

(from Phoenix Three)

It was a time of rejoicing and a time of sorrow. The Halloween following Catherine's death evoked painful memories for Vincent, as he recalled the special significance it held for him and Catherine. On the other hand, it was his favorite holiday as it was the only day he could freely walk among the population Above, eliciting little more than a snicker or an occasional sidelong glance.

He was unsure how - or if - he'd take advantage of that rare freedom this year. But now, the week before Halloween, as he hurried to Diana, he had no idea of the outrageous request she was about to make. He crossed the moonlit path of the park, hiding behind trees as he went, inhaling deeply of autumn air, feeling dried leaves crunch beneath his feet.

When he reached her building, climbed to the rooftop, and stood outside the entrance to Diana's loft, he looked down through the skylight, watching her quietly. She had never been more beautiful, he thought. She wore a dark green silk blouse and tight-fitting jeans; somewhat of a departure from her usual garb of baggy pants and discarded boyfriends' oversized shirts. Her brilliant hair captured in lamplight was like flowing fire. She stared into space, one hand on the phone, and the other cupping her chin. Vincent was familiar with this pensive pose, having noticed it many times when she was solving a particularly knotty crime situation.

Their relationship could best be described as tempestuous. Diana was strong-willed and knew she could get to Vincent in two ways - by expressing anger or shedding tears. Vincent could reach Diana by his sudden appearances or departures, and by the raw masculinity she found irresistible. Silently opening the door and descending, he stood waiting in the loft's shadows for a long time before he spoke.

"A penny for your thoughts."

Diana looked up, startled. "Huh? Oh, I didn't hear you come in."

"Obviously. You were rather deep in thought. Is anything wrong?"

Diana shoved a pile of pillows from the sofa.

"Sit down. I want to talk to you about something." She patted the cushion next to her. "I just got a phone call from my Aunt Victoria. She's coming to New York for a couple of days and wants to meet the man I've been "keeping company" with."

Vincent looked up, puzzled. "How does she know about me?"

"Susan, of course. Big-mouthed Susan. Wouldn't you know? She always has to brag to the rest of the family when sis is in the throes of romance. Well, I didn't tell her much when she visited, awhile back. All she knows is that I'm seeing someone. But she must have noticed the look in my eyes when I spoke of you. She has a certain clairvoyance - she can always tell. I guess she should have been the detective in the family. At any rate, Aunt Vickie is coming next Saturday, and you gotta meet her. She's erudite like you - shares your interest in the classics and the arts and is very knowledgable."

"Diana, have you gone mad?" Vincent asked, looking up toward the ceiling as if to find an answer there. "How can I possibly meet your aunt, even though I would very much like to?"

"Simple," Diana called over her shoulder, as she hurried to shut off a whistling teapot. "I have an idea. But first, according to you and Father, all conversation is better over tea."

Vincent nodded. He knew Diana preferred coffee, but converted to tea in deference to him - one of the many things he loved about her. Despite her independent nature, Diana always tried to please. But there were times she tried his patience. Like now.

"Yes. Tea will be wonderful. Now tell me of your plan."

I should forget it, she thought. Still, the scheme would work if Vincent would cooperate. "First things first," she said, setting down the tray. "One lump or two?"

Vincent's answer was nearly a shout. "Two - why are you keeping me in suspense, Diana?"

"Vincent," she began guardedly, "could I get you to wear a nice suit and let me cut your hair? Oh, don't worry. Aunt Vickie is 85 and nearly blind. She'll never notice otherwise, that you're - er - different."

Diana waited for Vincent to start ranting and raving. He didn't. He smiled.

"You say she's coming next Saturday?" he asked.

"Yeah. Saturday, the 31st of October.

"May I remind you that Saturday, October 31st is Halloween."

Diana took another sip of tea. "Yeah. So what of it?"

"Well, don't you realize that on the day other people wear disguises, I can be myself - unashamedly and openly myself?" Vincent seemed quite pleased with this revelation and realization.

Diana did not share his enthusiasm.

"I'd still like you to make a favorable impression on Aunt Vickie. She may not be able to discern facial features, but she can still see well enough to know that you aren't wearing a suit and tie and that your hair is long. I don't want her going back to the folks at home and telling them that I'm hooked up with some kind of radical."

Vincent was silent for a moment and drank his tea in one large swallow. "You're asking me to disguise myself as a denizen of your world. Why can't I merely be me, as I normally am? You have to admit my clothes are more costume-y than a three-piece suit, for example. Couldn't we say I'm going to a Halloween party?"

Diana looked as though someone had poured cold water over her. "No. It just wouldn't be showing the proper respect to an elderly, refined lady like my Bostonian aunt. Never mind. Forget I asked. Just stay out of sight, or else show up and let Aunt Vickie think whatever she wishes." Diana plopped down on the couch, cupping her chin in both hands. Vincent paced back and forth.

"I do believe," he said, "it's more a matter of how you perceive me, rather than what your aunt would think. The whole idea is outlandish. Any aberration of one's appearance on Halloween is totally acceptable. I think you're ashamed of me."

Diana took another sip of the hateful tea and banged her cup down angrily. "Now hear this, Vincent. You're my life. I'm not ashamed of you. I love and admire you more than anyone in the world - more than anyone I've ever known, even if you are the most stubborn of anyone I've ever known. But let's face facts. There are some who would be startled by your looks - to say the least. I just want you to make a good impression on a stuffed-shirt dowager aunt, who is nevertheless a delightful person once you get to know her. It's important to me that she relay the message back home that I've made a successful choice - you know: a businessman type. Please? However out of character it makes you feel - just do this one small favor for me."

Vincent scratched his head. "I don't know, Diana. This is something I must contemplate. I seem to

recall a literary allusion - something about making a silk purse from a sow's ear."

"You're no sow's ear, you idiot," Diana said, shaking her fist at him playfully. "Besides - I'm dying of curiosity to see what you'd look like as a white-collar type." She had a faraway look.

"Then there's the old bromide," Vincent went on, "about - 'O what a tangled we be weave when first we practice to deceive!'"

Diana was at the point of utter exasperation. "Vincent, you're just making things more complicated than need be."

"What would I have to do, then?" he asked, with an air of resignation.

Diana jumped up like a puppet. "Well - first we'd have to get you a dark blue suit, a white shirt, maroon tie - and then, your hair," she said, running her fingers through his unkempt mane, "should be cut in a short shag with fullness on the top. All this on the sides would have to go."

"Wait a minute," Vincent said, gently removing her hands. "It would take months for my hair to grow back. And have you figured out just how I would go about getting fitted for a suit?"

Diana threw her hands around his neck. "Just trust me. Leave it all up to me. Oh, Vincent, it will be okay. You'll look wonderful, and this means so much to me." She took his hands in hers and squeezed them.

Vincent groaned. "The things I do in the name of love. I've been so absorbed by your world - in its artifacts and modernizations and innovations. There's hardly any of the old Vincent remaining. Who would have thought I'd be exposed to things like microwaves, VCR's, dishwashers - things even Mouse is not trying to implement in my world? And now you're asking me to trade my boots and buckskin trousers and sheepskin vests for navy blue suits, white shirts and maroon ties."

Diana looked stricken.

"What's wrong now?" Vincent asked.

"It's your hands," she told him. "Oh, Vincent, we've got to shave the hair off your hands and trim down the claws. How can you ever shake hands with Aunt Vickie?"

The primal part of Vincent involuntarily came forth. His fangs bared for just a second. "No! This is where I draw the line. Don't you realize you'd be rendering me defenseless? Couldn't I wear white gloves or something?" he said with a sarcastic lack of conviction.

Diana's eyes filled with tears. "You're impossible. I can't do a thing with you." She cried. "Your hair and claws will grow back, for Heaven's sake. And how often - when was the last time you found it necessary to defend yourself with your bare hands? That's a side of you I have no desire to see. You shielded your precious Catherine from it, but with me you let it all hang out. If you don't do something with your hair and claws, the whole damn deal is off."

"Perhaps that would be best," Vincent whispered hoarsely. "This relationship between us may be a mistake, too. I love you, Diana, but we are oceans apart in our thinking. It's like trying to mate a bird with a fish - one couldn't survive in the other's world no matter how much love there is. I've known this all my life, but I've tried to deny it because I care so much. I care for you as I cared for Catherine. But you're asking the impossible of me. I could go along to a certain extent with this ruse of yours, the part about dressing up and cutting my hair - even though it's a deception that goes against my principles. But your last request I cannot honor. To do so would leave me vulnerable to the wrath of my enemies. More importantly, it would be a denial of my true self - my very existence - of who and what I am."

Diana stood with her feet apart, arms crossed in front of her chest. "Great speech, Vincent. If you've said all you have to say, you can leave."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"Have it your way, then," Vincent angrily replied, as he headed toward the roof entrance. He turned briefly. "Just consider all you're sacrificing just to win an argument."

"I have," Diana shot back stubbornly.

"Very well, then. Goodbye." Vincent whirled his cloak with a flourish, and in seconds was gone.

Diana's loft was silent except for her sobs.

"Father, have I made a mistake?" Vincent asked, resting his head on the oak table, where he sat with the older man. Father stared fixedly at Vincent, which was his habit. One could never decipher Father's piercing gaze, his stern yet kindly countenance. At last he spoke.

"Vincent, I sent for you because Jamie and Mouse heard your cries as you approached the tunnel. Whenever you cry out in frustration or agony, I can sense the hurt you're going through. Your account of your conversation with Diana - it disturbs me a great deal. But I can't tell you what's right for your particular circumstances, and what isn't right."

Vincent held his head in his hands. "Father, I have always looked to you for counsel. Diana is dear to my heart, but I can't reason with her. Catherine was more acquiescent. Diana has a mind of her own and is easily moved to histrionics when she can't have her own way."

Father patted Vincent's shoulder. "Go now, and get some rest. Perhaps with a good night's sleep, you'll see things in a different perspective. You must bear one thing in mind, however."

"And what's that, Father?" Vincent asked.

"Simply this. What Diana has asked of you may appear to be a rejection of who you are. But she is not turning away from you, as I see it. She is merely protecting you from others' derision. She wants her aunt to look at you with respect instead of ridicule. Think of it in those terms and perhaps you will not take it so personally, or feel so devastated."

Vincent stood and prepared to leave. "But Father, she's asking me to undermine my defenses. How can I protect myself, her, and others from harm with nothing to fight with?"

"There's been no threat to our world for some time. I doubt there'd be one in the relatively short time it would take for your claws to grow back. And if there were ... you have a particularly effective left hook, should the need arise."

Should the need arise. Father's words echoed back to him. Vincent also felt the sting of Diana's tirade - especially her reference to "his precious Catherine," and the way he'd restrained himself in his former lover's presence.

It was true, of course. He'd never wanted Catherine to witness his violent nature, except when her life or safety was on the line. Diana had nursed him back to health when she found him broken and unconscious on Catherine's grave. Diana had been the unwilling victim of his pain-induced delirium. She had to keep a gun nearby for self-protection. But even in his worst moments, he had never turned on her, knowing instinctively that he could never harm her. Nevertheless, Diana had observed what he was capable of. She had even asked him once what it felt like to kill with his bare hands. And tonight she had further rubbed salt in the wound by begrudging him his unbroken bond - the allegiance he still had toward Catherine.

Vincent slept fitfully - his slumber disturbed by distraught dreams.

Diana stared gloomily at the calendar. Only three more days and Victoria would arrive - *probably more to meet Vincent than to visit me*, Diana guessed, even though she shared an excellent rapport with her aunt....

How would she explain Vincent's absence? All the standard excuses sounded phony. Besides - Diana was no actress. She couldn't pretend her heart wasn't breaking - couldn't act like nothing happened when she had to endure the emptiness that only Vincent could fill.

I was a fool, she berated herself, for trying to change him. Why was I so stupid? If there was any benefit to their break-up, it was the fact Diana no longer had to worry about Vincent popping in on her at an inopportune time. Not that she had something to hide, or didn't want to see him. It was just that she liked to anticipate his arrivals. While she never tried to deliberately entice him, she still wanted to look presentable - not like the night he caught her wearing one of Mark's old faded shirts; her conditioner-soaked hair tucked into a shower cap, and an oatmeal scrub mask smeared on her face. But Vincent, true to his fashion, never commented on her appearance, and she merely excused herself and headed for the shower.

As she showered now, she got a temporary lift. In that steamy, sybaritic atmosphere, she could forget her troubles and feel pampered, while scrubbing with jasmine-scented soap. When she emerged, she wrapped herself in a terrycloth robe and wound a towel around her soaking-wet hair. It was then she felt, rather than observed, Vincent's presence.

He was here...!

She ran to the roof entrance she now kept locked, and opened the latch. At first she didn't see anything. She opened the door and looked out. He was standing, as usual, in the shadows. She ran to him and threw her arms around him. He stood stiffly at first, and then drew her close.

For a few moments, neither of them spoke. Finally, Diana broke the silence.

"I missed you so. Oh, Vincent, can you forgive me my foolishness?"

"Nothing to forgive. It was I who have been unyielding and unreasonable. I missed you too."

They went inside and kissed, gently at first, apologetically - then with urgency. Diana losing herself in the wonder, wetness, and weakness of passion. She figured they'd soon be on the floor - making love at the roof entrance, far above the city streets. Instead, Vincent pushed her gently away, breaking the spell.

"I almost forgot," he said. "I brought you something." He disappeared momentarily on the roof and returned with a small paper bag.

Still breathing heavily, Diana chided, "This better be good." His timing absolutely sucks!, she thought to herself.

Vincent handed her the package. "You be the judge, Diana."

She withdrew the contents of the bag. "What's this?" she asked, holding up a primitive-looking tool.

"That," Vincent replied, "is a special set of clippers Mouse devised for trimming tough toenails - or in my case, claws. Shall we see how they work?"

"Oh, Vincent, you don't have to do this. I was wrong to demand it. You were right. You have to have your defenses."

"Diana - my dear Diana, I am most defenseless against you - my most formidable adversary, who is also my dearest love."

Diana released her damp but glorious hair from the towel and laughed. "Wait - I have a surprise for you, too." Ducking into a closet, she brought out a suit, shirt and tie ensemble. "Courtesy of a

haberdasher friend who owed me a favor," Diana explained. "And don't be jealous. He's old enough to be my grandfather. Now try this on and let's see how accurate I was with my approximate measurements."

She knew every inch of the body she adored. She knew the breadth of his waist, the dimensions of his thigh, the distance across his shoulders, the circumference of his biceps - his height in relation to hers. Neither was astonished that the suit fit perfectly, as though Vincent had been to several tailoring sessions.

"But how ..." Vincent began.

She finished the sentence. ".....did I know you'd be back? I didn't, really. But I hoped you would. I could feel your hurt. Now - do you think we could get on with what we were doing before you presented me with the clippers?"

Vincent slithered out of his unfamiliar garments. "I think that could be arranged," he said huskily, tossing jacket, shirt, trousers, and tie into a careless heap on the floor.

Victoria Regina Bennett loved to travel, read books and listened to music. For many years before her retirement, she taught English Literature and Music History at Harvard. Now, at 85, an arthritic condition and failing eyesight slowing her down, she was still fairly active, and her interests were intact.

Vickie, as she preferred to be called, filled the void of never marrying or having children by focusing maternal gestures on her own nieces, Susan and Diana, particularly since the loss of their mother over a year ago. She wanted Diana to "settle down" and raise a family. When Susan had returned from her visit with Diana, she lost no time telling her aunt about the mysterious lover - mysterious because of Diana's evasiveness about him. This piqued Vickie's curiosity to the point where she had to find out herself.

Never had Diana been prouder of Vincent then during her aunt's visit. He looked fantastic, she thought, in the "Wall Street broker's costume," as he called it. His massive frame complemented the tailored lines of the suit. Vincent and Vickie had discussed literature, history, music, art - the names of Dickens, Thoreau, Renoir, Henry VIII, cropping up in the conversation. Diana sat quietly, observing their interaction, not wanting to interrupt scholarly dissertations with everyday trivia. Diana was glad she had persisted in the makeover, however temporary, of Vincent, and arranged this meeting.

Her self-satisfaction was short-lived, when unexpectedly, Vickie asked, "When are you getting married?"

It was one of those tactless queries which could open itself to endless dissertation. It was also a question that made Vincent die a little inside, and caused Diana to look like she swallowed a toad.

Vincent cleared his throat and said simply, "We haven't discussed future plans." Vickie took a sip of tea, setting her cup down carefully, so it wouldn't rattle. Her hands were a bit shaky these days.

"I had a chance to get married once, a long, long time ago," she said, studying her fingernails. "We were very much in love, but he had his life's work, and I had wanderlust. To me, travel was uppermost. There were places to go, things to see and do. Besides that, he was much younger than I, and so handsome. I would have had to fight off all the girls who were after him."

Diana was flabbergasted. "I never knew you had an admirer, Aunt Vickie. You've never mentioned him."

Vickie shot her a withering look. "Since when have you ever been interested in my affairs, Diana Bennett? You've always been, shall we say, a loner - self-absorbed."

Vickie's assessment was accurate. Diana loved her family, but once on her own, was never bothered by a scarcity of contacts.

Just then the intercom buzzer sounded. Diana and Vincent froze. Diana pushed the button. "Yeah?" "Trick-or-Treat," chanted a chorus of juvenile voices.

"Oh my gosh," Diana cried, "I forgot about Halloween." Without thinking, she pushed the button for the elevator and it began its slow ascent. She ran to the kitchen and grabbed a bowl of apples from the refrigerator. Soon a small clown, ghost and witch stood in the center of Diana's loft, holding open their sacks. Diana dropped an apple in each. Noisy and giggling, the little spooks got back on the lift.

"Hey, Mister - that's a neat mask." Now it was Diana's turn to die, and Vincent's to swallow the toad. But Vickie showed no reaction.

"How about more tea?" Diana offered, hurrying toward the kitchen. She could feel a migraine in the making.

Vincent followed her to the stove. "I think it's time for me to leave," he said, drawing her close for a quick hug. "There are plans this evening for a gathering." Diana knew about the annual Halloweed festivities Below and desperately wished she and Vickie could attend, but that was, of course, impossible.

To Vickie, Vincent said, "It has been a real delight meeting you. I can't recall when I've enjoyed a conversation more. Then he and Diana stood close together at the elevator, enjoying their proximity, but reluctant to display affection in Vickie's presence. Vickie pretended they were invisible as she rummaged through her purse.

"Vincent, before you leave, there's something I want you to see." She handed him a snapshot. Vincent studied it quizzically, turning it all different angles, bringing it up to his face, then stretching it out to arm's length to make sure he was really seeing what he saw.

It was a picture of himself and Diana, taken at last year's Winterfest. His hair was shaggy and unruly. He was smiling - his fangs were clearly visible. Diana's photographed expression was unmistakably that of a woman in love.

Silently, Vincent passed the picture to Diana. Her migraine suddenly became gargantuan. They both died inside and swallowed toads.

When at last he could speak, Vincent croaked, "Where did you get this?"

Vickie smiled. "I may as well blurt it out. The man I almost married, and the one who sent me this photograph, is none other than Jacob Wells."

Vincent stumbled into the nearest chair. He felt as though someone had kicked the wind out of him. He rocked back and forth and gazed ceiling-ward. There was a momentary desire, and immediate suppression, of fang baring.

"Father?" he cried, incredulously. "But I don't understand" Vincent's voice trailed off.

Diana held her head in her hands. Vickie smoothed her carefully coiffed hairdo.

"I know all about you, Vincent - I've known you since shortly after Jacob found and adopted you. I even cared for you at times, when you were just an infant. Jacob had kept me up to date all these years, through letters, pictures, phone calls and whatever. He speaks of you with pride and reverence."

Vincent rubbed his eyes and shook his head. "How did this escape me? How did I not know of you?"

"Does the name Tory, ring a bell?"

"My god," Vincent exclaimed, "you? You're Tory?"

Diana got up and ate two aspirins and a benedryl. Vickie leaned back in her chair, relieved she had nothing further to hide.

"Yes. I've always despised that nickname. It's another diminutive for Victoria. But Jacob liked it, so I put up with it for his sake. I would allow no one else to call me that."

"Father has spoken of you often," Vincent said, gradually regaining his composure. "You're the one for whom he nearly sacrificed everything - the 'older woman' in his life he has never quite forgotten. He still keeps your picture in his armoire, and often gazes upon it."

Vincent recalled the tintype of a beautiful, dark-haired girl in a lace dress.

"He speaks of you with reverence also. But what is most puzzling to me: if Father knew you were Diana's aunt, and of the subterfuge - Diana's and mine - why did he keep silent? Why did he not tell us you knew about me? Then, all this," he said, indicating the suit and tie, "would not have been necessary. Why did he allow me to go to such lengths?"

Vincent winced inwardly at the claw incident, recalling how it nearly wrecked his lovelife and left him temporarily disarmed.

Vickie leaned forward once again. "Don't blame him. Jacob has no knowledge I was Diana's aunt until I started doing some detective work. And he was bitterly opposed when I swore him to secrecy. You see, when Susan told me about Diana's mysterious lover, I started putting two and two together. I knew with Jacob and Diana both in New York City, anything was possible. Through letters and intermediaries, Jacob confirmed your liaison - told me everything - even about Catherine - I'm so sorry about that - and the child. You can imagine Jacob's surprise when he learned his beloved Tory, and Diana's aunt, were one and the same."

"By that time, things were already out of hand. When I heard of your attempt to hoodwink me, I decided to play a little trick of my own - not let you know I was Tory until after we'd become better acquainted. Even Diana doesn't know me by that name, because Jacob is the only one who's ever used it. In a sense, I was compelled to go along with your deception in order to effectuate my own. I must say, Vincent, the suit does become you. Why, I hardly recognized you."

Diana felt drained and a little foolish. "I guess it's really all my doing. I'm honor-bound to keep Vincent's secret and protect him. But at the same time I wanted you two to meet. So I cooked up this scheme. I know your vision is poor, and I counted on that, plus this get-up - suit and tie, to make you think I got myself an average guy, who's smart and a yuppie-type, too. For all Vincent's inner beauty, he freaks people out up here. Well, I guess I owe everyone an apology, including Vincent. Sorry, babe."

Vincent rose slowly from the chair. "It is of no consequence. There is no harm done. Perhaps it is fortunate Father and your aunt did not marry, or you and I would be related."

"Gosh, babe. I never thought of that."

Vickie put on her wrap. "We'd better go to the tunnels now. Jacob is expecting us for the party."

"This has been one helluva day," Diana reflected. "I think I'm going to write your memoirs on my computer, Aunt Vickie ... 'Confessions of Tricky Vickie,' or maybe 'Victoria's Secret'? I think that would be appropriate, don't you?"

"Touche'," Vickie said, gathering her purse, "I guess that makes us even."

At the tunnel entrance, they were met by Mouse.

"Tell Father I've brought his guest," Vincent said.

Mouse eyed them curiously, then executed a series of choppy pirouettes and broke out in smiles. Mouse had witnessed the conspiracies leading to this moment. Through the pipes, through gossip, through his unobtrusive snooping; by notes from helpers and crafting of heavy-duty clippers; by overhearing conversations between Father and Vincent, Father and Mary, and Vincent's impassioned soliloquies, Mouse had been a silent partner in the intrigue. And now he was delighted to see the principals of this scenario coming together at last.

"Tell Father we've arrived," Vincent repeated.

"Okay, good," Mouse said, leading the way. "Okay, fine."

As they reached the Great Hall, Diana could hear music. The aroma of hotdogs, potato chips, donuts and spiced cider made her ravenous. There were stronger drinks, too, and elfusive greetings. The children were in costume, with jackets underneath to ward off the damp chill of the stone walls.

Father came up to Vincent and embraced him. "I'm truly sorry about this, and I hope the experience did not traumatize you too severely. You know how much I dislike deceiving you. Tory has explained it all, I'm sure."

"Do not concern yourself, Father. I've had enough apologies and mea culpas today, to last a lifetime. Let's just enjoy ourselves and each other."

Vincent received compliments on his "costume." Vickie (or Tory) and Father had much to discuss about the day's events and circumstances leading to them, as well as catching up on other current news and reminiscing. Young Jacob was the center of attention in the elf suit Mary had made for him. Diana ate till she was stuffed.

Later, as everyone sat in a semi-circle for Father's benediction, Diana pressed close to Vincent. Father stood before the group and was assailed by applause, whistles, catcalls. He raised both arms for silence and began.

"As we gather on the Eve of all Hallows, our hearts are united and reunited. I am honored and enriched by Tory, Vincent, Diana and Jacob, and by all my friends. Warmth and laughter replace fear and suspicion.

"It is a time of communion among ourselves and within the spiritual world. Let us remember departed souls - our dear Catherine, and Kristopher. Yes, even the arch-enemy, Paracelsus. This is a time of hope and renewal, of casting out uncertainties. It is a time of peace."

Father's words, though sincere, were merely platitudes as far as Diana was concerned. For her and Vincent, life was a masquerade, impossible to completely unveil or identify. They were no ordinary couple. Their world was forever intertwined with the threat of danger - destined to encounter the unknown, the unexplainable, and the preposterous. Only a Vincent could present such a myriad of complexities, and only a Diana could meet each challenge head-on and come out unscathed. But to offset the angst, there were also memorable, romantic interludes like this, complete with soft background music and the flickering shadows of candlelight.

Diana brought Vincent's hand to her lips. She adored that hand - soft stubble, squared-off claws, and all. "Guess what babe? I love you," she whispered.

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