

TRICK O'TREAT

by Jackie Kapke

While Catherine amusedly watched, Vincent looked into the mirror she had given him, as he put the finishing touches on his costume. There was excitement and anticipation in the air Below. Tonight was their annual Halloween party.

He was letting Catherine embellish, enhance and accentuate features he had once loathed. Before meeting Catherine, he had tried to hide his face and hands, and now look at him!

Beside him, his love wore those very same features, a loving caricature of himself; the same muzzle, nose and brows. Her costume was most definitely not to make fun, but to show how much she adored him and all that he was. She wanted to look like him on the one day they could go Above together, when he did not have to hide his beautiful, unique features. Tonight, they would be displayed with pride and Catherine knew they would receive abundant compliments. How could his face be anything but awe-inspiring?

He looked down at her with quiet adoration.

"You are amazing, Catherine!" he sighed, for with her, he knew he had finally found acceptance of himself. He had always cherished life, but she made it all the more precious to him.

She laughed as they leaned their heads together, their cheeks rubbing, softly caressing.

A huge grin burst forth across each face as Vincent gave his whiskers a twitch.

Catherine pulled back in mild dismay. " 'Oh,' I wish I could do that!"

Vincent chuckled, knowing that only his real muzzle had that capability. It 'was' good for something, after all.

"Vincent, the children are going to love this!"

He knew she was excited, he could feel it bubbling up inside of her.

He took a final look at the dark whiskers they'd placed on his muzzle, the dark spots alongside and the rounded ears nestled inside the hair Catherine had lovingly teased and fluffed to make his mane seem fuller.

He raised a critical eyebrow. Once, he would never have even considered displaying himself in such a blatant manner. Yet, here they stood in front of a full-length mirror in matching, furry bodysuits; his of tawny gold, hers of creamy beige. Catherine had them specially made, and he was quite flattered and not the least bit threatened - comfortable and content, even with paw-footed gloves and tails.

He knew Father's eyes would pop out of his head when he saw them. The older man would be certain that he and Catherine had both lost their senses. Vincent chuckled deeply once more under his breath, slowly shaking his head with the thought.

Catherine leaned into him, stroking his chest as she smiled up at him, so happy that he wanted to do this with her.

Indeed, Jacob was more than a little surprised, as the couple entered the Great Hall together. The monocle he was wearing with his German costume popped right out of his eye. Vincent, with great effort, stifled his

laughter when he saw Father's reaction, gracefully bowed to the man he so loved, and then to all the others present who seemed momentarily stunned by his appearance.

Never in a million years would Jacob have guessed this to be Vincent's choice of costume, but it warmed his heart. Positive that it had been Catherine's idea, he was now more than certain that his son would do *'anything'* to please her. So many inhibitions had vanished.

He could tell that his son was enjoying it all as much as Catherine, and Vincent was truly stunned by the children's reaction when they bowled him over in a race to touch him and inspect his transformation from man to beast.

From his place on the floor, Vincent looked up at Catherine for assistance, but she gazed down at him smiling, and he knew that he would have to fend for himself. It began to get a bit wild, with wrestling and hair pulling, but with one long, rumbling, mock growl, Vincent quelled the rough-housing and the children returned to more civilized activities; some stronger boys even assisted their furry friend up from the floor. Catherine helped him brush off, and the games began.

They bobbed for apples, played blind man's bluff, pulled taffy and made candy apples. Vincent was wonderfully adept at keeping the sticky candy out of his mane and teeth. Catherine made a mental note to seek his advice on this later.

They had a haunted house of sorts, and in the dark, sat in a circle on the floor passing around parts of the deceased spaghetti brains, peeled grape eyes, chicken bone fingers and a beef heart. The little ones even got a chance to stir the cauldron full of *'witches' brew*. It bubbled and boiled delightfully, and to everyone's pleasure, turned out to be a wonderful vegetable beef stew that William had concocted.

Story time finally came and everyone sat in front of the huge fireplace. Before he and Catherine departed, Vincent took his turn reciting some of his favorite ghost tales for the little ones.

As they left the tunnel entrance, Vincent breathed deeply of the cool, crisp evening air and stopped in midstride to admire the full moon.

When his attention finally returned to Catherine, he found her smiling up at him. She knew he had been remembering his first lunar experience. He smiled silently back at her and taking her hand, they walked slowly into the city.

Their first stop was the *'Guggenheim Museum'* where Vincent saw many lovely paintings and works of art. Catherine was happy that many places were open tonight for the special holiday. There were extra police officers on duty to prevent any theft or vandalism, and she could sense Vincent's apprehension, but it soon ebbed and faded away. His trust in her was complete and she would not have their time together spoiled... not tonight.

They took the ferry to Staten Island and back then on to *'Bloomingdales'*. Vincent was stunned by the number and variety of items for sale. Catherine showed him her favorite shops, trying on hats and perfumes. Carefully, knowing of his acute sense of smell, she even offered a few masculine scents for his perusal. He shook his head, then sneezed when one scent was especially irritating. Catherine nearly rolled on the floor from his reaction.

'St. Patrick's Cathedral' was even open. Vincent might not get to the famous churches in Europe, but Catherine was determined to get him inside this one. There were security guards everywhere, but a man seated at the organ performed lovely pieces and even gave visitors a chance to try playing. Catherine encouraged Vincent to try. She already knew he could play the piano beautifully and so wanted to see him seated at the huge church organ. With a little instruction, he did quite well with the numerous foot pedals. Both the organist and Catherine were impressed with Vincent's skill. The couple were just leaving, as a man dressed like the *'Phantom of the Opera'* came to relieve the other organist. Vincent stood still, craning his

neck a little, amazed by the uncanny resemblance to Paracelsus and his gold mask.

"A little eerie, isn't it?" said Catherine, also amazed by the similarity.

Their last stop was Jenny Aronson's apartment and the costume party. Catherine had told Jenny they would arrive a little late, knowing that this stop would be the most difficult one of the night for Vincent. Mingling with total strangers at such close quarters, appearing to be costumed when he really wasn't, took incredible strength of will and courage on his part.

But, Vincent truly wanted to meet some of Catherine's friends, and what better opportunity would present itself. He had heard so much about Jenny and had been fascinated by the mutual dream of disaster they had shared. He was anxious to discover if there would be an empathic connection between them, as well.

Catherine took a deep breath before ringing the doorbell.

"You don't have second thoughts, do you? If so, Vincent, we don't have to go in. I don't want to force you into anything you're not ready for."

He shook his head and bent to kiss her forehead. "No, Catherine. I'm ready, and I want to go in. I want to meet your friends. Go ahead, ring the doorbell."

She squeezed his hand and pressed the button, and for the briefest moment he experienced a flash of fear, his heart in his throat, but he forced it down.

Jenny, dressed as a harem girl, answered the door.

"Cathy? Is that 'you?' It 'is' you! What an adorable costume! I love it! Wherever did you think up the idea?" Then she turned to look at Vincent and was suddenly silent, truly struck by his appearance, as he stood silently beside Catherine. Their eyes met and for an instant, Vincent felt certain that she knew of their charade. But, then her eyes and the shock of the moment passed, and she squared her shoulders, composing herself.

"And this must be Vincent... finally!" He took her extended hand hesitantly and gently, and she squeezed it tightly. He nodded and gracefully bowed from the waist.

"Oh, those costumes....," she said, stepping back to take a better look. "Let me look at you." She twirled her finger and Catherine obligingly spun slowly around. "Oh, those tails, they're marvelous."

Jenny looked again at Vincent, as if asking him to turn around as well. Vincent looked at Catherine beseechingly, silently asking if he must. She shrugged and gave him an '*oh go on*' look. Taking a deep breath and exhaling, he let Jenny view his backside, then turned back, not twirling quite as gracefully as his lady love.

Despite the shaggy fur, Jenny could tell he was powerfully built, and quietly admired his wide shoulders, slender hips and muscular thighs. When he came to a stop to look back into Jenny's face, she was once again staring at him as if mesmerized, and he could not help but raise an inquiring eyebrow, feeling once more that she knew his secret.

Jenny came back to her senses, as her eyes stopped their tour of his features and rested on his crystalline eyes.

"I'm sorry," she stammered. "I didn't mean to stare. It's just so amazing, that costume seems to be... made for you. Your makeup is so... so... extraordinary. You are both so cute, the whiskers and ears." She tweaked Vincent's right ear. "You both certainly have the most original costume category in the bag!"

She took hold of Vincent's upper arm, pulling him into the apartment. "Now that I've '*finally*' got you cornered, I want to know '*everything*' about you. Tell me a little now, what you do and all; then later, I'll sneak you away from Cathy and have you all to myself."

Vincent looked nervously over his shoulder at Catherine and could tell she was relishing his predicament. But, her grin softened, and her nod and look of encouragement relaxed him, as he cleared his throat to speak.

"Well... I teach... literature and history."

"For what ages?"

"Elementary through college."

"Oh, you must be very versatile."

"He's more than that, Jen," Catherine chimed in. "He's also a carpenter, mason, plumber, the list goes on and on."

"Oh, I see, a jack-of-all-trades," she laughed. "You're a lucky woman, Cath."

Jenny once again admired the broad chest and shoulders, and estimated his height. Her eyebrows raised in appreciation of his physique.

"Do you pump iron, Vincent?"

He looked at her questioningly then to Catherine, for he was unfamiliar with the term.

"She wants to know if you lift weights to build up your muscles."

"No," he said, turning back to Jenny. "But, much of the work I do involves heavy lifting."

His voice was truly striking, and Jenny could sense his shyness, his reserve. He was cautious with her and seemed so... well, innocent. Yes, that was it - untouched.

"I can see why Cathy adores you," she sighed.

"She has told you this?" Vincent asked, dropping his head and looking at Catherine through his bangs.

Now, it was Catherine's turn to blush, and she rolled her eyes at Jenny for letting her confession slip.

"Why, all the time; but, I'm sure you already know that."

Suddenly, they noticed two women across the room madly waving at Jenny. "Oh, it's Sylvia," Jenny sighed in exasperation. "I promised to introduce her to Paul."

She took Vincent's wrist a last time and said, "Now don't go far. I'm not through with you yet."

As she started across the room, she whispered to Catherine, "He's '*gorgeous*,' Cathy. Hang onto him!"

"I intend to, Jen. I intend to," she said laughing, knowing full well that Vincent's keen hearing could pick up their voices.

The evening went quite well. Vincent was popular with everyone. It amazed Catherine, the ease he had in joining almost any conversation. His body of knowledge was astounding. Many guests, especially the women, were dying to see him without makeup. Many had commented to Catherine how sexy his voice and eyes were.

Though many of the comments were meant to be secret, Vincent heard them and Catherine raised an eyebrow in a '*See? I told you so*' look. And he would smile back at her, his cheeks flushed.

A number of guests were amazed that he could eat hors d'oeuvres and drink punch with his fangs still in, and he shyly told them that they felt quite natural. Catherine almost burst out laughing at his final remark.

As the party wound down, Catherine and Vincent decided to bid Jenny goodbye. Throughout the evening, Vincent had felt Jenny's eyes upon him, felt her wonderment. It proved very distracting, to say the least.

"We *'have'* to say goodnight, Jen," said Catherine, standing by the door. Vincent once more at her side.

"Yes," Vincent agreed softly.

"I'm so glad you could make it, Cath." Turning more serious and after hugging her girlfriend, Jenny took Vincent's hand firmly, saying, "And thank you, Vincent, for coming. I'm glad I finally had a chance to meet you." Once again, he felt that she could see right through him and now he could physically sense it through her grasp and see it in her eyes.

Whispering low, he spoke to Jenny. "When the ears and whiskers are gone, there is only me."

Catherine couldn't believe her ears. She only hoped that Jenny would think he was joking or be in shock long enough that they could make their escape before she screamed.

But Jenny stood fast and spoke as if in a trance, her eyes never leaving his face. "I know. I knew it the moment I saw you. You're wonderful. I... I hope we can meet again soon."

"Yes," he nodded, returning her handshake. "I would like that. Goodnight, now."

Jenny released him, and she and Catherine embraced.

"Thanks, Jen. Thanks for everything," Catherine said, releasing her breath.

"It was my treat, Cath, and I *'do want'* to see you *'both'* again. Call me?"

"Soon."

Catherine sighed a deep breath of relief as the door closed behind them. She looked to her love, who had a sparkle in his eyes, the corners of his mouth pulled up in a grin.

"How long did you know?" she asked.

"I think from the same moment she did. Your friend, Jenny is a *'very'* perceptive woman, Catherine."

"Yes, so I see," she said, with just a hint of jealousy in her voice.

He said nothing, flattered that she could hold such emotions for one such as he. He was certain she knew of his complete devotion, so there was no more to be said.

They finished the evening with a carriage ride through Central Park. Yes, the buggies were running all night long! They cuddled together in the back seat, enjoying the crisp air and the last cricket song of the season. The horses lively step was pleasant and warmed the heart as the wheels of their coach crunched through the fallen leaves on the road.

His kisses were still so new and thrilling to her, but he was having a little difficulty finding her lips underneath her costume muzzle. Finally, in exasperation, she pulled it off, wincing a little from the discomfort. Any pain she felt was soon forgotten in his warm embrace and ardent kisses.

When finally, they leaned back against the leather seat, Vincent noticed no trace of clouds in the sky and the full moon shone larger than ever as it loomed brightly above them.

Wistfully, a little smile tugged the corners of his mouth and he spoke softly, his eyes not leaving the heavenly body.

"Do you know what I like most about the moon?"

She took his upper arm in both hands and snuggled closer against his side. Silently she looked upon his noble profile as he dropped his face to gaze dreamily into her eyes, then whisper in her ear, "Sharing it with you."

His voice and warm breath sent shivers down her spine, and she could not suppress a giggle as his whiskers

tickled her neck.

"Happy Halloween, Vincent."

The moonlight shone in his hair reflected brilliantly in his sapphire eyes. Her breath caught in her throat, so stunned was she by his unearthly beauty.

"Happy Halloween, Catherine," he whispered, his voice the same warm velvet as his lips.

END