

A Single Night

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Note: Some of the dialogue was taken from the episode "Masques" from the TV series 'Beauty and the Beast', written by George R.R. Martin.

Catherine's eyes longingly wandered up towards the hotel rooftop. She was searching for the cloaked figure in the darkness again. Vincent was gone, but in her mind's eye, she could still see his outline hovering over the roof edge and looking down on her.

A deep sigh and crestfallen face betrayed Catherine's disappointment when she looked down again. Without interest, she then turned back to the sidewalk, ready to head back home. Then her face lit up again.

"Will she...?" asked Vincent, who had appeared like a magician in front of her.

"She'll be all right," Catherine replied, not really caring about anything but the man standing close to her.

"Good," he replied, and after an eloquent beat, his eyes left her face and he turned to disappear into the night.

"Don't leave!"

Catherine's almost desperate call made him stop and look at her again.

"She told me that this is a special night... Saowen, when the walls..."

"When the walls between the worlds grow thin... and spirits of the underworld walk the earth..." he finished Brigit O'Donnell's quote with a smile. His eyes were like two burning embers.

"Vincent... We can't waste it..."

Catherine's glowing face and the silent but strong plea in her big bright eyes made him shake his head, partially agreeing with her statement, partially in awe. An incredulous smile appeared on his leonine face.

They were gazing at each other for what seemed like an eternity, before Catherine's smile widened, and she took a few steps towards him. She intertwined her arm with his, her eyes not leaving his face for a long time. Unable to believe it was really going to happen, she kept repeating in her mind: *We are truly going to walk the streets of New York...*

When she started walking, Vincent adjusted his long strides to her lady-like ones and arm in arm, they ventured into the busy city night together.

"Broadway," Catherine said, excited when they stopped. "The place where all the theatre and musicals magic happens."

From the excited expression on her face, Vincent could see, not only feel, how much she loved the place.

“The whole street runs for 33 miles, starting in Manhattan and ending in Sleepy Hollow,” Vincent added, observing the flashing billboards and the hustle and bustle on both sides of the road with keen interest. It was the first time he had seen it all so close from street level, instead of from the rooftops above.

Catherine looked at him with admiration. Vincent noticed her expression when she didn't reply. A soft laugh escaped from his throat - a sound the Catherine heard for the first time, and it made her smile.

“Father has many books on New York, especially on its history and architecture. Classical literature is not the only type of book we read Below, Catherine.”

She echoed his laugh with her own. “I know, Vincent, I just... I love how you surprise me with something new every time we meet.”

And I love everything about you, Catherine...

His eyes were smiling at her, imprinting in his memory the way she looked that night. Her fancy costume, making her appear as if floating on water when she walked; the ribbons in her hair, which was up-tied; the few loose locks around her face, underlining its softness and beauty. And her intelligent and kind emerald eyes, shining brightly that night as he had never seen them before.

When the eloquent silence between them was stretching, Catherine briefly lowered her eyes and chuckled. “Well, let's go and explore a bit of Broadway then.”

Intertwining their arms again, both enjoying the physical proximity only too much, they resumed their walk.

The colourful and bustling Times Square, the famous Rockefeller Center, the majestic St. Patrick's Cathedral, the sky-reaching Empire State Building...

Catherine had been to all of these places many times in her life, but this Halloween night, she felt as if she was on a magic carpet ride, seeing them all for the first time. She was seeing them through different eyes - the eyes of the man who had never seen them up close before, but who had more knowledge about them than any born and bred New Yorker from Above she had ever met.

Intrigued, enchanted, animated, under his spell... The further they walked, the harder it was for Catherine to focus on what they were seeing rather than on the man accompanying her. It almost defied belief how easily Vincent blended with other, “regular” people in the streets. The merciful veil of Halloween blinded everyone to the truth - that the man with the lion “mask” wasn't wearing a mask at all.

I wish this night would never end...

“Oh!” Catherine exclaimed suddenly. A little boy of about eight years had bumped into her out of nowhere. He was dressed up as a miniature Superman.

“Isn't it a little late for you to trick-or-treat, and above all *alone*, around here?” Catherine inquired, a little worried. She looked around to search for someone accompanying the child.

“I'm so sorry!” A relieved voice reached them, and they saw a woman in her thirties, dressed up as a witch, almost running towards them. “He always does that! We were visiting my sister, and while waiting for a cab to get back home, he sneaked away!”

“It's all right; he seems unharmed,” remarked Vincent with a bemused smile. He was enjoying the little interaction with the people Above.

Catherine was just slightly nervous, not really seeing any danger to Vincent, though, and smiled at the boy.

“Did you get a lot of goodies on your trick-or-treating, young man?” she asked.

“I’ve got Starbursts, Jolly Ranchers, M&M’s...,” the boy named automatically, ignoring the small basket full of treats in his hands and Catherine’s cheerful smile. His eyes focused solely on the lion man towering over him.

Vincent noticed the expression of awe on the child’s intrigued face and went down on his knee.

“My name is Vincent. Can you tell me your name?” he asked.

“Sup-- Sup--- Superman...” the boy stuttered, his eyes transfixed by the leonine face of the man smiling at him.

“His name is Devin,” the mother intervened, rolling her eyes. “He’s having a superheroes-phase at the moment.”

Vincent’s smile reached his eyes. “Devin... That’s a wonderful name. I knew a boy once who had the same name...” A moment of melancholy flashed in his eyes.

“Can I ask you something, mister?” The child interrupted his thought process suddenly, with his mouth still half-opened and his eyes widened in wonder.

Vincent returned to the present seamlessly. “Of course,” he replied calmly.

“Where can I get such a mask? It’s so... cool...”

Catherine froze, but when she looked at Vincent, she noticed that he wasn’t taken aback by the question at all - he looked bemused.

“I’m afraid it was made only for me,” he answered, a small smile playing on his face.

“Oh...,” the boy reacted with disappointment in his voice.

“Come on, Devin, it’s time to put you to bed,” the mother intervened, politely nodding to Vincent and Catherine with a smile. “I apologise again. Have a nice evening.”

She took her son’s hand and set out to get the nearest cab.

Vincent straightened himself up and chuckled. Catherine lifted her eyes to him and shook her head; amazement written all over her face.

“One would say you’ve been walking among people up here all your life,” she said, observing him with admiration.

“Up here, yes. Among people... not until tonight. But it was more than worth the wait.” He looked at her again, taking in the light in her eyes.

Catherine smiled, and when she remembered the child’s words, she thought to herself, *the “mask” is more than just cool...*

Suddenly, her mouth went dry under his direct gaze, and she lowered her eyes, trying to regain composure.

“Shall we?” she asked, inviting him with a smile again.

Vincent allowed her to slip her arm under his again, and they continued on their journey, exploring the nightly New York city.

After some time, when they fell into a blissful silence again while walking, Catherine spotted a fancy black carriage standing at the curb, not far from them. The coachman was tending to his horse, waiting for the next customers eager to take a ride in the famous city attraction.

Vincent sensed the excitement in Catherine, guessing exactly what she was thinking of. One pleading look from her was all it took, and a moment later, he found himself offering her his gloved hand in support as she was getting into the carriage. When he followed and sat down next to her, he understood why these rides were so popular with couples - there was just enough space for two people.

"The last time I rode in one of these was when I was twelve," Catherine chirped, excited. "Daddy took me on a Sunday at the end of the school year as a reward for my good grades. I kept begging him for weeks before."

Her proud grin made him smile. Imagining Catherine as a little big-eyed girl, with cheeks flushed from excitement, enjoying a ride with her father, warmed his heart. It didn't matter how wealthy her family was. They knew it's the seemingly little things, spending time with each other, that mattered the most.

"I'm sure your father would have taken you for the ride, even if your grades were less satisfactory," Vincent noted with an amused smile.

"I know it *now*." Catherine chuckled. "But back then, I felt like I had to earn it."

"Perhaps you should ask him to do it together again," Vincent suggested. "To revive the good times, spend more time with him."

Catherine lifted her eyes to his face. Her smile faded a little. She never talked to Vincent about the inexplicable growing distance between her father and her since she had left his firm. And yet, he sensed it, highly perceptive as always. Maybe one day she *would* talk to him about it; he would understand...

"Perhaps I should," she said quietly and returned his knowing smile.

They were passing well-known landmarks, popular places, watching the cheerful dressed-up people filling the streets. October had already handed over the reins to November, but on that special night, nobody seemed to be eager to go home.

Another moment of content silence fell between them. Each immersed in their own thoughts - each immersed in thoughts about the other...

Their bodies were touching on their sides, sharing the warmth in the nightly autumn air. The close physical contact was as electric as it was addictive. Sometime before, he had wrapped his long cloak around her to protect her from the chill of the night. She felt almost intoxicated by its pleasant scent - so warm, so comforting, so much like his owner...

Catherine barely dared to move, only to maintain the connection that made her feel in a way she had never felt before. Unconsciously, almost automatically, her arm slid under his, and her hand covered his gloved one, resting on his thigh.

Vincent's eyes dropped to her small hand covering his. It was partially hidden under the long cream-coloured lacy fingerless glove. Any other time, he would have admired the skilful craftsmanship of the person who put such an exquisite piece of a garment together (although it was just a part of the costume). However, at that moment, he could focus only on the feel of her hand on his - its warmth, the electricity it spread around his veins, creating the sweetest tension he had ever known.

Slowly, he turned his hand upwards and intertwined his long fingers with hers, securing his hold on her hand. Finally, he dared to look into her eyes, as if asking for permission that he knew was given even without asking.

Catherine's eyes and her beaming smile answered without words, while she held his hand even tighter. Then, she rested her head on his shoulder, savouring the moment as if it was the last they were going to spend together.

"I wish you could read me something, Vincent," she said quietly. "Right here, right now..."

Vincent looked down at what he could make out of her face and smiled. Then, he directed his eyes ahead of him again, looking over the luxurious restaurants they were just passing. He slightly leaned his cheek against the top of her head. Words came to him immediately, reminding him of an old poem that always touched him deeply.

*"All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
Whatever stirs this mortal frame,
All are but ministers of Love,
And feed his sacred flame.*

*Oft in my waking dreams do I
Live o'er again that happy hour,
When midway on the mount I lay,
Beside the ruin'd tower.*

*The moonshine, stealing o'er the scene,
Had blended with the lights of eve;
And she was there, my hope, my joy,
My own dear Genevieve!" (1)*

A tear escaped her closed eyes when Catherine smiled into the night. Wordlessly, she nestled up closer to him; whatever she might have said at that moment was needless. That one simple gesture spoke for her.

Vincent smiled again and equally wordlessly, he let himself be swept away by the feelings flowing through the bond from the woman by his side and by his own emotions.

The purple and pink shades of the sunrise were already colouring the ever-watchful Statue of Liberty and they were enjoying a stroll in Central Park again.

Although it wasn't full daylight yet, Vincent couldn't get enough of the colours, smells and sounds around him, so different from those of the complete darkness he was so familiar with. The songs of the birds; the crisp, autumn air of the beginning new day; the various shades of the still green foliage, the warm colours of the early-morning sky.

No book, no photograph could ever fully show him the reality. Never in his wildest dreams could he have imagined such beauty. He wished he could stop the hands of time and wait to see the full daylight, when the sun stood high above in the sky, shrouding everything in a bright and glowing veil, as he had read about it in the books and seen in pictures...

Catherine stopped and turned around, noticing that Vincent had fallen slightly behind. He was admiring the rocky pond they were just passing. The expression of wonder on his face made her smile when he caught up with her. It didn't need any comment; she let him enjoy everything at his

own pace. For once, she refused to be watchful of the time and people. Just for once, she wanted to pretend there was no need to hide...

They resumed their slow walk, side by side, without saying a word. The simple fact of being together and walking Above freely was both overwhelming and magical. And yet, they knew, time had no mercy and couldn't be stopped...

"I've never walked in the park at sunrise," Catherine remarked finally with a dreamy smile. "It's so uplifting and beautiful."

Vincent's eyes traced the soft features of her face before his velvety baritone spoke into the morning air.

*"Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning..." (2)*

A beaming smile greeted him when he looked at her again.

"Do you remember every line you ever read, Vincent?" she asked, astonished.

"No," he chuckled, tilting his head. "Only those that resonate in me; speak to me with their own voice, and I feel as if they were coming from my own soul."

His look softened when he focused on her gaze.

Catherine couldn't find the words to respond. *And she was there, my hope, my joy, My own dear Genevieve...* The memory of the poem she had heard earlier that night flashed in her mind like a sweet melody.

There was an eloquent beat, when they were just observing each other with an eagerness that was too palpable to go unnoticed, then Vincent suddenly awakened from the dream, hearing the sound of the traffic in the distance.

"I... I should return to the Tunnels," he said quietly and very reluctantly, his look still not leaving her eyes.

The reality of those words hit Catherine like a truck. She wished they could turn back time and do the whole walk together again. But it wasn't to be, at least not for another year...

"I know..." She nodded, a shadow of melancholy falling across her eyes. All at once, she was unable to look at him. The image of their parting was too much to bear.

Suddenly, she lifted her head and her face lit up again. "But... I think there is still enough time to see one more place," she said quietly, raising her eyebrows in the hope he'll agree. "It's only a few minutes walk away..."

Vincent couldn't have refused her. If he was never to walk among his "enemies" again, he wished to get the most he could of that single night. Especially, if it was side by side with the woman who was the beginning and end of everything to him.

"Yes," he replied softly without hesitation. "There is some time left still..."

Catherine sighed in relief and intertwined his arm with his, leading him on out of the park.

The sight that had opened up in front of him when they reached the bank of the East River almost took his breath away. The wide early-morning horizon over the still dark water mass reminded him of a watercolour painting. Shades of purple, pink, and orange blended seamlessly, with one centre point - the small, golden circle in the middle, still quite low in the sky but slowly ascending and gaining on intensity. The majestic Queensboro Bridge extended into the distance, connecting the opposing riverbanks.

The sun...

Vincent wished he could stay until it reached its highest position, or at least until full daylight pushed the last remnants of the night's darkness into oblivion. He knew he couldn't, but this was the closest thing he would get to see the one thing he was never allowed to...

"Catherine..." All other words failed him at that moment. The wonder and astonishment in his voice by pronouncing that single word told her everything.

"I thought you might like the view," she said, smiling, her eyes glistening.

She pointed at one of the benches nearby. Vincent accepted the offer, and they sat down, looking into the sunrise ahead of them, enthralled and full of unspeakable emotions.

"I've lived here all my life, and yet, it's as though I've never seen this city until tonight," Vincent breathed, still enchanted by the view, acknowledging the gift he had been given that night.

"You've seen so much violence and hatred of my world; I wanted you to know there's beauty as well," Catherine explained softly. She was trying to focus on his eyes, but her gaze was drawn to his unusual lips, too.

"Oh, I know that," he replied eagerly, taking in the light in her eyes and the soft sun rays reflecting in her hair, "ever since the night I found you, Catherine."

Their faces were close, too close for ignoring the almost magnetic pull between them. Vincent slowly leaned more forward, making Catherine mirroring his move, when...

"What the...! Geez! You gave me a real scare," a shocked man's voice interrupted the dream-like moment. "Hey, man, Halloween was yesterday."

The jogger chuckled and continued in his early morning run, disappearing in the distance.

Vincent lowered his head. The dream was over...

He stood up and walked a few steps. His eyes lingered for one more brief moment on the sky ahead of him, engraving the image in his memory to take with him forever.

Catherine's hands automatically reached towards him, but then, she pulled them back.

There is nothing to say; nothing can change the reality...

Vincent sighed and pulled up the hood on his cloak. When he turned to look at her, he looked like an elf from an ancient forest - tall and mysterious, the rising sun illuminating him from the back.

"I must go," he said, with a gesture of resignation.

One last small smile at her, and he glided past her with long, elegant strides to walk back into the safety.

Bittersweet emotions filled Catherine as she turned her head to watch him leave. When his dark figure disappeared out of her sight, suddenly, her lips broke into a smile, looking into the distance. The realisation of what they had achieved that night hit her, and she couldn't help but feel happy - for him, for both of them.

For one night, Vincent was able to walk fearlessly Above in her world, see its wonders and beauties, share it with her, as he was never able otherwise. She remembered the excitement in his face when he saw something he knew only from the books or the rooftops; the sparkles in his eyes when in astonishment, he took in the early morning colours of the park and the sky, deeply moved...

Still smiling, Catherine turned back to watch the sunrise over the East River, leaned back and thought about the most magical night of her life.

Yes, we must take what we're given. 300 days, a few months... or a single night...

(1) Samuel Taylor Coleridge: *Love*

(2) William Wordsworth: *Composed upon Westminster Bridge*