

# *Shades of Men*

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“One more, Vincent, please!” Eric cried from his cushion seat on the floor in his beloved mentor’s chamber. Other children eagerly joined him.

The man of the hour chuckled, and when he saw the excited, twinkling eyes of his visitors, he folded his hands in his lap and succumbed to the feeling of that special night of the year. He looked into the distance and started reciting.

*“Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,*

*Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—*

*While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,*

*As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.*

"'Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door—

Only this and nothing more..."<sup>1</sup>

Jacob, leaning against his son's chamber entrance, was smiling. He was listening as eagerly as the boys and girls surrounding Vincent. The warm glow from the candles gave this night an almost eerie impression; shadows were dancing on the ceiling. Not that Jacob hadn't seen Vincent's private quarters in candlelight before, but Halloween always gave every place in the Tunnels a special, almost magical feeling. Hearing Vincent's gentle but expressive voice conveying Poe's masterpiece to the young listeners, Jacob's smile slowly faded.

*"...Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,*

*Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;*

*But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token,*

*And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, "Lenore?"*

*This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, "Lenore!"—*

*Merely this and nothing more..."*<sup>2</sup>

Jacob remembered very well the last time he had seen Vincent reading this poem. That time, his beloved son was balancing on the edge of a mental abyss - it was when he thought Catherine, the woman he loved more than any man could ever love, was dead...

It was scarcely believable that more than a year had passed since that time. A time which was as dark and painful as it was devastating, and Jacob had to shake off a shudder that went through him, remembering the nightmare of those months. He couldn't quite believe how the presumed death of Catherine shook him to the core back then. It was the darkest time he could ever remember because he felt utterly helpless, unable to comfort and give strength to his son in the most soul-crushing time of his life...

*Enough of this!* Jacob berated himself. This Halloween, there was no need for grief. Only happiness filled these walls ever since his beloved daughter-in-law had returned to the land of the living. The little family occupying the chamber in front of him was a sight for sore eyes and a source of inspiration for everyone in the Tunnels - including the patriarch himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Edgar Allan Poe: *The Raven*

<sup>2</sup> Edgar Allan Poe: *The Raven*

“...And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, *still* is sitting  
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;  
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,  
And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;  
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor  
Shall be lifted—nevermore!”<sup>3</sup>

Vincent’s voice faded, and the look of the children around him was priceless - half-scared, half-excited. Samantha was the first one to break the silence.

“That was creepy...” She frowned but then her eyes narrowed in thought. “And sad,” she added.

Vincent smiled and nodded.

“It *is* sad. It’s a story of someone who once loved very deeply and had lost that love, but he could never reconcile himself with the reality of his loss.”

Samantha’s look changed into a knowing one.

“Like you,” she said with compassion.

Vincent tilted his head, and a trace of melancholy flashed in his eyes. Suddenly he realised that Samantha was growing up almost too fast.

“Yes... Fortunately, for me, fate provided a much better ending.” The corners of his unusual mouth turned slightly upwards.

Everyone present in the room was smiling. They all remembered those dark months only too well and were more than happy to let them wash away from their memories like a tide washing the seashore.

“I think it’s time you let Vincent enjoy Halloween in his way, as well.”

The sound of Jacob’s voice made everyone turn their heads, to see him smiling, leaning on his walking stick.

The children got up, and while thanking their friend for a great time, one by one, they left the chamber.

“Have fun, Vincent, and tell Catherine to look after you well up there.” Geoffrey smiled when passing his mentor.

“Thank you, Geoffrey, I will,” Vincent replied, bemused.

He smiled at his father and started collecting the heavy cushions from the rug on the floor, placing them into a basket nearby.

Jacob walked into the chamber and looked around the cosy place with a warm feeling filling his heart.

“So much has happened in this chamber over the years,” he said, contemplating. “So much of both good and bad.”

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<sup>3</sup> Edgar Allan Poe: *The Raven*

“Thankfully more good than bad,” Vincent replied with a smile of his own.

Jacob’s expression softened when his look fell on the little wooden cot next to the large bed in the back of the chamber. “Yes...”

He awakened from his reverie and turned back to his son.

“So, did Catherine tell you where she is taking you?”

Vincent chuckled.

“Only that it’s a place of many colours and great imagination.” His voice sounded relaxed and content. Jacob liked that sound very much.

“Trust Catherine to make it a secret. She seems to love those.” The patriarch teased.

“Well, wherever you two go, enjoy yourselves but please, be careful...” he added.

Vincent put his hand on Jacob’s shoulder in a reassuring way.

“We will, Father, do not worry yourself about us,” he said gently. “And don’t give little Jacob too many cookies, please. You know he can’t sleep then.”

He raised his eyebrows bemused. Vincent was well aware of his father’s weakness for spoiling his grandson when he had a chance to - much to the dismay of both parents, but they lovingly overlooked what they considered unhealthy.

Jacob flashed an embarrassed smile at his son.

“Well... He does have a sweet tooth... I suppose, like father, like son, right?” He glanced at Vincent, and the look in his eyes softened again when he caressed the younger man’s golden hair.

Vincent smiled warmly and kissed Jacob’s forehead.

“Always.”



Catherine was walking next to Vincent along the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, her arm entwined with his. The sky wasn’t blue, though, like in Catherine’s dream years ago. It was Halloween night after all - the only time when Vincent could walk among other men Above with no fear. Besides, it was too chilly for ice cream, but they didn’t mind at all.

They were enjoying their stroll through the city as if it was the first time, blissfully unconcerned with people passing them by. After all, most of them dressed up for the night’s occasion, so the couple blended in perfectly.

Vincent could barely focus on anything else but the woman by his side though. Catherine’s natural beauty stood out even more because of the beautiful dress she was wearing.

The medieval long velvet gown was rippled at the bottom, with at the wrists widened sleeves, and it had two layers - the main rich burgundy-coloured one and a golden one which was used on the sleeves edging and the inside layer of the skirt. It emphasised Catherine’s lovely feminine figure in ways Vincent had rarely seen, and

he liked it very much. Catherine's long sandy-coloured hair was curled, forming waves falling freely over her shoulders, with only a couple of strands pinned to the sides.

Although the thing he liked the most was the large hood attached to the top back part of the gown. When they had both left the tunnels after dark that evening, it was an almost surreal image - two hooded figures covered in long garments, setting out on a journey.

*Like the Elves leaving the safety of Rivendell*, Vincent thought to himself with a smile.

"I'm glad you are enjoying yourself." Catherine interrupted his train of thought bemused.

Vincent chuckled, lowered his eyes and then looked ahead - he realised he was staring at his wife and not looking where they were going. She was like a glorious vision from which he could not look away.

"I apologise, Catherine, I promise you, I *am* listening and enjoying what we are seeing." He smiled, and his eyes were twinkling in the darkness, illuminated only by the street lamps.

"It's just that in all those dreams I always had about you, I never envisioned you like Lady Guinevere."

"Well, if I am to walk side by side with Lancelot, I cannot be anyone else, can I?"

His smile made her stop and challenge him with a look.

"How *did* you envision me in your dreams?"

Appreciating her beaming smile, he gently brought her hand to his lips before his mouth opened to utter the words.

*"She walks in beauty, like the night  
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;  
And all that's best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;  
Thus mellowed to that tender light  
Which heaven to gaudy day denies ..."*<sup>4</sup>

Catherine sighed and couldn't resist stealing a brief gentle kiss. When they pulled apart, the light reflecting in his eyes gave Vincent an even more otherworldly appearance. She couldn't stop smiling and holding his hand tight.

The sound of a saxophone played by a street artist nearby brought them back to reality. Catherine entwined her arm with her husband's again as they continued walking. She reached in the small red velvet pouch-style purse, attached securely to her hand, and took out an elegant watch.

<sup>4</sup> Lord Byron: *She Walks In Beauty*

“Oh, perfect, we are right on time!” she exclaimed happily.

Vincent chuckled, suspecting Catherine was talking about her surprise.

“On time for... ?” he teased.

At that moment, Catherine halted and made him look up - he read the name of a modern art gallery he heard about before. Vincent looked back at the woman by his side and tilted his head curiously.

“This is the opening night for a new exhibition of lost and found paintings by a modern artist,” Catherine said, excitement building upon her face. “It’s newly discovered paintings by Kristopher... And we are invited.”

Vincent gasped quietly. Then, his shock changed into an incredulous smile.

“How?” Any other words were unnecessary.

“Mr Smythe called Jenny last month, and she arranged the exhibition.”

“But Catherine...”

“Don’t worry, Vincent.” She squeezed his hand to reassure him of his safety. “Jenny chose today especially as all guests were officially welcome to dress up for Halloween.”

Her beaming smile and excitement were contagious. Vincent just shook his head and chuckled.

“You have clever friends, Catherine.”

“Anybody talking about me?” A warm voice from behind made them turn around.

“Jenny!” Catherine exclaimed and hugged her friend.

“I was starting to worry you’d changed your mind,” Jenny said with a wide smile that reached her eyes, turning them into small twinkling buttons. Her costume and makeup would have fit perfectly into any *Cats* production. “Hello, Vincent, lovely to see you again.”

Vincent smiled and welcomed the warm hug from one of his newest friends. Jenny got introduced to him before his and Catherine’s wedding, and as with Nancy, they clicked immediately.

“One might think you would like to replace Catherine tonight,” Vincent said, smiling.

“Well, I thought it would make you feel a bit more comfortable, and you know, if lady Guinevere needs a stand-in at some point, I’m still available.” Jenny winked at him, making him chuckle.

“You stick to your tail, my friend, and leave my husband to me.” Catherine laughed.

Jenny grinned.

“I love seeing you jealous, Cathy, especially since I’ve never seen you jealous before!” She laughed, then turned around and walked back inside to the gallery.

Catherine chuckled and shook her head. When she looked back at Vincent, she noticed he was observing her with a wide smile.

“What?” she asked, a bit puzzled.

“Nothing,” Vincent replied, and his look softened. “Is it true you have never been jealous before?”

“Before I met you?” Her smile faded a little. “Not really..... I guess no one else was.... worth it...”

Vincent watched her lower her eyes a bit shyly. Despite being a grown woman, she still seemed like a school girl sometimes - insecure, innocent and vulnerable, her feelings exposed to the bare bone.

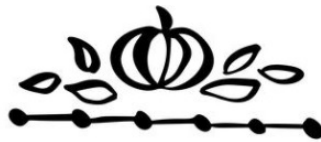
“It is an honour for me that I could be the first to make you feel like this, but...” Vincent’s gloved hand tenderly touched her cheek, and he added gently.

“I can assure you that you will never have a reason to feel like that again.”

Catherine let out the breath she didn’t even notice she was holding since he touched her face. Closing her eyes for a brief moment, she leaned into his palm and smiled widely.

“We should go inside,” she said quietly after opening her eyes, still smiling. “Jenny won’t start without us.”

Vincent smiled and entwined his arm with hers. He took a deep breath, and they walked into the gallery together.



“So, how do you like your first ever art exhibition, Vincent?” Jenny asked with a dazzling smile, noticing her friend’s blissful expression.

Vincent directed his attention to the ‘catwoman’ by his side, away from the large, almost graffiti-style painting of a young woman with angel’s wings.

“I must say, it’s not exactly what I had imagined,” he spoke seriously.

Jenny’s face fell in surprise.

“It is much more interesting,” Vincent finished with a hint of a mischievous smile.

Catherine laughed while Jenny exhaled loudly with relief.

“I can’t believe you’re pulling my leg, young man.” She giggled and looked over at Catherine.

“Is he always like this?”

“More and more,” the reply came from the bemused ‘Lady Guinevere’, and her eyes briefly regarded Vincent lovingly.

Vincent returned her soft look, then turned back to Jenny.

“I really must thank you, Jenny. It has been an extraordinary experience for me... And I’m sure Kristopher is happy, wherever he is.”

Jenny’s heartfelt smile told him more than her words.

“Anything for you, Vincent, you know that... and well...” She raised her eyebrows. “Wherever he is, he better stay there - we don’t want to scare the guests.”



With a wink and a grin, Jenny left Vincent and Catherine, walking over to Mr Smythe, who had spoken with the couple earlier that night. They exchanged distant smiles.

Vincent turned back to the painting. Something about the angel made him smile more than any of the other paintings.

Catherine noticed the expression on his face.

“Why are you smiling?”

Vincent chuckled and glanced at her before directing his look at the painting again.

“Does the face remind you of someone?”

‘Lady Guinevere’ narrowed her eyes, focusing on the painted face in front of her. Suddenly, the realisation hit her, and her mouth fell open.

“It’s... me!”

The smile on his face widened, reaching his blue eyes.

“I can’t believe I hadn’t noticed before!” Catherine whispered, staring at her own face.

“It’s not visible immediately, you have to look at it intently. But I believe Kristopher wanted to send us greetings again. Look at the dress the angel is wearing... see there, on her chest...”

Catherine’s eyes narrowed curiously again, studying the image, and an incredulous smile lit up her features.

“Incredible... a lion! And exactly in the perfect place - over my heart...”

She glanced at him before admiring the painted message in front of them again.

“Are you still sure you do not believe in magic, Catherine?” Vincent teased gently.

“The only thing I’m sure of is that I have to inquire about the availability and price of this particular masterpiece,” she chuckled and added dreamily. “Imagine it, Vincent... in the brownstone bedroom? One Below, and another Above...”

Catherine leaned against her husband’s shoulder, unconsciously imitating her pose from the painting Kristopher had gifted them two years earlier. With Vincent lovingly leaning his head against hers, the image was almost perfect.

“She’s a beauty, isn’t she?”

They both turned around, hearing the deep voice of a man coming from behind them.

Catherine’s mouth fell open. She froze for a moment, seeing the elegant figure of a handsome, bearded, dark-haired, smiling man in a black suit seemingly cut out from the latest fashion magazine, accented with snow-white shirt, a black bow-tie and shiny black shoes.

“Elliot...” Catherine stuttered.

“Lovely to see you again, Cathy. Won’t you introduce me?”

*Elliot Burch.*

Vincent tilted his head slightly, recognizing the man in front of him immediately. He had seen him on one occasion before, and it was not a pleasant one. Vincent managed to keep a straight face, but his mind was veiled with questions.



*What was that thing about jealousy? No, you mustn't, you are alive because of him...*

Catherine felt fear clamping her heart. *Vincent!* They were walking on dangerous ground...

"I... of course," she tried to sound composed. "This is Elliot Burch, a friend of mine."

That was the easy part. "And this is..."

Her throat closed at once as if a giant hand was squeezing it hard. In her head, Catherine was panicking, afraid for Vincent's safety. Elliot was not one to be tricked so easily.

"Vincent." She heard the man at her side say calmly. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr Burch."

Vincent stretched out his gloved hand towards the other man in a friendly gesture. Elliot accepted it after a brief moment, with a genuine smile.

Catherine flashed a smile, too, though not knowing where to look, as she feverishly tried to hide her panic. She felt Vincent's other hand giving hers a gentle squeeze, and when her eyes met his, a sudden wave of peace came over her.

*It's all right, Catherine, don't worry.*

"Yes, Vincent, my..." She looked at Vincent again, and the corners of her mouth turned upwards. This time, there was nothing but pride and happiness in her voice.

"The man I love."

Elliot observed the scene before him with mixed feelings. Seeing Catherine with another man was one thing; hearing her say it was the man she loved was another. And yet, something about this man was telling him it was exactly as it should be. And oh, yes, his mask was striking.

For years, Elliot couldn't get Catherine out of his mind and heart, though having known for some time she was involved with someone else. This woman had changed him, opened his eyes to a world in which showing emotions was not a weakness and love was not just a passing entertainment. When he understood it at last, it was too late for them.

Now, he saw the radiant smile and joyful sparkles in her eyes when she looked at the man beside her. It made him finally understand that Catherine was indeed his past. Finally, he saw the other man with his own eyes, and the writing was on the wall. There was no future with Catherine for one of the richest men in the country.

"Well... I feel privileged that I finally have the honour," Elliot spoke, his eyes set firmly on Vincent.

"I knew there was someone in Cathy's life, but she was always so evasive about you that sometimes, I wondered."

Vincent lowered his eyes for a moment, and a half-smile covered his surprising bemusement.

"I don't have many opportunities to go out," he said, looking calmly at his former rival again.

“Vincent is quite busy...Just as I am with my private legal practice,” Catherine intervened, trying to appear natural. “Most of the time, we are happy if we can steal some time for each other.”

“Oh yes, I’ve heard about that; helping the financially less fortunate, a very fitting role for you, Cathy. You always had a soft spot for the suffering ones.”

Catherine wasn’t sure whether Elliot was sarcastic or just friendly. The melancholic expression on his face didn’t give much away.

“I do what I feel is right, for the people who deserve help.”

Elliot nodded in agreement. “That’s the Cathy we all know and love.”

Catherine’s faint smile faded. She began feeling very uncomfortable. Elliot Burch had never been a man who was easy to see through, but at that moment, he was making it exceptionally difficult. And the worst thing was, he was behaving like this right in front of her husband.

“Catherine is remarkable in what she does. Her integrity, perseverance and the generosity of her heart have changed the lives of many good people for the better.” Vincent’s velvety baritone broke the awkward silence. The hint of a smile on his face told Catherine that he wasn’t as uncomfortable in Elliot’s presence as she thought.

“Yes,” Elliot replied to Vincent’s thought. “I should know something about it.” His smile was genuine and warm this time.

At that moment, a young waiter came by with a tray full of champagne flutes. Jenny, who was happily floating towards the group, stopped him immediately.

“Champagne!” she exclaimed when she approached them and reached for a glass. “I’m dying for one. I have a feeling all I’ve been doing tonight is talking to strangers tonight. My throat feels rotten.”

Catherine blessed this moment in her mind, for it was a perfect distraction from the tense situation. She asked Vincent if he wished a glass, which he gently refused. As Catherine turned around, she took a small step back and ended up knocking over a couple of the glasses on the tray.

“I’m so sorry!” Catherine apologised to the waiter while Vincent carefully helped her pick up the bigger shards of the flutes from the floor, and Jenny calmed her down.

The waiter waved the situation off with a smile, thinking to himself that he had already seen worse on such occasions. At least this lady wasn’t drunk. He thanked Catherine, said he would call someone to clean the spilt champagne, and walked away.

“Cathy, your dress...” Elliot pointed to the front of the burgundy masterpiece.

“It’s all right. It wasn’t wine,” Catherine said, examining the wet patch on the garment.

“We could go home if you wish,” Vincent suggested, touching her back gently.

“No need,” Jenny intervened. “Let us girls visit the restroom for a minute, and we’ll both be back fresh and ready to explore some more treasures of the mysterious Mr Gentian.”

Catherine opened her mouth to protest, but Vincent interrupted her softly.

“That is a good idea. We will wait here for you.”

His hand caressed Catherine’s back reassuringly while his eyes were focusing on hers, trying to convey the hidden thought.

*Don’t worry, Catherine; I’ll be all right.*

Her anxious eyes were still fixed on his when she took a deep breath and dared to ask a question.

“Are you sure, Vincent?”

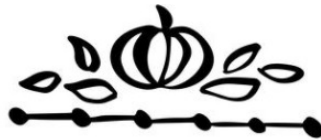
His smile answered for him, but still, he said the words.

“Yes, I will be in good company.”

“All right, then....”

She squeezed his hand, and with a deep look into his eyes, a small smile and then a quick glance at Elliot, Catherine let herself be guided away by Jenny.

The two men remained alone like the last two soldiers on a silenced battlefield.



“Well, that should be interesting...” Jenny whispered to Catherine with a giggle when they were at a safe distance from both men.

“Have you gone mad, Jenny?! How could you leave Vincent alone in a world up here? And with Elliot out of all people?!” Catherine was agitated but trying to keep her voice down.

“Come on, Cathy! Vincent is a big boy, he’ll be fine. That is until Father finds out about this.... Anyway, I think it’s about time Elliot realises that he can’t win you back no matter what he does. Before, he was fighting a ghost. Now, he finally has living proof that his attempts were in vain. The sooner this happened, the better.” Jenny explained with a content smile.

“I know but...”

“Cathy,” Jenny stopped and looked into her friend’s worried eyes. “You have known Vincent for much longer than I have, but I’m telling you, *trust him.*”

Catherine stared at the makeup covered face of her dear friend, looking for some words to reason with her.

*It is not Vincent but my world that I don’t trust...*

However, she closed her eyes for a moment and exhaled loudly.

“All right,” she spoke in defeat. “But not for long!”

“That’s my girl!” Jenny exclaimed with a victorious grin.

“But you’re a wicked woman,” Catherine added with a chuckle.

“*Cat-woman*, my dear... *Cat-woman*,” Jenny corrected her seriously. “And now, if you’ll excuse me, there is a phone call I should have made an hour ago already - I

got chatted up by that gorgeous-looking guy from The Museum of Modern Arts and then by Mr Smythe. Who knew cats could be so attractive!”

With an expression of a pretended surprise, Jenny glided away, wagging her fake tail, and left Catherine standing alone in the corridor leading to the restrooms.

For a moment, Catherine considered returning to Vincent, totally oblivious to the state of her dress. But then she thought about what Jenny said about Elliot. Of course, she was right.

*Though, she was also right about Father - when he finds out....*

Catherine waved off the mental image of her father-in-law losing his temper when he discovered that Vincent was left alone even for a minute among strangers from Above.

She was just about to walk to the restroom door when a familiar, cheerful voice stopped her in her tracks.

*“As she fled fast thro' sun and shade,  
The happy winds upon her play'd,  
Blowing the ringlet from the braid.  
She look'd so lovely, as she sway'd  
The rein with dainty finger-tips...”<sup>5</sup>*

That voice was all Catherine needed to recognise the person behind her. She turned around and tilted her head in disbelief with an astonished smile.

“Kristopher??”

\* \* \*

He had not changed a bit in the past more than two years since she had seen him: a slim figure hiding in worn-out street clothes with a dark sports jacket on top, the typical blue baseball cap partially obscuring the unruly dark brown hair, hands covered by fingerless gloves, and that unforgettable young, enthusiastic, smiling face with a boyish charm.

“Hello, Cathy,” he said, and the big smile only emphasised the mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

“How...? Why...?” Catherine was lost for words.

“Nice to see you, too.”

“I’m sorry, Kristopher...” She shook her head and chuckled. “You startled me. What are you doing here?”

“Isn’t an artist allowed to come and see his work being celebrated?”

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<sup>5</sup> Alfred Tennyson: *Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere: A Fragment*

His smile was contagious - Catherine laughed, and her shock faded as quickly as it had attacked her system.

“Of course, it’s just a bit unusual when the artist is...”

“Out of this world?” Kristopher raised his eyebrow and grinned.

“Sort of,” she chuckled. “So, are you enjoying the success of your beautiful artwork on display? You should be really proud; over half of the paintings have already been sold.”

The young artist pushed his hands in his jacket pockets casually and looked in the distance dreamily.

“I guess I have reached immortality at last...”

Catherine laughed. “You should see Mr Smythe. If pride had wings, he would be flying over Manhattan by now!”

Kristopher smiled warmly.

“I miss the old man. I haven’t shown up in a long time. I mean... Apart from leaving my work in the warehouse, which he bought back a year ago.”

“When he realised it could come in handy for someone...” Catherine raised her eyebrows with a cheeky grin.

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with helping each other out... which brings me to the real reason for my appearance tonight.”

Catherine’s smile faded a bit in surprise.

“What is the real reason then?” she asked.

Kristopher lowered his eyes for a brief moment before looking seriously at his friend.

“I thought it was about time to make a certain person stop dwelling on feelings which can’t be returned...”

Catherine sighed, knowing who he meant.

“Elliot...”

“You’re really good at guessing, Cathy. Keep it up.” Kristopher’s face lit up with a grin.

“Jokes aside, Mr Artist. I swear you and Jenny would make a great team.” Catherine shook her head. “Why can’t you all just let him be? He has suffered enough...”

“Because *he* won’t let *you* be, and you know it very well.”

Catherine started pacing in the short corridor. She was getting angry.

“And what about Vincent? Has either of you thought about him? It could be dangerous for him!”

“Nothing bad will happen; have a little trust in your man.”

Catherine stopped pacing. “Did you and Jenny plan this together?”

Kristopher only raised his eyebrows.

“All right then,” she said, resigned. “But could you tell me how you hope to execute your grand plan successfully?”

Kristopher grinned like a cat that just ate a canary.

“I don’t have to. I think Vincent is capable of doing just fine on his own.”

Catherine’s eyes went ablaze, and Kristopher held his hands in front of his face for protection.

“All I had to do was to make sure Elliot got his invitation to the opening night!” He pouted and tried to appear innocent. “And *accidentally* add a few words mentioning that you will be there too...”

She could have killed him, if he wasn’t dead already. Her usually bright emerald eyes darkened with anger, flashing fire blazes at the deceased artist.

“How could you?! What if Elliot asks too much and goes too deep? And what about Elliot? How can I be sure you won’t do more damage to both of them because of your reckless ideas to complete your mission?!”

Kristopher dared to step closer to Catherine.

“Cathy, there is nothing to fear, I promise you. They are both intelligent enough to sort out their issues in a civilised way. Besides...” A devilish grin lit up his face. “In the meantime, you can pose for me.”

Catherine’s mouth fell open. Her brain was feverishly searching for the words to reason with this ghost, but then she did the most unexpected thing - she started laughing.



They were observing each other for a few awkward moments before Elliot broke into a bemused chuckle.

“I guess this is where the usual socially appropriate questions come into play,” he said.

“I guess you are right,” Vincent answered calmly.

“But first, I have to tell you, your mask is quite spectacular...” Elliot’s face lit up in genuine awe and admiration.

A moment of melancholy washed over Vincent but disappeared quickly.

“Thank you,” he replied quietly, lowering his eyes for a moment but then he smiled.

“You seem to have quite an interest in the arts.”

Elliot smiled and turned his look to the painting of the angel again.

“I appreciate art, but in my life, I focus more on things that are real. The fantasy world is a nice place for escape, but it can’t provide for living, nor can it solve personal problems.”

Vincent cast a glance back at the painting as well.

“I dare to disagree,” he said gently, his eyes admiring the familiar angel’s face again. “*Fantasy is hardly an escape from reality. It’s a way of understanding it.*<sup>6</sup> As in literature... take, for example, Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. He created a

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<sup>6</sup> Quote by Lloyd Alexander (1924-2007)

whole and vibrant fantasy world full of all sorts of creatures and people. However, behind the adventures and heroic events, the story was a mirror image of our world. Good versus evil, pride going before the downfall, the strength that good ones find in themselves in the hour of need. What is not *real* about that?"

Vincent paused for a moment, noticing Elliot looking at him again.

"Or Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*. A seeming fairy-tale about a unicorn who believes she is the last in the world and desperately tried to find out what happened to the others. She discovers joy, love and sorrow on her path, only to suffer loss and grief. Is it not what we all are going through, as well?"

Elliot was mulling over his companion's words. Against his will, he was fascinated by the enigmatic man next to him.

Vincent's eyes wandered towards the painting next to the one of the angel they were admiring.

"Just look at this image," he pointed to the picture of a young woman standing on a bridge over a raging river. Behind her, crimson red and black rays of the sun were illuminating her from the back.

"Look at the woman's face, her eyes. There is sadness and aloneness mirrored in them. She's standing over a raging river, not knowing what to do - to jump in it or cross over and hope for something better? And the colours of the sun's rays are symbolic... red for blood, black for death. The artist is revealing the woman's intent even before you can come to your own conclusion."

"What does it have to do with the artist?" Elliot asked a seemingly ignorant question, but the fascination was quite clear in his voice.

Vincent clasped his hands behind his back and studied the painting while he was explaining. His teaching experience was very convenient at that moment.

"Kristopher Gentian was living in his own world, meaning that not many people understood him, or even tried to understand him. That's why he put his ideas, his thoughts into his paintings - the ideas of freedom (artistic and personal), his sorrows, longing for love, for opening people's eyes to the non-materialistic beauties of this world. It was not escapism for him; it was his way of communicating with the world and trying to make people see what they couldn't or refused to notice on their own. He is telling us that fantasy is merely a mirror which artists and writers place in front of us so that we see our own reality... our fears, hopes, desires, struggles, pain and joy," Vincent concluded.

Elliot wasn't even pretending to be indifferent anymore. He had his eyes fixed on the unusual "mask" of his companion, his mind absorbing every word the man spoke with his velvety smooth baritone. It had been a very long time since Elliot Burch was impressed by someone. Even if that someone "stole" the heart of the only woman he had ever loved.

"You certainly know your stuff," he said with an incredulous smile. "I bet Harvard would be more than happy to have someone like you on their payroll."

Vincent couldn't suppress a half-smile. "Literature and arts have always been some of my greatest joys," he said truthfully.

"So I can see... What is your job again?" Elliot asked suddenly.

Vincent didn't even blink. "I'm a literature teacher."



“Oh, that makes perfect sense. What school is the lucky one?”

An enigmatic smile appeared on Vincent’s face. He should have been nervous, wanting to escape this conversation and run back to the safety of the tunnels. But strangely, he was enjoying himself and didn’t feel threatened at all.

“None that you would have heard of. It is a school for children who were not fortunate enough to receive education in the usual schools,” he answered perfectly calmly.

“Oh, charity then.”

“Only passing on what I received generously in my childhood. It is something I am very passionate about,” Vincent said and looked at Elliot again.

The real-estate developer looked into the eyes of the enigmatic man next to him. He couldn’t fathom what it was, but something told him there was more behind the “mask”... something even more fascinating. Though Vincent spoke a lot, Elliot was intelligent enough to notice when he tried to avoid personal details.

Vincent noticed that Elliot was studying him.

“What is *your* passion, Mr Burch?” he asked, though immediately, he thought of a possible answer. *Catherine...*

The developer finally looked away and chuckled. The first answer crossing his mind would have been inappropriate regarding his companion, so he settled for the usual.

“Please, it’s Elliot. Apart from real estate development? I don’t have much time for anything else, I’m afraid. If you want to stay on top of the game, you have to sacrifice something for it.” He smiled, but Vincent noticed a hint of sorrow in his eyes.

“That is true in part, but sometimes the sacrifice can be too great, the price too high, and your life will slip through your fingers without you truly having lived it,” Vincent said knowingly, his look going straight into Elliot’s soul.

Elliot chuckled and glanced at his companion, knowing too well the truth in those words.

“I came to that conclusion some time ago as well, but unfortunately, it seems it was too late,” he spoke with a trace of regret in his voice.

Vincent suddenly felt sorry for the man who used to be his biggest rival.

“There is always time to start again, and do this differently, live another life,” he said with encouragement before adding, “with someone else...”

Elliot’s eyes found Vincent’s again, the compassion in them made him smile.

“I want to believe you, I really do...”

He sighed and decided it was time to change the topic.

“So, where did you and Catherine meet?”

“In a park,” Vincent said without hesitation, and he couldn’t suppress a half-smile, remembering that fateful night over five years earlier - a night full of contradictions, which brought the greatest gift into his life.

“I bet it was very romantic,” Elliot said wistfully.

“Barely,” Vincent replied briefly, but the smile on his face made Elliot even more curious. “Yet... it was the most blessed night of my life.”

He was regarding the angel on the painting before them, his eyes twinkling, the half-smile not fading away.

Elliot observed him for a moment silently and then directed his gaze to the painting as well. Suddenly, his eyes narrowed, and he tilted his head in surprise.

“That face... it looks like...”

“I’m back!” Catherine’s louder than usual voice broke the train of Elliot’s thoughts.

“Everything all right?” she asked with an exaggerated smile while casting a meaningful look at Vincent.

“Absolutely,” Vincent replied, smiling, and his eyes caressed her face while his hand took hold of hers. He gave it a light squeeze.

*Do not worry, Catherine; everything is fine.*

“Vincent gave me a remarkable lesson in the arts,” Elliot jumped in. “And life.”

“He is a remarkable man,” Catherine replied, looking at her husband with unmasked love and pride. “But I’m afraid we have to go now. It’s getting late, and we still have some things to do.”

“Of course,” Elliot said. Suddenly, he stretched out his hand towards the man at Catherine’s side. “It was a great pleasure to meet you, Vincent.”

The other man looked at the offered hand and accepted it carefully with a firm grip of his own. “Likewise, Elliot,” he replied genuinely.

The developer turned to the woman between them. “It was lovely seeing you again, Cathy. I’m happy for you,” he glanced at Vincent. “I really am.”

For the first time that night, Catherine lost the nervous feeling and smiled wholeheartedly.

“Thank you, Elliot. It was nice seeing you, too... bye, “ she said quietly and kissed him briefly on the cheek before leading Vincent away.

Elliot was watching them leave, thinking how great they looked together. Then, he turned back to the painting on the wall. Suddenly, the corners of his mouth turned upwards. He knew for sure who the face of the angel reminded him of, but what made him smile even more was the lion on the angel’s chest.

*After all, it is Halloween, the night when nothing is what it seems...*



“Are you all right, Vincent? I was so worried,” Catherine whispered to her husband as they walked out of the museum arm in arm.

“Catherine, truly, I am all right. In fact, I am beyond that. I feel... elevated,” Vincent replied with genuine joy. “Besides, Elliot seems like a nice and intelligent man... maybe not the happiest of men, but not an evil one. I could feel he was testing me, but not in a mean way. He was just curious, and I cannot blame him.”

Catherine’s smile was melancholic.

"I have always felt that Elliot was losing out on life just because of his high ambitions in his professional life. He's gone through a dramatic learning curve and changed a lot for the better... and yet..."

"And yet, he chooses to lead a life in solitude to fulfil his life-long dreams," Vincent finished her thought. "And that's a shame because you are absolutely right about him."

With a sad smile, Catherine briefly leaned her face against her husband's shoulder. She appreciated once again how lucky she was.

"Oh, look, Vincent!" she exclaimed at once and pointed at the vintage carriage with two white horses standing on the side of the road ahead of them.

This favourite tourist attraction sent them back to their first Halloween night spent together walking the streets of New York. There was a horse-drawn carriage then as well, and Catherine made sure Vincent would not miss the opportunity of a lifetime to have a ride in it. When she looked at her husband now, and her face was glowing with excitement, his darkened eyes mirrored her memories and anticipation.

They both jerked their heads at the sound of a repeating nervous neigh coming from one of the horses put to the carriage.

"Easy, easy boy!" The coachman tried to calm the frightened animal by pulling tighter on the reins.

But the horse had his own will, standing up on his back legs, trying to break free. The fast driving car that had passed them just a moment ago had given him a real scare.

Purely by instinct, Vincent disengaged himself from Catherine's arm and walked towards the scene, which by now had attracted the eyes of a few passers-by.

"Vincent, it's dangerous!" Catherine called after him, yet she was unable to move as if she could sense that something extraordinary was going to happen.

The cloaked man didn't turn back, though. He focused solely on the animal in distress, only a couple of feet in front of him now. Surprisingly, the other horse kept still, unaffected by the unsettling situation.

Vincent slowly approached the frightened animal that was on his hind legs again.

Catherine froze... fear gripped her but something else as well - fascination. The look of the tall and graceful figure of her husband approaching the scene, covered in his typical long dark cloak, almost hypnotised her.

Vincent carefully stretched out his arms towards the horse, trying to reach him. He didn't speak, but his deep eyes focused on the eyes of the animal. When they locked, within a few seconds, the horse stood back firmly on the ground, and the neighing stopped. Although still breathing heavily, his fear was gone, and so was the panic. The cloaked man's hands slowly reached for the horse's head, gently stroking its soft muzzle, moving up along the eyebrow arch and back down to the smooth raised cheeks. The calming, repetitive movement brought the animal to absolute stillness.

"There... No need to be afraid," only then, Vincent spoke softly, almost like addressing a child. His eyes were wide in awe and gratitude.

Vincent had never been so close to such a magnificent creature. He had seen horses used by the policemen in Central Park, and of course, there were the horses put to

the carriage in which he and Catherine had ridden on their first Halloween. But this was his first physical contact with animals that he usually had known only from books.

Catherine was rooted to her spot, enchanted by the scene playing out in front of her. She had seen Vincent tame angry dogs once. A simple look into their eyes and his presence was enough to do the trick, but this was something else. She would almost dare say it was *magical*...

“Thank you so much, sir! I don’t know what’s gotten into him, probably that wild car passing us.” The coachman was more than relieved when he saw the situation resolve in such a quick and calm way.

“Animals scare easily; they are sensitive to unusual noises or quick movements they are not used to,” Vincent replied, still looking at the horse and stroking its muzzle with his gloved hand. It seemed that the white beauty was more than comfortable with his gentle touch. “Please, take good care of him.”

“You bet I will, sir! Do you fancy a ride with your lady? Free of charge, as a thank you.”

Vincent smiled shyly, suddenly aware of himself again, and looked back at Catherine. When he saw her radiant smile and nod, something inside of him stirred with excitement.

“We would be delighted, thank you,” he told the coachman, who was more than happy to hear those words.

When Catherine walked to the carriage, Vincent offered her his hand to help her get in. After she gladly accepted it, his eyes suddenly noticed a familiar figure of a man in a black suit, now hidden under a long black coat, standing at the museum door. His dark eyes were narrow with awe, and Vincent felt at once that there was more than admiration in that look - it was one of recognition.

*He knows...*

But Elliot Burch did not seem to be shocked, appalled or disgusted. His look focused on Vincent’s deep blue eyes for a moment, and against all Vincent’s expectations, Elliot smiled at him.

The developer knew now what made him think there was something more behind Vincent’s “mask” - it was no mask at all. Regardless of how strange, extraordinary or fantastical the face was, it *was* the face of a man. Elliot was sure of it after having spent those few intriguing minutes with Vincent. And he was an intelligent and empathic man, indeed. No matter what caused his appearance, it could never erase the value of his character and behaviour. And those were things that Elliot Burch truly admired.

He nodded to Vincent, and the lion-man knew Elliot’s smile was genuine, and no danger would come his way. Acknowledging it with a smile and nod of his own, Vincent got into the carriage, took Catherine by the hand and let himself be swept away by the wonders of the Halloween night.



After the carriage ride through the city, they were walking the streets and parks until early morning. And like the first time, Vincent and Catherine welcomed the dawn sitting on a bench neat the Queensboro bridge. If they were to make this trip Above every year, Catherine thought it would be a lovely tradition for ending the night.

Vincent agreed without words; his smile and the sparkles in his eyes spoke for him. When the pink and purple veil brightened the morning sky over the East River, he felt like floating.

They were walking up the few steps to the front door of their brownstone - the first time for Vincent to use the front door rather than the basement entrance. He was enjoying the feeling of that moment when suddenly, he stopped and tilted his head.

Catherine followed his lead and spotted the reason for his abrupt halt. There was a large flat rectangle-shaped object, wrapped in white cloth, leaning against the front door.

Their eyes locked - this felt like *déjà vue*. Vincent, sensing nothing out of place, raised his eyebrows as if saying, *Aren't you curious?* Catherine silently nodded, and her husband lifted the object and carried it into the house.

Catherine slowly unveiled a beautiful painting - the image of the angel with Catherine's face and the lion on the angel's dress.

"Oh, Vincent!" Catherine gasped, a beaming smile illuminating her face. "I did inquire about the price of it, but I never got round to expressing my interest in it."

"Someone must have known about it for sure," Vincent said and pointed at the little note attached to the corner of the canvas.

Catherine reached for the note and started reading.

*"I hope this will bring you as much joy as it brought me to see you both tonight.*

*Vincent, your secret is safe with me... Hopefully, we can continue our conversation one day...*

*Elliot*

*P.S. Cathy, please, don't be mad at Jenny for giving me your address. I did bribe her with a bottle of the best champagne."*

Catherine could barely believe the words she was reading. The expression of absolute astonishment on her face bemused Vincent, who couldn't suppress a smile.

From the darkened corner nearby, Kristopher Gentian was observing them with a dazzling smile, his eyes burning brightly with excitement.

*See, Cathy? I told you Vincent was capable of doing just fine on his own...*

He chuckled and disappeared in the colourful, crisp morning of the new day.



