

Abominable

by Angie

Certainty. Certainty. Feeling. Joy. Peace.

- Blaise Pascal (found stitched into the lining of his coat, after his death)

Halloween was approaching and this year Catherine wanted to try something different. That first year, the one that only became a date late in the evening, she had worn an owl mask and southern belle dress, and Vincent had been Vincent. The next year, she had chosen to wear a Cat Woman costume, in an attempt to complement him. And Vincent had been ... Vincent. And last year too, he had been himself. She understood why he wanted to show his face one night a year, without fear, but she was a little worried. She wanted them both to be unrecognizable this time, just in case she saw someone she knew. They would wonder about her date and she wanted to avoid that conversation.

So she would have to convince Vincent of the value of her plan. Before she could that, though, she would have to decide on a costume. For a change, it would be nice if they could wear the same one. That presented a problem, of course, since both of them would have to be completely covered.

She waited until she knew Vincent would be busy away from the home tunnels – carving new chambers seemed to be a constant source of work for the able-bodied – and went to talk to the tunnel’s diminutive seamstress, Annabelle.

On her arrival in the large chamber Annabelle used as a workroom, she found it unusually quiet for a Saturday. At first she thought there was no one there, but then she spotted a mound of hair moving behind a row of large cardboard boxes and grinned.

“Annabelle!” she called, walking over to where she had last seen the hair. She rounded the corner and found the dwarf with her arms on her hips, her expression sour.

“What’s wrong?” Catherine asked.

She seldom saw Annabelle look discontented, and wondered what new crisis had hit the tunnels since her last visit. Almost everything of note affected the seamstress, whether it was a tunnel mudslide, work parties or new arrivals. There was never any lack of work to do and it usually consisted of sorting a lot of fabric oddments in boxes such as these, which Helpers sent down at irregular intervals.

Annabelle looked up and her face lightened a little.

“Catherine!” Just the person I want to see. You’re a little taller, could you help me record what’s inside these boxes? Seems our Helpers are using taller boxes all the time. I can tip them and you can mark the contents on some paper and tape it to the side. There’s only a few.”

She handed Catherine a clipboard of lined paper, a black marker and a roll of scotch tape.

“Of course,” Catherine said.

She and Annabelle took the first one in the row. Annabelle reached for the top of the box and tipped it.

"This will be number 1," she said. She leaned into the box and almost disappeared inside it. Catherine tried not to giggle at the sight of two legs and a rump wriggling from the opening.

"Humph," came a muffled remark. "This one is all blankets, mostly polyester, all sizes. Useful, but they need some repair work."

Catherine dutifully wrote that down next to the box number on a sheet of paper, then ripped the portion off and taped it to the box.

Annabelle backed out of the box, hauling with her some fabric with long hair in a very pale gold. She stood up and shook it out, grabbing the bottom so it wouldn't drag on the floor. It was a blanket.

"Whew, there's a few these. Might be useful for Halloween,"

Catherine gasped as an idea came to her.

"Annabelle, there are more of these? Is there enough fabric to make two adult costumes?"

The seamstress looked at her and grinned. "Should be. I think there's three or four of them. Don't tell me you want Vincent to be a bear this Halloween!"

Catherine grinned back. "Not exactly. You've given me an idea though. I like the colour of that fur."

"Right, I'll put these aside for you. You can tell me the plan later, after we finish the rest of these boxes."

For the next half hour they worked at identifying contents, the last box being, of course, the one with so many different items that it defied any broad description. So Annabelle identified them and Catherine listed them. When it was done and the list taped to the box, they both sighed with relief.

"Come sit and have a tea with me," Annabelle invited. "Then you can tell me your idea and I'll let you know if it can be done."

She carried the four blankets over to the table and went to fill the teapot from the kettle on the brazier. Lubrication was essential with all the fabric dust flying around, Catherine decided. Her mouth felt like the Sahara.

When they had gratefully finished one cup and poured another, Annabelle swivelled a little to look at Catherine.

"So what are you and our big hunk planning?"

"I haven't suggested anything to him yet, but I want us to be the same thing, and I want us to be completely covered."

Annabelle got a thoughtful expression. "A bear would have been nice, but I think something more mythical is called for with these blankets. And you should at least pay lip service to this fine city we live in ..."

She grinned suddenly and stage-whispered a single word to Catherine.

Catherine laughed.

"Perfect. We can be visitors to New York from ... wherever. That sounds like fun."

"I can cut out the pieces and you can sew them," Annabelle told her. "Pretty easy costume. All you'll need to do is collect some stuff to hang from a belt or something. You know, typical New York things."

Catherine laughed again. "I think I can find some of those. Now all I have to do is convince Vincent to dress up for a change."

"Aw, you know he can never refuse you anything, Catherine. Besides, it's time he had some real fun. Being someone else will be a nice change for him."

"I hope so. Well, I'd better get over to his chamber. He said he would be back by now and I don't want him looking for me in here. I like to keep our surprise for a few minutes more."

"So you can work on him in your inimitable lawyer fashion, you mean."

“Exactly. Without distractions.”

“Good luck then,” Annabelle wished her as she left the chamber.

“I hope I don’t need it,” she heard Catherine throw over her shoulder.

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Catherine did indeed find Vincent in his chamber. His hair was wet and he was a little damp around the edges. He must have bathed and dressed quickly, knowing she was close by. She allowed herself a little disappointment at that. Well, she would just have to undress him again ... later.

He must have caught a sense of her intent and grinned ferally at her.

“Catherine. I was just about to go and get something to eat. Would you care to join me?”

“Yes, I would, Vincent. I’m hungry and thirsty.”

He took her arm in his and they sauntered down to the dining chamber. It was mostly deserted, but for the others on the work team, who had not bothered to bathe, and who were deep into large bowls of something that smelled like chili con carne.

“I hope they left some for us,” Vincent remarked caustically, heading into the kitchen.

He was not there long and returned with a tray loaded with two bowls of chili, a stack of buttered bread and two glasses of water. He put it down on the table in front of Catherine, and she quickly grabbed a bowl. The smell made her mouth water, and she barely hesitated before starting it on it. It was a little hot, so she blew on each spoonful, but even so, was done in record time, and she had also taken care of a good portion of the bread and her glass of water.

Vincent’s eyebrows rose as he watched her, and he quickly grabbed the rest of the bread to finish off his own meal. After he had mopped up the remaining chili sauce with the last piece of bread, he sat back with a sigh.

“And what have you been up to, Catherine, to get such an appetite?”

“I was helping Annabelle,” she replied, around her own last piece of soaked bread.

“Ah, any interesting discoveries?” he asked.

“Some,” she replied. “Let’s go back to your chamber. I have a proposal for you.”

“Not so soon after dinner, Catherine,” Vincent protested.

“Not THAT, Vincent!” she admonished him, then realized his eyes were twinkling his mouth was turned up at the corners in his endearing smile. Several people nearby snickered, but didn’t look at them.

Catherine blushed. “Ok, you got me. Not that I wouldn’t like to, you understand, but I’m a little full myself. No, I have a plan.”

“A plan,” he repeated. He looked at her and wondered what she had on her mind this time. He stood up, took her hand in one of his own, then lifted the tray and its now empty contents with the other. He slid it onto the kitchen trolley on his way out.

Back in his chamber, he sat in his chair and pulled her onto his lap. They both sighed happily and Catherine put her arms around his neck and gave him a full lip kiss, taking her time about it. She wanted him in a receptive mood.

Finally, Vincent looked at her, his curiosity now extreme. He sensed there was an ulterior motive at work.

“Tell me please.”

She smiled. “All right, Vincent. I’ve been thinking about what we could do this Halloween. We’ll go

above, of course, as usual, but it doesn't seem right that I have to get all dressed up, while you are ... just you. So I'm thinking we could wear the same costume and be completely unidentifiable for a change. I hate being recognized on Halloween!"

Vincent was quiet for a moment, then looked down at the floor. His hands around her back tensed a little.

"I see. You mean that you want me to go as something other than myself. I agree it's not very imaginative, Catherine, or wouldn't be if those above knew that what they're seeing is real. But they simply think I've got extraordinary makeup. This is the only night I can walk in your world openly."

Catherine dropped a kiss on his lips. She understood his emotional need to walk free in her world, but there were other considerations. She always felt a little uneasy, although she knew there was little chance of anything happening. That jogger by the bridge, the first time, whose cruel words sent Vincent back to the tunnels as the sun rose, haunted her. She chose her words carefully.

"I realize that, Vincent, of course. I could just disguise myself better, but I thought you might want to see what it's like to be someone different for a night. I thought we could both be the same thing. Something ... unusual."

Vincent looked in her eyes and wondered why he had never considered a true disguise. Well, partly it was because creating a costume in his size would have been difficult, but mostly it was because he liked fooling the revellers. No one gave him a second look amongst so many weird and wonderful costumes. He had to admit that Catherine's plea had another element. Even if his deception was a good one, if anyone recognized her, they would automatically want to know who he was. That could prove awkward. Odd that he had never thought of that before.

He got a distant look in his eyes as he recalled past Halloweens, before Catherine.

"Tell me," Catherine whispered.

Vincent sighed.

"Until we met, I never considered going out on New York's streets on Halloween night. There seemed no point. I could roam any night, if I was careful.

"Instead, I accompanied the children to the carousel and castle, to the City's trick or treat event. I watched over them, usually at a distance. No one paid me any attention."

"Did you go out as a child, Vincent?"

"Yes. But I stopped after Devin left. He always had some mischief planned. It was too painful to think of going without him."

And one year, Vincent remembered, silently, he had eaten too many Halloween kisses and spent the night roaming the tunnels, unable to settle down. Devin had refused to let him in their bed until he was almost asleep on his feet. He had slept most of the following day. He had never eaten candy in any quantity since. And, now I know of sweeter things, he told himself, as he gazed at Catherine.

"And now?" Catherine prodded, curious as always about tunnel arrangements.

"Others are chaperones, usually Mary and Rebecca. They have almost as much fun as the children. They tell us all about the costumes they see, while ensuring the children's bags do not get too loaded down with candy, and that they always accept apples and fruit when offered. William makes wonderful desserts from them."

He got pensive again, thinking about Catherine's idea. He had to admit that being someone else for a change might be ... liberating. He had always been somewhat careful to not attract attention, although that did not seem to be a problem on Halloween. People tended to be overwhelmed by the sheer variety and never gave him a second glance.

"What did you have in mind?" he asked at last, as Catherine waited patiently. He could feel her fear that

he would refuse. Really, why should he? He visibly relaxed.

Catherine let out a breath. Well, at least he was considering it. Should she tell him the idea? It would be fun to hold it back, but possibly Annabelle would need them to do a fitting. She decided it was better to be forthcoming. She told him what they were planning. Vincent laughed – a very good sign, she thought.

“Abominable!” he commented at last, but his eyes were merry.

Catherine laughed and hugged him, while his arms tightened about her. “I just have to find some suitable accessories,” she told him.

“Such as a large soft pretzel or three?” he asked. “I get one occasionally from a Helper. Perhaps William can make us some.”

“You mean he’s never made them?” Catherine asked.

“No. Not because he has refused. I have just never asked. I ate it immediately, then forgot about it. Perhaps this could be a pleasant task for our Halloween party. The children would love making them - and eating them - and so would the rest of us. I will talk to William. He would probably prefer that to pull taffy or candy apples.”

He smiled, remembering the mess from the former and the challenges of eating the latter.

“Great, then all I have to come up with are the other items. Leave that with me. I want to surprise you. I’ll let you know when the costumes are done. We shall probably have to try them on.”

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A week later, Catherine and Annabelle had finished the costumes and she and Vincent clambered into them in the sewing chamber. Both costumes had extra long arms that were stitched so that they would form a kind of mitten. It saved the nuisance of separate gloves, but effectively hid their hands.

Vincent’s one piece was roomy and felt comfortable. The front opening buttoned closed and the head piece attached to the same button. He noticed Catherine’s costume was constructed differently.

“Why is yours in two pieces, Catherine?” he asked, curious.

Catherine looked at Annabelle, who hooted with laughter, but offered no explanation.

Catherine blushed a little and regarded Vincent with a wry look.

“Basic biology,” she remarked at last.

Vincent was silent for long moments, then realized what she meant. He got a pained look on his face. He now understood the reluctance of tunnel women to wear one piece work clothes. Seeing the light dawn, Catherine giggled.

“You got it, Vincent. Having to almost completely undress to answer the call of nature is ... a nuisance.”

Annabelle laughed, and turned to the table holding their costume accessories and handed them the chain belts Catherine had found to hold them.

Annabelle stood looking at them as they attached the chain around their middles. They waited for her comments.

“Well, I don’t think any one will recognize the two of you this year!” she said at last. “It’s bound to be chilly, and it might even rain. You should be well-protected in either case.”

“But our pretzels will get wet!” Vincent protested.

“I’ll carry a fanny pack, just in case,” Catherine promised.

“Then I have no objections,” Vincent said.

Catherine knew he was grinning under the costume, and she could feel his happiness through the

bond. But there was no way to see his expression – or hers for that matter – and his voice was a little muffled. Those were a disadvantages she hadn't considered. Well, silence would be golden – and they had their bond.

Vincent thoughts must have run in the same direction. He turned to her and gave her a huge hug, rattling the chains. They would attach the accessories on Halloween night.

“We shall be unique this year, Catherine. In more ways than one.”

She looked at him, catching a glimpse of his eyes through the costume. She realized then that they needed just one more item to complete the costume and made a note to herself to get them.

“What are you scheming about now?” Vincent asked.

“We need one more thing,” she remarked. “Let it be my surprise. I'll bring it down on Halloween night. You'll love it.”

“Then let me also contribute something,” Vincent replied. He pulled back the head piece and looked at her with a grin. “I have an idea. I'm pretty sure Annabelle can help.”

She removed her own headpiece and regarded him. “I hope you're not planning anything too outré,” she remarked.

“Oh no, my Catherine.”

Annabelle clapped her hands. “Well then people, all is well and you're set. Now I must get back to work.” She turned away and let out a series of loud guffaws that got louder as she got further away. She stopped and held onto her knees, finally getting control of herself. “Abominable!” she groaned.

Catherine and Vincent looked at each other.

“Does that mean this costume is a success, or just so hilarious that we will leave laughter in our wake?” Catherine asked. “And remind me to make sure no one is listening before I tell you anything!”

Vincent laughed. “There are no secrets below, as you should know by now. I believe we will certainly be incognito. I doubt we'll raise many eyebrows though, Catherine.”

“I've always thought that if aliens ever visited Earth, they'd come during Halloween in New York. No one would ever notice.”

“I am not sure they'd be noticed any other time,” Vincent replied.

Catherine laughed. It was an old New York joke, but she was surprised he knew it.

Despite her pleasure at the costumes, Catherine had some second thoughts. Vincent was large and their costumes made them both look enormous, but him especially. However, she decided not to worry. They would be on the move and there would be much weirder costumes on display.

“There is one problem,” Vincent commented. “How will we eat or drink in these?”

“To be honest, Vincent, any fancy costume makes it almost impossible, unless it's through a straw. I think we should return to the tunnels and join the adult festivities in the Great Hall. Then we can call it a night.”

Another thought occurred to her. These costumes will be warm ... but easy to remove. We won't need to wear much under them ...”

Vincent regarded her sternly at that. “Best not to think too much about that, Catherine, or we may have a very short excursion above. I cannot promise to disguise my ...um ... interest.”

Catherine sighed. “True. I'll try and keep my lascivious thoughts under control, since I know I can't keep you from feeling them. Now I must see if William needs anything for the pretzel making. Coming?”

“In a few minutes. I must talk to Annabelle.”

Catherine ran her fingers through her hair to put it back in place and trotted to the kitchen.

She found the rotund cook examining a cookbook. She peered around him and wasn't awfully surprised to see that he was examining a pretzel recipe. Word had got around.

"Do you think these are possible, William?"

"Certainly, Catherine," he rumbled. "I just have to decide whether to make them hard or soft. I presume the big guy prefers the large soft ones?"

"I think we all should, in deference to our fillings."

"Good point, Catherine. Father's dentistry skills are good - but much better if not needed at all."

He laughed and Catherine joined him.

"Do you need anything to make them, William."

"I think I have enough coarse salt and the rest is just flour eggs and yeast. These should be less messy than other year's treats."

"But just as delightful, I'm sure."

"Oh certainly. What New Yorker can resist a fine pretzel, especially a fresh one? We will have to eat them all the same day, you know. They don't keep."

"So we'll be making them that day and have to eat them by midnight. Sounds great to me," Catherine said. "Vincent and I will need a couple apiece for our costumes."

"I'll put four aside for you, then."

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Halloween morning began with excited voices outside Vincent's chamber. He had put down the carpet for privacy, but it didn't blank out the noise well enough. He and Catherine were awakened. He looked muzzily around and glanced at a clock across the room. It was only 5 am!

Catherine turned to him, heard the noise outside, and groaned.

"This is going to be a long day," she grumbled.

Vincent rose, put on a robe over his nakedness, and walked through the door curtain. Catherine could hear the rumble of his voice but couldn't make out words. The higher pitched voices of the children finally faded into the distance. Vincent returned and looked down at his lover.

"I'm afraid we are needed," he reported reluctantly, casting his eyes over her curves beneath the sheet.

"Why us?" Catherine asked. She wondered if everyone in the tunnels was being woken up this way.

"Because there's been a disaster in the kitchen and all hands are needed to help - most especially mine, apparently. It seems that Arthur broke into the syrup jug, which William keeps on a shelf above the stove. William says if the mess isn't cleaned up, he will retire to his 'dungeon' and play dead. No pretzels, no breakfast ... no anything."

Catherine giggled. Surely, the mess couldn't be *that* bad! But she got up and dressed in some old clothes and Vincent did the same. They made their way to the kitchen, but long before they got there, they could hear bedlam. William's voice rose in a bellow above the racket.

"YOU GET THAT BEAST OUT OF HERE, MOUSE! NO BUTS! If I catch sight of one hair of him, I will ... I will ...! There was a sputtering sound and some strangled laughter.

Vincent led the way in.

"QUIET! he roared, which got the required result. There was a deafening silence.

"I see everyone is already enjoying Halloween," he commented mildly.

He looked around, taking note of the mess, which was considerable, even in the dining chamber. He

spotted Mouse, trying to disappear into a solid wall, and strode over to him.

“Mouse, why was Arthur allowed to run around?” Vincent asked, finally.

“Didn’t! Put him in cage last night,” Mouse objected. “Broke out.”

“How?”

“Figured out how to open latch,” Mouse admitted, shamefacedly.

Vincent sighed.

“Where is he now, Mouse?”

“IN MY BROOM CLOSET!” bellowed William. “And he’s staying there until our ever-inventive Mouse can find a properly secure cage for him!”

“But ... it’s dark in there,” Mouse objected.

“Then you had better do something quickly,” William told him.

Mouse scuttled out of the dining hall, muttering.

Vincent sighed again, noticing that no one was moving to clean up.

“We should get started on this mess,” he remarked.

“Can’t,” Samantha told him. “All the cleaning stuff is in the broom closet ... with Arthur.”

Vincent couldn’t help it. He laughed, and was soon joined by everyone else. At least it was now clear why they had been woken up.

William finally spoke up, confirming it.

“No one wants to tackle that beast when he’s cornered, Vincent. I can’t blame them. Perhaps you could ...?”

Vincent looked around the faces and nodded. He was the logical choice.

“Have you two empty sacks, William?”

William nodded and retrieved them from a lower cupboard. Vincent took one, and William followed him to the broom closet, both of them making footprints in a crunchy mess of flour, broken crockery and syrup. Vincent chose not to ask how flour had got into the mix.

“Please stand behind me with that other sack, William. Should I miss him, you can divert him back to me.”

William positioned himself and Vincent slowly opened the door a crack, then made ready to open it further with his foot. He held the bag on the floor. He stiffened.

“Now,” he stated, opening the door with a kick.

A furry black shape was squeezing through the opening and Vincent scooped it up before it could get free. William nodded in relief. He had never doubted that the tunnel’s fastest resident could beat any old raccoon!

There was plaintive squealing and frantic movements from the bag. Vincent held it well away from himself and marched out of the kitchen, wiped his feet on the bag William handed him, then threw it behind him before going into the tunnels.

“I’ll help Mouse devise better security,” he threw over his shoulder.

Vincent trudged down the tunnels to the Mousehole, cursing their tinker for wanting to be situated well off the beaten path. Arthur had not settled down, although his vocal complaints were less frequent. Finally, he reached the chamber and entered to find Mouse examining the latch on a large cage standing on the floor, much bigger than the one Vincent remembered. It looked capable of holding a bear!

“Mouse, why are you using such a large cage? What happened to the other one?”

Mouse looked around guiltily.

“Wanted Arthur to have more room. Needs to be in cage while I’m working, or might get hurt. So found a bigger cage.”

Vincent wondered how on earth Mouse had managed to get it into his chamber. No doubt he’d had help, and it was best not to ask. He forbore to ask where the cage had come from, but Mouse told him anyhow.

“Found down in deep lower levels. Think maybe was Paracelsus’. No one there, so took it.”

Vincent looked more closely at the cage and shuddered. It did indeed look like something that evil genius might have wanted, and he was sure he knew for whom it was intended.

“Where was this, Mouse?” he asked at last. How was Mouse able to find caves and “stuff” no one else did, he wondered. If there was recent activity, the place would have to be cleared. Perhaps it should be regardless, he reflected.

“Below catacombs, in place with lots of rope and chains. Not our stuff.”

“We will have to bring it all up, Mouse. It cannot stay there. I will arrange for a team to empty it, if you can show us the way. But first we must fix that lock. Arthur is not happy in this bag.”

“Can put him in old cage for now,” Mouse offered. “Can’t open that.”

He dragged out the smaller cage Vincent remembered. He put the bag gently inside it, then quickly closed and locked the door with its padlock. Arthur scurried out of the bag and then sat on top of it chittering angrily at them. He had not escaped the flour and syrup either, and soon turned to grooming. Thank goodness for that, Vincent thought. Raccoons were like cats. They groomed themselves. The thought of having to bathe Arthur was not attractive.

“Do you have another padlock for the big cage, Mouse?”

“No. But can find one. Trouble is finding key.”

Vincent sighed and tried to look stern. Naturally, Mouse’s scavenging would be unlikely to supply both a useable lock and its key.

“I’ll ask Catherine if she can buy a good one for you. In the meantime, please keep Arthur in the small cage.”

“Mouse promises. Arthur bad. Made big mess. William must cook today,”

“Yes. I fear you had better keep Arthur caged for some days, if you value his safety. Please come to the kitchen and we’ll go and see this cave of yours,” Vincent told him,

“Yes,” Mouse agreed. He made sure Arthur had water, then followed Vincent.

By the time they returned to the kitchen, the cleanup was well underway. William was standing to one side, hands on his hips, scowling. His stove was of particular concern, and a small team was carefully scrubbing it down.

The flour, it seemed, had come from a large aluminum shaker next to the syrup. It was badly dented and the lid no longer fit.

Catherine came out of the pantry and grabbed Vincent’s arm.

“I need you in here, Vincent. William has decided to keep the remaining syrup out of reach, along with some other items too likely to be of interest to Arthur. Unfortunately, it’s out of reach for me too.”

Vincent followed her into the pantry and obediently placed the items on the top shelf. There was a stool nearby, so she could have done it herself. He looked down at her puzzled. She stood on her toes and lifted her face to him, thereby managing to place a kiss on his chin.

“Now that was worth a heap of flour dust and syrup,” she whispered.

Vincent bent down to capture her mouth and silently agreed. When they finally separated, he looked

around. The pantry seemed as neat as usual.

“What else needs to be done Catherine?”

“I don’t know, Vincent. I think I’d better make sure William still has everything he needs for the pretzels. I can go and get it now from one of the 24 hour stores.”

“Ah. By the way, Mouse needs a good, very large padlock for a cage.”

Catherine laughed. “I bet he does! I can buy that too. I hope Arthur is secure for now.”

“He’s in a smaller cage, with a padlocked door. Mouse had put him in a larger one, which couldn’t be secured properly. It needs a much larger padlock. Which reminds me. I need a team to extract some items from a deep cave. I think breakfast will be delayed, so we might as well go now.”

“Now? Can’t it wait until after Halloween?”

“Possibly,” Vincent replied. “But I fear that this place may not be unknown to others. I’ll see if I can extract some men from the cleanup.”

Catherine sighed as he left her. She looked around, satisfied that she had done her job, and then left and closed the pantry door.

The kitchen was almost back to normal, so she asked William if he needed anything, and when he said he did not, she decided to make a trip above for some treats. This work would have left everyone in a sour mood. She thought she could bring some smiles back to the faces. Vincent, it seemed, was going to be gone for a while.

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Catherine went back to Vincent’s chamber, gave herself another wash and dressed in her ‘above’ clothing. She exited via her threshold and went up to her apartment. It smelled a little stale, so she opened the patio door a crack. Then she picked out the clothing she would wear under her costume - a pair of orange tights and a purple thermal shirt - and stuffed them into a bag. She could no longer remember why she had bought either item, but they would at least get some use tonight. No one would have to know about her atrocious colour sense, except Vincent.

She was just about to head out to the nearest bakery, which she knew opened early, when the phone rang. She hesitated until the answering machine kicked in and she heard Jenny’s voice.

“Damn it Cathy, why are you never at home? It’s Halloween, you know – but I’m pretty sure you know that. Just wanted to know if you were planning to go anywhere. If you’re interested the New York Public Library is opening Astor Hall tonight for a special display of New York haunted places. I plan to go. Talk to you later. Bye.”

The phone clicked off. Catherine sighed and continued out the door. She could call Jenny back, but she had no idea where she and Vincent were going during the course of the night. And this time, she didn’t want to run into anyone she knew. Not that they’d recognize her – and she had no intention of revealing herself to anyone.

On the other hand, the library was a place Vincent had never been. If they stayed silent or just communicated with whispers, Jenny would never know them. There were sure to be a lot of other couples there in strange costumes.

That sounded like a plan. What time did the display open, she wondered. She dashed back to the phone book, found the library number and called. A recorded message told her the display would open at 7 pm and close at midnight. There would be some surprises for visitors.

Catherine smiled. The adult Halloween party in the Great Hall started at 10 pm. The timing would be

perfect. Happy now, she left her apartment building and headed downtown.

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She walked into her favourite bakery a short time later, and managed to find enough cupcakes and cookies to feed the tunnel community. Nothing extravagant was left, even at this early hour, but all of it had been appropriately decorated. She had them boxed up and asked them to hold it for a short time while she did other shopping.

She found a small all night convenience store and purchased a substantial lock for Mouse. Then, passing a chocolate shop, also open early for the occasion, she decided to buy something for herself and Vincent. Now what would he like, she wondered. Nothing too sweet, perhaps.

She looked at the offerings and decided to get a selection of fruit and nut-filled bonbons in dark chocolate. Then she spotted a small chocolate treasure chest and had it filled with her purchases. That would give Vincent a chuckle, she thought. Nothing would be wasted. She had it wrapped up in Halloween paper and carried it back to the bakery to pick up her other package. Then she took a cab back to her apartment. She went up, checked to see if there were any more messages, closed the patio door, picked up her bag of clothing, then went straight down to the storage room, which was deserted, and threw her bag down the ladder. Then she clambered carefully down with one box, then the other. Vincent had not appeared, so he must be still busy at his task.

She had missed breakfast, so she hoped something was left. Then it would be time to help with the pretzels. She went to Vincent's chamber first, and carefully placed the chocolate package on his table. She scribbled a note that said "*For later, love*", and put it on top of them. She carried the box and padlock into the dining room and placed them under a chair next to Father. He waved at her, but said nothing.

There seemed to be a lot of milling around. Catherine could not figure out what was going on, except that her nose told her there was food - and plenty of it. It seemed that breakfast had become brunch, for which she was grateful. No doubt the cleanup had delayed everything.

She made her way to the buffet table, a feature that William always provided on busy holidays, and loaded up a plate with sausages, bacon, home fries, a some sliced tomato and a bran muffin. She grabbed a mug, filled it with coffee, then returned to the chair next to Father's.

"What on earth is going on?" she asked him, after she had demolished a good portion of her plate's contents in a couple of bites, and taken a hearty swig of coffee.

Father looked at her and smiled. He looked replete and mellow. "William is trying to organize a pretzel-making team. Everyone wants to be involved and he has 'too many hands'. I fear there will be an explosion very soon."

He was correct. Hardly had the words left his mouth when there was a loud bellow.

"OUT! EVERYONE OUT OF MY KITCHEN!"

This was followed by a rush of abashed tunnel residents of all ages back into the dining hall. The adults muttered grimly, but everyone sat down at a table and waited. The children merely looked intently at the kitchen doorway. They knew Williams bluster was worse than his bite.

William emerged from his kitchen and regarded his audience with barely suppressed – but mock rage.

"I know you all want to help, but this can't work. Find a way to give me just 10 helpers and let them sit quietly over there, against the wall. I have work spaces all ready to go. The pretzel dough is rising nicely, thank you, and when it's time to form it, I'll let you know. It needs about another half hour. So have some breakfast, if you haven't already, or another cup of tea or coffee if you have."

William went back into the kitchen.

Everyone took up his offer and went to the buffet table. Catherine wondered where Vincent was, then felt him grow near. He entered with Kanin, Mouse, Cullen and Matthew, all of them looking a little tired and dusty. They all went silently to the buffet and loaded up plates. Vincent sat next to Catherine and immediately started eating. Father addressed his son.

“Good morning, Vincent. What on earth have you men been doing – and on Halloween yet?”

Vincent looked up, swallowed quickly and spoke quietly.

“Mouse found a deep cave with ... heavy items. We emptied it Father, and put it all in the back of the new storage room we carved out last week, two levels down.”

Father’s astonishment was now evident.

“Exactly what do you mean by ‘heavy items’, Vincent? I need to know so I can add them to our inventory list.”

Vincent sighed. “I meant exactly what I said, Father. Mouse had found and retrieved a very large cage. I saw it in his chamber. He told me there were more items in a cave, so I gathered a team and we emptied it. There were coils of thick rope and heavy chain, shackles, huge metal spikes ... and other things. I suspect they were Paracelsus’.

“What was it for - a torture chamber?” Father sputtered, without thinking.

“It seemed to be a storage place for such ... things. They were heavy and awkward and no one has been there for a long time. It was very dusty. Some of the rope and chain can be used to fix the Whispering Gallery bridge, some can be pounded into something more ... um ... utilitarian.”

“And you locked it all into the storage room?”

“Yes, even for Halloween, the items are too ... disturbing. I didn’t want the children to see them.”

“Good thinking, Vincent.” Father sighed. “And has Mouse secured Arthur properly?”

“Did, Father,” Mouse replied through a mouthful of potato.

Catherine reached into a pocket and extracted the padlock. She handed it to Mouse, whose eyes lit up and he smiled at her.

“New lock ...with key. Thank you, Catherine. Others too big.”

“Others?” Father gulped, wondering what more he hadn’t heard about this unscheduled excursion.

“Yes, Father,” Vincent reported, his voice casual, after a pause to chew another large bite of food. “They are much too large for normal use. Perhaps we can use them on some of the threshold gates as a distraction. They all have keys. I locked the storage room with one.”

He reached into his cloak and pulled out a key that was easily the length of his hand, and almost as wide at the business end. He handed it to Father, who quickly put it on the table in front of him and stared at it.

“Where on earth would anyone get something like this?” he asked, to no one in particular.

“Perhaps in an antique store,” Catherine suggested. “It might be a reproduction. There are still places who can make this kind of thing for medieval fairs and such.”

She could tell this was no plaything, though. It was probably as heavy as it looked. The thing made her cringe, and she was glad she couldn’t see the lock it belonged to.

There was a stolid silence around the table, which had also infected many others. Catherine suddenly found her appetite had virtually disappeared. She looked at her plate and forced herself to continue, to appear as if she wasn’t disturbed, although she knew she would not fool Vincent. She had no doubt that whatever plans had been conceived for the cave items, Vincent would have been the victim. She looked at him.

Vincent studiously ignored her and concentrated on his food. He and the others were unusually quiet and ate with deliberate effort. No one looked up from their plates. Father seemed at a loss for words as well. That thought would have made her smile under different circumstances.

Well Chandler, she berated herself, surely you can do or say something cheerful. Then she remembered the shopping she had done earlier. Looking around the table, she cleared her throat, which had become dry. She took a quick sip of coffee.

"I think we need something special to tide us over until the pretzels are ready. I have just the thing."

She reached under the table and brought out the box, opened it and passed it around.

The men began to smile and Vincent grabbed a large orange pumpkin shaped cookie and took a huge bite of it. Mouse took a large purple one, shaped like a spook, and laughed.

"Ugly, but tastes good," he remarked.

There was some laughter at that, and the mood broke. Father took a more modest bat-shaped cookie, and Catherine grabbed two, deciding that William had better have one before they disappeared. She got up to hand it to him in the kitchen, just as he came out. She handed him the cookie and he nodded his thanks, then bellowed, "WHERE'S THE PRETZEL TEAM?"

Father nearly jumped out of his chair, his back being to the kitchen door, and covered it by rising to his feet. He looked around the hall, where eager faces awaited their fate.

Sighing heavily, he quickly named three men, three women and four children. The rest groaned in disappointment, but quieted when Father raised his hand for silence.

"This may not be completely democratic, but it's best. The rest of you have jobs to do in the Great Hall and you can get the children to help you decorate.

"I'll supply you with all the lemonade and pretzel ends you can handle," William offered.

"And there are even a few remaining cookies," Father added. "Mary and Rebecca will help the children find Halloween costumes in Annabelle's sewing room."

There were whoops of joy at that and the both the box of cookies and the dining hall emptied quickly.

Catherine looked at Vincent. "Pretzel ends?" she giggled.

Vincent looked puzzled.

"What is so funny," he asked, when it seemed she wasn't going to elaborate.

Father chuckled too. "I think that was William's little joke, Vincent. There are no leftover bits when making pretzels. They're rolled out into ropes and twisted."

"I see," Vincent responded with a wry grin.

Vincent, Catherine and Father stood up to leave.

"And what you two planning now?" Father asked.

"I must have a bath," Vincent declared.

"And I could use one too," Catherine stated. "I was roused out of bed early and didn't have time for a good soak."

"I think I need a rest," Father confessed. "I think we'll all need one by early afternoon. There are no work parties scheduled. I'll tell Pascal to put out the word that once the Great Hall is ready and the pretzels made, everyone can relax until supper time."

"Except William," Vincent pointed out.

"I'm sure William has a plan that allows him some rest time too," Father said. "Good day, children."

"Thank you, Father," Catherine told him, giving him a hug and then following Vincent back to his chamber. They wasted no time getting into the bathing chamber they shared with Father. Once sunk into the

warm water, they both sighed. Vincent closed his eyes. Catherine was too wound up to do that, so she washed her hair and body before settling next to him.

He sighed and made a sluggish effort to start washing.

“Let me wash your hair, Vincent,” she suggested.

He meekly sat on the bath step so she could reach his head and closed his eyes as she soaped and rinsed his hair. After that, he washed himself and then lay back on the sloped side of the pool, again closing his eyes.

They lay there for some time, relaxed. They heard the announcement about the afternoon rest and Vincent stirred and looked at Catherine.

“I need a nap, Catherine.”

“May I join you?” she asked.

“If you understand that I must have an hour or two of sleep.”

Catherine smiled. It was usually he who disturbed their sleep, not she - and usually for one reason.

“As you wish,” she said, playing the game. She knew he knew she wasn’t fooled. He grinned at her.

“I promise to let you sleep too,” he said, picking up on her humour.

“That’s only fair,” she said, kissing him on his furry nose.

They dried and padded back into the Vincent’s chamber. He pulled down the rug, giving a silent prayer that there would be no interruptions to their nap, and then joined Catherine in bed. He was asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow. Catherine was close behind him.

When they woke up in mid-afternoon, the tunnels were silent. Feeling energized, they made quiet love and then napped for another hour. When they awakened, it was to find the rug pushed into the room by something. Vincent lifted the carpet to find a large cardboard box containing their costumes and all the accessories. He lifted it onto his table and sat down in his chair, yawning hugely. Catherine sat on his lap and gave a smaller, but no less intense yawn.

“When is supper today?” she asked at last.

“In about an hour, I believe,” he answered. “The children will want to model their costumes, so we must go to the dining chamber about half an hour early.”

“No need for us to dress up yet, I hope?”

“No, it won’t be dark until after 7:00 pm. Where are we going, by the way?”

“Jenny gave me an idea. The library has a special Halloween display, which will open the Astor Hall from 7:00 pm until midnight. They say there will be surprises for visitors. Costumes are encouraged. It’s free and I think you’ll find it interesting.”

“And if we see Jenny?”

“If we keep to ourselves, she’ll probably miss us. There’ll be lots of other couples there, I’m sure. If I see her with fire in her eye heading our way, we’ll make a fast retreat.”

Vincent laughed. “Won’t that make us obvious?”

“I don’t think so. We can dive behind ... something.”

“Such subterfuge, just to avoid a friend.”

“You don’t know Jenny, Vincent. She’ll hold onto you until she has wheedled out every secret you ever forgot. Some day she will have to meet you for real, when all her questions will be answered. But not like this, not in public.”

They got dressed in casual clothes, and Catherine told Vincent more about Astor Hall.

“It’s just beautiful. This might be the only time you’ll be able to see it. Of course the whole library is

magnificent, but the hall is ... cathedral like. “

“I know something of its history. It was built on the site of the former Croton Reservoir,” Vincent remarked. “That was a massive above ground structure, like a huge fort. People could walk around the top. I have a postcard ... somewhere.”

“I believe some of the old walls have been incorporated into the Library foundation,” Catherine remarked, trying to remember what she had read in school - and hadn’t thought about since.

“New York’s water today comes from reservoirs outside the city, but it reaches your world via ours, via large water pipes some distance above us, above the subway tunnels.” Vincent remarked.

“There is so much fascinating history in this city,” Catherine sighed. “I’m hoping tonight will show us some of the spookier bits.”

“We should go to the dining chamber now,” Vincent remarked, as the announcement came over the pipes. “I suspect the children are eager to show off their costumes and can’t wait any longer.”

Catherine laughed and they went arm in arm down the tunnels, hearing the noise level increase as they got closer to their destination. Vincent winced as a particularly shrill voice broke through the rest.

“That sounded like Samantha,” Catherine remarked.

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”

The entered the dining chamber to find chaos. Costumed children were running around and the adults were trying to get them to settle down, without much luck. Father was not in evidence.

Vincent shoved his way to the front of the hall, where Father always sat and looked around.

“QUIET!” he roared, for the second time that day. The noise abruptly dropped, then died away completely.

“Now, everyone please sit down and behave like civilized beings,” he ordered. “Where’s Father?”

William emerged from the kitchen.

“He’s in the hospital chamber attending to Mouse. He tripped over something in his chamber and injured his arm. He should be here any time.”

Vincent sighed. “And Arthur?”

“Still caged, last I heard,” William rumbled.

“We will wait for Father and Mouse,” Vincent announced. “Will all the children who want to show off their costumes, please line up at the back, in order of size – smallest first.”

There was a rush to the back of the hall and some scuffling while the children sorted themselves out. In the course of that, Father and Mouse entered the hall and sat in seats next to Vincent. Mouse had his arm in a cast, and looked more than a little contrite.

“He needs to tidy up his chamber,” was Father’s remark at Vincent’s questioning look.

“The children look ready to begin,” Vincent told him. Father sighed and stood up, raising his hand for quiet.

“Children, please walk slowly around the outside of the hall, five seconds apart. We want to see you all, and we don’t want to see any pushing.”

There was a loud protest from Samantha, but she said nothing intelligible and waited her turn.

The children paraded around the hall, displaying a range of costume that quite astounded Catherine, knowing as she did that they were all made from previous years costumes and materials Annabelle had on hand. There were pirates, witches, clowns, bums – and a lot of small ghosts, their identities hidden under a sheet with just two eye holes. The sheets were clearly headed for the rag heap, but that only made them more authentic-looking. She laughed at seeing flowered and striped ghosts, and she heard Vincent chuckle as well.

Samantha, when she finally appeared as one of the taller and last children, was something between a ghost and a bowling pin. The costume was all white, and tightened under her neck, and she had a great deal of padding on her lower part, no arms, but balloon-like legs. Her head had two eye holes with a fan of black broom bristles under them.

Now what did that remind her of? Catherine wracked her brain for some time and suddenly dredged up a name.

“A Shmoo!” she said triumphantly.

Vincent looked at her and laughed.

“I fear so, and now I understand why she was upset. With no arms, she can’t pick up or carry anything, or even eat like a human being. I don’t think she realized the disadvantages when she chose the costume.”

They watched Samantha go by, noticing that she had a long zipper down the back of the costume.

“I’m guessing someone will have to let her out to eat,” Catherine remarked, wondering what disadvantages they would discover in their own costumes. There was always something that was not considered. Well, they would work it out whatever it was.

Dinner was over quickly, as several of the adults had plans for the night. They too wanted to go above and mingle with the crowds in Bryant Park. Catherine didn’t know what would be going on there, but it was next to the library, which was more important.

“It will be getting dark soon, Catherine,” Vincent remarked, as if he’d read her mind. “It’s too early for your library show, but we can soon walk around Bryant Park.”

“Yes, let’s do that,” Catherine agreed.

They returned to Vincent’s chamber and he had to decide what to wear under this costume.

“It will be chilly, but there’s no rain in the forecast,” Catherine told him, as she put on the tights and thermal shirt.

Vincent regarded her and grinned. “Halloween colours,” was his comment.

Catherine gave him a wry look. “Just for tonight,” she promised.

Vincent rooted through a drawer in his wardrobe. He emerged with a pair of thin burgundy-coloured long johns and put them on. He decided his usual long sleeved undershirt would suffice.

“Wow, I haven’t anything in that colour since the 60s,” she remarked. “Sexy!”

“I think they will be adequate,” he replied, choosing not to reply to the compliment. “I may be warm, but I have nothing thinner and I cannot go naked under this.”

“Certainly not!” Catherine agreed. “I don’t want to be distracted by that thought.”

Vincent chuckled.

They clambered into their costumes and the chain belt was carefully attached, then the accessories clipped to it.

They pulled on their head pieces, then Catherine gave Vincent a final costume item, from a dark bag in the box.

He looked at them and laughed.

“Sunglasses, Catherine? At night? Are we going to be able to see?”

“Yes, I think so, Vincent. These look dark, but they’re polarized, so will be less dark in low light. As long as the light is good, as it will be where there are people, these should be fine ... I think. I attached a stretch band to each – people who jog use them – so they’ll stay on over our headpiece, since our ears are covered.”

"I see," was Vincent's only remark, and Catherine giggled when he put them on.

Vincent rooted behind his table and handed Catherine his contribution to their costume, a cartoon fixed to cardboard, a length of string through one corner.

"Oh, perfect," she laughed. "Who's the artist?"

"Annabelle. She also has a unique sense of humour," he remarked, pointing at the accessories worn by the cartoon figure.

Catherine giggled. "A woman of exceptional talent."

"Yes," Vincent agreed, his voice muffled inside the costume.

We must find someone to take our photo, Catherine thought, but didn't say aloud, for fear of Vincent refusing. She was carrying a fanny pack with some money around her waist, accessible only because her costume was two piece. There would be photographers with Polaroid cameras somewhere, she was sure.

"Just one more thing," Catherine said. She hauled out a brush from her suitcase and began brushing Vincent's costume. When the result was to her satisfaction, she gave the brush to Vincent to do the same for her. He did so, carefully, then stood back to see the result. Catherine obligingly turned around for him.

"If I look like you, then we are a very handsome couple," he remarked at last.

Finally, they both put their hands through the sleeve ends that would hide their hands.

They had one more duty, to see Father, who days ago expressed an interest in seeing their costumes before they left to go above.

Their entrance to his chamber created a sensation. Several other people were already there, also in costume. There were hoots of laughter as Vincent and Catherine entered and they in turn laughed at some of the other costumes. No one would be recognizable outside the tunnels. The masks were all full-face, and some were grotesque. Kanin wore one that looked like a very old, very dissolute man. Catherine recognized him by his voice. Olivia - at least she thought it was she - had on a ragged Snow White-type costume and an adapted Disney mask that made the character look like an ancient crone.

Mary and Rebecca were only moderately costumed and the children were gathered around them on the floor, giggling and waiting impatiently.

Father looked around at the assemblage and waved his arms for silence.

"Friends, I think you all look the part for this special night of the year. May you all enjoy the thinning of the walls. I shall have a nap until it's time for our adult party."

With that he sat down and waved goodbye to them as they took their leave.

Vincent and Catherine were not slow to leave. They made a side trip to the kitchen to pick up their pretzels from William. They thanked him and attached them to their belts.

"Why do you suppose Father wanted to see us all?" Catherine asked as they left the kitchen. "Just to give us his blessing?"

"No, I suspect the reason is more practical. He wants to know who is going out and as what, just in case there are problems later. He says he will nap, but I know he will not - not until all of us are safely back home."

"Shall we go up now?" Catherine asked.

"I believe it is dark enough," Vincent replied, "although I am not afraid of the light tonight. I'm sure there will be many others out, even now. And in a short while, we can go to the library."

"I can't wait. How do we get to Bryant Park? Is there a secret exit there?"

"Yes. It was created long ago by Paracelsus. He liked to go to the Library to do researches and hated

to walk in crowds. You'll see."

The walked along a lot of tunnels, which gradually became more obviously maintained and well-lit, finally reaching one that was lined with bricks. It sloped gradually upward and reached a small room.

"This was where equipment to maintain the reservoir was kept," Vincent explained. "It did not need much, so there was not much use for it. The City crews sometimes come in this way to access the water conduits. There's an entrance on the far wall. We will use a hidden one."

He led her to a corner and pushed on a brick. A very long flight of steep arrow steps greeted her. Vincent reached into a slot in the wall and pulled out a flashlight.

"We must be careful here, Catherine. A fall could be disastrous."

The journey seemed endless. Catherine couldn't understand why there were so many steps, and then remembered some history. The Library had expanded in the early 80s, building more room for the their collection stacks by excavating under Bryant Park.

Finally they reached the top. Vincent tapped on a brick, which slid back revealing a small slot. He looked out, and then lifted Catherine up to see. She realized she was looking out over a huge expanse of steps and a wall of massive verticle marble slabs and windows. This had to be the side of the Library! She realized they were behind the Bryant Memorial. There was no one in sight and the Library itself was in darkness, since the focus tonight was on the main entrance opening into Astor Hall.

"Holy Cow!" she exclaimed.

Vincent nodded. He put the flashlight into a convenient slot in the wall, then pushed on an ancient metal spike inset into the wall. A section swung out noiselessly and he beckoned to Catherine.

"Quickly," he urged. They exited and Vincent pushed the door back in place. They waited until they could see no one nearby and then casually moved around to the front of the memorial, as if they were tourists, looking up at the massive structure.

The park lawn was lit with hanging lanterns and a lot of people were milling around the various booths. Vincent and Catherine strolled, hand in hand, saying nothing, waiting for the right time to go into the library. They could see there was a line-up, so decided to wait until everyone was in before going in themselves.

Jenny arrived at the Library, practically falling in the door. She wanted to have lots of time to scope out the people attending.

She couldn't be sure if Cathy had checked her phone messages, but she had a feeling this was the kind of event she and her mysterious boyfriend would like. Although Cathy had said next to nothing about him, Jenny had gained the impression he was a lover of classical music and good literature. She had seen the name Vincent under a brief salutation in the front of a book of Shakespeare's Sonnets in Cathy's apartment. She guessed this was her friend's mystery man.

And tonight was her chance to meet him - if they showed up, and if she could recognize them.

Looking around her, Jenny realized that she would have to browse the exhibits in a logical fashion in order to be sure of seeing all the guests. The Hall was sectioned off, each area between pillars showing a different aspect of New York's supernatural history. She hadn't realized there would be so many!

Never mind, Jenny, she told herself. This is what you wanted to do tonight instead of sitting at home and watching horror movies on TV - or worse, going to some god-awful costume party and sweating it out until it was possible to escape.

She loved a mystery and Cathy was becoming more of one all the time. Where on earth was she nights? She hardly ever answered her phone anymore. Was she even living in her apartment?

Jenny kept her eyes sharply on the lookout for a small woman. She herself was dressed in something that would make her unrecognizable, even to her own mother. That, she had decided, was necessary if she was to spot Cathy and her escort before they saw her. The polar bear costume might get hot, but luckily it was cool and airy in the hall. She was betting the number of people would change that before the end of the evening, though.

Should she wait near the front door for the new arrivals, or wait near the end to see who completed the round? She didn't want to miss the excitement herself, so she compromised and decided to examine the displays counter-clockwise, rationalizing that most would do it the more traditional way. No one had completed the round yet, so she might just meet the couple she sought.

She began to browse the exhibits, trying not to look too obviously at any couple who might fit the bill. She guessed Cathy's boyfriend was quite large - although she could not say why. Just a feeling she had. Unfortunately, there seemed to be quite a few couples with marked height differences. She sighed and continued on.

Vincent and Catherine strolled up past the stone lions, Patience and Fortitude, then through the massive main entrance doorway. Vincent tried not to gasp as he took in the scale of Astor Hall. He had seen pictures, of course, but the reality was so much more impressive.

Catherine kept hold of his hand, thereby confirming that she wanted him by her side and close to her. He agreed with that wholeheartedly. He did not want them to get separated. There were a surprising number of people already, although the space was more than large enough to accommodate a great many more.

Catherine pulled him over to the first of the exhibits, a large display planted in a enormous arched doorway between two pillars. He was astonished at the scale of the hall.

This section was titled "Haunted Histories" and outlined some of the notorious structures with gruesome pasts.

Vincent realized he couldn't see well with the sunglasses on, and used his free hand to lift them slightly. Catherine looked up at him and nodded, doing the same. Well, she had wondered where the flaw in their costumes was, and this was it. The exhibits were lit, but not extravagantly. After all, she guessed, they wanted to maintain the mood. She heard small recorded spooky sounds coming from behind the exhibit, and tightened her hand on Vincent's, trying not to laugh. He caught her humour and replied with a tightening of his own hand.

Vincent found himself fascinated with the display. He had never heard of most of these places. There was mention of myths concerning Captain Kidd's treasure, reputedly buried somewhere under New York, perhaps even under the Statue of Liberty. That almost made him laugh. But the story would thrill the children, so he read that section with interest.

Catherine meanwhile, although interested in the display, was more concerned about keeping an eye out for Jenny, whom she was sure was looking for them. She wondered if she would even recognize her friend. If Jenny was on the lookout for them, they were at a disadvantage. There were lots of couples, but many could be eliminated because of age, size, or because their identities were not completely obscured. A single person would be more mobile. She sighed and tried to focus on the exhibit.

Gradually, they moved around, following the general flow of traffic, although occasionally having to steer around those going in the opposite direction. Catherine had not noticed anyone who seemed to be searching, so far, and began to relax a little. Perhaps Jenny had not come after all.

Jenny, moving slowly and enjoying the displays, looking carefully but not too obviously at every couple within range, while keeping her head turned to one photo or another. Her mask allowed her to use her peripheral vision, for which she was grateful. So far, she had seen no couple who completely met her specifications.

Then, two exhibits away, she caught a glimpse of two light-coloured costumes, which slid almost ghost-like through the crowd. She took a better look when she moved to the next exhibit in the series. Yes, that was probably a small woman and a quite large man. Something told her this was her target couple. What should she do now? She watched the pair, and although they seemed as interested in the exhibits as everyone else, there was a stiffness about them. They were nervous! Yet, they were as close as they could be, moving together at all times, holding hands. That was affection, Jenny decided. No question about it. No costume could disguise that!

Jenny suddenly found herself questioning her tactics. This was Halloween. She had no right to impose herself on anyone, least of all her best friend. And if Cathy was so very concerned about anyone meeting her boyfriend, there had to be a good reason. Jenny now feared that her curiosity could lose her that friend.

Unsure, perhaps for the first time, Jenny decided to pretend indifference - or at least be absolutely sure of their identity. She needed time to think.

She got closer to the couple and soon arrived at the same exhibit, albeit with no few other people. It was called Mysteries and Magicians. How appropriate, she thought. She edged closer, wanting to hear them speak, but they did not. Their hands were invisible too, she noticed, not that she would necessarily have been able to spot Cathy by her hands!

Then they turned to look at a side panel, and Jenny spotted the cartoon hanging from the back of their belts. She stifled a snort and her eyes began to water as she tried not to laugh. Whoever that was, they certainly had a sense of humour! At least she now knew what their costumes were supposed to be.

Her internal debate raged on, though. Should she confront the couple, who were obviously enjoying the exhibit?

Jenny watched them, out of the corner of her eyes, and noticed that the taller figure moved with the grace of a big cat. Their costumes hid them completely, although she did notice they had to raise their sunglasses to read the descriptive text. That made her grin behind her mask. She couldn't see their eyes, though, because the angle was wrong. Should she pretend to be a long lost cousin?

The couple moved on and Jenny saw the smaller one rub against the hip of the larger, deliberately, and wondered if she had been spotted. Just in case, and out of sheer indecision, she turned away and continued on to the next exhibit.

She just couldn't do it! Their body language said they were lovers. She had no right to spoil their evening in public, which their nervousness indicated was not a usual thing for them.

Having let the opportunity lapse, Jenny immediately felt more relaxed - which was a sign that her conscience agreed with her. The sighting made her feel better, though. If this was Vincent and Cathy, their relationship was special. Cathy had not been that close to Elliot, or god forbid that insect Tom - or that nutcase Steven. This one seemed to be for keeps. Had to be at least three years - a record for Cathy!

She felt tension leave her at that thought. She had been worried, although she knew, deep down, that Cathy's reasons for being mysterious would be good ones. She was sure it was because of Vincent, not because she enjoyed secrets. The why of it was still a question. The figure inside that suit looked perfectly formed, grandly so. So it must be something else. Maybe his face was scarred or something.

Or hell, who knew?

Very well, she would allow Cathy her mystery - for now. Someday, this would have to change, though. Jenny decided she must have lunch with Cathy in a few days. She would find out something. She didn't absolutely have to know now. Cathy was a bad liar and didn't even try to do so face to face. Over the phone, well, that would not happen if she had anything to say about it. Patience, she told herself, like the lion statue. All in good time!

Vincent and Catherine roamed the exhibits, Catherine keeping a weather eye out for Jenny. When they reached the Mysteries and Magicians one, her sixth sense tingled and someone in a polar bear costume caught her eye. At least they weren't the only ones in fur coats, she told herself, amused.

The polar bear didn't make any obvious moves towards them and did not seem interested in anything but the exhibit, but Catherine watched surreptitiously. It would be just like Jenny to do the tour in reverse. Had she spotted them as likely candidates?

She held her breath while they all, with many others, browsed the photos and read the text. She noticed that the polar bear had a slight stiffness to her right leg, and knew her fear was confirmed. It had to be Jenny! She had broken a leg badly during an uninhibited celebration after college graduation. She had needed months of recuperation. She now swore that the forced inactivity had got her interested in books and publishing. She had healed well, but her walks was distinctive, at least to Catherine, who had always been able to identify people by their gait. She knew she would recognize Vincent no matter what he wore, or how distant he was.

Now she tensed a little, expecting at any moment to hear Jenny address them. When she didn't and passed by them, Catherine bumped Vincent lightly in the hip and they moved onto the next exhibit. Jenny didn't follow them and a glance showed her moving onto the next display, increasing the distance between them.

Catherine let out a breath she had not realized she was holding. Vincent tightened his grip slightly on her hand and looked at her. She shook her head and turned to examine the display.

She had no idea why Jenny had not confronted them, but was incredibly grateful for the reprieve. She was sure Jenny would invite her to lunch soon and put the question to her. She would not be able to lie, so would confirm her friend's suspicion. That would satisfy her, at least for a time. She had been made to understand that Catherine could not reveal some information. Hopefully, she had been satisfied that Catherine's love life was not dangerous. If this excursion accomplished nothing else, that alone was worth it. Jenny was observant. She would see far more than most people.

Suddenly, Catherine did not care if they stayed any longer. She wanted to complete their tour, but had a burning desire to get back below and perhaps enjoy some quiet time with Vincent before the Great Hall party. And just in case Jenny changed her mind - if she spotted them again.

Vincent turned to her, sensing her need to go, and nodded. They had only one more exhibit to see and they did so, not hurrying, but now clear on what they were doing next.

They were again near the entrance to the Hall and began making their way through a heavy crowd. Everyone seemed to be milling around. The centre of the Hall seemed to have something of interest, and Vincent, who could see over heads, tugged Catherine in that direction, curiosity getting the better of him.

Catherine followed, not reluctantly, having also noticed that something was happening there. There were occasional flashes and laughter coming from that direction.

When they managed to reach the front of the crowd, they saw a line of men in black costumes with florescent skeletons painted on them, very effectively spooky in the low light. They each had Polaroids

and were taking photos of the patrons, handing them the result and also giving out something.

Catherine and Vincent bowed before the man closest to them and he nodded and his camera flashed. He waited it for it to emerge, then waved it around a bit to dry it, before handing it to them with a bow. Catherine was glad they were wearing sunglasses, but even they had not prevented her from seeing pink dots in front of her eyes.

The man handed them each a key chain with the NY Public Library's lion logo on one side and a photo of one the stone lions on the other. Patience or Fortitude, Catherine wondered looking at the latter side.

Catherine almost laughed then, and felt Vincent's humour. If they only knew, she mused happily. What a wonderful end to the evening! Nothing could beat this, she decided. She slipped the photo under her costume and into her fanny pack, and Vincent handed her his key chain, so those went in too.

They left quietly and without apparent hurry. Catherine didn't see the polar bear anywhere, but in the crush of people, that didn't surprise her. She sighed with relief as they reached the bottom of the steps. Once back in Bryant Park, they wandered a little, enjoying the cool air. The Hall had been getting stuffy, for all its size. The moon hung low over the skyscrapers of Manhattan. There were not many people in the park now.

They made their way back to the memorial and were relieved to see that no one was around. They swiftly walked behind the structure and Vincent pressed a stone above his head. Catherine gave one last glance at the Library before they slid into the opening and closed it behind them.

Vincent grabbed the small flashlight and they carefully negotiated the steep steps, their head pieces pushed back and Catherine sliding her hand along the wall for comfort. Both let out a large sigh of relief when they reached the bottom. Catherine was very glad she could go into the Library the normal way. She wondered if anyone ever used this exit anymore. It seemed too dangerous for casual use. She looked at Vincent and smiled at him.

Vincent pulled her close to him and she tilted her head up for a kiss. When they finally came up for air, it was Vincent who spoke first.

"Thank you Catherine. This has been a most delightful evening."

"Oh, Vincent, you're very welcome. I had fun too ..."

"Did you? You seemed preoccupied."

"I was watching for Jenny, I admit, but I did find the exhibits interesting."

"I take it you spotted her?"

"Yes, but she didn't do anything! I wonder why? Most unusual."

"Perhaps she decided discretion was the better part of ... whatever," Vincent suggested.

"I have to assume so. I'm sure I'll hear more about it when we next have lunch together," Catherine remarked. "Nothing to worry about, I think. We should get back."

Vincent took her hand again and led her back to the home tunnels. There was almost total silence as they approached, except for the occasional message on the pipes. Vincent picked up a rock to announce their return, and received a confirmation.

Of course, the children would be in bed, Catherine realized. It must be almost 10 pm.

They entered Vincent's chamber and he busied himself feeding the brazier and lighting the Tiffany lamp above his table.

"Do we need to wear these to the party?" Catherine asked.

"We don't have to, but I would like to," Vincent replied. He had enjoyed the reaction to their costumes in Father's chamber. Laughter at his expense was rare. "Perhaps we can just hang the sunglasses from our belts, though. I would like to be able to see properly."

Catherine laughed. "I agree. So much for polarization!"

"I would like some tea and a pretzel or two," Vincent remarked, removing his from the belt. "I'll get the tea.

Catherine removed her pretzels too and took a bite while she waited. Vincent returned to find she had only one left. He uncovered a plate on the tray to reveal a stack of them.

"Good thing William has more than enough," he commented.

"They're delicious," she remarked, biting into another.

"Better save some appetite for the party food," Vincent reminded her.

They sat in comfortable silence, eating pretzels and drinking tea, until a message over the pipes made Vincent sit up.

"The party begins in about 15 minutes," he reported.

"Let's add the key chain charm to our belts," Catherine suggested, extracting them from her fanny pack, which she left on the table. She wouldn't need it.

"What about this?" she asked, showing him the photo.

"We need a special frame for this. I'll ask Cullen tomorrow."

"Just one more thing," Catherine told him, and grabbed the brush. She carefully brushed him down, and he did the same for her. She noticed he was not completely oblivious to her ministrations. She sighed.

"Later, Catherine," Vincent told her primly.

Catherine gave him a hot look and remarked, "I'll hold you to that."

Vincent winced at the allusion, but said nothing. They put up their head pieces and made their way down to the Great Hall via the easier route, through the kitchen, which meant that the great doors did not need to be opened. The stairway was longer and more narrow, but it had a railing and there was no wind to muss their hairdos, Catherine thought gratefully.

They arrived to a room already well-filled and noisy - or it was. The sudden silence made her stop and Vincent stopped with her. All faces were turned in their direction and a round of applause went up.

Playing to the crowd, Vincent took Catherine's arm and they did a pirouette, stopping so that their backsides could be seen.

There were loud guffaws and much noise as those in the back moved to see what was so funny. The couple obligingly remained in place.

When they turned, Father had hobbled over to them. "I think you need a quiet place after all that," he commented. "Come and tell me about your evening."

The two lovers followed him to a sitting area and sat down, one on each side of Father.

"So tell me," he urged.

Vincent gave him an abbreviated description of the displays, omitting any mention of Jenny, but showed him the key chain.

Father chuckled at the latter.

"If they but knew," he remarked, smiling.

"That's exactly what I said," Catherine told him.

"It has been a great many years since I was in that library," Father said wistfully. "I always love a great library. The atmosphere is like nowhere else, unless it's a great cathedral. Too bad you couldn't see the stacks, Vincent."

"The rest of the library was closed, but it was worth everything to see Astor Hall," Vincent remarked. "It was stupendous. Incredible."

“Yes. I fear such monumental projects are a thing of the long ago past. There is neither the vision nor the money now for such classically-styled public buildings.”

“And those that remain are not guaranteed a long future,” Catherine remarked.

“In some ways, that is what I love about our world,” Father went on. “It’s bedrock, unchanging, eternal. We humans make scratches in it, carving out chambers, tunnels, conduits, subways. But what is here, in the deep regions, is here forever. The odd flood or cave-in is just part of the evolution. The rock and water will always be here, long after we are all gone and the world above and its works have turned to dust.”

“You’re waxing depressingly philosophical tonight, Father,” Vincent remarked.

“I suppose so.”

“Did the children enjoy themselves,” Catherine asked, to change the subject.

“Indeed,” Father replied. “They came back loaded with fruit and even brought some special treats for Mouse, who I commanded to remain here. Trouble seems to pinpoint that boy.”

Catherine chuckled. “I hope he wasn’t too upset.”

“Not for long. He supervised the set up of his favourite decorations, and William has him manning the beer keg, put on a table so he can use one hand. He prefers to drink lemonade, so the beer is quite safe.”

“I think I’d like some of that,” Vincent remarked.

“Me too,” Catherine said.

“Please bring us all a mug,” Father requested, and Vincent strode off.

“Your costumes are wonderful,” Father commented, smiling at Catherine. “Although seeing only your eyes is a little disconcerting.”

“And a bit awkward,” Catherine remarked, pulling off the head piece. “Can’t eat or drink with that on!”

She gazed around the hall, suddenly hearing music start and some of the crowd move to the sides to allow dancing. She wanted to get Vincent out there before the end. She got so little opportunity to dance with him. There simply weren’t enough festivities below - and, she had to admit, there simply never could be enough!

Vincent returned with their mugs and they all swigged gratefully. Vincent virtually inhaled his and Catherine wasn’t far behind. She wanted to finish and dance.

Vincent looked at her and caught the desire.

“Would you care to dance, Catherine?”

“Thought you would never ask,” she smiled at him.

Father watched them head to the dance floor and sighed. His son had changed so much since finding Catherine. How had Vincent managed to grow into such a loving man, given the lack of the most important love for a good part of his adult life? Father knew himself partly to blame for that, but Vincent had always found his own way, and love was no exception. No one was happier than he that his son had found a soul mate, beyond all hope. Fate moved in mysterious ways, he decided. He finished his beer, set down his glass and rose to make his way around the perimeter. He wanted to talk to Kanin. Something nagged at him about those ... things ... Mouse had found.

He reached the other end of the hall and found Kanin, Matthew and Cullen sitting together, deep in discussion. It did not look like it was giving them any pleasure. He sat down next to Kanin and waited. All three men looked at him and then at each other.

“Let me guess,” Father said. “There’s something I haven’t been told.”

Kanin flushed a little. “Vincent didn’t want us to tell you.”

"You might as well tell me now I know there *is* something else."

Cullen looked at Kanin, nodded, then cleared his throat.

"It's just that the stuff was not all ...um ... unused. In fact, it wasn't even ... um ... empty."

Father started and stared at the three men, one after the other.

"Tell me," he said, his voice suddenly hoarse.

"There was a set of manacles attached to one wall, in the back, around a corner. Someone was attached to them, a skeleton. Not much else was left."

"Who?"

"The clothes ... underclothes, that is ... were extra large. We think they ... um ... he ... was Lou. Um ... and there was no head."

Father looked down at the table and gulped. The conclusion was inescapable. Paracelsus had impersonated Lou, taken his clothes and chained him in that dreadful place. No one had thought to wonder why Paracelsus had chosen Lou. Lou had disappeared, but he did go on holidays sometimes. Usually, he left a note taped to his shop window. He was a solitary man, so no one had been too concerned, at least not immediately. Then when they did begin to wonder, no Helper could tell them anything. The mystery had been unsolved ... until now.

Therefore, that face mask worn by Paracelsus had been made from life ... or death. Father wanted to gag, but gulped again and clenched his hands on his knees, his eyes closed in a silent prayer for his old friend.

"Where is he now?" he asked, finally, his voice barely above a whisper.

"We put ... the remains ... in a sack we had, and left it in the catacombs," Matthew replied.

"We must arrange a ceremony in the Mirror Pool, even at this late date," Father declared. "Lou was a good friend. He cut everyone's hair at one time or another. If it hadn't been for him, I would never have known that Margaret was looking for me. At least we know what happened to him. Just another crime to lay at Paracelsus' door. I hope this is the last of them and we are quit of the man at last."

Kanin nodded. "None of us have seen any of his gang, nothing has gone missing, and this cave was very dusty. No one had been there in a long time ... probably since ... um ... Lou was chained there."

Father nodded.

"Thank you for telling me. I'll call a Council meeting tomorrow to discuss the ... arrangements."

Then a thought occurred to him. "Did you have time to search for the ... skull?"

Cullen answered. "No, but Vincent and I will do that tomorrow afternoon. We didn't want this to get around tonight, of all nights. The children would have nightmares."

"I hope you can find it," Father said.

"Vincent knows where it might be. There was a woman who made masks - someone Paracelsus knew well. Vincent found her cave after that Winterfest, but she was gone. Her masks were all over the walls. He's pretty sure the head ... skull ... is in there, somewhere. We hope she didn't dispose of it. Vincent is certain she hasn't been back. He has kept a casual watch."

"Very well. Keep me informed. Now I think I will leave and go to bed ... and try to sleep. Don't tell Vincent you told me. He will find out at the Council meeting. No need to disturb him further. He's happy and deserves to have a night of peace. You three should treat yourselves to a mug of beer," Father suggested. "Doctor's orders!"

The three men nodded and rose.

Father made his way back to the stairs and trudged up and then to his chamber. He met no one, for which he was grateful. He wanted to be alone. He tapped out a message for Pascal to call announce

a Council meeting at ...11am ... tomorrow, and waited for the acknowledgement. That should give everyone time to have a good sleep, and allow them a late brunch after the meeting, which he expected would be short. He tapped that time suggestion to William, who he knew was in the kitchen, tidying up for the next day. William confirmed the request.

Catherine was leaning on Vincent as they danced slowly around the Great Hall. She loved the way he held her. She could feel his joy along their bond and it made her blood sing and her heart swell. She loved him so much!

All too soon, however, her legs started to feel fatigued. It had been a long day, with a good part of it on her feet, more so than she was used to. She pulled away from Vincent slightly and looked up at him. He smiled down and planted a kiss on her forehead.

"I know," he whispered. "We can leave if you wish."

"My toes want to be vertical, and the rest of me horizontal," Catherine whispered back.

Vincent chuckled and led her through the dancers to the steps. They went single file up them, Vincent in the lead holding her hand, for which she was grateful.

Back in his chamber, they both sighed as they stripped off their costumes, replacing them in the box. Perhaps someone else would use them next year, Catherine mused. Now that Vincent had agreed to this, who knew what she could devise for next year?

As she stretched a little and yawned, she spotted the box on Vincent's table. She had forgotten about the chocolates!

"Vincent, there's one more thing, a surprise gift."

She pointed to the box and Vincent regarded it for a moment, then carefully took off the ribbon and paper, folding the latter neatly. He took the lid off the box and the chocolate treasure chest was revealed. Opening it slowly, he chuckled when he saw the contents.

"Catherine, there's enough chocolates here to keep us awake all night - but I don't recommend it. We need our sleep."

"Yes, but we can have just one, I think. The roundish ones are nuts and the squarish ones are fruit. With one exception this one, which is a cordial cherry."

She popped it in her mouth and closed her eyes as she ate it.

"Then I will have a ... nut cluster," Vincent replied, picking out a particularly large one.

Catherine laughed, not missing the allusion in their choices. Vincent joined her, then grinned at her, all his canines showing. He knew the effect that sight had on her, and was not disappointed. Her core was heating up.

They both had a perfunctory wash in his small bathroom and then undressed and got into bed. Catherine hugged Vincent close to her, wanting to feel his soft furry body close to hers, first and foremost.

"You're even softer than our costumes," she said at last. "How lucky I am to have such a man."

"And I a woman like you," Vincent whispered back, holding her close and letting his desire blossom and fill him. He felt Catherine's skin heat up and soon they were moving in a rhythm as old as time. Completion came to them both and their happiness sang along their bond. Sleep came while they were still joined.

Later, Vincent extracted himself and freed his arm from under Catherine. Then he rolled onto his side, pushing himself back until he could feel her breast against his back. He heard her sigh in her sleep and was soon asleep himself.

When they awakened, it was mid-morning. No one disturbed them and the tunnels were unusually quiet. However, the community's two essential people were awake. The pipes suddenly announced a Council meeting at 11 am - an hour away - followed by William announcing that a brunch was being prepared for anyone who wanted it, and that it would be ready in half an hour.

"I think I could eat," Catherine mused, stroking Vincent's chest. He was purring and regarded her with a wry grin.

"Are you sure? We will have to get up and get dressed immediately."

"I'm sure," she replied, removing her hand and forcing herself to get into a sitting position and then leave the bed. She put on a robe and padded to the bathroom. Vincent watched her then sighed. He was hungry too, but could not at the moment decide whether it was breakfast or the food of love he wanted most. Catherine had made up her mind, so he had to comply.

A Council meeting on the day after Halloween! That could only mean one thing, Vincent mused, and the weight of that sobered him up completely. Yes, they had better eat first. Catherine would learn the story at the Council meeting, without a doubt.

She returned and began to dress. Vincent followed her and used the toilet, then washed himself as well as he could. As he dressed, he decided that a proper bath was essential some time that day - but would probably not happen until late afternoon. He and Cullen had an unpleasant task ahead of them. He winced at the unintended pun.

The couple strolled to the dining chamber, still a little muzzy after the long Halloween, and filled a plate with muffins, cheese and sliced ham. There was a mountain of orange segments and apple pieces and it was disappearing quickly. All from the children's Halloween excursion above, Catherine guessed, helping herself to a few. Just what she wanted - something tangy and not too sweet.

They sat down at Father's table, as was their custom, and found the patriarch already well into his meal.

"Good morning," he smiled at them, but looked a little grim and not a little tired around the eyes.

"And to you," Catherine replied, when she saw that Vincent had his mouth too full to speak. She looked at Father, wondering what on earth was on his mind. The Council meeting, then, was not to announce good news.

She ate her food thoughtfully and said nothing more. Vincent seemed to be studiously avoiding any conversation, much like yesterday. That made her wonder if there was a connection. Yes, there must be. She looked around the table and saw Kanin, Cullen and Matthew, also very much engaged in eating, rather than talking. That settled it in her mind. Something else was afoot regarding that cave they emptied.

She sighed and sipped her coffee, glad for the respite, however short. She just knew she wasn't going to like what she heard at the Council meeting. Hopefully, it could be easily resolved. A day of rest would be appreciated, but somehow she felt circumstances would not go that well.

As she was finishing her last gulp of coffee, Father stood up and raised his hand for attention.

"Will all the Council members please attend me in my chamber. Bring along a drink if you wish. It won't be a long meeting, but it could be a dry one."

He led the way out of the dining hall, followed by Vincent, Catherine and the others - William, Pascal, Mouse, Mary, Cullen, Kanin, Matthew and Rebecca. Peter was waiting in Father's Chamber and smiled at them all. They took seats and waited.

Father stood and looked around at them, his face sombre.

"Last night, Kanin, Cullen and Matthew told me what they found in a deep cave that Mouse had discovered, and they went with Vincent to empty yesterday afternoon. The cave apparently contained chains, shackles, ropes and other hardware. Vincent chose not to tell me the main find, so as not to

spoil my Halloween. Alas, I am a curious man. I'll let Vincent tell you the rest."

Vincent sighed deeply. He had dreaded this. He stood and put his hands on the table before looking around.

"What we found is not pleasant to relate. We went down to the cave with Mouse, and found a variety of items, as previously stated - along with spikes and huge padlocks ... all of some use to us here, but not left there for our convenience.

"On the back wall, around a corner out of sight of the rest of the cave, we found something very disturbing. A person had been shackled to the wall. What was left, a skeleton, was wearing large-sized underwear and socks. There was no skull. We believe it to have been Lou, who Paracelsus impersonated at that memorable Winterfest a few years ago. Lou has been missing, as you all know.

"We bundled up the remains in a sack and left it in the catacombs. Later today, Cullen and I will go to a place where I believe the skull may be found - a cave used by a woman who made masks, and who undoubtedly made the one Paracelsus wore that night."

Vincent sat down, suddenly tired. He looked around and saw the shocked expressions he expected on every face. Peter was staring at the floor with a grim expression.

Father stood up then, leaning heavily on his cane.

"When the skull has been found, I propose that we bury Lou in the catacombs and hold a ceremony at the Mirror Pool. Is everyone in agreement?"

There were nods around the room.

"Anyone opposed?"

There was no dissent and the expressions were sombre. It was Rebecca who spoke up.

"How could this have happened? How is it we did not know? The thought of poor Lou in that place, dying ..."

"We do not know that he was alive when he was chained there, Rebecca," Father replied. "His head was taken. Quite likely Paracelsus killed him quickly and had the corpse chained where it was found. I think, even in such a deep cave, the sound of someone in pain would have reached us - or possibly Narcissa."

There was a deep silence after this pronouncement. Vincent spoke quietly.

"That Winterfest, we found Narcissa badly burned and bruised. She would have died had not Pascal heard her weak message on the pipes. She gave us warning about Paracelsus' bomb and saved many lives. We know she saw him. He had intended her to die, but did not count on her determination to get to us with her news. Narcissa also saw something that upset her, but would not speak of it, even when she recovered. She merely said it was too late. I suspect Paracelsus was carrying Lou's head to the mask maker's."

Father spoke again.

"A friend was killed by Paracelsus and we must do what we can to give him peace. I'll send out messages to our Helpers and we can hold a wake. We all need to expel our grief and support each other."

"When do you think we should do this?" William asked, after a long silence.

"I suggest in three days," Father replied, "supposing the head is found and can be interred with the body. The sooner the better."

"Agreed," Pascal said quietly to nods from the rest of the Council.

Mary spoke up, her eyes swimming.

"I will talk to Annabelle about making a suitable shroud. It's the least we can do."

"Thank you Mary," Father replied. "That would be wonderful."

“And I’ll prepare some special candles,” Rebecca said.

“And I’ll prepare some of Lou’s favourite food,” William offered.

“Then it’s decided. I will keep you all informed and unless there is a change of plan, we will meet at dusk on Wednesday, at the Mirror Pool. Council dismissed.”

Father sat down. The rest of the Council slowly filed out, leaving Peter with Father. Vincent, Catherine and Cullen were last out. Catherine followed the two men, still stunned.

Vincent turned to look at her.

“Perhaps you should rest, Catherine. I should not be long.”

“Yes,” she muttered, and made her way back to his chamber, where she plunked herself down on the bed and began to weep. Poor Lou! She had helped to unmask Paracelsus, but no one had thought to wonder how he had created that so-realistic mask. After William had been knifed, it had been more important to rise above the horror of that night and try and recover some of the joy of Winterfest, and each other.

She must have napped, because she woke to find Vincent stripping off his clothes.

“I need a bath,” he said shortly, and headed to the bathing chamber. Catherine followed his example and sank gratefully into the warm water. She didn’t want to think anymore. She closed her eyes.

A little later, she was brought back to awareness by a kiss. She opened her eyes to see Vincent regarding her amorously. Strange how death seemed to promote that kind of response, she mused, nevertheless raising her arms around his neck to bring him closer.

They made quiet love there in the bathing pool, releasing the tension that had built up during the day. Vincent sighed deeply when he and she parted. They washed themselves, then each other’s backs, and then met in a soapy hug.

“I needed you, Catherine, even more than usual.”

Catherine looked in his eyes and nodded. She had to ask.

“You found ... him ... then?”

“Yes. He is now whole. I have informed Father.”

“Thank goodness. He suffered enough indignity.”

“Yes. There is a lot of anger in the community now. I think we will have to do something to defuse it.”

Catherine suddenly had a brainstorm.

“Are there a few jack-o-lanterns we could borrow?” she asked.

Vincent stared at her, trying to make the connection, and failed.

“I believe there are many. We usually compost them after a few days. I’m sure they haven’t been collected yet. We pile them in the corner of the dining chamber until there’s time to haul them away. Why?”

“In my world, there is an old tradition following Halloween. It’s called a pumpkin smash. It’s messy, but it’s remarkably satisfying to throw or smash those ugly blackened things.”

Vincent smiled. “I think that would be a wonderful idea, Catherine. I believe we should make a mark on each. Perhaps a ‘P’.”

“Where should we do it?”

“The corner of the dining room where William normally stores them would be best. It can be blocked off to ensure the mess is contained.”

“We have to tell Father.”

“Yes, I will do that, Catherine. Then I’ll let William know as well. I believe this will help everyone. Thank

you for the suggestion.”

“You’re welcome.”

They left the bathing chamber and got dressed. Catherine decided she had better check her phone messages and left to visit her much neglected apartment.

Amazingly, there were none, but there was an envelope pushed under her door. She put it in a pocket and returned below. Vincent arrived shortly afterwards.

“Is all well in your apartment, Catherine?”

“Yes. Well, there was a letter.” She pulled it out of her pocket and opened it. She laughed as she pulled out a Polaroid photo. It was of the polar bear.

“So you were correct, Catherine.”

“Yes, although I was really in no doubt. I guess I will have to call Jenny soon.”

“I think we must arrange a way for her to meet me,” Vincent remarked.

Catherine looked at him. “Perhaps in my apartment?”

“Yes, we don’t want to overwhelm her with my world right away,” he commented.

They heard the pipe code for supper and went to the dining chamber.

The next three days were busy ones for everyone. The pumpkins had been piled along the walls, bracketing the corner for the smash. William had announced a menu for the wake, and was busily preparing it for later that day. Rebecca’s candles, thick and black with little glitters in them like stars, were taken to the Mirror Pool and placed at strategic locations. One pillar type was placed on each table in the dining room.

At dusk, the community assembled by the Mirror Pool and burned letters to their friend and Helper Lou. There was a long silence. Father spoke quietly.

“Softer than sleep.

All things in order stored

A haunt of ancient peace.’

“May you have eternal rest now, old friend.”

“Amen” rang around the cavern and after a long moment’s silence, everyone filed out and returned to the dining hall.

Father turned around near the pile of pumpkins and raised his arm for silence.

“We have one more task to perform, those of us who wish to. We have arranged our jack-o-lanterns here, each inscribed with a large letter ‘P’. Here let your anger be appeased.”

Father turned, set aside his cane, and picked up a modest jack-o-lantern cut into a particularly nasty sneer. Appropriate, he thought, as he lifted it up and threw it against the corner of the wall. It shattered into dozens of pieces with a satisfying wet smack. He smiled, then turned and walked away.

Vincent took his turn, picking up the largest pumpkin he could see and heaving it with all his strength

against the corner. It exploded, and one string of orange flung outwards to stick on his vest. He picked it off and flicked it into the pile of debris. So may Paracelsus, in the end, be dismissed, he wished silently. Catherine was correct. It felt wonderful to do this! He smiled and caught her eye.

She took her turn, picking up a pumpkin not much bigger than a melon. She wound up her arm and flung it at the corner, high enough to miss the pile of debris by several feet. It shattered and dripped down the wall. She laughed.

Others soon followed suit and the wall became coated with orange sludge. Laughter, much missed in recent days, exploded among the youth.

William then handed around red wine in small paper cups and they all drank it down quickly.

"May vengeance be yours, Lou," William rumbled. He drank down the wine, then threw his cup into the corner with the pumpkin debris.

A good idea, Catherine thought, as she and others followed suit. The paper cups would compost nicely. After that, they sat down to eat large plates of macaroni and cheese, with braised sausages and hot red cabbage slaw - dishes they were assured Lou had loved above all others.

"A plain man wants plain fare', he often told me," Peter remarked, as he tucked into his portion. "I told him he should eat less of his 'plain fare', but he said he would only live once and he was going to do it the way he wanted to."

"A sensible attitude," Father remarked quietly.

Across the room, a chant began quietly and gained in strength.

"For he's a jolly good fellow,

"For he's a jolly good fellow

Fore he's a jolly good felllllloooooow!

Which nobody can deny!"

There was a round of applause as everyone stood up and raised another paper cup of wine to their departed friend. There was a flurry of cups thrown in the general direction of the pumpkin smash, but many didn't make it. There was general laughter as the throwers were admonished to retrieve their errant cups and they were thrown more accurately.

"I think Lou would have enjoyed this," Peter commented.

"There is no better vindication than fond memories," Vincent remarked. He was glad it was all over and they could return to their normal activities.

With a sigh, he allowed himself to relax. Halloween was now officially over for another year.

END