

Spiders, Spooks and Pumpkins

by Angie

***Every day is Hallowe'en, isn't it?
For some of us.***

-Tim Burton

Vincent exited Father's chamber deep in thought and abruptly backed up as the very person they had been discussing barrelled towards him down the tunnel, a big smile on her face and clutching what looked like a patched rag. When she saw him, her expression changed to one more in keeping with the serious pre-teen he expected and she slowed down – but only a little.

"Hi Vincent," she threw over her shoulder as she speed-walked in giant strides past him.

Vincent looked after her, puzzled, at a loss to explain the behaviour. Curious now, he followed her some distance back, reasonably sure where she was going after the first bend. Why would she be running to Mary with her ... whatever it was ... and smiling about it? He reached the doorway to Mary's chamber, soft-footed as always, and stopped to listen.

He could hear Mary tsk-tsking and Samantha's contrite tones explaining what had happened. No levity now, he noticed. He could hear the younger woman's footsteps and abruptly strode past the doorway and turned around, as if going in the opposite direction. Mary's chamber was in a broken circle of older chambers and he could have been coming from the other direction. He slowed when he saw Samantha exit the chamber. A glimpse of her face revealed she was even happier than before. Fortunately, she didn't notice in the shadows and ran back down the tunnel the way they had both come.

More curious than ever, Vincent entered Mary's chamber to find the older woman looking at what

appeared to be a coverall with dismay. She looked up as Vincent's shadow fell over her and she made a face.

"Just look at this thing," she groaned at him, shaking her head. "There's hardly two consecutive inches of original fabric left anywhere on it. Yet, Samantha wants me to patch up this latest damage. This garment already weighs twice what it should, thanks to layers of patches. What on earth does she do to get it in this state?"

Vincent looked closely at the coverall and agreed that it was probably time it was retired. "Why doesn't she sew the patches on?" he asked.

"She says she's no good at it." Mary informed him. "You and I know that particular excuse is not acceptable from older children. And Samantha nearly fainted when I suggested that it be put in the rag heap."

"Perhaps she wants it for Halloween," Vincent suggested.

Mary looked thoughtful. "But why? We have plenty of old clothing. Why go to such extremes to create this?"

"It is odd," Vincent agreed. "Father and I were just discussing her. She is very competitive and a good worker, but seems to be distracted by many things which apparently take so much of her time she can do little else. I don't think she is malingering, so perhaps we just need to guide her so that she's encouraged to find a better use for her time."

"You're right, of course," Mary agreed. "There must be something we can give her to keep her mind busy. I'll think on it."

"Thank you, Mary," Vincent said, relieved. He had not wanted to burden her with yet another duty, and was glad she had offered. He himself had no ideas at all.

He left Mary's chamber, deep in thought again. Something about Samantha's attitude bothered him. Why would she be so happy about presenting a damaged piece of clothing to Mary for repair. And why did she want to hold onto it long past its useful life? Something was going on, he concluded, and now he wanted to know what.

He continued on to his chamber and sat down in his chair, wondering how he could find out without putting Samantha on her guard. He was still sitting there when Catherine entered.

"Penny for your thoughts?" she asked, kissing him full on the lips as he raised his head to her. She sat on his lap then and ran her fingers through his long hair, knowing he loved it.

He hugged her to him and posed a question.

"Catherine, you were a young girl once. How would you find out something that another girl wanted to keep secret?"

"Oh ho," Catherine chuckled. "What has your insatiable curiosity aroused now?"

Vincent told her about Samantha and Catherine grinned when he finished.

"I think I might have an inkling. Leave it to me."

Vincent had all but forgotten that minor concern three days later, in light of another puzzle. He had been happening upon clutches of children and teens in out-of-the-way places as he patrolled the tunnels - there being, for a change, no hard labour for him. The groups were inevitably arguing - loudly. They had obviously set up the meeting place so as not to be interrupted by some well-meaning adult. But he was soft-footed and intensely curious, so he could hear a great deal before they became aware of him. Some of these groups included newcomers, who perhaps had not yet learned the intricacies of their life below, but most in the groups were not - and it was these who seemed to be most adamant about whatever it was. The tone and volume of their voices was disturbing. They seemed about to come to

blows!

After the first time he had made himself known to them, he was more cautious and hid in the shadows, trying to determine what the problem was. He found himself unusually baffled.

Samantha, unsurprisingly, was one of the loudest. She had always been an adamant child - bossy, he supposed the word was. She had not become less so with age.

"NO!" he heard her yell as he neared yet another such gathering, in a tunnel far beyond the normal range of residents, and marginally lit as well. He was thankful that he was not carrying a lantern, so would not be revealed until he wanted to be.

"You can't tell us what to do!" yelled another, and Vincent was shocked to discover it was Geoffrey. He had never known the boy could shout; he was usually very quiet.

Another voice broke in. "This is stupid. Why are we arguing? What does it matter?"

That was Kipper, Vincent knew. He was the tunnel skeptic for just about everything.

"BECAUSE IT MATTERS!" Samantha yelled. That seemed to end the argument, because there was a lot of shuffling, and Vincent retreated, swiftly and silently, until he could take a side tunnel and hide.

He waited until several children had rushed past carrying small lanterns, then waited for a couple of minutes before more noisily again approaching the meeting point. He knew there was someone still there.

He found Samantha and Geoffrey in quiet conversation. They looked up as he approached and both looked, for want of a better term, guilty.

"Good afternoon," he greeted them, studiously avoiding any indication he suspected anything.

"I hope I didn't interrupt anything. I know how hard it is for young people to get privacy."

Samantha and Geoffrey turned beet red and looked at each other.

"No, it isn't that!" Samantha burst out, then was silent for long moments, obviously grasping for an explanation.

You're a long way from the home tunnels," Vincent commented into the heavy silence. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes, Vincent," piped up Geoffrey. He said nothing more and the two teens looked at each other in obvious distress.

Vincent ignored that and nodded. He looked around, as if trying to see what the attraction was, and gave them a puzzled look.

"This seems an odd place for a conversation," he remarked, when neither teen said anything more. I remember meeting Devin and Pascal in unusual places, but we never came this far away. Perhaps the home tunnels are too well-travelled these days."

He was trying to keep them from running off with an excuse. Samantha shrugged her shoulders, as if in answer. They knew quite well they couldn't lie about what they were doing. Vincent would know it immediately. And lies were not permitted under any circumstances.

Samantha finally let her shoulders sag a little and looked Vincent in the eyes. He knew he would now get some of the truth at least.

"We were making plans ... and you know it's hard to keep secrets in the home tunnels ... and this is important to us."

"So you can't tell me either, I suppose?" Vincent asked.

"No," they said, perhaps too quickly.

"There are many places you could meet safely," Vincent remarked, finally. "We often met in one of the storage caves. If you do a little re-arranging, you could have a clubhouse."

"This area is not safe. If there were trouble, no help could reach you quickly. An invasion came this way once before."

Samantha and Geoffrey looked around them, obviously puzzled.

"It was a long time ago," Vincent told them. "We cannot watch every tunnel, and even Mouse's alarms can be circumvented. This tunnel goes into Chinatown, as you know. We dare not tamper with those tunnels because that would reveal our presence. Dr Wong is a helper and his basement our only entry. But there are many other ways down, and not everyone is trustworthy. The Chinese like their secret ways. They use them seldom, but we are always careful. Our best defence is to let things be. No candles, no noise."

The teens looked very uncomfortable now.

"Sorry Vincent," Geoffrey said quietly. "We thought it would be okay. We won't come here again."

"Good. Now surely you have chores to do before dinner. I'll escort you back."

Samantha picked up a candle from the floor and blew it out. It was dim, but not totally dark since there were lights, albeit at long intervals. Vincent led the teens back to the home tunnels and said goodbye. He returned to his chamber deep in thought.

He was more worried than he had indicated to the teens. There was some plot afoot, he had no doubt, and if they were meeting in such out-of-the-way places, it did not bode well. He knew from his own years as a teenager, and even earlier when Devin still lived with them, that plans could go badly wrong. Sentries could not be put everywhere and there were many dangers in their world, not all of them natural.

Hallowe'en was coming soon and he was beginning his annual patrol of the more remote areas to see if there were any likely places intruders could enter. However, his doing so should make it safer for any plot being planned.

He disliked the infrequent patrols because he always found places where spiders seemed to congregate. He had to find out the reason, in case they indicated a danger to his world.

Spiders! No one below really liked spiders, but they were an inevitable part of their world. They spun their webs across tunnels that had been untravelled for only a few hours.

They invaded William's kitchen, which insects seemed to find, despite its distance from the surface - and therefore the spiders followed them. They stayed wherever there was food. William had named a very large wolf-type which lived under his stove. The big cook preferred to let spiders be because they kept other insects under control.

The stupid spiders, he always said, died of starvation. They also left their webs to collect dust in forgotten corners of their world, corners Vincent had to venture into.

Vincent tolerated spiders too, but they did occasionally get to be of impressive size, and these Vincent felt it incumbent upon him to destroy - quickly and humanely. He had read enough books on arachnids to know that the bigger ones could bite, although they were usually not poisonous. However, it wasn't always easy to tell what the species was in half light. Better safe than sorry, he decided. It wasn't impossible that tarantulas and other non-native species might find their way into the tunnels, and he didn't want Father to have to deal with those kinds of problems.

Generally, he let the spiders be, but in one place he made sure there was not even a hint of one - Catherine's threshold. She had told him about her waking nightmare of seeing dozens of tarantulas on her bed. And although they knew she had been drugged by the professor on that occasion, Vincent ensured there would be no reminders. He even made sure there were none in their music chamber, which being just below ground level, meant insects inevitably found their way there - along with their hunters.

The common areas were regularly patrolled by Mary and her cleaning crew, with corn brooms, and the

tunnels were patrolled by himself and the sentries, so most spiders had little opportunity to become established.

What Vincent hated most about spiders was getting their webs in his hair and although he could see well in dim light, he didn't always spot the silken strands in time. They seemed worse in the late fall and winter, he supposed because the insects retreated to where it was warmer.

This year, he carried the torch well in front of him to break and melt the webs before they could reach his face. A lantern worked, but meant his hand would be covered in web when he was done, not a pleasant prospect.

Was there anything worse than feeling that fine silk pulling across one's (fuzzy) nose? No!

Armed with an unlit lantern, in case he needed it to examine anything closely, Vincent began his patrol with mild trepidation. Every year about this time, teenagers got it into their heads to explore some tunnel someone had heard about. He had to make sure they had been sufficiently discouraged. Spider webs helped in that regard, but were almost never in a convenient place to do so.

He had passed the stone serpentine stairway when he poked his torch ahead of him and took a few steps into a short dead-end passage. He could see a thick, multi-layered curtain of webs, undulating in a fairly constant breeze from the other end. He couldn't tell if there were any live spiders, but he didn't particularly want to find out.

It must have been a very long time since anyone had been this way. This passage had been carefully blocked, and since the web was obviously undisturbed, patrols would have ignored it.

The short passage had a small sentry cave and a peephole. It had originally led to a very circuitous tunnel that began in a bus storage yard and bypassed all the main tunnels to lead to an obscure drainage culvert in a forgotten corner of a City maintenance yard. It was seldom used by tunnel dwellers, being nowhere near where they needed to go, but it had proven useful to lead invaders away and down into the Maze.

This passage had once been part of a junction that led to a parking garage. They had closed off the opposite tunnel section because it was where the outsider gang had gained access to their world. Catherine had told them of the gruesome murders in that place, and after the intruders were taken care of, they had closed it off and wedged the door in this passage.

Somehow the spiders had found it profitable to be in this remote stretch of tunnel, however, and that worried Vincent. There was no access to the world above for some distance now, far beyond what normal curiosity would encourage. So what had attracted the spiders?

Vincent had to find out, but decided to do so from the circle route. He had no desire to walk through the web, not even with his torch. Burning web in this quantity would stink.

Before he left, he pulled out a piece of sidewalk chalk and marked a large "X" inside a circle on the tunnel walls on both sides. Then he made another at the entry, with an arrow pointing down the tunnel.

He retraced his steps and made his way to the nearest connecting tunnel, then strode back to the point he had been trying to reach. He looked at the wall which hid the tunnel entrance. The peephole was plainly visible, which was disturbing enough in itself. The wall had cracked and subsided, and the small peephole had become a large hole. Their security was now at risk, since the empty space behind it could be seen and would be tempting to the curious. It didn't explain the spiders, however.

Vincent tapped out a message about his discovery on the nearest pipe and waited for Pascal to confirm. Hardly had that been done, then Mouse sent a message that he was on his way. A very curious Mouse, Vincent reflected wryly.

He had a bad feeling about this mystery, and decided to wait for his friend. He might need help. While he was waiting, he lit the lantern and stuck the torch into a nearby bracket. They might need more light. He didn't have to wait long before he heard running footsteps and Mouse came into view. He slid to a

stop beside Vincent and grinned.

“Found something? Can Mouse see?”

“I am not sure what it is,” Vincent told him. “There are a lot of spider webs in the tunnel beyond this wall - but I don’t know why. We have to open up this door.”

“Easy,” Mouse said. “Move wedge,” which he did. “Then push.”

He put his shoulder to the wall below the peephole and Vincent did the same. They heaved and the wall moved marginally. Vincent turned his back to the wall and then dug in his feet to push harder. Mouse kept up the pressure and the wall moved grudgingly another foot.

“Something stuck behind door,” Mouse concluded, unnecessarily. He peered around the opening, then pulled out a flashlight from a capacious pocket to look more closely. Then he squeezed around the door and Vincent lost sight of him. The gap was too narrow for him to follow.

“What did you find, Mouse?” Vincent asked at last, wondering why Mouse was so silent.

Mouse stuck his head around and Vincent saw that his face was white. He immediately got alarmed.

“Can I push this further?” he asked finally.

“Maybe. Wait.”

There was a shuffling behind the wall and finally Vincent heard a muffled “Okay now.”

He leaned on the wall and it moved another foot. He picked up the lantern and squeezed through.

Mouse was waiting well back from the door. He pointed to the area behind it. Vincent stiffened when he saw what had been obstructing it. A skeleton, a small one, obviously a child. He held his lantern over it.

There was no doubt in his mind now. A memory returned and he leaned against the wall and closed his eyes, his chest tight. Memories flooded him. His hands tightened into fists around his cloak.

He felt Catherine’s concern along their bond, and pulled himself together with an effort, sending her an apologetic rush of love. But the memories remained, as if it had happened yesterday. The incidents ran across his mind’s eye like a movie film.

The outsider gang incursion. The feral boy who had scuttled away after shooting him. Catherine distracted and trying to determine how badly he was hurt. He had paid little attention to the boy, all his effort spent in trying to dampen the pain and calm down.

Later - much later - they had searched for the child, but he had disappeared. Yet this passage was close to the original entry. The boy must have remembered it.

Vincent sighed.

Mouse spoke in a worried tone. “Vincent okay?”

Vincent looked at his friend and nodded. He regarded the pathetic little corpse and wondered could have befallen the boy.



Obviously, the child had been unable to open the door - but it might not have helped, since the parking garage entry had been closed off quickly.

This door was not intended to open easily even from the circle passage side, and not at all from the inside. There had not been a sentry here for many years. The door wedge was well camouflaged, being merely a piece of native rock.

He bent down for a closer look at the skeleton and realized there was nothing much left to examine. The boy's long greasy hair, now dusty as well, was enough for Vincent to be sure of the identity, even without the filthy clothing and lack of footwear. There wasn't even much smell, just the kind of dusty decay that hung around the rat skeletons he found occasionally. It had been years since that terrible time.

But the mystery of the boy being here was unanswered. Had he died of starvation? Why hadn't he tried to steal food from them? He had done that once before, from Geoffrey, on one of their food runs.

The body seemed to be laying in a very awkward position. Mouse had only moved it sideways to clear the door, obviously pulling on the clothing to do so. Looking closely, Vincent realized that one leg was at an unnatural angle and one shoulder looked skewed as well. The child must have fallen, perhaps down the spiral stone staircase, which wasn't far away and was very dark. He must have dragged himself to this old passage and died.

"What now?" Mouse asked, finally.

Vincent shook himself and focused on the immediate problem - two of them, he reminded himself.

"Mouse, we need to close up the peephole and crack on this door. Can you do that?"

"Sure. Just mix some cement and add sand and rocks. Never know it was there."

"Good. We also need to do something with this," he indicated the skeleton. He didn't particularly want to touch it, but that was unavoidable.

"Perhaps we can move it into the sentry cave and build a cairn over it before we shut the door again."

"Lot of work," Mouse remarked doubtfully. "Not many rocks here. Could dynamite the wall."

Vincent sighed at this predictable Mouse's solution. Dynamite and plastic explosives fascinated him, but were more dangerous than useful in the tunnels, and apt to call unwanted attention to them, especially this near the surface.

"There are lots of rocks in the circle tunnel, Mouse. We can use enough to bury this."

The rock falls in the tunnel were intended to discourage explorers, and generally worked well. In some places they were as high as the ceiling.

"Okay. Not easy like dynamite." Mouse's disappointment almost made Vincent smile, but he kept a serious look on his face.

"First let's move this."

The two of them grabbed clothing and slowly dragged the skeleton into the cave. The clothing was fragile, and it tore in Vincent's hands several times.

"Now I will move some rocks to the entry and you pile them on the skeleton," Vincent suggested. He left the lantern where it would light their work.

By the time they had completed the task, Vincent was very glad the corpse was a small one. He could have asked for a wheelbarrow to be brought, but that would have just delayed them and he wanted to get this done quickly.

"Maybe close doorway forever," Mouse suggested.

"A very good idea," Vincent agreed. Next to blowing things up, making and fixing doors was Mouse's favourite work.

They left the area through the doorway and wedged it for the last time. He and Mouse returned to the home tunnels, Mouse to organize cement and tools, and Vincent to return to his chamber, where Catherine was waiting. She looked up as he entered and then immediately rose to hug him.

"You're tired and dusty," she remarked, letting him go after a nice long hug. "What on earth have you been doing? I thought you were patrolling."

"I was. I found something that puzzled me - spider webs."

Catherine waited. This must have disturbed him for some reason. She had felt it.

Vincent looked down at the floor.

"Catherine, I found the skeleton of the outsider gang child. He had injured himself and died there."

Catherine looked down now too. She had flung that child into the wall after ridding him of the gun, and had paid no more attention to him. A search had been organized but he had disappeared. They had assumed he found his way back above, so they had sealed off all the entries the gang had used. They had left a trail of garbage easy to follow from each one.

"He must have hidden himself well," she said at last.

"I think he fell down the stone stairs," Vincent replied softly. "He could have hidden under the lower ones then painfully moved to where we found him. Mouse and I built a cairn over him in the sentry cave."

The pipes sounded the signal for lunch, so Vincent made quick work of a wash, and then they walked to the common room. It was a noisy place, full of excited chatter about Hallowe'en. It reminded Catherine that she needed to do some serious thinking about what she and Vincent would do this year.

Last year, the NY Abominable Snowmen costumes had worked well and Vincent had been able to visit a special library exhibit with her. This year, she needed to do devise a different costume, but one that would still cover them both completely. Then she had to figure out where they could go.

They were well into their meal when an argument began on one the tables where Samantha, Geoffrey, Eric and Kipper were sitting. Vincent perked up his ears for any clues as to what they were up to.

"It's for the Great Pumpkin," Samantha shouted.

"Crazy!" was Kipper's response.

"No, it's not," chimed in Eric.

Father abruptly banged on the table and the children became quiet and looked around embarrassed.

"Great Pumpkin?" Vincent whispered to Catherine.

She looked like she was holding in laughter, which didn't tell him anything at all.

"What?" he asked, now intensely curious.

She got herself under control and whispered back. "After lunch."

So Vincent had to content himself with eating, for the time being. Then Father distracted him.

"Vincent!" Father called from a few places down the table.

"Yes Father?"

"What did you find today?"

"A lot of spider's webs," he replied, looking around. He caught a satisfying number of yucks from Samantha's table. He decided not to mention their other find until he could tell Father privately. Mouse studiously said nothing, more interested in filling his mouth with pie.

"What kind of spiders?" Kipper asked.

"Arachnids," Vincent replied with a smile, generating a few whoops of laughter from the adults listening.

"I bet you could tell us a story about spiders," Samantha prodded him.

"Perhaps, but I think I'd rather tell you about Arachne, whose name has come to be associated with spiders."

"Great, a pre-Hallowe'en story!" Geoffrey enthused.

"Tonight after supper," Vincent promised. "In Father's chamber, if he permits."

"Far be it for me to stand in the way of a good story," the patriarch replied with a smile.

"Yippee," a chorus of voices shouted, and the children left to get on with their various chores.

Catherine nudged Vincent. "Aren't they going to be a little disappointed?"

"Perhaps. But Ovid has no equal and perhaps they'll be metamorphosed into something a little more intelligent in the process."

"Vincent!" Catherine, tried to look shocked, and failed.

"All part of growing up," he said. "Stories are not always what they seem."

They rose to leave and when they reached his chamber, Catherine sat on his bed while he took his usual chair.

"Tell me," he begged.

"The Great Pumpkin, or the waiting for him, is part of a popular comic strip, Vincent. I think the secrecy of the children is explained. And perhaps Samantha's patched outfit too. She probably wants to disguise herself as a scarecrow. The children will want to find a pumpkin patch and wait for this mythical being."

"But Catherine, there are no pumpkin patches here. Not even in the Park. I have no idea where there would be one."

"No, I don't think there are any, unless someone has a patch in their garden ..." She stopped and let the sentence hang.

"But it does give me an idea, Vincent. I've been trying to think of costumes for us for Hallowe'en. This would be perfect."

She told him her idea and Vincent grinned.

"But how do we announce this?"

"I suspect the children will ask around, Vincent. So you must be sure to give them just enough information to keep them out of trouble above, and tell them they have to wait until Hallowe'en. Tonight, after your story would be the perfect time. I should know something by then. I'll tell you as soon as I return. I must go above now, and work on the details. Oh, this is going to be fun!"

Once above, Catherine visited several costume shops, but none had what she wanted. The last one told her, bluntly, that the costumes she wanted had been reserved for months before, implying that she had left it too late. It was less than two weeks before Halloween, they pointed out, none too politely.

Catherine sat down on a handy chair in the shop and put her brain to work, something she realized, ruefully, she should have done earlier.

The solution became obvious. "Cathy, you're thinking like a Park Avenue topsider," she muttered to herself, irked that she hadn't thought of this earlier and saved her feet. She asked the proprietor to borrow a phonebook and quickly found what she wanted. She returned home and drove out in her car. Speed was now important or she'd miss supper!

Not surprisingly, there were several thrift shops in the east side and Village. She found a costume in one that would fit her, and another larger one in a second. They both needed a little TLC, but that was fine. They were also cheap and could be reused. Best of all, they didn't have to be returned to a rental shop! She even found a couple of very large plastic pumpkin buckets, perfect for what she had in mind. She returned home and left the bags in her hallway. She called Peter and arranged to meet him the

next day, a Saturday, first thing in the morning, to discuss the rest of her oplan. Then she went below, well pleased with herself.

Vincent, meanwhile, went to see Father to report on his discovery. Father put down his cup of tea and regarded it for some time before looking up at his son.

"I begin to wonder whether we will ever be quite rid of the repercussions of that horrific incident," he said quietly.

Vincent nodded slowly. He understood exactly what Father meant, but decided to concentrate on the prosaic.

"We've done our best. We have blocked or created detours for all the entrances they used, that we know about. The tunnel across from the location where we found the child had been blocked permanently. No sentry has been in that location for some time. We did get warning about the gang from the one there at the time. I believe it was Randolph."

"And Randolph died."

Vincent sighed. Obviously Father did not want to let it go just yet. "Yes, Father. And the outsider gang all died in their turn - at my hands."

"Vincent, I know this upset you at the time, but I take responsibility for the gun. I did ask Catherine for it. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to give it to me before the situation worsened. We had to halt the evacuation of the children, which she was to help us with."

"One error piled on another." Vincent remarked. "Why did no one tell her of the change in plans?"

"I don't know. Pascal was supposed to meet her with a group of children, but had to turn around because of the danger. He was helping us move furniture into the Great Hall, as you know. We were preparing for a siege. He must have assumed someone would tell Catherine."

"To make matters worse, you were shot by the very gun Catherine had brought into the tunnels, at my request. I will never do such a thing again. I misjudged the situation badly. If I had been willing to admit the gang was as dangerous as you believed, perhaps Randolph would still be alive."

"Father, you know that is not true. If you had sent me, as William suggested, we would have violated our principles. Randolph died, but we did not allow them a second chance. We did try to appease them. There is no dishonour or guilt in that."

"Unfortunately, that child found the gun, which had been dropped during the fight."

"I don't believe we would react that way again. We have been very much more aware since," Father sighed.

"We learn lessons the hard way here, Father. We always have. This world is unforgiving. We can love our world, but it cares not. We have only each other to depend on."

"Yes. It's easy to forget not only that we have adapted to this place, but the cost we have paid in lives to continue to exist here."

"No one here is unaware of that, Father. It is a lesson reinforced with every breath and step we take. But we can panic too. There lies the real danger."

"Which is the reason for our drills. Everyone hates them, but they remind us of the dangers of our life."

"And awareness is our strength, Father."

Vincent returned to his chamber and tried to interest himself in reading. But every book he picked up seemed inappropriate. Instead, he decided to write in his journal. He often found doing so eased his mind.

"I found the outsider gang child today, reduced to bones, rags and dust. I looked down at that pathetic little form and it all came rolling over me in a wave.

Father blames himself for what happened, but if he had let me do what I believed necessary from the start, we would have lost something more, I think - our compassion, our desire to give everyone the benefit of a doubt. Although I didn't see it that way at the time, I now believe this is the only way we can be what we are.

I do not particularly believe in Fate, but sometimes there are lessons to be learned in events such as that. I did not know Catherine was nearby until she was attached by the gang. We were all distracted, our communication system wasn't being used, and the gang was ruthless.

We made mistakes because we had no plan in place. Father ensured we created one after that, and drills are held every few months to remind everyone, particularly the children, of the value of always being prepared.

We had become too insular, too reliant on the stone around us, and the vigilance of our sentries, to keep us safe. There is in fact no safe place.

We had not considered how we would deal with a concerted threat. The last such had been the Chinatown gang, but they were less brutal, although no less committed.

When I use these hands to protect those I love, I pay a price, but I pay it willingly. It must be so, or I would become no better than those I kill. Catherine has told me this often, but it isn't easy for anyone with a conscience to accept that killing can be justified. The alternative, to do nothing, is not acceptable either.

I accept that when I am called upon to do what must be done, I will do it, protecting this place which protects me, along with the people who allow me to live among them.

When I think of all the children who will never know the love of a community like ours, or who suffer from human-caused ills, I despair. We cannot help them all, even if we knew who they are, where they are.

So we live here, trying not to dwell on what we cannot do, and do the best we can for those we do help. We work so hard just to survive in this unforgiving place, this place which is largely unsuited to humans. Only our persistence has made it habitable.

That child discovered the truth that is part of who we are. He learned that an accident, alone, where no help is near, can mean death.

Such a fine line we all walk. It is a lesson we try to impress upon our children, but they are not always careful either.

But that child! Who protected him in his short life? It saddens me that he was bound to such Truly, I can think of no other term for them. They were barely recognizable as human. Was he one of their children, or just someone they found useful? We'll never know.

I remember how his hands shook when he pointed the gun at us. Was it I who frightened him, or the fact that the others were dead and he was alone? Was he trying to revenge himself on me, or disable me so he could escape - as he did?

He found - as all that demented group did - something unexpected in this maze of tunnels. The monster in the Labyrinth.

Byron said 'tragedies are finished by a death,' but memories remain. As they should."

"Monster," he said aloud, wishing he'd never been reminded of that terrible time.

"What?" Catherine asked, coming up behind him. He had not realized she was so close.

He hung his head and closed his journal. His love was obviously very pleased with herself and whatever

she had accomplished – but now that was overlaid with concern for him. He berated himself for causing her to make that abrupt emotional change.

“I was just thinking of that child,” he said softly.

“And calling yourself names again,” she accused him. “Vincent, there is nothing monstrous about you. It implies something ... I don’t know ... deformed, or ugly. You are neither. In fact, you are perfect. You are strong, beautifully formed, intelligent and never ugly. True ugliness resided in the people in that gang. They were the monsters, warped on the inside, and totally inhuman in all other senses. The child may have been too. We know he was violent. How could he not have been affected by them?”

Vincent nodded. He rose and turned to her and she gratefully moved into his arms, putting a full stop to that conversation. Catherine sighed. It felt so good to be exactly where she was, in the arms of her man.

She always forgot how much work it was trudging around pavement above, when she was below.

“To think I used to love shopping,” Catherine moaned, moving away to sit on the bed, where she quickly kicked off her shoes.

Vincent pulled up a chair and began to massage her feet. Catherine sighed, even more deeply.

“But coming back to a foot massage makes it all worthwhile.”

“Did you find what you sought?” he asked.

“Yes, although I had to do a bit of a search. But I also managed to corral Peter at home, and I’ll talk to him tomorrow morning. He’s looking forward to being part of this. I’ll leave the costumes with him.”

“I’m glad Peter’s amenable. Are you disappointed that we aren’t spending the whole night above?” he asked her.

“No. Last year was fun, but it was also somewhat stressful. This will be fun and we will still be above - just in a different way. A private party, so to speak.”

She signed and let herself fall backwards onto the bed. With little encouragement, she could sleep.

Vincent could feel her fatigue and realized that he was still grubby from his morning’s work with the cairn. He had washed his hands and face, but a true soak would be welcome. There really wasn’t time for a nap.

“Supper will be soon, Catherine, but I believe we have time for a bath.”

“Wonderful idea. Let’s.” She sat up, her face eager. “Then I’ll be able enjoy your story after supper and we’ll both be ready for bed afterwards.”

Vincent smiled at her as he caught her unspoken meaning. Would he ever come to regard such suggestions without wonder? He sincerely hoped not!

After supper, as everyone was finishing their dessert and relaxing with tea or coffee, Brooke stood up to announce that she and some of the teenagers were creating a spooky Halloween scene. It would be placed on the route to the main event, and everyone should dress up for it.

Michael, she said, had acquired a Polaroid camera, so that pictures could be taken in front of it, the way it was done in the world above, as Catherine had told them about last year.

They promised that everyone would be able to see it on the way to the main event of the night.

Catherine abruptly realized her plan needed some modifications. She told Vincent she would see him in a short while and rose to follow Annabelle back to the sewing chamber.

“Well, Catherine, I had expected to see you before this,” was the dwarf’s acknowledgment of her visitor.

“I have our costumes already,” Catherine admitted, “but now I see we’ll need something more, a kind of head to toe covering.”

Annabelle smiled and beckoned over to where bolts of fabric sat on a shelf.

"What do you think of this," she asked, lifting a bolt of fabric that shimmered between blood red and blue grey in the incandescent light Mouse had installed in this important workroom. The fabric had a blue fringe.

Catherine's mouth fell open.

"Is that what I think it is?" she asked, finally.

"Well, if you think it's taffeta, you're correct," Annabelle told her. She gave one of her raucous cackles which started Catherine laughing as well. It was some while before they got control of themselves.

Curiosity finally made Catherine ask, "Where on earth did this come from?"

"A helper helped clean up after a warehouse fire. This was one of the casualties. It has smoke and water damage, but I don't suppose that will worry you."

Catherine sniffed at the bolt and realized it did smell a little smoky, but given that everything in this world did, no one was likely to notice. The water damage would certainly not matter.

"With hoods, Vincent and I would be able to stroll the Park afterwards," Catherine mused.

"And you'd certainly look spooky," Annabelle agreed. "We won't need to do much sewing, not even for the hoods. I'll cut them out tomorrow."

"Thank-you," Catherine said, hugging the dwarf, who chuckled.

"You're getting to be almost as good a hugger as Vincent," she commented. "The talent must be rubbing off."

She took the bolt across to her cutting table and Catherine moved quickly to Father's chamber, hoping she hadn't missed any of Vincent's story.

She was just in time. She found a seat as the children finally settled into place, shrugging each other aside to get closest to Vincent. He regarded them sternly and waited until all were quiet. Father sat in his chair, a slight smile on his face.

"This is the story of Arachne, and of the dangers of hubris.

Minerva, daughter of Jupiter in the Roman pantheon (Athena in the Greek), was the patroness of arts, crafts and magic, and also that of wisdom. Because of the latter she is often portrayed with an owl.

She regularly listened to the Muses talk. They often received considerable praise for their talents, so Minerva believed her divine inspiration should be recognized by mortals, who should be punished if they did not do so.

Minerva learned of Arachne of Maeonia, who refused to give the goddess credit for her talents in the art of spinning. The girl was of humble birth and her father dyed the wool she spun and wove, especially a purple prized by nobles. Her mother was dead. Although they lived in a modest home, she had gained a reputation for artistry throughout the cities of Lydia.

Even the nymphs of Mount Tmolus deserted their vine-covered slopes, and the nymphs of the River Pactolus deserted their waves, to examine her wonderful workmanship. It was not only a joy to see the finished cloths, but also to watch them made: so much beauty added to art. Whether at first she was winding the rough yarn into a new ball, or working the stuff with her fingers, teasing out the clouds of wool, repeatedly, drawing them into long equal threads, twirling the slender spindle with practised thumb, or embroidering with her needle, you could see she had been gifted by Minerva. Yet she denied it, and took offense at the very idea that she had a teacher.

One day Minerva took the shape of an old woman: adding grey hair to her temples, and ageing her limbs, which she supported with a stick, and visited Arachne.

Arachne voiced her usual denial, so the disguised Minerva told her: 'Not everything old age has is to be

shunned. Knowledge comes with advancing years. I'll give you some advice. You may seek great fame amongst mortals for your skill in weaving, but give credit to the goddess, and ask her forgiveness and be humble. She will forgive you if you will ask.'

Arachne looked fiercely at her visitor, left her work and replied with anger.

'You are weak-minded and worn out by old age, and having lived too long destroys you. Let your daughter-in-law, if you have one, let your daughter, if you have one, listen to your words. I have wisdom enough of my own. If you think Minerva is upset, why doesn't she come and tell me herself? We can have a contest.'

Then Minerva threw off the old woman's form and revealed herself. But the girl was unafraid, although she did blush a little. She was stubborn, however, and would not change her ways.

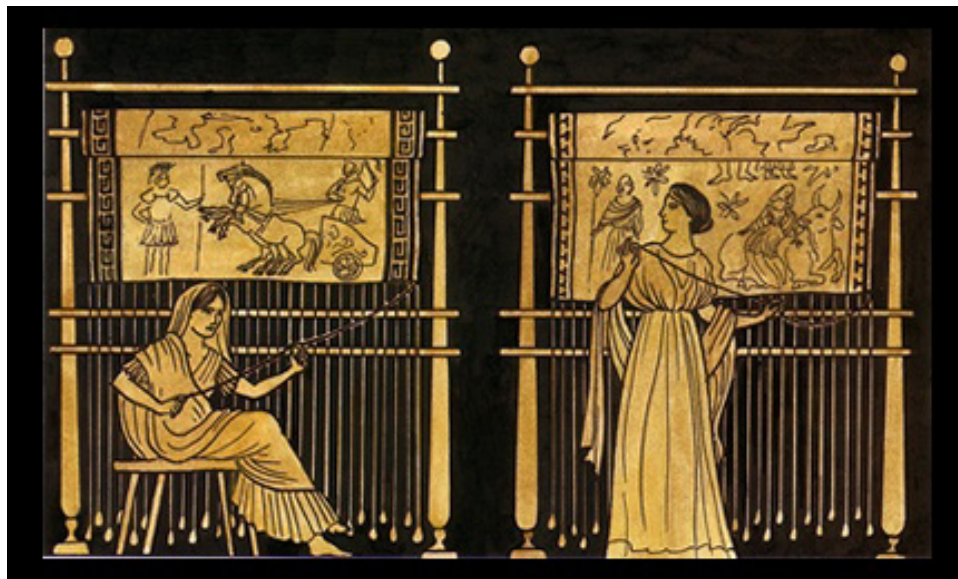
Minerva, eager to put this girl in her place, agreed to a contest. Immediately, each took a loom and began to stretch out the fine warp threads over their frames, fasten and separate them, prepare the weft threads and beat them into place as they wove.

They worked quickly, their clothing gathered tight so as not to get in the way. Each showed such skill that it seemed easy, mixing and weaving threads of purple in many shades, interwoven with golden ones, each telling a tale.

They each chose tales they knew well.

Minerva wove tales of the court of Jupiter, 12 gods sitting in majesty with him in the middle, but depicting their many crimes. She also wove in very fine details of trees, mountains and people to embellish the tales - ending her work at last with olive wreaths, her personal emblem.

Arachne wove many myths, including Europa, Asterie, Leda, Antiope, Proserpine, Neptune, Bacchus, and Saturn, each in the appropriate settings with animals or birds.



Minerva could not fault the work of her rival, and was grieved as a result, so that she tore the tapestry she had made, and struck Arachne on the forehead with her shuttle.

The girl could not stand to be so insulted and put a noose around her neck.

Minerva, however, took pity at last, and said these words:

'Love on then, yet hang, condemned one. Lest you are careless in future, I declare that this is your

punishment. All your descendants, to the last generation must stand condemned, just as you do.'
Minerva sprinkled Arachne with a potion from Hecate, the goddess of night and death, whose garden was famous for both medicinal and poisonous plants. On the touch of the juice, Arachne's hair fell out, her nose and ears also, and her head and body shrank to a small size. Her slender fingers stuck to her sides and became legs.
Thus Arachne still spins, but as a spider, from her belly into a web."

Samantha's eyes had grown large as she listened and even the boys seemed to be a little shocked. "Good thing we don't have goddesses like that now," was her comment. "Not as such," Vincent agreed. "But back in the days of ancient Greece and Rome, people believed that any talent was a gift. Every skill - be it weaving or with weapons, came from an immortal god or goddess." "Well, my skill isn't weaving," Samantha mused. "No, your skill is being bossy and loud." Kipper told her, which caused some chuckles from the other children. "Sometimes being loud is important," Vincent told them. "All skills are a gift, even if they may not seem so. Samantha is a good organizer." Kipper took this at face value and didn't comment. Truth to tell, he failed, as usual, to see much value in anything involving females. He looked over at Eric and Geoffrey and at their nod, posed the question he had been wanting to ask since lunchtime. "Vincent, do you know where there's a pumpkin patch?" Father's brows knitted in puzzlement. Before Vincent could answer, he interrupted. "Now why on earth would you want to know that, Kipper? You know we always get as many pumpkins as we need for jack-o-lanterns from our helpers. There are always far more than anyone can use above." "I... I ... just wanted to see some growing," the boy answered. "I've never seen a pumpkin patch." Vincent gave Father a wink of warning and looked suitably thoughtful. "I believe I do know of such a patch, Kipper," he said at last. "Wow!" said the four conspirators together. "Where?" "This should remain my secret until Halloween. But I promise to take you there, along with anyone else who wishes to come. Will that be all right?" They all looked relieved and nodded energetically. Samantha suddenly became very restless. "I'm going to work on my costume right now," she said, and ran out of the library. The other children thanked Vincent for the story and quietly filed out. "Oh dear," Mary said quietly to Vincent. "I hope Samantha doesn't bring that overall to me again." Vincent chuckled. "I think she'll do any more work herself."

The days before Halloween were passing remarkably swiftly, Catherine mused. Since she and Vincent were involved with a special event of their own this year, she had not had much to worry about. Their costumes were waiting at Peter's and their cloaks, needed to get them to the scene and later perhaps for a walk in the Park, were ready. Peter was planning something, but refused to tell her what. Curious about what William had planned as treats for this year, and whether she could help in any way,

she approached him in the kitchen the day before Halloween. He smiled at her, drying his hands on a towel.

"Do you need anything for tomorrow," she asked.

"Not a thing, Catherine," he replied. "Take a look."

He pointed at some large cookie tins stacked on a table in the corner of the kitchen.

"What's in them?"

"Ah now, that's my secret. Let's just say there's more than enough for everyone to have several. The children will no doubt be getting some treats you've arranged, so I've made something more ... basic," the big cook rumbled.

Catherine chuckled.

"Great!. I'm sure I'll enjoy whatever they are."

"You'll see them at lunch tomorrow," he promised, turning back to see what else needed doing in his kitchen.

Catherine left and returned to Vincent's chamber.

She found him tidying up his table and putting books away. Several new candles were waiting. After all the fun was over on Halloween, they'd be having a small celebration of their own. She could hardly wait.

By lunch on Hallowe'en, so much excitement among the community that the food was almost an afterthought - although Williams cookies had briefly changed that. He had announced them as "Rock Buns", a recipe he declared appropriate for both the place and the time.

Despite their name, they were not hard, but soft and chewy, more like a scone. William explained that the name probably came from their appearance, which was irregular, and the use of currants.

No one much cared what they were called by the time lunch was finished. They were delicious and not many were left by the end of the meal.

William then announced that a "few more" had been put aside for the adults as a treat for later. The children, he pointed out, would have plenty of sweets to keep them happy.

The evening got underway as soon as supper, a hearty stew, was over. Everyone retreated to their chambers to get prepared for the procession, which was scheduled for 9 pm.

Vincent and Catherine had put on their cloaks, and joined the excited crowd of adults and children, in a variety of costumes, in the main tunnel.

Brooke, dressed as a witch, had beckoned them to follow her. They were taken to the Chamber of the Winds, where lanterns lit a remarkably spooky scene against one of the rock walls. The winds were less strong on this night, but the flickering of the lanterns gave the right atmosphere and everyone shivered a little. The children whispered to each other as the carefully prepared display came into view. An orderly line was led around to it and everyone had a good look.

It took the form of a fence with two straggly tree, but with a lot of detailed spooky items - a tombstone, two skeletons, two lit jack-o-lanterns and even a spider in a web. It took some time to assimilate, there were so many spooky things. Even a big full moon had been added.



Michael was on hand to take any pictures with his Polaroid camera, and flashes briefly illuminated the scene as many children took the opportunity to have a permanent keepsake. Even Vincent and Catherine consented to have their photo taken, although no one could tell who was inside their capes.



When everyone had complimented the proud teens standing nearby, most of the adults left to return to the toddlers and a modest celebration in the dining hall. A few others joined Vincent and Catherine, with the children, to go to Peter's.

Arriving there, they had politely knocked on the door and a skeleton answered it. Peter had found a realistically painted black costume, which shone with a greenish iridescence in the dim light of the tunnels. His voice, which they all knew well, prevented any of the younger children from becoming frightened.



He beckoned them in and they passed through and up some stairs into his back yard.

There were oohs and ahhs as the children viewed the huge pumpkin patch awaiting them, where some truly huge vegetables were lit by neighbouring jack-o-lanterns. Samantha immediately placed herself at one side and used an old broomstick to make herself stand like a scarecrow.

Peter stood with the others and gathered them around him to tell them some traditional Hallowe'en stories. Father, given a seat of rough barn board to ease his hip, also contributed a few and the time passed swiftly.

Meanwhile, Vincent and Catherine put on their costumes and prepared for the main event, which would



be at midnight.

They waited out of sight until Peter rang a deep handbell, then made their way around the edge of the garden, in the deep shadows, wearing their cloaks over their costumes, to where a special display had been set up for them. Then they shed their cloaks and waited.

Then a witchy light was turned on, making the whole scene appear greenish, and two 'Great Pumpkins' were illuminated.



There were gasps and laughter from the children and whoops of joy as Vincent and Catherine, in their pumpkin costumes, approached them and held up their enormous pumpkins, almost overflowing with goodies. They proceeded to pass out small candy packets and small toys to the children.

Samantha joined them and laughed when she received a small plush pumpkin that squeaked. Several other children discovered their toys made noises and there was soon an impromptu band. Peter then turned on a hidden stereo and a somewhat uneven version of 'The Monster Mash' was sung - not too loudly because of the neighbours - punctuated by as many sound effects as the children could insert. Then followed 'Fats Waller's 'Dem Bones', 'Insomnia' and lastly the 'Ghostbusters' song.

By the end of the last song, everyone was hoarse and Peter brought out a tall tower of paper glasses and a large punch bowl. He immediately began filling the glasses and handing them out. The drink turned out to be a fizzy red combination that delighted everyone.



The first sip took Catherine back to a time many years ago, when she and Peter's daughter Susan had made this for their infrequent get togethers with some friends. She had forgotten about it completely. It was a mixture of cranberry juice, ginger ale and orange juice, as she recalled. She made a mental note to add that to Vincent's list of treats, since he seemed to be enjoying it immensely, gulping down several glasses.

But why was his throat dry? Had he been singing too? Why hadn't she noticed? Then she realized that with the costume head down, it was unlikely she could tell what he had been doing. He had only flipped it up to drink. She looked at him and he gave her a feral grin.

After that, everyone had said goodbye to Peter and trickled back by twos and threes into the tunnels.

Vincent and Catherine changed out of their costumes before they left and put on their cloaks. Peter promised to take the costume bags to Annabelle on his next visit.

Catherine gave him a hug. "Thank you for arranging such a wonderful party." Vincent added his praise for the decorations and punch.

"Oh, it was a pleasure," he told them. "I never see so many healthy children enjoying themselves in the normal course of things. And Susan living on the west coast means I don't even see my grandchildren much. I had forgotten how wonderfully rambunctious a good party is. I enjoyed it as much as they did."

The two ex-Great Pumpkins then left in their all-concealing, shimmering cloaks. Vincent didn't have his black cloak, having used the new one. It was the first time Catherine had seen him without it and it struck her as they were walking back into the tunnels.

"Even I don't need to wear two cloaks," he told her with a smile.

"I wonder what will Peter do with all those pumpkins?" Catherine mused

"I think we will see the ones which were not used as jack-o-lanterns moving into William's kitchen," Vincent guessed.

"Oh, pumpkin pie!"

"And pumpkin muffins, and pumpkin cake and pumpkin served with every meal possible," Vincent told her. "And he'll also toast the seeds. They're wonderful."

Catherine was silent for a moment. All this talk of pumpkins suddenly gave her an idea.

"Can we go out via the north end of the Park?" Catherine asked, suddenly.

"Certainly, Catherine. It's actually closer."

They travelled some tunnels she had never seen before, moderately well-kept, lit with dim lights, but not dark at least. They came to a brick wall and Vincent quietly shifted a stone to peer out. Sensing no one, he pulled on a large metal handle and a large section of the wall shifted, scraping softly over sand. They exited quickly through a curved culvert and emerged under a bridge. Vincent took her hand and led her onto a pathway snaking across a dark lawn.

Looking around to get her bearings, Catherine paused and then led him further north. He could see the glitter of a lake, and knew it was the Harlem Meer. He seldom came this far. As they approached it and then paused to stand at a railing and look over its dark waters, he gasped in astonishment.

The water was lit by a hundreds of jack-o-lanterns, set on small floating platforms.

"I'd almost forgotten about this," she confessed softly. "The Pumpkin Sail".



Vincent looked at the glowing pumpkins and hugged her close. “All the Hallowe’ens I’ve roamed the Park, I never knew about this.”

“And this year we are just a couple more visitors,” she remarked, looking at him, but unable to see anything under his hood. Which was the point of the capes, she reminded herself. It wasn’t so important now, since there seemed to be almost no one around.

They stood there for some time and watched the fantastically-carven shapes moving and bobbing to the gentle current in a kind of informal quadrille. It was restful, Catherine decided, after a rather hectic and noisy night.

Then they strolled around the now, almost-deserted Park, heading generally homewards. There were clear sounds of merriment in the great distance, making the evening seem less spooky and more human.

They found a bench to sit on and held hands, enjoying the peace and quiet and gazing at the moon, which was a nail paring this year. In their cloaks, they were almost invisible in the dim light.



When the autumn chill began to be felt, they made their way to the culvert, sad that their evening above had come to an end. But when they entered Vincent’s chamber, it was to the scent of spice and candles and Vincent took an appreciative deep breath. Catherine had arranged with William to have a light repast waiting for them - including several rock cakes.

“Another Hallowe’en to remember,” she commented after gobbling down a couple of ham sandwiches and eating one of the rock cakes, washed down with a generous sip of some fizzy Rosé.

Vincent smiled at her. “I don’t think I’ve ever enjoyed one Halloween so much.”

“Not even our first?” Catherine asked with small smile.

“I’ll never forget the pumpkin floatilla,” he told her, emphasizing the pun. “It was a wonderful evening. Thank you, Catherine.”

“Oh don’t thank me. I just bought the costumes. Peter did the rest. I had no idea what he had planned. He even bought the treats we handed out. I wanted to be surprised – and he certainly did that. I think he really enjoyed himself.”

“Yes. We don’t involve him often. An oversight. He deserves a special thanks. I’ll get the children to

write a joint thank-you card.”

“Excellent idea, Vincent. He’d love that.”

“But you know, Catherine, you’ve now set a new standard.”

“Oh, we’ll think of something. I’m glad I remembered the Harlem Meer. But right now I just want to relax.” She looked at him and he had no trouble discerning what she meant.

He said nothing more. They finished their wine, removed the remnants of their costumes and settled into his big bed with a joint sigh. Not much later, any concerns about Halloween, past or future, were completely forgotten in present joy.

END