

CONQUEST OF SHADOWS

by Babs Horne

(from MASQUERADES '93)

The filmy curtains fluttered gently in the breeze. From the softly lit room, a gentle light filtered out onto the shadowed balcony, high above the streets of Manhattan, giving an ethereal glow to the heads of the two seated figures.

The distinctive timbre of Vincent's voice floated out on the air.

"When I am weary, thronged with the cares of the vain day that tease as harsh winds tease the unresting autumn boughs, I still my mind at evening and put all else away but the image of my love, where all my hopes I house.

'The thoughts of her fall gently as the gentleness of snow, that after storm makes smoothness in the ways that are rough white with a hush of beauty over her heart they grow to the peace of which my heart can never hold enough.'

"That was beautiful, Vincent. You read so well. Would you like me to make some herbal tea, now?"

Vincent looked uneasy. "Thank you, Catherine, but I think I should be returning Below. Our time together is limited, but each moment is doubly precious."

Rising gracefully to his feet, Vincent drew her up with him, then with a swift hug, he was gone.

Catherine stood alone for a moment, a puzzled expression on her face. Vincent was usually reluctant to leave her, but on several occasions recently, she had sensed a fear in him. *'Now why should Vincent fear returning to the tunnels?'* Catherine shrugged, then entered her apartment, fastening the doors behind her.

Vincent raced through the tunnels until he reached the safety of his chamber.

Safety?' He looked warily over his shoulder, then sank onto the bed, whilst trickles of perspiration ran down his face.

'How long?' he wondered. How long before the nightmare presence returned to haunt him with memories of the past. The few remaining candles were flickering as they burned lower and strange shadows materialized on the walls. An icy chill ran down Vincent's spine and then, he saw it - the dark outline of nightmare - prancing hooves, tossing head, glowing eyes beneath long black lashes. Vincent drew his feet up onto the bed and pulled his body higher onto the pillows. He reached out for one of the heavy patchwork quilts, putting it high over his head. He lay there in the darkness, heart pounding, breath rasping, waiting in dread for the horrors to come.

'... It was cold - bitterly cold. A night for neither man nor beast. Indeed - the barely-breathing, rag-wrapped bundle lying amidst the garbage outside St. Vincent's Hospital bore slight resemblance to either.'

Beneath the heavy quilt, Vincent shivered. His blood ran ice-cold in his veins; sobs shook his body as he relived his abandonment and rejection. Finally, he threw back the cover in time to see the ebony mane tossing, as the nightmare vanished into the shadows. It was over - for this time!

Catherine sat on the edge of the bed, ruffling her hair with her hands. It was quite a while since Vincent had left so abruptly, yet she could still sense his unease. It was now affecting Catherine, herself. She looked over her shoulder, half expecting to see a shadowy form in the dim light of the one lamp left on. To her relief there was nothing to be seen but the familiar everyday objects.

"This is nonsense," she muttered, tossing back her hair and searching for the brush on the nightstand. After a vigorous brushing, she laid aside the brush and picked up the silver-backed mirror which her mother had given her.

Almost at once, she became aware of another presence in the room. Quickly replacing the mirror, Catherine jumped to her feet and spun around to face the presence she felt. She was alone.

'Pull yourself together,' she told herself. 'Just because Vincent is behaving strangely, doesn't mean that you have to as well.'

Turning off the light, Catherine climbed into bed, pulling the silken sheets over her head, hoping that sleep would not be long in coming.

'In the darkened room, amber eyes glowed and a silky ivory mane swung gently. A spiral of mother-of-pearl gleamed eerily as Unicorn swung his head in a weary gesture. Centuries of legend lay behind his kind, and there was no turning back from the path that lay ahead. For tonight, the oppression had ended and he could fade back into oblivion.'

Vincent's day had been long and weary, but he had welcomed his workload, Below. Keeping mind and body occupied had become an obsession, almost outweighing his desire to see Catherine. At last, washed, changed and somewhat refreshed, he started on his journey to Catherine's balcony.

'Nightmare was bored and petulant. Her duties gave her no pleasure. Each time she brought torment to this unique creature in his tunnel retreat, she became aware of a sympathy awakening within her. She had watched as he had endured loneliness and pain, because of his differences; seen him coerced into striking out and scarring his dearest friend - then endure the long years without him. Nightmare had come to realize the beauty of this gentle being and sensed his empathy with the woman from the Upper World, whom he visited with such frequency.'

'What did she look like? Nightmare decided to find out for himself and followed Vincent on dainty prancing hooves.'

Catherine was waiting to enfold Vincent in a tight embrace, burying her head against his shoulder. Vincent clasped her to him as if he would never release her again.

"Catherine ... know that whatever I am, I love you."

Catherine raised her head, green eyes meeting blue.

"Vincent, I know what you are to me. The kindest, more beautiful being that has ever been - and you are all that I need to love."

'Nightmare backed into the farthest corner of the balcony, shielding Vincent from sensing her presence.'

"Come, Vincent. Sit with me. I have felt as if something has been trying to come between us. Will you read to me, please?"

Vincent sank to the waiting cushions, pulling Catherine down to sit beside him. He took a slim, leather-bound volume from inside his jacket.

"I have felt that intrusion too, Catherine, but nothing can truly come between us. I found these lines for our reading, today."

Catherine pressed her head into Vincent's shoulder as he opened the book and began to read;

*'It was not in the winter,
Our loving lot was cast;
It was the time of roses --
We plucked them as we passed!*

*That churlish season never frowned
On early lovers yet!
Oh no - the world was newly crowned
With flowers, when first we met.*

*Tw'as twilight and I bade you go
But still you held me fast
It was the time of roses -
We plucked them as we passed.'*

Catherine's eyes filled with tears. "Why is everything that is beautiful, so sad, Vincent? Whenever you read such lovely words I feel I want to cry."

"Perhaps it is because we need both sunshine and rain to create a rainbow, Catherine."

"You have an explanation for everything. Things seem so right when we are together. I wish you could stay longer."

"No more than I, Catherine, yet, once again I must leave you."

Catherine began to feel uneasy again. "Not yet - please. I'm frightened. It's as if I'm being watched."

"Catherine, I too, have these feelings. Perhaps it is because of the nature of our bond. We become fearful of shadows - even our own. I must return Below. Please, go back into your apartment and secure the doors."

With his usual swift movements, Vincent rose and folded Catherine into a tight embrace.

"Sleep well, my love," and he was gone.

'Nightmare remained immobile as an ebony statue. Catherine obeyed Vincent's request, re-entering her apartment and locking the doors. An unexpected pang of sympathy struck Nightmare, then she wheeled swiftly to follow Vincent.'

In what had hitherto seemed the safety of his chamber, Vincent lay in dreadful anticipation, bathed in icy perspiration. How long would this torment continue? Even with closed eyes he could visualize the dark shape and glowing eyes as Nightmare approached his bed. His hands gripped the quilt on which he was lying, then with a groan, he turned to bury his face in the pillows; his curtain of hair falling across his trembling shoulders. Through the darkness, vague pictures formed in his inner vision.

'A slim figure pirouetted around his motionless form. He felt again the surge of adolescent desire as the delicate perfume floated in the air and blended with the acrid odours of smoke and wax. He was lost in wonder and disbelief, as dainty hands fluttered around his head, stroking his hair, and a soft form leaned against him with a movement at once provocative and innocent.'

The adult Vincent choked on a sob, knowing what was to follow;

'The compulsive clasping of the young Lisa's body, lost in the rapture of the dance, then the horrified reaction as she struggled to free herself from his embrace. Tightening his grip, his clawed hands ripped her flimsy dress and marred the exquisite creaminess of her skin.'

All that followed was indelibly printed in Vincent's memory; Lisa's screams; a hand on his shoulder; turning with claws poised to strike; then falling, sobbing into Father's arms.

All the horrors which he strove to suppress were laid bare, as Nightmare proceeded with her deadly task.

Catherine was aware that Vincent's soul was in torment. Even though she did not share the intensity of their empathic bond, she was aware of the anguish that held him in thrall. Closing her eyes, she summoned all her love for Vincent to send him her strength and reassurance. She stood behind the curtained balcony windows, resting her head against the frame, until she felt the tension slacken, and knew that Vincent had felt her enveloping love.

'Nightmare too, had sensed a power other than her own and, tiring of the persecution, turned away to return to the realm of her kind.'

Feeling reassured, Catherine wearily sought the comfort of her bed. Her eyelids drooped, but even in her state of exhaustion she felt the vague awareness of another presence. Forcing her eyes open, she met the amber gaze of ... what? Something strange, yet familiar; unknown, but knowing. Catherine turned away, too tired for conjecture and was soon lost in dreamless sleep.

'Unicorn gazed at the sleeping figure and gently shook his ivory mane in bewilderment. Why had destiny chosen him for this task? There were others of his kind, but the Elders had elected that he should fulfill the legends of the past. The dim light caught the gleam of the spiralled horn, as Unicorn turned and disappeared - his task unaccomplished.'

In what he had formerly considered the sanctuary of the tunnels, Vincent tried to keep his mind on the task at

hand. It was a constantly recurring job that needed very little concentration and Vincent found his thoughts returning to the events of the past nights. He realized how powerless he had become in the face of the memories that assailed his mind, and how only the strength of Catherine's love had pulled him back from the brink. How long could he tolerate this intrusion into the nightmares of his past?

Pausing to wipe the back of his hand across his brow he became aware of a trickle of blood and realized how tightly he had been gripping the section of rock which he had been replacing.

Vincent sighed, longing for the comforting feel of Catherine's arms around his body as he held her close; her head resting on his shoulder. To feel safe and loved, knowing that nothing could harm him whilst they stood within that magic ring of enchantment. He shook his head wearily, loosing a cloud of dust from his tawny hair. All he needed now was to be cleansed and rested and then to seek out Catherine. Turning his back on the pile of broken rocks, he made his way stumbling to his chamber.

Catherine lay on her bed, temples throbbing. It had been a day when almost everything had gone wrong. Papers had been misfiled, mislaid and misappropriated. All she craved now was Vincent's presence, his warm embrace and to hear the softly spoken words that could dispel all aches of mind and body.

The curtains floated gently across the unlatched balcony windows. Catherine felt the cool breeze fanning her cheeks and her eyelids blinked open. Almost at once she sensed another presence - nothing tangible, but she was definitely not alone.

The pinky-orange glow that seemed to be ever-present in the skies of New York filtered into the apartment. Catherine clutched Vincent's crystal where it lay against her smooth skin and as its myriad lights flashed across the room, she saw the ivory shape, spiral horn erect upon the splendidly-maned head. Her free hand reached for the bedside lamp and its dim glow revealed nothing but the familiar inanimate objects.

Catherine heaved a sigh of relief. *'Chandler, you are jumping at shadows. Remember what Vincent said.'*

The thought that Vincent might soon appear on her balcony sent Catherine rushing to the bathroom to splash her face with cold water. Now wide awake, she returned to her bedroom. Sitting on the bed, she reached for her hair brush and mirror. Quickly stroking the brush through her tangled hair she glanced into the mirror and froze, as the reflection of Unicorn appeared. It had hardly registered on Catherine's subconscious before another apparition appeared; coal black with flashing, ruby-red eyes and raven black mane.

'Nightmare had finally tired of taunting Vincent and became aware of Unicorn's existence. Her excitement grew as she stealthily followed him, never quite completing the journey, until now. At the sight of Catherine, jealousy raised its ugly head and she reared on her hind legs - jet black hooves flashing.'

'Unicorn hesitated, he knew what his destiny should be. He heard again the words he carried in his head; 'To be within the silver mirror and in her.' but the crystal around Catherine's neck flashed another message; 'This is the woman I love.'

'Unicorn rose on his powerful hind legs to protect Catherine. Nightmare retreated and hung her head in submission, then cast a provocative look at Unicorn, fluttering her long jet lashes. Something stirred within Unicorn - this could be his escape from legend. He approached Nightmare cautiously. She stretched out her long neck and gently nuzzled his ivory muzzle, ruby eyes meeting amber.'

'The die was cast; together the ebony and ivory shapes appeared to merge, vanishing into oblivion.'

Catherine drew a deep breath and closed her eyes before forcing herself to look into the mirror again, steeling herself for what she might see. As she raised the mirror she had a feeling of *'deja vu,'* but this time her skin

was unscarred and the face of her shoulder was ... beautiful!

"Vincent!" she cried and flung herself into his arms. "I was so afraid. I needed you so much."

"I know, Catherine, I felt your fear. Believe me, we were both in peril, but now, we are free."

Catherine tightened her embrace, then gave a little smile. "At least fear made you cross my threshold at last. Please, stay here, and read to me. I have a good collection of books and a whole tin of herbal tea! Please, Vincent."

Vincent reluctantly allowed himself to be pushed gently down on the edge of the silk-sheeted bed.

"Don't move," warned Catherine. "Tea will be ready in a few minutes. We both need something to calm our nerves."

Vincent closed his eyes, hardly daring to believe his torment was over, and that he was actually here, with Catherine, inside her apartment.

Catherine reappeared, carrying two mugs of steaming herbal tea and gripping a leather-bound book against her side with her arm. Handing Vincent his tea, she settled beside him, placing the book across her knees. Sipping the fragrant liquid, her head settled against Vincent's broad shoulder. Tawny hair and warm brown intermingled. His free arm gently circled her waist.

"What am I to read to you, my dearest Catherine?"

A mischievous smile flickered across Catherine's lips as she opened the book and gazed up into his clear blue eyes. " *'GREAT EXPECTATIONS'* please, Vincent. From the beginning!"

END