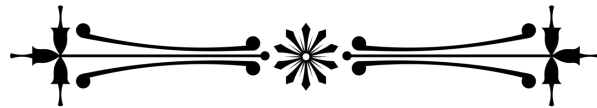


Another World, Another Time

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



The heavy steel door behind the grate opened with the familiar shifting sound, and Catherine stepped happily into the tunnel, pushing the lever to close the door behind her. The cheerful smile on her face revealed her inner excitement as her feet were leading her to the Home Tunnels.

She had closed her private legal practice three hours earlier, making her young assistant Jessica ecstatic, as she would have more time to prepare for the Halloween party she was going to attend later in the evening. *Samhain... the night when the walls grow thin*, Catherine thought, and her eyes twinkled in the dim tunnel light. Jessica couldn't have known that her employer (and a very generous one) had her own festive engagement, one of a quite... different kind.

It was the sixth year of her being Mrs Wells, albeit unknown to most of the world Above. And as each year, Halloween was a special night for Catherine because she could share a part of her world up top with the man she loved, but whose face on any other day or night of the year could not be seen by any of the people outside the tunnels. As every year, their *walk among the enemies* would include some familiar places, as well as some new ones.

At the thought of Vincent, she put a spring in her step and thrill coloured her cheeks pink. It was he who promised her something special on their outing that year. Catherine couldn't think of anything more joyful than going together trick-or-treating with the six-year-old Jacob and the four-year-old Charlie and spending some time as a family Above. However, knowing Vincent, she knew it would *really* be special.

Step by step, staircase after staircase, tunnel after tunnel, she was nearing home, or so she thought, because it seemed that tonight's journey was neverending. *I guess Kristopher is playing tricks with me tonight*, Catherine said to herself, a bit tense, when she crossed the threshold of yet another tunnel, and still her home was nowhere in sight.

The strange thing was, she didn't even recognise her surroundings anymore. After years of roaming the Tunnels (first as a visitor and then as an inhabitant), to her knowledge, she knew every corridor, every bend, every hidden place. But her certainty was waning with every wrong turn she made...

"I'm warning you, Kristopher," she called, irritated, wishing she had left her heavy briefcase full of case files in the office. "If I miss the Halloween outing with my family, I'll find you, and then you'll regret the day you crossed my path, Mr Artist!"

It didn't help to relieve her frustration since the only response she got was the echo of her own voice.

At last, she stopped, looking around and trying to spot at least one familiar sight. In vain, though, and before she would allow fear to take hold of her, she lifted her chin up and resolutely followed her instincts.



Catherine kept walking down the chilly tunnels, but her mind couldn't get rid of a single thought: Why hadn't Vincent set out to find her yet? He must have felt her confusion (and she had to admit, fear as well)... He would have never left her wondering aimlessly in such a state of her mind.

Never mind, her resolution to find the right way refused to dissipate, even when she suddenly hit a dead end - the tunnel ended, and there seemed to have not been any entrance. The only way was to go back.

"Damnit!" Catherine rarely cursed, but she couldn't help herself. The frustration kicked in properly.

She huffed with anger but turned around, determined to find another way. To her surprise, she found the way behind her shut-off, too.

"This is really too much, Kristopher!" she called, but to no avail. If Mr Gentian was playing with her, he must have decided to do so silently. "All right, Cathy, just don't panic." She tried to give herself some courage and keep an open mind.

Just as she was ready to give up, the wet wall in front of her suddenly lit up like a big gate illuminated by hundreds of fireflies.

"Narcissa?" Catherine whispered with suspicious eyes. Unable to resist, though, her hand slowly but bravely reached for the light. Some strange force was drawing her to it, making her step closer.

I've walked through a magic window before... What worse could happen?

Her question was soon to be answered, for the moment her hand touched the peculiar stream of light, she was swallowed by it, vanishing from the spot where she stood only a moment before...



Stone walls of a long corridor were the first thing she noticed on *the other* side. They reminded her of the secret tunnels in an ancient castle she'd visited in Europe with her father as a child. The corridor wasn't as wet as the tunnels below New York in winter, although the light torches were almost identical. The air was warm and filled with expectation.

Curiosity got the better of Catherine, so she walked on, hoping to find the end of the corridor and discover more. Upon reaching her destination, she saw a heavy wooden door with an old iron handle. It needed only a little effort to push it open and enter a spacious chamber beautifully decorated in the 18th-century style.

Mahogany table with shell-shaped and heavily ornamented chairs, a marble-top side table with a porcelain washbowl and a jug, a gilt mirror on one of the walls, a settee under a large window, covered with patterned velvet, and a massive walnut bed next to it, surrounded by heavy curtains. And a little extra to top it all: a narrow mahogany, intricately decorated bookcase filled with beautifully leather-bound volumes. Shakespeare, Machiavelli, Blake, Defoe, Molière, Newton, More, Milton, LaFontaine, Swift, Corneille, Schiller... Whoever owned this magnificent place had a tasteful way of occupying their guests in their leisure time indeed.

A guest chamber some long time ago, Catherine reckoned and curiously roamed the space. Despite the splendid, grand beauty around her, one thing was missing - the chamber was empty.

"Hello?" she called into the space, her eyes skimming every nook and cranny, looking for another door. "I'm sorry I'm intruding; I don't even know how I got here, but..."

The words got stuck in her throat when she finally found a door, and upon opening it, she saw a figure of a young woman dressed in a fine, crimson and black, lace-decorated robe, with black lace gloves and a black owl mask, keeping her face hidden.

"There you are! I almost gave up hope when you left... Oh, I am so glad... Welcome back!" exclaimed joyfully the woman, with a strong Irish accent. She eagerly reached out her hands in invitation. Catherine was stunned.

If she could trust her eyes, she was looking at Brigit O'Donnell.



"Brigit?? How...?" Catherine was shocked. Out of anyone she would have expected to see in such a place, Brigit O'Donnell would not be it.

"Oh, my dear! I thought I put you off by mentioning the count as a possible match for you and that you ran off to avoid him," the pretty Irish said, relieved it wasn't the case. "I won't talk of any potential husbands, suitors or men in general anymore if you don't wish so, but please, return to the Great Hall with me!" she begged, grabbing her friend's hand.

Only then did Catherine realise she was wearing a fancy robe and lace gloves as well. It was the same pastel-coloured robe she wore years ago for the Halloween party where she met Brigit for the first time. The only thing she was missing was her owl mask.

Whatever this is, a product of my imagination, another world or reality, at least I'm with someone I know... or at least, in a way...

"The Great Hall?" she asked then, confused.

"Yes! The ball is in full swing. You must rejoin us; there are way too many untaken gentlemen..." Brigit's eyes twinkled as a conspiratorial smile appeared on her cheerful face.

Amidst all her confusion, Catherine had to laugh. "I thought you said no more talk about men," she remarked, raising her eyebrows.

Brigit grinned, revealing a perfectly white set of teeth.

"My dear... One or two can't harm, can they? After all, a lady does need some male company in public."

She entwined her arm with Catherine's and led her out of the chamber. "Come to think of it... Did I mention the owner of this castle is a knight?"

When they entered the Great Hall, it was nothing like Catherine imagined. Massive, intricately decorated chandeliers illuminated a space that would make even King Louis XIV. envious. The marble dance floor had the shape of an enormously wide circle, separated from the area full of richly carved tables and ornamental high-back chairs only by several groups of ladies in exquisite, long robes, and gentlemen in their best attire, some in fancy uniforms. They stood impatiently as if uncertain whether to join the dancing guests or make the most of the food-filled tables nearby.

"It seems we've come at the right time," Brigit whispered to Catherine, nodding toward the other side of the hall, with a smile. Her companion looked in the suggested direction, and suddenly, her mouth went dry.

"That's impossible...", she whispered in awe, more to herself than anyone else.

"Oh, I know, dear," Brigit remarked quietly. "No one knows why he looks this way... He never speaks about it, but I guess, with his fortune and being one of the King's favourite knights, no one would even dare to ask. Besides, he's well-educated, intelligent, generous and a great swordsman. And he regularly gives food and clothes to the poor. On several occasions, he accompanied me on my trips to the poor quarter. The King might not have eyes everywhere, but he's got his best man to see and act for him." She leaned closer to Catherine and smiled. "Between you and me, I think he looks rather striking, don't you?"

The question was pointless, for the man Catherine was looking at was exactly that - striking. He was tall, strongly built, and broad-shouldered, which was clearly visible even through the layers of linen shirt with frills, black vest and knee-long black coat. The long black trousers (he obviously didn't care for breeches like all the other men around) and knee-high boots covered his long, strong legs. However, it was the man's face that elevated Catherine's heart rate...

“Vincent??” she whispered incredulously.

”You know him?” Brigit was surprised.

Catherine blushed and flashed a smile. “No... I mean...” She was racking her brains for a plausible explanation. “People talk about him, you know...”

“Of course, they do. People rarely accept something different without endless debates. I wish they would simply let the man live and follow his good example.” Brigit shook her head but then smiled again.

“Is he... Does he live... alone?” Catherine asked, trying to sound casual.

“Of course, he does. Can you imagine any of these stuck-up so-called ladies ever falling for a decent and honest man?” Her sarcasm made her friend chuckle. “Come, I’ll introduce you,” Brigit added with a smile.

By the time the two women approached the man in question, he had his eyes already firmly set on them. To be precise, on *one* of them, for Catherine caught his eye the moment he saw her across the hall. It wasn’t just her beauty that drew him to her; he suddenly felt a strange pull somewhere at his heart, making him wish to be closer to her...

“Sir Vincent? First, please, allow me to compliment you on a wonderful evening. We are very grateful for your generosity.” Brigit smiled. “And second, allow me to introduce you to my dear friend, Lady Catherine.” This introduction earned her a confused look from the mentioned lady. “As I told you earlier, she is spending some time with me; she has never been to our lovely county. Catherine, this is Sir Vincent, King’s most loyal knight and the master of this enchanting castle.”

“It is my greatest pleasure meeting you,” the knight spoke with a slight nod, his soft, gravelly baritone making the young woman shiver.

Catherine couldn’t find words. The situation was so surreal that she wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry. The fact that Brigit called her *Lady* Catherine was confusing but not as big a shock as the man standing in front of her. He looked and talked like *her* Vincent, and yet, he was a stranger, as well. Obviously, in this world, he didn’t know her, so how come she knew him? And how was it possible that he lived among people in the world Above without being hunted or at least ridiculed? The walls not only grew thin in this world; they were non-existent, it seemed.

For a moment, she was under his spell, but something reminded her that this wasn’t her Vincent after all. Or was it?

”I didn’t mean to make you speechless, my lady,” Sir Vincent spoke when the silence stretched. A small smile on his unique face made Catherine relax, and she regained her speech.

”I apologise, sir. I’m just a little overwhelmed,” she said, smiling.

“I can understand that,” he replied. “I don’t often visit such public events, so I feel a little overwhelmed myself.”

Brigit noticed Catherine’s tenseness and promptly came to her friend’s rescue by changing the topic. ”We’ve known each other for a while now, Sir Vincent, so we can talk straight. Tell me, how many of these people have ever done anything good for the society?”

“Careful, my friend,” he replied with an amused smile, softening his leonine features. “Lady Catherine might think you are a hypocrite. After all, you accepted my invitation to the ball, sharing the same space with them.”

"That's different," Brigit argued. "I accepted because of *you* because you are my friend, and I found it appealing to share the same space with *you*." She winked, making him chuckle. "And it was just an added bonus that I could bring my lovely friend with me."

Sir Vincent glanced at Catherine, noticing her keen gaze, and his heart skipped a beat. He had known her only for a few minutes, but it felt like knowing her for years. There was something in her look, deep intensity revealing much more than met the eye.

"To answer your question," he said then, looking back at Brigit. "I'm afraid most of these people have never done anything beneficial for anyone apart from themselves."

"Why have you invited them then?" his friend asked with interest.

"Because I believe that people can change for the better."

"How?"

"By example," he explained. "And if I can make at least one person stray from their path and make them do something selfless, I shall not live in vain."

Brigit shook her head, smiling. "That's all very beautiful and noble, but I'm afraid you live in a fantasy world."

"Perhaps, but as I know you, that world is not so unfamiliar to you either."

That rendered his friend speechless, and they shared a quiet laughter as she had to admit he was right.

The playful tone of Sir Vincent's voice was enchanting, and Catherine caught herself more and more intrigued by this seemingly strange man. Her heart wasn't singing as it always did when she was near *her* Vincent, but there was something she couldn't deny - with every thought Sir Vincent expressed, she found him more and more similar to his double in the other, *real* world. The kindness, his gentle manners and generosity of his heart, the moral compass, the respect with which he treated everyone and everything. And the voice, *the* voice that was undeniably his.

"Are you enjoying your stay in our county, Lady Catherine?" Sir Vincent involved her in the conversation.

She liked that he didn't inquire about her opinion of his castle.

"I am still to see more of it," she replied after a moment of hesitation, "but I like what I've seen so far. I like it very much..."

His eyes smiled at her, and for a second, she forgot he was a stranger.

"Goodness!" Brigit suddenly exclaimed. "I completely forgot that I was supposed to take a few books to the school for the poor children. If you excuse me..."

"Now, at this hour?" Catherine asked, bewildered.

A conspiratorial smile on Brigit's face ruled out any discussion about the matter.

"I'm going there early morning, and I still haven't chosen which books to take. What do you think, my friend?" She turned to the knight. "Would *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels* present a satisfactory reading material for the little souls?"

"I would stick with *Robinson*. Visiting Brobdingnag, Laputa or meeting the Yahoos might prove a bit demanding for their young understanding," Sir Vincent answered knowingly with a smile, perfectly understanding Brigit's desire to leave the scene.

"Mr Defoe it is, then! Thank you very much for the invitation to this magnificent evening, my friend. It has been a pleasure as always," Brigit said, then turned to Catherine. "I will send the carriage back immediately after I'm home."

"No need," the leonine man intervened gently. "My carriage is at your friend's disposal whenever she wishes."

There could not have been two more different reactions to that statement than those of Catherine and Brigit. The latter one's reply was a beaming smile at the host of the evening; Catherine was confounded, astonished at the inconspicuous boldness of *this* Vincent. However, the prospect of spending some more time with him wasn't so unappealing to her. *Maybe he is some alternative version of Vincent in this world...*

"Brilliant!" Brigit remarked, obviously satisfied with the way her little trick worked. "I shall see you later tonight, Catherine. Sir Vincent." She nodded in his direction, and still smiling, she floated away, leaving them alone.

Silence befell the two newly acquainted, but it didn't last long. Catherine never had issues with starting a conversation with people. This skill hadn't deserted her even now as she - taking a deep breath - turned to her companion and saw him smiling.

"I always knew Brigit is a clever woman, but sometimes she still surprises me with *how much* clever. Or should I rather say cunning?" she remarked with a chuckle.

"I think it's safe to say *both*," Vincent replied, his voice coloured with genuine fondness.

The dance floor in front of them was filled with couples, swaying to the rhythm of the romantic violin and flute music played by a group of musicians on the opposite side of the hall. Catherine's eyes clouded with melancholy as she couldn't help but remember the Great Hall in the Tunnels, the Winterfest, her first dance with Vincent...

"Music evokes different emotions in people," she suddenly heard Sir Vincent's soft voice. "What brings joy to one person can be meaningless to someone else. Or awaken longing."

He said the last sentence with such certainty that Catherine was sure he could feel her emotions the same way as the Vincent of her world. Despite her not feeling him, the Bond was there. "Sometimes, when I wish to escape people, I go for a quiet walk in my gardens." He leaned slightly to her and asked with a deep, quiet voice. "Would you like to see them?"

Catherine dared to look into his warm eyes, and he knew the answer before she said the words. "I would love to," she heard herself say. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she heard a gravelly voice whisper *Always...*



The castle gardens were enchanting, even at the late night hour. The darkness itself couldn't veil the lush greenery and alleys of trees of various kinds lining the pathways zig-zagging the way from and back to the grand back doors of the castle.

"This is truly a magnificent place, Sir Vincent," Catherine paid the master of the house a genuine compliment. "And it has such a warm and welcoming atmosphere..."

He lowered his eyes with a smile. "Thank you for your kind words," he said, before looking up again. "The compliment belongs to my ancestors, though, especially my great-grandfather. He wanted to create a place of comfort and peace for everyone who would need it, not only the wealthy people. "

"And you follow in his footsteps as I see," Catherine remarked warmly, remembering the warm smiles of the servants they passed on their way to the garden. The respect and fondness for their master were engraved on all of their faces.

"We must treat people with respect and care if we expect them to treat us the same way. It is a simple thought but it has served me well in my life."

They went silent, and Vincent noticed the pensive expression in his companion's pretty face. Already a while ago, he was astonished to find out that he could *feel* her emotions and know what was on her mind.

"When I speak of my ancestors, I mean those of my adoptive father," he explained then, making her look at him. "I know that my appearance causes bewilderment and curiosity among people, sometimes even resentment." His sapphire-blue eyes grew sad. "The truth is, I do not know the reason for the way I look. My father found me as a newborn child, abandoned at the doors of a monastery he went to visit that day. He gave me the chance to live and loved me like his own son. I owe him my life and everything I am today. I was born... and I survived. That is all."

Catherine observed him intently, hearing the sadness, but also the gratitude in his voice. *I was born... and I survived...* Those words hit her with the same intensity as they did the very first time she heard them all those years ago. Moreover, his love for his adoptive father was palpable, though he only said a little about him.

I wouldn't be surprised if his father was called Jacob...

"It must have been hard, making people see the man in you and not focus on your... being special," she remarked with compassion. Sir Vincent saw genuine care in her emerald eyes.

"Sometimes it was, but then sometimes it wasn't. When my father took me in, it caused quite a sensation. But the more time had passed, the less people focused on my uniqueness. Perhaps if my father wasn't so respected among people and at the court, it would have all ended very differently."

How lucky this Vincent was! Catherine's real world was never so generous with anyone different from the rest. If anything, she would have expected a world of the past even more repulsed and feeling threatened by someone like Vincent out there, surely hunting him. But this one... How she wished this and her worlds could merge into one and change everything!

They were just passing a little pond surrounded by several statues of cupids.

"This used to be one of my favourite places," he said with a fond smile, his gloved hand gently touching the head of one of the plumpy messengers of love. "I imagined these were my friends since I had only a few when I was a child, mostly the children of the castle servants. I spent hours in their silent company."

"Do you have many friends now?" Catherine asked.

A sad smile settled on his face. "True friendship is a very delicate thing. It doesn't demand favours, nor is it conditional. That's why it is rare but the more appreciated. I count myself blessed with a few of such friends."

Catherine had the feeling that maybe *her* Vincent had much more luck in finding friends that this one did. The knight was free to roam the world Above without restraint or danger, but was that enough? Did it come at some cost he didn't wish to reveal?

Still contemplating, she absently stroked the head of the nearest cupid statue, smiling at the sight of his sweet child's face.

"Does it remind you of home, lady Catherine?" Sir Vincent broke the silence between them when he noticed the melancholic expression in her eyes as they roamed the exquisite garden features. Catherine jerked her head in his direction, caught by surprise.

"Not at all," she remarked with a nervous laugh. "I was just thinking how someone I know would love sharing this night with me... with *us*," she corrected herself hastily and flashed a smile at her companion. He nodded and walked on by her side, deep in thought.

With each step, her heart was growing heavier. How she longed to enjoy every minute of this extraordinary adventure, the company of this man! The man she knew so much and at the same time, not at all... He had Vincent's exotic looks, his hypnotic voice, his majestic presence, his kindness and wisdom, and yet... It was Vincent and also wasn't. No matter how hard she tried, her heart was mute.

He seemed to have read her thoughts - *can he feel what I feel like the real Vincent?* - because the next time she looked into his eyes, they were sad.

"I apologise, Sir Vincent," she said with guilt. "I realise I'm not the best companion tonight."

"It is the company's fault, not yours," he replied, a veil of sadness colouring his gravelly but soft voice. "The man you are thinking of is a very lucky one, truly... blessed..."

Blessed... That one word forced Catherine to halt and look at him again. Her hand suddenly had its own will and reached for his arm to stop him.

He didn't dare to look her in the eyes; his own eyes would reveal too much of the feeling that had been growing in his heart from the moment he met the woman standing beside him. Something inexplicable within his heart was pulling him to her with a force he couldn't resist, one that he hadn't known in all his life...

Her hand slowly but without restraint moved toward his cheek. The moment it made contact with his stubbly skin, Vincent closed his eyes with a sigh. His resolution to control his emotions crumbled way too easily.

Catherine felt a familiar sensation in her heart as her breath caught when her thumb gently traced the knight's cheekbone. *The same feel... the same warmth...* Her head started spinning; her confusion grew even more as his deep-set sapphire-blue eyes finally found hers again. What she saw in them almost made her cry.

This isn't possible... It can't be! Vincent...

Before she could surrender totally, the sound of someone's footsteps warned them of a presence nearby, interrupting the tense moment between them. They were obviously not the only ones craving a bit of peace in fresh air.

They abruptly stepped away from each other, as Catherine quickly stepped into the shadow of the closest tree, pulling her companion with her. Her hands still rested on his forearms while she secretly watched a young couple pass by, the woman giggling at something her man whispered in

her ear. Unaware of her effect on Sir Vincent, she didn't notice his broad chest suddenly rising and falling much faster than before. His hands slowly and cautiously closed around her.

Vincent had never felt a touch of a woman other than friendly or motherly. When she looked into his darkened eyes, she realised the truth, suddenly feeling mesmerised as well. And yet, her hands had no intention of behaving rationally at that moment. Whatever the sense was telling her, her heart whispered something else.

"I... I don't understand..." Catherine whispered, unable to look away from his eyes, despite her confusion.

Sir Vincent tilted his head a bit, unsure about the meaning of her words.

"I've only just met you, and yet I've known you for so long," she explained, gasping with despair and shaking her head. It didn't seem to confuse the leonine man, since a gentle smile appeared on his face before he replied.

"To see the world in a grain of sand and Heaven in a wild flower, to hold Infinity in your palm and Eternity in an hour..."(1) Our perception of what we feel can change anything, even time."

Feel? Yes, Catherine's feelings had been shifting towards the man in whose arms she was still lingering. Strong, warm, reassuring arms, ready to take what was waiting for them.

But I'm in love with Vincent! This can't be happening!

Her mind was reeling. He even quoted Blake! How was she to separate reality from this fiction?

And then it came - a memory in her mind, one of a sweet summer day... Little Jacob running around the garden, chased by his brother Charlie. The happy giggling made her smile, but her heart skipped a beat the moment when someone else came into view - sitting on the roofed terrace with a book in his lap and watching the boys play was Vincent... *Her* Vincent. Larger than life, warm, comforting, loving... The smile on his face revealed the joy, the gratitude, the pride in leaving his footprints in time in the form of his own children.

It almost caught her unprepared as he suddenly looked (what seemed) directly at her. His smile got wider, and in his eyes, Catherine saw the sparkle of heat that ignited her heart almost ten years ago. This was the Vincent she knew, the one she loved, the one she *wanted*...

"I... I can't..." she started, swiftly returning to the present. "I'm sorry..."

One look in her eyes told the knight everything there was to say. They were filled with compassion and guilt... guilt of awaking hope in him when there was none.

"As I said, he is blessed," Sir Vincent replied quietly, not needing any explanation.

The first stroke of midnight from somewhere near made Catherine jerk. She stepped back from him but held his hand.

"I won't forget you," she said softly. "You are a very special man, sir, and I don't mean your appearance. And even though you maybe see it differently, you are blessed, too, in many other ways, just as are those who have the privilege to know you." Her hand slowly released his. "Be well..."

The slow chimes of midnight resounded in her ears as she ran away from the garden back to the palace, eager to return to her world. The man she had just said goodbye to quietly and motionlessly watched her silhouette disappear inside. Against his will, the corners of his mouth turned upwards.

"Blessed..." he whispered and turned his eyes up toward the sky, searching for the moon, suddenly feeling light and warm at heart.

After Catherine ran into the palace, she didn't think of anything but leaving this world and returning to her family, to Vincent. Then it struck her.

Return... but how? Where shall I find a window to my world?

The only way she could think of was to retrace the way that led her to the palace, going back to the guest chamber, through the corridor, hopefully finding what she was looking for. Just as she had left the Great Hall, the last stroke of midnight rang in her ears, along with a different sound.

Catherine... Catherine...

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"Catherine..."

Her eyes flew open, and she gasped from relief at the sight of the man leaning over her while she sat in the robust high-back chair.

"Vincent!"

She was unable to contain herself, shooting off from the chair and falling into his arms in a tight embrace.

"I'm here," he whispered soothingly into her hair. Then she pulled back from him, and her joy of seeing him was palpable.

"You have no idea how happy I am to see you!" she proclaimed, and her hand reached for his cheek to stroke it.

This time, as she traced the planes of his face, she felt everything. The fire burned bright, never to be extinguished. On impulse, she kissed him.

"I don't know what you dreamed about, but I like the outcome of it," Vincent remarked with a chuckle when they pulled apart.

"Dreamed?" Catherine mumbled, still in a daze. Suddenly she realised what he had just said. "I was... *dreaming*?"

"I came to see if you are ready for our Halloween night and found you asleep in my chair," he explained, caressing her hair.

Finally, it all made sense to her, and it made her feel sad at the same time. In her dream, she travelled to another world, in another time, and saw what could be, only to find out it was all in her imagination. People will still have to learn to accept differences without prejudice. Something buried deep within her told her they might never learn to do so.

"Ready..." Catherine repeated quietly, then looked down and noticed she was wearing the fancy dress she wore on the first Halloween she walked with Vincent *Above among the enemies*. The same dress she wore in her dream.

"For you, I'm *always* ready," she said with a smile, her heart truly singing this time.

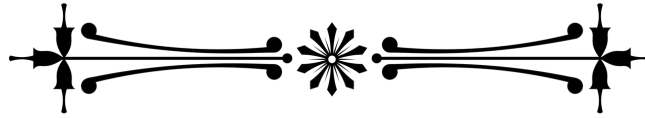
"Good," Vincent replied, satisfied and took her by the hand. "Before we take the boys trick-and-treating, I have a surprise for you."

"I know. You said this Halloween will be special." The thrill in her eyes filled his heart with joy. He never ceased to wonder how emotionally invested she got in everything that concerned him. Not even time could lessen the strong bond of love between them.

"It is always special with you," he stated, kissing her hand.

"You haven't changed a bit, my friend. The same charmer as when I met you for the first time on the masked ball. I truly believe you have sailed with Theseus a long time ago." Their voice with a prominent Irish accent, coming from the chamber entrance was unmistakable, and Catherine turned around sharply.

If she could trust her eyes, she was looking at Brigit O'Donnell...



Is all that we see or seem but a dream within a dream?
- Edgar Allan Poe -

(1) William Blake: *Auguries of Innocence*