

FORESHADOW

A.N.D

Father eyed the huge sewer rat with loathing. The rodent glared back at him with an equal lack of affection. For a moment he toyed with the idea of simply beating it to death, but the memory of Vincent's 10 year old face raised in hopefulness intruded. For it was little Vincent who had found the injured rat, and brought it to him to "fix."

Rats! Father thought as he reached for the iodine again. Why can't he find a nice little kitten or something? This is almost worse than when he found the snake a dog had bitten. Mary still isn't over the shock!

Beady little eyes watched with suspicion as Father's hand approached. Split seconds later that hand retreated, saved from a nasty bite only by the padding in its rough fingerless glove.

"That's enough out of you!" Father shouted, reaching backwards...

Some time later, Vincent slunk back into the room and tentatively approached his parent, who was hunched over behind the desk.

"Father?" he asked timidly. "Is it gonna be okay?"

"Is what—oh, the rat." Father didn't dare look up from the cane he was polishing and meet those big blue eyes. "I'm afraid that it was hurt too badly to fix, Vincent."

The little boy nodded. Not all of the long line of injured animals he had brought home had survived, and he had learned to accept that fact. "Shall I bury it?" he offered.

"Oh, no--I took care of that for you," Father said, far too quickly. "Vincent, I want to talk to you about your habit of bringing animals to me."

"You always taught us to take care of anything in need, Father," came the ready response.

"Well, yes..."

"And you told me how proud you were of me when we fixed the wing on that bird," Vincent rushed, cutting him off.

"Well, yes, bu-"

"And you said it was a good thing that I brought that fox to you, the one from the park with a broken leg."

"Well, ye--"

"And when I first brought that puppy down you said it was a nice change from bringing you tunnel bats and--"

"Vincent, stop interrupting me! " Father thundered, interrupting in turn. "Yes, I taught you to be kind and considerate to all things. And I am happy that you apply that teaching. But some of the animals you bring me--bats, rats, snakes--"

"I told Mary I was sorry about the snake," muttered Vincent, digging a toe into the carpet.

"That's not the point! The point is, not every hurt thing you find in the park should be brought down here!"

"Just some things," Vincent, suddenly quiet, told his boots.

"Vincent, some animals simply don't belong in a community, even for the short time it takes them to heal. Animals that carry disease more than others, like rats or bats..."

Vincent nodded, still staring at his footgear. "Some things shouldn't be helped," he whispered. "Nobody wants to help them. They should just be left to die." He suddenly raised his head and nailed Father with his eyes. "Isn't that what some people said about me?"

Father gasped. "Vincent, it's not the same thing!"

"Isn't it?" Vincent retorted. "I was left out to die. Nobody wanted to help me cause I was diffrunt. Ezra says even some people down here didn't want to help me. Don't I belong in a com-communiny?"

"Yes, you do!" Father snapped, suddenly sweeping his strange son into his lap for a hug. "And don't let anyone tell you anything different!"

"Then what's the diffrunce 'tween helping a fox and a rat?"

Father sighed. No sense in trying to curb the boy if he was going to take every injured thing he found personally to heart. For a split second he even almost regretted what he had done to the rat.

"You're right, Vincent. There is no difference. And," he added, tapping Vincent on the nose for emphasis, "I am very, very proud of you for taking such interest in things that are weak and in need of our help."