

ONCE AND FUTURE RACCOON

A.N.D

Mouse sat among the other children, listening raptly as Vincent read *THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING* to them.

He loved to hear Vincent reading tales of adventure almost as much as he loved tinkering with things. Fortunately, nobody ever yelled at him for listening to Vincent. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for his other hobby.

In fact, this was the first time he'd been able to listen to Vincent for a while, as he had been confined to his chamber by Father for a week, for breaking into a construction site and looting some wood for Cullen to carve.

Mouse hadn't quite understood what all the fuss was about — they had lots and lots of boards at the site, and Cullen had wanted just a few for his latest project. But it didn't matter now. He was free again, and Father and Vincent loved him again, and he loved them.

Vincent finished his chapter and told them all gently that it was time to go to bed. There was a general groan from the listeners, and assorted pleas to read '*just one mere chapter, Vincent,*' or '*just one more page please!*'

"That is what you all said a chapter ago," Vincent reminded them with a smile. "I'll read to you again tomorrow night, I promise. Now, good night, and go to bed."

Mouse shuffled off reluctantly with the others, heading for his distant chamber. After the last week, he was in no hurry to get there and welcomed the diversion when he saw Jamie leaning sulkily against the tunnel wall ahead.

Jamie was fun, and he was glad that she had been brought down by the helper who had found her. He smiled at her, but she continued to pout and kick aimlessly at loose rocks on the floor.

"*It's not fair!*" she burst out as he drew near. "I hate being told what to do and when to go to bed, like I was a little kid!"

The adjustment to an ordered society was hard to make for someone who had lived for four years in the streets Above as a runaway.

Mouse shrugged. "Everybody follows rules."

"They're *stupid* rules!"

Well, Mouse agreed with that, but he couldn't think of a way around them.

“Besides, we're not little kids anymore. We're 12. We're almost teenagers, and that's practically grown up!”

Mouse considered that logic inescapable, but if she didn't stop yelling, Father was going to come get them both. “Jamie come with Mouse?”

She considered the offer. “Where?”

“My chamber. We can talk. Father ask, we say you look at gizmos, too tired to walk back. Sleep over.”

Jamie smiled at him and said simply, “Okay!”

They bounced onto his bed and talked for hours on all sorts of subjects, including the impending Mid-Winter Feast.

Mouse wanted to give Father a very special present, so Father would like him and not yell at him anymore. But he didn't know what Father might want. He posed the question to Jamie, who thought for a moment.

“Y'know,” she told him. “Father doesn't scold you because he doesn't like you. He gets upset because you keep stealing stuff from Above, and if you're caught up there, he can't help you. He only wants to keep you out of trouble.”

Mouse was horrified. “Don't steal! *Take!* Stealing's wrong. Only take from places won't miss it. Don't ever steal from people, ever!”

Jamie sighed and went back to the original question. She liked Mouse a lot, and she knew he wasn't stupid, but he never could seem to grasp the concept of private property as opposed to personal property.

“Okay. I did overhear Father saying something to Vincent once. He said he missed all the colors you can see Above, and he wished Vincent could see them.”

Mouse was confused. “Can see color down here. White candles, brown walls, black shadows.”

“Not like that, Mouse. Bright colors, like you see in the Park in the day. Colors like yellow and red and green and blue. Father said he missed those kinds of colors.”

A sudden thought struck her. “Hasn't he ever been Above?”

“Can only go at night. Topsiders might hurt.”

“Not Vincent - Father. Hasn't he ever gone back up?”

“Doesn't like Above. Doesn't want to leave Vincent.”

“Well, that's the thing you want, anyway. Find Father something with lots of colors in it, like a quilt or a picture or something. After I heard that, I found Vincent the perfect present, but I need Winslow's help to get it for him.”

“What?”

“It's a stained-glass window, all green and yellow. It's in a building with a big 'Condemned' sign out front, and Winslow says that if it's still there the night before they start to wreck it, he'll help me bring it down here.”

“How come Winslow helps you take from buildings and yells at Mouse?”

“Because it's not the same thing.”

“Is too!”

“Is not! If the window is still there the night before they wreck the building, that means that the people who own it don't want to keep it. That means it's trash and we can take it. But if we took it now, then it would be stealing because the owners might be meaning to rescue it for themselves -- oh, never mind!” Jamie could tell not a word was being understood. “It's really late, let's go to sleep.”

That night was a pleasant interlude of companionship for Mouse; the calm before the storm. His new invention, a drilling machine, had failed miserably when he had shown it to the others the next day.

Everybody had laughed at him. Even Vincent and Jamie had smiled, and it cut him to the quick.

He'd run away from them all, and was stomping angrily through the Park. Stupid machine! He kicked a rock hard along the path. When it stopped rolling, he ran up to it and kicked it even harder.

Stupid, stupid people! Run, kick. He hated everybody. Kick, kick, run and kick again. He never wanted to see another person as long as he lived!

The rock flew off into the gathering darkness, striking something hard. *Not even Vincent!* He ran off after the rock. *Not even Jamie!*

He could just make out the dim shape of the rock in the shadows under a tree. It had been caught in the roots, and he nudged it out with his toe to kick it again.

But instead of rolling, it squeaked and grabbed him.

Mouse was so startled that he lost his balance and fell, sitting abruptly down to face the thing under the tree. It was a little raccoon, just barely out of babyhood, and it didn't look healthy.

It was very thin, except for a badly swollen hind leg. What if he had hit it with the rock? Mouse felt terrible. He had never meant to hurt anybody, but he was always getting into trouble.

He scrambled in his pockets for a couple of cookies he'd saved from lunch and offered one to the little creature, which grabbed it and turned it over in its tiny hands, then

started nibbling along the edges. Hoping that it would be too occupied with the food to object, Mouse gently picked it up.

Once it was in his arms, he saw that whatever damage had been done to it was not his fault. It was covered in scratches and cuts, and there were punctures on its back that looked like a bite. Perhaps somebody's dog, being exercised in the Park, had found and attacked it.

Father had always told the Tunnel people that they had to help anyone in trouble. Mouse knew that if anyone could save the little animal, Father could. He settled it gently into a deep pocket then gave it the other cookie to keep it quiet.

Halfway to Father's chambers, doubts came to him. When Vincent and Father talked about helping people, maybe they just meant people. Maybe they wouldn't care about a raccoon. Maybe they'd tell him he shouldn't have brought it down. None of the others had pets.

Mouse thought of the humiliating events of the afternoon. Worst of all, maybe they'd laugh at him. He came to an abrupt decision.

He'd take the raccoon down to his own chamber and hide it there and take care of it himself. He could borrow books of Fathers to read about how to feed it and bandage it, and Jamie could help him get the stuff he needed. Cheerful again, Mouse changed course and headed for home.

He made it a nest on his worktable out of some cleaning rags and a cardboard box. It had been frightened by the jostling it got in his pocket, and bit him several times as he pried it out of his pocket and shoved it in the box.

Mouse folded one of the flaps on the top of the box over, making a little cave for the raccoon to hide in. It crawled into a dark corner and curled up.

Mouse filled a dish with water and gently put it into the box, then went to see Father. His hands were bleeding, but he didn't mind. He would pay lots of attention while Father fixed him up, so he could come back and do the same for his new pet.

Father fussed and fumed when he saw Mouse's injuries, but he was gentle as he washed the wounds clean and carefully bandaged him. Mouse told him he'd been bitten by a dog when he had gone Above.

"You should have known better than to tease a loose dog," Father muttered irritably, then added in kinder voice, "Dog bites can be dangerous. I'm going to put some iodine on this, so it doesn't become infected."

Mouse whimpered as the disinfectant stung, but Vincent was there and held him and stroked his hair.

To take his mind off the pain, Vincent reread to Mouse the chapter on King Arthur he had read to the rest of the children earlier, and Mary, who had stopped in to see Father, brought him a sandwich to make up for his having missed the common dinner.

When they were through, Mouse asked Father to give him some of the iodine, to put on his hands in case he got oil or grease on them before they healed.

Vincent ruffled his hair and told him he was a brave boy, and even Father smiled and told him he was pleased to see Mouse taking such responsibility for himself.

Mouse trotted down several levels back to his chamber and checked on the little raccoon. It was still alive and looked beadily back at him from its corner.

"Hi," he told it. "Here. Dinner."

He put half his sandwich next to the water bowl. The little animal limped out to investigate, and he reached a bandaged hand to it.

"Dog bites dangerous," he said very seriously. "Mouse give stuff so not get infected." The raccoon squealed, bit and squirmed as he treated it. "I know. Hurts. Sorry."

"Mouse?" Jamie's voice echoed from his door. "Who are you talking to?"

Mouse jumped and pushed the raccoon back into the box. "Nobody."

Jamie came in, "I wanted to tell you I was sorry I laughed at you this aftern -- *Hey! What's this?*" She gestured at the little nose peeking out over the box top, scolding furiously.

"Nothing," Mouse lied desperately. He shoved the nose back into the box and tried not to flinch as he was bitten again.

Jamie pushed up. "It's a *raccoon!* What are you doing with a raccoon kitten?"

"Not a kitten."

"Well, a cub, then, or whatever they call them. Where did you get it?"

"In the Park. Dog bit it. Please, Jamie, don't tell!"

"Are you going to keep it?"

Mouse hunched down and looked at the floor. "Yeah. Please don't tell."

Jamie was interested. "I won't. I promise."

Mouse lit up and grinned at her. "Our secret!"

The little animal healed and thrived under Mouse's inexpert care. What he lacked in learning, he made up for in concern, and the little creature found itself with all the food it could want, even if chipped ham and cookies were not what it had been used to in the wild.

Mouse grew fonder and fonder of his pet. When the others laughed at a failed invention, the little creature was always there to cuddle with him. When one of the adults scolded him for “taking” from Above, the raccoon would nuzzle him and demand attention, taking his mind off their anger.

It was always there when he needed a little uncritical love and understanding, like a knight in furry armor.

In fact, one night when Jamie was visiting, and she yelled at him, the raccoon had bristled and chattered angrily at her. It would even defend him just like just like... *King Arthur*, from Vincent's and Father's stories!

So Mouse and Jamie solemnly christened the animal “Arthur” one night, with a little spring water and had a feast of cake (which Arthur shared) afterward.

Arthur remained Mouse's constant companion and, to Mouse's delight, seemed as interested in machinery as he was. It would play for hours on end with shiny wing nuts and sniffed with interest at whirring toys and engines.

Mouse's only fear was that Father would find out about his pet and take it away. It was so hard to tell sometimes what would get Father upset.

One night, two weeks before the Mid-Winter Feast, Vincent came to visit Mouse and discuss a present for Mary. Until then, Mouse had been throwing Arthur back into his box whenever anyone came to call, tossing in some food and toys after it to keep it quiet.

But this time, Mouse had been too buried in his plans for a new ventilation system for the second levels and hadn't noticed his visitor until Arthur came to investigate this strange new person.

“Mouse?” Vincent's voice was soft as always, but he was keeping a close eye on the raccoon trying to crawl up his vest and sniff at him. “*What is this animal?*”

Mouse decided to be nonchalant about it and hope Vincent wouldn't ask questions. “That's Arthur. Come see plans.”

“Where did you get it?”

“Central Park. Dog bit. Cured him.”

As if this wasn't bad enough. Father himself suddenly came in.

“Mouse, is Vincent here? I need -- what is *THAT?*” He stopped dead at the sight of a half-grown raccoon climbing up his favorite son.

Mouse took a deep breath and prepared for the worst. “Arthur.”

“Arthur *who*, Mouse? Have you been keeping that thing down here?”

Mouse was near tears, but Vincent spoke before he could. "Father, Mouse found it in the Park, hurt. He has been nursing it back to health."

"Mouse, is this true?"

Mouse nodded, staring at his feet. Father limped carefully over to Vincent and peered closely at the animal, which suspiciously sniffed his beard in return.

Satisfied that it wasn't dangerous, Father gently pried it off Vincent's clothing and ran his hands through its fur. He could feel the healing scars on its back and leg, but it seemed healthy and tame enough.

"Did you tend these bites and splint this leg?" Mouse cringed but nodded at his boots again.

"It was very irresponsible of you to bring an animal down here and care for it yourself. You could have hurt it, even killed it, by accident!"

Mouse started to cry. "Took good care! Only did what you did to Mouse! Never hurt Arthur!" He jumped when Father unexpectedly put his arm around his shoulders and Arthur flowed back into his arms.

"Yes, I can see that you've taken very good care of him, Mouse. You couldn't leave him in the Park to die. It's just that so many things could have gone wrong! Arthur could have been sick, or hurt too badly for you to treat. I wish you had felt you could tell me before, and let me help you."

Mouse dared look up and meet the older man's eyes. "That mean Mouse can keep?"

"Will you continue to take care of him? You can't just decide that you're bored one day and let him loose again, now that you've tamed him."

Mouse's eyes were shining. "*Never* bored of Arthur. Can keep, *please?*"

Father and Vincent were smiling broadly. "Yes, Mouse. You can keep Arthur. But!" he added, waving his cane at the raccoon for emphasis, "you must take *responsibility* for it and whatever damage it might do."

Arthur batted at the cane and chattered defensively.

"*Okay good. Okay, fine!*" Mouse lunged forward and hugged Father, then hugged Vincent for good measure.

The three of them talked of their plans for the upcoming feast for a little while, then Vincent and Father had to leave, although Vincent promised to come back and play with Arthur soon.

Mouse watched them go with a full and happy heart. Father hadn't been angry! Well, not too angry.

He'd make Father the best Mid-Winter present ever, a tube with all the colors of the rainbow. More colors, even!

There was a construction shack he knew of with lots of piping, and just the other day he'd seen a place with lots and lots of colored glass he could take...

He sat down and joyfully began describing his new project to Arthur.

END