

ONCE IN A FULL MOON

by AND

Vincent trembled with excitement as he walked along behind his 'brother'. Devin sensed it and turned to look at the little figure dogging his heels.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered through the dark.

"I'm not afraid," Vincent lied back.

"I won't let anything happen to you, I promise."

Vincent didn't reply. He trusted Devin implicitly. and he wanted to see the Park the other children played in with all his heart -- but he was still afraid, a little.

Father had always told him he could never, ever, go Above, must never take the risk of a Topsider seeing him, lest something horrible happen to him. Father never went into great detail about what could happen, exactly, but Vincent was frightened all the same.

But that fear wasn't enough to comfort him from longing to join the other children when Mary or Sara took them Above to play in the playgrounds or run in the Park. Sometimes, one of his friends would bring him something -- a leaf, a flower, a twig -- and tell him all about the place where it came from.

But most of the time, the description wound awkwardly down with the line 'you gotta see it to really understand it,' and Vincent would be left alone with his imagination, once more, in his dark chambers.

It had gotten to be too much for him about a week ago, and Devin came back to their room to find him crying over a copy of *The Wind in the Willows* because he wanted to see a willow tree so badly and he never could.

Devin patted him on the shoulder, and promised he'd find a way to take Vincent Above, soon.

Several fights with Father later, Devin wrangled permission to take Vincent Above in the Park after dark, so long as they stayed for a very short time and did not wander far from the tunnel entrance.

Marg loaned Vincent a shawl to keep over his head and hide his face, should they be seen, and, with Father's guarded blessing, off they went.

Devin showed him the way out through the drainage tunnel, and Vincent froze as the door grumbled back on its track. Surely all the City could have heard a sound so loud.

But Devin stepped through, unconcernedly, and started to walk away, until he realized that his smaller shadow tracked him no more.

He turned and saw Vincent staring back at him with wide, horrified eyes.

"C'mon!" he hissed.

Vincent overcame just enough of his paralysis to shake his head. "It's too loud! They heard us!"

"Nobody heard us. We use that door all the time, and nobody ever hears us. You're just scared!"

"Am not!" Indignant as he was, the little figure still didn't move.

Devin displayed a touching concern by walking over to the trigger on the outside of the door. "If you don't come out, I'm gonna shut the door and go without you!"

"You WOULDN'T!" came the betrayed wail.

"Would too. Thought you wanted to come Above, but you're just a scaredy-cat."

"Don't call me that!" Devin never picked on him like the others could, but Vincent had to draw the line somewhere.

"Fraidy-cat, fraidy-cat!" Devin crooned from the other side of the door.

That did it. Vincent launched himself at his brother with a half-real snarl, and Devin sprinted down the tunnel to escape. Before he knew it, Vincent felt dirt beneath his feet, and he was really, actually in the Park!

Used to carpeting or hard concrete floors, Vincent slipped on the dew-slicked grass and landed with a thump. He froze again, this time in wonder.

There was a breeze, a real breeze, blowing through his hair, and on the breeze were the most intriguing scents.

Looming all around him were big tall things that rustled tantalizingly – trees! He finally got to see real trees! He was so excited that he didn't know where to go first.

Devin was smiling like a magician who had just pulled a million rabbits out of his hat, and Vincent felt as though his brother had managed to conjure up the whole world just for his amusement, and he loved him for it with all his heart.

“Wanna see a willow?” Devin asked.

The next hour was a glorious whirl of exploration and discovery. Vincent got to see his willow, plus climb a delightfully climbable oak tree, and an impromptu acorn war began as Devin tried to tug him back out of it.

They prowled through thickets and pretended to be Indians; they clambered over rocks and pretended to be mountain climbers. At one point, Vincent snuck up on Devin and pushed him into a pile of leaves. Devin exploded out in a spray of dead foliage, and chased Vincent straight out of the coppice they were hiding in.

And straight into enchantment. The moon was low and full and brilliant, and it was the most beautiful thing the little boy had ever seen.

Vincent didn't even dare blink, lest the vision pass, and he barely felt his brother tugging on his shoulder.

“Vincent, c'mon! I hear a car!”

Vincent shrugged him off, too spell-bound to understand the words until the car was right beside him. There was a little girl in the back seat, gazing wide-eyed at him, and Vincent smiled at her. Tonight, the whole world was his friend.

Her face crumpled into tears.

Devin was tugging frantically at him, and this time he followed. By the time they reached the drainage tunnel, Vincent was in tears, too.

Father was waiting for them just past the door. He just had time to notice the leaves and dirt ground into their clothing, before Vincent tore loose from Devin's hand and dove into his arms.

"What happened?" Father asked the older bog, his voice sharp with alarm. "Are you alright?"

"Nothing happened," Devin muttered, cowed.

"You're both covered in dirt! Was there a fight?"

"No! We were just... playing," Devin's voice was faltering under Father's concerned frown.

"He didn't do anything wrong, Father," a muffled voice gulped from below.

Father gently stroked his strange son's long hair. "Then, what did happen?"

"I -- we were looking at the moon, and - and there w-w-was this l-l-little girl and sh-s- sh-she..." the explanation petered out into loud sobbing, and Vincent sank his claws into Father's jacket to hold his parent close.

Father cradled him closer and glared at Devin. "Were you caught? Did anyone see you?"

Devin shrugged. "There was a car, but it didn't stop. I didn't think anyone saw us."

"She saw me! And she cried!" wailed a thin, rough voice from the depths of Father's jacket.

There was a hush as the other two tried to think how best to comfort him. Finally, Devin reached out and patted his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Vincent. I just wanted you to see what it was like Above... Next time, we'll be more careful. I promise."

"NO!" Vincent jerked away from them both. "I'll never go Above again, I hate it, hate it, HATE IT!"

He ran away, toward the main level, and Devin made as if to follow, only to be stopped when the man above him dropped a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"And why were you so close to the road in the first place?" Father asked his son with deceptive quietness.

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Once out of sight of the others, Vincent slowed to a heavy walk, stopping every now and then to kick at loose pebbles or punch a wall in an effort to work out his rage.

His chamber door loomed before him and he trudged gratefully into the silence within -- and almost walked into Mary.

She had been straightening the bed that the boys always left unmade, and now she turned with a ready smile.

"How did you like the Park?" she asked

Vincent pouted at her, a young, furry thundercloud.

"I HATE it. I'm never going again! I'm GLAD I don't have to go Above with the others!"

That became his standard answer when he was asked about his impressions. In fact, over the next couple of weeks, Vincent told anyone who would listen to him (and a couple of people who wouldn't but couldn't get out of his way fast enough) that he would never, ever go back up as long as he lived.

When the other children were taken Up to play, Vincent waved them goodbye with a certain air of condescending pity then plodded into Father's library to explore the world in his own fashion.

Father was slightly relieved over Vincent's resolution, although it broke his heart to see the lasting impression one little girl's tears had on him. At least now, he didn't have to worry that the boy's wanderlust would get him into trouble with the Topsiders.

Devin, as usual, didn't agree with his father. Unlike the older man, he had seen the rapture on Vincent's face as he looked at the moon, the joy at finally achieving every little child's birthright and climbing a tree. Leading the other children into adventure was somehow less exciting when Vincent wasn't there to share it.

He gave his little brother three weeks to mourn his disappointment in peace. then broached the subject one night after lights-out.

“Vincent?”

“Hmmm?” came the sleepy answer.

“Are you awake?”

“Maybe.”

Vincent giggled at his own joke, but Devin was in a serious mood.

“Vincent, I want to take you Above again. I promise, nothing will happen to you.”

Silence from the other side of the bed.

“Vincent? The moon will be full again, just as pretty as it was last time. Maybe even more beautiful than last time.”

Still the silence.

“Vincent?”

“Shut up. I'm asleep.”

That was a challenge no eleven-year-old could resist. “No you're not, or you couldn't be talking to me.”

“Yes I am. I'm talking in my sleep.”

“Are not.”

“Am too!”

“Are not! You snore when you're asleep.”

“Do not!”

“Do too!”

This great, intellectual debate waged until they were both overcome with giggles, and had to bury their heads under the covers and pretend to be asleep as they heard the fateful sound of Father's cane tapping down the corridor.

He looked in on them, and they tried hard to be still and look innocent. Vincent gave a slight snore, just in case. and Devin had to bite his lip to keep from laughing.

Once Father had moved on, he tried again.

“Vincent? I mean it. I really want to take you Above.”

Without a word, Vincent solemnly shifted around and hit him with a pillow.

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Devin let the matter rest that night. But he tried again the night after, and the night after that. He couldn't manage to convince Vincent, but they did have some grand pillow fights.

Frustration was not an emotion that sat well with Devin; he wasn't used to it when dealing with the other kids. With Father, yes, but not with the others.

He had always been able to talk them into anything, and he wasn't about to let some ten-gear-old thwart him, brother or not!

The problem was how to get Vincent to come again, and without telling Father, who had discovered the reason behind the arguments and pillow fights, and expressly forbidden him to pester Vincent in an attempt to change his mind.

It was quite a challenge – but then, Devin had always loved a good challenge. And it was for a good cause, really! Vincent had been so thrilled...

It was ironic that Father, who was so dead-set against the idea of Vincent going back Above, who gave his son the perfect idea.

It was the time of day when Father gathered all the children to him to teach them songs and tell them stories, and today he told them of a game he had played at their age called ‘*Marco-Polo.*’

It was kind of like tag, and kind of like blind man's bluff, with one person designated "it" and set the task of capturing the other players while blindfolded.

The others could move wherever they wanted, but whenever "it" called "Marco!" they had to yell "Polo!" in return. Then "it" could try to find them by the sound.

The game sounded exciting, and the children scrounged a piece of thick cloth from Sara as a blindfold, and set out to field-test playing it.

Of course, the first problem was trying to pick the tagger from among 15 children.

Devin was searching for some way to pick someone fairly when Mitch drawled, "Why not pick Vincent? He's an 'it' anyway."

Lisa instantly snatched the blindfold from Devin and volunteered, but the damage was done. Vincent slouched off, dragging his feet, no longer in the mood to play.

It tortured Devin to see his brother so unhappy, and he ran after the disappearing figure. But when he caught up, Vincent was in no mood to talk.

"Hey, Vincent, don't worry. I'll settle Mitch."

"You'll get in trouble for fighting."

"I don't care! He had no right to say that!"

Vincent shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I don't care. Just let me be alone for a while, okay?"

"But..."

"Please."

"Okay. But I won't let him hurt you again!" And Devin returned to the others and rejoined the game. But he worried all the same, and it was only a small consolation to push Mitch over while "tagging" him.

Vincent was still quiet when Devin found him in the room later, but he made an attempt to seem normal. "So how is Marco-Polo?"

“It’s a lot of fun, Vincent. You’ll have to play with us next time.”

“Yeah.” Vincent couldn’t have sounded less enthusiastic if he had handed plateful of vegetables to eat.

Devin was aimlessly playing with a loose thread on the blindfold, and inspiration struck like lightning.

“Vincent. I’ve got an idea! Why don’t we play now, just you and me? You know you can trust me!”

Vincent cocked his head, considering.

“C’mon! It’ll be fun! Just the two of us, like Huck and Tom!”

The appeal to Vincent’s favorite story worked like a charm, and soon the two were charging through the lesser-used tunnels after each other. The blindfold had changed owners several times, and Vincent was thoroughly relaxed when Devin put his plan into action.

Vincent was “it” for this turn, and Devin carefully maneuvered him into unfamiliar passages, heading for the other exit into the Park. Staying always a step or two ahead, Devin lured his brother closer and closer to the surface.

“Marco!” Vincent yelled, a little further down the passage.

“Polo!” Devin shouted back, using the sound to mask his pulling of the lever.

The door here swung silently, and Devin danced through it just ahead of Vincent’s questing fingers. But, just on the other side, Vincent stopped as he heard the noises of the Park rather than the sounds of the Underground.

“Devin, where are we?”

“Guess.”

Vincent swept off the blindfold and looked around. “You tricked me! You brought me back Above! How could you do this to me??” He looked hurt, betrayed, angry, and for the first time Devin really questioned the wisdom of his plans.

“I never wanted to hurt you,” he mumbled. “It's just that you were so happy last time, and I wanted to make you happy again.”

“I can't come here! What if someone sees me? What if were caught?”

“We won't get caught, Vincent! Who do you think I am, Mitch or somebody? I'm trying to do something nice for you!”

Vincent threw the blindfold to the floor. “I'm not going out there,” he said firmly.

Devin's patience snapped. “Yes you are! Damn it, Vincent, I've been planning this for a whole month!”

His mood suddenly shifted as he realized that anger would get him nowhere. He didn't want to pick a fight, he wanted to give Vincent a present.

“Think about the moon, Vincent,” he coaxed. “It's full again; just beyond those trees. Think about how fun it would be to climb up and see it again, just one more time...”

“No! I don't want to!” But the refusal sounded weaker.

“We're this far already, aren't we? You don't even have to go near the road, or the paths, or anything. You don't even have to leave this pipe. Just come to the edge and look out. I'll be here. I won't let anything happen to you, I promise.”

Vincent took a hesitant step forward. “I really shouldn't.”

“Round and full and white and glowing, Vincent. Waiting for you.”

Another step. “And we wouldn't go out in the Park? Just go to the edge of the pipe and no further? You promise?”

“I promise. C'mon, Vincent, that's it. Think about the moon, Vincent.”

Two more steps, then, “What would Father say. He'll be mad.”

Devin exploded. “Father, Father, Father! Look, he let you come up the first time, right?”

“Yes, but...”

“No buts! I’m not going to let any brother of mine be a coward because some girl cried!” and, patience exhausted, Devin jumped back and grabbed the littler boy’s wrist and started hauling.

Vincent, of course, hauled just as hard in the other direction He was strong for his size, and very reluctant. He scrambled for a handhold with his free hand, all but leaving claw marks on the sides of the pipes

But Devin was just as angry and a little bigger, not to mention more used to fighting than his gentle brother. With an effort, he hauled the squirming boy to the end of the pipe and shoved him out into the Park beyond.

“Now, look at the moon, dammit!”

Vincent looked, and was lost again in wonder.

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It was much later when they walked back home -- after curfew, in fact, and Father was waiting impatiently for his prodigals.

“Where have you been?”

“We were in the Park, Father,” Vincent replied calmly.

“WHAT??!” Father glared at Devin, but was interrupted before he could speak.

“It was my idea, Father. I wanted to see the moon again. Besides,” and a glint appeared in a small blue eye, “you said I could go at night.”

“But ... you..”

Vincent was perfectly serene, a definite contrast to the others, “I changed my mind. I can do that, can't I?”

Father frowned at Devin. “And what were you doing with him?”

“I asked him to come along, Father. And I'm the one who kept him out after curfew.”

Father was unconvinced, but let it go. “It's late, we'll talk about this tomorrow.”

Devin watched him go with an open mouth, then turned back to his brother. "It was all my idea! I MADE you go, I tricked you, I forced you, I had to throw you out there again!"

Vincent looked at him with the same small smile he'd worn since he'd seen the moon again.

"I know. Thank you."

END