

VIGNETTES

Beginnings

- by Judith Nolan ©

“Life isn’t about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.”

George Bernard Shaw

Elliot...

Glancing behind him, Elliot now knew how the Pied Piper of Hamblin must have felt. But that guy had been followed by a stream of rats, not a straggling line of raggedly-dressed children clutching precious birthday gifts for a good friend. Elliot smiled at the chattering throng. They all seemed very content with their lot, as they vied good-naturedly with each other to take the lead.

Every child was burdened with several stainless steel tubes bound in tooled navy leather, each containing one of the maps Elliot had so painstakingly gathered over the last few months. The collection stretched to nearly two hundred, both large and small. It had taken many willing hands to carry them as they began the long journey into the world Below from the newly-created entrance beneath Elliot’s apartment building. They were intended as birthday gifts for Vincent. Elliot was shouldering more than his fair share, while beside him Mouse trotted, burdened with even more of the cumbersome tubes.

“Good maps?” the tinker demanded to know, peering over his awkward burden. “Shows us stuff we don’t know? Good stuff.”

Elliot laughed. “I doubt I could ever show you things about your world you don’t already know. But this collection is the best money could buy. I’m sure Vincent will find them useful. Once he’s had time to look at them all.”

“Okay good, okay fine.” Mouse adjusted the grip on his load which threatened to escape his control. “Father, Vincent, these will be good for them.” He slanted Elliot a considering glance. “You’re Vincent’s good friend now? You’ll keep all our secrets?”

“Of course. How could I do anything else after the trust you have shown to me?” Elliot agreed, looking around in wonder at the maze of tunnels and chambers they were passing through. This whole world was far bigger and more complex than he had ever imagined. He couldn’t wait to begin exploring it all.

“I could never betray any of you. Besides, Cathy would kill me if I ever did anything to hurt those she loves and protects. She can be really fierce when she’s provoked.”

Elliot smiled as he remembered the night he’d finally gathered his courage and followed her into the drainage tunnel for the first time. Catherine had flown at him, obviously intent on doing him some serious damage, before Vincent had intervened, saying it was already too late for recriminations. It had been an interesting night.

The night he’d met Catherine’s mysterious lover for the first time... Elliot shook his head ruefully. Vincent was the biggest surprise of all. But they’d found themselves almost immediately in total accord about the city they both loved so well, each with their own, unique perspective and view on how it should be protected and best served. Catherine had watched them in seething confusion, but she had not intervened. And now Elliot had finally been issued with an invitation to a surprise party. He’d been asked to venture into this amazing, hidden realm...

“Yes, that’s right!” Mouse skipped a step and nodded. “Not good to have Vincent’s Catherine mad at you.” He sighed. “Mouse tries to be good. Can’t always.”

“I can understand that problem all too well.” Elliot stared at the steam pipes running beside them as they moved deeper underground. He was fascinated by the rhythmic tapping that never stopped. Sometimes near and then further away, echoing back and forth like messages being sent and received. He shook his head in amazement.

This whole place was way better than Alice’s Wonderland. His mouth curved upwards into a rueful smile. “Besides, if I did try to tell anyone about all the things I know I’m going to see down here, I think they would call out the men in white coats and lock me up for good.”

“Then better not to tell,” Mouse advised seriously, his guileless face crumpling into deep concern. “If Elliot ever gets locked up, Mouse would have to get him out again. Might get into trouble for that with Father.” He winked conspiratorially. “But I got skeleton keys that’ll unlock anything. You’ll see.”

Elliot halted, his eyebrows rising in astonishment. “You would do that for me? Someone you don’t even know all that well?”

“You, Vincent’s friend.” Mouse nodded vigorously. “And Catherine’s friend. Now Mouse’s friend too. Got to help friends out. It’s what they’re for.”

“Mouse, my friend...” Elliot began walking again, shaking his head slowly. “If you need anything, and I mean anything, I want you to come to me first. Okay?”

Now Mouse halted stock-still in awed wonder. “Anything?” he asked breathlessly. “Good stuff? Up Top stuff? Not broken? Not need fixing?”

“Good stuff, Up Top stuff and brand, spanking new.” Elliot laughed at the tinker’s deeply astonished expression. “It’s a firm promise.”

“Oh, Mouse likes Elliot...” The boy’s blue eyes widened. “Mouse likes Elliot a lot! We’re gonna be just fine!”

“Okay, but for now we’d better keep moving, or we’ll be run down by that lot.” He jerked his chin over his shoulder at the chatting group of burdened children who were catching up to them fast.

“Good idea.” Mouse grinned as he jerked back into forward motion.

But his face was still filled with wide-eyed excitement and Elliot quickly became concerned he may have over-stepped his newly-won authority. He could almost see the list growing ever longer behind his new-found friend’s eyes, and he prayed he could live up the grand title of being Mouse’s friend. He’d already figured out it came with a heavy sense of responsibility...

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