

The Christmas Gift

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



The chill in the Whispering Gallery was getting right into his bones that night. Not even the Handel's *Messiah* Vincent was listening to could have changed that. He wrapped himself tighter into the new, long heavy cloak he had received for Christmas from Mary. She worked on it for almost a month and had left Vincent almost speechless when passing into his hands the carefully folded, intricate hand-crafted garment.

For your walks, Vincent.... You've outgrown your old one already....

Sweet, kind Mary, the only mother he had ever known...

The majestic voices floating high above him were lifting his spirits high to spheres he could only have imagined. He closed his eyes and let himself be carried away to Heaven's gate. The harmonic and powerful voices of the choir were making it too easy, and his always vivid imagination got angel's wings.

All too soon, the concert was over, and all Vincent could hear again was just a myriad of whispering voices penetrating the chilly air from all directions.

He sighed, and after a few moments of silent contemplation, turned on his heel to head back to the Home Tunnels.

On the way back, Vincent suddenly thought of visiting with Father for a moment. His adoptive parent appreciated his visits very much, especially since Vincent had turned twenty-one and become more introspective. Not that he didn't like interacting with his friends and his parent anymore, but he was seeking solitude more often and used it to contemplate what life would bring him. The relatively carefree days of his childhood had passed. Especially since the incident with Lisa, Vincent found himself frequently thinking about his future life ending up being a lonely trip, without a soul to love and share the journey with him, in the closest possible sense.

On the way to Father's chamber, Vincent stopped in the kitchen to pick up some of William's delicious oatmeal cookies for the patriarch. There were plenty of them spare after the Christmas Day festive meal the community had shared that day. A secret sweet tooth was another thing Jacob Wells shared with his beloved adoptive son. Yes, cookies would be more than appreciated.

When he entered the kitchen, there was not a soul in sight, though the stomach-bewitching smells of the delicious food William had cooked for his folk were still lingering in the cold air.

Vincent's feet were leading him to the door of the larder when his sharp senses suddenly made him aware of a different smell. One that didn't resemble anything he was familiar with. But for some reason, he didn't sense any danger. He stopped in his tracks and turned around swiftly when he felt a shadow moving quickly behind the crates, used as a worktop.

He stood still for a moment, waiting for a sound or another movement. And there it was, only a few seconds later, the shadow appeared in his peripheral vision again. This time, his sharp eyes spotted it on the other side, though disappearing behind big sacks of flour sent by one of the Helpers just that day.

All right, if you want to play, let's play...

Within a second, Vincent jumped behind a pile of crates at the larder door, hiding from view. That was when he noticed the door was slightly ajar.

Not even a minute had passed when the shadow appeared again and began creeping towards the larder door. And then, Vincent saw the shadow turn into a shape....

The larder door was opened wide, and the shape silently vanished inside. Vincent used the moment to noiselessly and quickly approach the door, pulled up the hood of his cloak and waited behind it.

A few moments later, the shape re-appeared, and its shadow seemed somehow larger. Vincent stood still at the slow and cautious movement of the larder door being shut. Suddenly, he found himself face to face with the intruder - a little skinny boy with scared blue eyes, a messy nest of blond hair, dirt-smudged face, and dressed in clothes which had seen better days a long time ago.

The boy's eyes grew wide, and his momentary reaction was dropping the things he was carrying in his hands (a loaf of bread, a wedge of cheese and some apples) and darting out trying to run off. But Vincent's long legs caught up with the boy easily in a few long jumps, and he wrapped his long arms around the boy's waist, lifting him immediately.

In all his twenty-three-year-old life, Vincent had never seen or heard someone yell so much. His sensitive ears were almost hurting at the screeching sound fighting its way from the boy's throat, and it seemed almost impossible to calm him down. With all the strength his little body possessed, he was kicking around as if fighting for his life. Vincent had to use all his skills to prevent him from escaping, yet not hurting him in the process of doing so.

"Don't be afraid, please!!" he pleaded with a slightly raised volume of his gravelly baritone.

The boy didn't seem to hear or listen to him.

"I'm not going to hurt you!" Vincent's words sounded entreatingly right at the boy's ear.

The meaning of those words must have gotten through to the boy's brain because only after a brief moment, his limbs stilled, and the yelling changed into quiet whining moans, resembling crying.

"What on Earth is going on here?!" a loud man's voice boomed from the kitchen entrance.

It was William, the tunnels' beloved cook, who found his way back to his kingdom and was watching the scene before him with bewildered eyes.

"I think someone is hungry," Vincent replied, a bit bemused.

He was fighting to hold on to the child in his arms because the boy started kicking and screaming again, seeing a new person appear.

"I'll bring him to Father," Vincent managed to say, in between the kicks, and walked out of the kitchen, leaving William standing and shaking his head.

By the time Vincent finally reached his father's chamber, his usually strong arms were already cramping. The little foundling required all his muscles to work to the maximum, and even the relatively short way from the kitchen was proving a difficult task.

"Vincent?! What on Earth.....?"

Jacob stopped mid-sentence, seeing his son with the unusual cargo.

"I found him in the kitchen trying to steal some food from the pantry," Vincent raised his voice through the boy's screams.

Not that he would enjoy it, but he knew there was only one way how to make the child go quiet, at least temporarily.

The deep but not too loud growl coming from his throat right into the boy's ear worked - the child froze immediately and stopped fussing. Vincent felt him shaking, though.

"No one is going to harm you, " his voice changed into his usual soft, gravelly one. "Please, don't be afraid."

As he felt the boy's wild resilience weaken immediately (either from fear or from curiosity), Vincent slowly released his tight grip on the little body in his arms and put the child down to his feet. Then he stepped slightly away to face the little intruder and went down on his knee.

The boy's dark blue eyes were following his captor's every move. His skinny body was a little hunched, his head slightly down, as if trying to hide within himself from the outside world. But the eyes were constantly watching.

"What's your name?"

Vincent's question remained unanswered, as the boy was just staring at his unusual leonine face.

"Where did you come from?" Vincent inquired further, softly.

The child finally stopped staring and looked down.

"Can you understand me?"

When the boy lifted his head to look at Vincent again, he nodded hesitantly.

Vincent suddenly knew what the problem was.

"Can you speak?"

When the boy lowered his eyes again and shook his head, Vincent sighed.

Seeing the child glancing at the plate with the remains of Jacob's cookies on the table nearby, he stood up and picked one. He handed it to the boy, who grabbed it immediately and started eating it eagerly.

“Why do you think he can’t speak?” Jacob asked his son.

“There could be many reasons. He may have been abandoned by his parents and relatives. Or he may have gone through a traumatic experience which has closed his mouth, as well as his heart.”

Vincent turned to his father. “I don’t think he has anyone looking after him.”

There was an unspoken question in his eyes when they locked with his parent’s.

Jacob sighed loudly and scratched his head while observing the boy. He always knew when his son defeated him.

“This boy can’t be more than seven or eight years old. He requires a *lot* of attention. He has no idea about hygiene; he steals, he can’t speak...”

“He’s just scared. He steals because he’s hungry. And he can learn to speak.”

Jacob sighed again. His eyes lingered on Vincent and then went over to the child again. The boy was now looking around nervously, his hands deep in his torn trousers pockets.

“How can we trust him?”

Vincent looked at the boy, who was observing him now with interest, and a small smile appeared on his face.

“By teaching him to trust *us*.”

Vincent was standing near the bed in the Hospital Chamber, where Mary was tending to the new member of the Tunnels. After she had managed (with great struggle), to give the child a proper wash, she was dressing him in clean and warm tunnel clothes now - to the little rascal’s dismay. He was doing everything to avoid being dressed into anything.

When Vincent saw Mary’s struggle, he approached her and took the clean shirt from her overworked hands. She returned his knowing smile and stepped aside.

Jacob was observing them with a slightly worried look, not far away from them.

Vincent sat down next to the boy and looked at him with a calm expression on his face. He looked at the shirt in his hands.

“You know, it can get really cold down here this time of year. If you don’t wear warm clothes, you might freeze and get sick.” His deep sapphire blue eyes wandered over to the curious boy’s ones.

The boy’s eyes were revealing the hard thought process going on in his little head. He glanced at the garment in Vincent’s clawed hands and then back to his eyes. Ever so slowly, his little hands reached for the shirt and started putting it on.

Vincent smiled and helped him to put on a warm quilted vest over it.

Jacob shook his head and chuckled.

“You’ve always been better with children than me, Vincent. Do you also have a name for him?”

The boy, fascinated by his companion’s unique face, reached out his little hand towards it and carefully touched Vincent’s cheek. Discovering the soft stubble on it, he was moving his fingers around the face, over the nose and back over the cheek before pulling his hand back and smiling. His eyes were wide with wonder.

Vincent smiled at the child and stroked his messy blond hair gently. “I couldn’t even hear him when I found him in the kitchen. All I could see was his shadow. He was moving quietly, like a mouse...”

“Moouuuse...” the boy parroted slowly with a curious look, stunning the adults present in the chamber.

Vincent’s smile widened, and his eyes were twinkling. “I think he has named himself,” he said bemused. “Welcome home, Mouse.”

Mouse’s face lit up, and he threw himself on Vincent, sticking to him like wax.

Vincent embraced him warmly and couldn’t think of a nicer Christmas present.

“Mouse? Are you here?” Vincent entered the chamber with five smaller beds. He was looking for his little friend because he'd missed out on Vincent’s regular literature class with other children.

In the almost two years since Mouse had come to live with them, Vincent had grown very fond of the boy. It was he who spent most of the time with the foundling - teaching him to speak, telling him stories, reading to him before bedtime, taking him for walks around the tunnels, even to its deepest parts.

Vincent had very soon realised that Mouse was no usual child. Despite Vincent's best efforts, his friend never learned proper grammar, and his vocabulary was only slightly more than basic. However, the boy’s imagination, and especially his creativity, knew no boundaries.

Mouse loved gathering all sorts of odd things, scraps and bits of whatever, then putting them together and creating something unexpected and often amazing (and not rarely, on the opposite side of safe). That carried a problem with it, though - he loved escaping Above and rummaging in dump and building sites, causing Jacob quite a few grey hairs. When he got caught, he had to listen to Jacob’s lectures about how stealing was inadmissible, not just in the Tunnels, but everywhere in society. His only answer was:

“Not stealing, taking!”

No matter how great his capacity for understanding the most complicated mechanisms, he couldn’t get the grasp of certain parts of the moral code engraved so deeply into the tunnel community. In his utterly pure and innocent mind, he knew hurting people was wrong. But taking things which were lying about wasn’t hurting anyone, in his eyes.

The other tunnel dwellers took the boy to their hearts as well, and though it was not exactly easy for him to express his affection, they could feel his inclination to most of them. However, it was Vincent whom the boy absolutely and unconditionally adored, and it was Mouse who was the light that so often shone for Vincent, when he found himself lost and lonely on his life journey. One look at the adoring boy’s face managed to return a smile to his face and warmed his heart whenever it got weary.

“Mouse?” Vincent repeated his call once more.

A shuffling sound from the other end of the chamber caught his attention. He walked a few steps in that direction, then spotted Mouse crawling on the floor as if looking for something he had lost. The boy’s beloved and always hungry pet raccoon, Arthur, was crawling around him on his little paws, sniffing at his master’s feet, as if looking for something perfect to chew on.

Vincent remembered the day when Mouse brought Arthur home from one of his escapades Above and refused to take him back - much to Jacob’s dismay - as Arthur had chewed up the newest medical journal in Jacob’s collection the first night of his stay Below. The fluffy white-grey animal was no stranger to mischief and didn’t hesitate to sneak around every part of the tunnels. That’s why Mouse called him Arthur, like the brave and fearless king of Camelot.

“Can I help you with something, Mouse?” Vincent inquired calmly.

The boy straightened himself up, quick as lightning, and his panicked eyes were moving from side to side, looking for an answer. He was fiddling with his hands and fidgeting.

Vincent tilted his head curiously and was fighting the urge to smile in bemusement. "We missed you in literature class. Can you tell me what prevented you from joining us?"

Mouse looked up at his teacher and friend, holding his breath. Then he rolled his eyes and sighed heavily, while shaking his head in frustration.

"Mouse lost a gizmo... Making a surprise..... For Father.... Mustn't tell!"

Vincent didn't hide his smile this time. It was soon to be Jacob's birthday, and Mouse wasn't the only one in the Tunnels who was preparing something special for him, as a gift for his constant love and care.

"I won't, but you can work on your surprise when you have no classes. There is plenty of time for that."

The boy shrugged his shoulders and pouted.

"Mouse don't like school... " Then his face lit up with excitement. "Likes playing with gizmos! Make things..."

Vincent knelt to face him and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "You can learn a lot of useful things in lessons. When you learn to read properly, you can read books about the things that you like. Things that can help you to invent and create even more and better." *And safer*, he thought to himself.

Mouse knitted his eyebrows and pouted again, this time deep in thought.

"I will help you to find what you've lost, and you will come for the next class with me, agreed?" Vincent suggested.

The boy's frown suddenly changed into a beaming smile. "Okay, good... Okay, fine!" he proclaimed with enthusiasm.

Vincent chuckled and went down on all fours to keep his promise to a little boy.

"And last but definitely not least, Mouse has a gift for you as well, Father," Vincent said, with pride sounding in his baritone.

Jacob smiled at the blond boy beside Vincent. Mouse was keeping his head down shyly, but slowly approached the patriarch, handing him a wooden box. Cautiously, he lifted his innocent eyes to Jacob and flashed a quick smile, then quickly returned to safety by Vincent's side.

"Thank you, Mouse," Jacob beamed, but then a slight hesitation came over his face when he was about to open the box.

"It is safe, Father, I assure you," Vincent remarked bemused, noticing his parent's unease.

"I'm.... happy to hear that," came the reply, along with a visibly-relaxed facial expression, followed by a collective chuckle all around.

Jacob opened the medium-sized box, and his eyes grew wide in awe. His hands slid inside to carefully take out a golden coloured apparatus, reminding him of a telescope. He shot a worried look at Mouse.

"Where did you get this, Mouse? Did you...."

"Not stealing!!" the boy interrupted him eagerly in defence. "Made it.... Found bits and made it..."

Jacob breathed a sigh of relief and looked at the apparatus in his hands.

"Look through!" Mouse prompted him.

When he did as advised, the corners of his mouth went up quickly. His eyes were eagerly taking in the colourful geometric shapes resembling flowers, changing every time he turned the tube in his right hand. A *kaleidoscope*...

"Tube of colours," Mouse said with pride and a beaming smile, his head finally coming up.

"Mouse, this is wonderful!" Jacob couldn't contain his almost childlike amazement. "Thank you very much!"

The boy was grinning, as if he had just won a contest for the invention of the century.

Vincent put his hand on Mouse's shoulder and smiled.

"You did very well, Mouse; you should be proud of what you've achieved."

The boy glanced at him with adoration. "Make Father happy. Give him colours from up top."

Vincent looked over at his father and saw his grey eyes glistening.

Catherine shook her head with a warm smile on her face. "Dear Mouse.... "

"Father was very touched," Vincent said, smiling at the memory. "He was so proud that Mouse could create something so masterful at such young age - until he found out that Mouse had stolen the parts for the kaleidoscope Above."

Catherine laughed, joining his chuckle. "He is such a pure and giving soul," she said gently, then.

"He always has been, right from the start," Vincent acknowledged with a soft smile of his own. "Mouse has always sensed when people are sad, lonely, in need of encouragement... Perhaps because he himself was lonely and sad for such a long time before he came to us. He has his own, unique ways of lifting people's spirits. He was the only shining light for me many times, before..."

Vincent lifted his eyes to look into the green eyes watching him. "Before a new light entered my life..."

Catherine's look softened even more when she heard his words and saw the bright, intense light in his sapphire blue eyes.

"Even the greatest darkness is nothing, so long as we share the light," she spoke, with all her love for him encompassed in those few words.

"Vincent! Catherine!"

Their heads turned sharply in the direction where the call had come from.

"Mouse..... Is something wrong?" Vincent inquired, standing up from his chair.

The young man at the chamber entrance shook his head and grinned.

"Got a surprise," he was positively glowing. "For Catherine..."

The young woman in the chamber gasped in excitement. "For me, Mouse?" A beaming smile illuminated her lovely face.

"Not here, Father's chamber," Mouse said with a grin and vanished into the tunnel.

Catherine looked puzzled at the man by her side. When he only raised his eyebrows and smiled enigmatically, she grinned, took Vincent by the hand, and they made their way for Jacob's chamber.

“Ah, there you are,” Jacob exclaimed seeing Vincent and Catherine walking down the few steps leading to his not-always-so-private quarters. He was trying to hide a conspirational smile, but failing.

“Mouse said he has a surprise for Catherine,” Vincent joined in, the enigmatic smile not leaving his face.

Catherine glanced at both, father and son, with suspicion. “You two know what this is about, don’t you?” she seemingly scolded them.

Vincent’s smile widened. “*And though she be but little, she is fierce.*” (1)

Catherine chuckled and shook her head. Vincent’s eyes were twinkling with mischief, something she rarely saw - but she loved it. Turning around, she spotted Mouse standing at the big round wooden table - there was a medium-sized wooden box standing on it.

“For Catherine...,” he said quietly, looking at her with adoration palpable to everyone present.

Catherine stepped to the table with a warm smile and opened the box.

“Oh, Mouse....,” she gasped and took out an almost antique looking telescope.

“For proper stargazing... with Vincent... on Catherine’s balcony,” the young man added, with a proud grin, his hands, as always at such moments, stuck deep in his pockets.

Jacob, now smiling broadly, was observing Catherine with fondness. “Some of the Helpers were so generous that they gave Mouse parts needed for assembling it.”

“And he has outdone himself once more,” Vincent added, looking very proud of his friend.

Catherine couldn’t get enough of studying the masterfully-crafted apparatus. Her hand was gently gliding along the shiny polished surfaces, her eyes shining brightly with excitement, imagining the actual stargazing with the man she loved by her side. After a moment, she turned to Mouse and hugged him with enthusiasm, stunning her friend a little.

“Thank you so much, Mouse!” she whispered, and when she pulled back from him, her eyes were glistening.

“Okay, good.... Okay, fine!” Mouse said with a beaming smile, making everyone laugh.

He turned on his heel to leave the chamber, with a sense of deep satisfaction and pride.

Suddenly, Catherine remembered something and called his name.

“Mouse? The lens for the telescope, it’s usually the most expensive part of it... even for the Helpers...”

“Not stealing!” Mouse jumped in immediately.

Everybody breathed a sigh of relief and smiled before Mouse added quietly. “Taking...”

And he darted out of the chamber.

END

(1) William Shakespeare: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*