

Father Vincent

by Judith Nolan

“Now, this yours, Vincent.” Mouse shuffled sideways into Vincent’s chamber, bent almost double beneath a large, well-worn velvet sack. He dropped it to the floor beside his feet with a sigh. “Father said so.” The tinker straightened. “Said, ‘William, you must rest.’” He matched Father’s exasperated tone exactly. “Said, too much cooking was gonna kill him. He not young anymore. William got mad.”

“Then Father told William he’s not to come out of his chamber again until he’s completely rested.” Jamie appeared from behind Mouse. “William didn’t like it. Not one bit. Said he still had too much to do. But he’s gone anyway, after he made sure everything’s done. All the food is ready, and the decorations are up. Father’s down in the hall making sure nothing gets missed.” She eyed Vincent closely. “So that’s where you come in, Vincent. We need you.”

“I was wondering when you two would get to the point.” Vincent grimaced as he put aside the book he was reading; sitting up slowly and dropping his feet over the side of his bed. Disturbed from her comfortable position curled on his chest, Cleopatra made her displeasure known with a discontented hiss before scampering from the chamber.

“Not much to ask, Vincent.” Mouse nudged the large bag towards his best friend with the toe of his boot. “Just gotta get dressed up. Hand out presents. Easy. Mouse will help.”

“And you don’t want to disappoint all the little kids, now do you, Vincent?” Jamie eyed him hopefully. “I mean, what’s Christmas without Santa? And William can’t do it. Not now. Doctor’s orders.”

“So you have come to me since William has been sent to bed.” Vincent smiled ruefully. “I gather any other volunteers were conspicuously lacking.”

“Well, we couldn’t find Cullen anywhere, and the others are now all busy helping Father finish everything for the party tonight. Winslow did say something about hell freezing over first...” Jamie’s quicksilver grin flashed and was gone. “Honestly, Vincent, you’re our best choice anyway. The kids all love you and you know how to talk to them. They need this.”

“Only choice.” Mouse shrugged. “Father said, not with his leg. And Mouse too small.” The tinker didn’t look disappointed with his observation. “Jamie can’t do it. She’s a girl.” That dismissive remark earned him a sharp elbow jab from his co-conspirator.

“Well, the little kids need Santa. Makes Christmas...” Mouse shrugged, hopping impatiently from foot to foot. “Christmas. Okay, good, okay fine?” He gazed up at Vincent hopefully.

“Of course, anything for the little ones...” Vincent surveyed them with rueful resignation. “It seems I have little choice now, anyway.”

He wondered what Catherine would make of his new position. He did have a gift for her, which he had intended to give her later, when they could find some time to be alone together. Now that hope for a little privacy was fast becoming a distant dream. He knew he would not get any peace tonight from the children, until well past their bedtime. And Catherine’s ability to remain Below was necessarily limited by the time it took to escort her back up to her apartment entrance.

“But Christmas would not be Christmas without gifts for the little ones. You are right there, Mouse.” Vincent sighed as he shook his head, remembering the tales told in the tunnels of when John Pater had first founded the community of misfits and outcasts beneath the city.

Back then Pater had eschewed any memories of the celebrations Above. This edict had been accepted by the community, until Grace brought Father to live among them and slowly, under his more benign guidance, things began to change. But what they celebrated back then had been their fellowship and closeness, not the gift-giving and excesses practiced in the hectic, self-centred city far above them.

Then, after John finally left their tunnels, the slow evolution continued, gathering pace and greater acceptance. Small gifts began to appear and a few fairy lights were strung. To illuminate the darker places, Father had reassured the older sceptics among them, nothing more than that. But it didn't take long for the last of the pretence to drop away and the full enjoyment of the season finally sprang into being, to be closely followed by their own celebrations at Winterfest.

Vincent smiled now. He could clearly remember, as a wide-eyed four-year-old, being given his first, actual Christmas gift. It was a wind-up locomotive, hand-made for him by Winslow's father. He had held the toy gingerly, as if it would explode at any moment. His heart beating fast with wonder, he'd been almost too scared to set the toy down and put it into motion. But the temptation to play with it had finally been too much, and he'd enjoyed his toy to the fullest - with the active encouragement of his older brother - until he saw that Devin had been given the skateboard he'd insisted he needed to deliver his messages Above more quickly.

Vincent had gone on playing with his train, head kept determinedly down, all the while coveting that skateboard with a burning passion. Of course he was far too young to be sent on the long journeys required to deliver messages, and make the return journey with whatever gifts the helpers Above managed to share with the hidden realm. But it didn't prevent a young child from dreaming. The skateboard had been put to good use until the next year, when Devin had finally scraped together enough money to buy his own, brand-new board. Vincent had hunted determinedly for weeks for the old board, but he never found it, and Devin had perversely refused to tell him where it was.

And then there had been the tales the newly-arrived children told of a jolly, fat man in a red suit who walked the streets Above, looking for all the children who had been either naughty or nice... Vincent knew he'd been very, very good all year... Maybe if he also asked for a skateboard next Christmas, one would magically appear... But it never did...

“For the children then...” He reached towards the bag, loosening its corded tie. “We wouldn't want to disappoint anyone, now would we?”

“No, Vincent,” both his companions agreed in unison, as they hurried to help him.

As Vincent laid out the wine-red velvet coat and embroidered, baggy trousers, before shaking out the white false beard and wig, he wondered idly just where Devin's old skateboard had been hidden. No doubt, knowing his older brother, it was languishing forgotten and alone in some dark, ill-frequented tunnel, just waiting for another wide-eyed young child to find it, and make full use of its Christmas magic...

THE END