

Tiger Instructed

by Angie

*"The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction."
- William Blake*

It was Halloween again, the night when Vincent most missed Catherine. He could not stay below, but he had come to his own terms with it. He roamed the darker and wooded sections of Central Park, determined to make it safer for those who ventured there, on this night of all nights, when he could walk among them.

He took basic precautions. He told Father nothing, went out late, and wore his darkest clothing and cloak. He wanted his face to be as visible and frightening as possible, so he used a little cornstarch to lighten it.

Then he wandered the pathways, alert for the kinds of intruders he knew too well, having observed them – or their victims – far too often.

He walked silently, carefully, staying to the shadows, not unlike his prey – he preferred to think of them that way. They were barely human; predators and murderers.

He sensed two within a short distance of the culvert and approached carefully. He smelled the scent of liquor and caught the glint of knives as he spotted them in the black shadows beneath a stone bridge. He crept near, becoming one with nearby shadows, and waited.

It wasn't long before three revellers approached the bridge, obviously the worse for drink, loud and oblivious. Vincent crept closer, oozing over the ground, taking advantage of the deep shadows of trees created by the nearest light standard.

Just as the two groups came within a few yards - the potential victims still oblivious, the predators tensed and waiting - Vincent showed himself at the edge of the bridge, clearly visible to both groups. He hunched down a little to make himself less human in form, gave one of his best roars, followed by a deep menacing growl, and watched as the revellers ran noisily back the way they had come and the knifemen ran in the opposite direction, less noisily, but no less quickly.

Vincent followed the two muggers at some distance, careful to let them know he was there when they looked back. He drove them to one of the main pathways and watched as they took the exit, still walking far too quickly for strollers.

Satisfied, Vincent swerved to continue his perambulations. It gave him great satisfaction to rid the park of even a few criminals, while knowing he couldn't possibly prevent all the incidents.

He moved quickly down the smaller pathways, his cloak billowing behind him, stepping off them if he sensed anyone, out of habit, even on this night. Therefore, when he almost walked into a shadowy figure, he was shocked – until he realized who it was.

"Kristopher!"

The man in the Met's cap nodded.

“Vincent.”

There was no one else around, so Vincent confronted the ghost. He definitely did not want a man in a baseball cap getting in his way.

“Why are you here?”

“To help,” the ghost replied, with his characteristic cheeky grin.

Vincent clenched his fists, but managed to remain calm with an effort. What was the point of getting angry at a ghost?

“You do not look frightening,” he commented, finally, after biting his tongue against saying anything more cutting.

“That is true ... usually,” Kristopher replied. “But on this night of the year, I can make myself a little more ... spooky.”

He proceeded to turn his cap black with the Met's name glowing an eerie green, then changed his clothing into black as well, streaked with a luminous red, like blood.

Vincent sighed. Now the ghost looked like a cheap mannequin in a costume rental shop window.

“Can't you be a little more 'ethereal'?” he asked, finally, since his comment seemed to be awaited.

“No, but I can make a manifestation of someone I know look 'ethereal', as I did once for you in that warehouse ...”

Vincent brought his fist up and spoke as loudly as he dared. “NO!” You will NOT use Catherine's image in that way again.”

Kristopher hung his head and was momentarily serious when he looked up.

“Sorry, you're right. I won't do that. But the only other person I know well enough is Mr Smythe, and he wouldn't look scary, even in a white nightgown. He'd look like Santa Claus.”

“Then I suggest you let me do the scaring and be ready to encourage a faster retreat,” Vincent commented. “Your 'costume' should be adequate for that.”

He walked on and Kristopher walked beside him. Vincent let his companion nudge him towards one path or another. After all, what did it matter?

However, the Park was remarkably empty, Vincent realized, belatedly. Where was everyone? Perhaps some special event had drawn everyone elsewhere. He could not sense anyone nearby. So they walked some distance before they both stopped. Vincent now perceived someone was near, but whoever it was, he didn't sense any danger.

“There's something wrong over there,” Kristopher pointed into a deep copse of trees, where Vincent knew there was a picnic table.

Vincent grunted in agreement. He sensed despair, rather than danger, and hoped it wasn't anyone injured by yet another denizen of the night.

They moved slowly towards the spot, Vincent slightly in the lead. He made sure his hood hid his face, but did not attempt to look threatening. They both walked firmly, making no attempt to sneak up, like security guards out for the night.

The picnic table was in such deep darkness, Vincent could only make out a small huddled shape, holding an even smaller one inside her coat – a baby, he assumed – top of the picnic

table. She was rigid with cold. He sensed she was almost unconscious, but he approached carefully, then did the only thing that made sense under the circumstances - he gathered her and her baby into his cloak, sat down on the picnic table, and held them close. He felt her move, so projected calm and safety as well as he could, holding them gently.

The girl was small, barely more than a child herself, he realized, her baby tiny as well.

"Vincent," whispered a timid voice from inside his cloak.

Astonished, Vincent swivelled until he could let some light from a distant standard shine on him, and gazed at the girl in his arms.

He abruptly realized Kristopher had vanished – as if this had been the reason he had appeared – and now that he thought about it, urged him to this spot.

"Cathy?" It was a question, but he recognized her immediately. She had gone missing somewhere above months ago and no one could find her. Lena had been frantic for weeks, but had at last resigned herself to losing her only child to the evil of her former world.

"Yes. I'm sorry. I did a stupid thing, and I ... I couldn't return to the tunnels."

"How?" was all Vincent could think of to ask. He meant the baby, of course.

Cathy told her story quietly.

"I was curious to see the Park at night in the winter. I thought it would be safe, being so cold. I was waylaid by a man and raped. I managed to escape, and got back to the tunnels, but I wasn't hurt so I said nothing. Then a few months later, I realized I was pregnant. I went back above before anyone knew. I couldn't tell my mother. I was so ashamed."

"Your mother, of all of us, would have understood," Vincent remarked softly.

"Perhaps, but I ... I couldn't face her, Vincent. I felt so stupid. I walked the streets until some nuns found me near their church. They cared for me, and helped me deliver my baby three days ago. I left today. I wanted to come home, but I ... I was trying to get up the courage and got cold. It was easier to go to sleep ..."

"You will come back home now," Vincent declared. "We have missed you. You know no one will judge you. Children have got into trouble above before – even I."

Cathy snuggled closer. "I know that, Vincent, but this was too big for me. I'm so glad you found me. I want to save my child. He's not to blame."

Vincent remembered a similar argument from Lena when she joined them, so he nodded. He gave the situation some thought as Cathy settled down. He sensed the baby was asleep.

He realized the faced something he rarely considered. For himself, no matter what mischief he got into, he had always known that the tunnels offered the only safe place for him – and that Father always took that into consideration when he meted out punishment.

Vincent had never considered that other children might find the world above a less worrisome option, or that their shame, embarrassment – or just fear of their elders – was far stronger, and quite different to his own. But of course, it was. They were – or could be - part of the world above, as he never would.

His lack of true understanding was a detriment, he realized. The children came to him with their troubles, but Cathy's experience was something he could not relate to, and not just because he was male. Her experience above was quite different to his own. He walked the streets at night, but the danger for him was very different – and he had weapons, strength and senses no one else had, which he tended to take for granted. He had been able to

protect himself, even as a youth. The other children could not. He could not know the same fear as they. As a result, he often, even without quite realizing it, parroted Father when his advice was sought. That was simply not good enough.

He rose then, carrying Cathy, now also asleep, and her child easily in his arms. He made his way back to the culvert, keeping to the shadows. He did not want to attract any attention now, but the Park was quiet. He was grateful as he walked into the culvert and opened the door.

He took Cathy directly to the hospital chamber, woke her gently and sat her on the examination table with her son. Then he tapped out a message on the pipes. Within minutes, Lena arrived and ran to her daughter, hardly daring to touch her, taking in her situation at a glance. She closed her eyes in silent gratitude. It was obvious Cathy was well and had not been living rough.

"You're all right?" Lena asked nevertheless, just in case.

"Yes, but I have a son," Cathy replied.

Lena nodded, but said nothing, and then Father arrived. He did a complete but quick examination, declared them both healthy, and then sent them off with Lena to have a warm bath and get something to eat. The two women left quickly, obviously relieved.

Father looked at Vincent. "You seem to have had an interesting night, Vincent."

The tone of his voice told Vincent that Father knew exactly what he had been about. He had never been very good at fooling the patriarch.

Vincent sighed and nodded. "The 'tiger of wrath' became one of 'instruction', Father. Cathy and her baby were in the Park, shivering on a dark picnic table."

He didn't mention Kristopher. Father didn't believe in ghosts – and this one needed more explanation than he wanted to give.

"And on this night too. Well, all's well that ends well," Father declared.

Vincent gave a wry smile. The night had given him something more – and he needed time to consider it.

"I think I'll see if there are any Halloween snacks left," he replied, saying nothing of his inner quandry.

Father watched him leave, bemused. There was more to this story, he was sure – while also knowing he might never learn it. Nevertheless, it really was remarkable how Vincent's luck seemed to draw him to those who needed him most. *May it always be so*, he said to himself.

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