



# "Possibility of Being"

by Judith Nolan

A Winterfest Eve story...

*"We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty."*

*~ Maya Angelou*

*"I guess you're all here because you want to hear another of my stories." Father laughed. "Well, I suppose, since it will be*

*Winterfest again tomorrow, you had all better come on in and gather around..."*

*The tunnel children, hovering expectantly in the entrance of his chamber, moved quickly to sit at his feet. Their eyes shone with the knowledge that they were in for another of Father's Winterfest tales full of information about their parents and grandparents.*

*Catherine had been sitting and talking with Father, but now even she moved closer, fully prepared to be as entranced as the youngsters who were waiting impatiently while Father cleared his throat. Samantha gathered baby Jacob firmly into her lap, her expectant stillness quickly communicating itself to the small boy, who sat with wide eyes fixed on his grandfather's face.*

*Father stroked his beard. "I have told you this story once before on another magical night like this, some time ago now, but you seemed to enjoy it. I'm sorry I was a bit short on all the details that time, so I promise to make up for that now. But, it is a good story, with a happy ending...and since Catherine and Vincent are getting married tomorrow, I thought it would be appropriate to tell a few tales from Vincent's childhood." He smiled and winked at Catherine. "I'm sure he won't mind."*

*"We don't care if we've heard it before. Tell us again, Father, please..." Erik entreated from the back of the group. "We love your stories."*

*"Very well..." Looking around at the sea of eager faces, Father began to weave the magic of his story. "About 25 years ago," he began slowly. "A young couple were scavenging for the means to*

*live in one of the many subway tunnels above us. Unfortunately we didn't know they were there until it was too late. It had been a terrible winter and they were starving." He sighed as he shook his head. "They had two children to care for and they worked alongside their parents. There was a boy aged about seven and a little girl, a sweet natured, dark haired child, who was about three years old."*

*"Oh, I remember this story, it was so sad that they had to live like that." Catherine observed quietly.*

*"There are some people none of us can save, Catherine." Father sighed. "Whenever I think about the events of this story, I am reminded of the resilience of the human spirit, and the inability of a certain young man to admit defeat. No matter what it cost him."*

*He leaned down to ruffle Jacob's hair before continuing his tale. "We never understood the full story of the tragedy. The little girl was lucky to survive, but she wouldn't speak to any of the adults for weeks afterwards. When she did finally talk to me, she would only call out for her parents and brother and cry. It was all very sad. Vincent was the only one she would speak with. He's always had the knack of finding the lost and vulnerable, nurturing them back to health."*

*Father shook his head as he cast his gaze over the expectant faces of the children. "We did find...evidence of what had happened to them. Pascal's father finally managed to piece it together; we must assume they never heard the train, until it was too late. I've always believed the little girl's escape from certain death was a true Winterfest miracle..."*

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Tossing a battered baseball he'd found on one of his rambles through the subway system, Vincent walked along the tunnel, not even sure he had a destination in mind tonight. He loved to walk for the sheer joy of it.

Soon it would be Winterfest again and he was determined to find a gift worthy of Father's discerning eye. At almost ten years old, Vincent was already tall and rangy, for now all arms and legs, but showing certain promise of a powerful, impressive manhood in the unusual strength of his growing muscles and excellent state of health. He hardly ever got sick.

Now his keen eyes quested, back and forth, searching for inspiration. His good friend and blood brother, Devin had promised to mend anything Vincent might find. Their ongoing competition for Father's love was good-natured, though Vincent was aware he was becoming increasingly favoured. He scanned the tunnel confines for anything that looked likely. Failing to find anything down here, however, did not worry him at all.

It simply meant he would have to venture Above, into the intriguing world of the great city far above his head. He found the whole prospect exciting. His heart began to beat faster. Father did not encourage him to walk in that dangerous place, where he may be caught and caged; in fact he had forbidden it. But, what the old man did not know...

*Perhaps I should abandon my search and venture Up Top anyway, seek out a gift for Father in the forbidden places of the Topsiders, where they —*

“What was that...?” He stopped, his eyes narrowing.

He was sure he could hear crying, like a small animal in mortal agony, soft and low. He leaned down to peer into the broken and abandoned drain he was passing. But even his night sensitive eyes couldn't pierce the gloom of the farther reaches.

He held his breath, straining to hear anything more. But the silence hung, grim and forbidding. He straightened, shrugging his shoulders, considering his options. *Perhaps it was nothing but the wind, so he would —*

He jumped as the sound came again, a soft moaning from somewhere deep in the darkness of the tunnel. “Okay...” he leaned down again, straining to see anything to give him a clue about the identity of the hidden creature.

It came again, the faintest of sighing sobs. Going down on his knees and crawling into the drain, Vincent gasped as the cold water soaked his lower legs. He grimaced. “This had better be worth it.”

He decided it was probably a cat or a dog, a possible pet for him to take back to Father. With the right preparation, he didn't doubt he could persuade his parent to allow him to keep the unseen animal.

He crawled forward slowly, allowing time for his eyes to become accustomed to the gloom. There was something there,

something small and curled up into a ball. He could not discern any fur, so not a dog or a cat then. He shrugged off his disappointment, pushing further in through the cold, dirty water.

The pipe bent away to the left and in the curve he could make out the shape of a child. He assessed the huddled body as that of a girl by the long, tangled length of her dark hair. She appeared to be closer to death than to life. Her small body was shivering, nearly blue with cold and obviously very sick.

“Now what?” Vincent hesitated. He didn’t want to scare the child any further by his sudden appearance. Her eyes were tightly closed, but she was not comatose, the constant kneading of her fingers against her flesh and the fractured moaning indicated she still clung to consciousness by the barest of treads.

He reached back behind his head; dragging up the damp cowl of the cloak he wore against the chill of the upper tunnels, covering his face. He pulled the rest of the garment around his body, as he inched closer to the child.

“It’s all right...” Tentatively he placed his hand on her bare arm. But she didn’t move, or react to his presence. Her skin was icy cold.

“You cannot stay here...” Vincent tightened his grip, edging backwards slowly, trying to draw her after him. “You will die in here.”

She didn’t reply. He could see now the child was very young, he guessed about three or four years old. Her clothes were filthy and torn. But, despite her terrible situation, she refused to move with him.

Unsure of what to do next, Vincent edged closer again, opening his cloak with his free hand and pushing it around her small body. Again, dragging insistently at her arm, he drew her to him, finally bringing her up against the warmth of his chest. For several breathless seconds fraught with indecision, the girl hesitated, pulling back from his hold, her soft moaning increasing. But Vincent held on, pushing his cloak around her to finally envelop her completely.

“It’s all right, I won’t hurt you...” he soothed her with his voice, inching further forward until she was resting completely against him. “You’re safe, you’re safe with me.”

The girl didn’t react. The chill of her body pushed it’s way into Vincent’s cramping limbs. He began to shiver with reaction. But then he felt her thin arms creep around his waist, tangling in the folds of his cloak as she burrowed into him.

He looked down, his arm going around her protectively. As he tried to decide what to do now, the little girl’s head sank, her knees drawing up to her thin chest and the breath fleeing from her, her body becoming alarmingly still. She sagged in his arms, curled completely into a small ball of abject misery.

“I’m going to take you to someone who will help you get better.” Vincent talked more for himself than the girl. He was afraid to move her, afraid she would not survive, even the short journey back to the home tunnels. But she could not remain here, alone in the dark and the cold.

He drew slowly backwards out of the tunnel; the child held tight against his chest in one arm, the other hand outstretched to

guide his way out of the drain. Straightening into the subway tunnel once more, he shifted his slight burden into a better position, covering her completely with his cloak.

“Don’t die, please don’t die...” he begged, pressing his warm cheek to the side of her cold face. “If you live, we can play games and do things together. I promise you will be all right. I will look after you...always...”

The child didn’t move or murmur as he began to run, desperation lending extra speed to his long legs. He flew past startled tunnel dwellers, who called after him, but he didn’t pause to answer their questions as he sped towards Father’s chamber.

He arrived breathless and panting, barely pausing as he clattered down the steps into the chamber where Father was working on a map of the tunnels. The older man looked up in astonishment as his son skidded to a halt beside him.

“What is it, Vincent?” Father caught his arm, as he staggered.

“I found something, or someone.” Vincent opened his cloak. “I brought her to you. You can fix her, can’t you, Father?”

“Slow down, catch your breath.” Father bent to peer at his son’s small burden. “Good Lord, it’s a child.” He performed a quick assessment of her breathing and pulse. “Her vital signs are very weak. Where did you find her?”

“I was looking for a Winterfest present, for you,” Vincent gasped as he watched his father work. “I heard something in a water main, and there she was. At first, I thought it was a dog or a cat.”



“She is very ill, Vincent.” Father grimaced. “And this is soaking, you’ll catch a chill and then I’ll have two patients to deal with.”

He stripped away Vincent’s wet cloak, replacing it with one of his own he snatched from a nearby chair. The larger garment enveloped the two children completely. Father tucked it securely around the unconscious child.

He gripped his son’s shoulder. “Bring her. She is better in your arms; she will keep warm that way. We’ll see what we can do. But, I’m sorry, Vincent, it doesn’t look good. She may be too far gone to survive.”

As they hurried towards the hospital chamber, Vincent’s worried expression became set and stubborn. “She will live, Father. I can sense the life force is strong in her. I promised her she would not die. I won’t allow it to be so.”

“I don’t know, Vincent...” Father shook his head. “But we will try not to give up, Vincent. It is your true gift, to find the slightest flicker of life in someone and nurture it back into a flame. I can only hope you are right this time.”

He caught the arm of a passing child. “Go and fetch Mary to the hospital chamber and then find Pascal. Send him to me as well.”

“Okay, Father.” The boy nodded and hurried away.

“Get on the bed, Vincent,” Father directed as they entered the room. “We’ll wrap you both and you can warm her slowly.”

Vincent nodded, backing up and onto the bed, his precious burden still clasped tight against his chest. He pulled Father’s

cloak close around them both as the older man bustled around the chamber.

Mary came running in. "What is it, Father?"

"Vincent has found a child, in a drain. I am wondering if she is from that dead family Maurice discovered last week in the subway tunnel. She must have been wandering for days."

"Oh, poor baby..." Mary moved to the bed, uncovering the girl's face where she nestled against Vincent's shoulder.

The child whimpered, turning her face from the light of the candles. On a shuddering sigh, she burrowed deeper into Vincent's warm body, one hand rising to close tightly around a length of his tawny hair.

Vincent winced, but otherwise didn't move. "She is warmer now," he whispered. "I can feel her getting stronger. She will survive, I just know it."

"Not all tales have such happy endings, Vincent." Father kept his gaze averted as he sorted through his medication. "You cannot make it so, just by wishing."

He looked across at Mary. "When Pascal gets here, I want him to send a message up to Peter. Tell him what we have and ask him to bring down and administer the latest drugs, as soon as he can. Then all we can do is to wait and let nature take her course."

"She will *not* die," Vincent reiterated stubbornly. "I will stay with her day and night, I will not sleep. I will let her slip away without a fight."

“With you in her corner, Vincent, she stands a chance, but a very slim one,” Father cautioned, shaking his head. “She may have been in that drain for too long. But you cannot make yourself ill trying to save her.”

“She is mine...” Vincent closed his arms protectively around the small body nestled against him. He stared at both adults. “She will not die,” he said again. “I will not allow it.”

“We will do what we can,” Mary tried to placate him. “For now we must leave her as she is. When her temperature returns to normal, then we will see about getting you both into some dry clothes and cleaning her up.”

She fussed about the bed, tidying and straightening as Vincent watched her warily. Father worked methodically, cleaning and dressing the girl’s arm before inserting a needle for the IV bag of fluids he’d prepared. He looked up at his son’s set expression, seeing Vincent’s sapphire eyes taking careful note of everything his father did, assessing and approving.

“I have said this before, and no doubt we will talk of it again in the future, but you truly do have the soul of a doctor.” Father kissed his son’s forehead as he worked. “When I went through medical school, they still refused to admit minorities. That has always baffled me. But, I’ve often wondered what they would have said about you.”

“That I had a good teacher, Father.” Vincent pressed his fingers to the older man’s cheek. “That I am just as stubborn as he was. You will not give up on this child either, I know you too well.”

“Why did I ever teach you to play chess?” Father straightened, shaking his head on a rueful laugh. “I swear you also have the talent to be a lawyer, Vincent. You have the gift for turning people to your point of view against their better judgement. Turning everything so neatly to your advantage.”

“But you won’t give up on her, will you?” Vincent seized his hand as Father drew back. “Will you?”

Father sighed. “No, Vincent, I will not give up. But we must pray she is strong enough to want to survive. It is up to her now. I can do no more until Peter arrives.”

Okay...” Vincent huddled down, drawing the child closer into his warmth. “Then I will keep watch, until she makes up her mind. And I will be here, when she wakes up. I will not let her die.”

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*“And in that place hollowed out by their love, it stood up all at once and didn’t need existence. They nourished it, not with grain, but with the mere possibility of being. And finally this gave so much power that from its forehead a horn grew. One horn. It drew near to a virgin, white, gleaming—And was, inside the mirror, and in her...”* Vincent sighed, as he lowered the book of Rilke poems and leaned over the bed.

The little girl was almost hidden by the covers tucked around her. He stroked her hand, talking softly to her of all they would do together, when she was well again. The adventures they would undertake, the places they would see. It had been almost six

days since he'd found her and she was barely clinging to life. *But she is still alive.*

Vincent's throat was raw from the constant talking, his voice beginning to give out on him, but he wouldn't stop. He couldn't stop now. He had dozed in the chair, only leaving the room when nature dictated, and even then he'd made the quickest of journeys to the bathroom and back. Mary had kept him supplied with food and drink, murmuring her disapproval at his tenacity, but otherwise making no comment.

Vincent didn't look up when Father entered the hospital chamber. "Have you slept at all today?" He demanded to know. "You cannot go on like this, Vincent. You will kill yourself. You can barely speak now. For pity's sake, at least allow Mary to take your place, while you go and get some rest."

"I am here, Father. I will stay here. I will be here when she wakes up." Vincent's tone brooked no compromise.

"This is madness, young man." Father gripped his shoulder, attempting to draw his son from the bedside. "Come away now, before you make yourself ill. Then what use will you be to her?"

"Leave me..." Vincent growled warningly, deep in his throat. He spun up and away from his chair beside the bed, his hands upraised defensively before him.

Shocked at the sudden outburst, Father took an involuntary step backwards. He had seen the growing signs of his son's need to control his environment before, but he had dismissed it as

Vincent simply learning to harness his unusual temper. But now, even he hesitated before the sudden, all-consuming blaze in his sapphire eyes.

“Now, see here, Vincent, I—”

The growl became a roar as Vincent flung himself across the room, forcing his parent to take hasty steps back towards the door. Vincent swiped his fist through the air before Father’s startled eyes.

“I said, *leave me alone!*” Vincent halted, trembling with the force of his emotions, his face ashen. “You cannot make me rest, if I do not wish to do so.” He whirled about, stalking back to the bedside and sitting down.

He sat rigid and trembling, his shoulders squared as he awaited his punishment for his unexpected defiance.

“I am sorry, Father,” he said finally, when the older man didn’t speak. “But, I know if I leave her now, she will die without me here to talk to her, to encourage her. She has come too far for me to give up now.”

“Very well. I cannot say I approve of your methods, Vincent.” Father passed a shaking hand over his face. “But you certainly do have a way of making your point. We shall not speak of this incident again.”

He sighed, as he approached the bed once more. “But, I am sorry too, Vincent. I should have known better. You are too good a physician to desert your patient. But you are worrying me.”

“Thank you, Father.” Vincent took his hand and carried it to his lips. “I would not have slept anyway. She needs me.”

“I understand.” Father ruffled his hair. “All right, let’s see what more we can do for her.”

He leaned down to check the lines running into the little girl’s body. There was not much more he could do for her now. He was considering his options when a miracle suddenly unfolded before his startled eyes.

The girl stirred and moaned. She raised a hesitant hand to her forehead, turning her head restlessly against the pillow.

“I don’t believe it...” Father gasped.

“I told you she would live.” Vincent smiled at him triumphantly. “I could feel it in her, she wants to live now. She has made the right choice to stay with us.”

The little girl opened her eyes. She frowned at Vincent, but didn’t speak. Father froze, holding his breath, waiting and watching the pair of them, praying his unusual son would not have his stubborn perseverance repaid with rejection.

But Vincent did not seem to share his concerns. He reached to stroke the hair back from the girl’s damp forehead. He leaned forward, inclining his head, until it was level with hers on the pillow. “Hello,” he whispered.

The girl sighed, hesitating a fraction longer before reaching out to trace a tentative fingertip across Vincent’s lips, before opening her hand to lay it against his cheek. They just stared at each other, both smiling.

“She’s not afraid of me, Father.” Vincent spoke in a wondering tone as the two children continued to look at each other.

“I can see that.” Father swallowed against the sudden lump in his throat. “I am glad, too. She must see what we all see in you, Vincent, the beauty of your spirit. Children have the ability to see things most adults chose to ignore.”

Vincent didn’t move; he kept his head beside the little girl’s on the pillow. “Happy Winterfest, Father.”

“Happy Winterfest, Vincent.” Father shook his head. “Now will you listen to an old man and go and get some rest?”

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*“Before that moment, I had never seen anything as beautiful as Vincent’s face,” a woman’s voice commented from the chamber doorway. “I wondered, for a moment, if I was in heaven.”*

*Everyone swivelled to look. Shannon walked into the room, kissing Father’s cheek, before moving to the seat next to Catherine’s, taking her hand. She turned to smile at the many faces watching her. “I know it is a good Winterfest story, with a happy ending, because I was that little girl. Thank you, Father, I’ll admit, I had forgotten some of it. But I do remember all the poetry Vincent read to me. I will always remember that.”*

*“Yes, I also remember those talks.” Catherine nodded on a sigh. “My favourite was when Vincent read Dickens to me, Great*



*Expectations. The sheer beauty of his voice is one of my earliest memories.”*

*“We have come a long way, you and I.” Shannon reached to hug Catherine tightly. “And tomorrow night will be another step in this wonderful journey you and Vincent are taking together. I wish you all the very best of everything.”*

*She laughed. “And, I’m sure Father can’t wait to add more stories to his collection.”*

*“Happy Winterfest everyone.” Father spread his arms wide. “Now, who’s ready for another story about Vincent’s exploits...?”*

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*“The flower that blooms in adversity is the rarest  
and most beautiful of all.”*

**~ Walt Disney**