

## BOYS WILL BE BOYS

by Kate Nickell

Softer than the murmur of the underground stream came the gentle tapping on the pipes behind him. He chose to ignore them, concentrating instead on the suspiciously long silence in the next room. Though the chamber was dark, and he had heard nothing, the few rustlings and creaks had not convinced him that the children had settled down to sleep.

All was quiet.... too quiet.

Father set the pen on the blotter and carefully closed the inkwell. Rising, he moved to the steps then climbed them one by one. Luckily, stone cannot betray one's position, so he remained on the last step several minutes, peering into the darkness.

Automatically counting the lumps under the blankets, he listened. Devin lay on the right hand side, Vincent on the left, while Harry preferred to snuggle on the chest under the stained glass window. Despite their adventures of the day, they seemed to have settled for the night.

Smiling, he turned away. Then something caught his attention. Hurrying to Vincent's bed, he flipped back the blanket and stared at the bundle of coarse straw which lay around a ball, forming the head. A bolster with clothes tucked around it formed the body.

"Devin ..."

Just as he suspected, there was another lump of clothes in the second bed; a dark blue baseball cap substituted for Devin's black hair. Father did not bother to check the third bed; he knew who the instigator of tonight's wanderings must be.

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The city was hidden by a veil of leaves as they crept out of the tunnels and moved into the park. Shadows creaked, but when they spun round to see what had made the noise, they could see nothing unusual. Even Vincent's night vision detected nothing more than ordinary bushes and trees.

Leaves scrunched under their feet, no matter how silently they tried to step. Devin was glad that he and Harry had timed the patrols; although Vincent and he could blend into most backgrounds, Harry was still too new at the game. Worse, Harry had never had to learn how serious the game could be, particularly whenever Vincent was present.

Devin glanced at the two younger boys, who waited impatiently for the signal to follow. Behind them, he spotted six or seven more children. These unexpected tagalongs were no problem; he could take care of them all, just so long as they did as he said.

Vincent crouched impassively, his cloak blending into the shadows; only the darting of his light eyes betrayed his fascination with the world around him.

*'Harry was no better, though he was the older. And they were both babies compared to him',* Devin decided loftily.

"You can come out now," he whispered. "They've gone."

Harry burst through the thicket in an explosion of dead leaves. " 'Bout time! Well, what do you think of it, Vincent?"

His friend was silent for a moment. Forgetting Devin's admonitions to be quiet, the other kids surged around them and stared into the forbidden territory; their shrill voices shattered the night air. Some clung to the fence surrounding the fairground; a few scabbled up the fence after Devin, but their courage failed them midway and they hung suspended between earth and sky. Each time they tried to see what Devin was doing, an eerie metallic rattle echoed with the autumn leaves.

Still Vincent had not moved. He gazed at the night lights glittering above the dark trees. "It is so beautiful.... you see this every day?"

Harry glanced incuriously at the skyscrapers. "Yeah, I guess so. It's no big deal; they're only lights."

"Perhaps to you...." Vincent slowly turned so he could see the entire cityscape. "I never knew it was so big...."

"There's a whole world out there - all kinds of stuff to see and do." Harry swept his arm in a wide gesture. "Just follow me."

Before Vincent could answer, the gate rattled wildly. Devin called, "Harry, get over here!"

"I guess we better see that he wants." Harry moved past Vincent, who smiled at the marvels around them, then turned to join his friend and brother.

"Can you open this?" Devin shook the gate once more, then glared at the kids hanging around. "Get down! You want the police to know we're here? Toni, get the little ones quiet. Don - off the fence. Harry?"

The blond boy wormed his way forward and jerked his sleeves away from his hands. "Stand back - Harold the Magnificent will show you how it's done. Nothing up my sleeve----"

"Hurry up! We can't stay all night," hissed Devin.

"All right, all right! Some people just don't appreciate and artiste."

Ignoring the groans around him, Harry extracted a slim lockpick from his back pocket and inserted it into the lock. After probing its innards for a moment, he gave a quick twist and the lock popped open.

"Open sesame!" he announced, bowing with a grand flourish.

"Harry! Don't go far ..." Devin paused to pull the gate wider, then propped it into place.

"C'mon, guys; we can't hang around all night." Harry shoos the other kids ahead of him, but no one moved. It seemed that their courage had failed them now that they had realized that they truly were beyond the safety of their familiar tunnels. In desperation, he turned to his friend.

"Vincent?"

An incredulous smile spread across the boy's face as he gazed into the open sky. "Yes, let us ..."

Suddenly the darkness exploded with light and sound. An organ wailed weirdly, gained speed, then its tune sang out to them. The carousel sparkled, its lights reflecting in the mirrors above the prancing horses which seemed to invite them to come and ride.

They needed no second invitation. Harry bowed as they stepped hesitantly into the magical land; Vincent took one step, then another, then raced forward. One bound, and he was on the carousel which caroled its siren song to the stars. The other children dashed forward to join him; the carousel wheezed to a halt just long enough for the older children to help the little ones mount.

Harry lingered at the main gate, squinting into the darkness. Behind him came Vincent's voice.

"Harold, are you coming?"

"Start without me. Devin - crank 'er up!"

The older boy must have heard him, for the carousel began to move. It circled round and round, faster and faster; its ancient song almost drowned out by the riders' squeals of pleasure. Harry grinned at the center spoke where Devin was hidden; they'd planned this outing for a long time, and nothing was going to spoil Vincent's unbirthday present.

Just to make sure, he reconnoitered outside the fairgrounds from gateway to paths to tunnels. Nothing moving out there, he decided as he returned and began to check the grounds near the carousel. As he rounded the funhouse, he spotted someone moving ahead of him.

It was a suit, a cop. Great - Harry backtracked quickly and raced for the carousel, but the man's longer legs got him there first.

**"What's going on here?"** the guard roared from the darkness.

Startled, the children stared at him, unable to move. The carousel wheezed to a stop, as it slowed, the kids tumbled from their mounts and raced for the exit. The guard dashed after them, clutching at their cloaks, desperate to capture one culprit to show for his troubles.

Horrified by the disastrous end to his plans, Harry watched as one then another made it to freedom. The guard snatched a smaller kid and lifted him kicking and shrieking off the ground.

**Now I got ya!"**

With a savage growl, Vincent leaped onto the guard's back. The man howled and swung around, trying to dislodge him; in the confusion, he dropped his prey which raced to join the others.

**"Just don't stand there, Harry - 'do' something!"** yelled Devin.

Without thinking, he retorted. "You hit 'im high - I'll hit 'im low!" He darted forward, hit the ground on hands and knees, and braced himself.

Somehow Vincent turned the man, so he backed over Harry. Arms flailing, the guard went down in a tangle with the two boys. Vincent wriggled out before he could recover and tugged Harry to his feet.

Just then the lights went out. Harry whirled around, unable to see, but Vincent grabbed his arms and dragged him away.

"I gotta get my glasses!" he wailed.

The guard stood; something crunched under his feet. From their hiding place, Harry groaned as the man inspected the cracked horned rims then tossed them away. "My dad's gonna kill me...."

Vincent gripped his shoulder in sympathy. "Do not worry, it was a wonderful adventure."

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He wished he could say as much after they got back to the tunnels. A patrol met them as soon as the gateway opened and escorted them to Father's chambers. The patriarch lectured all of them, from oldest to youngest, about the follies of wandering Above; after assigning suitable punishments, he dismissed them.

The boys steeled themselves for the worst. "I was surprised that you would abuse our trust in this manner, Harold, For that, you are forbidden to return to the tunnels until Winterfest."

Harry stared at him. "You can't ... that's not fair!"

"Continue in this manner, and the injunction will stand until the new year. You cannot influence the other children to go Above, it is too dangerous."

"Father, it wasn't Harry's idea." Devin's quiet voice broke the silence.

For a moment, their eyes met. "What did you say?"

"That Harry didn't persuade us to go - it was my idea."

"No, it was mine!" Vincent stepped forward from the shadows. "I ... I told them that I wanted to go Above. I said I would go alone if they would not take me."

Father gazed at his two sons then at Harry, measuring their stories, weighing truth against falsehood. One might be lying, maybe all.... or perhaps each was telling his own truth. They waited silently for his decision. Soon they would be exploring on their own, with or without his blessing, so he must choose his words with care. Too often, if children believed they had to prove themselves, adventures could turn to disasters.

"Obviously, you must be disciplined ..."

"Now we're gonna get it," muttered Harry. Devin shot him a black look as Vincent hissed for silence.

"A community like ours would perish without discipline. Therefore, the punishment should fit the crime. You three will become our cartographers; you will learn how to map the tunnels from Winston and myself, then you will travel with the patrols two hours each day...."

He described in detail what their duties as an exploration team would entail. When he concluded, Harry was wishing that Father had settled for an old-fashioned spanking, while Devin groaned at the thought of another assignment to learn by rote. Only Vincent seemed pleased.

"Just think," he whispered, after Father had sent them to their room. "We will see things no one else has seen ..."

"Yeah, lotsa rocks and old sewers." Harry pounded the pillow and plopped onto the mattress. "There goes my Christmas vacation."

"It could be worse." Devin grinned evilly at Harry's sour expression. "He could make us clean them out."

Vincent sat up and glared at both of them. "You do not understand. No one, not even the adults, will know the tunnels as we do...."

Harry squinted as he considered the idea. "That means we can stake out our own hidey-holes, so the next time we're in trouble ..."

He grinned, and Vincent's and Devin's eyes met as comprehension dawned. "Presto! We can really disappear!"

The adventures were just beginning.

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