

A Tale of the Jack-O-Lantern

(S3)

By Mel

“So, to what do we owe the honor of your presence?” Vincent asked as he led Diana deeper into the tunnels.

Diana Bennet gave a halfhearted shrug. “Just wanted company tonight. Is that so wrong?”

Vincent’s silence was thoughtfully with understanding. As a fellow empath, Vincent had a strong sense of how much the toll of her job normally took of her...especially at Halloween. While most of the world saw the day as one to get free candy and have fun at parties, and Vincent himself enjoyed the freedom to roam the streets without fear, it was a time Diana loathed. She, above most people, knew how easy it was for those masterminds of evil she hunted for work could slip into wearing different masks and hide behind the phase of anonymousness of the night to commit unspeakable actions.

But with no way to change it, she seemed to typically try and ignore it as best as she could. Unless she was working on a case that commanded all her attention, she typically locked the doors of her loft Above and watched early Christmas movies to pass the night where evil could roam undetected. Why was tonight different?

“You said I could always come here to find the tunnels warmed by friends,” Diana added, after a moment of silence.

Vincent smiled to himself. She seemed to have an unnatural ability to read his mind. “I did and I meant it fully. What do ...”

“Wow look at that,” a child’s voice called.

Excited voices of both children and adults in the distance drew Diana and Vincent’s attention as they neared the great hall.

“Is there a party going on?” Diana asked.

“Of a kind,” Vincent said. “It’s tradition that the children carve their pumpkins with Mary before they go off trick or treating. Jacob loves it.”

“Ah fun. Where do the kids go trick or treating?”

“The children follow the same path as they do when they deliver the Winterfest candles to our Helpers,” Vincent said, trying to assure Diana of the safety those Below employed to keep the precious children safe.

Diana nodded, seemingly lost in her own thoughts, but then she glanced over at him. An amazed but teasing smile came to her. “But now how you can get pumpkins down here?”

Vincent smiled. While he valued truth and honesty, there was something nice about joking with another person like the way he and Devin did as kids.

“We have a special kind that grows in the dark.”

Diana’s smile grew. “Oh really, what color are they?”

“Black.”

The answer was so straight forward and instant, Diana laughed as the pair entered the great hall to the children all dressed in an array of costumes. Both children and adults sat at the long tables like workstations. Along one table, the pumpkins were being hallowed out; the orange goo dripped from overflowing bowls and the table edges like candle wax. On the other table, adults and children sat

carving the pumpkins into various faces and designs. Diana almost envied the skills she saw on the three finished ones set on a third table, set in the center to create an awkward triangle of labor.

"Are the candles ready, Rebecca?" Samantha, dressed as a fairy princess, asked.

"Yes, but we need to wait for everyone to be done curving," the candlemaker said with a smile.

Diana glanced over to see a basket filled with different sized orange candles. *How much wax does Rebecca get?*

A tug on her sleeve drew her attention as she looked down to see five-year-old Jacob Wells staring at her with a smile.

"You came, Diana."

"Hey Jake." Diana crouched to be on his level. "Yeah, I came and how have you been?"

"I'm good. I'm gonna get lots of candy tonight," Jake grinned.

"Oh that sounds fun, kiddo," Diana said, ruffling his blonde hair, with a smile. It still amazed her how in one breath Jake could be a typically excited kind wanting sweets, but somehow also having the vocabulary of a scholar.

But then, who were his father and grandfather if not scholars themselves, Diana reminded herself as she looked over Jake's costume.

"Let me guess you're a...ghost?"

"Nope...I'm a vampire." Jacob playfully patted away at her hand and showed her his pretend fangs. "I'm like... but where's your costume?"

Vincent caught Diana's smile faltering for a moment. Dressed in her typically blue jeans and purple shirt, she seemed out of place in a sea of little monsters, fairies, and various other creatures that the children played at. Even her red mane was pulled back into a hasty ponytail, as if today was any other in the year.

"Why don't you...?"

"Not everyone needs to wear a costume, Jacob," Vincent said. "This night can be celebrated in various ways."

Jake pouted.

"Don't you have a pumpkin to finish, Jacob?" Vincent asked, scooping up his son.

With a squeal of delight, Jacob let his father lead him back over the worktable where Kipper sat working on his own pumpkin. He glanced over at Diana. "Can you come help.?"

Diana stood, shaking her head. "You know I'm not good at those, but thanks."

Jacob and the other young children shifted in disappointment.

"You know," Diana said, "I may not have a costume, but I might have a story. Do any of you know where the idea of putting candles in jack-o-lanterns came from?"

"No," Kipper said, his attention still focused on his carving.

"What's the story, Diana?" Samantha asked.

"Well there are a lot of legends, but this one my grandmother told me from Ireland, about a man named Stingy Jack*," Diana said.

"Stingy? Jacob asked.

"It means he's a doesn't like to spend money, like Scrooge from a Christmas Carol," Vincent explained, before nodding back at Dianna.

"It's about trickery," Diana began, "And the devil, and how deals like wishes with a genie can turn your world upside down."

The chatter soon quieted as the children turned towards her; their wide eyes eager for a story that wasn't Ichabod Crane, or one of the ghost stories Father crafted.

Vincent settled beside his son at the bench, intrigued. Diana's normal matter of fact, and sometimes blunt, way of speaking had seemed to disappear as she warmed herself into spinning this tale. He wondered if she was representing her own grandmother in this retelling.

Diana cleared her throat. "This is but one legend, but this is a grand tale. Once there was a lad named Stingy Jack who worked as a blacksmith. One day the lad meets the devil and invites him for a pint."

"Ah that'll end badly. No pint is worth your soul," Willaim muttered.

"Well, they shared a drink, and the lad Jack dug into his pockets to find no money to pay. 'Could you pay for this one? I got next drinks,' Jack said. The devil obliges and..."

Diana pulled out a coin from her own pocket and held it up to catch the light before she placed it on the table. "... And he turned into a coin to pay, like a proper guest."

The adults around the room smiled.

"The stingy Jack snatched the transformed devil's coin up and stuffed it in his pocket," Diana said, acting out the moment herself.

"That bad, worse than bad," Mouse said, shaking his head. "Bad Jack."

"But," Kipper said, rising his hand in protest. "Couldn't the devil just change back to himself?"

Diana shook her head. "The stingy Jack was also a trickster and had hidden a piece of silver tucked into his pocket that kept the devil trapped as a coin."

The children booed at the man's actions.

"What does this have to do with pumpkins?" Kipper asked, refocusing on his carving of the orange gourd.

"I believe the story isn't finished, Kipper," Vincent said.

Diana gave him a small smile and looked back at Kipper. "Patience is a virtue. Now should I keep going?"

"Yes," chorused the other children. Even some of the adults seemed taken in by the tale.

"The devil pleaded and begged Jack to release him from his prison.

'What will you do for me?' Jack asked the coin.

'Anything,' the devil said.

Stingy Jack smiled. 'Let's make a deal then. I let you go and you swear to leave me alone for three years.'

The devil agreed and the deal was struck," Diana clasped her own hands together as if sealing a bargain before she pulled out the coin setting it back on the table.

"What's the big deal?" Kipper asked. "Sounds like they both got off easy--"

"Shh!" Little Jacob said.

Diana smiled and stepped over to the last hollowed pumpkin. "Well the years passed until the harvest time came in the third year with new turnips and pumpkins growing when the devil and Jack met once more. But Stingy Jack didn't like the devil showing up, so asked him if he could help him get some apples out of a tree. The devil agreed and climbed up the tree."

"It's a trap," Mouse said, fear edged in his voice. Jamie reached over and patted his arm in reassurance.

Diana nodded. "Stingy Jack placed a silver cross into a hole into the tree, trapping the devil up in the barren branches. Once again, the devil pleaded and begged Jack to release him from his prison.

'What will you do for me?' Jack asked again.

'Anything,' the devil said.

"Stingy Jack smiled. 'Let's make a deal then.'

"That the devil would never make Jack go into..." Diana's voice faltered for a second taking in the various ages of her audience. She tapped her foot and pointed at ground. "The fiery realm the devil called home beneath the earth, but which humans fear to go after they die."

Diana caught Father's smile of approval, before she continued the story.

"The devil agreed and they two left each other alone. Three years later when the autumn chill filled the air and the left-over harvest lay scattered across the ground, Jack had died. He went toward the white light of heaven but was denied entry inside for his lies and tricks, he turned to the devil's home.

" 'Let me in,' Jack called.

The devil appeared at the doorway and shook his head. 'Twas your own wish to be kept out of my home. I have no sway up there and I keep my promises. Rejected, he turned back to the cold and dark earth to wonder alone."

As Diana had woven the tale, she had quietly maneuvered herself over to the carved pumpkins.

"But the devil wasn't completely heartless. He tossed Jack a lump of burning hot coal to light his way in the eternal darkness a restless spirit endures. The small lump burned the ghost's fingers and he nearly dropped it. His eyes scanned the ground and found a carved-out pumpkin by his feet. Placing the warm, glowing ember inside the gourd he used it as a lantern to light his way."

Suddenly darkness fell over the great hall; the sound of struck match was sharp before a warm, bright glow spilled out of the lopsided smiling pumpkin with one tooth.

"Over the years people would try to spot the floating lantern and its host around the time of the harvest. It wasn't long before they began to copy these mimics, calling it Jack of the Lantern... or as it's known today Jack-O-Lanterns."

Silence fell over the hall for a moment before the whole hall cheered. He heard Kipper let out a "wow" and other whistles of approval.

Caught in the glow of the candle's light, Vincent saw Diana's unease at her tale slip into relief. For himself, Vincent was in awe at the detective's storytelling. How had she managed the thing with the lights? Not that it mattered as it certainly drew the audience in.

The next moment he felt his son slip off the bench and rush over to Diana.

"You don't need to wear a costume, but can you come back and tell the story again?" Jacob asked.

Diana gave an almost awed chuckle that the storytelling had worked. "If you want."

Vincent caught her gaze this time when she looked up. It seemed a new Halloween tradition had been born.

**The legend of "Stingy Jack and the Devil" originating the Jack-O-Lantern was an Irish legend and can be found in various forms online*