

Le Morte d'Arthur

*Yet some men say in many parts
of England that King Arthur
is not dead, but...
that he shall come again...*

✎ Sir Thomas Mallory

Coming hand-in-hand up the tunnel toward Vincent's chamber, they paused at the unexpected sound of voices coming from within.

"You shouldna brought it down," came the first young voice, whispering.

" -- Not in here, anyway," agreed another.

"What was I supposed to do?" a third demanded fiercely. "I couldn't just leave him there, could I?"

Catherine looked up sidelong at Vincent, who stood beside her, his head cocked attentively. She nudged him gently in the ribs. "Oho," she whispered. "So you *do* stand outside of doorways, listening!"

His mouth quirked, a little sheepishly. "You've discovered the secret," he murmured, "of my celebrated omniscience."

" -- At least where the children are concerned," she said wryly, delighted by this seldom-seen ability to laugh at himself.

Squeezing her hand, he drew her toward the door and cleared his throat. They heard, "He's coming!" and "Put the top back on!" "He's here!" ... Waiting another moment, they stepped into the familiar chamber.

Kipper, Geoffrey and Eric were standing uneasily around the writing-table. On it lay a large cardboard box, about six inches deep, emblazoned with orange-and-yellow dancing hotdogs.

"Good morning, boys," Vincent greeted them curiously. "What have you there?"

A fourth tousled head bobbed around the table; Naomi ran to take his hand. "I didn't do anything," she reassured him, anxiously.

He smiled down at the five-year-old. "I'm sure you didn't," he said as though he believed it; and kept hold of her hand. He looked up again. "Boys?"

Kipper elbowed Geoffrey, who put his hand on top of the box and took a deep breath. "Eric and me... we found something in the Park."

"On the drive-through," Eric offered helpfully.

"Anyway," Geoffrey went on, "I thought we should bring it back with us."

"What is it?" Catherine asked him softly, for he was obviously troubled. "What did you find?"

"Well..." He looked from her to Vincent and back again, unhappily. "It's Arthur... sort of."

"Sort of?" Alarmed -- his eyes widening with sudden comprehension -- Vincent stepped forward and reached for the box, which could not for a moment have held the rotund and rapacious raccoon they knew so well. Hesitating then, he glanced toward Naomi and back at the boys; his very look was an eloquent question.

"No, it's all right," Kipper shrugged. "He looks okay."

Vincent lifted the lid from the box and set it aside. Within, a familiar bandit-masked form was curled up, as if sleeping. Catherine let out a long breath. Vincent brushed his fingertips over the thick and still-glossy fur.

"Let me see," Naomi insisted, too short to peek over the side of the box. "I didn't get to see!"

After a moment of weighty uncertainty, Vincent lifted her up.

"That's not Arthur," the child said at once, squirming down again. "Arthur was fatter."

"Now he's *flatter*," Kipper snorted, ending in a wheeze as Geoffrey's elbow caught him fairly in the ribs. "Hey!"

"Where's Mouse?" asked Catherine, looking worriedly back over her shoulder as if she expected that young man to pop through the doorway at any moment.

"Above," Vincent answered, absently. "He and Cullen have just left to go 'foraging' for tools and other necessities. I don't expect them back until late afternoon, at the earliest." Anticipating her next question, he said, "There's no way to reach them. They could be anywhere in the city."

"He's going to be crushed," she sighed.

With a glance, Vincent warned an irrepressible Kipper against the most obvious pun. "Where did you get the box?"

"From one of the food-vendors," Eric answered him. "He was going to throw it away, but we asked for it because it was the perfect size."

"Well, it makes a very nice casket," Vincent said. "Arthur liked hotdogs, and I'm sure he would appreciate it. Geoffrey, you and Eric were right to bring Arthur back Below. You... didn't see it happen, did you?"

The ten-year-old shook his head. "I think it must've been sometime during the night."

"Yeah, he was already -- um, like this -- when we found him."

"What happened to him?" Naomi demanded.

"It looks like he was hit by a car, sweetheart. That happens a lot in the city," Catherine said sadly, thinking that the Park's "wildlife" was no less at risk than the city's stray cats and dogs; and of poor Arthur, who was accustomed to coming and going Above as he pleased. She studied Naomi, half-expecting for tears.

None were forthcoming.

"It's all right," Vincent said. "You can be sad, if you need to be."

She frowned up at him. "I'll be sad for this raccoon, then... but not for Arthur, 'cause it *isn't* Arthur. -- Anyway, I'm going to see what William's making for lunch."

As the little girl went out, Catherine, worried about her persistent denial, whispered, "I didn't know she was so attached to Arthur."

"Neither did I," Vincent replied, with raised eyebrows.

"What're you going to *do* with him?" Eric broke in.

"Vincent?" came a familiar voice from the door. They looked around to see Father standing there, leaning on his walking-stick. "I thought I might come and... What have you got there?" The little group around the table moved back a little to give the elder

a clearer view as he stepped forward. "Oh, dear. Dead, is he?"

"Quite dead," Vincent nodded.

"Quite, *quite* dead," Kipper echoed ghoulishly.

"All right, Kipper." Father frowned reprovingly at him before looking down into the box again. "Well, he looks very... very *peaceful*, doesn't he." He glanced covertly at the boys, of whom only Geoffrey, really, seemed appropriately solemn. Eric looked more curious than sad, and Kipper was obviously full of characteristic irreverence. He went on, "I think he probably didn't suffer at all."

"It's *Mouse* who's going to suffer," Catherine said, putting it all back into perspective for them.

"They were kindred spirits," Vincent conceded.

"Yes, indeed," said Father, who for several years had put up with the little bandit's antics, for Mouse's sake. "Little wild spirits, both of them."

"Did something happen to Mouse, too?" asked Eric, unnerved by this inclusive eulogizing.

"No, no," Father was quick to reassure him. "Mouse is fine, I'm sure."

"So, what are we going to do with Arthur till he gets back?" Kipper demanded.

At this, even Vincent looked uncertain. "It would be best to keep him cool, I suppose..."

"Now I know what you're thinking," the patriarch said severely, "and please don't think it. William objected to Arthur's presence in his pantry while the little beast was *alive*. If he stumbles on -- *this* -- in there, we'll all be eating canned fruit and stale buns for a week."

"Then... the little alcove by the Mirror Pool?" his son suggested. "It's relatively cool there, and no one would be likely to 'stumble' on it."

"So be it," Father nodded, watching him replace the garish box-lid. "We can discuss more permanent arrangements over lunch, then. Come along, everyone..."

As they followed the others out into the corridor -- Vincent assuming responsibility for the box and tucking it under one arm -- Catherine took his free arm and whispered, "I thought the children would be more upset."

"Arthur was... a one-man raccoon," Vincent murmured, carefully unsmiling to her startled glance. "He and Mouse shared a sort of understanding."

"An understanding?"

"Arthur agreed that he would not bite," Vincent said solemnly, "and Mouse agreed not to tell Father whenever he *did*."

Catherine bit her lip to keep back the laughter that might be considered "unseemly," given present circumstances. "Really?"

He nodded. "And a raccoon isn't everyone's idea of an ideal pet. They're more temperamental than a dog might be. Arthur generally slept all day, and at night he either 'helped' Mouse with his gadgets and experiments, or went Above."

"I've wondered about that, but I've never asked," she said. "Did someone have to let him out at night?"

"In the beginning, of course, he simply accompanied Mouse on his nocturnal excursions. Then he began to disappear, some nights, on his own. It was at about this time that we began to discover the secret door at the Park entrance was being left ajar." His voice turned dry. "There were all sorts of accusations, until we realized who was to blame."

She stared at him, incredulous. "Arthur?"

Vincent nodded. "He'd been watching Mouse open it for so long that it was a simple matter for him to learn to work the lever himself."

"I'd heard raccoons were intelligent."

"Unfortunately, while they may quickly learn how to *open* a door, nothing will induce one to close it behind him. It was the closest Arthur ever came to official expulsion."

"What happened?"

"Mouse -- with Cullen's help -- had to rework the levers on all the entrances, so that Arthur either couldn't reach them, or wasn't strong enough to trigger them any longer. And a little hidden 'door' was constructed, so that Arthur could come and go as he pleased without undoing all our security. Of course, it was rigged with a counterweight so that it closed after him each time."

Catherine grinned at the thought of the tunnel-world having its own equivalent of a "doggy-door." "So he was free to come and go as he pleased?"

"Oh, yes. Mouse never liked it, however. He did worry about Arthur's safety -- rightly so, it seems -- and he was forever going

out to 'recapture' his friend and bring him back Below." Vincent's mouth quirked, a little sadly now. "Arthur would climb into a tree and hide, watching him all the time from behind the trunk. Mouse never caught on."



"But you knew?"

"I watched them, once or twice... when neither of them knew I was about." He paused then, at the intersection they'd reached; and watched the others go on. "I'll go down to the Mirror Pool... and then I must go and speak with Kanin. You go on ahead; I won't be long."

Impulsively, Catherine leaned up and brushed his soft-bristled cheek with her lips. On that note -- and on his look of pleased surprise -- she smiled and hurried after Father and the boys.



It was at lunch, when nearly as many of the tunnelfolk gathered together as at the common supper, that the news was told, and general sympathy expressed.

"I'm going to miss Arthur," Mary said pityingly.

"Yes," Father said, "he always did make life... *interesting*."

"Seems to me you used to say that about Devin," Pascal said slyly. "And he made you shout, too."

Amid scattered laughter, Father said, "Yes, well, you must admit I was provoked -- and on more than one occasion."

"Vincent told me about the secret doors," Catherine smiled.

"Oh, my dear, yes -- but it didn't end there. Like all his kind, as Arthur grew and matured he was always into something."

"My kitchen," William grumbled, passing him a platter of cold sliced meats.

"He ate up all our desserts," young Jesse put in. "Lots of times!"

"And remember when he tipped over that vat of melted beeswax in my chamber?" asked Rebecca. To Catherine she explained, "I guess it still smelled like honey, or something. Anyway, he thought he smelled something edible, and he was going to get to the bottom of it or die trying."

"And it was a miracle he didn't," Sarah reminded her. "All that hot wax --"

"Rebecca would have liked to have him 'waxed and feathered' that night, I think," Pascal teased her.

"Well," she said indignantly, "you saw what it was like -- twenty gallons of blue wax, hardening into every crack and crevice of that chamber floor. Why, we had to do everything but sandblast to get it up. It's been three years and I'm *still* running across little bits of it."

"Mouse offered to build us a flamethrower of sorts, to *melt* it off." Father gave a familiar long-suffering sigh. "Fortunately, we were able to talk him out of it."

"Then there was that time at Dr. Wong's," Zach reminded him. "Remember?"

"Dear God, yes -- Ah, Vincent, I was beginning to wonder what had happened to you." He nodded to the chair between himself and Catherine. "Everything, er... all right?"

"Yes, Father." Vincent took his seat (pressing Catherine's hand under the table); and served himself from the platter Pascal passed across the table to him. "Thank you. This looks delicious, William."

"What was it that kept you so long?" Father asked him.

"Yes," came a piping query from farther down the table, "where'd you go?"

"Eat your lunch, Naomi," he answered her, kindly but firmly. "I went to speak with Kanin, Father, about making a stone."

"A stone? -- Oh, yes, a *stone*. I see." Who better to have charge of that, he thought, than their own resident stonecutter? "And what did he say?"

"He was sorry to hear about Arthur, of course. He'll be happy to take some time from his current project, and says he has just the stone. It's not a big job; it should be ready by evening."

"Good, good. Now -- "

"What's going to happen to Arthur?" asked a small boy named Julio.

"Yeah, what are you going to do with him?" Naomi demanded.

"Can we stuff him?" asked Eric, whose most recent foray into Father's library stacks had yielded him an antiquated volume on the art of taxidermy.

Vincent looked around, startled. "Stuff him?"

"Yeah!" Eric jabbed his glasses back up his snub nose with excitement. "We could stuff him like one of the pictures in my book, like this -- " Baring his teeth, he threw his arms up over his head, fingers curved rigidly as claws. "Like a grizzly bear or something, you know?"

"Good heavens," Father exclaimed, "I should say not. How would Mouse feel?" About to elaborate, he paused suddenly and reconsidered. "On second thought, Eric, you're not to mention this to Mouse -- not for any reason. And *don't* show him that book. I hope I've made myself clear?... Excellent."

Vincent gave Catherine a covert smile as they both realized what Father must have been thinking.

"So, what are we going to do with him?" Kipper asked.

"We could have a funeral, sort of," said fair-haired young woman cradling her baby at the next table. "After all, he was one of us... in a way."

Father turned, beaming with approval. "Why, yes, Lena, that's exactly what I was thinking." He ignored the muffled moans of small boys who evidently thought that stuffing Arthur would be *much* more fun than just burying him. "Mouse would like that. Interment with honors, so to speak, of a faithful pet."

"Yes, but... where?" Mary asked doubtfully.

Naomi leaned forward. "Down in the Tombs, with the *people*?"

"No, no." Father shook his head. "But there is a smaller alcove near there, that I think would make a suitable pet cemetery."

There were thoughtful nods all around. "I think that would be nice," Catherine smiled.

"So do I," Vincent softly agreed. The boys subsided. "And until Mouse returns, later, we can all be thinking of nice things we can say about Arthur."

"Nice things?" William said doubtfully.

"You mean," put in Kipper, his black eyes dancing, "like, 'he didn't always eat *all* the strawberry tarts -- he'd just take a bite out of every one'?"

"Now, now," Father frowned. "Arthur did make life more interesting, more... *fun*. Surely you can think of something nice to say about him, for Mouse's sake."

With a devilish grin, the boy returned to his sandwich. "We could always ask Dr. Wong."

"Someone mentioned that before," Catherine remembered. She turned to Vincent. "Just before you came in. What happened with Dr. Wong?"

There was a subdued wave of anticipatory laughter, and Vincent turned. "It happened while Arthur was still experimenting with the doors. Apparently he followed me on a visit to Dr. Wong's shop one evening. Later, out of curiosity, he returned on his own."

Catherine's green eyes widened. "Oh, no. You mean...?"

"Oh, yes," Father answered. "Now you know that Dr. Wong, in addition to his herbs and roots and such, does a thriving business in the new 'health foods' and 'natural' gourmet products." He paused, with a drama not lost upon his audience. "This included bottled honey, jars of molasses..."

"Oh, *no!*" Catherine repeated, grinning.

"... Peanut butter, apple butter, apple sauce..."

Everyone was laughing openly now.

"He went for the sweet things first, of course," Father continued, straight-faced. "And I was amazed, later, by two things: One, that Dr. Wong slept through the sounds of breakage for as long as he did; and two, that Arthur's orgy of consumption didn't hurl him into some sort of diabetic shock by the time he was discovered. Of course, by then the place was a shambles. Arthur himself was a vision; plastered all over with various kinds of sticky-sweets, and too full or too defiant to retreat."

Catherine was helpless with laughter. She'd seen enough Disney bear-cub movies, growing up, to be able to visualize the picture he was painting. Accepting Vincent's handkerchief, she dabbed at her eyes and gasped, "What happened?"

"Dr. Wong recognized Arthur, of course," Vincent chuckled, "and he is a man of some temper, as you may recall. But no amount of shouting or arm-waving would frighten the raccoon back Below. Dr. Wong had to go down into the tunnel himself, and rap on the master-pipe there until Mouse and I came to rescue him." He grimaced at the memory of the furious and almost-incoherent pipe-clatter that had awakened them.

"Now, it wasn't funny," Father insisted with theatrical gravity to all those still wiping their eyes and holding their bellies. "Dr. Wong was so beside himself that even once they arrived, it was nearly an hour before his scolding lapsed back into English again. Arthur was very lucky he didn't just call the police, or the zoo -- "

" -- Except they wouldn't have been able to understand him, 'cause he was still talking in Cantonese," Geoffrey giggled.

"Fortunately he was insured for the stock he lost," Mary added.

"Yes, the insurance company which reimbursed him for the destruction, attributed it to 'an animal or animals unknown' -- an act of God, so to speak."

"Act of Arthur," William muttered, starting them all off again. "He did have sweet tooth," he went on, mopping his face -- for even he had succumbed to an infrequent bout of hilarity. "Many's the time I put out pies to cool, only to come back to find each one 'decorated' with a raccoon-handprint where he'd reached in to sample the fruit-filling from each one, equally in turn."

"Arthur was very democratic, that way," Mary granted him.

"Oh, yes," Vincent nodded. "He didn't play favorites."

"Well," Pascal contradicted him, "he brought you the bees."

A soft snort of laughter. "Yes, you're right. I'd nearly forgotten that."

"Bees?" asked Catherine.

"Actually," Father remembered, "it was hornets, wasn't it?"

"Arthur had discovered beehives up in the Park by then," the pipemaster grinned. "And the honey they contained. Then one night he found a low-hanging hornets' nest. I suppose he thought it was another kind of hive, and there might be a honeycomb inside..."

"But one of them must have stung him when he bit into it." Father picked up the tale. "At any rate, he came to get Vincent with a nose like W.C. Fields' -- grabbing at his sleeve and chittering like a mad thing -- and led him back to his bedchamber."

"He'd left the hornets' nest, still attached to its branch, on my bed," Vincent said ruefully. "I suppose he was hoping I could open it, unscathed, and get us the honey somehow."

"He was willing to share," Lena put in, in the raccoon's defense.

Father shook his head. "Heaven only knows how he got it all the way down here."

"He must've run like hell with it, the whole way," Jamie grinned. "But then the rest of the hornets woke up, and the chamber was full of them -- "

" -- For days," Vincent sighed.

"You took to sleeping in the guest chamber, as I recall," Father said, his eyes twinkling.

"It was nearly a week," Vincent explained to Catherine, "before we stopped finding furious hornets in our beds, in our boots -- "

" -- In the folds of our trousers," William said darkly, to renewed and self-explanatory laughter.

"They were incredibly pervasive and persistent in their outrage," Father went on. "And quite a few of you went about that week, I remember, with swollen noses, and sticking-plasters on various parts of your anatomies. The only one who never got stung, somehow, was Mouse, even though he did help with the extermination efforts."

"He'd better have," William glowered. "It was his 'coon, after all."

"Now, not everything Arthur got involved in was his fault," Mary reminded him. "Remember the night he got chased in the Park?"

Grudgingly, the big chef nodded. "I suppose he really wasn't to blame, that time," he conceded, "even though he did scare the hell out of everybody."

"Chased?" Catherine found herself asking, irresistibly drawn in. "What was he being chased by?"

"Well, at first we didn't have any idea what was happening," Mary began, warming to her tale. "Most of us were asleep in our beds when there came echoing through the tunnels the most terrible, wailing *noise*."

"Nobody could tell where it was coming from," Jamie continued. "Pascal put out a general alarm on the pipes, and we were all huddled into Father's library in our pajamas and nightclothes."

"It was plainly getting closer at every moment," Father interrupted, leaning toward the children who didn't know the story and were sitting there enthralled. "We thought our security had been breached by whatever was making this awful clamor, and we were going to have to evacuate."

"What did it sound like?" breathed Naomi, her blue eyes enormous.

"Like a ghost," Kipper said at once. "Coming to get us."

For once, Father didn't contradict him. "It was a dreadful kind of high-pitched banshee wail," he replied in sepulchral tones. "Rising and falling, coming nearer and nearer as we waited. It sounded like a hound from hell."

The five-year old got down from her chair without a moment's hesitation, and climbed up into the safety of Vincent's lap.

Father pretended not to notice. "It grew louder and louder," he went on, grasping his walking-stick and lifting it like a weapon. "And yet it seemed to echo from everywhere, and we couldn't tell what direction it was coming from --"

"So we didn't know which way it was safe for us to run," Pascal put in.

"After all, we didn't want to run into its very jaws," Kipper added, stealing a memorized line directly from Father and earning a stern look from the storyteller.

"It grew nearer and nearer," the patriarch went on, "and louder and louder." His voice grew softer by contrast so that everyone, even those who knew the story, leaned forward unself-consciously to hear him. "We were all very frightened, and huddled closer and closer together. And then, as our hearts hammered in our chests and we grew convinced the end was near... just as the terrible noise echoed so loudly that we knew the Death would round the corner and spring in among us at any moment... just then, Arthur scurried into our midst."

Catherine, who'd been as caught up as any of the children, sputtered, "Arthur?!"

"Arthur, indeed," Father said drily. "And at his very heels came his dreaded pursuer, revealed in all its terrible splendor... a little Pug dog, howling its head off."

Laughter exploded throughout the chamber. Amid this hilarity Naomi tugged on a strand of Vincent's long hair. "What's a Pug dog?" she asked plaintively, over his soft chuckling.

But Father recovered first. "Oh, child," he said weakly, dashing the tears from his eyes. "A Pug is a breed of small dog I

saw quite often in my youth, before I left England... although I don't believe it's quite as common here. It's got a round head like a grapefruit, bulging eyes and a very pushed-in face -- no proper muzzle at all, to funnel any kind of a howl through. I suppose that's why it sounded so very odd when the sound was magnified and distorted by the tunnels. It sounded like a *much* larger and more dangerous creature than it actually was."

Vincent murmured, "The Pug of the Baskervilles," sending the gathering into peals of laughter all over again.

"Anyway," Pascal gasped finally, turning to Catherine, "you know how many Topsiders walk their dogs in Central Park. This one apparently caught a glimpse of Arthur, and with visions of itself-as-Coonhound, took off in hot pursuit."

"And Arthur, rather than letting himself be treed," William continued, "sensibly hotfooted it for home instead. He ran through the little 'door' they'd made for him; and the dog, being small, ran in right after him."

"Arthur found Mouse and scrambled up his leg and onto his shoulder, scolding furiously." Father took out a worn handkerchief to polish his spectacle-lenses, which seemed to be steamed up with laughter. "The Pug skidded round the corner and began to circle the boy, baying hysterically. She was underfoot before we knew what she was. For a few moments it was quite a circus in here."

"All the grownups were yelling and screaming," Geoffrey told Eric; and Kipper, grinning, added, "Mary jumped up on a chair," as if the memory still delighted him.

"Now it seems to me," Father said in her defense, "that you children were only entertained in retrospect, *after* we'd gotten the dog back Above and to her owner."

"Yes, you were plenty scared at the time, too," William reminded them. He looked around him. "Well, I see you all haven't all been laughing so hard that you forgot to eat." The tables were scattered with large platters, now mostly empty; and as he watched, several people -- and not just the children -- reached for the last buns and scraps of cold-cuts to take with them.

As everyone started to leave Father called after them, "We'll send word about the ceremony, please be ready to attend..." Watching their happy departure, he reflected that what might have been a somber gathering had somehow instead attained the raucous flavor of an Irish wake. "It's almost a shame Mouse wasn't here," he said, thinking that the pet raccoon, once gone, had gained a level of acceptance he'd never come near to achieving during his life.

"It's a shame *Arthur* wasn't here," Vincent reminded him softly.

"Yes. Yes, of course you're right."

Naomi, still in Vincent's lap, turned to look up at him. "But he *will* be here."

Catherine, her brow furrowing worriedly, said, "Sweetheart, you know that Arthur is gone."

The child shook her head stubbornly. "He'll be back."

"Well," Father sighed. "Perhaps in the greater sense of things, he will be."



Much later, as afternoon wore on toward evening and Catherine sat with Vincent in his chamber, there came a signal on the pipes. Vincent lifted his head, listening.

"What is it?" Catherine asked. "Is Mouse back?"

He shook his head. "Kanin would like us to come and look at the stone," he said, standing and extending his hand.

In Kanin's workshop -- a large space scattered with rocky debris of every kind -- they found the stonemason chipping the finishing touches into a stone about eighteen inches tall. "I've fixed him up a sort of little crypt down there," he said, standing back to display his work. "This is the door. What do you think?"

They considered the rectangle of pale grey stone. Lettered across its surface was one simple word:

ARTHUR

"It's lovely, Kanin," Catherine told him sincerely.

"Yes." Vincent clasped the man by one broad shoulder. "It's a wonderful job."

Kanin brushed a little of the stone-dust from his calloused hands. "Olivia's never had a pet," he said thoughtfully, "so it

was a little hard for her to understand... but growing up Topside, I always had a dog. I don't suppose it's the same as a raccoon -- maybe nothing could be -- but I know a little of how Mouse will be feeling. I wanted to do all I could."

"That's very sweet," Catherine said, touching his wrist briefly and sadly. "I'm sure Mouse will appreciate the care you've taken."

The tunnel community settled in to wait. Vincent had volunteered to break the news to Mouse, once the young man returned with Cullen; and as the evening wore on the suspense Below became almost palpable.

"There's nothing heavier," Vincent mused, "than the weight of bad news kept waiting."

"Yes," Catherine agreed. "But I'm glad I didn't have to work today; I'm glad I could be here with you... all of you."

There were familiar, uneven footsteps in the corridor, and Vincent called out, "Father?"

The elder came into the doorway, leaning on his stick. "I do hate to ask you this," he said, addressing the question to both of them with obvious reluctance, "but have either of you seen Naomi?"

"No." Catherine rolled her eyes ceilingward. "Not *again*."

"Now, I'm sure she couldn't have gone Above," Father was quick to reassure them. "The sentries have been keeping an extra-sharp lookout, watching for Mouse, and she couldn't have gotten by them. Not tonight. She's still somewhere here Below, I'm certain. But after the children had their baths, she slipped away from Mary and Brooke and disappeared."

"Dinner is late," Vincent said shrewdly. "Has anyone checked the kitchen, or the pantries?"

A sudden tapping on the pipes caught their attention. "Well," Father said after a moment, "we can't look for her just now... Mouse and Cullen have arrived, and are on their way down." He turned and started back down the corridor, glancing back over his shoulder to make certain they were following. "She'll turn up at the ceremony, I'm sure. I've never known Naomi to miss any kind of excitement."

The tunnelfolk were already beginning to fill the large library-chamber. Some of them were carrying children in night-clothes. Conversations were carried on in whispers as they watched

the door.

"Now I told you all I'd send word," Father said impatiently. "You weren't supposed to gather until one of us signalled. Mouse hasn't even been *told* yet."

"We're hungry," Kipper said bluntly. "Besides, I wrote down a lot of good things I thought of, about Arthur. I want to read 'em to Mouse."

Father retreated to his desk, scowling, and the group lapsed into a restless, waiting silence. After a moment, Mary cocked her head. "I think I hear someone laughing," she said, puzzled.

"I hear it too," Jamie frowned.

A murmur of agreement swept the chamber and they lapsed into silence again, listening. It was unmistakable; someone was coming up the tunnel, laughing. Chortling. *Guffawing*.

"Why, it's William," Rebecca exclaimed.

"It *is* William!" Mary said. "I recognize his voice."

Before Father could rise, the large tunnel-chef had filled the doorway. He stood there red-faced, wiping his eyes, gasping for breath. "Come with me, Father -- all of you. You've got to come with me, and see this."

"William," Father began, "you know we're all waiting for Mouse, so that we can --"

"No." The man shook his big, blond-bearded head. "That can wait. You'll see. Come on!" And he turned away, stumbling away out of sight again.

"Well, really, I can't imagine..." But Father rose to limp back toward the door, his obvious irritation vying with his curiosity for dominance. "Vincent, Catherine? What do you suppose...?"

"I don't know, Father." Taking Catherine's hand, Vincent realized the three of them were leading a general exodus from the chamber. The others spilled out into the corridor after them.

Catherine said, "Could there be something wrong in the kitchen, do you suppose?"

"He wouldn't be laughing, surely," Father said. "Come to think of it, I've never seen William laugh like that. Do you suppose he's all right?"

Leading the subdued parade of tunnelfolk, the three turned the corner of the last tunnel and saw William standing there, one finger pressed to his lips in warning. "*Don't make a sound*," he

whispered. "You've got to see this." And with an uncharacteristic grin, he beckoned them forward.

Vincent, conscious of the tiptoeing crowd massed at his back, urged Father and Catherine ahead of him; then, as they peeked around the edge of the kitchen doorway, he peered over their shoulders.

On the wide stone floor of the big kitchen sat a little girl, oblivious to her growing audience. Her whole attention was focussed on scooping jam out of the big jar before her; and on the accomplice with whom she shared this booty. Sitting flat on his ample bottom, he seemed to be taking turns with the child; first her sticky hand went into the jam-jar, and then his smaller one, each to be licked clean by its respective owner.



There was a commotion in the crowd behind Vincent; he felt someone pushing up beside him. Mouse's voice rang out in his ear, shocked and dismayed. "Arthur! What've you done? -- Sorry, Father."

In the kitchen Naomi looked up, startled, to find the doorway crowded with familiar and incredulous faces. At Mouse's cry her face underwent a series of expressions; surprise, guilt and, as she heard the laughter beginning, a small and sheepish smile. This she directed at Vincent, in a transparent attempt to charm. "You see?" she asked him meekly. "I told you that wasn't Arthur."



"So what happened?" Catherine asked him a week later, walking through the tunnels hand in hand. She'd had a hectic and exhausting week at the office, and this was the first time she'd seen him since the day of the near-funeral. "I mean, with the arrangements, once Arthur came back?"

"Would you like to see?" he asked; and when she nodded, he began to lead the way down to the level commonly called "the Tombs." As they walked, he said, "Being that the raccoon Geoffrey found wasn't Arthur, we were simply going to... well, *discard* the imposter. So many animals are killed that way in the city; we can't, as Father pointed out, collect them all."

She reached up absentmindedly to hook the soft, light-brown hair back behind her ear, out of her eyes. "But you didn't, after all?"

"No." He shook his head. "When Naomi found out, she was quite upset by the idea."

Catherine looked up quizzically at his blunt, leonine face in profile. "Why was that, do you think?"

"Oh, she was quite emphatic about it... and the other children agreed with her. She said that just because this raccon wasn't a part of us 'like Arthur,' that didn't mean nobody loved him; and perhaps he had a family somewhere, who would never know what happened to him. So we *couldn't* just 'throw him away.'"

"Well," Catherine smiled, "I suppose she was right."

"And besides," Vincent went on, "I don't think the children could bear to waste a perfectly good crypt."

Catherine laughed at him softly. "Cynic." They turned another corner downward and she asked, "It's near here, isn't it?"

He nodded. He'd deliberately chosen a route that would take them well clear of the Tombs area with which she was most familiar. Instead they entered a smaller gallery nearby.

In one corner there in the half-light, she could see a small boxlike crypt, standing no more than two feet tall. "Read the inscription," Vincent urged her.

Coming down onto one knee, Catherine could see at once that Kanin's original lettering had been chiseled out. The top of the doorstone now read,

ARTHUR

"What's that underneath it?" she asked, leaning forward and squinting over something carved lower into the stone.

"Can't you read it?" Vincent asked, his quiet voice rich with humor. Kneeling beside her, he reached toward a niche in the wall; found a small candle there, and lit it. And in that flicker of new light she read, smiling,

TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN RACCOON

The End

* * *

*This story is dedicated to Arthur
in any incarnation; and to Dorothy,
the real-life Pug of the Baskervilles
who howls at my house.*