

# The Homecoming

"I know you think he isn't coming back." The young woman faced him resolutely from the chamber door. "He is."

Jacob Wells stepped toward her. "Child, it isn't that I believe he *won't* come back. But... you haven't heard from him, have you, in nearly a year -- "

"It's been ten months."

"Ten months," he amended. "But in light of that, I simply want you to be prepared for the... the possibility."

"It isn't a possibility, Father." She lifted her chin; her dark hair settled over squared shoulders.

It was a sight that made the old man sigh. Olivia had always, he thought, been... *resolute*. As a child, growing up in the tunnels, this had been masked by shyness or mistaken for stubbornness. As an adult, it was the bedrock underlying her more apparent qualities of quietude and natural sweetness.

"You know why he hasn't written," she went on. "Why he asked me not to write to him, too, or -- or visit him there..." She had abided by those wishes, and the pain of that decision was still plain upon her face. "You know that he couldn't bear to be reminded of what he'd left behind here... and he couldn't stand the thought of my seeing him there -- behind bars -- or seeing Luke and not being able to touch him, or hold him..."

"I know," he said gently, "that it has caused you to feel more alone than you perhaps needed to, throughout this ordeal."

"Don't condemn him." She didn't add, *Again*, but the word seemed to hang in the air between them anyway. "And after all, I had all of you." She said it without bitterness. "You've all been a great help... much more than I expected."

Father limped to the bottom of the short metal stair, and leaned upon his stick looking up at her. "We're your family."

"Yes, you are. I doubted that once, when all of this started, and I shouldn't have. But he's my family too, Father -- he is my *life* -- and you mustn't ask me to doubt him, either. Not now... and never again."

"All right," he nodded, and watched her turn and leave the chamber. He wondered, sadly, whether he would see her disappointed before this day was through... or whether she would find her love vindicated, and fulfilled. With all his heart, he hoped it was the latter.

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"She asked me if I'd take care of Luke for the day... while she waits." Catherine sat cross-legged on the end of the big bed, watching the toddler stacking blocks on the threadbare carpet. When she looked up, her face was alight. "I mean, when I was Below the other day she deliberately came and sought me out. She could have asked anyone, Vincent. Mary, Lena, Rebecca..."

"Any of them would have been glad to help," he agreed, leaning forward in his reading chair. As they talked he couldn't help but notice how the soft golden light from the stained glass window, behind her, haloed her face and hair.

"I haven't seen much of Olivia this year," she said, raising her gaze eyes to his. "I'm hoping this, today, means she's begun to forgive me."

His blue eyes widened. "You did nothing wrong."

"That doesn't matter. I was part of something -- no, let me finish -- something that tore her family apart. And I don't mean only her and Kanin; it caused a lot of dissent among the rest of you, too."

Vincent nodded. Too well he remembered the arguments aimed at trying to persuade Father to make an exception to one of their most basic rules. And in his mind's eye he could still see Mouse, turning imploringly to Catherine with the plea no one else would voice, but all were thinking: "*Let him go.*"

"It was only natural for Olivia to feel hurt, and angry -- "

"At all of us," he murmured. His eyes fell again to the child playing at his feet, oblivious to the day's importance.

"Olivia never mentioned it again, but... I know she felt, at least in the beginning, that by not shielding Kanin we had all somehow betrayed them."



"She could not allow herself to be angry with *him*, after all," Vincent said of the man who had lived a lie among them for sixteen years. "And it was good that we could be here for her... even for that. She was very reserved with us for some time after Kanin left to begin his sentence." His voice betrayed none of the pain Catherine knew he'd felt, at being treated that way by his lifelong friend and childhood playmate. "We could accept her coldness -- even her anger -- so long as she did nothing foolish."

"Like taking the baby and trying to live outside the perimeter," Catherine suggested.

"Yes. But that would have been impossible without Kanin, and she realized that."

"I'm glad she got over being angry," she sighed.

"When Luke fell ill with fever," he remembered, "Father stayed with them day and night. That was the turning point."

With every appearance of robustness, Luke noisily demolished a block-tower, then grabbed hold of Vincent's boot and trouser-leg to lever himself upward. Vincent lifted the child up onto his knee.

Catherine watched him with the baby. His great, furred hands were so gentle with this tiny being; his face was alight and unguarded as he returned the youngster's smile. *Someday*, Catherine thought, making no effort to shield her feelings; for the poignancy of her hopes here were no secret to either of them, and she could not have concealed them if she'd tried. Vincent looked up, blue eyes meeting green enigmatically for a long moment; then both of them returned their attention to the child. "He's grown so much since Kanin's been away," Catherine observed.

He nodded, not looking up. "Olivia says that since he started walking, he's gotten into everything."

Luke was looking up at Vincent with an adoration all the tunnel-children seemed to share. Impulsively he reached up and caught a fistful of gold-red strands of his hair, yanking enthusiastically. "Wellyow!"

"What?" asked Catherine.

"'Yellow,' I think." Wincing, Vincent caught the baby's hand in his much larger one.

Catherine grinned to see him trying to loosen Luke's grip. "He has his father's hands, apparently."

"Are you going to be a stonemason, Luke?"

The child giggled and yanked again, enjoying the attention and ready to agree to anything.

Catherine's smile saddened. "This must have been the hardest part of all for Kanin."

"Yes." Freeing himself finally, Vincent set the boy gently on his feet again, and watched him toddle toward the bed. "We can only imagine what this year must have been like for him."

"The one time I went to see him, he asked me not to come again. Said he didn't want to see anyone he knew. Not even... any of you."

He nodded; it was a story he'd heard before. "Especially us. His shame was... overwhelming for him."

"I haven't seen Mrs. Davis either," Catherine said, "not since the sentencing."

They watched Luke reach up over the side of the bed, first with one dimpled hand and then the other, now intent on seizing the trailing end of one of Catherine's shoelaces. Vincent said, "I don't suppose one ever really recovers from the loss of a child."

"No," she agreed, thinking inevitably of losses they too had suffered. "But at least, once Kanin came forward, there was a kind of -- of closure."

"For both of them, I hope. I sometimes suspect, when I think of Kanin chipping our chambers out of solid rock, that in working at the stone year after year, he was chipping at the mass of his own guilt."

"I can't imagine what it would be like to be responsible for the death of a child," she said. "Even accidentally."

"The boy that Kanin was, fled from it. The man that he became, paid the price."

"As if he hadn't been paying it anyway, in secret, during all his years Below."

Vincent nodded. He could still hear the man's voice, pleading desperate. "A day doesn't go by that I don't think of it. There isn't one thing I've done that isn't in some way trying to make up for it..." All the while knowing, as they did, that he couldn't make up for it. But -- "That's my sentence. I'm already serving life." And Vincent had thought, *Then has our world been nothing more than a prison for you?* He had looked to Olivia, seeing her stricken and torn, and wondered if she wondered it too. And perhaps, sixteen years before, Kanin's life among them had begun that way. But now the man had a wife, a son, a life...



Until the District Attorney had reopened the case, and his file had ended up on Catherine's desk. *Driving Under the Influence. Vehicular Manslaughter.* And the mother of the dead child pressing for resolution... serving her own kind of sentence.

Kanin had told Vincent, "I'd walk into hell if it meant I wouldn't have to face that woman!" But in the end he *had* faced her... then walked into hell anyway. Walked away from his life; from his wife, and from the ten-month-old son who meant everything to both of them. That had taken a special kind of bravery.

Coming back would require a courage equally rare.

Luke had caught one of the elusive shoelaces now; and crowing with triumph, was yanking out the bow. Catherine, laughing, leaned over to pull him up onto the bed, where she tickled the chortling child into submission.

From his chair Vincent watched them, smiling, his fingers laced across his middle. He thought, *How natural she looks there...* and once again he was astonished and humbled that she would deny herself joys like this in her own life, simply because of her love for him.

"I know what you're thinking," Catherine warned him in a soft singsong voice, not raising her eyes.

Caught by surprise, he chuckled out loud; then got up and came to sit at the head of the bed. When Luke sat up again, Vincent caught him up in a great warm hug.

"Vincent?"

They looked up to see a young, fair-haired girl standing in the chamber doorway. "Lena," Vincent greeted her with pleasure. "How are you?"

"Fine. Hi, Catherine."

"Lena," Catherine smiled. "Where's little Cathy?"

"With Mary." The young woman stepped forward. "We're taking some of the little kids down to the wading pools."

Vincent cocked his head. "Is Naomi going?"

"Well... She offered to 'help' with the babies." Lena smiled. "Don't worry, I'll keep an eye on her." Like everyone else, she'd come to recognize that little orphan's penchant for misadventure.

"Please tell her I said to keep away from the springs *and* the falls," he said.

"I will," she nodded, for only a warning from this particular source might keep the wayward waif out of some mischief there. "Listen, the reason I came is, I went to Olivia to ask if Luke could come along, and she said he could, if it's okay with you. I'll bring him back when we're done..."

Vincent handed the child over, and Lena shifted him expertly onto her hip. "Are you excited about seeing your daddy again? Huh? I bet you are." She looked up. "Has anybody heard anything?"

"Not yet." Vincent shook his head. "But..."

"We're still hoping," finished Catherine, reassuringly.

Lena hesitated. "I heard... Some people think he might not come back."

"We can only wait and see, like everyone else," Vincent said softly. "The sentries will let us know, if he's seen arriving. But..."

"I think he'll come back." Lena lifted her head with some of the optimism she'd picked up during her short time among them. "After all... I did."

When she'd gone, Vincent looked up to find Catherine watching him, her green eyes sparkling. She scooted closer over the quilt. "You do think he'll come back, don't you?"

His mouth quirked; he reached to take her small, warm hand in his. "And you?"

"I... One minute, I look around at you all and your world and I think, *How could he not come back?* And the next, I realize how hard it would be for me, if I were in the same situation. You know... to come back to people you'd lied to, people who knew your secrets and had seen you at your worst; saw you shamed."

"People who love you," he offered. "People who accept you as you are, for good or ill, and welcome you."

"Before, when he was a fugitive, he felt he had to stay here in hiding," she pointed out. "But now, he could go anywhere. He doesn't *have* to come back."

"No." He shook his head, his face softening. "And yet I rather think that's why he will."

"And if he does?" she asked. "If he does come back? Are you all going to have a welcome-home party for him, or anything? I haven't noticed any special preparations going on."

"No," he smiled. "Not a party. But we have thought of some-

thing. Listen, and tell me what you think..."

\* \* \* \*

The man waited for the gate to rumble shut behind him, and checked to make sure it was secure before setting off down the tunnel. He was a tall man but he walked slowly, big hands thrust into his pockets and his coat-collared shrugged up as though against a chill wind.

*The ways change*, he thought, noticing that a familiar passage had been bricked up, and a little-used one opened. At his feet, a "casual" scattering of pebbles that would never have been noticed by a topsider, told him which tunnel-entryways were currently in use. He walked on.

Gradually, as he began to recognize familiar sights and sounds, his pace quickened. And although he knew every sentry-post along the way, and heard the notice of his coming being rapped out along the pipes, he never glanced toward any of the spy-holes or acknowledged the presence of those unseen watchers. He only walked determinedly forward, looking neither right nor left, like a man who'd thought about it for a long time and had made up his mind.

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Vincent started to his feet with a soft exclamation of surprise.

"What is it?" whispered Catherine, behind him on the bed, watching the tension of his listening stance. She could hear a faint but rapid message being rapped out across the pipes.

Vincent gave a heartfelt sigh, his broad shoulders sagging with relief. "He's been seen," he told her, turning. "It's going to be all right. He's coming home."

Catherine came off the bed and into his arms in one fluid movement. "Oh, I am so glad," she breathed, torn between laughter and tears. For an instant, she envied them their reunion, as she had occasionally envied them their child and their marriage. And then, feeling Vincent's arms tighten around her, she forgot that it was possible to envy anyone, anywhere, anything.



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Alone in the great library-chamber, Father heard the signal, recognized the excitement even in the hurried tapping of it; heard it picked up and repeated on a dozen different systems, by at least that many hands.

*He's back -- Kanin's come back -- Been seen in the east tunnel  
-- He looks fine --*

The old man came forward into the center of his chamber and stood there listening, a smile upon his face. *Well, well, he thought. So it's going to be all right, after all.*

There was the sound of running feet, out in the corridor. Kipper skidded into view, and caught hold of the short metal bannister to stop his momentum. (And for once, Father didn't scold him.) "Father -- he's here! I saw him, Father!" Behind the boy came a rather breathless Mary; and finally William, whose bulk all but filled the doorway.

"Yes, I heard he's returned." The patriarch turned his kindly but stern gaze on them. "Now I know we would all like to run in and welcome him home, but I want you to please remember what we agreed. Remind everyone you see. We must give them time to become... reacquainted. All right?"

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Olivia sat very still on the edge of the wide bed, her dark eyes focussed somewhere in the middle distance. She'd tried to read; to finish the mending; to re-clean a chamber already spic-and-span. She'd brushed her hair until it shone, and changed her dress three times. Dozens of candles stood in their holders, that he himself had set into the stone of all these walls; she'd lit them, blown them out, and lit them again. She wanted this place to be ablaze with welcoming light when he arrived -- and she was afraid that they'd burn away to nothing, if he... if he hesitated.

She never knew how long she'd been sitting there, blind to her surroundings and deaf to the clamor of the pipes, when she realized that someone was standing quietly in the doorway. Her eyes found his face and she came to her feet, her heart throbbing painfully against her ribs. "*Kanin,*" she whispered.



"Livvy -- " He stood there as if he were afraid to move; afraid to shatter some dream or vision that had appeared unexpectedly before his eyes. Olivia's first thought was, *He's so pale*; and her second, that there was more gray in his dark curly hair than there had been when he left, although he was only thirty-eight. He stood there looking at her with his heart in his eyes, his boyish mouth trembling; and suddenly she wanted nothing more than to soothe away that pain. She held out her arms and he came into them.

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Much later they on the big bed together, still fully clothed, still content to talk and touch and warm each other with their rekindling love. Earlier in the afternoon Vincent had brought Luke back to them -- a very damp and drowsy Luke -- and after that reunion, his father had put him to bed in a crib that was larger than the cradle they'd been using when he'd left.

"Do you think he remembers me?" he whispered to Olivia now, his face just inches from hers on the pillow.

"Of course he did," she reassured him, although it had been impossible to tell. "You're his father."

"He's so beautiful, Livvy," Kanin said again, his eyes drifting past her shoulder toward that now twenty-month-old stranger sleeping in the crib-corner. "You've done a wonderful job with him." He didn't ask if it had been hard; he knew it must have been.

"Everyone helped." She reached up to stroke his face.

"I'm glad you're not still angry with them. It wasn't their fault, what happened. It was mine."

"I couldn't stay mad," she confessed. "They were all trying so hard to... to make it up to me somehow."

"Some things," he said, "you really can't 'make up' for."

"I know," she answered, knowing too that he spoke not of her, but of himself. She searched his face for some sign of the torment that had been there when he left. "But it's all over now. Everything's going to be all right."

Was she asking for his reassurance, or reassuring him? He couldn't quite tell. "If that's true," he said, "then where is everyone?" For, aside from Vincent; they had seen no one since his

arrival. Kanin wasn't sure whether he should feel good or bad about this. Although he had, in a way, dreaded seeing any of the tunnelfolk again, he hadn't expected to be so soundly *ignored* by them, either. "Even the pipes are quiet."

"I don't know." She squeezed the large calloused hand she held in hers. "Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters." He leaned forward and kissed her gently. "Coming back here -- to you, and to them -- was all I ever thought about, the whole time I was... away." He'd refused to speak to her of his life in prison, except in generalities. "I was afraid."

"I know." Her soft brown eyes held his.

"After the way I deceived everybody, all those years, what if they've decided they don't -- "

"No." Olivia wouldn't countenance the expression of such a thought. "Vincent welcomed you, didn't he? He was so glad to see you."

That was true, Kanin reflected. Livvy had taken the baby, and reintroduced him to his son; and after those first overwhelming moments, he'd realized that Vincent had withdrawn discreetly to the chamber doorway, but was still here. He'd come forward then and, taking Kanin's hands, had drawn him into a powerful embrace. After Livvy herself and Luke, Kanin thought now, he could have had no finer welcome. "But where are the others? They must know I'm here by now."

"It'll be all right," she said again, but suddenly felt unsure, herself. He was right; if that were true, then where was everyone?

As if at some long-awaited signal, there was a sound in the corridor outside; feet noisily shuffled, a throat politely cleared. Kanin and Olivia, with startled looks at one another, got up hastily and straightened their clothing.

"May we come in?" came Catherine's voice.

"Yes, please," Olivia called out uncertainly.

When she and Vincent came in, Catherine went straight to Kanin with a shy smile. "Hello, Kanin," she said softly, taking his hands and leaning upward to kiss him on the cheek. "I'm so glad you're back."

Plainly a little startled, he embraced her briefly and let her go. "Catherine...?"

"It's nearly suppertime," she told them. "Unless you've made



other plans, we were hoping you'd join us."

"'Us'?" Kanin looked from one of them to the other.

"But first," Vincent said gravely, "I'm afraid there is some unfinished business that must be taken care of."

"'Unfinished business'?" Olivia repeated faintly.

"Yes. A Council meeting."

Kanin reached for his wife's hand. "What about?"

"There's a new arrival in our midst," Vincent answered enigmatically. "You know that in such cases, a Council vote of confirmation is always required."

Kanin's honest eyes narrowed; he hung back suspiciously. "A 'new arrival'? Look, I don't know what you --"

"Come." Vincent put his hand, warmly, on the other man's shoulder. "You and Olivia are expected."

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When they entered the great library-chamber, silence fell at once over the gathering. Kanin, carrying a drowsy Luke down the short metal stair, turned uneasily to Vincent. "I thought you said it was a *Council* meeting." For it was immediately clear to him that in addition to the Council members, nearly everyone he could ever remember seeing Below was also in attendance. The place was crowded with people; adults and children alike, they were sitting in chairs, on stacks of books, on the carpet, on the winding staircase. At a glance he picked out William, Cullen, Mouse, Old Sam -- dozens of his old friends, people he loved, and had missed, and hadn't been able to say goodbye to before he left. He was startled to see that even old Elizabeth, whom he hadn't seen since finishing her new "gallery" two years previously, had made a rare journey from her beloved Painted Tunnels.

He felt Olivia's hand on his arm; and with his free hand he gave it what he hoped was a reassuring squeeze. Every face in the chamber was turned in their direction; every eye in the place was fixed on them. Some of the children could be heard, tittering with excitement. "What is this?" he demanded of the familiar figure standing in the center of it all.

"Patience, my boy, patience," Father answered. "All in good

time." He straightened, assuming his most serious expression and an almost visible mantle of authority. "It has come to our attention," he said portentously, "that there is a new arrival in our midst. And as you all know, a Council vote is required before he can be allowed to remain. Kanin and Olivia, step forward."

Olivia was looking at him as though he'd lost his mind. "A 'new arrival'? What on earth are you talking about? Kanin's lived with us for sixteen years! You're acting as though he's a stranger!"

"In effect," Father answered, both hands clasped atop his walking-stick, "he is a stranger."

"But he only left us -- "

"A fugitive," he answered, though not unkindly. "One who gave up his place among us willingly. He comes among us now, a new man." He studied the younger man, standing tensely before him with the toddler dozing in his arms. Unknown to Kanin, and despite his size and strength, to his friends it was a pose that made him seem terribly vulnerable. "Now, Kanin. As a new arrival petitioning to come and live in our world, you must realize that our resources are limited. Just what do you feel you would be able to offer our community?"

Kanin looked at him blankly. "Offer?"

"I've been given to understand," Father patiently intoned, to the man who'd carved half their living-chambers out of solid rock, "that you're a stonemason."

Kanin felt Olivia squeeze his hand, and finally registered the children's muffled giggles of delight. Something, here, was not just as it seemed... but it had been a long day and an even longer year, and he hardly dared to hope. He tightened his hold on Luke, as though the boy were a kind of anchor in these uncertain seas. "Uh... yes, that's right," he said dazedly. "A stonemason."

"And are you a *good* stonemason?"

"I... I think I am." He lifted his head with a vestige of the pride he once had felt. "Yes."

"Is there anyone here," the patriarch went on, "who can verify this fellow's skill?"

Vincent stepped forward. "I can. I've worked with him often, and hope to again."

"Very well." Father gripped his cane afresh, the very picture of scowling solemnity. "I've also been told that he's a family man. Would anyone here care to speak to that? -- Not you, dear; I'm afraid you're partial," he said to Olivia, who gaped at him



with disbelief. "Anyone else?"

"I would." Catherine stepped forward to take Vincent's hand, smiling reassuringly at the bewildered couple before them. "Kanin is a good husband and provider, and a wonderful father... Father."

"I see. Then we have only one final matter to resolve." He paused, dramatically, as though to gather his thoughts. "As you know, Kanin, our rules require that someone among us speak for a new arrival; stand up for him, as it were, and sponsor his entry into this new life. This is more than a mere show of confidence. It is a grave responsibility, one which implies total faith in the newcomer; faith, and the belief that the new addition will prove to be in the best interests of us all... individually, and as a community." He looked sternly around at the collected tunnelfolk. "Keeping all of this in mind, who among you wishes to stand up for this man?"

The sounds of muffled mirth and small stirrings faded. The large chamber was filled with an electric, breathless silence. Olivia moved to put her arm around her husband and child. Fearing the worst, Kanin bowed his head, his cheek brushing Luke's hair --

Someone cleared his throat, a little diffidently. The couple looked up, startled, and saw the pipemaster getting slowly to his feet. "Pascal," Kanin exclaimed -- but there was movement elsewhere in the chamber as well. He turned to discover Mary rising too.

Rebecca stood up next, followed by Cullen and Lena.

Not to be outdone, Mouse leapt to attention. Brooke and Jamie joined him.

Children began popping up all over the chamber like jack-in-the-boxes: Kipper and Eric, Samantha and Lana, Julio, Geoffrey and Naomi.

William lumbered to his feet.

And Old Sam.

Then Sarah, Zach and Elizabeth.

One after another, every single one of them stood up, until finally the whole community was on its feet and wreathed in smiles.

After a moment Father said, very softly, "Well. There you have it."

A ragged cheer went up, dissolving into talk and laughter as they began to come forward, singly, in pairs and small groups. With hugs and handshakes, kisses and congratulations they welcomed Kanin home, surrounding him with a warmth he'd remembered and

longed for, in spite of himself, during all his months Above in the topsider prison.

Someone gave Olivia a handkerchief; she blotted her eyes gratefully. Kanin held his head high, but Catherine could see that he was blinking back tears. She felt Vincent's arms encircling her from behind. Leaning back into his warmth she whispered, "It's going to be all right."

"... Yes."

She covered his hands, where they crossed her middle, with her own. Soft, short hair tickled her palms. "Look at them. So much in love... so happy to be back together."

And it was true that, throughout all the greetings and excitement of this reunion, Kanin and Olivia had been careful not to lose their hold on one another. Vincent chuckled to see that Luke, who'd become convinced that all this attention was somehow directed at him, was now flinging himself toward every friend who came forward, bestowing wet kisses with great freedom and enthusiasm. Kanin maintained a precarious hold on the toddler's legs.

"Well, Kanin," Father said finally. "What do you think?"

"You planned this... all of you." He was shaking his head, his eyes full of more than tears. "I can hardly believe it."

"Wanted to welcome you," Mouse told him. "Welcome you home."

"You did that, all right." He took the handkerchief his wife offered, and unashamedly blew his nose. Then he looked to Vincent, who had been so instrumental, the year before, in persuading him to surrender himself to the authorities. "You knew, didn't you? I mean, about how I felt about coming back."

Vincent nodded. "We talked about it... and we realized you might be feeling some uncertainty regarding your place here."

"And we felt a need, ourselves," Father added, "to welcome you back in a way that would leave no lingering doubt in your mind." He cocked his head, his faded blue eyes twinkling. "Have we succeeded?"

"You had me going, there, for a minute after we got here." Kanin smiled, a little ruefully. "But... coming home is all I thought about for months. Could I? Couldn't I? What would it be like? Could we live anywhere else? Would we want to?... And as much as I longed to see all your faces again -- " and his eyes swept the gathering " -- I dreaded it too."

"It wasn't so bad," Vincent murmured. "Was it?"

"No... but after what happened -- the way I left -- I was



afraid that none of you would..."

"We're all very glad," Mary said, beaming, "that you had the courage to come and find out."

"I spent so much of my life being afraid," Kanin said slowly, pulling Olivia closer. "I ran away from my life Above, because I was afraid. I almost ran away from my life here, once I was found out, because I was afraid... and ashamed."

"But you didn't run away," Vincent pointed out. "You faced your troubles honestly... one might even say, nobly."

Kanin shook his head. "I... I didn't feel very noble. And then, when I realized I was afraid to come back *here*..." He took a deep breath. "Well, I just didn't want to keep making the same mistake over and over again."

"Then," Catherine asked, "you learned from the experience?"

"Oh, yes," Kanin said softly. "Many things."

"Well," Father said briskly, after a moment. "Be that as it may... we were hoping the three of you would sup with us, this first night. From the way William's begun to glower over there, I think we can assume our meal is getting cold. Why don't you come and eat? You must be famished."

"Thanks, I -- I think I am, all of a sudden."

"Excellent, excellent." Limping forward, the old man clapped Kanin on the shoulder. "And afterwards, I promise we'll leave you both quite alone for as long as you like."

Watching them begin the exodus toward the door, Vincent stood quietly with his arms around Catherine. He let his friends and fellows break around them like a tide; and if any among them noticed, it was only with nods and covert smiles.

( -- Except for Naomi; who, looking back to discover her two favorite people lagging, would gladly have come back to keep them company. Mary and Rebecca, between them, were just able to shepherd the reluctant child safely up the stair and out the door.)

Catherine leaned back into Vincent's warmth, her arms crossed over his.

"You're smiling," he murmured; for he could feel it just as clearly as though he could see her face.

"Do you think they're really going to get any privacy, over the next few days?"

"You heard what Father said."

"Yes," she chuckled, "I heard what Father said." She turned in his arms, smiling up into his face, her small hands braced warmly on his chest. "I asked you what you thought."

"I think," Vincent said solemnly, "that before they even clear the tables tonight, Father will have thought of at least three projects we've been forced to put off, solely for the lack of a skilled stonemason."

"And he'll mention these -- "

" -- In all innocence, certainly," Vincent answered. "Nothing that needs to be taken care of *immediately*, you understand."

"I understand," she grinned. "And Kanin, who you said wasn't ever idle a day after coming to live Below -- " (but who, they both knew, had been a victim of enforced idleness during all his months away) " -- will bring out his tools tomorrow morning, just to see what kind of shape they're in..."

"And he'll soon be back at work," Vincent said, his own mouth curving with a rueful humor. "I'm certain even Olivia expects it. And... it will be good to hear the sounds of his chisel ringing through the tunnels once again."

Catherine grew more serious. "I know that you've missed him."

"We've been friends since he first came here." Vincent gazed off over her shoulder, into the memory-distance. "We were... almost of an age, he and I -- and yet our friendship took me by surprise. We had nothing in common, or so I thought."

Catherine reached up and smoothed a stray strand of hair away from his cheek. She thought of those two young men, seemingly so different, working side by side through the long silences of their respective, terrible secrets. Kanin's past... and Vincent's very existence. "Kanin had the courage to face his truth," she reminded him now, not unmindful of certain parallels.

"And then to come back here, where love waited," he mused. "I sometimes think that took more courage than leaving did."

"Vincent." She was still looking up at him, and in her face he could see a hint of the smile he'd sensed through the bond; a smile that lit the depths of her smoky green eyes, and softened her full lips. She pressed closer, willing away melancholy, and his hands tightened at her waist. "Vincent, it was a happy ending -- or a happy beginning. They deserve it, don't you think?"

"I do," he answered softly.

"And if *they* deserve it, then surely -- "

"Hey," came a piping interruption from the door. "Hey, are



you guys finished yet?"

"Naomi," Vincent sighed, bowing his head to Catherine's for just an instant before they turned. The little girl was poised uncertainly at the top of the entry-stair, and he fixed her with a stern blue gaze. "'Hey, you guys'?"

"Are you finished yet?" she asked again, undaunted. "Because it's supertime, you know."

"We know," Catherine smiled.

Naomi looked as though she might be considering swinging a leg over the short bannister; Vincent cleared his throat, and she looked up at him a little mutinously before letting it go. "Well, Father said you're late, and I should come and get you."

"Did he." As he spoke, Vincent was fully aware of Catherine smothering mirth at his side.

"He said you're missing all the *fun*."

"Not all of it," Vincent said gravely. "Now, why don't you go ahead, and we'll be along -- "

"But you're late," she insisted, shaking her bright flyaway curls. "You never let *me* be late."

"That's true, Vincent," Catherine murmured at his shoulder. "What kind of example are you trying to set?"

He glanced down at her sharply; but she'd ducked her head, and a soft wing of light brown hair swung forward to hide her face. He returned his attention to the little girl. "Naomi -- "

"Father *said*," she reminded him plaintively. "And besides... your chairs are empty, and I been missing you."

"You heard her, Vincent -- " He felt Catherine's elbow in his ribs; her voice was full of laughter. "Father *said*." And then she was taking his great hand in hers, pulling him toward the stair and the door above it.

"To supper?" he asked resignedly, allowing himself to be led.

Naomi sang out, "Last one there is a rotten egg!"

"Oh?" Vincent lunged up the several steps, and the child fled before him out into the corridor, giggling. Turning then, he reached down for Catherine and simply lifted her up the stairs to his side.

"Vincent!" she said, a little breathlessly.

He was pleased at the way surprise widened her eyes. Impulsively he bent his head to brush her smooth, blushing cheek with his gold-bristled one. Straightening then, he took her hand and tucked it securely beneath his arm. "To supper?" he asked again, his voice low.

"To supper," she smiled; and leaning her head on his shoulder as they went out, she happily matched her pace to his.

