

Rebellion

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Catherine had updated Father on Kanin's status, and he invited her to stay and pass the information on to everyone in a meeting that he called right after dinner. Father had informed Olivia separately, but other than the people she'd told, no one else knew.

The Dining Chamber was full. The tables had been pushed against the walls, and the benches and chairs were set up in rows on either side of an aisle that had been left down the center. The council was seated at a table in the front even though this wasn't a formal meeting.

Father called the meeting to order, introduced Catherine and explained why she was there.

Catherine stepped forward and leaned back against the table. She'd been to council meetings before, even spoken in front of them, but never in front of the whole community like this.

She glanced around the chamber. Olivia was sitting on a bench near the kitchen. Luke sat on the floor at her feet playing with what looked like one of the wooden toys that Cullen carved for the children. There were enough seats for everyone, but a few of the men stood along the back walls.

When she was sure everyone was settled Catherine began.

"As you all know, Kanin has been in jail since February. He entered a guilty plea, so instead of waiting for a year or more for a trial he only had to wait a few months for the sentencing hearing. That was this morning.

"He was sentenced to four years, and the judge is giving him credit for the time he's already served," she told everyone. "The judge was surprisingly lenient."

A murmur went through the crowd, and Father rapped the table with his gavel.

"Still, four years is a long time," Cullen said, giving voice to what a lot of them were thinking. There were a lot of nods from the crowd.

"It is, but he'll be in a minimum-security facility not far from here. He will be allowed visitors and could be home as soon as a year from next month. He'll be eligible for parole at eighteen months, and although hardly anyone gets it the first time they are eligible, he will go before the parole board every three months after that."

"Why was the judge so lenient?" asked Father.

Catherine, feeling almost as if she was back in the courtroom, turned toward Father.

"Mrs. Davis, the woman whose son was killed, wrote a letter to the court asking for leniency. No one was more surprised than I was. She said that she understood that Kanin had been young and scared and although she couldn't condone his running, she did understand it. I talked Joe into also asking for leniency based on the fact that Kanin had obviously stayed out of trouble since the accident. The judge said that it looked like everyone was on Kanin's side, so he went along."

“If it hadn’t been for you, he wouldn’t even be in jail,” Olivia said, in a harsh tone. “Luke will be almost three by the time he sees his father again, and this one,” she rubbed her six-month pregnant belly that she was sure had been conceived on their last anniversary. “He won’t even be here to see this one born.”

Vincent stood, saving Catherine from making an awkward explanation. “Olivia, you know that Kanin saw Mrs. Davis before Catherine even talked to him. Mrs. Davis went to the authorities and told them that she’d seen him. That was why Catherine was given his file. Mrs. Davis demanded that something be done. Kanin knew she’d recognized him and would probably ask that the case be reopened. He was already thinking about what he needed to do before Catherine talked to him.”

“But if she hadn’t told Father, we would still be together. What good does it do to put him in jail? It doesn’t bring that woman’s son back.”

Olivia didn’t even wait for a response, she picked Luke up and rushed out of the chamber. Mary nodded at Father, then followed her.

“Yeah, I always wondered what gave you the right to be judge and jury,” Cullen put in, directing his comment at Father. “Kanin’s a good man. So what if he made some mistakes in his youth? We’ve all been there and done that to some extent.”

The crowd was getting loud, especially those around Cullen. Catherine and the rest of those in front heard comments agreeing with Cullen.

“Cullen,” Vincent almost had to shout over the noise. “You know all of us up here, especially Father, found it just as disturbing as the rest of you. I know what it’s like to be put in a cage and I wouldn’t wish that on anyone, much less someone I look on as a brother!”

That quieted the crowd.

“I’ve been wondering since I got here, how that kind of thing is handled.” Ben, who was standing next to Cullen broke the silence. He’d only been one of them for a few months, and he’d been working with Cullen, learning woodworking and furniture repair.

“Well, Ben,” began Father as he stood in his place at the table. “We all agreed long ago that for the safety of the community, we cannot...” Father hesitated. Remembering the response it had garnered from Olivia back when all this had started, he wanted to avoid using the word *criminal*. “... harbor someone who is hiding from the authorities Above. We have rules. Our own laws, and when one of them is broken, someone brings it before the council, and after all sides are heard, we take a vote. First, we vote on whether or not we think the person is actually guilty of the charges. If we find that he is, then we vote on the punishment. Sometimes there is a precedent, and the vote is on whether to go with that punishment or to tailor the punishment to the person or crime.”

“Is that what you did with Kanin?”

“We told him the rules,” Vincent said. “Kanin made the decision to go Above.”

“What kind of choice did he have?” asked Cullen. “What would you have done if he hadn’t gone? Exile him?”

“It never got to that point, Cullen,” said Catherine. “Kanin saw what needed to be done and he did it. He’d been living with what he did for years. It was a difficult decision, but he made it.”

“I still agree with Olivia,” Cullen scoffed. “If it hadn’t been for you, Kanin would still be here with us; with his family.”

Cullen also turned and left the chamber. About a dozen others, mostly their newer citizens, like Ben, followed. Mouse looked undecided, and William looked ready to explode, but he kept his seat.

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Later, in Vincent’s chamber, Catherine looked up at him. He could sense that she was troubled.

“Tell me,” he said as he took her jacket and motioned her to a chair.

“Is that really the way they feel about my role in all that?” she asked. “I know I haven’t spoken with Olivia since Kanin left, but it’s not for lack of trying.”

“She’s refused to talk to you?”

“Yes. I’ve passed messages from Kanin a few times, but I’ve always had to pass them through Father or Mary. I wanted to tell her that he’s going to be writing to her, but he will be sending the letters to her care of Peter, and I have an address where she can write to him.” She handed Vincent a slip of paper.

“I’ll see to it that she gets this and the message.”

“Be sure that she understands that all his mail will be read before he gets it, and everything he sends her will be read before it leaves the prison. She needs to make sure that she doesn’t say anything about this place.”

Vincent sat as he tucked the paper into a pocket.

“I wasn’t aware that so many had such strong opinions in this and that they placed so much of the blame on you. I knew that Olivia was angry. She’s been angry with all of us on the council, except William, who was on her side when she tried to talk Kanin into staying. I didn’t realize that she was so angry with you that she’d refused to speak to you.”

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For the next week, Vincent had a distinct impression that something was going on. He lost count of the number of times that he walked down a tunnel or into a chamber and conversations stopped. His empathic sense backed up his impression, and he could feel an undercurrent of something he couldn’t quite name. Anger?

He mentioned it to Father, who laughed and told him it was his imagination. But the next council meeting proved Father wrong.

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Council meetings were always open to anyone who wanted to attend, and anyone in attendance could speak if there was something they wanted to bring up. The meetings were usually held in the

Study, but occasionally a meeting would be so well attended that they would have to move to the Dining Chamber. This happened to be one of those meetings. From the looks of it, every adult member and a few of the younger ones were in attendance. Vincent was pretty sure that what he'd sensed going on around him for the last week hadn't been his imagination.

After everyone was settled in the Dining Chamber, Father called the meeting to order. They listened to the report of the minutes from the previous meeting. There was some discussion of routine matters, then Father opened the floor to motions from the audience. There were a few motions, some debate. The council voted on one matter, and two motions were tabled until people supplied more information. Everything was proceeding as any other council meeting might until Ben stood and made a motion that there be a vote of confidence for the position of president of the council. The office that Father held.

Father was somewhat taken aback by the motion but didn't miss a beat.

"Does anyone second that motion?" he asked.

"I second it," came Olivia's voice from a spot closer to the front.

"Discussion?"

William, who was seated at the council table, stood. "Why are you asking for a vote of confidence?" he asked Ben.

"Because I don't have much confidence in the current president. I think that the council needs new blood. I've been asking around, and I found out that pretty much the same people have been on the council for years, and that he's been the president for as long as people can remember."

"You do know that the office of president is more of a figurehead than anything, don't you?" said Vincent. "Father sometimes advises but has no real power."

"But he's the tiebreaker," Cullen pointed out. "There are seven people on the council, but the president doesn't vote unless there is a tie, then he votes to break the tie."

"Yes, that is the way our rules are written," Father agreed, "but I haven't been required to cast a vote in years."

"That's because the votes are almost always unanimous. You have all the council members in your pocket," Ben retorted.

"Then maybe we should vote on new council members rather than just president," suggested Olivia.

That caused an uproar. The council didn't have a Sergeant at Arms, they'd never needed one, but Vincent was beginning to wonder if he might be called upon to fill that role and the noise increased. There was a decided split in the group that filled the chamber. At least two dozen people moved to where Ben was standing in the rear.

"Is that a formal motion, Olivia?" called Father, over the noise.

"Yeah, it is," put in the young man standing next to Ben. "Maybe it's time to replace everyone!"

“Second!” called several voices from the group surrounding Ben.

Father stood. He waited for the crowd to quiet before he spoke. Vincent could tell that Father was disconcerted, but he didn’t show it.

“The way this is normally done is that once every two years we hold elections. Three members on one vote and four the next. Then every four years, the sitting council elects a president from within its own ranks. It’s only been six months since the last election, and at that time we added Rebecca and Pascal to the council, and they replaced Sam and Kanin. William was re-elected to his position. We can open the floor to nominations...” Hands shot up all over the chamber. “...but first...” He turned to the six people sitting at the table with him. “Do any of you want to step down and not seek re-election to the council?”

All the members shook their heads.

“All right, then as per the rules, the general population can nominate as many as two people for each of the seven council seats. So I’m opening the floor to nominations.”

Vincent observed that this had been planned as the new members of the community quickly nominated fourteen people, all male, and almost all newer additions to the community, all having been there less than two years.

Nominations done, Father asked if anyone would like to speak before a vote was taken. No one wanted to, so they went on with the election.

Small slips of paper were handed out to everyone who was present, including the council members. Each person got seven votes, one for each seat on the council. The voting was over quickly, but the counting took longer. People from the audience were called upon to sort and count the slips of paper. The people doing the counting were Olivia and Sam.

When the slips were all sorted and counted, none of the current council members had been replaced. The council took their vote and Father was re-elected as president. Several people walked out of the meeting when the results were announced.

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“I don’t understand what they were trying to accomplish,” Vincent said to Catherine later when they met on her balcony.

“You said that all those nominated to run against the sitting council members were people who hadn’t been living Below for very long?”

“None of them have been there longer than two years,” he told her. “There are a few who have been there longer who are siding with them, like Cullen and Olivia, but only the newer people were nominated, and all of them were men.”

“Are there women who haven’t been Below long?” Catherine asked.

“Lena, and one of Ben’s friends, I think his name is Philip, is married. There are a few other women, but I can’t recall all the names. We’ve added about twenty adults in the last two years or so. We also

lost a few, mostly because they were ready to go back Above, or like Michael, they went up to go to school or for jobs.”

“You say they didn’t seem satisfied with the vote.”

“That was obvious. Most of them left. I could feel their anger, but no one said anything.”

Catherine’s brow furrowed in thought, he could feel her worry.

“You might want to keep your ears and eyes open. Sounds like they’re planning something.”

“I said as much to Father before I came Above and he agreed. He suggested that he and I and everyone on the council start visiting people and talking to them. Listening to what everyone has to say. If there’s a problem, we want to try to do something about it before it festers into something major.”

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In the following days, Vincent noticed that some people were all too willing to talk. All the longtime members wanted to talk about was how awful it was that the “new people” as some of the older members of the community had started to call them, were trying to come in and change everything. Vincent tried to point out that everyone’s ideas and feelings were valid, but very few of those who had been in residence the longest were willing to listen to any defense of what had happened.

Vincent was in his chamber one evening after dinner when Lena called out asking for permission to enter.

“Come in, Lena.”

She came in carrying little Cathy, who held her arms out to Vincent as soon as she saw him. He smiled and took her, and Lena sat down across from him.

“You need to know what’s going on,” Lena said without preamble.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Ben and Cullen are planning a mutiny or whatever it’s called.”

“Well, since we aren’t on a ship, it would probably be more like a rebellion. What are they doing?”

“They have been talking to all the newer folks here and trying to get them on their side. They want to take over, like one of those coups d’état you talked about in history class.” Lena had been sitting in on a lot of classes.

“And how do they propose to do that?” Vincent was concerned, no one Below was armed, but if taken by surprise a lot of damage could be done. Someone might get hurt.

“I’m not sure, but Cullen said that if they couldn’t get enough people on their side, they should just leave. He’s already gone and scouted out chambers on one of the lower levels. He said that they were just below Mouse’s chamber and workshop.”

“We considered those chambers months ago,” Vincent told her, “but decided that they weren’t suitable since that area is so close to the maze and it’s so damp. Some of the chambers even flood when there are heavy rains Above. Do you happen to know how many they might have talked around to their side?”

“They had a meeting right after dinner tonight. I went more out of curiosity than anything. They met in the chambers Cullen was talking about. I can see what you mean. There’s no way I’d move down there. There were maybe twenty-five or thirty people. Mostly men, but there are a few women, maybe seven or eight, not counting me. I was surprised to see Olivia; surprised that she’d even think of moving into something that rough with Luke and another one on the way.

“To tell the truth, I’m wondering now why I ever thought Ben was attractive,” said Lena with a huff. “He might be tall, dark and handsome, but handsome is as handsome does. But he seems to be in charge and Cullen is pretty much in agreement with him, but that’s about it. Oh, and I was surprised to see that Mouse was there. He seemed to be real interested in what was going on.”

That last comment really had Vincent concerned. When Lena left, he went straight to Father and told him what Lena had said.

“They’re planning a takeover?” Father asked indignantly.

“Well, it seems that they have an alternate plan and may not resort to that. But I’m going to post sentries in the corridors here in the hub until we work all this out.” He stepped out into the tunnel and tapped out a quick message on the pipes. Within minutes, ten sentries who weren’t currently on duty on the perimeter arrived in the Study.

“Did any of you attend a meeting in the lower levels this evening?” Vincent asked.

One hand went up in the back.

“What did you think about what was being said, Matthew?”

“I thought they were all out of their minds. I was going to come and talk to you about it tomorrow.”

“Thank you for your loyalty, Matthew.” Vincent turned to the entire group. “Until this passes, I want sentries posted here in the hub. I want one here in the Study at all times, and four more in each of the other corridors to keep an eye on the children’s areas, the Dining Chamber, and the private chambers. That means that everyone is going to have less time off for a while; I’m going to rework all the sentry schedules. We will be going from 4-hour to 6-hour shifts. Pass the word to the other sentries to come here to pick up their schedules when they get off duty. I want half of you to go on duty here in the hub now. Your shift will be a little longer since it’s only 10:30. The rest of you relieve them at 6am. Everyone stay alert and keep your staffs handy. Call me at the first sign of any trouble.”

“I’m sure there won’t be any trouble...” Father began.

“I’m hoping that this will turn out to be nothing,” Vincent interrupted, “but I don’t want to take any chances.”

But all the preparation was for naught. The Rebels, as some had started to call them, didn't stage an uprising; they all just skulked away in the night about a week later.

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Things went on as they always had, just with fewer people. About 30 fewer. Some jobs had to be redistributed, and they didn't have anyone who was quite as good with woodworking as Cullen had been, but they made do.

Mouse showed up in Vincent's chamber to make sure that Vincent understood that he hadn't left with the others.

"Wanted Mouse to leave his chamber and leave Arthur. No way! Everyone here would be lost without Mouse. Besides, haven't shown Father the plans for the new project yet."

"What kind of new project?" Vincent was relieved that his young protégé hadn't elected to join the rebellion.

"It's a way to heat some of the chambers. Mary was worried about the braziers in the little kids' nursery. Sarah said it takes a long time for stuff to dry in the laundry. Got a plan."

"Are you ready to present it yet?"

"Not yet. Need more time but will show Father soon."

With that, he was gone, and Vincent went to tell Father that Mouse hadn't been with the group that had left.

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Olivia looked around the one small chamber she'd been allotted.

God! What have I gotten myself into? She wondered.

The chamber was only about half the size of the one she and Kanin had shared right after they'd married. There was barely room for her bed; if you could call it that, it was no more than a pallet on the floor. She had managed to get the men to carry Luke's crib down when they'd left, but the new baby was due in less than two months, and she wasn't sure where she was going to put everything she needed for that.

She wondered if the chamber was even fit to raise children in. It was damp, and there was water oozing down in one spot. It smelled bad. She and Luke had both had runny noses since they moved in.

She'd approached Cullen about it, and he'd referred her to Ben, who had become their ad hoc leader. Everyone kept saying that once they got settled, they'd have elections, but no one had made any moves in that direction yet.

She was concerned about what would happen when she went into labor. Her labor with Luke had been pretty easy, but this one seemed to be a little bigger than him. Philip's wife, Micki, claimed to

be a nurse, but she seemed totally ignorant of the birth process. Olivia wondered if she'd be allowed to call Mary or to go back when she went into labor.

Things were definitely not turning out as she'd thought they would.

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Mary poured tea into Father's cup then into her own.

"I'm worried about Olivia," she said. "What is she going to do when it's time for that baby to be born? None of those men will be of any use, and I'm sure that Michelle isn't the nurse she has told everyone she is. She helped me a few times, and I doubt that she was more than a nurses' aide, if that."

"Olivia has made her bed," Father said harshly. He'd been in a bad mood since he'd lost part of his flock. He wasn't used to having his authority questioned.

"How can you say that?" Mary admonished. She was shocked. "She's been like a daughter to you. You all but raised her after her mother died."

Father sighed. Mary wasn't the only person to chastise him for his attitude lately. Vincent had done it several times.

"I'm sorry. This whole thing has me second guessing everything," he admitted to her. "Am I really that much of a dictator?"

"A benevolent dictator," Mary admitted with a smile as she patted his hand. "You do nothing that isn't motivated by love. Those new people obviously don't see that."

"But what about Olivia, Cullen and the others who have been with us for years who left with them? They never seemed to be dissatisfied before. Why didn't they say something to me... or Vincent or anyone else on the council? Are we really that unapproachable?"

"Face it, Father," said Vincent as he entered the chamber, "you are a bit of an autocrat." He joined them at the table and helped himself to a cup of tea.

"I do not have absolute power!" Father insisted.

"But, as the President of the council you do give advice, and your advice is almost always heeded. It might go a long way toward building more confidence if you were to withdraw your name from consideration the next time the council votes for a president."

Father was lost in thought for a few minutes.

"Perhaps I should retire from the council completely," he finally suggested.

"That might help," Mary said. "You could still attend the council meetings in an advisory capacity."

Father looked at Vincent. "What do you think?"

"I have to agree with Mary," he said. "But it's your decision to make."

“But we’d have to have another election, and without the dissidents here to add one of their people to the ballot and to vote, I don’t know that it would do any good.”

“As I said, the decision is yours,” Vincent told him. “But I was planning to make a trip down to that level tomorrow to check on Olivia and take her a letter from Kanin. If you’d like, I can talk to Cullen and ask him to pass the word.”

Father took a deep breath. It was hard for him to let go of the reins. He’d helped create this world. He didn’t know if he was ready to turn it over to the younger generation to run. Was that younger generation prepared to take over?

“Tell him,” he told Vincent after some thought. “I will be officially retiring from the council as of the next general meeting on September 1st. I will make the announcement at dinner next Sunday. September 1st is six weeks from now. That should give everyone time to decide if they’d like to run for the open seat on the council.”

“Do you think the council should vote for their president right after the election or should they wait for the next council meeting?” asked Mary.

“That is up to the council to decide,” said Father. “I will be acting in an advisory capacity only, but my advice would be to wait until the next meeting to elect a new president.”

Mary nodded. He knew that the information would get to the right people.

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Vincent was appalled at the conditions the “Rebels” were living in. It was damp, dirty and smelled of sewage. He didn’t know if they were just near a leaky sewer pipe or if the smell was coming from their own inadequately handled waste.

He met Cullen as he was approaching the new chambers.

“I have a letter for Olivia,” Vincent said, after a surprisingly cordial greeting from Cullen.

“I think she’s in her chamber,” Cullen told him. “She’s been excused from the work crews because of her pregnancy. She’s having a lot of trouble with swelling, and she says she’s tired all the time.” He turned and headed back the way he’d come. “Come on, I’ll show you where she is.”

Vincent followed and got a few looks and heard a few uncomplimentary comments as they passed through the center of the small settlement.

When they reached Olivia’s chamber, they could hear Luke crying. Olivia invited them in when Cullen called out to her.

She was sitting on the pallet on the floor with Luke on her lap. He was red-faced, but the sobs subsided when he saw Vincent.

“I think he’s caught something, Cullen,” she said without looking up. “What am I going to do? We didn’t bring any medicine with us.”

“You could come home,” Vincent said as he squatted down in front of her.

Olivia looked up and burst into tears herself.

“You’d let me?” she asked, between sobs. “I feel like such a fool for letting them talk me into this.” She looked at Cullen as if she expected him to chastise her for voicing her feelings.

“It’s your home, Livy,” said Vincent, lapsing into the childhood nickname as he sat down next to her and put his arms around her and Luke. “You can come back with me right now if you want to. Mary is worried about you and Luke, not to mention the baby.”

She looked at Cullen again, almost as if asking permission.

“It’s probably a good idea,” Cullen told her. “You’ve been having some problems, and I know that your symptoms aren’t good at this point in a pregnancy. Father and Mary will know what to do.”

“And Luke needs medicine too,” she added. She looked at Vincent. “You’re sure it’s OK?”

“It’s your home,” he repeated. “Your chamber is just as you left it. We all want you to come home.” He looked at Cullen. “What about you?”

“I think I’ll say a little longer to see where this experiment goes,” he told Vincent.

“Then there’s something that I need to tell you. You can pass it on to Benjamin and the others. You are all welcome to come back. There will be another election on September 1st. Father is retiring from the council, and we will need to elect a new council member. The council will likely elect their new president at the next council meeting after that. Your people need to come home and be there. I would advise that one of your numbers run for the seat on the council.”

“We ran the last time, and it didn’t do any good,” Cullen retorted.

“We were blindsided, Cullen; everyone was. No one expected that to happen. With Father announcing his retirement this early, it will give everyone a chance to think about it before the election. Maybe you should run for the seat. You’ve been bridging the gap between the two groups fairly well. You could continue.”

“You should,” Olivia agreed.

“I’ll think about it,” was all Cullen would say.

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Both Luke and Olivia were in the hospital chamber a little over an hour later.

Father looked up from examining Luke.

“I think Luke is just having an allergic reaction to something that was in your environment. From Vincent’s description, it was probably mold. I think he’s got a bit of an ear infection. I’ve sent Geoffrey up to Peter’s office for the proper antibiotic. We want to catch it before it develops into something worse. He doesn’t have much of a fever, and his lungs sound clear, so I don’t think it’s bad yet.”

“I’m so glad Vincent came today. I was feeling overwhelmed and didn’t know what to do. Thank you, Father.”

“You, on the other hand,” said Father as he looked at the numbers on the clipboard Mary handed him. “You need to go to bed and stay there! Preeclampsia isn’t a joke. Your blood pressure is slightly elevated, but there doesn’t seem to be any protein in your urine. Have you had any symptoms besides the swelling? Things like fatigue, nausea, shortness of breath, blurred vision?”

Olivia shook her head. “Only fatigue, but that could be because we haven’t been eating very well.”

Father hadn’t considered that before. Without access to what the Helpers sent Below, no one would be eating well. He didn’t even want to think about what the Rebels were subsisting on.

He shook his head and looked up at Olivia.

“That is possible, but I still want you to rest. I don’t think you were on short rations long enough to affect the baby, but we will make up for it. Drink plenty of water. I’ll tell William to prepare your meals without salt and to make sure you get a slightly higher protein diet for now. We will see how you’re doing in a few days.”

“I need to take care of Luke,” Olivia protested.

“I’ll send Brooke to help you,” Vincent told her. “It will be good practice for her. She’s planning on going Above to nursing school next year.”

Vincent accompanied Olivia to her chamber and stayed with her until Brooke arrived. Then he joined Father in the Study.

“Were you able to talk to anyone else?” Father asked.

“I spoke to Cullen, who was surprisingly cordial. I told him your plan, and he said he’d pass the word. I suggested that he run for the open seat; Olivia agreed. I overheard some of the other’s talking, and they didn’t seem to be very happy to see me, but no one was openly hostile or rude. I think Cullen will give it the attention it deserves, and I wouldn’t be surprised to see people start to trickle back.” Vincent sighed and shook his head.

“The conditions they are living in are very primitive. It’s evident that not a lot of thought went into the move. They are using those chambers that are closest to the maze. They are very damp, I’m surprised more of them aren’t sick. That’s probably only because most of them go Above for several hours every day to scavenge and it gets them out of the damp environment.

“There are no good latrine facilities, the whole place smells of sewage, and there are no bathing facilities. Olivia said that she and a couple of the other women have been using the bathing pool on Mouse’s level late at night when they know Mouse has gone Above or asleep. There is only one source of good water, and it doesn’t really produce enough for drinking and cooking for as many people as they have. The women have been carrying water back from the bathing pool.”

“Those conditions are even worse than the way we were living when we first came Below,” Father commented. “I hope they see the sense of our suggestion.”

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“It sounds to me like they are making concessions, and are willing to compromise,” Cullen said when he finished telling Ben and the others what Vincent had said.

“Sounds to me like he’s feeding you a line, and you are swallowing it, hook, line, and sinker. Olivia did. She couldn’t wait to get out of here.”

“Olivia is pregnant, and she has that baby to think of,” Cullen said. “I don’t blame her. The conditions here aren’t good, and certainly not healthy for kids. I don’t think they are healthy for anyone. We should consider Vincent’s offer or at least start looking for something better.”

“If we’d had more people on our side, we wouldn’t have had to leave; we could have stayed and been running things.”

“That’s what Vincent is offering. With Father stepping down, one of us can run for the open seat. Then we’d at least have a voice on the council. As much as we’d like to see it, things just don’t change overnight. And this place has always run on the concept of ‘majority rules.’”

“But what if there is a minority who has valid complaints?” snapped Michelle.

“That is why we need to have someone on the council,” Cullen pointed out. “You or Ben could run. Maybe Philip.”

“What good would it do? It would still be 5 against 1,” Philip pointed out.

“But they would listen. No one on the council gets shut down. Everyone always gets their say, and when a vote is put to the whole community, you’d be surprised how often it goes with that one person.”

“Then you run,” retorted Ben. “See how far you get. All they want is for us to come back so we can share the workload.”

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“I don’t see how we need them back!” William responded after Vincent told everyone of his conversation with Cullen.

“But it’s dangerous where they are,” Father pointed out. “Now that Olivia is back they don’t have any children with them. But most of them are new to the tunnels and don’t know how dangerous the maze and the surrounding tunnels and chambers can be.”

“They aren’t eating well, and I’d hate to see anyone get sick because of an inadequate diet,” Mary added.

“From a security point of view, it’s really better to have only one community,” Vincent pointed out. “They’ve been using different thresholds, some that we’d closed because they were in bad areas of the city or too exposed. They haven’t posted any sentries on those thresholds. We need to all be working together.”

“So we just welcome them back with open arms?” William seemed to be intent on being the dissenting voice.

“If they choose to come back, I think we should,” said Vincent.

“Maybe we could put them on probation, or something?” Rebecca suggested.

“For what?” asked Father. “They haven’t really broken any rules, that we know of. They just didn’t agree with the way things were being run. Granted, I would have suggested they stay and work it out from the inside, but they chose to do it another way. It might not be working out as they hoped, but I hope that we can bend enough to compromise and work with them.”

The discussion continued with Father and Vincent often the only voices of reason. William grumbled, Mary placated, and Rebecca made suggestions, but Vincent was proud of the way Father was handling everything.

“Do you think they will all just come home at once, or do you think they will come back a few at a time?” Mary asked Vincent as they all left the Study later that evening.

“I think they will probably come back a few at a time,” Vincent told her. “Ben has a few of his close friends, who will probably be the last holdouts.”

* * * * *

Vincent was right, people started to trickle back over the next couple of weeks. Cullen showed up in the middle of the second week. Father requested that he stop by the Study when he had the time.

That in itself was a change, and Cullen couldn’t help commenting on it when he arrived.

“No summons, Father?” he said, his smile taking the sting out of his words. “You *requested* I drop by when I had the time?”

Father smiled wryly, and Vincent laughed out loud.

“I’ve had some things pointed out to me,” he told Cullen, “and since I will no longer be a member of the council after September 1st, I thought I’d start early and get used to it. Please, take a seat.”

Cullen sat on the chair in front of Father’s desk. Vincent was lounging in the other one.

“What did you want to talk to me about?” Cullen asked.

“I just wanted to say, ‘welcome back’ and ask if the others are also planning to return?”

“Ben and Philip are still holding out and trying to talk the others into staying, but Philip’s wife has about had it with where they are. There was a small cave-in last week in the chamber we were using as a kitchen, and we lost a lot. We had a small hearth in there for cooking. It was buried, and so were all our dishes, pots and pans and most of our food. We had to scramble to keep people fed. I stayed long enough to make sure they were going to be OK, then I left.” Cullen shrugged.

“I tried to tell them that it wasn’t safe there and we needed to try to find something we could use permanently. But Ben likes being in charge too much. He likes making the decisions and dictating to everyone. No offense, Father, but he’s worse than you ever were.”

Father was chuckling at that when Vincent held up his hand asking for silence as he closed his eyes and turned toward the entrance to the chamber.

“What is it? Catherine?” Father asked.

“No, I heard something. Felt it as much as anything, actually. A low rumble and a vibration in the rock.”

All three of them were listening when suddenly the pipes came alive with emergency messages.

As they listened, Pascal called for an all quiet then he queried each sentry post in turn. The one near the entrance to the Maze reported a loud rumble, just before a cloud of dust belched out of the tunnel.

“There must have been another cave in,” Vincent said as he stood. “I’ll go and see if anyone needs help.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Cullen.

They were met halfway there by Mouse, who was on the same quest.

“Sounded like explosion under Mouse’s chamber,” he commented as he jogged along beside the other two men.

Zach was on sentry duty when they reached the entrance of the Maze. There was still a lot of dust hanging in the air, and Zach had a bandana tied over his nose and mouth.

The air not only smelled of dust but the very distinct, disagreeable odor of sewage.

“Did you see anything, Zach?” Vincent asked.

“No, only the dust coming out of the Maze.”

“Anyone been in or out this way today?” asked Cullen.

“No one, but the entrance on the other side is closer to the surface.”

Vincent pulled a bandana out of his pocket and tied it over his nose and mouth then picked up one of the spare lanterns and lit it.

“I’m going to go in to see if anyone is trapped or hurt. I want everyone to stay here for now. I’ll be back as soon as I know something.”

Halfway in he met Michelle who was on her way out.

“Oh Vincent, am I glad to see you!” she exclaimed.

“What happened?”

“We had a small cave-in last week in our kitchen area. This time it was much larger, and the whole wall between the tunnel to the chambers we’ve been using and the Maze has just collapsed. And the smell is awful. There must be a leaky sewer pipe somewhere.”

“Was anyone hurt?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I was on my way back to you guys,” she held up a backpack. “I think they’re trapped, and the wall that collapsed is a good 50 feet from any of the living chambers we’re using, but right at the intersection where the access tunnel meets the main tunnel.”

“You go on out,” Vincent directed. “Zach, Cullen, and Mouse are out there. Tell them what you told me and tell them I’m going to check and will be out in a few minutes.”

It didn’t take long for Vincent to ascertain that the tunnel was blocked entirely, at least on his side. The ceiling of the tunnel was low in that area anyway, and the boulders and smelly mud were packed in tightly. Before they started digging here, he wanted to check to see if anything was accessible from the Maze or maybe from the other entrance tunnel that came down from Above on the other side.

Everyone was waiting impatiently when he emerged from the tunnel.

“It’s completely blocked,” he told everyone. “Mouse, I want you to go around to the tunnel on the other side, the one that comes down from Above, and see what it looks like from there. Maybe it’s open enough for them to get out that way. I’m going in through the Maze to see how extensive the fall is. Something might have opened up in there, and we might be able to get through. Cullen, I want you to take Michelle and tell Father what has happened. Tell him what we are doing and to wait for our reports. I’ll let him know how many people we will need and where, if we have to dig anyone out.” He turned to Zach. “I want you to stay here and keep your eyes and ears open. Send a message if anything else happens.”

Vincent picked up the sentry staff and headed back up the tunnel. About halfway to the area that had caved in, he took a tunnel that went off to the left and led to the Maze.

He was probing the pile of dirt with the staff when Mouse came in from the other side.

“Opened the whole wall from the other tunnel,” he told Vincent. “Didn’t see any way in from that side. All rocks and dirt.”

“It’s the same in the other tunnel,” Vincent told him. “But all this,” he gestured at the pile of dirt in front of him, “appears to be mostly mud and smaller rocks. The staff moves through it easily.”

“We dig here, mud just slips. Need lumber. Lots of boards. Prop it up.” Mouse observed. “Mouse has some; Cullen has some. Might not be enough.”

“We’ll work it out,” Vincent told him. “Let’s get back to the pipes and send a message.”

After the message was sent, Vincent turned to Mouse. “Do you know how thick the wall between the Maze and that tunnel was?” he asked.

“Couple feet maybe 3, and the tunnel was about 4 or 5 feet wide. We’re going to have to dig through at least 6 or 8 feet of mud and rocks. Lots of work. Big job.”

* * * * *

About thirty minutes later men started arriving at the job site. Many were carrying doors. And there was a whole stack more on one of the flatbed carts they used.

“I thought the doors might work better to shore up the walls than all the odds and ends of lumber we have,” Cullen told Vincent. “Where do you want everyone?”

“It looks like the best place to dig will be in the Maze. There are fewer boulders; looks like it’s mostly dirt and smaller rocks. But it is the Maze, so we are going to have to be careful, but move as quickly as possible. From the smell, I think there is a sewage leak that has made that whole area very unstable. More so than it has been. Once we get everyone out, we’re going to have to seal off this entire area, once and for all.”

The going was slow. They would dig a few feet, then turn the doors on their long edges and shove them in to reinforce the sides and top. It made for a short, narrow crawlspace but it worked better than planks would have. Vincent said as much to Cullen as he hauled out another bucket of the smelly dirt to dump.

“I salvaged them from a demolition site a few months ago,” Cullen explained. “I have an idea for fitting some of the chamber entrances with doors. It will be nice if we can manage to pull these out of here before we seal the area.”

“We will see what we can do,” Vincent promised. “I for one would like to put my name on the list for a door.”

“You are right up on the top,” Cullen said with a grin.

Everyone was exhausted and covered with the smelly mud by the time they finally broke through on the other side about 3 hours after they had started. The handful of people Ben had talked into staying were all huddled together several feet down the tunnel from where the entrance used to be.

“Is everyone all right?” Vincent asked as he slithered through the mud. He’d long ago pulled his hair back and tied it off his face with the bandana, but it was still stiff with the half-dried filth.

Philip stood, he looked worried.

“Is Michelle OK?” he asked. She left just before everything collapsed and I was afraid she might have been buried.”

“She’s fine. She was on her way out to get help when we arrived. Is anyone here hurt?” Vincent repeated.

“No, we’re all fine,” Ben told him. “We were starting to dig our way out when we heard the messages on the pipes that a rescue crew was working. We decided it might be better if we just waited.”

“It’s good that you did. It’s not stable, and you might have caused another cave in and been buried.” Vincent looked around at the group. There were only about a dozen, and they were all men. “Are you all going to come back with me?” he asked.

There was a lot of head nodding from the group. But Ben stepped forward.

“I was surprised you’d even bother with us,” he said.

“Ben, you are all part of us, even though you separated from us for a time. We couldn’t leave our family buried here.”

“What about Father?”

“You will be welcomed back by all. I think you might realize now that we work as a team and when we do that, we almost move mountains.” He gestured at the mound of dirt behind him then extended his muddy hand to Ben.

Ben reached out and took it, and they shook.

“Now, if anyone needs to go get anything I suggest that you do it now. We need to get out of here. The water is still seeping through, and even though we’ve shored it up, I don’t think it’s very stable or that it will last long.”

No one needed to get anything; most had already collected what they needed, and Vincent started ushering them through the narrow tunnel they’d just dug.

Once everyone was out, tools were collected, and Vincent went to where Cullen was trying to figure out if they could get the doors out without killing themselves.

“I think you can do it,” Vincent told him. “The way we slid them in on the sides, we left the ends overlapping the inner end of the previous door then we slid the ‘ceiling’ door in on the top. I think we can pull them out in reverse order, and if we are careful, no one will be trapped.

They started doing what Vincent said, and the tunnel slowly collapsed as Cullen and Mouse carefully pulled out the doors that formed the ceiling and walls. They handed the doors out to Vincent, who stacked them on the flatbed cart.

“I’ll have to clean them all,” Cullen commented as he and Vincent pushed the cart along, “but it doesn’t look like any of them were damaged. I’ll be down to measure for your door first thing in the morning.”

When Vincent left Cullen’s workshop, he headed straight for the Chamber of the falls. He took the steep path down to the narrow beach and waded into the slow-moving, ice-cold river fully clothed. There was no way he was going to go anywhere near his chamber or his small bathing pool smelling like a cesspool. When he felt he’d washed off the worst of it he walked up to the beach where he pulled off his boots and scrubbed them thoroughly. By the time he was done he had stopped dripping, so he walked back to his chamber in his stocking feet. They were muddy again by the time he got back, but at least this mud was *clean*.

Even after a thorough scrub in the bathing pool in which he used almost an entire bar of scented soap he still swore he could smell the sewage, even though Father assured him that all he could smell was his soap and shampoo.

He hoped so, since he was supposed to be visiting Catherine later.

* * * * *

When he reached Catherine's balcony, she was waiting for him. She stepped into his arms, buried her nose in his chest and took a deep breath. He stiffened, waiting for it.

"What's wrong?" she asked when she felt his embrace go slack at the same time his body went rigid.

"What do you smell?" he asked cautiously.

She leaned back and gave him an odd look.

"Ah... you," she said. "What I usually smell. You, your soap, it smells like sandalwood. And the wood smoke seems to cling to your cloak. Why?"

"That's all?" he persisted.

"Is there supposed to be something else?" she leaned in again and sniffed his chest, then stretched up and sniffed his neck and then his face. "You had something with cinnamon in it. Did William make apple pie?"

"No, Samantha shared some of her cinnamon candies with me."

"So why are you concerned about the way you smell?"

"If you'd spent the afternoon as I did you'd be concerned too," he said with a relieved chuckle. "I was literally crawling through sewage all afternoon."

"Ew! Why would you do that? What happened?" She reached up and touched his face as if checking for a fever. "Does Peter know? Do you need shots?" she bombarded him with questions.

"There was a cave-in which was likely caused by a sewage leak. Father will probably let Peter know. I seem to have a natural immunity to things like typhoid and hepatitis. Peter will probably give everyone else shots or boosters tomorrow." He answered her questions in order.

"Was anyone hurt? Where was the cave-in?" She was concerned; she knew how things like this could affect his world.

"No one was hurt, and the cave in was down near the maze where the those who'd left us were living. It only took a few hours to dig them out."

"I thought they'd all come back," she said as she tugged him over to a bench and invited him to sit next to her.

Vincent hadn't realized how fatigued he was until he sat down. He gratefully leaned back against the brick wall and relaxed for a moment before continuing.

"Most of them had. Ben was still holding out with Philip and a few others. Ben said that he was surprised when they heard the messages on the pipes and realized that we were working to rescue them."

"I'm glad no one was hurt. Are the rest moving back?"

"They already have, and I think they will be taking part in the election of the new council member next month."

EPILOGUE

October 1, 1989

“I think that went very well,” Father said, as he and Vincent strolled back to the Study from the Dining Chamber where they’d had the council meeting and elected their new council president.

“You would,” said Vincent with a chuckle.

“I think the addition of Philip to the council last month was an excellent move. The young man is quite bright and seems to have more common sense than some of the others his age.”

“He does have some good suggestions,” Vincent agreed. “I’m just not sure I’m fit to be the council president. I was thinking more along the lines of Pascal.”

“I think you are an excellent choice,” Father argued. “You’ve always been very good at keeping order and keeping people on topic during discussions. You can point out the pros and cons of any argument. You’ve done that since you were first elected to the council.”

“I’m not sure I like the idea of having the deciding vote if there is a tie,” he pointed out.

“It seldom comes to that. I don’t think I’ve had to break a tie more than once or twice in the last 20 years. If you are that reticent, why did you accept the nomination in the first place?”

“Because I honestly didn’t think I’d be elected. It was between Pascal and me, and I thought he’d be elected. I even voted for him.”

Father had to laugh. “When I counted the votes, it was 6 for you and 1 for Pascal. Seems that even Pascal voted for you.”

Vincent was about to leave Father at the door to the Study when Father put his hand on Vincent’s arm.

“Do you think they are all settling back in all right?” he asked.

Father didn’t have to specify who *they* were.

“I think so. I was disappointed and surprised when Ben left, but he said it was time for him to move on.”

“And Catherine... Olivia seems to have come to terms with her?”

“She’s still not as friendly as she was, but she’s been nicer.”

When Vincent got back to his chamber a few minutes later, he was surprised to find Catherine waiting for him there.

She stood and went to him for a hug.

“I heard on the pipes... So, am I supposed to call you ‘Mr. President’ now?” she asked with a smirk.

* * * * *

Thanks again to CindyRae for her able editing!