

TO SOOTHE THE SAVAGE BREAST

P S NIM

Vincent was aware of the rabbit as he listened to the music in the dark. He felt its tiny, twitchy consciousness as it huddled near the broken chain-link fence that separated them; inside his head he felt the pinprick of its narrow, nothing mind as it tried to identify threat in his enormous shape on the other side of the fence. It was a distraction. He kicked out with one foot suddenly and the rabbit scuttled away.

His attention returned fully to the organ music pouring through the screen door of the house on his right. The inner door always stood open, laying a square of yellow light on the ground.

It was the only residence in this depressed and deserted part of the city, and it was occupied by a tall, thin man who lived alone and played a small, but richly-toned, pipe organ every evening, sometimes late into the night. His schedule never varied and so it had become Vincent's habit - when Catherine was not available - to spend at least an hour leaning into the cold, sagging embrace of the broken fence and listening.

The man was a fine and highly-gifted musician with an extensive repertoire and Vincent often wondered, during the long trek back down to the world Below, what quirk of fate had fettered him to such a reclusive way of life. Sometimes, from the concealment of a thick tree across the street, Vincent watched the man take his afternoon walk, just before dusk. The man was always alone, and he always whistled the same tune, an old Shaker melody:

*'Tis a gift to be simple, 'Tis a gift to be free
'Tis a gift to come down where you want to be...'*

Sometimes snatches of the words were sung out loud, absent-mindedly, in a cheerful voice.

Vincent did not know the musician's real name. In Vincent's heart, his name was Magister.

Sometimes, during the recital, Vincent's eyes wandered over the drab and sullen area that constituted and surrounded Magister's home. On his left was the dilapidated shed where the musician kept his car, seldom used, along with heaps of the kind of junk that tended to accumulate in people's sheds over time. Between the right-hand corner post of the broken fence and the house, was a gap of about three feet which opened up on weed-infested, litter-strewn empty lots. In these lay the hulks of vandal-ravaged cars and piles of old tires. Magister's lonely house was a thing of peeling paint and missing roof tiles. Its windows during the day were bare and black behind the reflected light. The general area was one of many such anathemas to the city, a place where drug addicts hung out and sordid-looking, plastic-wrapped bundles were sometimes dumped from passing cars. Often, during the concert, the distant revolving red lights of police cars shed their turning beacons across Vincent's still form.

But Magister's music paved this part of the city with beauty, every night. And Vincent loved him for it ...

The Widor toccata ended, its rapturous climbing of cadence over cadence grandly leading into the

final, thunderous chords. The cold night became silent. Vincent folded his arms over a jagged break in the fence and laid his head down briefly, as he waited for the next piece. The moment stretched out, and suddenly he realized the the concert had ended. Then a light inside the house went off. Snapping away from the fence, Vincent hurried into the night.

Even an arrangement of show tunes was stirring when played by Magister. Often, Vincent was tempted not to stay for the more modern pieces, especially when the temperature seemed to drop a few more degrees each night. But he always stayed - and he was always glad that he did.

Tonight was damp and raw.

On the street, a car went by very slowly and Vincent froze, watching from the corner of his eye, not turning his head. Then came the sound of breaking glass and the squeal of dragging rubber as the car swerved down a sidestreet and disappeared. It was fortunate - he supposed - that there was so little traffic in this area. It made things convenient for him, but he worried sometimes about Magister living in such an isolated and unfriendly place. If Catherine kept him busy on many successive nights, he found himself chafing to get back here again, simply to check on the musician.

A soft rain began to fall. He willed himself to ignore it. Ten minutes later he was soaked and thoroughly chilled. Disgusted, he fled.

"Vincent - that organist you go up north to hear so often. You seem to have him pegged as a teacher."

Father leaned on his elbows, slightly crumpling the sheets of diagrams that lay on top of his desk. Vincent also noticed the big book on mining engineering; this was something Father occasionally consulted when there were structural problems, and its contents were apt to become the subject of heated debates between him and Mouse.

Vincent sat down in the big oak chair beside the deak.

"Magister just happens to be my name for him, Father. I do not, in fact, know that he is a teacher. I know virtually nothing about him."

"But he lives alone?"

"As far as I can fell." Vincent waited for these queries to be explained.

Father toyed absently with a fountain pen, then looked up with a rather wistful smile.

"Well - I have the usual happy/sad news..."

"Who are we losing now?"

"Tom and Esther Philips. They finally managed to get themselves appointments at the same school - Ohio Westeyan - and they're leaving us in a few days. They've decided to have a try at the world Above again."

"I am very happy for them - but sad for our children."

"Yes. So am I. This leaves us with nobody who can teach music. So now you know why I was asking about your Magister. It would be a good idea, perhaps, to keep an eye on him."

"I intend to."

Father sighed deeply. "Some of the children will keep up what they've learned - but without the impetus of encouraging teachers, many of them will not. It is too bad in that respect." He settled back in his chair, pressing his fingertips together. "That it could go to waste..."

He noticed that the line between Vincent's eyebrows was beginning to deepen, the shaggy head was lowering slightly. With Catherine so busy lately, Vincent tended to plunge into a blue funk at the slightest excuse... So it was time to change the subject - or at least lighten the mood.

He rasped a thumb along his beard. "Actually, Vincent, there is one other matter I wanted to discuss with you. The north exit in Section E must be closed off. We'll seal it up for good soon, but for now I'm wondering if you and your friend Barnat would mind taking the signs and barriers up there, perhaps tomorrow..." Interrupting himself he exclaimed, "Vincent! I do hope that's not the exit you use when you go to hear Magister."

"It isn't. There is a large storm-drain somewhat farther south. How dangerous is it?"

"Very. I was up there myself a few days ago and had a look ..."

"Father! You shouldn't walk so far. Your leg ..."

"Didn't give me a single twinge," Father reported triumphantly. "I can even run now - sometimes." He returned to the subject of Section E. "The exit tunnel runs underneath the foundation of an old foundry with a very deep concrete floor. The cracks and holes in that foundation have been filling up with water and freezing for years and now with all the rain we've had lately the whole place is waterlogged. I could see buckling and slippage. It's about to cave in and I don't want any of us inside when it gives way. I know it's not an exit we use very much ..."

"Can anything be done to shore it up, do you suppose?"

Father shrugged. "It's not really worth a lot of trouble. It's a bad area Above, full of drug addicts and other miscreants hiding out; not any place we visit as a rule. I did have the men shore up the actual mouth of the exit. The immediate outside area is filled with all kinds of rubble and there were some railroad ties lying about. I had them use one to prop up the entrance. But I don't trust it."

"We'll go up there tomorrow morning."

"Good." Father rose. "Well, I'm off to the library. You'll find me among my new tomes, *in status pupullari*, should you need me..."

As Vincent rose to leave Father spoke up again; "Oh, Vincent - don't actually go into the exit part of that tunnel - please. I don't trust it."

"All right, Father." Vincent turned away but once again Father's voice detained him.

"One more thing ..."

Vincent waited, his leonine head tilted patiently.

Father paused, standing in an uncertain attitude behind the desk with his fingers tapping the papers on top. He removed and folded his glasses, then threw a piercing glance at his son.

"I do hope you're being careful up there."

"You know I always am, Father."

"Sometimes I feel that you push your luck. We both know you have remarkable healing powers, but

you're more than a mammoth clump of wonderfully cooperative blood cells, Vincent. Physically, you always recover very quickly from any injuries you suffer during your ..." He reflected, searching for the right word. "... encounters in the world Above. But spiritually, it always takes you much longer."

For a moment Vincent looked uncomfortable. "Please believe me, Father. I do take every precaution. But I'm afraid Magister has become an important part of my life." He turned and left quickly, not giving the lecture time to gain any more momentum.

Father stared down at his littered desktop. He picked up and ripped in half a bookmark one of the children had made for him. Then, seeing what he had done, he irritably reached for Scotch tape.

He muttered. "He'll do as he damn well pleases, anyway..."

The rabbit was back, setting its tiny but insistent, prying edge on his enjoyment of the music. The curiosity he evoked in animals never ceased to plague him, for he was annoyingly sensitive to their rapid little minds. They could not be said to think, exactly, instead they were directed by a kind of signal system so faceless and impersonal that it made him profoundly uneasy when he came in contact with it. That sentient life should exist in such a way; almost... almost... almost able to think. Reflectively, he kicked put and his foot struck an old crate that always lay nearby, and knocked it against the fence. This made a clatter.

The music stopped abruptly.

Thoroughly annoyed at himself, Vincent turned to flee and his hair snagged painfully on the chain links. Rubbing the sore spot on his scalp he rushed into the enfolding darkness.

"Vincent, you mangy ol' megalith, will you hurry it up? I keep getting ahead of you." From the tunnel ahead Barnat almost danced on the balls of his feet, gazing backward at Vincent from eyes that were unnaturally bright. Always a high-strung personality, Barnat seemed particularly hyper today, his restlessness tumbling forth in a string of affectionate childings and insults. He was twenty-six, with shirt sleeves rolled up over lean rosy muscles, and long hair that spun off his shoulders every time he looked back to check on Vincent's progress.

Vincent plodded along, in no hurry. He carried the signs and wooden barriers while Barnat had the gunnysack with various tools they might need. Vincent's mind was on Catherine, feeling for her thoughts - which eddied coyly from his patient mental reachings. This was because she was not totally invested in any particular experience, just coping in an automatic way with numerous trifling matters. She had been this way for days, and it meant that her life was very busy right now, that's all. It was no cause for concern, other than missing her. At night, too, she slept soundly, no doubt completely tired out, and no fragments of her dreams stirred his body and mind. That tiredness he did sense to some extent, and he would have liked to ease it from her, holding her in his arms until he felt her relax, soothing her with words, perhaps reading her something that would lift her from her preoccupation with drudgery. It wasn't a fierce longing yet, but if she kept up this pace much longer, she would build up needs that would press him hard. Perhaps tonight, instead of visiting Magister, he would climb up to her balcony...

Vincent and Barnat paused at an intersection in Section E, took their bearings, then followed the north branch to the exit tunnel which ran beneath the old foundry and opened up to daylight through a mud embankment. Barnat ran ahead, alternately jogging and trotting, and Vincent's thoughts remained pleasantly wrapped around Catherine. As he considered what book to take up to her, a cold damp wind blew over him from the mouth of the exit, bringing the smells of saturated earth. The ground underfoot became muddy and slippery. He glanced upward at the uneven ceiling of the tunnel, noting with interest that a slab of concrete from the foundry above had, at some point, begun to break through. Along its downward pointing jagged edge a trickle of muddy water dripped steadily.

Barnat followed Vincent's gaze. "Looks pretty secure to me," he declared, hitching up his jeans. Barnat had never acquiesced to the dress code of the World Below.

Vincent would have disputed this remark, but he thought better of it. Barnat could be snappish when he was this wound-up and Vincent preferred the humor that flowed out of his friend unchecked - as long as nobody tried to argue about something.

He leaned over to place the signs on the floor of the tunnel and as he did so Barnat thumped him on the buttocks with one fist.

"Good ass, Vincent. You'll make a good lover."

Vincent straightened up quickly. Barnat's raffish sense of humor tended to leave him feeling a bit uncertain - yet he always came back for more.

"Why do you say that?" he queried.

"Because - a guy needs a good ass to be a good lover. My old man always used to say 'You can't drive a spike with a tack hammer'." Barnat's rapid, staccato laugh echoed along the tunnel. He spun suddenly and danced toward the exit.

Vincent called out. "Barnat! Please don't. It is dangerous ..."

Barnat shrugged and retraced his steps. "Aw, Vincent ..."

There was a sudden plop at their feet as a piece of one of the barriers fell off.

"Shit," said Barnat.

Vincent asked him, "Did you bring the wood glue?"

His friend hastily rummaged in the gunnysack. "Wood glue, wood glue; what is life without wood glue? Aha!" Barnat produced a plastic bottle. "Wood glue!"

Vincent propped the barriers against the side of the tunnel and, after wrapping his cloak around his thighs to keep it out of the mud, he squatted down to begin repairs. Suddenly, he heard Barnat's voice coming from the mouth of the exit.

"Your old man is a straw-catcher, Vincent. There's nothing wrong around here."

Vincent hesitated. He had already asked Barnat once to stay out of the exit. How much farther could tact be ...

Barnat's voice took on a surly edge. "I just don't see why we have to give up a perfectly good exit." The change in his tone made Vincent look up, and then he scrambled to his feet, dropping the barrier. At the mouth of the exit, Barnat was kicking at the vertical railroad tie. "Not *necessary* ..."

"Barnat - stop that!" Vincent started forward and then an odd sucking nouse from above him stopped him in his tracks. His gaze lifted. Above him a crack sprang outward, skimming along toward the entrance like some horrid living thing...

Vincent lunged forward. "Barnat - *get out of the way!* It's *going!*" He reached his friend in five leaping strides and shoved him violently toward daylight just as a hail of mud and concrete fragments engulfed them both. Something struck Vincent's shoulder, throwing him forward.

He rolled, trying to get away, but the mud beneath him slipped, refusing traction, and he felt something come down on his legs.

There was an agonizing pain and the world thinned to a grey line before him.

The first thing he heard was a strange, raspy sound. It was himself panting. He opened his eyes and raised his head. A rush of searing pain from his left leg dragged a moan from his throat. Gasping, he lay still. He was on his back in a puddle of mud and water at what had been the mouth of the exit - and a huge chunk of concrete was pinning him by the left leg with sickening torture. As the full front of pain climbed back up through his senses, he nearly passed out a second time. He could see that a piece of the foundation had collapsed at the mouth of the tunnel - and he was trapped beneath it. Barnat, his mud-covered hands under the edge of the slab, was making a hopeless attempt to lift it off Vincent. But a piece that size, Vincent knew with a sinking heart, would take at least five men.

The leg was broken. There was no question of that. In a strange, lucid way through his agony, Vincent recognized that he would have to lose the leg. With this much weight on it, in the time it would take Barnat to return with help from Below, there would be irreversible damage to the circulation. Oddly, this horrible thought gave him no distress. It was all he could do to handle the pain.

"I can't budge this!" Barnat gasped. "I'm going to have to get help ..."

Summoning everything he had, Vincent managed to speak. "You must...get the men from Below...There is another entrance... south of here about three blocks... large storm drain..." He broke off, clenching his teeth and digging desperately through the mud with his fingers in search of something to grip. He couldn't stand this... He couldn't stand this...

Then, suddenly, there was a lessening of his torture, and hope surged through him. He had been aware, as he was speaking to Barnat, of a gradual sinking beneath the pinned leg. His leg was being pushed into the mud! The concrete chunk, settling, had come to rest on something else - and its full, destructive weight was no longer directly on the leg.

Vincent closed his eyes, still trapped and still in great pain - but able to bid the vision of losing his leg a finger-kissing farewell...

Suddenly, he raised his head again and looked around.

Barnat was gone.

That was good. It occurred to him briefly that there had been no apology for the foolish move that had resulted in this mess, but Vincent did not linger long on the thought. What was important now was getting help up here as fast as possible. Apologies could come later.

Perhaps this accident would be a chastening lesson to Barnat not to be quite so cocky. Given his choice, though, Vincent would have picked some other route to enlightenment for his young friend.

He looked around as best he could, assessing the area for danger of exposure. Fortunately, he was shielded from the street by piles of bricks and other rubbish.

The pain spitefully lured his senses away from the other disagreeable facts of his entrapment - like

lying alone and afraid in a puddle of filthy water, covered with mud and fragments of concrete. If he moved even the slightest bit the pain was excruciating. Once he tried a quick tug and the grinding of bone against bone wrenched a scream from his throat. He couldn't afford such a lapse - not even in a desolate place like this.

Seeking comfort, his mind groped for something from Catherine, but found nothing it could grasp, nothing that would bring her gentle spirit closer.

The cold gradually began to seep into him, adding its quaking discomfort to his plight. His fingers grew numb and the toes on his right foot began to hurt when he tried to curl them. He kept trying - anything to distract him from the pain in his leg. Then it began to rain, and the needle-sharp drops forced him to close his eyes. If he didn't pay attention the water ran into his mouth, soapy and brackish, making him spit and shake his head. then the world would slowly revolve as though to dump him into the sky...

Fiercely, he tried to will himself away from this scene - and sometimes it seemed to work. Then his eyes would open again to the rain, and the throbbing in his leg would return in force to sap his endurance.

Despite the greyness of the day, he could tell, from subtle changes in the light, that well over an hour had gone by since Barnat had left him. What was keeping him? It wasn't that far to the next entrance and Barnat, with his nervous, long-legged sprinting, would have arrived Below in some twenty minutes. Allow half an hour or perhaps even forty minutes for the men, with first-aid equipment, to arrive. They would be slowed somewhat by Father - who undoubtedly would come with them - because of his game leg... but they should have been here by now.

At some point he was approached by a scrawny dog. He felt the mind of the vagrant mongrel glancing off what was left of his awareness long before the hesitant paws and questing nose reached him where he lay. Not liking his inexplicable scent the dog backed off, its tip wrinkling with distrust.

"I can do that," Vincent muttered. The words seemed hard to get out. He wondered if his leg was bleeding under all that mud and concrete. He felt so horribly cold - and dead. The pain was all that let him know he was still alive...

His eyelids sagged and he lost track of the dog, the cold, plaguing drips of rain, and for a time, everything except the continual pain.

Then, through the swimming disorder in his head he seemed to hear whistling. Yes, it was whistling. The Old Shaker hymn, *Tis a Gift...* Vincent's eyes opened to the bleak vista of grey, spitting sky and then winced shut as the raindrops stung him. Again he seemed to float out of himself, out of his pain, and he drowsily built a picture of a tall, thin man walking briskly along a cracked and broken street, whistling and singing:

"Tis a Gift to be simple, Tis a Gift to be free..."

Magister! No, no... You mustn't come here. You mustn't come this way.

Yet the sound of the whistling grew stronger and it seemed to be headed toward where Vincent lay. Already thoroughly numb, he stiffened even further, trying to prime himself for abrupt movement. Experimenting, he shifted a tiny bit. The pain raked his senses into oblivion...

Vincent blinked and stared at the sky. It seemed darker and the rain still mercilessly fell. He was a rigid log of ice in the puddle, the pain in his leg beating against him with its cold, icy ache. The whistling had stopped - or had it? Yes, it had. He turned his head and stared at a pair of shoes, legs...

His startled gaze swept upward to the long barrel of a rifle. On its dark cylinder the rainwater stood out like drops of perspiration.

A jangling wave of horror screamed through him. He heard words spoken and then his eyes reached the face above the gun.

Something inside him tried to die. He never felt the bullet strike.

"Thank you, Stuart. You've earned your place in Heaven," Catherine declared as Stuart plopped the thick folder of data onto her desktop.

"That's just what I'm afraid of," Stuart retorted with a wink, "that the Good Lord will greet me at the Pearly Gates with an armload of back files." He trotted off, throwing another quick grin over his shoulder as he went.

Catherine pushed the folder aside; she would look at it later. Right now it was time to eat the yogurt she had hastily crammed into her shoulder bag this morning, and work up an impression of lunch hour ease. That's all it would be - an impression. Her system felt as though it were on overdrive and she couldn't quite believe that tomorrow was Friday and that a weekend empty of commitments actually awaited her. Somehow she had done it... She had reserved an entire weekend for Vincent. He deserved it. He had been more than patient.

The holidays had been frantic; the pace at work hectic, as it always seemed to get just before a major holiday, forcing her to cram her shopping trips into the evenings, when everybody else had the same idea and the same amount of spare time - and was standing in the same line. Then there had been a spate of evening-consuming events; the obligatory New Year's cocktail party at the office, Daddy's birthday, which meant dinner and a show, then Patricia and Dan's fifth anniversary party filled with brightly noisy friends wearing their best gilded smiles and wondering the whole time if the marriage would survive another year... It had all been such a whirl; she had all but lost Vincent somewhere in the midst of it ... She hasn't really, but it felt that way.

Early morning was often the best time for avid study; Father found that he retained more of what he had read, while for some reason, as the day wore on his grey matter relaxed and became seduced by style, rhetoric, the meanings of words, and things like that... Immediately after rising he went to his desk and became absorbed, deciding first on having a late breakfast and then, as time went by, a still later breakfast.

The insistent banging in the pipes had just begun to irritate him when a familiar name, tapped out in code, wrenched his attention away from the book.

Leaping up he rushed to the pipe and hovered near it anxiously---It was the North quarter sentry reporting.

Section E north exit down.

Vincent trapped.

Vincent hurt bad.

Send heavy rescue.

Urgent send heavy rescue.

He fled into the tunnel and ran toward the Common Room, his cloak swirling. Last night, he had fallen asleep in bed with his books - and when that happened it was Vincent's habit not to disturb him with their ritual good-night kiss. So this morning he had merely assumed that Vincent was in bed sleeping late after the customary visit to Magister.

He rushed into the Common Room, startling everyone. Fortunately, everyone he needed was there.

"William! Albert! Pascal! Mouse! Vincent's been hurt. He's trapped up in Section E. We'll need the large stretcher. Get the first-aid equipment. John - get the splint materials and the cervical collar. Ed - get spades and a prybar. Peter and Joe - you come, too. Hurry! There's not a moment to be lost. The sentry says he's badly hurt!"

The faint sound of organ music went unnoticed by the group of men who, in their warm layers of tunic, leggings and cowled cloak, poured out of the large storm-drain like some sort of medievalist's hallucination. Running, clutching the equipment, tools and rolled-up stretcher, they headed for the remains of the foundry building, its few remaining walls stark and crumbling in the grey morning light. There was no one around to see them, but nevertheless, three of the group fanned out and took up inconspicuous positions in the immediate area - as lookouts - while the rest, with Father, rushed to where Vincent lay at the collapsed mouth of the exit.

For one horrible moment, as they were still approaching, Father thought they were too late. Then the shaggy, rain-drenched head turned toward them.

He flung himself to his knees beside his son, immediately checking vital signs. "Vincent - Vincent, how did this happen?" He saw at once that Vincent was dangerously weak. Snatching up the cervical collar he slid it into place and then Vincent spoke to him faintly.

"You don't need that, Father. My only injury is the leg..."

But Vincent's skin, beneath the delicate fur on his face, was dead-white, his lips and eyelids bluish and his respiration rapid and shallow. Confused, Father glanced down the length of soggy tunic and vest - and then he saw the pool of blood beneath Vincent's waist... the hole surrounded by a scorched area of cloth...

"Oh, my God - you've been shot!" he cried.

It took six of the men to lift the concrete chunk off Vincent, and during the subsequent ordeal of being extricated from the mud Vincent fainted. It was just as well; Father could only imagine how desperately this respite was needed. The break was a full but clean one midway between ankle and knee - certainly not a life-threatening injury, but the gunshot wound was another matter. With all the water around it was impossible to tell just how much blood Vincent had lost, or whether the bullet, which had entered and exited the flank pad muscle on Vincent's left side, had nicked the peritoneum. Father thought that it had not, in which case he was dealing only with a very nasty flesh wound, entailing blood loss - and the possibility of a severe infection. But the fact of the gunshot wound also

urged haste upon him - for whoever had shot Vincent would undoubtedly return in a very short time with police and reporters.

Still, he made certain that the broken leg was well-splinted and that Vincent's bleeding had stopped before he had the men lift his patient carefully onto the stretcher.

Then they hurried, as fast as they dared carry their burden, back to the storm-drain three blocks south.

Despite his frantic concern for Vincent, Father hung back at the mouth of the exit with three of the men and had a last long look around, to make sure they had not been observed.

As Father had expected, word of Vincent's accident spread rapidly, and by the time they reached the home section of the world Below, everyone was waiting in the main tunnels, anxious and full of questions. Fielding these all with curt dismissals - which he knew would be forgiven immediately due to the terrible circumstances - Father shouted orders:

"Mary - get two clean dropsheets, spread them across my bed. I'll need clean rags; Johanna - make some strong tea. Teddy - bring the first aid supplies to my quarters. *On the double everyone!*"

By the time they reached his quarters, the sheets had been laid and varieties of antiseptics and bandage material were arriving as fast as the children could carry them. But there was still a swirl of apprehensive questions and clustering bodies to be dealt with.

"Everyone out! I will talk to you all later. Vincent is going to be *all right*."

The men lifted Vincent very carefully onto the bed and then left, after assuring Father that they would stand by in case anything more was needed; he responded automatically to their pledges and chivied them out. Finally, he and Vincent were alone. He wanted to plunge into his doctoring. The urge to repair Vincent, to change all this back into something more acceptable - and to do it immediately - was very strong within him. But he knew also that they could afford a moment more before he began, so he took Vincent's head between his hands and gazed down at him.

Sensing their privacy Vincent spoke, his voice weak. "You must be very angry with me, Father, for ignoring your warning."

"We won't think about that now." The older man briefly caressed the tawny head. "First we must get you well. How did you get shot, my son?"

"I don't know. I can remember very little. Has Catherine been told?"

"Not yet. Everything's been very rushed. I'll fetch her myself if necessary, but not until after you've been attended to." He began to straighten up but Vincent grasped his arm. "Father ..."

"What is it?"

"Will you bathe me? Please. Before Catherine gets here; I don't want her to see me like this."

The older man smiled gravely. "Well, Vincent - I think I will take that as a good omen for your recovery. Of course I'll clean you up."

"Ohly you, Father."

"Certainly ..."

"I'm sorry. I know it's a big job ..."

"Vincent - are you sure you can remember nothing about the shooting?"

A moment passed with only the sound of Vincent's quick, harsh breathing. "Nothing."

Father stepped into the tunnel. The men, still waiting, were instantly attentive.

"Yes, Father?"

"A large basin of hot water and plenty of towels."

"Yes, Father."

Returning to Vincent with a pair of shears, he began to slice away the bloodstained clothing, dropping the pieces on the floor. As he worked, he gradually wrapped his soggy patient in the sheets, leaving the gunshot wound and the broken leg exposed; both injuries were on the same side. His eyes returned often to Vincent's face, checking for signs of shock, but there were none - only pain and exhaustion.

He would have to make a cast; it was fortunate that Mouse always kept a large supply of masonry plaster on hand...

Vincent moaned suddenly. "Why does my side hurt so?"

Father stared at him, bewildered. "Vincent - you've been *shot*. Don't you remember? We were just talking about it!" Had Vincent sustained a blow to the head? But there were none of the other telltale signs of concussion ...

The voice was a tired sigh. "Oh - yes..."

Father straightened up, ready for the next step in his procedures. Grimly he explained. "I'm going to need assistance when I set your leg. I'll need another pair of hands for that and - and to wipe my eyes for me when I have to hurt you. Who would you like it to be?"

The deep, soft voice was weaker. "Barnat."

Father's stare became even more perplexed and disturbed. "Vincent - Barnat was with you. He hasn't returned."

She finished listening to her phone messages and turned off the machine with a self-congratulatory smile. Nothing important; all *hi-how-are-you*'s. They could all wait.

Catherine bounced a little on the bed, feeling almost schoolgirlishly happy. The day had gone well; several cases were resolving with textbook simplicity, and the witnesses she had interrogated that morning had all given interesting and viable testimony.

It had been only a few minutes past three when Joe stopped in front of her desk and said, "Why don't you knock off early today, Radcliffe - something tells me you have a big weekend coming up." Then he had winked at her and sauntered away, leaving her open-mouthed. Joe could be uncanny. He had a close friend's way of divining - in a general sense - what was simmering on the back burners of her mind, and he seemed both amused and impressed that she could do such fast and thorough work and yet have so much of her mind somewhere else entirely...

...*Far below the city streets...*

She tumbled off the bed and changed to jeans and a sweater.

The doorbell rang.

She unlocked the door and peered through the crack admitted by the chain. Then she quickly rattled the chain out of its holder and flung the door open.

"Father!"

The squarish, elderly man with the neatly-trimmed beard and restless, peregrine gaze, looked so out of place standing in the hall, that recognition had actually been delayed for a couple of seconds while her mental circuits reeled. He was dressed for Topside in a worn and elbow-patched tweed jacket and slacks and a carelessly knotted dusty tie. He held a paper shopping bag on one arm. His face shocked her. He looked exhausted, as though worn down by some terrible ordeal.

"Father - are you all right?" Then the full horror of possibility seized her. *"Is Vincent all right?"*

Father replied. "He will be." Without preamble he said, "His leg is broken. And he has been shot."

Catherine felt dazed. There was a draining sensation in her stomach and the floor seemed to recede. *"Shot?"* She stepped aside. "Come in here!" He did so and gently closed the door behind him.

Catherine's hands lifted and her fingertips pressed her temples. There was a great, screaming denial inside her that couldn't find its way into words or even tears. She was just too stunned.

"Are you ... are you sure he's going to be all right?" she stammered. Beneath her turmoil, a quiet voice said, *Father wouldn't be here if Vincent wasn't going to be all right... Father wouldn't leave Vincent's side...* She began to calm down and Father moved closer to her, his expression softening. He reached out and touched her.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, he will be. He's very sick and in pain and he needs you, but he will be all right."

Her arms dropped to her sides. She realized she had just been standing there, staring wildly at Father, absolutely reduced to idocy by this news.

She took a deep breath. "How did this happen?"

He told her. " ... and we still don't know what's happened to Barnat," he concluded grimly. "He wasn't caught in the cave-in, and he didn't return Below. He has ... disappeared."

Catherine recalled a skinny, nervous young man, who had a sort of proprietary friendship with Vincent.

Father went on; "The Council met briefly this morning. I told them all I knew of the accident - which wasn't much - and we have agreed to initiate a search Above for Barnat. We're all concerned about him, especially Vincent. And so I'm hoping we find him soon. Vincent will chafe and fret until we do, and he's got enough energy to expend just trying to get well. Look - why don't you pack a small bag? I think you'll want to spend the night. You were planning to come Below, weren't you?"

"Oh - yes. Yes, I am. Of *course* I'll spend the night. Poor Vincent ..."

She rushed into her bedroom and through it to her bathroom, and she stared at the various things that littered the sink and countertop. Nothing looked familiar. Standing there, she pounded her forehead with the heel of her hand. *Get ahold of yourself, Chandler...* Three minutes later she had thrown some things into a small tote bag and was shrugging into her coat.

"I'm ready. Let's go!"

In the harsh lighting of the elevator, Father looked very tired and drawn. But he was positively garrulous with tension, and as they rode the elevator down to the basement, talk spilled out of him.

"Peter's out of town, so I've been Above to visit an old acquaintance - someone I helped with a special favor years ago. He hadn't forgotten. Of course, I had to do a great deal of inventing to explain where I've been since the last time he saw me, so I guess it's a good thing I can think on my feet when I have to. I did manage to convince him to let me have the medicines and supplies we'll need for Vincent. I even have enough for a few more emergencies - perish the thought!" He shook his head drearily. "Vincent was shot at close range. Someone stood over him as he lay helpless and pulled the trigger. I could tell because the fur around the entry point was ripped away, the flesh terribly bruised. And yet what concerns me the most is that Vincent can't seem to remember ..."

"Fur?" Catherine repeated.

There was a stark silence. Then Father said in a guarded way, watching her closely. "I'm sorry. I thought you knew. Vincent has fur - about a half-inch of it - all over his body."

An awkwardness came between them. She pushed it away. "Well, I've always suspected it," she said breezily and then she pressed him back into his topic. "Vincent hasn't been able to remember anything?"

He gave a heavy sigh. "Not yet. But a certain amount of disorientation is to be expected after blood loss and trauma. His mind will clear soon - I think. Vincent's physiology is - different... I'm not always quite sure what to expect with him."

They left the elevator, hurried through the boiler room, and stepped through the hatch into the brick-strewn tunnel entrance.

"Of course right now he's very ill," Father explained. "High fever, can't keep anything down - not even tea. It's just trauma; he's lost a lot of blood and he was lying in the cold rain alone for almost twenty-four hours. Tomorrow, he'll be much better. Today, our goal is merely to keep enough water in him to stave off dehydration. Mary and our seamstress, Mrs. Larrimore, are taking turns watching him until I return with you ..."

"She still insists on being called *Mrs.* Larrimore?"

"I gather things were more formal in the old country."

"Is Vincent in a lot of pain?"

"Considerable. But I have something for that, now. And he heals remarkably fast, you know. I expect he'll be up and stumping about with a cane in about three weeks."

It felt odd, making conversation with Father as they hurried downward. It was never particularly easy for her at any time, but now, with her fears for Vincent churning away, it was quite burdensome. He was a strange man, a leader and yet personally shy. Circumstances had not yet presented them with the chance to get to know each other.

In their haste - and tension - they both stumbled frequently. To Catherine's surprise, Father suddenly took her hand in his own and kept it there; it helped them both. It also did something unexpected to the controls she had piled against her emotions, and reaction began to set in - the meaning of Vincent's narrow escape. That someone would point a gun at him and pull the trigger without knowing, or caring to know, the wise, gentle and loving creature who would die...That someone would pull the trigger without knowing or caring to know, that this creature lying at his mercy could be his friend - the most precious, devoted friend he could ever have in a lifetime...That someone would try to kill Vincent, seeing only as ugliness his fully comprehensible beauty...That she had almost lost him...That the most vital part of her would have almost been ripped away...That he had lain in the cold and wet alone, afraid and in pain, and she hadn't known...For *twenty-four hours*, and she hadn't known...

Unable to help herself, she crumpled inwardly and the tears began to drift down her face. She gasped and took a swipe at them. At once, Father stopped. He put his arm around her, saying nothing. She glanced at him and saw some of her own feelings reflected in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," she managed. "I can't help it... but I'm getting this over with now. Vincent's going to need me to be strong for him - and I will be."

It was Mrs. Lattimore's watch when they arrived at Vincent's room. She rose from the chair by the bed, her face a network of anxious lines, and scurried to Father. Behind Catherine, they conferred in low tones, but she did not try to hear what they were saying. She had eyes and ears only for Vincent who lay flat on his back, covered with a quilt, his left leg elevated. As she approached, his head turned toward her and his weak, soft voice reached out to her. "Catherine... you're here..."

He was so pale. Even his nose and lips were chalky.

Hastily, she dumped her coat and bag onto the chair and then she sank to the edge of the bed and leaned over him.

"Yes - I'm here. Oh, Vincent, look at you..." She pressed one hand gently over his forehead and the heat of his fever came through to her. "Oh, Vincent ..."

He murmured, "I feel better now that you're here." Those wide blue eyes looked into hers adoringly. with the deep sadness that suffering always laid bare in him, and a stinging rush of tears threatened her. Fiercely, she pushed them back. He stirred, and his arms came out from under the quilt and reached up. She hugged him, pressing her cheek against his, nuzzling him. His hair smelled faintly of shampoo. He felt so good - but he was frighteningly hot ...

From behind her came Father's voice, crisp with instructions; "The washbottle on table stand contains drinking water."

She picked it up.

Despite her apprehensions for Vincent, a small part of her mind stepped aside to admire Father's ingenuity, the innovative way of thinking that had made this underground world possible. The washbottle was a perfect way to get water into Vincent without having to raise him up, without having to risk a spill.

Gently, she placed the end of the funny hooked tube between Vincent's lips.

"Come on - you have to drink some more."

"Can't keep it down."

"You must try, Vincent. You must try for me." She squeezed out a trickle and he swallowed.

He said earnestly, his voice a little stronger; "Catherine - you must stay out of danger. I'm not as receptive to you. Most of me is taken up with healing ..."

"And it should be."

"Don't endanger yourself..."

"I'll be right here all weekend, and as for the immediate future, I have no plans for hanging around in any dark alleys."

Father had unloaded the medical supplies onto the tabletop, where they made a strange contrast with the brass candelabra and Vincent's collection of antique fountain pens and inkwells. He was now stripping the wrapper off a disposable syringe.

Vincent's eyes wandered to this scene and became apprehensive and Catherine's spirits were lifted by a tickle of amusement. It was quite clear that Vincent was, as Father had pointed out, very ill - but he was also the most rugged individual she had ever known. At times, he seemed practically indestructible; once he had been struck by an automobile doing 50 - and he had sustained only a few cracked ribs. That he should be squeamish about needles was just plain funny.

Father announced in a professional tone of voice. "I'm going to give you a couple of shots, Vincent. One is a powerful antibiotic. The other is a painkiller that will no doubt make you drowsy. But you'll feel better after it takes affect."

Vincent glanced helplessly at Catherine and she grinned and shrugged. Suddenly she noticed his arms. He was wearing only a light, short-sleeved tunic, with no shirt underneath, and it was the first time she had ever seen his arms exposed above the wrists. Immediately, she laid a hand on the sleek, short fur and stroked it, and her smile, as his eyes anxiously searched her face, radiated delight. It was a private moment between them, one that she preferred not to share with Father through any words she might speak to Vincent, so she kept quiet, hoping that her warmth and approval would get through with just a smile - and a touch that wanted more... She thought his wary look faded a little, but perhaps she was imagining it... At any rate, Father was now inserting himself between them with a hypo in one hand. She got up and moved off a ways, watching them together.

Vincent's eyes remained on hers, deeply meditative. Then he flashed his teeth in a quick grimace.

Catherine moved slowly around the perimeter of the room while Father gave Vincent the second shot. This accomplished, Father replaced a few of the things in the bag and prepared to leave. Surprisingly, he passed close to her on the way out and said in a low voice. "Would you come see me... after he's asleep?"

She stood quietly in the entrance, watching him.

Father was seated at his desk, surrounded by guttering candles, staring down at an open book - and obviously not reading it. He had changed back into his heavy cloak, russet shirt, tunic and vest. Catherine stepped into the room and he glanced up with his frugal smile. Then he rose and came around the desk to take a seat in front of it and he gestured her to the large oak chair close by.

"Please - come in. Sit down."

Catherine did so and they sat with their knees almost touching, studying each other.

"I'll have the boys set up a cot for you in Vincent's room," he stated and she gave a nod. A minute crawled by, then he said in his formal way, "It is good of you to stay with him."

Catherine said nothing, but she waited gently, her eyes very large and full in the candlelight.

After a moment more Father rubbed at his beard and neck abstractedly and said, "I really don't know why I asked you to come here ..."

"You didn't have to ask. I would have come anyway."

He seemed nonplussed. "You would have. Why?"

"Because you love Vincent. And so do I. So - we're in this together."

Not expecting this he shifted in his chair, oddly unsettled, as he frequently was, by her kindness and gentle spirit. The knowledge that he had not always been very accepting of her, gnawed with nasty little rat teeth at his conscience.

Catherine regarded him with her tranquil smile, more at peace with their being together than she would have expected. This man, who had once called her relationship with his son "a tragic mistake", while she stood before him in tears begging for his help, had gradually learned to trust and accept her. It had not been easy for him. At times his resistance had been distressing to her, but she had found patience through the knowledge that he was concerned for Vincent - and that he was terribly fearful that Vincent might be hurt. But aside from this, she had always been somewhat in awe of Father, seeing him as a restless, driven, mercurial scholar, whose moods ran the gamut between realism and whimsy, to whom everyone in the world Below deferred. He was a heavily fortified personality, and she had often longed to see him as a more vulnerable man - in some of the ways that Vincent was, perhaps - so that she could reach through the unarmed area with her offer of friendship.

But he did have such an area, and it was showing tonight.

She asked; "What were you thinking about - when I came in?"

He reflected for a while before answering this, seeming almost to gather courage. Then he said; "I was remembering Vincent's childhood."

Her reply was a gentle prompt. "You've never talked to me about that."

His eyes remained lowered. "No... I've never talked to you much about anything, have I?" He threw her a miserable glance and then stared intently at the floor, a muscle in his cheek twitching.

"It's never too late to start," she said in her gracious way. "What were you remembering?"

He gave a dry chuckle and rubbed his face. She could sense how tired he was, and how uncomfortable with his need to talk to someone - his need, at last, to talk to her.

He said; "I was remembering some of the problems Vincent used to have when he played with the other children. Sometimes he would scratch them by mistake during playful tussles. Then he would come to me crying with remorse. I was remembering how hard it was for him to be so different. And how hard it was for me. It still hurts me inside when he ..." His voice quivered suddenly and he broke off. He turned his head away and stared hard into the corner.

After a moment he continued. "... when Vincent is unhappy with himself. He doesn't deserve ever to feel that way. He doesn't deserve any unhappiness. He's so good. He's so brave..." His voice broke again and Catherine leaned forward and squeezed his arm. He raised a hand to cover his eyes, his fingers digging spasmodically into his temple.

"I had to hurt him this morning," he whispered. "When I set his leg." During the long silence that followed, Catherine studied him gravely. Father was the heart and soul of this place. Vincent's accident had upset everyone and so Father had spent the morning answering questions, reassuring Vincent's "family." Then came the mad scramble for medicines, the stress of having to go Above. Then he had coped with her shock and her emotional reaction, and he had comforted her. Now he needed comforting.

"Father ..."

His hand dropped and he looked at her, red-eyed.

She reached out with both hands, pulled his head forward, and kissed him. "You know what we both

need?"

"What?"

"We need a drink." Her smile coaxed an answering one from him.

"Would sherry do?"

"Perfect."

He got up and limped past tiers of books to a small inlaid cabinet. His leg had had a workout and was obviously troubling him; the sherry would help that, too. From the cabinet he took two glasses, a small silver tray, and a bottle.

They sipped their drinks for a few minutes in silence. Catherine held her glass up and looked at one of the candleflames through the amber liquid. It looked like a tiny sun inside the glass.

"How did you find Vincent when he was a baby?" she asked.

Father appeared to be more at ease, and the emotional warp had left his voice. He smiled wistfully, toying with his glass.

"I still remember that day so well," he said. "Everything about it..."

She settled back in her chair, pleased to see his mood lifting as he warmed to the tale. He spoke out to her in his measured but forceful way.

"You know, contrary to 'legend' around here, it wasn't I who actually found Vincent. It was one of the others, someone who has since... left us. You see, in the two years before Vincent came, we all went Above regularly. I needed a great many books and materials for the library and the whole vast network of helpers to be established... Anyway, at the time Vincent was found I was dabbling in chemical experiments. It was great fun, except when the others complained about the smell. But everyone seemed to get a big kick out of finding glassware and things like that for my lab, so there was a great deal of scavenging going on at hospital dumpsters. Well, on one cold January night, a member of our group found Vincent. She got the shock of her life, I recall..."

Father smiled. "She wasn't expecting to find anything alive in all that debris. It seems she pulled at a large paper bag and it ripped away and here was this ... this little... *creature* blinking up at her. Poor Anna. She was positively frightened."

Father's smile widened. "Vincent was a most peculiar-looking baby." He paused, a touch of irony in his mood. "But thank God, Anna had the presence of mind to realize the poor little thing had been abandoned and would certainly die, so she gathered up the rag-wrapped tiny bundle and brought it down here to me." The smile faded beneath a heavier look of pensive remembrance. "Vincent was a tiny, frail baby, very sick from exposure - yet somehow he found the energy to cry almost continuously those first three days..." In spite of his mood, a chuckle escaped him.

With the infant nestled in the crook of his arm, comfortably held against his tunic and shawl, he moved closer to the candles, to see how it would react to the pleasant points of light. The baby's eyes traveled briefly toward the flames and then returned to their study of his face. Its arms and legs kept moving, pushing against him a little, as though to find out who he was. The large, light eyes gazed directly into his, un-babylike in their ability to focus, and yet empty of any thought or message except openness... The soft hair, now clean and dry, was a flaxen cloud around its head, and a sterile bandage covered the umbilical area. He had made a diaper out of a clean rag and the women were already cutting pieces of cotton and hemming them, excited by this new arrival, despite his strange appearance. The baby's warm, yielding weight against his body gave him a sudden rush of peculiar feeling - a tremendous outpouring of tenderness from some undiscovered niche of his embattled and

embittered soul.

Nothing must ever hurt this baby.

Nothing must ever hurt his---son.

Nothing must ever hurt Vincent...

"Did he have all his fur then?" Catherine asked. She was finding this tale very enjoyable, a good way to relax with their sherry, especially since Father was enjoying telling it...

"No - although he was fuzzy in spots. The fur all came in when he was about three, then he got about half an inch of it all over his body. I remember it was very light and kitten-soft. It darkened up as he grew older." He stopped here long enough to pour them both another half glass of sherry. Then he reflected. "It was after Vincent came that I stopped going Above. He was – clinging - as a small child... He virtually didn't want to let me out of his sight. Devin, of course, was always more independent."

"And you taught them everything."

"Well...Yes." Father grinned. "Except for the mischief they got into. I read to them both a great deal, right from the beginning. Vincent talked in nearly full sentences by eighteen months. We had many childrens' books down here, of course, and he read those. But he didn't seem to prefer them to my own material - and he was reading voluminous quantities of heady stuff by the time he was eight. There was simply no stopping him. He was quite remarkable - in every way."

Catherine said generously. "Why shouldn't he be? He has a remarkable man for a father." She saluted him with her glass.

He gave a self-effacing laugh. He had emerged from his despondency. "Well..." He concluded, "You can be sure there were times when I wondered if I was raising him right, if I was doing the right things. There were times when I wondered where I could possibly find the answers I needed ..."

"And you didn't find them, did you?" Catherine said. "How many people do you know who've raised a Vincent?"

"I wish there were more," Father said, putting down his glass, his eyes becoming shadowy pools once again. "If there were more Vincents around, this world would be a much better place."

He was wet, hot, and tightly enclosed in a dark place. He couldn't move his arms and legs. He couldn't cry. He couldn't breathe. And something was pushing against him in the most horrible way. But he was stuck and the pushing hurt him. He felt a great shifting against his body, and a strangulation of every part of him. It went on... and on... There was a liquid in his nose and mouth and he was drowning. Something was wound around his throat, and slowly he was being forced to die as the squeezing and the choking and the helplessness...

"Vincent! Vincent, wake up!"

Catherine's voice...

"Vincent - stop gagging. It's only a dream. You have a high fever ..."

He seemed to see - he thought – darkness, except for the vague form of someone hovering above him. He seemed to see bare shoulders – pale ... Catherine?

But he had not emerged. He was still wedged inside the hot place, slowly choking to death.

He gasped, "My neck! What's around my neck?"

Her voice came to him - pleasant, but was he dreaming it? Would he die before he could get a chance to struggle out ...

"Nothing is around your neck, Vincent. You've been dreaming."

Soft, smooth hands came down on his forehead and glided along his temples, soothing him - but where was the rest of his body? He couldn't feel it! He was still stuck!

"Catherine - I can't move. I'm stuck."

"Yes, you can. No, you're not." Her voice was a whisper, butterfly wings touching his fear, fanning it gently away. He felt hands close around a dead part of him - his arm - and move it. He reached up with his other hand and laid it on top of hers.

"See? You've been dreaming, Vincent. It's just the fever."

"I can't get out," he moaned.

Catherine said, "You're here. In your own bed. You're here safe, and I'm here with you."

"Why am I so numb, Catherine? I can't feel my body. I'm not here - I'm still stuck. I'm not alive. I'm not real."

"Vincent ... Vincent..."

He could feel her hands on the other side of the quilt, moving along his body. He could feel his body. He could feel her hands...

"See, Vincent? You're all here."

A slight, gentle pressure came against his groin and inside him, suddenly, a thread of pleasure pulled tight. The aura of his dream drew back and fell away - and he was lying on his own bed with a hot, pulpy brain and an aching leg and an aching side...The pressure and the pleasant feeling he had just experienced were also gone. In the dark, he looked for them again with his body and mind, oddly comforted.

He heard himself saying, "What was that?"

"That was you."

"It felt - nice."

Her voice floated to him like the gentlest of breezes. "*G-o-o-d.*" She leaned over him, her hair silky against his face as she murmured with her soft resonance. "All of you is very real, Vincent. Don't be afraid."

She drew away and he sensed that she had left her position on the edge of the bed. Then one of the smaller lamps was turned on and he saw her standing beside it. She was wearing a pale blue pajama jumpsuit held up by straps and it did leave her shoulders bare. She was so beautiful! She was such a comforting sight.

She returned and stood over him, looking down.

"Vincent ..."

He said; "I wish I could sit up."

"Father says you mustn't. Not until your side has started to heal."

He closed his eyes and listened to the sound of water being wrung through a cloth. She bathed his face and neck, and rubbed witch hazel on his forehead and temples. She had discovered earlier that the sweet smell helped to ease his unremitting nausea. She gave him a sip of water. Then she plucked herself down and sat cross-legged at his feet.

"Why don't you tell me about this dream you were having?" One of her hands squeezed his good foot through the covers - reminding him again that he was real? But he was more absorbed in the memory of where and how she had touched him a moment ago - and as he became more awake, and this memory became clearer, he felt suddenly very shy.

"Come on, Vincent. I think you should talk about it."

He wanted to please her so he described the sensations he had experienced - and the terrible fear.

Her voice still held that dreamy, deeply thoughtful quality. "It sounds almost like a birth memory."

"How could anyone remember that far back?"

"Well, it doesn't seem likely - but then you do have unusual powers of feeling and cognition, Vincent. Maybe these powers have something to do with your dream."

"Why would they lead me back to my birth?"

"There must be a reason."

Father stirred at the mess on top of his desk, as though wondering if it would ever come to a boil. He glanced up at the blond, heavysset man who was waiting in the entrance.

"Come in, William. Sit down. I was just wondering what the top surface of my desk looks like and I guess I'll never know."

"How is Vincent feeling today, Father?" William eased his portly form into the big oak chair.

"He's definitely better. Catherine was here all weekend."

William nodded approvingly. "I know. It was quite a treat to have her around for so long."

Father took off his reading specs and folded them. "Yes," he said with softly-spoken emphasis. "Yes, it was." His keen glance assessed William's face. "What did you wish to see me about?"

William's large hands tightened on the chair arms and he reported unhappily; "We checked Barnat's things this morning to see if we could find any clues to his disappearance. We found syringes and other drug paraphernalia. We also checked his savings box and it had been cleaned out. So I'm afraid we've lost him - and in the worst possible way."

Father slammed his fist into palm. He got up and paced. "Damn! I always had a feeling he would return to drugs eventually. I just - always had a feeling... Damn it! Damn it, anyway..." He glared at the floor, shaking his head. "This is going to upset Vincent ..." He had incisively to William, "I don't want him to know. Not yet. Not until he's stronger."

William gave a bleak nod of agreement.

Father's mind went caroming about with this new information and he muttered, "I can guess what happened last Thursday. I can just guess... Barnat couldn't go back through the north exit to get help from Below, so he headed south toward the storm-drain. And then, on the way he met someone..."

someone selling something he needed..."

William commented wryly. "He and Vincent were close friends. He must have been pretty desperate to leave Vincent trapped while he grabbed a fix."

Father dealt with this notion in grim silence. "I don't want Vincent to know - not yet," he repeated.

They talked about a few other matters and then William left.

Father decided to take a break from his studies. Perhaps he could interest Vincent in a game of chess; he folded up the large, antique board and began to pack the pieces in their box.

Certain aspects of Vincent's recovery were troubling, were, at the very least, not satisfactory. The leg, in its heavy rigid cast, was less painful now and the gunshot wound had begun to heal without signs of infection. The fever was gone - but Vincent was still weak and listless, and unable to cope with much in the way of solid food. Able to sit up now, propped by a mound of pillows and cushions with his left leg still elevated, he seemed grateful for the books, crossword puzzles and other amusements that were brought to him, and yet whenever Father looked into the room Vincent seemed to be staring off into space. He still had no memory of what had happened Thursday morning and Father was reluctant to press the issue - yet. In a few more days, perhaps...

His restless mind, roving on, built a picture of Catherine's face as she had sat in the chair just vacated by William, her full, serene features lit softly by candlelight. There had been a time when he had thought Vincent was merely captivated by her beauty - for she certainly had that, and beauty of any kind always deeply appealed to his extraordinary son. But this was a cliché he could no longer indulge in. This young woman had grace, the kind that marched ahead of outward beauty to enrich all she touched with her friendship. She was loving and spirited and mettlesome, willing to grapple with reality and to meet its demands, and to fill his empty spaces with hope. She had a wonderful way of not allowing Vincent to become *too* dejected over this or that, or at least not for very long. And as for himself... Father smiled pensively. He had given her ample reasons over the last year to dislike him, but instead she liked him - and he was humbled.

"I have a present for you, Vincent." She placed the little box on his lap.

"A gyroscope! Wherever did you find one?"

Catherine unloaded several other packages onto the tabletop and draped her coat over a chairback.

"Believe it or not, in a toystore, sandwiched among the photon torpedoes and dolls that can bump and grind ..."

"And what is that delicious smell?"

She pushed the table closer to the bed and began to clear some space. "Chinese! I got you your favorite Old-Bland-and-Blah ..."

"Chicken chow mein?"

"... without the MSG."

"The bean sprouts are crunchy," he pointed out.

She smiled impishly, setting out the small waxed-paper boxes. "Well, I thought we ought to do something special to celebrate your getting your appetite back." She unwrapped her chopsticks and

handed Vincent the plastic fork he preferred. "I had a visit from Michael. He's changed his major."

Vincent looked startled. "He has? To what?"

"Sociology, of all things."

"Somehow I'm not surprised." Vincent mused. "It is a good field for him."

"Well, I would say he's good for the field," she quibbled. "Michael won't put up with all that abstract mumbo jumbo. He'll straighten them out..." She made a quick, careful study of Vincent as he began to dig into his chow mein and then she said briefly, "He's gotten over his crush on me."

"I knew he would."

"That was just because of a lot of things that all happened at once - and because I was there. But I think he's really getting interested in Tina. And Vincent - I'm hoping Marcy will get intersted in Brian."

"He has been down here several times lately."

"Seeing her?"

"Among others."

She could have jumped up and pranced around the room. Things had a way of working out. But it was best not to remain on the subject of budding romances for long, or Vincent would begin to brood about the Gordian knots in his own lovelife...

Catherine chattered on. "For some reason, on my way down here, I was thinking about my earliest childhood memory. I must have been three, or maybe four. I had this fuzzy little Easter hat with flowers on it. I threw it into a stream and watched it swirl away on the water. It seemed to me like the most enchanting sight! My mother plunged right into the stream, up to her knees - in her full Easter regalia - and kept trying to catch the hat. Now that was the best entertainment I'd ever had!" She squeezed a packet of soy sauce over her fried rice. "What's your earliest memory, Vincent?"

He meditated for a while. "I remember Father trying to spank me once ..."

"*Trying?* You mean he didn't succeed?"

"No. I bit him."

She exploded into giggles. "Oh, Vincent ..."

He sat gloomily. "It wasn't funny at the time. He bled profusely. He still has the scar."

"Vincent ..." Catherine gazed at him patiently, meeting his questioning eyes with a stern look, followed immediately by a smile. "Try to remember something that was *fun*."

A subway roared distantly overhead and a splattering of faint messages clicked along the pipes. Her buoyancy affected him at last and he said; "I remember Father scrubbing Devin and me in one of the galvanized iron tubs. No - actually he didn't scrub us. That's what I remember. Father wasn't very good about 'bathtime.' He would get everything all set up and then he'd sit down with a book and he'd say that he was only going to read a little bit, so that Devin and I could have a few minutes to play. Then he's sit there for half an hour with his glasses sliding down his nose, until Devin and I had splashed all the water out of the tub. He'd come to his senses to find us racing up and down the tunnel naked, snapping towels at each other and getting dirty again ..."

Catherine rocked back and forth, almost choking.

"How did we get on ths subject?" Vincent inquired. Catherine noticed that he had only eaten a few bites and so, taking hold of his hand, she forced it to dip up a forkful of chow mein and guided it toward his mouth.

She said; "Father's been entertaining me with the story of how you were found by the hospital dumpster. You were a bag baby, Vincent."

"Oh yes; what was it he was looking for ..."

"Glassware for chemical experiments. They'd throw out stuff from their labs ..." she happened to glance at Vincent at that moment and she saw a sudden, quick spasm of horror twitch across his face. He stared ahead for a moment vaguely and then their eyes met.

"What was that expression all about?" she asked gently. She poked absently at her food without eating, awaiting his answer which was a long time in coming.

"I'm not sure."

Silence engulfed them both and she continued to poke at her food with the chopsticks. Vincent was motionless, his own meal forgotten.

"Vincent," she coaxed. "What is it?"

His eyes moved restlessly, catching highlights from the candles. His face had fewer muscles for expression than other faces, and yet it was always clear to her when a struggle was taking place inside him. His voice was very deep and gruff when he replied.

"I had a strange feeling when you said that word."

"What word?"

"Lab. Labs. It did something to me; made me feel ... anxious. More than anxious - truly frightened. I don't know why. The feeling came out of nowhere. And where it has gone I don't know."

They were quiet and the thoughts he had just expressed lay contained and compelling between them, a mystery box neither could open.

Suddenly, Vincent said, "I don't feel well ..." He said anxiously, "I think I should lie down flat."

Catherine jumped up. She took the food from him and as he leaned forward she pulled away all the pillows and cushions. As he sank backward to lie flat she saw that he had gone very pale and was breathing in a tightly controlled manner.

"Vincent, what is it? Do you want me to get Father?"

"No - I'll be all right. Don't leave..."

"I won't."

He rolled his head fretfully. "Don't leave, Catherine. Don't leave me ..."

"*Vincent* ..." She sat down on the edge of the bed, clutching his shoulders. "I'm right here." He was trembling, actually trembling. "*Vincent!*" His arms went around her, almost panicky in their sudden grasp and she leaned tenderly into his embrace. She laid her cheek against his. The deep, soft voice murmured to her, so full of longing.

"Catherine, I love you. I love you."

She breathed the precious words close to his ear. "I love *you*, Vincent."

He whispered. "Don't go away."

"I'm not. I'm right here."

She nuzzled the honey-colored hair and squeezed him tight.

"Here's one. How about onager?" Catherine held open the faded red Webster's and waited expectantly. She and Father and the young people were assembled in Vincent's room, sitting on hassocks and folding chairs that had been carried in. Michael was there, being watched dotingly by Marcy, and so was Brian, slim and cute in jeans and a turtleneck, his big, cornflower-blue eyes sparkling with boyish zeal. Marcy's gaze tended to drift away from Michael to Brian - and remain very speculatively on Brian.

"Nah."

"Doesn't suggest anything."

"Try another one, Catherine."

She scanned the pages and said, "Ratchet ..."

Michael called out. "That's the noise you get when you drag a heavy piece of furniture across the floor - RAAAA-TCHET!"

There was a general murmur of approval.

"Anyone else?" Catherine asked, and she consulted the pages again. "Okay - try rigamazole ..."

"A dance number."

"The art of knot-tying."

"A kind of pasta - 'tonight we're having rigamarole with meatballs and tomato sauce'."

She looked under M. "Miasma..."

Brian spoke up quickly. "That's how a cat with asthma says 'meow'."

"All *right*."

"Yeah, Brian - good."

"Plinth," Catherine tossed out.

"That's one of those nasty little muscle cramps you get when you walk too fast."

"The highest note on the piano - you know, the one that doesn't even sound like a note."

"The teensy little plastic cork out of a ball-point pen that you always used to pry out with your teeth when you were a kid."

Catherine paged to S. "Scud ..."

"An intestinal parasite," Father declared and laughter bounced through the room. Catherine glanced at Vincent.

He lay on his pillows and cushions, attentive but very quiet. Although the quilt was spread over his legs he was fully dressed except for boots. The steady stream of visitors had made him feel self-conscious and so he had been getting dressed in the mornings, with Father's help.

Vincent usually liked *Daffynition*. He never actually participated; his sense of spontaneous fun was an underdeveloped part of his nature - but Catherine felt there was hope for him. She loved to sneak looks at him during the game to catch his enjoyment, to see that rare, shy smile transform his face.

But tonight he was different; although interested as usual, he did not smile, and Catherine felt torn. It was good for him to be surrounded by friends, but at the same time his energy was at low ebb and

perhaps it was all too tiring... She thought about this, speaking out the dictionary words automatically and not really paying attention to the responses.

"Heptose."

"That's the color your mother's face gets when she's been yelling at you for hours."

"Dinoflagellate."

"A masochistic religious sect from the Meozoic period..."

Catherine closed the dictionary. "Okay, folks," she announced. "Let's end it. Vincent's getting tired."

Taking her cue, everyone rose chattering happily, and the folding chairs were picked up and carried out. There was much careful hugging of Vincent, and Michael lingered for a moment, slipping his arms beneath the massive shoulders and kissing his friend soundly.

"Love you, Vincent. Wish me luck on my first term paper. Just pray I can find enough words ..."

"I wish you success," Vincent said gravely. "But remember, '*Words are like leaves; and where they most abound, much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found*'."

"Alexander Pope -'*An Essay on Criticism*'." Michael fired back. "Thanks, Vincent. Get well."

Brian, who still hadn't quite adjusted to such freely-expressed affection among males, squeezed Vincent's hand and grinned.

"How is your father?" Vincent asked pointedly, detaining him.

Brian looked radiant. "He's been just great, Vincent - really different. I got him to sign up for a stress-reducing course in the evenings and we've been going together. Then I get him to do the exercises with me. It's been fun and it shows him I care and, well, it's just turned everything around."

"I'm very glad to hear that."

"Night, Vincent."

"Good night."

The young people left but Father remained.

Wanting to be alone with Vincent now, Catherine waited patiently for him to leave. He paced the floor restlessly, cloak swirling. An awkward silence came over the three of them.

Suddenly, Father gave a sharp sigh, as though in exasperation. He said; "Vincent, it's been several days. You're safe, you've rested and you're healing. Are you sure you can remember *nothing* about last Thursday?"

She could see Vincent stiffen. "No. Nothing."

Father tossed a hand impatiently. "Please try, Vincent. Barnat is still missing. None of our contacts Above have seen him. Was he there when the cave-in occurred? Did he say he was going for help? Did he see whoever shot you ..."

Vincent made a sudden thrashing attempt to sit upright; at the same instant he vomited a great, foamy cascade down the front of his tunic. In the next second, Father dove forward and relocated a plastic-lined container from the floor beside the bed to Vincent's lap. The whole thing happened so fast Catherine could hardly believe it - it was almost like a knee-jerk reaction on Vincent's part. She and Father stared at each other unhappily, while Vincent made terrible noises into the container. Catherine went to him and held his head. But she and Father continued to look steadily at each other, and she could tell that his thoughts were re-aligning themselves along some new and disturbing

course.

"Very well," Father said. "We'll talk about it some other time." He handed Vincent, who had finished being sick, some tissues and removed the container. Subdued, he stood there watching Vincent - and he seemed deeply troubled.

Catherine pulled Vincent's head against her sweater, comforting him. "What happened? Weren't you feeling well during the game?" He said nothing and she plucked at the stained tunic. "Let's get this off you." She reached down and his hands closed gently around hers. His hair had fallen forward, concealing his face, and he did not look up at her. She could feel in him a pulling-back, a reluctance amounting almost to dread. They remained this way and she waited, but still he did not look up at her. She decided to keep it light. "It's only fair, Vincent. After all, you've seen *my* ribs."

There was a sudden flurry of motion at her side as Father went in search of a fresh tunic and then, returning, laid it on the bed. Then he left the room.

Very slowly, Vincent released her hands. He held his arms out in front of him.

She carefully pulled the tunic off over his head.

The sight of him took her breath away. His chest and shoulders were beautifully developed and the sleek fur that followed the lines and curves of muscle was a deep, golden-brown in color, like old honey. It was also, she delightedly wanted to tell him, very sexy. But she sensed that this was not the right moment for a lot of words.

One step at a time...

"In medical jargon it's called a conversion reaction," Father expounded. It was lunch hour and he was sitting in a chair beside her, dressed once again for Topside, and very much the picture of a seedy academic. He didn't attract a stray glance from the men and women who jostled back and forth in the hall beyond; but to Catherine he was a glaring anomaly against the backdrop of business suits, file cabinets, water coolers and shrilly ringing phones.

"It's like a temporary psychoneurosis, a process of denial," he went on. "That's what it is - denial. Denial through a disguised response, a physical symptom. Someone held a gun on Vincent and pulled the trigger, while he lay helpless, and he's blocked the whole thing out of conscious memory. In psychology it's sometimes called "splitting." The individual splits away from some actual, highly traumatic event and instead develops a physical response to divert himself from the memory. And that is exactly what Vincent is doing." He declared, "Every time I press him to remember what happened that morning he gets sick. That way - in effect - he can throw up his feelings before they can turn into conscious memory. It's a way of avoiding some terribly threatening piece of knowledge."

Catherine replied. "You seem to be awfully sure of what's going on ..."

Father shrugged. "It couldn't be more obvious. We all do it to some degree when we react to stress with illness; it's a well-known pattern among all sapient life. But I've never seen such a patent case. It's almost as reliable as Pavlov's bell. Just mention the accident and presto - he's sick!" He spanked his hands together restlessly and then drooped a little in the chair, gazing at her and awaiting her response.

She murmured. "I'm not so sure it's the accident or even the shooting that's bothering him."

Father waited.

She groped but could not come up with anything that she felt would be acceptable to him in proving her point; it was just a hunch, a strong one, because of her sensitivity toward Vincent, but a hunch nevertheless. She stirred and pushed back her hair behind her collar.

"Oh, I don't know. It's just a feeling I have. He's been having strange dreams. And he's very fragile right now, emotionally." Her eyes transfixed him. "Have you noticed?"

Father nodded uncomfortably. He dug a finger into his collar and yanked on the already crooked tie.

"I'm afraid he had a bit of a crying jag this morning," he muttered.

Her eyes widened. "He did? Why?"

"I had to tell him about Barnat." He filled her in on William's discoveries and the possibility of what might have happened on the morning of Vincent's accident.

He sighed gustily. "It's such a shame. Vincent cared deeply for him; he took part in Barnat's rehabilitation three years ago and they have been friends ever since. Barnat was good for him, in a way. My son, as you know, tends to be somewhat melancholic and Barnat loosened him up, got him to unbend a little now and then. Vincent was very upset, but I couldn't keep it from him any longer."

"Poor Vincent..."

"If only he could *remember!* I know he has the memory in him; what I can't understand is why he can't find it and articulate it!"

"Perhaps we should leave it alone ..."

"No, I disagree. He's edgy and dispirited. He's not eating well, his nights are troubled... If he goes on like this he'll suffer a complete nervous collapse."

"Father..." She leaned close to him, speaking gravely and earnestly. "You must have faith in Vincent. It may be that he just needs more time - and the right conditions to work out his problem. All we can do - both of us - is just give him as much of our time and patience as we possibly can." She grasped his arm. "Be with him during the day - as much as possible." She squeezed the arm. "Vincent loves you very much."

A sudden moisture glimmered in Father's eyes. He glanced peevishly around the busy area and gave a snort. "This place you have to work in - I wouldn't last five minutes in a place like this..."

She grinned and said wryly, "You've lasted twenty."

Father rose. "And the headache it's given me is beyond description."

"Take two aspirin," she said, "and call me in the morning..."

*"...When can their glory fade?
Oh, the wild charge they made!
All the world wondered.
Honor the charge they made!
Honor the Light Brigade,
Noble Six Hundred!"*

Next to Vincent, Father lay comfortably supine, leaning against the same great mound of pillows and cushions, his feet up and his legs crossed. He held a slim volume of Tennyson, and on his lap were several other books of poetry. On the other side of Vincent, between him and the wall, was a huge pile of books - a rediscovery of old friends Father had dug out of forgotten niches of the library. He had meant to spend the day at his own studies, but after delivering the armload to Vincent, he had made the mistake of having a look at one or two of them.

"Hand me another, Vincent. I feel a bit saturated with poetry; how about a short story? Didn't I see *Famous Old Favorites* in that pile?"

Vincent handed him the book.

"Ah - yes! It's been years since I've seen this one. Remember '*The Cat's Night out*'?"

"How could I forget, Father? You always read it so well ..."

"All right, all right! No need to beg." Father turned pages until he found the marvelous short story by Edward Peple. There was a shifting beside him and Vincent's shaggy head came to rest against his shoulder. He lowered the book and then glanced down through his reading specs at the top of Vincent's head.

"By the way; tomorrow we're going to try putting your weight on that leg. I think it's time---"

"No."

"Yes, Vincent. It's time ..."

"No. Please, Father..."

"Vincent! I'm a doctor; I won't let you hurt yourself!"

The head remained against his arm, heavy and warm.

"I'm ... afraid..."

"That's not like you."

Vincent's voice was cloudy and faint; "I know."

Father sighed. "You didn't touch your breakfast again this morning."

"I'm sorry."

"Why apologize to me? You're the one who's becoming weak and debilitated."

He brooded for a moment in silence. The room was quiet except for the faint tapping in the pipes and the muffled overhead thunder of the subway trains. But these were the familiar and comforting sounds of their world, like the droning of bees and chirping of birds in the country areas of the world Above...

Vincent spoke again, softly. "I'm haunted, Father..."

They had been together all morning, reading at first in silent companionship and then aloud to each other without interruption, peacefully savoring words and phrases the way they both loved to do. It had been a delightful way to spend the morning, thoroughly relaxing to both of them - and yet Father could now feel Vincent stiffening.

He banished the impatience from his face and voice - the stamp of a doctor with a stubborn patient - and reached across himself to touch his son.

"What is it? What's haunting you?"

"I don't know."

"It's your accident, isn't it? It's the memory of what happened,"

Vincent moved restlessly and then pulled away from Father - as though to pull away from this statement, this question.

"I don't know. I'm not sure it's that."

"What, then? Try to put it into words. Try to tell me."

"I can't tell you. I can't tell myself..." Vincent was straining toward the opposite edge of the mound of pillows and cushions, his face turned away, his voice filled with sadness.

Father watched this process of retreat, this retreat from the questions, the memory...

Gently, he said, "Come back here." He said succinctly and with affection. "Put your head back where it was." Picking up the book he again found *'The Cat's Night Out'* and began to read;

" *'Sadri-Azem Azerbaijan was a cat. This unadorned statement would have wounded Sadri-Azem to the marrow of his pride, for he chanced to be a splendid tiger-marked feline of purest Persian breed'...*"

When the story was finished, Father got up and stretched. On the table beside the bed lay a familiar leather-bound notebook. "May I look at your journal?"

"You know you may - at any time, Father."

He flipped the pages backward three weeks. Under the date of Thursday, January 5 was only one brief entry;

Broke my leg

Tight-lipped with consternation Father stared at Vincent. "No, absolutely not!" he declared hotly. "How could you even think ..."

"It's not that far, Father."

Fully-dressed and leaning on a cane, Vincent was standing in the middle of the room. The heavy cast had been removed and he was wearing, in its place, a lightweight brace cleverly engineered by Mouse to redistribute most of the weight to a strap buckled securely around the leg just above the knee. He had done two slow laps around the room with Father holding him, and then one lap with just the cane.

Father gesticulated wildly. "I don't understand you, Vincent. Yesterday you didn't want to walk at all. Today you want to walk six miles ..."

"More like six blocks. It's not that far ..."

"Give yourself a few more days - please," Father implored. "Until we can be sure you're thoroughly mended."

Vincent shook his head. "No. I must see Magister tonight. I must go. I've been worried about him."

Father sank helplessly into a chair and dropped his head into his hand.

The faint sound of organ music greeted Vincent as he emerged from the mouth of the large pipe, and he hoped he had not missed much of this evening's recital. His progress had been much slower than usual.

Cloaked by the darkness, he hurried, limping, across the cracked and broken pavement of what used to be a parking lot. The cold, made unfamiliar by his long absence, was biting and nasty. There would be frost later for sure.

It was Bach; J.S. of course... *The Toccata and Fugue in D Minor*? No, perhaps not.

Nothing had changed. There was the drooping shed, the broken fence, the hard-packed, grassless ground where broken shards of bottles thrown from passing cars winked up in the moonlight.

Vincent leaned on the fence, allowing his cane to fall. It had been too long since he had been here, and he hoped Magister had been well. Obviously, the musician was in excellent form tonight, so he must be all right. Still, Vincent wished he could see this man up close and learn something more about him from his face and bearing. With this thought a vague pressure, he drank in the sound, staring at the yellow patch of light that always fell through the open screen. His eyes wandered from the door to the small window that was placed high in the siding between the door and the edge of the house. It, too, shone with lamplight, and there appeared to be no curtain. But it was high...

On the ground beside the fence lay some sort of wood-slatted crate. It had been there a long time, but now it brought an idea to Vincent - and he almost chuckled as he wondered why he'd never had this idea before. Using one foot to turn it upside down he pushed it against the fence. It made a soft thud, not loud enough to be heard by Magister. Vincent raised his foot again and tested the crate for strength. It held. Carefully, he stepped up on it and he found that this gave him the necessary height. Through the window he could see Magister's back as he played. The man was not young; his fine, glistening black hair was streaked with white and his shoulders made sharp corners. He was painfully thin. He wore a baggy sweater with patches on the elbows and he played without many flourishes, swaying only a bit, his hands seeming only to caress the keys. There were pictures on the wall on both sides of the organ, but the light was sufficiently poor ...

Recognition struck. It was the *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor*, but it was toward the end of the piece, and Vincent felt tremendous chagrin that he had missed the spectacular, so-memorable beginning. If he had heard the beginning he would have known it instantly. How could one forget that beginning after seeing, just once, Claude Rains in '*Phantom of the Opera*' slamming out those thunderous opening chords deep in the bowels of the Paris Opera House? That was one of the old movies Father used to run now and then, until the projector bulb burned out...

He realized suddenly that his legs were trembling with fatigue. The newly-healed break ached from the damp cold and he thought; *Father was right. I shouldn't have attempted this.* He was tired, and the thought of the long walk back was discouraging.

Just then Magister ended the Bach and swept jauntily into Lehar's *Gold and Silver Waltz* - this, too, was one of Vincent's favorites and its cheerful beat flooded him with pleasure. Hoping to ease his physical discomfort, he moved backward slightly on the crate, shifting all his weight to the good leg - and the top of the crate broke with a loud snap. His ankle plunged through, catching in the broken wedges of wood and his flailing reaction threw him backward against the broken chain links. There was a loud ripping sound as a piece of the fence gouged through cloak and tunic, dragging the cloth upward toward his chin and snagging him as effectively as if he had been hung there in a harness. He dangled for a half-second, his toes barely touching the ground, then sharply he thrashed himself

to the right and to the left, hoping to rip free. But the cloth was strong - especially now that it was all bunched up at the back of his neck - and all he did was yank another flap of chain links off the corner post. Spreading his arms outward and hooking his fingers through the links he tried again, desperately. It didn't work.

The music stopped. First a light over the door and then one on the shed came on. He struggled violently. The door opened and Magister stepped outside - and a great wave of anguished self-reproach swept through Vincent. He abandoned the struggle and allowed himself to hang there - in a position of cloth-choked crucifixion - as he and Magister stared at each other through the wan light.

Vincent's mind raced ahead of the situation; *If he calls the police I'll still have time to work myself free. Unless he gets a gun ...* The haunting floated near, and right on cue his stomach gave a queasy twitch ...

The musician stood motionless, one hand still tight on the doorknob. His initial look of disbelieving horror had left his sensitive, aquiline face set in grim lines, but as Vincent watched he could see something in that face shift from fear to fascination - although the alarm remained very much in evidence.

"It's all right. I won't hurt you," Vincent said hastily.

The musician remained transfixed. Sounds of the distant more populated stretches of city - sirens, automobile horns - reached them through the stillness of the place, through the absence of music. Then, in a slow, dreamlike way, Magister's hand left the doorknob and fell to his side. He continued to stare fixedly at his trapped and tangled visitor.

He said; "That's not a mask, is it?" The voice was crisp, refined, forthright - and contained no edge of panic.

Vincent regarded him steadily. After a moment he answered softly, "No."

Magister closed the screen door behind him and then leaned back against it, his eyes remaining on Vincent, alert, watching, wondering... Suddenly he said in an offhand way. "I'm feeling tempted right now to make some sort of joke about a captive audience."

"I do seem to have a penchant for getting myself trapped," Vincent admitted ruefully.

His own dismay began to subside a little. The conversation was bringing some ease to them both, and Vincent could see that the musician, although still thoroughly shocked by what he beheld, was not about to rush off to call the police *or* get a gun. At least not until he had asked a few more questions;

"Who are you?"

"My name is Vincent."

Magister stepped forward and then stopped. His eyes dropped to Vincent's one exposed boot - the other was wedged inside the crate - and then his gaze climbed upward as though taking in a number of important details at once. He nodded thoughtfully.

"You're the one. You're the one, all right. That hair - it's the same color as the tuft I found snagged in the fence a while back. That boot, or whatever you call it, is just the right shape to have made the tracks I found in the mud during that week of rain we had a month ago. You come here frequently to listen after dark. At least, you used to come frequently ..."

"Lately I haven't been well."

Magister shrugged expressively and smiled. "Ah ... I guess that's an excuse I'll have to accept. The

smile, a pensive one, remained. "Isn't there a saying; I seem to recall something about music having charms for both man and beast..." He then said gently, "Which are you?"

There was a stinging pain in Vincent's back and his arms were beginning to go numb, but he was unwilling to resume his struggle, lest he frighten this unexpectedly bold and amiable man. Perhaps...

"The best answer I can give you is that I am some of both," he replied. "Actually, the quote you're thinking of is from '*The Mourning Bride*' by Congreve. It is '*Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast, To soften rocks, To bend a knotted oak...*' "

Magister's eyes shone. "Remarkable," he murmured, then he seemed to reach a decision. He said; "If I can find something for you to stand on I believe we can get you down off that fence."

But after saying the words he didn't move immediately and with sadness Vincent thought; *He's lost his nerve. He is afraid to approach me now.* Then, with relief, he cancelled this thought as the tall, thin man left the doorstep and went into the shed. Another light came on, went off. He emerged, carrying a second larger crate. Slowly, but without any obvious qualms, he approached and then laid the crate at Vincent's feet, upside down.

"There. I think this one will hold up. Try it."

Vincent stepped up on it with his free leg and at the same time Magister caught hold of the other crate and deftly worked it loose. Then the musician went around behind the fence and Vincent felt him working at the large knot of snagged cloth. Magister tugged and pushed and grunted with his effort. Then, suddenly, Vincent was free.

Magister came back around the fence. He picked up the crate. "Is this yours?" He held it out to his strange-looking visitor, noting without comment the sharp claws on the extended hand.

Moving very slowly, Vincent stepped down off the crate. There was still the possibility that any sudden move on his part might alarm this man, and he wished to remain cautious, even though Magister now seemed totally at ease.

Vincent stated gravely. "You are a courageous man. That is something I always admire."

"Your back was cut by the fence," Magister said. "See - there's blood on my hand. Come inside and let me fix you up."

"You're very kind - but no, I cannot. I really must go." But his legs were shaky again and he realized that the whole episode had taken an enormous toll. He leaned heavily on the cane, resting a moment, and in that interval Magister reached out and closed a hand on his arm.

"I do insist," the older man said firmly. "I want to treat that cut. And besides - you haven't heard the rest of the Lehar."

His house was a warm and inviting place. A framed picture of J.S. Bach hung just inside the door and other frames on the walls contained ancient musical script. a photograph of Toscanini, a print of '*The Music Lesson*' by Renoir. The organ was a small one and charmingly scrolled. Piles of music lay everywhere.

If Magister was newly appalled by the sight of his guest in a stronger light he didn't show it. "Come in here." He beckoned from a doorway. Vincent followed him into a small bedroom and waited while his friend removed piles of sheet music from the bed. "Sit down. Take off your top layers and wait here."

For a moment the old reluctance to expose his body held Vincent - but only for a moment. He could feel the tickle of blood furrowing its way down his back.

Magister rummaged around in a closet and when he returned with first aid supplies he barely glanced

twice at the powerful arms and torso of the tawny creature sitting on the bed.

"Let's see, now. Lean forward a bit. Oh my, yes - a nasty gash you've got there. Tell you what - you lie down here, face that way. Just put your feet right up; this old spread won't take any harm. That's the way. Hold on, now - this is going to sting."

A cold surge of alcohol bit the wound and Vincent winced. He was astonished at the man's gently running speech - as though he were trying to reassure *him*.

"You've gotten over your fear of me very quickly," Vincent murmured.

Magister pressed gauze against the wound. "Well, you see it wasn't really fear - not exactly. I have to confess I was somewhat taken aback at your appearance, but then, if you'd been out to harm me you would have done so a long time ago, I should think. I've been leaving my door open and the screen unlocked for the evening practice session."

"That's a risky thing to do. This is a bad neighborhood."

"I suppose." Magister chuckled in a pointed way. "You never know what might be lurking around outside in the dark. But, you see, I've been aware of having an audience for a long time - and I kept hoping I could lure that audience inside for an introduction. It gets lonely around here sometimes."

"You live here alone?" Vincent thought he should ask, even though he already knew the answer. He didn't want to alarm his new friend now by appearing to know too much about him.

"Yes. I had a wife once; she died. I had a dog once; it died. I had pupils once, music students; they all grew up and got married or took up skiing instead - things like that. It's just me and my music now." He noted the leg brace and the pale naked area around the bullet scar and said; "I can see you've been through a bad time." This got no reply from Vincent. "There now, the bleeding's stopped. Why don't you stay like this for a few minutes while I finish Lehar for us? I'm sure you don't want anything taped to you, but if you'll roll over and lie on this hunk of gauze for a moment I think that might be a good idea."

Vincent complied, aware of leaden weariness in every inch of his body. The intelligent, faintly lined face of Magister looked down at him, studying him still with fascination - friendly fascination. Then the musician left the room and Vincent was pleasantly washed with the music of Franz Lehar. He sighed deeply and closed his eyes, allowing the bed and the music to cushion body and soul...

Magister finished the waltz and went onto a more sedate sarabande and then, smiling, he flowed into the *Moonlight Sonata*. When this was finished, he placed the velvet cover strips over the yellowing keys and went to check on his guest. As he had expected, Vincent had gone fast asleep, his head turned to one side and one fuzzy hand up near his face.

Magister lowered himself to a chair and gazed intently at this sight. Despite his absorption in playing the music, his heart had never quite ceased the rapid beating it had begun during those first few minutes of confrontation outside. He was not afraid now - he was entranced. He realized that this was a momentous event in his somewhat pedestrian and predictable life. He had been visited by something quite beyond everyday reality, quite outside of normal human experience. But the questions that thronged his head were almost unwelcome; he had the sense to latch onto what really was precious here - someone who loved what he loved... Someone who had come to him, often, as an unknown, and now, as a known, would undoubtedly come again.

Vincent woke suddenly, and with such a violent jerk that Magister couldn't help starting himself.

Vincent sat up abruptly and reached for his shirt and tunic. "I must be going."

"No. You're very tired - perhaps not feeling well. Why don't you stay ..."

"Thank you, but I can't. If Father thinks I'm missing again, he'll go out of his mind with worry."

"Your Father? There are others like you?"

Vincent said slowly. "Like me in some ways. But they don't look like me, Magister."

The musician's eyes softened. "How do you know that name? How do you know my pupils used to call me Magister?"

Vincent inclined his head in a reflective way. "Sometimes I know things about people. It happens when they're special. I don't know why it happens, but it does."

He fastened the cloak around his shoulders and rose and Magister rose too, and extended a hand.

"I'm very happy that I'm special to you, Vincent."

The strong, fur-covered hand closed around the musician's long, sensitive fingers.

Vincent gasped as his body slammed down on something hard and he struggled for a moment against the tight, smothering thing that had wound itself around him. Then he sat up. The quilt fell off him.

It was his own room. He had fallen out of bed. Father was gone.

In the hearth the fire had burned down to crackling embers, and its soft spray of deeply orange light wavered through the room. Against the walls his furniture and things were dark shapes and masses.

Clutching the edge of the bed, he pulled himself to his feet. His head was swimming from the sedative and it's drug-induced lethargy rose his senses, dulling him. But he still felt the clinging chill of the terror that had just quit his mind.

He wanted Catherine. He wanted Father. He wanted...

Vincent stumbled around the room until he found where Father had laid down the Norton anthology. He touched it. On the bedside stand was the gryroscope, back in its box. He laid his hand on it and then he saw that Catherine had left her hairbrush. Vincent picked it up and smelled it. Her scent was on it.

He put the hairbrush down and climbed back into bed, dragging the quilt. Then he pressed himself into the covers and wept.

"Here, Luv - time to wake up, now ..."

Vincent stirred and blinked up at the grey-haired woman bending over him. "Mrs. Larrimore!" His eyes traveled automatically to the brass clock on the stand and he saw to his dismay that he had slept straight through the morning recitation class.

"Nay - don't fret yourself, now. Father said you were to sleep in this morning. There's toast and tea here for you, and I've some new shirt pieces to be tried on."

She busied about comfortably and he relaxed. He sat up, allowing the quilt to puddle around his

waist. Mrs. Larrimore was one of the few he permitted to see his furry body - mainly because her careful measurings and fittings so often resulted in more and better ways to cover it up.

She fitted a basted-together-garment over his head.

"Father tells me you've ruined yet another set of clothes. Have you any clothes left, Luv?"

"I've only ruined my favorites."

"Is that so? We'll make you more favorites, then."

The gentle cadences of Debussy's *'Reverie'* drifted from the high register of the organ, as Magister's hands rippled over the keys. In a soft circle of lamplight, he swayed a little on the bench, latched inseparately to the music, his heart and soul singing through each note. Near the organ, in a large stuffed chair, was Vincent. Half turned in the chair, one leg folded beneath him, his arms on the chairback and his tawny head on his arms, he made a strange picture of repose, one that often attracted a quick and satisfied glance from the musician as he played.

The last note floated away and Magister swiveled on the bench. "Well..." He reached out to lay a hand on Vincent's arm. "Have I soothed the savage breast? Have I softened rocks and unbent all the knotted oaks?"

"Magister..." Vincent's penetrating eyes looked deep into the essence of his friend; his soft, gruff voice carefully framed each word. "I know a place filled with people who honor all the best things life has to offer. The children there live simple, uncluttered lives and they have been taught from their earliest days to cherish each other, and to love art and literature and to find beauty wherever they can. They have everything to nourish the spirit ... except a music teacher."

Magister gazed at him for a long time without speaking. The sensitive, translucent face seemed to radiate an inward light, and the dark eyes glowed with a deep and vital longing. At last he sighed, and the eyes lowered and then raised again, filled with hope. In a voice choked with emotion he whispered, "This place... Vincent... you must take me there."

A fire crackled merrily in the hearth, shedding its warmth into the room. Sitting at his writing table with the cane across his knees. Vincent picked up the gyroscope, wound its string and yanked it into a spin. Experimenting, he placed it on the lip of an empty holder in the candelabra and it whirled away complacently in a tiny orbit.

Something touched his senses. Tranquility... A sunny mind filled with thoughts that held his image and loved it.

Catherine was on her way down.

The gyroscope wobbled then fell.

Vincent got up and limped into the tunnel. He hadn't gone far before he saw her coming, slender and supple in jeans and a long pullover, her hair bouncing off her shoulders. She broke into an ecstatic smile.

"Vincent! You're walking!"

Propping the cane against the tunnel wall, he held out his arms and she raced up to him.

Catherine would have liked to leap into his arms but she prudently held her greeting down to a careful hug - one that lasted a good long time. He was so big and there was so much - so wonderfully much - of him to embrace. Her hands, sliding around behind him in between cloak and tunic, found a warm, cozy place where the strong, flat muscles of his back were just meant to be rubbed and squeezed.

"Mmmmm - Vincent, you feel so *good*." She snuggled beneath his chin, happily receiving the warm pressure of his arms and loving the way he rocked her slightly as they held each other. He was so cuddly. And she hoped she'd get the chance soon to point out to him that his fur would make him even more cuddly - in a certain different situation.

"Your hair is damp," he observed, pressing his cheek against the top of her head.

"Yes, I just got out of the shower. I didn't bother to dry it all the way; I just had to get down here to see how you are - it's been too long."

"There's a fire in my room," he said. "You can get dry there."

She squeezed him again. "What a perfectly delightful idea."

In his room, on the rug before the hearth, she settled down, leaning back against a scarred old sea-chest in which extra blankets were stored. She wriggled a little with pleasure as the friendly warmth of the blaze soaked in, then she looked up at Vincent who was still standing. Reaching up, she turned on his cloak.

"Hey - come down here. In fact, come *all* the way down here and put your head in my lap," she commanded.

She was rewarded by that grave, shy smile and then Vincent complied, stretching out on his side and placing his tawny head in her lap as she had requested.

It was bliss.

The warmth of the fire... the warmth of Vincent's head on her lap, his massive shoulder pressing against her thigh...

Catherine wondered when she had ever, before, felt so at peace.

Her arm drifted tenderly around him and she squeezed his wrist and stroked the soft fur on the back of his hand. She observed how the firelight played across his leonine features, outlining the high cheekbones and sensitive mouth, leaving deep-notched shadows around his eyes and paths of darkness through his hair.

"How have you been feeling?" she asked.

"All right."

"Been eating any better?"

He did not reply to this and she made a mental note, but wisely did not press the issue. Moving her hand to his face she gently scritchd the tender, fuzzy area between his eyebrows.

"Does that feel good?"

"Mmmmm. Yes." They were quiet for a while and then Vincent said, "We have all been talking about Magister. I have council sanction to invite him Below for a visit."

"That's wonderful!"

"I finally met him - by accident, but it turned out to be a good accident. He is a brave, kind and very charming man."

In his soft, murmuring voice he told her all about getting stuck on the fence and being rescued by Magister and so forth... Midway through the story, his eyelids began to sag, his words came farther apart. Catherine's hand moved against his back in a slow, circular motion. As he stopped talking and fell into a doze, she smiled.

She gazed down at him, watching him sleep. She had never been so happy in her entire life.

It was early in the morning, and as Father passed the Common Room on his way to Vincent's quarters, the pleasant aroma of coffee drifted along the tunnel. He scarcely noticed it. He wasn't hungry for breakfast anyway. It was only seven - and yet he was already thoroughly depressed.

Vincent was still asleep, sprawled comfortably on his stomach, and in the many niches and holders around the room, the candles had burned down to puddles of wax. The quilt, about to slide off onto the floor, had worked its way to Vincent's waist and Father was surprised to see that his son was not wearing customary sleeping gear. This was unusual. In fact, he couldn't remember a time when ...

"Father - when is Devin going to get his fur...?"

He paused in the lower entrance to the room, the newspaper clipping in his hand temporarily forgotten. Sometimes, the quality of Vincent's fur was the best barometer of his health. Father crossed to the bed and very cautiously lowered himself to the edge. His hand moved across Vincent's shoulder to where the fur grew quite long over his spine; that fur would stand erect when Vincent was angry - something that only Father knew about. He gave a gentle tug and his fingers came away holding more of the stuff than he liked.

"How is it?" Vincent murmured in a sleep-thickened voice.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you."

Vincent rolled over and sat up slowly, his tawny muscles rippling. He said, "When somebody yanks out a handful of my fur I do tend to notice." He yawned and repeated, "How is it?"

"Too dull and dry and comes out easier than it should. You aren't really well yet, Vincent. I just wish I knew why." He sighed dismally and his eyes dropped to the newspaper clipping. Always quick to sense his mood, Vincent's gaze followed him.

"What is it, Father?"

"Very sad news, I'm afraid. Vincent, Barnat is dead."

Vincent sank backward and lay staring up at the ceiling.

"This was sent down to me by courier first thing this morning. It was in one of the early editions. They found his body in the East River and the police are calling it a suicide. They are awaiting the results of an autopsy to be sure. He was identified through old police records."

Father watched Vincent for a moment unhappily, and the bit of newspaper slowly crumpled in his fist. Then he laid a hand on his son's shoulder and kept it there.

"I'm sorry, Vincent," he whispered. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Sitting alone in his small corner kitchen, Magister watched the yellow taxicab drive slowly toward his house. Its slowness had caught his eye initially, but now, as it drew to a stop out front, he gazed through the window with acute surprise. A young woman in jacket and slacks got out and headed straight for his back-door step. Jumping up, Magister hurried to the door and unlocked it. Opening it, he peered through the screen.

She stood there, gazed back at him with a big smile. Her lips were very full, her eyes wide with some inner merriment, as though she knew some precious, secret joke and was going to share it with him. Something about her was spirited, almost bouncy with friendly energy. She was lovely, and so unexpected on his doorstep in this drab place; it was like finding an orchid in the gutter.

"Hi!" she said. "You must be Magister. My name is Catherine Chandler. I'm a friend of Vincent's."

"A friend of Vincent's?" he cried out with delight. Immediately, he pushed open the screen door.

"Come in! Come In!" He stepped aside as she entered, bringing her liveliness into his quiet house.

"What a wonderful surprise," he exclaimed. "I didn't know Vincent was going to send me an emissary."

"Well, that's just what I am," she laughed, setting her purse down on the kitchen table. "Vincent's leg is troubling him. I'm afraid he pushed himself a little hard when he found out he could walk again."

"Please - sit down," Magister invited. "I just made a pot of coffee."

"That sounds fantastic."

He set out cups and napkins, moving about self-consciously. "You must forgive me," he said, waving a hand. It's like Below. Nobody ever does *any* housekeeping. Too many piles of books lying around."

"Did they give you the grand tour on your first visit?"

He poured their coffee and sat down opposite her, a blissful light in his eyes. "Yes, they did. What an enchanting place. And I met the children, even heard what some of them can do. Some of them are very advanced."

"Well, they won't be for long without a teacher." She studied him with her full, winsome attention.

"Vincent tells me you are ... interested."

He drew a long, deep breath in a way that imparted total rapture. "It's much more than that," he asserted. "This whole thing has been Heaven sent for me. I really thought my life as a musician and a teacher was over. And then Vincent came along - and, and brought me children again ..." Emotion suffused his voice and he stopped for a moment. Then he said; "Of course I'm interested. I want to be as much a part of them all as I possibly can be."

"And Father has left the decision to you - whether to 'commute' or live Below?"

"That's right." Magister's eyes shone. "And I think I want to live Below."

"Good idea." Her shoulders lifted. "I'm a 'commuter', myself, and it can be quite a rat-race sometimes.

They sipped their coffee and she glanced around at the piles of music and simple furnishings. She propped her elbows on the table and grinned at him conspiratorilly.

"Well, there are lots of little things that a newcomer needs to know," she explained. "And that brings me to my reason for stopping in. I thought maybe you'd like to hear in some detail, from an old-timer, just what it's like down there from day to day."

"Tell me everything you can," he bade her earnestly. "I can never hear enough about the world Below..."

Three days later amid much jubilation and many genius-feats by Mouse involving ropes and pulleys, the pipe organ was moved down to the world Below.

At lunchtime that day, the Dining Hall was bedecked with streamers and balloons and other decorations made by the children, and William served a special, very fancy buffet luncheon in honor of the new member of the family.

Everyone attended except Vincent, who was too ill to leave his room.

From his bed, where he lay face-down and very still, he could hear the distant, cheerful sounds of revelry and then, as though in a wonderful dream, the lifting tones of the organ as Magister began to entertain his new audience for the first time.

And yet it wasn't enough. Through his desperate condition, he was aware of it – faintly - but it was like the slight brushing of a flower petal against the crushing wheel of some tremendous evil juggernaut. Against the terrible things that menaced him, it meant very little.

He had been sick all morning and his whole body was a gutted hulk. Above him lay the cloud of fear, denser and more threatening than ever. Within it lay some horrible thing that breathed cold breath down upon him, fringing his soul with ice. He cringed away from it, pressing himself down into the bed which could receive him no further. Sometimes, he felt that if he could just get up and walk about, his motions would drive it away, but he didn't have the strength, and so he lay beneath the cloud, rigid with fear. One hand clung to a towel which he held wadded up against his face. It was damp from his tears. Strange how they seemed to keep coming...

His connection with Catherine had wasted to a spider-web filament stretched out infinitely thin between them and about to break. He was deeply afraid for her, afraid that she might get into danger and that he would be unable to know or help.

After a while, Vincent sensed a presence in the room and then hands gently touched his back and someone was sitting on the edge of the bed. It was Magister.

Magister's voice said, "I am very sorry you aren't well."

Vincent wanted to say something in return, but the effort was too much. Was he dying? Was there nothing left of him?

The hands on his back applied friendly pressure, comforting.

"We all missed you at the party. Could you hear the music down here?"

Vincent stirred, gathered strength. He whispered, "Yes."

"I'll play more. But I wanted to see you first. Would you like me to play some more right now or stay here for a while?"

"Stay..."

"All right." Magister's voice was rich with concern. "You look so tired. You should try to sleep."

Vincent closed his eyes. The hands retreated. He opened his eyes. The hands returned, gently grasping his shoulders.

Magister repeated, "Try to sleep." Then he added, "I'll stay right here."

Vincent found comfort in this, enough to ease his mind out of conscious awareness and into a spiral of light dreaming. The feeling of lying on his bed, heavy and weak, dissolved, and he seemed to be standing in a cold, dark place, listening for something that didn't come... A house, dark and deserted. A broken chain link fence... There was no music. Magister was gone...

He rushed out of this dream with a violent start and the hands on his shoulders tightened. Immediately, he felt better. Magister was here, part of his world. Magister was his friend.

Again, he went somewhere... His mind skimmed backward through dark places, past sounds and voices, through tunnels and chambers and stretches of cold night air. He seemed to be thinking about Catherine. A puff of frigid wind reached him, bringing the smell of damp earth. He heard the voice of a friend, distant, angry.

"*Not necessary...*" He was alone, left to die. Alone, left to die...left to die...left to *die*...

Vincent's stomach contracted sharply, waking him. Above him and all around him lay the cloud, pressing its terror-storm down upon him, and he couldn't get away. Someone was swabbing at his lips with the towel, and the cloud lifted.

Magister's voice came to him again. "How long has he been like this?"

Father's voice answered; "For weeks, really - but not this bad. He's getting worse. And I don't know what to do. I just don't know what to do."

Vincent felt their fear - a terrible, helpless, desolate sadness. He could do nothing to help them. His mind couldn't find Catherine. With Herculean effort he pushed the cloud away, and he tried to reach out to Father and Magister with his feeble voice.

"Don't be afraid. I'll be all right. I just need to sleep."

Searching with his depleted awareness he found their love and rested gratefully within it. The cloud receded further and in its place came a sense of well-being, borne outward to him by their wishes, pulled inward by his need. It flowed through him, blessing his tortured nerves with its healing touch - and he could feel Catherine now, thinking about him. He recalled how good it had felt to lie with his head in her lap...

He fell into an exhausted sleep at last.

The Common Room was a vast expanse of pleasant noise and activity. By now, all the adults except for Magister had left to go about their various evening chores, and only the children remained, filling the room with their exuberance. Magister had spent part of the afternoon tuning the old upright piano while his new young admirers clustered around, tirelessly assessing the quality of each note. After that he had given a few piano lessons and then he had taught the six-year-olds to play three notes on soprano recorders.

Now that this lesson was over, the room was a scene of general chaos. There was time to be frittered away before dinner, and the children, dividing themselves up by sex as customary for their age, were making the most of their freedom. The little girls had appropriated their new teacher and were showing him their art projects at the big center table, but the boys were running around the room in all directions, wrestling and poking each other with the fortunately sturdy recorders.

Vincent was there, staying carefully out of the way.

In a chair against the wall and partially obscured by the large, heavy drape that was sometimes used to divide the room, he sat with the cane across his knees watching the children and Magister. He did not feel like participating and the children, sensing his need for solitude, did not approach him. But he did observe this scene. Magister was a charming and persuasive teacher, who clearly loved children and understood how to hook their enchantment. Watching him teach and then watching the random, high-spirited antics of the children after the lesson, was a comfort to Vincent, restoring his sense of harmony and balance, of security within his world.

He had slept for a while after Magister's midday visit, and then Father had made him get up and walk around. He hadn't wanted to, but Father had cleverly reminded him that Catherine was expected later. The thought of her finding him in such a depressed and weakened state, after she had believed he was getting well... The thought had provoked him into sipping the strong tea and nibbling at the dry toast that Father urged upon him. This had revived him a bit further.

Above the heads of the little girls, he caught Magister's eye and the musician smiled at him encouragingly.

The boys romped and squealed.

Vincent was tired. His head sank lower on his chest and his hair fell forward, gradually obscuring his view of the room and closing him into a cell of loneliness he was simply too weary to break out of. Magister passed through his narrow scope of vision. Listlessly, his eyes followed as the musician crossed the room to where the organ had been installed and removed the cover strips from the keys. Ignoring the racket made by the children, Magister began to play softly, adding this sweet, pervasive higher order of sound to the cheerful babble of voices in the room. Vincent's chin lifted. The melody was that of *Au fond du temple saint*, the famous tenor/baritone duet from '*The Pearl Fishers*' by Bizet. It was one of the most moving duets in all of opera - the song sung by Zurga and Nadir as they recalled their vow of eternal friendship. Eternal friendship...

And then he felt the cloud behind him.

Very slowly, he stiffened, knowing that if he got up and moved away everything would fall into normal lines and there would be nothing to fear. But he was tired, and the cloud was already breathing its deadness into him. Its brittle, soundless voice was inside his head, its curling, icy fingers were twitching inside his belly and creeping relentlessly upward toward his heart ...

Catherine! Catherine... She was on her way down... She was there in his mind and the cloud cringed away from her presence. He could feel her on her way to him, moving along the tunnels with a cheerful smile for anyone she met, thinking about nothing much and yet at the same time filled with him, his image, his voice, his love, his needs. She was a precious glowing inside his head, a slowly warming touch, a healing peace growing stronger inside him with every step she took. He breathed deeply, as though to pull harder on these wonderful feelings, impatient for her to arrive and fill his arms. But this sudden deep breath did something strange. It pulled a sadness into his stomach. There it was - a tight, clammy feeling of grief so terrible there were no words for it. There it was - along with his love for Catherine. It was linked to her. It needed her presence to help it find words. It needed her strength nearby, so that he could face it and call it by name. It needed her hands to hold him so that he could seize it and tear it out of himself...

A rustling knot of little boys reached the piano, shrieking and giggling. The knot broke and small bodies tumbled hither and yon. The piano lid went down with a crash.

The sudden report slammed through the room like a gunshot.

Vincent catapulted off his chair with a scream.

The high-pitched, anguished, animal sound he had made echoed far into the tunnels and brought everyone in the room to stunned silence. Magister whirled on the bench and stared. The children stood rigid. One of them whimpered.

Chest heaving, Vincent swayed on his feet uncertainly, his eyes blind to his surroundings and stark with horror. Turning, he stumbled and clutched the heavy drape with both fists, then, still holding it he fell against the wall.

"No!" he gasped. "NO - NO!" Another jolting scream erupted from him and he tried to hide his face against the drape.

Magister muttered something under his breath. He started to rise from the bench ...

"Magister!" Father's voice rang out. He was standing at the west entrance to the room, his knuckles ice white as he gripped the back of a chair. "Get the children out. Send them down to Mary."

Reacting, Magister hastened past Vincent and gathered up the frightened children, herding them out of the room.

Leaning against the wall again Vincent slowly turned toward the source of Father's voice, seeking... But then he crumpled as though in great pain, as though something had struck him inside with terrible force. Staggering forward he fell and lay sprawled and gasping on the floor.

"No ... No... No ...

Catherine appeared suddenly behind Father. In the tunnel she had heard the screams. From over Father's shoulder she glimpsed Vincent lying face down, clawing at the rug, and she heard the sound of his heavy, ragged gasping.

"Oh, my God," she whispered. Pushing past Father she rushed to Vincent, but Father's voice, behind her, was sharp and commanding. "Don't touch him!" Then he was there beside her saying more gently. "Not yet..."

They both knelt down close to Vincent. Unsteadily, his head raised and he seemed to look at them. But he was not seeing them. His lips moved, trying to get something out, then his head dropped again and he gagged.

Father leaned over him and shouted. "Don't be sick! Don't be sick - you'll disconnect it!"

Vincent began to tremble. His fingers worked and worked at the rug and a tiny, desperate sound came from his throat. Catherine strained forward, aching all over with her need to touch him, but Father's arm swung out and restrained her.

He shouted at Vincent again, "What happened, Vincent? What are you remembering?"

Vincent found his voice suddenly and he gasped out, "He shot me... He held a gun on me and then he shot me..."

"Who shot you? Say the name!"

The name was wrung out of him in two pieces. "Bar-nat..."

Father sank back on his heels. He expelled his breath in a long, disburdening gust.

"All right," he said quietly. "Tell us what happened."

He glanced at Catherine and gave a nod and her hands flew down to Vincent. At her touch he seemed to find strength and he flopped weakly over onto his back, tears gushing down his face.

"He ... he was my friend," he sobbed. "My friend ..."

"No, he *wasn't*," Catherine said fiercely. "His only friend was drugs." She crossed to Vincent's other side, crouched there leaning over him and holding his arms. Magister had returned and was now standing at Vincent's feet, looking dazed and pale.

"Tell us what happened," Father repeated.

Catherine's hands passed lovingly over Vincent's tear-drenched face, smoothing out the delicate, damp fur. She thought he ought to be allowed to rest for a few minutes, but he seemed to gather strength as his eyes traveled the three faces above.

He said, "Barnat kicked down the railroad tie. I pushed him away just in time...The whole place caved in... Part of it fell on my leg..." He paused, dragging in a deep breath. "I told Barnat to go for help and he left... He was gone ... for a long time... For such a long time... Then I heard Magister whistling ... out for his walk... I was afraid he would find me and be frightened ..."

Magister shook his head, moisture glimmering in his eyes.

"I must have passed out... The next thing I knew, Barnat had returned... He ..." Vincent's body went rigid and his eyes lost their focus. His arms, reaching out blindly, came against Catherine on the one side and Father on the other. Catherine kissed his furry hand and pressed it against her cheek.

"He had a gun... He said... He said ..." Vincent writhed, his face contorting.

Father urged him on. "Say it, Vincent. Say the words.

"I...I c-can't ..."

"You can and you must. You must get them out of you."

"No - please, Father. I can't ..."

Father shouted at him again, making Catherine wince in sympathy for Vincent. "Say them, Vincent!"

He shuddered, and then, finally, the words were hurled from his throat; "He said - 'I KNOW A LAB THAT WOULD PAY A GOOD PRICE FOR A BODY LIKE YOURS'."

The horror of this made its sickening impact on Catherine, Father and Magister.

In the quiet room Vincent's sobbing was a raw, moaning sound. He quaked with it, his face a mask of pain as Catherine held his head between her hands. Then, suddenly, he caught his breath and stared upward with an expression of such hellish terror, that Catherine actually glanced up toward the ceiling. There was nothing to be seen and her eyes whipped back to Vincent. He was trembling again, harder than before. He was no longer seeing the faces around him. He was far away from them all, and he was terrified. They were all touching him, and yet she knew he couldn't feel their hands.

Somehow his voice changed and became distant and hollow as though he were speaking to them from a dream; "No... Don't go away. Don't leave me here... No! No - please don't leave me here! Don't leave me here to die! Please - oh please come back. Please touch me. Please come back! Please pick me up. Oh please come back and pick me up." His tone grew frantic and he pulled his legs up over his abdomen as though to protect himself. "No! No! Don't go away... I'll die! All of me will die! Come back! Come back! Oh, please come back! I need you to pick me up. I need you to look at me and love me and pick me up. Please love me! Please love me! Oh, please come back and love me!" He broke off, gasping. His arms pushed outward, searching... he blinked rapidly and rolled his head, still blind to the people above him, still far from them...

The amount of suffering in him was unbearable to watch. Through her own tears, Catherine glanced

desperately at Father. His face was grey.

Leaning close to his son he coaxed gently. "Who are you talking to, Vincent?"

The question got through and Vincent responded to it in his ravaged voice. "No - I can't ..."

"Say it. Say the name."

He dragged in air and went totally limp, his arms sliding back downward. Over the next few minutes, he rebuilt himself slowly. No one dared move or speak. The word came out at last, barely audible, a shattered whisper, "Mother..."

Father closed his eyes. There was silence now except for Vincent's ragged breathing as he groped for purchase against the rug and pushed himself wearily into a sitting position. Then he toppled against Catherine and her arms went around him and his head lay against her, heavy and damp. She kissed his hot forehead again and again, murmuring soft, moaning words into his hair and squeezing him with everything she had.

There just didn't seem to be enough comforting to give him. The thought of where he had just been and what he had just relived was devastating, and she couldn't get beyond it. She couldn't hear anything but the terror in his voice, she couldn't see anything but the stark loss in his searching, pain-filled eyes. All these years, he had carried this terrible memory – dormant - in his soul. It was something that had happened at a time when he was simply too little and helpless to be able to feel the terror and the loss without those feelings destroying him. And so he saved it, locked it away deep inside until he was strong enough to tear it out of himself and throw it away... And even then, he resisted... For as long as he could... Even then it was almost enough to kill him...

Father was mumbling something to Magister, and her sense of reality crept back into place.

"Barnat must have realized what he'd done," Father was saying. "And so he killed himself. Where could he go? Where could he go to escape from himself after that - after knowing that he had tried to kill his own best friend?"

Still holding Vincent tight, she looked around. At every entrance people were clustered, their faces pale and strained.

Father spoke out to them in shaky tones. "It's all right. Everything is all right. It's all over and Vincent's all right." Then, pulling himself together and taking command he said; "William! Pascal! Come here. Let's get Vincent to his feet, take him to his room."

The men came over and helped Vincent up. He sagged a little at first and then managed to walk. About to follow them, Catherine suddenly turned to Father and said; "Do you know? Do you understand what just happened here?"

He looked exhausted. undoubtedly every bit as knotted and frayed inside as she was. But he nodded and replied, "Yes, I think so."

She still hung back as the men left with Vincent. She asked pointedly; "When Vincent was found - at the dumpster when he was a baby - was he crying? Was he upset?"

Father shook his head. "No. He was very calm."

It all fit, then. All of it. She said, "So, you see what happened. He put it away. He had to. He was really terrified, but he couldn't give into that terror. So he stored it inside. And it's been there all this time."

She began to turn away but Father clutched her arm. His eyes had reddened and his mouth was harsh with emotion.

"Catherine - he knows, doesn't he? ...that no one will ever throw him away again?"

Reaching up, she laid a hand against his face. Reaching through now, through his unarmed area, she gave him her friendship and felt his trust awaken and close with gratitude around it.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, he knows."

In Vincent's room, she sat on the edge of the bed, hugging herself against a creeping chill. Either the room was getting cold, or she was still tense from the agony she had witnessed - it didn't matter which, and she wasn't sure of how much time had passed since the men had left and Vincent had - almost immediately - fallen into a deep, exhausted sleep. He lay on his back, his deep breathing a soft, purring sound, his cheeks still furrowed from tears. He was so utterly spent... When she had covered him with the blanket and kissed his damp face, he hadn't even stirred. For a long time she had been sitting here, watching him tenderly, and reviewing it all over and over again in her mind.

But now, her own need for comfort and actual physical warmth began to seep through her preoccupations and her thinking became newly directed as she studied the big expanse of cushion-strewn bed.

Pushing off her shoes she stepped nimbly up and over Vincent.

Cautiously, she settled down, sliding beneath the blanket and pressing up against his warm bulk. Grabbing one of the cushions, she stuffed it under her head.

Her body loosened. The chill melted away and so did the tension, and she happily basked in the feeling of his solid, powerful and wonderfully warm body against her own. He slept on, unaware of his largess and of her delight as she reveled in it.

About half an hour later, he opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Surprise," she said.

He shifted in quick, full joy and then lay very still, studying her almost as though afraid she would disappear. His eyes, so close to hers, held fierce adoration - and that slight shadow of uncertainty that she had come to know so well. But there was time to deal with that - all the time in the world.

He turned over to face her and they lay slightly apart, their breath intermingling. Their need for each other pleasantly pulled at mind and body.

There was movement - that neither of them saw - at the lower entrance to the room. Father almost stepped in. But if they had been watching, they would have seen only a soft swirl of cloak as he spun around and quickly retraced his steps.

Catherine wound an arm around Vincent's neck, gazing at him seriously. "How do you feel?"

When he replied his voice was normal again - that soft, gruff, caressing tone she knew so well. He said; "I'm not sick anymore. I'm not afraid. I feel ... whole again, Catherine."

"You found the strength to survive those terrible feelings, to overcome that terrible memory."

"Your love gives me that strength, Catherine. Your love makes me real."

Her hand drifted along his face, smoothing back the hair at his temple. "Well, I guess you're right, Vincent. We aren't real unless we have someone's love."

She asked; "Do you remember your mother at all?"

"No. All I remember is feeling that I had been left to die and knowing that I needed somebody to come back and pick me up."

She detected no stiffening in him as he said these words. He was totally relaxed and at peace. Once experienced in its full devastating horror, the memory was now just a memory, stripped of its force, no longer anything that could hurt him.

"And then someone did come and pick you up."

"Yes - but I must have been there a long, long time. I must have given up all my hope."

"Your life began with a terrible betrayal. And so it took Barnat's betrayal to bring you back to your beginning, so you could endure it and cast it out of you forever..."

He murmured sadly. "The whole thing with Barnat was really my fault. I sensed something was wrong. He was - quite hyper. Probably desperate for his drugs. I sensed it - but I didn't want to listen to myself. I was thinking about you, and so I kept on thinking about you. I didn't pay attention to him because I didn't want to face my failure ..."

"You mustn't blame yourself, Vincent. You did everything you could for him." She traced his eyebrows with her fingertips and had the satisfaction of seeing the shadow lift from his eyes. "Nobody could have a truer friend than you."

Something in his face changed, diverted by a stray thought. "Do you know what he said to me in the tunnel just before ..." Abruptly he stopped and seemed to retreat inward as though to examine this from another angle.

Then he said quickly, "Oh, never mind."

Catherine smiled. "Perhaps you can tell me later," she said.

Intently gazing at her, he whispered, "Perhaps..."

Her eyes traveled along his powerful body, over the Gibraltar shape of his shoulder and down the contour of his hip and thigh. Then, in response to something in his look, she clasped his head in her hands and drew it forward. She kissed his eyelids and temples, his delicate nose and his soft lips - and he responded, pushing gently against her. His tawny, manelike hair fell over her face.

"Mmmmm, Vincent - you always feel so good."

In answer his arm crept around her, heavy and warm, and his hand moved slowly against her shoulders.

He laid his thigh over her - and then shyly drew it back.

They clasped each other, snuggling close, and Catherine said; "Listen - Magister is playing the organ. You can hear it down here..."

"Yes."

She hummed a little, matching the tune. "I know that song. It's that old Shaker hymn... Isn't that the one you told me he always whistles?"

"Yes. It does seem to be his signature tune."

They lay enfolded in each other's warmth. There was no cloud of fear. Above them the subway rumbled and the pipes gave out their faint percussions. In the many niches and holders throughout the room the candles flickered and glowed. They cuddled beneath the blanket and all that mattered in the world was theirs to share.

The voice of the organ floated to them: *Tis a gift to be simple, Tis a gift to be free...* and Catherine, nestling close to Vincent, sang the songs softly against his ear;

*"...Tis a gift to come down where you want to be.
And when you find yourself in the place just right---
You'll be in the valley of love and delight."*

THE END