

REFUGE

by Janet Rivenbark

Cathy didn't know what was going on. She knew something was wrong, but that was really nothing new. Nothing had been "right" since her mother died six months ago.

Her dad had given her two large suitcases and told her to pack everything she owned in them. She had packed her clothes in one and her toys in the other. Both suitcases were now crammed to bursting, and she was sitting on the couch in the living room, holding her favorite doll, waiting. She wasn't sure what she was waiting for, but she was waiting, nonetheless.

Daddy and Uncle Peter were in the kitchen talking.

"I've talked to someone, Charles, and there's a place you can go. It's not fancy, but it's safe and the people there will help you."

Charles was a little skeptical, but Peter was his friend. He'd never steered him wrong. He'd introduced him to Caroline, after all.

"Where is this place?" he asked. He had a lot of questions. "Will Cathy be okay? Will we be allowed to stay together?"

"Yes, to both of the last questions. And as for its location, it will be easier to show you than to tell you. It's going to seem strange, but you're going to have to trust me on this one." He looked around the kitchen. Everything was in boxes. "Give me your key and I'll have someone come in tomorrow and move all your stuff to storage," he said.

"I can't afford to pay for storage," Charles argued, even as he handed Peter the key.

"Don't worry. The people in the place I'm taking you to know people who are always willing to help. They will ensure that everything is stored until you have figured something out and found a new place. You'll need it then. When you get back on your feet, you can return the favor." Peter stood, and so did Charles. "Is Cathy packed?"

"She should be, I told her to. We both have two bags."

They went out into the living room, where Cathy was waiting.

"Did you pack, honey?" Charles asked.

Cathy nodded. "I left the suitcases in my room. They were heavy."

Charles and Peter went down the hall, and when they returned, they were each carrying two suitcases.

Once on the sidewalk, Peter waved down a cab and gave the driver an address on Mott Street in Chinatown.

They walked into an herb shop in Chinatown. There was a middle-aged man behind the counter. Despite the late hour, Peter was greeted as if he had been expected.

"Your guide is waiting in the basement," the man told them.

They descended the stairs to the basement, where another man was waiting. Peter greeted him cordially and then followed him to a shelf at the back of the basement.

The shelf was pulled out of the way, revealing a dark room. Once inside, Cathy thought it looked like a cave. She wondered where on earth they were going. As they walked, she couldn't help but compare her surroundings to a movie she'd seen on TV recently: *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. She wondered if they would run into any of the giant lizards she'd seen in the movie.

They walked for what seemed like a long time, but never encountered any giant lizards, so Cathy began to relax. They did see some strangely dressed people as they walked, and some of them greeted Uncle Peter.

They entered a room lit with candles and a couple of lamps, and books were scattered everywhere. A man was sitting behind a desk across from the entrance. He stood.

"Peter, it's good to see you. And nice to meet you, Charles." He came out from behind the desk and shook hands with Cathy's father. Then he surprised Cathy by turning to her. "And this must be Catherine." He leaned down and offered his hand. She hesitantly held hers out, and he took it and shook it. "You can have a seat over there," he told her, pointing at a chair. "Your father, Peter, and I have to discuss a few things.

Cathy went to the chair and sat, prepared to listen and find out what was going on. But it was late, and she had been up early that morning. She was tired and fell asleep within minutes of sitting down.

"Charles, this is Jacob," Peter began. "I don't know if you met him when we were in college. He was a few years ahead of us at Harvard. You went on to Law School after, but I ran into Jacob again in Med school, and he was Chief Resident when I did my residency."

Jacob returned to his chair behind the desk, while Peter and Charles took the chairs in front.

"Can I offer you refreshment?" Jacob asked.

Charles shook his head. "No, thank you." He looked at Peter, then back at Jacob. "What is this place?"

"It's a refuge," Jacob said before Peter had a chance to answer. "A sanctuary of sorts. We offer help where it's needed, and Peter has brought you here because he says that you need help, so please tell me your story."

Charles hesitated for a moment before beginning. When he started, he chose the least painful place to begin.

"I'm a lawyer. As he said, Peter and I met at Harvard. We were both there on academic scholarships and met while working part-time in the college bookstore.

"When I was a senior, Peter introduced me to Caroline. We dated for several years while I finished law school, and soon after I passed the bar and started working for a personal injury law firm, we got married. Our daughter, Cathy, was born a couple of years later.

"We were doing okay, not rich, but my salary and bonuses were enough that we were able to start saving for a house... but then, about six months ago, Caroline was crossing the street near our apartment, and she was hit by a car. It was speeding, and she was killed instantly." Charles stopped, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath before continuing. "I'm afraid I wasn't able to hold it together after that. I missed a lot of work. They were sympathetic at first, but when I started losing cases that I really should have won easily, they lost patience and fired me.

"I've been looking for another job but haven't had any luck. My only real experience is in Personal Injury, and my failure to win cases has become public knowledge among those firms. I've used all my savings and have been given notice that we need to vacate the apartment by the end of the month. We have no place to go. Peter has tried to help, but he doesn't have room for us, and I

can't be on the street with Cathy. She's only ten." He glanced over his shoulder at his daughter, noting that she had fallen asleep. He was glad she didn't have to hear this.

"We all mourn differently," Jacob observed. "I was in a similar situation at one point. Someone from this place found me and helped me. We've always offered help where we could. Peter has vouched for you, and you are welcome here for as long as you need us. All we ask is that you keep our secret, and that you work here with us when we need you."

"I still want to look for work," Charles said. "And what about Cathy's school? She is supposed to go back in September, and it's already almost the end of July."

"We have teachers here," Jacob assured him. "Education is not neglected."

"And in some respects, it's a better education than in the public schools Above," Peter added.

"You can go Above to look for work anytime you like," Jacob told him. "You will be provided with a guide to take you to a convenient threshold. But I suggest that you give yourself and your daughter some time to get acclimatized here. And when you do go Above, Catherine will be looked after with the rest of our children."

When Catherine woke, she was comfortable and warm, but the sounds in the room were all wrong. There were no car horns or the hum of the city, just a constant tinny tapping sound.

She opened her eyes, confused, but she saw her father on the other side of the room. He was standing in front of a mirror, shaving. Then the previous evening came back to her.

"Good morning, Sleepy Head," her father greeted her when he saw that she was awake. "Hurry up and get dressed. Someone is supposed to be here to take us to breakfast."

He showed her where their *bathroom* was, she quickly used it, then splashed some water on her face from a basin and brushed her teeth.

"It's going to be a little like camping for a while," her dad told her as she tied her shoes. "But we can do this. It's better than the alternative."

He left her to wonder about that alternative.

A few minutes later, a young black man arrived. "Good morning, I'm Winslow. Father said you would need a guide to breakfast."

"Father?" Charles questioned as they followed Winslow.

"I think you met him last night," Winslow said. "In the study... the room with all the books?"

"Is that what you call him?" Charles asked.

"That's what everyone calls him. His son, Vincent started it when he was little, and it kinda stuck. He is like a father to everyone here Below."

They arrived at a large chamber that contained more people than Cathy thought it was possible to be in this place. The smell of cooking made her stomach growl.

"Hello, welcome," a woman greeted them at the entrance. "I'm Sarah. Father asked me to show you around."

She took them to a long table that was set up like a buffet table.

"This is how all our meals are served," she told them. "You are welcome to take as much as you want, but we do ask that you don't take more than you can eat. We have Helpers who send us food, and we are able to find more. William is a wizard at making it all edible, but we can't really afford to waste anything."

"What hours are meals served?" Charles asked.

“William is in the kitchen very early, and he has breakfast out by 5:00 am, but he adds to it as needed until about 9:00. Lunch is from about 11:00 to 1:00, and dinner starts at about 4:00 pm and is served until people stop showing up. But if you miss a meal and show up late, he won’t turn you away. He might grumble, but he won’t let anyone go hungry if he can help it.”

They went down the line selecting things. Cathy had never really liked breakfast. She usually just had juice or milk and maybe cereal or toast. There wasn’t cereal, but there was toast. She chose two slices with butter and a glass of apple juice, and her father picked a toasted bagel and coffee.

Sarah led them to a table near the back wall, introducing them to people along the way. While her father talked with Sarah and the other people at the table, Cathy looked around the big room. It wasn’t brightly lit, but there were candles and kerosene lamps on every table. She noticed that there were quite a few children. Some were sitting with people who were probably their parents, but there was one table where about ten younger children and some teenagers were all sitting together. She was looking at the table when another teenager joined them. At least she assumed he was a teenager. He was tall but not as big as the boy who had brought them here earlier. But then she wasn’t really sure if he was a boy or a girl. His back was to her, and he had long blond hair. He was wearing pants, and from what she’d seen, she was the only girl in the room who was wearing pants. All the other girls and women were wearing dresses, including the girl with the long dark hair who the boy sat next to.

She had finished her toast and juice and was just looking around the room when Sarah spoke to her.

“Would you like to join the other children, Catherine?” she asked.

Cathy looked at her father, and he nodded. “I need to see where I can be useful,” he told her. “You go and meet everyone.”

Sarah led Cathy to the table with the other children, but the boy with long hair and the girl he’d been sitting next to were gone. It wasn’t long before other children joined them.

“Everyone, this is Catherine, but I heard her father call her Cathy, so that might be her preference.” She looked at Cathy, who nodded. Then Sarah had each of the children introduce themselves.

It was like the first day of school, and Cathy knew that she wouldn’t be able to remember all the names. There was Winslow, whom she knew, and a boy who was somewhat short; she thought he was Pascal. There were two teenage girls, Olivia and Rebecca. But the rest, the younger children, had talked so fast, and some of them had spoken softly, and Cathy wasn’t sure what their names were.

“And we missed Vincent and Lisa,” Sarah told her, verifying her assumption that the one with the long blond hair was a boy. “But you’ll meet them later.”

Sarah led the way to a large room. Cathy noted that everyone down here called the rooms chambers. This chamber was filled with toys, tables, and some desks. There were old couches against the walls and several bookcases filled with books.

“This is where most of the children stay during the day, when they don’t have chores or classes, or when we aren’t off doing something as a group,” Sarah explained. “But since it’s summer, there aren’t classes, but some of the children have chores. Once you’ve been here a while, and you find something you are interested in, you will be assigned some chores, too. Feel free to play with anything you like, but it all stays here in this chamber, except for the books. If you find one you want to read, you are welcome to take it with you, but you must bring it back when you are done.”

Cathy nodded and looked around. Then Sarah bent down to her level. “Don’t worry, Sweetie. I know it’s all new and confusing, but it will be fine, and you’ll find your niche. We’ve all been there and understand.” She put her arm around Cathy and gave her a little squeeze.

After Sarah left, Cathy went to the bookshelf. It wasn't long before she found a book that was an old friend. She picked it up and went to one of the couches to read. Throughout the morning, some of the children joined her on the couch and started talking. She noticed that Olivia and Rebecca seemed to be in charge of the younger children, but the ones who appeared to be her age and a little older were coming and going as they pleased. She assumed that they were going to do the chores that Sarah had mentioned.

Cathy had been taught to address all adults as Mrs., Mr., or Miss with a last name, but no one down here seemed to have a last name. And she didn't think it was appropriate to call them Aunt or Uncle. That was something she'd have to ask her father when she saw him next.

By lunch, she'd managed to read only a chapter of the book, but she had learned most of the names of the children her age. She left the book on the couch when they all went to lunch.

She joined her father for lunch, and they compared notes. Her father told her that it was all right for her to call the adults by their first names as long as they were Below. "No one seems to need to use surnames here," he explained. "They have Helpers Above that they sometimes use surnames for, but even Uncle Peter is Dr. Peter to them. The gentleman who was behind the counter in the shop we were in yesterday is an herbalist, and they call him Dr. Wong. But just about everyone, Above and Below goes by first names only. Have you been okay?" he asked.

Cathy nodded. "I'm learning the names of the others."

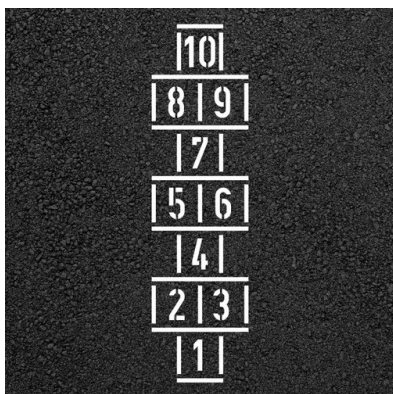
"Have you met Vincent yet?" he asked.

"He's the boy with the long hair, isn't he? He and a girl, Lisa, had already left when I went over to their table."

"Yes, that's Vincent. I met him and Lisa a little while ago. Lisa is studying ballet. She's a little older than you, but you might have something in common with her, since you took ballet for a couple of years."

Catherine's ballet lessons had stopped after her mother died, and she hadn't actually been upset about it. She enjoyed watching people dance but wasn't particularly fond of it herself.

She went back to the room with the others after lunch, but she didn't go back to reading. She put the book back on the shelf and went to play hopscotch with three other girls her age.



Most of the tunnel floors were covered with sand, but this area had been cleared, and someone had painted the stone black and painted a white hopscotch board on it.

"Winslow made this for us," one of the girls told her. "And he found an old Chutes and Ladders board and is trying to find a chamber big enough to paint that on a floor, and we can play that, but we get to be the pieces."

Cathy agreed that it sounded like fun, then they got down to a serious game of hopscotch.

At dinner, her father told her that they had been assigned a permanent chamber, or in their case, chambers. He'd moved all their stuff. The main, larger chamber had a large bed and was furnished to serve as both a bedroom and a living room. There was a smaller chamber off it that was her bedroom. It had a small bed, a comfortable chair, and a wooden cupboard for her clothes.

"If you need anything else, let me know and I'll see what I can do," he told her.

One thing she'd noticed that made her a little uneasy, was that none of the chambers down here seemed to have doors. A few, like theirs, had rugs that hung over the entrances. But the opening between her chamber and the main chamber was open. She asked her father about that.

"Some of the living chambers have some way to close off the entrances, but a lot of the chambers are left open for ventilation. Since we are below ground, it stays pretty cool down here year-round, so they need fires to keep the individual chambers warm. But those fires have to be vented, or dangerous gases could build up, which would be deadly."

He pointed to a black iron dish in the middle of the chamber. There was a fire smoldering beneath a screen top. "That is our heat source. I don't want you to go anywhere near it. If it needs more wood, let me know and I'll take care of it." He used a set of metal tongs to lift the screen so he could put another small log on the embers. "The top is flat enough that we can heat a kettle of water on it, if we need to. But with a bathing chamber just a few feet down the tunnel, we probably won't need it."



Cathy spent the evening arranging her room, while her father read the newspaper, looking for any possible lead on a job.

"Daddy, do you think I could have a bookshelf?" she asked, when she finished getting ready for bed.

"I'm sure there is one in the storeroom. I'll ask. But I thought you packed up all your books to be put in storage."

"I did pack most of them, but I have a few with me. And I thought that I could put some of the toys I brought with me on the shelves with the books."

"I'll ask someone tomorrow," he promised, then he folded the paper he was reading and set it aside. "Can we talk for a minute?"

Cathy was surprised at the request, but nodded and sat on the little couch near her father's chair.

"I think I asked you earlier if you'd met Vincent yet, and you said you hadn't. Have you met him since then?" he asked.

Cathy shook her head. "I spent the afternoon playing hopscotch with some of the girls. We didn't see anyone."

"I just thought that I would tell you a few things about Vincent."

That puzzled Cathy. "What?" she asked.

"Well, the gentleman we met last night, the man everyone calls Father, adopted Vincent. He considers Vincent his son. Vincent was found abandoned Above, and one of the women brought him down to Father. But that is all just his history. What I wanted you to know is that Vincent is..., well, he's different."

That made Cathy think of the little boy in their building, who had Down Syndrome. "Is he like Marty?" she asked.

"No. Vincent is nothing like Marty. In fact, he's quite intelligent. Jacob... Father said that he teaches math to the younger children when their school is in session. His differences are in the way he looks." Charles paused, trying to pick his words carefully.

"Is there something wrong with him?" Cathy asked.

"No, I wouldn't call it *wrong*," Charles told her. "What is different about him seems to be typical for him. Father said that other than when he was first brought Below, he's never been sick. Until recently, he was a little smaller than the other boys his age, but he's started growing and has caught up with them and is even taller than some of them. But he looks different. He has a lot of hair..."

"I noticed that he has long hair; none of the other boys here have long hair," Cathy put in.

"That's not all of it. He's got a lot of hair all over, and he kind of looks like a cat?" It came out as a question as he watched for Cathy's reaction.

"A boy who looks like a cat?" Cathy questioned.

"It's hard to explain. Father has no idea how that happened, but says it's probably why he was abandoned Above. But he has claws on his hands, and some unusual teeth, and his upper lip and nose look catlike." Charles had decided to stop trying to do it the easy way, and just tell her. "I just didn't want you to run into him somewhere and be frightened."

"He doesn't sound scary," Cathy told him. "Especially since everyone who has talked about him acts like he's just another of the kids here."

Cathy went to bed, leaving Charles stunned by her attitude. They'd been there only 24 hours and already she was fitting in and making friends.

Kids are so resilient, he thought, shaking his head.

Cathy met Vincent the next day. All the children were in the main playroom when he came in to gather a group of the older boys.

"I need some volunteers to go to the threshold in Sy's Warehouse to bring back supplies," he announced.

Sarah was startled by his sudden appearance and looked over at Cathy, who was reading on the sofa. She watched as Cathy looked up. The girl's eyes got wide, but she showed no fear.

"Cathy," she called out. "You haven't met Vincent. Come here a moment."

Cathy left her book on the sofa and went over to her, then let Sarah lead her over to Vincent, who was counting the boys who volunteered to help.

"Vincent," Sarah said, before he could leave. "You haven't met our newest addition yet."

Vincent turned and smiled as his eyes met Cathy's.

"This is Catherine Chandler. Cathy to her friends," Sarah said.

Vincent leaned down a little.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Catherine," he said in a low voice. "I met your father yesterday. Welcome to our tunnels. I hope you enjoy and benefit from your stay."

"Thank you," Cathy answered, returning the smile. Usually, when someone closer to her age called her Catherine, she would tell them to call her Cathy; Catherine was too formal, but she liked the way Vincent said it and didn't correct him.

That evening, after dinner, Cathy admonished her father for not telling her everything about Vincent.

"You didn't tell me everything," she said as they walked back to their chamber. "You didn't tell me he has a nice voice and beautiful blue eyes. I think he's quite handsome."

That made Charles chuckle. His daughter was definitely fitting in.

They'd been Below about two weeks, and Cathy was noticing that her father was acting more like he had before her mother's death. She'd even heard him laugh a few times. Sarah said it was because he no longer felt like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. Cathy wasn't sure what Sarah meant by that; she was just happy to have her Daddy back.

By the end of the first month, Cathy was looking forward to starting school with her new friends. Her father was still looking for a job Above, but Cathy was secretly hoping he wouldn't find anything. She was enjoying her new life Below.

"I've got an interview," Charles told Cathy one evening after they'd been there a few months. He'd just got his suit out of the wooden cabinet and was hunting for a tie. "It's a different kind of law than I was practicing," he added, "but right now, I'll take anything."

"If you get the job, we won't have to leave, will we?" she asked.

"Not right away. It will take some time to save enough to get an apartment, and naturally, I'll contribute to the common fund here Below, but I estimate that it could take as long as six months after I start getting a paycheck to save enough."

That made Cathy feel better. Six months sounded like a long time to a ten-year-old.

Charles hadn't needed a guide to a threshold for several weeks. He preferred to go up through the threshold in the park, then walk to one of the two subway stations closest to Central Park.

As he sat in the waiting room of the law firm where he had his interview, he was surprised to hear someone call his name. Not "Mr. Chandler," but "Charlie."

He looked up and was surprised to see a friend from college.

"Charlie. Great to see you," Jay Coolidge said when Charles rose to shake his hand. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting on a job interview," Charles told him. "You?"

"Working here. Getting a taste of corporate law. I thought you were working over at Tatum & Fox."

"I was, but they fired me when my productivity fell off after my wife died."

"I heard about that. Sorry for your loss," Jay looked around, then checked his watch. "How about drinks after your interview?" Jay suggested. "You should finish about quitting time around here."

"Sorry, I don't have any extra cash for drinks," Charles said with a shrug.

"On me. There's something I'd like to talk to you about. Don't leave without me."

By the time the interview was over, Charles was ready to accept Jay's offer for drinks. The interview had been rough. The senior partner who had interviewed him hadn't pulled any punches, and Charles was pretty sure that he wasn't going to get the job.

Jay was waiting for him, and they walked down the block to a little bar that was frequented by employees from several law firms in the area. They found a booth in the back and placed their orders.

They chatted until their drinks were served.

"What did you want to talk about?" Charles asked, after taking a sip of his drink.

"Remember back in law school when we used to talk about being high-powered corporate lawyers?" Jay asked.

Charles laughed and took another sip of his drink. "I remember that it usually took at least two beers each before we got to that point in our pipe dreams," he answered.

"Well, what if I told you that our pipe dreams might just be possible?"

"What do you mean?" Charles was skeptical, but willing to listen.

"I have a couple of clients who like me, but they don't like the law firm I work for. In fact, I'm not particularly enamored with the law firm either, but it's a job, and I have a family to support. One of the clients has approached me to help me set up my own office. They don't want me to work exclusively for them, but since there are several of my clients who would likely follow me if I had my own office, I think there would have to be more than one lawyer, and when I saw you today, it suddenly all seemed a lot more possible." He went on to explain what the client had proposed to him. "So, what do you think?"

"And the firm you are currently working for wouldn't have an issue with you leaving and taking clients with you?"

"The clients aren't big ones. That was why they were assigned to me. They would likely never miss them."

"And you want me to work for you?"

"I want you to work *with* me; a partnership just like we used to talk about."

"Coolidge & Chandler? I do like the sound of it," Charles said with a smile.

"Well, I think back when we were talking about this, we'd agreed it would be Chandler & Coolidge, but that's a detail we can work out later. What do you think?"

"Sounds inviting; being our own bosses. What do you need me to do? I don't have any money I can invest, but I can do the legwork."

"That is exactly what I need. I don't want to take time off work to file paperwork with the city and the state. If the place I am now got wind of it, they'd probably fire me. You can take care of all that; we can meet to fill things out, and you can take care of filing, find us offices." They went on to discuss the plan and what they needed to do.

When Charles went back Below that evening, his step was lighter, and he was happier than he'd been in months.

He told Cathy about it the next morning.

"Then we will have to leave?" she asked. She'd asked the same question before; she seemed to be more concerned about that.

"I know that I said it would take a while to save enough to leave, but doing it this way will probably take longer. Neither of us will be able to draw a paycheck for a while."

That was enough for Cathy. She didn't like math, but she was enjoying her math class with Vincent as her teacher.

In fact, she loved all her classes Below.

Later, she was doing homework at the table in their chamber while her dad was reading.

"What are you reading?" she asked him.

"Rules and regulations for having a business in this city. There are a lot of them, and even more if it's a law firm. I should be an expert on that aspect by the time we open our office. I think we should probably add that to our list of services," he said with a laugh. "How's school?"

"I don't know how I ever learned anything in that public school," she told him. "It was always so noisy, and the teachers spent more time keeping order than they did teaching. This is much better. There aren't that many students in the class. We only have classes for about four hours a day, and the teachers make it much more interesting."

"Who are the teachers?"

"Father teaches science. Vincent teaches math. Elizabeth teaches art. We read with Sarah and some of what we read is history. We have different teachers for other things," she told him.

"Do you have much homework?" he asked.

"A little bit, but it's mostly reading, or writing about what we read. We do most of our work in class."

Charles had noticed that she'd been doing a lot of reading lately. She'd always been a reader, but now she always seemed to have a book in her hands.

By the beginning of the following year, Charles was gone every weekday. He and his friend Jay had a small office, and they were both feeling like they just might beat the statistics and wind up being successful. They started with four clients; by the end of the first six months, they had ten, and they had hired another lawyer and a secretary. And best of all, everyone was drawing a paycheck.

Chandler & Coolidge already had a reputation for being fair and ethical, and hardly a week passed that they didn't get a new client.

The world Below was in a tizzy. Lisa's ballet teacher had managed to secure an audition for Lisa with Brookhill School of the Arts.

Lisa was thrilled and spent every possible moment dancing. She danced up and down the tunnels in the dining chamber after meals. Her favorite place to dance was in the Great Hall. And her favorite partner was Vincent, even though he seldom did more than stand and act as her living ballet barre.

Cathy was in Father's study for a biology class the day Vincent carried Lisa in.

He was frantic; he said there had been an accident and Lisa was hurt. Cathy saw the scratches on her shoulder.

Father had hastily shooed the class out, telling them to read the rest of the chapter in their biology book before telling Vincent to take Lisa to the hospital chamber.

Cathy had to pass the hospital chamber on her way back to her chamber, and she could hear Lisa protesting being carried as she followed behind.

"It's only a scratch, Vincent," Lisa said. "I can walk."

By the time Cathy reached the entrance to the hospital chamber, Vincent was in the tunnel outside, sitting in the sand against the wall.

"Is everything okay?" Cathy asked the distraught young man.

"I just wanted to hold her and tell her how beautiful she is. I scratched her. Now I've ruined it all." He covered his face with his hands.

Cathy didn't know what to do; she just knew that she wanted to comfort her friend.

"You heard her," Cathy said. "It's just a scratch." She awkwardly patted his shoulder, but he didn't seem to notice.

She stood a moment before turning to continue to her chamber.

The next morning, the mood was somber in the dining chamber. Cathy didn't understand. Her dad had left early to go to work, so she was eating at a table with other children. She leaned over to Rebecca.

"Is something wrong?" she asked. "It's so quiet."

Rebecca looked around to see if anyone was looking their way. Father hated gossip, but Rebecca felt that Cathy needed to know the whole story.

"Father has sent Lisa Above," she said.

"Because she was hurt? It didn't look that bad," Cathy said.

"Not that. It had more to do with how she was hurt," she said.

"Vincent said he accidentally scratched her," Cathy told her.

Rebecca turned to her with a surprised look. "You've seen him? Talked to him? Where is he? No one has seen him, and he didn't sleep in his chamber last night."

"I didn't see him today. I saw him outside the hospital chamber yesterday. He didn't say much. He seemed very upset."

"That's what Father said when he asked everyone to keep our eyes open for him."

"But why did Father send Lisa Above? She wasn't supposed to have her audition until next week."

Rebecca leaned in close. "If you ask me, Father is just being overprotective of Vincent. He does that," she whispered. "Lisa is staying with her ballet teacher until the audition. If she makes it into the school, she will be living in their dormitory."

Everyone was worried about Vincent. He'd disappeared and no one had seen him for almost two days, when Cathy found him sitting on the bridge over the Abyss.

Cathy didn't like taking this route; she didn't like the Abyss. The other children said that it was bottomless and if you fell into it, you'd wind up in China. Father had pointed out that if that was possible, they wouldn't find China on the other end but would be in the middle of the Indian Ocean, just southwest of Australia. Cathy didn't find that at all reassuring. Although she doubted the Abyss was bottomless. She wondered if it would be full of water from the Indian Ocean.

Cathy was going to have to pass him, so she spoke. She didn't want to startle him; he was sitting right in the middle of the bridge, awfully close to the edge.

"Hi, Vincent," she said. "Where have you been. Everyone is looking for you." She approached slowly.

When he looked up at her, she could tell that he'd been crying.

"He sent her away," he said quietly. "Because I'm a danger to her, and probably to everyone else."

Cathy had just turned eleven, but she knew that he was wrong. Vincent could never be a danger to anyone. Despite her fear of the Abyss, she sat down next to him.

"Father didn't send her away," she insisted. "She went to stay with her ballet teacher until the audition. I heard some of the other girls saying that she needed to be with her teacher to make sure that she had the dance right. It has to be perfect if she wants to get into that school."

Vincent turned his head and looked over at her.

"Thanks for saying that," he said dismissively. "But I know the truth. There have always been those here Below who were frightened of me."

"Then they, whoever they are, are wrong!" Cathy insisted.

"Weren't you on your way somewhere?" he asked, turning his head back to stare into the Abyss.

Cathy sighed. He wasn't in the mood to listen. She put her hands on the rough boards of the bridge, and there was immediate pain.

"OW!" she moaned, bringing her hand to her mouth.

"What is it?" Vincent seemed to come out of his haze.

"A splinter... I big one," she said, holding her hand out so he could see the toothpick-sized splinter in the muscle below her left thumb.

Vincent took her hand and was going to pull the deeply embedded splinter out, but noticed how dirty his hands were. He pulled her hand toward his mouth.

"This is going to hurt," he warned before he grasped the splinter with his teeth and quickly pulled it out.

Catherine barely flinched, not even when he pulled a clean handkerchief out of a pocket and wrapped her hand, which was now bleeding profusely. He stood then helped her to her feet.

"Let's get you to Father, so he can make sure that the whole splinter is out and that it's clean."

As they headed back to the study, Vincent contemplated the strange feeling he'd gotten when he'd touched Catherine's hand. He was used to being able to feel what others felt when he touched them or was near them, but this was different. It felt different. He could feel the pain in Catherine's hand as if it were his own hand. He looked down at his hand and flexed it out of curiosity. With others, he would feel their pain, but not as if it was his; he just knew where it hurt.

And he was feeling her emotions; he was used to that, too, but not to this extent. She was feeling concern and sympathy, and he could tell it was for him.

They reached the study, and as soon as they entered, Father stood.

"Vincent! Where have you been? I've been worried; we all have."

"We will talk later, Father," Vincent said. "Catherine has hurt herself. She had a large splinter in her hand."

Father came out from behind his desk and met them in the middle of the chamber. Vincent lifted Catherine and set her on the table there, so Father wouldn't have to bend to look at her hand.

"Did you pull it out?" Father asked her after he examined her hand.

"Vincent did," she told him.

"I wanted to do it before the wood had time to swell and became harder to get out cleanly," Vincent said.

"And where was the splinter from?"

"It was from the bridge over the Abyss," Vincent told him.

Father raised an eyebrow at that, but just pointed at his desk.

"Bring me the first aid kit and a basin of water."

Vincent retrieved the first aid kit from the desk drawer, poured hot water from the kettle on the brazier into a metal basin, and set both on the table beside Catherine.

"Do you remember what this muscle is called?" Father asked Catherine, trying to distract her while he was cleaning the small wound.

"It's the Thenar muscle," Catherine answered. "I remember you said that it has a good blood supply since it's a muscle and that it has a lot of nerves... which is probably why it hurts so much." She hissed as he dabbed iodine on it.

"You were listening in class," Father said. "Usually, my anatomy classes tend to put students to sleep." He dabbed some antibiotic ointment on the small wound, then covered it with a Band-Aid. He handed several Band-Aids and the ointment to Catherine. "Keep it covered until a scab forms. Wash it every night, then apply more ointment with a new Band-Aid. When a scab forms, you can stop that. Bring the ointment and any band-aids you have left back to me."

Catherine looked down at her hand, then up at Father. "Thank you," she said as she slipped off the table. "Both of you. I'm late for my kitchen chores." She turned to dash out of the chamber.

"Tell William to let you do something that keeps your hand dry," Father called after her as she ran out.

He turned to Vincent. "Where have you been?" he repeated his earlier question.

"I'm sorry I worried you, Father," Vincent said contritely. "I needed some time alone, to think."

He didn't tell Father what he'd been thinking about, as he sat on the bridge over the Abyss.

"I don't begrudge you that," Father said. "I would just like you to let me know before you take off."

Vincent nodded, then looked up at Father. "Why did you send her away?" he asked.

"Lisa? I didn't send her away. Her ballet teacher contacted me to let me know that Lisa's audition has been moved up to next week. She wanted her to go Above to stay with her to work on her audition dance. She said that Lisa has learned the dance, and she's got the strength; she just wants to fine-tune her form."

Vincent nodded. That was pretty much the same thing that Catherine had told him. He realized that if he hadn't gone off on his own, he would have heard the whole story, just like everyone else Below obviously had.

"Will she be back?" he asked.

"Probably not before she starts at the school. If the audition goes well, they will know right away, and Mrs. Rhodes, the teacher, said that they will have to do some shopping so Lisa can dress correctly. The school has uniforms that include her dancewear, but she will also need regular clothing. She might have the opportunity to visit during breaks, although Mrs. Rhodes has told us that Lisa is always welcome at her home."

When Vincent heard that, he realized that he probably wouldn't be seeing Lisa again. When she was engrossed in something, it became her sole focus. And that was what ballet was to her.

Later, as Vincent was soaking in his private bathing pool, he examined the empathic exchange he'd had with Catherine. That was when he realized he could still *feel* her. She was warm, sweating a little, and she was laughing; he could almost hear it.

Chandler & Coolidge was really piling up successes. Charles was surprised that *word of mouth* worked that well. They hadn't had any money to do much more than having a listing in the yellow pages of the phone book, but the clients that Jay had brought over from his old job had told other small businessmen. As the word had spread, the law firm grew. Before they'd been in business a year, they had added two more lawyers, another secretary, and a receptionist. Charles had decided that it was time for him to have an address Above.

His secretary, Marilyn, did most of the looking. She would find a listing and make arrangements for Charles to go look at it. It didn't take long for him to find a two-bedroom apartment in a nice neighborhood, not far from the building where his office was.

The day he signed the lease, he called the Helper who was storing their furniture, and set up a time to have it all delivered to the apartment. That evening, he told Father that he and Cathy would be

leaving that weekend. Father congratulated him on the success. Charles thanked Father for his help and promised that he would not forget them.

That evening, he told Cathy. Cathy was not happy. She didn't want to leave.

"But I thought that you would be happy to be back in a regular school; we might even be able to get you back into your old school."

"But my friends are here!" she said tearfully.

"You have friends Above," he pointed out.

"Who have probably forgotten me because we moved so suddenly, and I was never able to see any of them." Catherine was as angry as she was sad.

Vincent was reading in his chamber when he suddenly felt a surge of feelings from Catherine. She was angry and upset. Over the past few months, he'd found that he could use what he'd started calling a Bond to find her if he wanted to. He'd also learned how to mask the feelings that he got from Catherine, but whenever she was in pain, or really upset about something, it would break through that mask. Often, when those strong feelings broke through, he would find himself going to her to see what the problem was.

He was outside Charles and Catherine's chamber when he stopped and called out.

"May I enter?"

"Come in," Charles answered.

Vincent was surprised as he stepped into the chamber when Catherine rushed across the chamber and threw her arms around him. He instinctively returned the embrace.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Daddy said that we are leaving this weekend," she sobbed into his chest; she barely came up to his chin.

Vincent looked across the chamber at Charles, who nodded.

"You always knew that this day would come," Vincent told her.

"I know, but I didn't think it would come so soon."

"We've been here a year," Charles reminded her. "And I told Father that we wouldn't forget them. Like so many of the people that have been helped here through the years, we will remain Helpers."

"And I'm sure you will visit," Vincent told her as she stepped back. "And your friends from Below might even be able to visit you."

"But you won't be able to visit," she said. "I won't see you again."

"You will be invited to Winterfest," he reminded her.

Every time Catherine came up with an argument, either her father or Vincent had an answer. She felt almost as if they were ganging up on her. She finally gave up.

When Saturday arrived, Vincent helped the Chandlers carry all their belongings to the threshold in the basement of the moving and storage company that the Helper owned. Charles and Catherine rode to the apartment building in the truck that was carrying their things.

Before they left the tunnels for the last time, Catherine ran back for one last hug from Vincent.

"I won't forget you," she whispered.

"Of course you won't," he answered. "You will be back in a few months for Winterfest."

When school started a few weeks later, Charles told the principal that he hadn't been able to get Catherine's school records, because she'd been going to a private school out of state and they'd had a fire. So, Catherine took some tests, and it was found that although she was 11 and should probably be in 6th Grade, she was reading at a much higher level and was at least at a 7th Grade level in everything else. So, they put her in 7th Grade. What Peter had said about the education Below had been correct.

At Winterfest the following December, they received their candle, but weren't able to go because of Charles's work. And that continued every year after. They continued to be Helpers, and as Chandler & Coolidge grew, their help became more generous, but they never went Below again.

Catherine left Tom's party in a snit, wondering why she'd ever started dating him.

Oh, yeah, Daddy introduced us, she reminded herself. *But I don't care if Mayor Koch introduced us; I'm not putting up with that kind of treatment any longer.* She vowed to call her father first thing in the morning and have Tom Gunther assigned to another attorney.

She stepped off the curb to wave down a cab, but it drove past.

"Great," she muttered, looking around for another one.

Suddenly, there was a man next to her. He smiled.

"Say, you're uh, you're not having very much luck. I'll get one for you... I'm an expert." He stepped off the curb and raised his arm. "Yo! Taxi!"

That taxi drove on past.

But a van pulled around the corner, the door slid open, and the man roughly grabbed Cathy and shoved her to the van door. "Hey Carol, are you going home alone tonight?" He asked as someone reached out from inside the van and pulled her in.

Cathy tried to get away, but between the two of them, they were too strong.

The man followed her into the van and closed the door as it sped off.

Catherine had been taken by surprise, but wasn't too surprised to struggle. All that got her was being slammed against the floor of the van.

The man from the street was holding a razor and saying something about little girls who can't keep their mouths shut. And he kept calling Carol.

"My name isn't Carol," she protested.

She was pinned down and could hardly move.

"Shut up!" the man from the street growled. "You're gonna remember every time you look in the mirror," he said as he brought the razor closer to her face. The next thing she knew was excruciating pain.

Vincent was walking in the park when he felt a stirring in the Bond that had been all but dormant for years. Now he was feeling confusion, fear, and finally pain. His hand went to his left cheek. Something was happening to Catherine; she was in pain and in danger. He stopped for a moment to figure out where she was, but she was moving around. For over an hour, he walked back and forth in the park, following her progress.

When he felt her stop moving abruptly, he started running in the direction he could feel her.

He found her a few minutes later, in the bushes just off the 96th Street Transverse. He dropped to his knees beside her. She had landed in a pile of leaves that had broken her fall somewhat. He could smell blood, and when he turned her over, he saw the cuts on her face.

"What have they done to you?" he asked aloud. He checked her pulse; it was strong, but she was still losing blood. The closest hospital was Mt. Sinai, but that would require him to take a longer route to stay out of sight. The threshold in the park was closer. He picked Catherine up and headed in that direction at a trot.

At the first sentry post, he told the sentry to send a message to Father to meet him in the hospital chamber. He hoped that Father hadn't gone to bed yet.

Father was there when he arrived, and although he was admonished for bringing a stranger Below, he didn't mention that their patient wasn't a stranger. He just assisted Father and kept his mouth shut. After her wounds were stitched, dressed, and Father had wrapped her entire head in bandages, Vincent insisted on taking her to his chamber, where he could look after her.

Catherine woke, and the first thing she noticed was that her whole body hurt. Then she remembered what had happened. She lay still, taking in the sounds around her, wondering if she was still in the hands of the men who had snatched her off the street.

As her mind cleared, her surroundings started to sink in. The never-ending clanging; the smell of wood smoke; it was all familiar.

I'm Below! She realized, just as the mattress dipped next to her when someone sat down. Her hands shot out, and they were captured by warm hands.

"Vincent?" she asked.

"Yes, it's me. I was afraid you wouldn't remember," he said, giving her hands a squeeze.

"I told you I would never forget."

She pulled her hands free, and they went to the bandages on her head.

"My eyes?" she asked in a slightly panicked tone.

"They're fine," he assured her as she started to tug on the bandages. He pulled her hands away.

"Let me take them off."

As he carefully unwound the bandages, she was talking.

"They cut me, didn't they?" She didn't wait for his answer. "I remember the pain, but I think I fainted pretty quickly. I don't remember anything after the first two or three cuts. But how am I here and not in a hospital?"

"I found you in the park," he told her.

"How long?" she asked.

"Early this morning."

"So, it's what? Saturday, Sunday?" she asked.

"Saturday." He finished unwinding the bandages, and she looked up at him, and surprised him by smiling.

"You grew up well," she commented.

"And you," he said, returning her smile.

"I doubt I look it right now." She started to touch her face, and Vincent caught her hand.

"Don't touch," he told her.

"How bad is it?" she asked.

"It looks bad now, but Father said that the cuts are superficial, and a good plastic surgeon should be able to repair the damage.

"Do you have a mirror?" she asked.

Vincent got up and went to his armoire. Catherine's purse was on top. He brought it back to her, and she pulled the compact out from inside.

The face she saw in the mirror was barely recognizable. It was swollen and jagged cuts crisscrossed her cheeks and forehead.

"I'm a mess," she said, as tears started to fall.

Vincent gently pulled her into a hug.

"It will be all right," he assured her. "Father was more concerned with closing the wounds and keeping them clean than anything else. You also have some bruised or possibly broken ribs, so you need to be careful how you move.

"If it's just Saturday, Daddy hasn't had a chance to miss me yet," she said after a while. "He wouldn't realize I was missing until I didn't show up for work on Monday. Is there a way to let him know?"

"I sent a note to Peter. I explained and asked him to contact Charles," Vincent said. He started to move away, but she held on to his arms.

"No, don't go... not yet. This is nice. I didn't realize how much I missed this place and you... especially you. Daddy always kept me so busy."

Vincent settled back beside her and agreed silently with her; it was nice, holding her.

"You never came to Winterfest," he said.

"I wanted to. I saw the candles every year; I kept all of them, but Daddy was always busy, and after a few years I stopped asking. Then, after his law firm became successful, he took time off from work at that time, but he always planned a trip out of town for Christmas."

Catherine sighed and rested her head on Vincent's chest. He put his arm around her and took her hand as she dozed off.

A few minutes later, Father entered the chamber.

"So, how is our patient..." He stopped both his forward progress and his question when he saw them.

"Vincent? What on earth? Why...?"

Vincent shook his head.

"It's all right," he said softly. "This is Catherine."

"Catherine? Catherine who?" Father said as he approached the bed.

"Catherine Chandler," Vincent said. "She and her father, Charles, were with us for a time almost 20 years ago."

Father was quiet, thinking for a moment. "I remember. Charles was a lawyer. He's still a Helper, but only through Peter. We haven't seen either of them since they left. But how...?"

"I'll explain." He eased away from her, settled her on the pillow, and pulled the cover up over her shoulder before leading Father out and back to the study.

"We need to let her father know she's all right," Father said, once they were settled.

"I've already sent a note to Peter asking him to let him know and bring him Below," Vincent said.

"How did you find out it was Catherine?"

"That's the real story," he told Father. "I knew it was her before I even found her."

"How?"

"That empathic ability I have... it just goes a little farther with Catherine."

"When did this happen?"

"When she and Charles were living Below. That time she hurt her hand. I felt her pain, and later, I found that I could usually tell where she was, and sometimes what she was doing. When she and Charles left, I found that it didn't go away. There have been times when I've felt her at great distances, and others when I knew she was almost directly above us in the park. And I think she lives very close to the park. I started calling the connection a Bond."

"After she'd been gone a while, I learned to mask it, but last night, when I was walking in the park, I felt a sudden surge of fear from her, then pain and then nothing. It's like I can almost hear her heartbeat if I concentrate. I could still feel that, but it was like she was unconscious. She was moving around the city, then that movement suddenly stopped, and I was able to track her to a spot just off the 96th Street Transverse. I was close to a hospital, but it would have taken longer for me to take her there and make sure someone knew she was there, so I brought her Below."

"I hope Charles hasn't been too worried," Father commented.

"Catherine said that he probably wouldn't have noticed she was missing until she didn't show up for work on Monday."

A few minutes later, Peter arrived, but he didn't have Charles with him.

"I wanted to see the extent of the damage before I contacted him," Peter explained. "I want to be able to tell him what happened, but reassure him that it's going to be okay. Cathy is pretty much his life. He was thrilled when she decided to go to law school, then started working at Chandler & Coolidge."

Catherine opened her eyes to find Vincent, Father, and Peter peering down at her.

"Um... Do I look that bad?" she asked.

"Actually, not as bad as I expected," Peter told her, as he sat on the side of the bed. "Jacob says that the cuts were clean; they must have been done with a very sharp knife."

"Razor," she corrected. "I remember that. It was a straight razor."

Peter nodded. "And I agree with Jacob. A good plastic surgeon will be able to fix this."

"Did you bring Daddy with you?" Catherine asked.

"Not yet. I wanted to see you first. Now that I have, I'll go call him and bring him back." Peter stood and started to walk out. Then he turned back to the others. "You know, a plastic surgeon may want to allow the wounds to heal before performing a corrective procedure like scar revision. That could require anywhere from several months to over a year."

"We can cross that bridge when we get to it," Catherine said. "I'm sure that Daddy and Tom will be more impatient than me."

Peter and Father left, and Vincent sat back down on the bed. "Who's Tom?"

"He's the man I got angry at last night. I was angry and left his party early. If I hadn't, those guys wouldn't have grabbed me... Funny, they kept calling me Carol. I think they thought I was someone else."

"It's not your fault he made you angry. I'm sure he deserved it," Vincent assured her.

"He did, he always does." She laughed. "I was going to ask Daddy to reassign him to another attorney at the office. Now, I doubt I'll be working for a while, so that decision has been made for us."

Charles arrived a while later, and he was beside himself. He was grateful that Vincent had found her and understood why she'd been brought Below, but he was adamant about taking her straight to the hospital and fixing everything right now. It took a lot of talking from Jacob and Peter to convince him to wait.

"Take her home. I'll prescribe some antibiotics and something for the pain, and I'll call a friend who is a plastic surgeon first thing Monday."

"Is he good?" Charles demanded.

"The best," Peter said with a laugh. "If you take her to an ER right now, you'll have to explain the care she's already had. I'll call Jack Sanderle first thing on Monday morning. He knows Jacob and is familiar with this place. He will be discreet."

They finally got Charles to agree, and then Catherine's fight to return to her apartment ensued.

"I'll be fine, Daddy," she argued, after she had dressed and they were leaving Vincent's chamber. "I just want to be in my own place. You can come and check on me, or I can just call you."

Charles finally agreed. They went up through Peter's threshold and took a taxi back to Catherine's. Charles went up with her, and it took another hour to get him to go home.

Catherine wasn't surprised when Vincent showed up on her balcony later that evening.

"So, tell me how you found where I live," she said once they were settled on a bench on the balcony. "Did Peter give you my address?"

Vincent smiled and ducked his head, then went on to explain about the Bond.

END