Beauty and the Beast

TUNNELKIDS – BOOK TWO

NOR IRON BARS A CAGE

A Novelization

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April 2015

Based on the *Beauty and the Beast* television series (1987-1990) created by Ron Koslow

"Nor Iron Bars a Cage"
Season One, Episode 7
Story by Alex Gansa, Howard Gordon, and Ron Perlman
Teleplay by Alex Gansa and Howard Gordon
Originally aired on November 13, 1987

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This is where the wealthy and the powerful rule. It is her world. A world apart from mine. Her name is Catherine. From the moment I saw her, she captured my heart—with her beauty, her warmth, and her courage. I knew then, as I know now, she would change my life, forever.

~*~

He comes from a secret place, far Below the city streets. Hiding his face from Strangers, safe from hate and harm. He brought me there to save my life. And now, wherever I go, he is with me in spirit. For we have a bond stronger than friendship or love. And although we cannot be together, we will never, ever be apart.

In memory of M.K.C.
1979-2011

Because we need heroes who
can teach us how to be bravely unwell,
how to be honest about every kind of death,
and how to live generously in the meantime.

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Part One: To Speak of Dreams

Chapter One: Gifts of the Night

I

18 March 1987
Wednesday Night

The gracious dark invited many secrets to venture out of hiding. Dream-bearers cruised the streets, and dream-seekers with them. The clouded sky stretched out above the city. People flocked to the pulsing heart of New York from all five boroughs and beyond. One among the multitude had already acquired his bit of dream-come-true. He traveled homeward through the night to share his prize with others.

The tall hooded figure strode alone through the shadows of Central Park. As he walked, Vincent, silent as the shadows that masked his passage, glanced up toward the white brick building where his beloved friend Catherine lived, feeling her amusement sparkle inside him. He smiled. He sensed she kept company with a friend tonight, and they were laughing together. He felt glad for Catherine.

On the street below Catherine's apartment someone drove along Central Park West, their car stereo blaring a synthpop rendition of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. A breathless female voice sang: "*Un bel dì, vedremo / levarsi un fil di fumo...*" The woman's voice levitated above a rollicking drum track and throbbing bass line. Vincent hadn't known that aria could *be* blared. The music merged into the more ordinary sounds of distant traffic as the car passed beyond the range of even Vincent's keen ears.

He shifted the load he carried from one shoulder to the other. His sense of Catherine's pleasure relieved many of his worries for her. Lately, rage and sadness often weighed down her thoughts, sending dark ripples along the emotional connection between them. There were other feelings too, other concerns that burdened her. Catherine's work provoked some of her feelings, Vincent knew—her work to resolve the many difficult cases that claimed her time. And some of her troubled feelings had to do with him. He found this knowledge harder to bear, although he did so willingly, never losing sight of the greater graces Catherine brought into his life. Catherine's confidence in their love enriched him. He felt privileged to witness each stage of her growth and healing.

It's a time of recapitulation for her, Vincent thought. *Almost a year has passed since the night those men attacked Catherine in the street. Such anniversaries can be painful.*

Vincent knew from experience the pain—the setbacks and indignities—inherent to the process of rebuilding a shattered life. He grieved that Catherine must make such a journey. At the same time, he beheld her courage with profound respect. She was choosing a path of compassion as she struggled to restore her sense of self. Last year's chilling April night had not defeated her.

Turning his face up to the cloudy sky, Vincent thought, *And dark though it was, for both of us, that night also sent Catherine into my life.*

Vincent remembered following the scent of blood through the park, traveling almost the same route he took now. How his soul had *ached* for her—and *with* her—when he found the

woman discarded in the damp grass, lying dangerously near the threshold into Vincent's world. As he knelt to help her, Vincent had been surprised by his instantaneous intimate sense of the woman, a Stranger who was somehow not a *stranger*. He recognized some indefinable quality inside her heart, heard her soul crying out to his. She broadcasted a powerful longing for *life*.

Vincent's empathy for the woman's inner battle mirrored his own shadowed contentions. Her pain sheared through the shroud of secret despair that had woven itself around him during his previous long days—and his even longer nights. At the midnight moment when Vincent found Catherine, he had found himself suddenly unwilling to surrender his life to the stifling shadow of his fate, when *this* wounded woman had not surrendered to her own ending. Vincent felt that his silent pain was nothing in light of *hers*. He wanted to see her clean, dressed in warm clothes that were not torn, as the young woman's heavy velvet coat and burgundy evening gown were torn. He wanted to see her cared for, and comforted. He wanted her to live. And because he wanted these things, he found new reasons to embrace his own life. The woman needed help from him that only he could give.

Vincent broke all but one law of his community, and of his own code of communal security, to bring an adult Stranger directly into his home for medical care. He had obeyed his chief imperative to help someone in need and he knew no other way to give her aid as quickly as she must receive it. Her face and left forearm were badly cut, her body cruelly beaten. She was losing too much blood. The nearest Topside hospital was too far away. So Vincent carried the Stranger into the Tunnels beneath the city. Vincent's swift response, and his father's surgical expertise, saved the woman's life. Tending Catherine as she slowly regained her strength, Vincent came to know her—and to love her.

He knew many things about Catherine now, and it pleased him to ponder his knowledge, day by day, night by night. Vincent loved being a part of Catherine's life. He marveled that he had now become an undeniable part of *Catherine*, and she the most liberated part of him. He could feel Catherine's gratitude for his intervention that first night, and on many subsequent nights thereafter. He knew she was fiercely determined to live a full and noble life in her perilous, wondrous world. He knew, too, that even as she tried to fulfill her dreams, Catherine often felt overwhelmed by the work she'd undertaken at the New York County District Attorney's office.

Catherine's difficult investigations fueled her fear that she might fail to help other survivors of violent crimes. She struggled to trust that Good remained active in the world—and that an unquenchable hope in Light could prevail in the end. She believed that justice was worth any sacrifice. She had told Vincent so several times, and whenever she spoke of this matter, he felt her fear of loveless judgment, her quiet anger with the labels others tried to impose upon her—names like Débutante and Victim. Vincent knew her desire to feel safe, and to be loved for who she was. Catherine looked to *him* to love her in that way.

That she should need this from him truly puzzled Vincent, for he did not know any *other* way to love someone. It always shocked him to observe the many tactics people from Catherine's world used to manipulate one another. They sought to engender gainful change by granting or withholding favor, calling such payments and privations "love." It made no sense. Catherine had turned away from men who tried to treat her in this way, all of them wealthy suitors from a sunlit realm Vincent had only read about in books—

The sound of voices nearby interrupted Vincent's thoughts. Instinctively, he ducked his hooded head. He knew his eyes reflected light in the darkness and he did not want to draw the attention of Strangers. He had recently received too much of such attention and had no desire to repeat the experience. He moved to the shadowed side of an elm tree, merging his shape with

that of the gray-ridged trunk, as two men walked closer to him, arguing with each other about a car.

"So get your brain switched on! Take some lessons or something. That was two hundred bucks!"

"C'mon. Gears were stripping before I ever *touched* the stick. I brought her home with a full tank. What more do you want?"

"She's just *special*, okay? Me and Pop, we're gonna fix her up, take her in for sweet detail. For Roxy, see. She'll *love* it. Abe knows a guy. It's just, we're *saving*, right? Can't afford no two hundred bucks every time *you* can't work out how to drive."

"Said I was sorry."

The men walked away. Vincent took a long breath. He listened for any whispers of fright or anger inside himself and felt only a gentle curiosity about the lives of the two men who had unknowingly passed him by. Good. A few days ago, Vincent had been playing hide-and-seek with a group of Tunnels children and unreasoning fear had cornered him in the narrow pipe *(hunted! lost!)* where he was hiding. It spoiled the game and worried his young friends.

But Vincent's nature was not a fearful one. That Shadow lifted swiftly and had yet to return. Tonight, the danger of these Strangers' nearness felt like the tart bite of the home-brewed cider which the Undercity's cook and brewer, William, crafted each year. The springtime darkness was heady with the scents of fertile soil and green things awakening from winter: the small clusters of buds on the American elms, spicebush, the welcome optimism of snowdrops and crocuses giving way to the heavier scents of daffodils and tulips as they greened their spear-like leaves toward their blooming time.

Vagrant edibles were already staking their insistent claims in the lawns and undergrowth —the chickweed and shepherd's purse, hoary bittercress, deadnettles and dandelions. Not near to budding yet, but making strategic preparations. The rain-damp streets of New York, the fumes of industry and transit systems, and the aromas wafting from a thousand different restaurants intermingled with the upperworld's sweet dreams of new opportunities. Central Park's verdant evening shade became the earthy, robust finish to Vincent's all-too-brief taste of the world Above at night. He drank deeply and joyfully. The park had always been his place of comfort. On this night it gave him a sense of connection to the many lives and loves of the great city surrounding him.

When the way became clear again, Vincent continued his journey. He thought about the young car owner, and the wishful delight Vincent sensed bubbling inside him when he spoke the name, "Roxy." Vincent understood the desire to please a loved one with gifts. He was beginning to understand the sorrow that came when what tangible gifts he could offer were no match for the lavish treasures others could provide.

Catherine has told me that she's had many suitors in recent years, Vincent mused, resuming his westward cogitations. *Her father encourages their advances. He wants Catherine to marry, to be happy with someone.* And yet, although each of her world's charming princes added new chapters to her history, only one had truly touched Catherine's heart. Vincent grieved that Catherine's dream of a life with this man had been so painfully erased—by differing priorities, and by the man's inability to love Catherine the way she needed someone to love her. Vincent shook his head. Catherine felt ambivalent toward this man now, and had good reason to feel so.

Vincent considered recent history. Less than two weeks ago, this suitor, this man Burch, had reinstated himself into Catherine's life—just in time to be unwittingly instrumental to Vincent's salvation during a cave-in Below. Afterward, Vincent sometimes felt Catherine's hope

and her suspicion at war inside her. Vincent shared these feelings. Burch had nearly ended Vincent's dream of love with Catherine. And then Burch had supplied Catherine with the demolition equipment which freed Vincent and Vincent's father from that collapsed cavern deep beneath the city.

Burch gave this gift freely, with trust and honor. Catherine felt grateful to, and confused by, the giver. "I've doubted my own judgment many times this year," Catherine had told Vincent after they returned to his home from the Maze. She sat with him in his chamber, both of them begrimed with rock dust. They drank hot, honey-sweetened tea to brace them for the walk Up to Catherine's apartment building.

"I never doubt myself so often as I do whenever I talk with Elliot," she had said.

Listening to her tale, Vincent knew Catherine had been badly frightened by the prospect of losing Vincent that day: his friendship, his support, his protection. His love. Himself. Even now, she still feared that she would somehow lose him. *But you cannot lose me, Catherine,* he thought. *I've already given myself and my life into your hands. My heart is yours now. Forever.*

Would it help her to hear him speak these words? Or would she find Vincent's gift burdensome to her anxious soul? On many days, he could feel Catherine's fears chiseling into her mind and heart. He was aware that she remained desperately ashamed of herself—for things she had said and done during last week's investigation of two men murdered by Vodou practitioners.

Vincent walked quickly across an open clearing toward a sheltering copse of brush and trees. He thought, *I told you during that time, and after, that I will never leave you to face the darkness alone. Never.* Catherine struggled to believe him. Yes, her heart had become a tumultuous place.

Despite his promise to her, Vincent knew she believed herself alone with her conflicting emotions. Each time he saw her now, he tried to reassure her that she was *not* alone. He blamed her for nothing. He told her that she had blessed him with her professions of love, and he admired her for coming so far, in so short a time, since the night she was first attacked.

His reassurances made little difference. Catherine was becoming restless. Over the past several weeks, she'd been assigned to cases involving battered women and sexually abused children. The pain these people experienced seeped into her heart—and thus, into Vincent's. He had no consolation to offer her beyond his own sorrow that such evil existed in the world.

He was happy that she'd found a reprieve tonight in the company of her friend.

Vincent scanned his immediate surroundings and changed his course, circling wide to move downwind of a dog being walked along a nearby footpath. He did not get on well with most dogs. His physical aspects frightened them, and his intuitive abilities confused them. It was not difficult to intimidate one or two dogs at a time—if Vincent was given the chance to stare them down. But dogs who belonged to someone were quick to alert their owners to Vincent's presence. Strays were completely unpredictable, as likely to leap for Vincent's throat as they were to cower at his feet. And packs of dogs running wild through the city had been the lifelong bane of Vincent's nighttime excursions. Vincent avoided *Canis lupus familiaris* whenever he could.

Not that I've made that precaution easy for myself tonight, he thought wryly.

It was early for him to be Up in the park. There were still many people out—some, it seemed, with their pets in tow—and this required careful navigation on his part. But a blush of cloud cover had blotted out the moon and the cidery shadows were deep. It was spring, and Vincent felt restless too.

He looked across the park once again, toward the lights that illuminated Catherine's high

balcony. It did not help that Catherine seemed unusually giddy tonight. Across their emotional bond, Catherine's relaxation elicited lightheartedness in himself. Vincent guessed that she and her friend must be indulging themselves a little, as he was. It was a fine night for delectable vintages—those sipped slowly from crystal goblets, and those imbibed directly from the unstoppered currents of the wind.

Vincent readjusted the bag he carried slung over his shoulder. He decided he also felt rather self-satisfied at the moment. Just after nightfall, he had gone Above and found a treasure trove of toys and children's clothing, overflowing from several plastic garbage bags that had been set out in an alley for trash collection. Vincent hoped such obviously hasty work did not indicate tragedy for some unknown family—the loss of a child, rendering the child's possessions unbearable to mourners, perhaps. But the goods he brought home with him now would benefit the children living in the world Below. On their behalf, Vincent accepted what the city Above had to offer them tonight.

He smiled to himself, pleased he could be the one to bring these things to his youngest friends. He was not a regular forager. His visits to the world Above were too fraught with peril for Vincent to be concerned with "finding and taking," as his young friend Mouse phrased it. Getting Topside safely, and getting back home safely, were his primary tasks on these occasions.

Furthermore, Vincent had no liking for foraging work. Gleaning in the city meant sorting through a lot of garbage. It did not occur to him to consider this activity in any way beneath his dignity; almost everything he owned or shared Below was something reclaimed or recycled from Above. His problem was more fundamental than that: after a night spent pawing through dumpsters, trash cans, and scrap piles, it took *forever* to wash the smells away.

Even Father didn't fully understand how torturous certain aromas could be to Vincent's senses.

A sudden burst of muffled wing beats caught his attention, followed by the rustle of paper from farther away. Vincent stopped walking. He stood still behind a bush and looked out into the dark.

He sensed nothing dangerous nearby. Besides the ordinary atmosphere of the park at night, the wind brought him the sounds and scents of four separate people—two runners, a man and a woman, jogging away from him; the man with the dog; and a stationary man sitting some distance from Vincent's position, crinkling paper and drinking heavily sugared coffee. The sound of wings died away as the flying creature's altitude increased. Vincent's eyes picked out its shape as it swept across the sky: a large owl passing overhead, its wings silent now as it cruised for prey.

While Vincent watched the bird's silhouette float across the cloud-mottled, city-dimmed starscape above him, he pondered lines from his vast poetic repertoire:

The Curfeu tolls the Knell of parting Day,
The lowing Herd winds slowly o'er the Lea,
The Plow-man homeward plods his weary Way,
And leaves the World to Darkness, and to me.

Now fades the glimmering Landscape on the Sight,
And all the Air a solemn Stillness holds;
Save where the Beetle wheels his droning Flight,
And drowsy Tinklings lull the distant Folds.

Save that from yonder Ivy-mantled Tow'r
The mopeing Owl does to the Moon complain
Of such, as wand'ring near her sacred Bow'r,
Molest her ancient solitary Reign.

The owl vanished into the night. *Good hunting,* Vincent thought to the bird. Then he continued on his way.

He leapt across the stream of water that trickled out from the Park Entrance culvert and flowed away over a muddy swatch of grass. He looked forward to delivering his collection to Mary for distribution, and he was eager to find Ellie and Eric. He had pocketed two items from the trove especially for those two children. Vincent smiled again and ducked into the drainage tunnel system that would bring him home.

II

18 March 1987
Wednesday Night

"There are days when smiling at anything feels impossible," Catherine said. "I get so frustrated." She waved a glass of Merlot toward the city lights visible through the French doors to her eighteenth-story terrace. This was her third glass, to Jenny's second. They had now emptied the bottle of *Vigna L'Apparita* Jenny had brought with her to dinner, so it would also be Catherine's last glass of the evening. She sighed and sipped the superlative wine.

"I have no control over how victims are treated by the system. No way to make it any easier for them. I know it feels like they're being bullied by the very people they've turned to for help. Even by me, because *I'm* the face they see. *I'm* the nosy ADA investigator who has to ask the hard questions to keep a case moving."

Jenny nodded, a trim woman in a breezy blue silk blouse and black slacks. She leaned back in her chair, stretching her legs, and watched Catherine draw concentric circles on the lush carpet with one toe. They were dining barefoot, a vice they'd picked up while they were still students together at Radcliffe College, and one they had yet to sacrifice on the altar of adult respectability.

"You're seeing the system from the inside now," Jenny said.

"I am. And sometimes it's a very ugly place. Justice comes at such a high price. Too often, it never comes at all."

Jenny nodded again and drank from her own glass. Catherine felt grateful for her companion's balancing presence tonight. For as long as they had been friends, they had always balanced each other. Jenny countenanced many things that Catherine could not. Jenny turned energetic and outgoing when Catherine retreated into aloof reserve. Jenny kept herself casually stylish where Catherine cultivated elegant refinement. And when confronted with Catherine's stomach-knotting self-recriminations, Jenny proved both loyal and pragmatic.

She embodied down-to-earth liveliness beside Catherine's tactical beauty. Jenny's intelligent brown eyes and short brunette hair contrasted well with her more petite friend's green-hinting-at-gray eyes and Catherine's sandy brown, shoulder-length tresses. People noticed them

at parties; they complemented one another so completely. Catherine felt doubly grateful—and relieved—that her best friend seemed willing to listen to her rant like this. Catherine's workday had been a quiet little round-trip visit to hell. She couldn't hold in her feelings anymore.

I don't believe there's anything remotely resembling justice in the Ehringer case, she railed bitterly to herself. Catherine could think of no penalty the law could impose that would ever undo the heartache wrought by that evil man. She tried to shunt her thoughts away from her work, but her mind wasn't done gnawing at that bone.

"I don't like feeling helpless," she said. "And I *hate* feeling useless."

"You're not useless." Jenny's dark eyes underscored her words with steady patience.

"It's how I feel, though."

Jenny nodded to acknowledge Catherine's complaints without passing judgment. Catherine loved her for this. Jenny was a good listener, seeing Catherine through many rocky romances, their scholastic shenanigans in college, and even the recent one-eighty shift in Catherine's career. They lived and worked in the same city, enjoyed the same novels and movies, shared memories of the same sorrows and joys.

Catherine thought: *When Martin Belmont's hired muscle mistook me for Mayfair's call girl—for their intended target, Carol—it was Jenny who saw me through the aftermath. That was THE sorrow that shook both of us down to the roots of our lives. Moving through the tragedy has brought us closer than ever before.*

Jenny Aronson had been the first person she called after last year's brutal accident upended Catherine's already tilted life. Jenny was the first person from Catherine's world to get an up-close look at Catherine's ruined face. Jenny was there for her when Catherine's father arrived at his daughter's apartment with police officers in tow.

She, better than any other among Catherine's friends, knew how Catherine felt about being attacked by an overburdened justice system. Catherine had not wanted to answer personal questions about what violent criminals did to her body and spirit. Hiding and forgetting had seemed like the easier options. It happened the same way for so many others Catherine had met since then. But she *had* answered the detective's questions, and kept her new secrets as well as she could. She had let Dad schedule her surgeries to correct the physical damage to her face. She had let Jenny look after her on the night before she checked into the hospital. Jenny's presence then was as supportive as her presence now.

"It's hard to be a cog in a larger machine," Jenny said.

"Yes. And it's hard on *me* to see just how much misery exists out there." Catherine speared her last bite of grilled duck with her fork. "I know it makes me the naïve daughter of Charles Chandler, Esquire...but I had no idea, Jen. Only nine months ago, I had no clue."

"Don't feel bad about that," Jenny advised. "There are good things, and tragic things, in every level of society. Each level is like its own world. There aren't many bridges between them all."

Isn't that the truth! More true than you could ever know, Catherine thought. She was learning all kinds of things about separate worlds these days—and not only from her work for the Manhattan DA. She knew how rarely people were able to find a bridge between two worlds. Sometimes, she still found it difficult to believe that fate had given her so uncommon a gift. On the same night she'd been attacked by ruthless monsters, one such bridge had found her, and saved her.

This was something Jenny *did not* know about that terrible time in Catherine's life. The secret bridge was a person, someone no one else from Catherine's world knew. No one could *ever* know about him. If society at any level of Catherine's world became aware of the fact that

her rescuer, Vincent, existed, that world would destroy him. Catherine had seen her world try.

Aloud, she told Jenny, “I understand what you mean. I don’t feel guilty about where I’ve come from, my family, my life. If I tried to do my job out of a sense of guilt...that would make my work—and my life—*impossible*. I feel grateful for all I’ve been given. I only wish I could do *more* now, for people who don’t have the good things I’ve enjoyed. People who’ve had good things taken from them.”

“You do what you can, Cath. And you do everything you can. In my book, that makes you a hero.”

A hero? Catherine laughed. “Just so long as the pen is mightier than the sword. Attorneys are *not* called heroes every day.”

“Oh, I refrain from all lawyer jokes in your presence. I only call it like I see it.”

“Well, thank you, anyway, for your vote of confidence. It means a lot to have you on my side.” Catherine finally persuaded her mind to let go of her day. Her third glass emptied now, this was easier for her to do. “Even when I’m crotchety and too bogged down by paperwork to get us better than take-out for a dinner date.”

“But it’s such *good* take out,” Jenny objected, smiling. “Sometime, we’ll eat at the restaurant.”

“Sure. Sometime.”

“Besides, I don’t mind eating in. Look: I even brought videos for Chandler-and-Aronson’s version of dinner and a movie.” Jenny rose from her chair and crossed the living room to her bag. She pulled out three video cassettes in paperboard sleeves. “Drama, comedy, or romantic comedy?” she asked.

Catherine giggled. No doubt at all: Jenny loved her. “What’s the romantic comedy?”

“*Roman Holiday*.”

“I’m in.”

III

18 March 1987
Wednesday Night

Edward Hughes set his thermos cup on the field table and leaned forward to peer through the camera’s viewfinder. He panned across his current section of Central park, homing in on any moving figures he saw: a couple of joggers, a man walking his dog, and there—an owl. He caught the bird’s motion as it turned its head. This was a great horned owl, a magnificent bird. Hughes picked up his logbook to note the sighting. When he looked through the camera again, his subject had left its perch. He swiveled the camera on its tripod, tracking along the owl’s probable flight path, seeking out shapes and motions because the camera’s night vision relayed everything in a limited range of reds.

He yawned, letting his mind wander a little. His part in this survey was nearly done. Next week, a colleague would take over. Hughes didn’t mind the work, exactly. It was tranquil in the park at night. But it was cold, too. Also, he had some symposium lectures scheduled at the University, and he needed to polish his presentation notes. *Hopefully, I can use some of this new footage to illustrate my talks for the students and other attendees*, he thought.

He saw something move through the brush on the periphery of his camera shot. Hughes

refocused both his thoughts and the camera lens to get a better view. It was not the owl. It was something very big, something earthbound. He followed the thing's progress. What *was* that? It moved with swift, lithe grace, slipping from shadow to shadow with predatory ease. Hughes leaned away from the camera, but could see nothing with his own eyes. It was too dark.

He pressed his right eye to the viewfinder again and zoomed in. There! The thing stopped, turning its face toward Hughes. And such a face! Feline. A *large* feline. In Central Park!

It's too tall to be a ranging or escaped wildcat, Hughes thought.

He boggled at the image he saw, his pencil clenched between his teeth. The proportions of that face were all wrong. They weren't feline *enough.* That face was also—simian.

The creature turned and disappeared into the darkness. Hughes abandoned his camera and his departmental equipment van, chasing after the thing. He caught glimpses of the hulking shadow far ahead. Scrambling over a little rise, he shoved through clumps of bushes and splashed to a stop in a muddy drainage field. A lamp post on the little bridge up ahead lifted a yellow light against the sky, illuminating the area. There was no sign of the creature. Hughes saw only an open cement pipe gaping beneath the bridge. Water spilled from the pipe in a fast-flowing stream.

Hughes turned in a circle, his eyes watering against the dark. He saw nowhere else the creature could be. He looked at the tunnel. The creature must have gone in there.

Old memories crowded into his mind. Memories of painful times, before he was *Professor* Edward Hughes. Before he had settled for conservation biology as a niche vocation. Before his mentor had moved on to bigger and better things, leaving Hughes his position at Columbia, but taking with him all the fruits of Hughes's own work.

Before all that, Hughes had been on the cutting edge, ready to track down any anomaly, certain he was destined to make unique contributions to science. He *knew* Mystery when he saw it. This creature was something undeniably new. Hughes whirled and ran back across the park to his camera. He had to review that tape.

IV

18 March 1987
Wednesday Night

"Pause it?" said Catherine. She reached for the jangling telephone.

Jenny pressed pause on the remote control and sat back against the couch cushions. She pointed to the TV screen, clapping a hand over her mouth as Catherine picked up the receiver. They had caught Audrey Hepburn just before she brought a guitar down upon her pursuer's head. The look on that young elfin face was priceless.

Catherine didn't bother to stifle her own laughter as she spoke into the receiver. "Hello?"

"Well, hello," a welcome voice said back. "You sound happy tonight."

Catherine's smile grew wider. "Nancy! Hi!" She glanced over her shoulder at Jenny, who waved her own greeting at the phone. "Yeah, I am. Jenny's here with me. We're watching old movies."

"Good times," Nancy said.

"What's up?"

"Just thought I'd check in. Tell you I'm thinking of you. It's been a while."

"That's so sweet," said Catherine. "Yes. It *has* been a while. Too long." She jabbed her thumb over her shoulder toward the bedroom. "Get on the extension," she mouthed at Jenny.

Jenny swung her feet to the floor and crossed the room.

A moment later, it felt like the best days of Catherine's girlhood had returned. They were the old trio of college friends, fun-loving and indestructible. They shared old stories and new ones and talked movies.

Jenny related her latest comedy of errors with the aged archaeologist whose book she had edited and was now trying to see published. "No Indiana Jones, he!" Jenny finished. They all laughed. Nancy topped Jenny's tale with her father-in-law's Thanksgiving visit to Westport the year he decided that she *must* serve a deep-fried turkey to the family for dinner. Catherine laughed again, light of head and heart, feeling more like herself than she had in many days. Even the virulent memory of the interview she'd conducted that afternoon almost faded into the background at last.

Almost, but not completely.

Amber Kurdy. Six years old. Just one more of Robert Ehringer's many victims. The thought spurred her mind into worrying that same investigative bone again. A whole skeleton of troubles speedily reasserted itself.

Catherine felt a pang, even as Nancy told a new funny story—this one about her daughter's recent Valentine's Day party. Nancy's little girl was growing up happy, while another mother's daughter would grow up scarred. And the mention of Valentine's Day also reminded Catherine of her own private woes. She'd spent February fourteenth alone this year.

Elliot Burch had left a message on her answering machine, persistent in his attempts to make up with her after she discovered he was the owner of a building where elderly holocaust survivors were being terrorized into vacating the premises—so that Elliot could build a new tower on the site. He kept offering gifts, and Catherine had returned or refused them all. His Valentine-by-phone was Elliot's way of saying that he intended to back off. He told her he only wanted to talk, and that he still cared about her. Catherine didn't return that call. She had still been very angry with him.

As for Vincent—she didn't know whether Vincent had planned anything special for her or not. He had kept safely to his bed Below that night, waiting for his burns and gashes and broken bones to heal. Only two nights previous to the holiday, Catherine's fear had drawn him into the streets above his subterranean home. On that disastrous night, a gang's explosive attack had ended a completely different witness interview—and the life of Catherine's witness—and very nearly Vincent himself. Catherine had not dared to go down into the Tunnels on the night of the fourteenth. Vincent's father had still been very angry with her. She'd still been very angry with herself.

There's too much anger in the world, Catherine thought. *Too much fear. There should be more laughter. We should all have more simple pleasures, and more love*.

"Earth to Cathy," Jenny called, waggling her fingers at her from the bedroom.

"Cathy here," she called back. "Don't mind me. I'm just cursing the scarcity of simple pleasures in life."

That set them off again, and the three friends began making a list: chocolate truffles, a child's hug, the best wines, being kissed by a clean-shaven man, down comforters, freshly ground coffee, autumn colors on the trees, long walks in the park.

Encouraged by their energetic brainstorm, Catherine let go of her problems and invested herself fully in their conversation. She thought, *There should be more good things, for more people...but I have love enough right here, right now*. *I can be content with that*. *I have friends*

who love me. I can be grateful.

After Nancy wished them both goodnight, Catherine and Jenny cleared away the dishes from dinner and made popcorn. They sat down in front of the TV again, squabbling companionably over the popcorn bowl. They finished the movie. Catherine slid Jenny's video cassette into the rewinder. Jenny stretched her arms up and sighed.

"You're still a lot of fun, my dear," she said, brushing one hand over her fashionably spiky brown hair. "Thanks for having me over."

"Thanks for coming," Catherine answered. "I needed this, Jen. I really needed a change."

"I could tell. Next time, you come to my place."

"Deal," Catherine said.

Closing the front door behind her friend a few minutes later, Catherine yawned. The case files in her satchel could wait until tomorrow. Tonight, she intended to drift to sleep on her warm cloud of hard-won elation.

V

18 March 1987
Wednesday Night

Mary hugged Vincent, smiling. Vincent looked down at the top of her head, enjoying her delight and her embrace; since the year Vincent had grown taller than the motherly woman, he could count the occasions she'd hugged him on one hand. They stood together in one corner of the Dormitory, watching the children become acquainted with their new toys. Weaver sat nearby on one of the children's beds, sorting clothes into baskets for laundering. So far, nothing needed repair.

Not only had Vincent arrived with new things for the little ones, but he'd brought *new* new things. Clean new things. *Radical* new things, as young Nicholas informed him.

Vincent heard small feet running along the corridor outside the Dormitory. A few seconds later, Geoffrey rushed in with Eric, Ellie, and Kipper close behind, all four children dressed in nightclothes and slippers, holding toothbrushes and jars of toothpowder in their hands. They might be just getting up or they might be just going to bed. Like the adults of their world, the children were free to keep whatever hours they chose, so long as they did not disturb the resting times of others. Kipper spoke for the entire foursome. "What's happening?" he asked.

"Come and see," said Zach, grinning. The older boy pulled a new garment out of Vincent's collection bag for Weaver's inspection.

The four newcomers darted around Zach and the adults to join their friends on the floor.

"Ellie?" Vincent called in a low voice that nevertheless reverberated through the chamber. "Eric?"

Both children stopped and looked up. Vincent held out a hand. "Come. I have something special for you."

The children set their toiletries on a night table and came to him. Vincent gave Mary a gentle squeeze, then stepped out of her sideways hold to crouch down in front of the two siblings.

"What is it?" Eric asked.

Vincent reached into his overshirt pocket and pulled out two small objects. The other

children crowded close, looking on with great interest. Vincent felt their collective excitement enfold him like a blanketing mist of warmth and happiness. His surprise visit tonight offered a welcome departure from their nightly routine.

"Ellie and Eric were not with us for Winterfest," Vincent explained to them all, "and at the place where they were staying Above, none of the children received any presents at Christmastime."

The children, well aware of how Uppercity Christmas traditions were supposed to work, made collective sounds of sympathy and indignation. Ellie lowered her eyes. Vincent offered his understanding, resting his empty hand on her shoulder.

Eric had been angry and unhappy at Ridley Hall, but Ellie *hated* the foster home and feared the adults there. In that place, her darkest nightmare had come true: her best efforts had failed to protect both Eric and herself and the grown-ups took her little brother away from her. Then they *sold* her to a lecherous pickpocket who beat her because she refused to steal. Ellie's courageous heart still struggled to heal from these violent betrayals.

Vincent continued. "So, tonight I have brought each of them a late midwinter's gift. Remember, these things are theirs, to keep or to share as they please." That was the rule with personal items Below. Sharing was certainly an expectation, but if a thing was not communal property, it belonged to its owner. Individual gifts were private possessions.

Vincent handed a small metal car to Eric, who shared Mouse's fascination with mechanical devices and Topsider vehicles.

Eric's face lit up. "Hot Wheels!" he cried. "Omigosh!" He turned to Kipper. "Check it out!" Vincent felt Eric's gladness and his gratitude, the boy's sense of belonging renewed. Someone had brought something special, just for *Eric*.

Kipper held up a hand and Eric slapped him a high five.

"What do you say, Eric?" Mary prompted.

"Oh. Thanks, Vincent!" The bespectacled boy beamed at him. Vincent would have preferred to do without hearing Mary's quiet goad, but the community's nurse and midwife was also guardian of the Nursery and Orphans' Dormitory. All honored her methods. Vincent smiled back at the boy, an expression which showed mostly in Vincent's eyes.

"You're welcome," Vincent said to Eric. He turned to Ellie. "And this is for you."

He held out a thin plastic star, green-tinged yellow, about the size of his palm. A white satin ribbon had been knotted into a loop through a small hole in one of the star's five points.

"Look," Vincent said, taking his hand from her shoulder and cupping it over the star. He raised his hands to Ellie's eye-level, inviting her to peer between them. She did so. Her "Oh!" was little more than a breath, but her wonder ignited like a flame in Vincent's sense of the girl.

He placed the star in Ellie's hands and leaned back on his heels.

"What's it do, Ellie?" Samantha asked the older girl.

"It glows in the dark," Ellie said.

Ellie would never admit it to an adult, but Vincent knew she missed the sky—missed counting stars at night. She and Eric were not quite ready to venture Above again, but seeing this ornament among the discarded toys, Vincent had known he could bring one star Below for her. He had paused to expose the plastic to bright torchlight before entering the children's Dormitory.

Many voices exclaimed over this gift, telling Ellie to hold it up to lights to make it glow after those lights were put out, sharing stories of other glow-in-the-dark objects the children had seen. Ellie's friends all affirmed that glow-in-the-dark was *cool*.

While the others chattered around them, Ellie remained quiet. She looked into Vincent's eyes. She saw that he understood something of what the star meant to her.

“What’s the matter, Ellie?” Mary asked. Vincent could hear the little frown in her voice, feel the maternal propriety in her manner. “Don’t you like your present?”

Ah, Mary, he thought.

Ellie didn’t answer Mary. She only stepped closer to Vincent and wrapped her arms around his neck. Vincent could feel the shape her fingers made as she clutched the star behind his head. He pressed one hand to her back, careful to keep his own fingers flat so he would not scrape her with his claws, nor catch his sharp nails in the curling strands of her soft brown hair.

For a moment, the girl’s heart beat against his, quick against slow. Vincent’s joy expanded into wonderment. He felt humbled to know that this beautiful child so entrusted herself to him. She was delicate as a little bird beneath his wide hand, solemn as an owl in her thankfulness.

“You’re welcome, Ellie,” he murmured in her ear. She nodded against his cheek, then released him.

Vincent stood up. “I must go now,” he told Mary and Weaver. “Cullen has asked me to help him with something in his workshop.”

“Night, Vincent,” Weaver said. Her white, wrinkled face smiled at him in the molten candlelight. “Did good, scrounging.”

Vincent nodded to her and went to the chamber entrance.

Mary must have given the children a Meaningful Look behind Vincent’s back, because as he left the Dormitory they chorused, “Thank you, Vincent!”

Out of everyone’s sight, Vincent could not suppress a toothy grin. Catherine was not the only one feeling loved by friends tonight.

VI

18 March 1987
Wednesday Night

Hughes hovered over the video monitor, replaying the footage for the dozenth time. He watched the dark figure move downhill, turn, and stand still. Hughes hit the pause button. The infrared images were grainy and blotchy but he was *not* mistaken: that face came straight out of the annals of cryptozoology. The creature was carrying something slung over its shoulder, and it was wearing something else—a blanket?—draped over its head and torso. Hughes wished that blanket-or-whatever wasn’t part of the picture. It shadowed those astonishing features and concealed the creature’s full shock of long, pale hair.

The professor picked up his Styrofoam coffee cup (his third since he’d returned to his lab), sipping from it as he backed across the room to a rolling lab stool and sat down. He gazed at the screen.

Is it possible? he wondered, hardly daring to hope. He’d grown up in a religious family, but had long since abandoned the notion of miracles—or it might be fairer to say the entire sphere of faith had abandoned *him*. But now, outside all of his expectations, here came the second chance that Hughes had stopped looking for years ago. It stared out at him from the screen. It resounded in his memory.

Back when Hughes had been young, and eager, and stupid, his trajectory in the field of biology sent him into practical work, studying rare and endangered species as a hand-picked member of his mentor’s research team. Albert Canton was both his idol and his friend in those

days. Canton also became closer to Hughes than any of their other colleagues because he and Hughes seemed to entertain the same quiet flight of fancy.

What if *other* hominid species remained undiscovered in the wildest parts of the world? What if reports of not-quite-*Homo-sapiens* creatures had some basis in fact? With anyone else, these questions were relegated to the "secret personal hobby" category of interest. But in Canton, Hughes found a brilliant mind willing to ask, to speculate, to investigate legend and folklore—and to do more than dream.

Toward the end of their good times together, Canton and Hughes undertook two special expeditions, ostensibly to seek out and study vulnerable primate populations, but (as Canton, winking, liked to point out to Hughes in private) also investigating locations where local legend indicated other possibilities. They chased rumors and tracked nebulous traces of truth. They dreamed.

"You know, Edward," Canton said to him one night during their second foray, as the campfire burned low outside their tent and the rain forest chirred and whispered around them. "Even if we never find such a creature, it's worth the effort to *try*."

Hughes eagerly agreed.

"It's the *trying* that makes us human. Our *attempting* to ask the right questions, and to comprehend the answers. If you take nothing else away from this trip, remember that."

Albert Canton, PhD, had sounded so wise in that moment. So noble. He reminded Hughes of the older brother Hughes had lost when he was seventeen. The life of Blake Hughes had revolved around baseball rather than biology, but Blake had been the only one in the family who never disparaged his baby brother for Edward's scholarly pursuits. Blake and Albert were the only people who ever gave the young Ed Hughes any useful advice.

Canton gazed through the gauzy insect netting, watching one of their Atlantic Forest guides (whose name Hughes could never pronounce correctly) stir the coals with the charred end of a stick. "I've got this dream, Edward. I want to find something science has never found before. Bring it to light, let the world get a good look at it. Show them all that our little blue planet is a grander place than they expect it to be. That's why I try so hard, whatever the stuffed shirts back home have to say about me. Do you know the only cure for intellectual stagnation, Edward?"

Hughes *did* know. "Dream big," he told his friend. Canton had looked away from the fire to smile at his assistant. Hughes had smiled back, happy to be Canton's up-and-coming collaborator.

Unfortunately, in the end, Hughes found out that Canton was not at all willing to share the unexpected achievement of their dream. The funny part an unfunny situation? Because the two of them had spent several years seriously discussing how a hidden species might exist in the modern world, both men were also uniquely suited for detecting scant signs of a small animal population in the wilderness. They did not unveil a bipedal hominid, but—together!—they did discover a new primate.

Together, they captured three animals alive. Together—together, damn it all!—they studied their find in the field. Later, after relocating to their partnering research center in Buenos Aires, Canton gave the most important documentary tasks to Hughes. Hughes had been grateful for the work, for the experience—and for Canton's trust.

His dedication paid off exponentially after Hughes hypothesized that their howler's dietary preference for the young leaves of the uncommon *hestas* tree greatly minimized the incidence of disease in the tiny primate group. Canton and Hughes returned to Misiones, confirmed the finding, and were the first to study the nutritive properties of the tree. Two vital

revelations from the same expedition! Canton had showered Hughes with praise, and Hughes was sure they had changed the world for the better, that his future had opened wide, the whole universe now his to explore and explain.

Then they returned to New York. And once they were home, Canton claimed every last iota of the glory. He presented his assistant's painstaking research as his own, and if Hughes came up at all in conversation, it was only when Canton deigned to identify "my Edward" as a model researcher. "Very nose to the grindstone!" had been Canton's favorite designation.

The University welcomed the moderate prestige Canton brought to it. When Hughes went to the Provost, he was impatiently ordered not to make waves. It was 1972. The student body was—well, one could call it "rambunctious," and the city was splitting apart at the seams. And anyway, was it not *Dr. Canton's* expedition? Was Hughes not Albert Canton's *assistant* in the venture? It was in everyone's best interest for Hughes to shape up and stay out of the limelight.

Meanwhile, Canton was publishing papers and raising consciousness (whatever *that* meant) about environmental conservation. He became a popular expert both on and off campus, and led several research teams over the next few years in his quest to refine or synthesize *hestas* alkaloids into useful human pharmaceuticals (frequently using the more common relatives of Canton's Howler in the ensuing drug trials). Hughes remained Canton's doleful shadow, rounding out the department's ranks of adjunct faculty and keeping Canton's new projects in order for the man. Canton seemed to find nothing amiss in their working relationship. He had become the big fish in his little pond, while Hughes devolved into an over-imaginative sidekick. For years afterward, Canton liked to joke that he went to Argentina looking for *Alouatta cantoni* —while his young associate expected to find mythical *Ucumar-zupai*.

This destroyed Hughes, and he was sure Canton knew it. Only too late did Hughes begin to recognize the thousand little strategies Canton had used to manipulate Hughes into doing all the work so Canton could enjoy a nice little vacation during his sabbatical. The fact that Hughes uncovered a profitable medical puzzle piece only slathered icing on Albert Canton's cake. The betrayal cut Hughes to pieces and left him scrambling to sweep the fragments of his life back together into some modicum of a respectable career.

He knew he merely tarried now, riding the current of Canton's influence with the University. He remained secure in his predecessor's old position mostly because, once-upon-a-time, he had been Canton's favorite protégé. And also (Hughes could admit this with grim pride) because he faithfully did not rock the all-hallowed administrative boat, delivered adequate content in his lectures, and remained nose-to-the-grindstone as a biddable assisting researcher for all of his colleagues' academic investigations.

Now the embers of his derided dream flared to life in his soul. Let Canton keep his South American monkey-munch and his over-bloated research grants. Canton had never seen anything like *this* creature before.

His mentor's hypocritical dreams had turned out pathetically small *(Albert's miserly little HEART was always pathetically small!)*, but Edward Hughes had gotten as far as he had because he truly did know how to dream big. The cost of his dreams had proved exorbitant, but if this creature, this new chance, offered a longsuffering scientist's reward—

Hughes drank the last swallow of his coffee. Perhaps the time had come for a little boat rocking. He needed to prepare for his request, get some shots from the video printed. He glanced at his watch. Ten minutes to midnight. *Well, I won't be able to sleep tonight anyway,* he thought. He sat on the stool, looking up at the alien face on the video screen.

It was a beast's face—a lion's face, shrunken to the size of an ape's head and attached to a body that seemed to walk on two legs. Was the creature actually bipedal, or did it only stand up

like a bear or a gorilla before dropping onto all fours again? So many questions crowded in. The possibilities inherent to this discovery were intoxicating.

The professor thought, *I want this. I want this more than I've ever wanted anything else. This Mystery, this time, is mine.* His dream reclaimed, Hughes crossed the lab to gather his photography equipment, galvanized into action.

Chapter Two: Choices

I

19 March 1987
Thursday Morning

"Vincent," Father said. He held out a sheet of paper. "Have you seen this?"

Vincent walked to Father's chair from the short flight of iron steps that connected Father's Study to the encircling gallery and the lower passage which led to Vincent's rooms. He took the stiff sheet of hand-recycled paper from Father's outstretched hand. "No, I haven't seen this before," Vincent said, admiring a sketch of Father holding a stethoscope to a child's chest. "But it's a true likeness." The child might be Samantha as a toddler. "Who drew this?"

"Laura," Father answered. "She says Elizabeth is helping her to depict human figures."

"Effectively, too," Vincent said, glad that Laura had found her way into the Painted Tunnels, and into the painter Elizabeth's heart. He knew the old woman was happy to have so capable a student visit her in the isolated tunnels above the South Pockets. Laura, for her part, had long been ready for a new instructor's artistic perspectives. She liked to draw in graphite pencil and to paint with brilliant acrylics (neither being among Vincent's favorite mediums), and the time had also come for Laura to learn about *color* from someone who had not lived all their life in the eternal firelit twilight of the world Below.

"It seems the two of them have plans for a new mural," Father said. He nodded at the paper in Vincent's hands. "This is the general idea for Laura's first contribution to the piece. I suppose I'll have to make my way out to see their work, after they've finished."

Vincent returned the drawing and watched Father try to look at it without seeming too flattered by Laura's rendering. She had smoothed the cut of Father's rusted-gray hair and beard. She had also emphasized the laugh lines around his eyes rather than the creases of his brow, which long years of leadership and private sorrows had etched into his face.

In the portrait, as was often the case in life, Father wore a heavy knitted sweater under a long cloak. The cloak was buckled across his shoulders by leather straps. Fingerless gloves protected his penciled hands from the perpetual chill of their underground home. The well-shaded arms were insulated, like Vincent's this morning, by fleece-padded wraps from wrists to elbows.

"I dare say, she's rolled back the clock a few years," Father murmured.

Blue eyes smiling, Vincent bent down to kiss the older man's cheek, inhaling the familiar conglomeration of scents that defined *Father*: book dust, mellow Castile soap, candle smoke, his skin's individuated masculine spice, the wool and leather in his clothing, and a faint note of rubbing alcohol. "Good morning, Father," Vincent said.

"Good morning. Please, sit, eat." Father set the drawing to one side and tugged at a breakfast tray on the table.

Vincent silently observed that despite Father's carefree comment about venturing all the way out to the Painted Tunnels, he continued to have difficulty shifting even the weight of his dented, silver-plated food tray. Vincent said nothing about the matter. He slid the tray closer to the table's edge and claimed the place beside Father, where a second tray waited for him. He and Father had breakfasted together in Father's Study almost every day since the cave-in. Father was still recovering from his injuries. He had now become ambulatory again, but had yet to venture

farther from his room than Vincent's lavatory.

Vincent reached for a jar of cherry preserves and watched his guardian pour hot tea into both of their cups from two separate teapots: herbal medicine for Father, and fragrant jasmine tea for Vincent. Vincent was thinking, *Peter has recommended some light exercise for Father. Perhaps tomorrow evening, I'll suggest a slow walk together. We can go out to the Mirror Pool.*

He expected that the older man would accept his offer without a moment's hesitation. Father might grumble about the differences between his definition of "light exercise," compared to his friend Dr. Peter Alcott's, but he would also adopt the pace Vincent set for their stroll. They both knew that although impatient with his half-healed status, Father was not quite able to journey any distance alone beyond Vincent's rooms—a situation Father, of course, hated to admit.

Vincent remembered the day Father first arose from his sickbed, stiff and cantankerous. He had been quick to remind Vincent, and Mary, and anyone unlucky enough to wander into the Study hoping to borrow a book from Father's blissfully chaotic Library, that Father remained a *doctor* in full possession of his faculties and his medical skill. He was *perfectly* capable of ascertaining his physical limitations and felt certain that *any* location within the Hub would be *well* within his range of circumnavigation.

Mary had murmured something dismissive about cabin fever and calmly picked up a brunch tray to return it to the Kitchen. Father grumped and clumped across his chamber toward the salvaged pulpit staircase that spiraled upward to the mezzanine of the cavernous two-story room. Vincent had remained seated in the piebald, velveteen-upholstered chair he favored. He stroked his fingers over places on the chair's arms where the fabric was still a fuzzy carmine red and waited for Father's good sense to catch up with him.

It did so at the top of the stair. Father slowed down. He made a fine show of taking several minutes to select a heavy book from a four-foot stack of similar volumes, all of which stood packed against the wrought iron balustrade. Then Father sighed, crestfallen, and called, "All right. I'm done now. Vincent?"

And Vincent went up for him. Father abandoned his crutch to lean his weight upon Vincent's shoulders. They descended the stair together, Vincent moving sideways two treads below Father, his strong hands keeping Father balanced. Stepping safely down onto the stone floor, Vincent led his obstinate patient to a chair. He went to Father's Victorian sideboard for medicine.

"What can I bring you?" asked Vincent softly.

"Ibuprofen will do," Father said.

Vincent brought him the ibuprofen bottle from the upper cupboard, where Father kept the community's small supply of prescription medications and nutritional supplements out of the children's easy reach. He let Father open the bottle and decide upon his own dosage. Vincent fetched a tumblerful of water in a heavy faceted drinking glass while the Undercity's physician shook two white tablets out of the bottle.

Father swallowed his pills and glared at the faded Kirman carpet on the floor.

"Give yourself time, Father," Vincent said.

Father had only nodded. Vincent retrieved Father's crutch and the book—Sandburg's *Remembrance Rock*—from the balcony. He placed both within Father's reach and sat down across the table from him. In meditative silence, he studied the muted colors of the gilt triptych displayed upon a natural shelf of the rock wall on the other side of the room.

Father began to feel better. So they discussed rational ways to accommodate Father's in-between stage of healing. Father was willing to accept his meals in his chamber. He agreed to

write down lists of books and supplies he could ask people to bring to him, rather than trying to find those things for himself. But when they came to other practical matters, he balked at intruding into his son's private bathing chamber, which had, Father argued, been hollowed out from the living rock and furnished expressly and exclusively for *Vincent's* use.

Vincent had contended that while privacy was indeed a relatively scarce commodity in their world, convenience was even more so, and a man in Father's condition needed every available convenience to speed his recovery. Vincent's room was *closer* than the communal chamber—and *he* was closer if Father found himself in need of assistance. Would Father rather have Vincent at hand to help with bathing, poultices, bandages, and the struggle to dress himself? Or would he prefer whomever happened to be in the communal chamber when Father needed such help—one of the children perhaps, or, say, Winslow?

"Or, God help us," Father had finally muttered, "Mouse!" Sometimes winning an argument with Father was like playing a game of chess with him: exchange volleys of tactical contentions, then let Father's own logic lead him toward Vincent's patiently prearranged endgame.

Yes, Vincent thought, *Father needs to leave our end of the Hub soon. His patience for even logical confinement won't last much longer. He'll enjoy seeing springtime constellations reflected in the Mirror Pool.*

"Laura continues to astound me," Father mused, blowing on his steaming tea. "So many talents. Poetry, embroidery, foraging. Now drawing and painting." He glanced over the rim of his mug at his adopted son. "Although she's not the only one with a scavenger's eye. I hear you brought in quite the haul last night."

"I chanced upon some useful things." Vincent picked up his fork and knife and began shaping his slices of cherry-covered French toast into manageable pieces.

"You were out rather early." Father's chastisement sounded gentle. He knew springtime exerted a tidal pull upon all the denizens of the Tunnels, and that Vincent was far from immune.

"And I returned early as well," Vincent said. "I knew Cullen wanted help with some framework beams."

"The seal for the Maze?" Father asked.

"Yes. The Needle's Eye."

This was the entryway into the unstable underground labyrinth most accessible to children and unwary Tunnelfolk. The Needle's Eye led into half a dozen side passages, each more tantalizing than the last to adventurous (or even merely curious) Tunnelkids. It was impossible to find *every* entrance to the Maze, let alone seal them all. Vincent had spent his life exploring all the nooks and crannies of his underground realm and he still discovered new openings into the Maze from time to time. But after Eric's accident in that cavern the children called the Dungeon, and the subsequent cave-in that had trapped and injured Father and Vincent, sealing the closest entrances and blockading the Inner Maze altogether had become top priorities for the community.

Father nodded. "Good. Cullen is installing the frame today?"

"Yes. I am one member of his crew this afternoon, along with Kanin. Michael will help as well. We need Michael's hand at the ropes, and tomorrow he and Cullen will board up the frame."

"*Very* good." Father turned his attention to his own plate. "I hope Michael appreciates this opportunity. Not all our youngsters have the benefit of three experts to guide them through their first construction project."

Vincent chuckled. "I certainly did not. Kanin was still teaching himself when I began to

learn stone cutting work from him."

"I remember," said Father grimly. "You will be careful, down there, won't you? Look after Michael?"

"I'll keep him safe." It was Vincent's first duty to all of them, and his highest privilege: to protect his family—body and soul. "His real work begins with the weekend. Kanin plans to build a stone wall across the Northwest Opening. And after that, Cullen and Winslow are counting on Michael's help for the Inner Maze barricade. I'll be teaching Michael's literature class in his absence."

"What are they reading these days?" Father asked.

"Dostoevsky. *The Brothers Karamazov*."

Father looked up from his breakfast. "Michael's teaching *that*?"

"Yes. The Garnett translation. I sat in on the session two weeks ago. His group is enthralled."

"Remarkable," Father said, shaking his head. "You've unearthed a brilliant scholar in that boy, Vincent."

Father's pride for Michael, and for Vincent, suffused the chamber. Vincent basked in the emotional warmth. Their graceful *mudita* encompassed three generations of teachers Below. Vincent felt honored to find a place within the legacy they were building for all the children to come.

Thinking about children now, Vincent began to prepare himself to meet one of his own classes, which should be arriving in his chamber after breakfast. He intended to bring them out into the Long Gallery where they could trace figures upon the smooth floor with chalk and string. Today's lesson would delve into the geometry of circles. Vincent did not doubt that after the lesson ended, the younger children would be playing marbles out there with new respect for their measurements of diameter and circumference—

Sudden wrath expelled him from his reverie. *Catherine?!* He sat up, listening with his heart, intent on the inner connection.

"Vincent." Father touched his arm. His concern flooded Vincent's awareness. "What is it?"

"Catherine is...very angry," Vincent said.

He took a deep breath, sorting through his emotional impressions with the cautious dexterity of a man who has scorched his fingers upon a stove he had believed to be cold. She was not in danger. Catherine was surprised and furious, but not afraid. Vincent imagined the bond between them as a line, directing him to her. She was still in her apartment, and safe, which meant she was probably reviewing her case files before traveling to her office. Knowing what he knew about many of her recent cases, Vincent had a good idea why she might be upset. Nevertheless, the intensity of her feelings startled him. At the surface, she felt angry on behalf of others. Beneath that, Catherine was very unhappy, and Vincent could not pinpoint a reason.

This is more than what she sometimes feels after a celebratory evening, Vincent thought, although he'd also been feeling that particular irritability in her ever since she awakened. Catherine's discomfort inserted an underhum into Vincent's thoughts, countermanding his present contentment. Her cloudburst of anger troubled him.

Father was still looking at him, still holding Vincent by one arm. Vincent turned to cover Father's fingers with his own large hand. "She has complicated cases right now," he told his worried parent. "She's been helping people who have no one else to turn to."

"Yes. I've seen Catherine's dedication to her work." Father waited for Vincent to release his hand before he pulled away. Now Vincent felt Father's grief and gratitude. He guessed Father

was thinking of Margaret Chase—and the help Catherine had provided to reunite him with the woman he loved for a precious few days before Margaret died, peaceful in Father's warm embrace.

Father sipped his tea. It smelled strong to Vincent this morning, the blend including nettle, calendula, and lemon. Olivia, resident herbalist that she was, did her best to help Father heal. "I expect you'll go Above again tonight," Father said. "To see Catherine."

Vincent nodded and picked up his fork. If Catherine did not come to him after her workday ended, Vincent would go to her. Either way, he would be Above, and she would need to talk. *Take care today, Catherine,* he thought. *I'll be here for you, when night falls. I am here for you now. Be gentle with yourself.*

Vincent could hear light footfalls echo in the passage outside the Study as the first of his students passed by, heading for his chamber. He hurried to finish his meal, reluctantly setting thoughts of Catherine aside. Until he could be with her in person, Vincent had his own responsibilities to attend to.

II

19 March 1987
Thursday Morning

Catherine paced the floor in front of Joe Maxwell's desk, fuming. *I'M overreacting?* she thought. *You think YOU don't have time for this? Well, what about Polly Alberti? Give me a break, Joe!*

Joe flipped through the new pictures in Polly's case file—pictures which had been waiting on Catherine's desk when she got into the office a few minutes ago. *At least I had some warning,* Catherine thought. Polly had called her at home before leaving the hospital, just catching Catherine on her way out the door. Warned or not, Catherine was incensed by the new wounds and bruises those photos from the ER documented.

"According to Polly, he used his belt this time," Catherine informed Joe. "And there were also cigarette burns on her back."

Frowning, Joe didn't look up from the snapshots. His mop of wavy black hair and his loosened gray-striped necktie gave Joe the air of a schoolboy preparing to cram for a midterm exam in his least favorite subject.

"For God's sake, Joe! They've been married twelve years!" Catherine leaned over the edge of her supervisor's desk, wanting him to look her in the eye. She also wanted to shout, *Polly finally finds the guts to do something about her private hell, and you're "too busy?" We're all too busy, but that's beside the point!*

"All right," Joe said, holding up one hand. He did look at her face then, and Catherine saw he was just as angry as she. Only, he held it in better. Joe must not have spent *his* previous evening pushing the proverbial envelope with a third glass of Merlot. "I'll have an arrest warrant out for Alberti before he can put down another six-pack. *All right*?"

No, Catherine thought, only partially mollified. *But it's the best we can do*. Joe stuffed the photos back into the file folder. Catherine turned to walk out of his office.

"Hey, stick around," Joe said to her back.

Catherine half-turned in the doorway. "I have a deposition."

Joe closed Polly's file. "There's something we need to talk about." He stood behind his desk, waiting for Catherine to come back.

Thinking, *Great. Now what?* Catherine closed the office door and crossed the room to take the envelope Joe held out for her.

"Just came in this morning," Joe said.

Catherine read the return address. "Providence, Rhode Island?"

Joe sat down in his chair. "The DA up there is a good friend of Moreno's. He's been looking for someone outside his office to head his Domestic Violence Bureau." He nodded at the envelope in Catherine's hands. "Go ahead, open it."

Catherine glanced over the pages she pulled out. A cover letter, a job description, a list of associated offices. "I don't understand."

"What's not to understand?" Joe was smiling now, a happy little smirk of pleasure at her good fortune. "You've got an impressive record. Moreno's word is like gold with the guy. He wants you in Providence, a week from yesterday."

Catherine looked from the papers to Joe's smile. "I'm very flattered." And she *was*. "But this is very sudden, isn't it?"

"Well *yeah*," Joe said. "Like everything else in life. But we're not just talking about a promotion here. We're talking about a quantum leap in your career. Go ahead. Read the job profile."

Catherine did. She felt a twinge in her back as she leaned over the page. She straightened her spine. The bullet wound she'd received from the extortionist Mitch Denton still ached when she moved the wrong way. *Relax,* she told herself. The pain faded as she looked at Joe again. The profile seemed too good to be true.

"You'd be coordinating everything from counseling services to court appearances," he told her. "That's right up your alley, kiddo."

The job was indeed right up her alley. "Joe," she said, a slow smile spreading across her face. *And to think,* Catherine's heart sang, *when they saw this, they thought of me! This is how I've been wanting to help people for months now. This is what I'm best at doing.*

And the Manhattan District Attorney, and this Deputy District Attorney, both acknowledged that fact. Simply knowing that they chose to hand this envelope to *her* made Catherine feel like the past nine months of her employment downtown were worth every drop of sweat—and blood—and every second of frustration.

"Not to mention a fifty percent salary hike, minimum," Joe continued. "Which I know to you isn't exactly a top priority, but it would certainly make me smile."

Catherine thought, *This is a dream come true. Only, I didn't know I've been wishing for this. I didn't know this was even possible for me.*

Joe seemed to take her silence for uncertainty. He said, "Look. Nobody knows better than me how good you've been for this office. We put you in Research, you dig up the answers to questions no one knew they needed to ask. We stick you with Investigations, and you find witnesses that our detectives can't track down with a bloodhound and a Geiger counter. But let's be honest, Cathy: here, you're just another foot soldier, anonymous and underpaid."

Catherine hardly felt in a position to disagree. *You know what? Joe's right. And I owe him my thanks for saying it out loud.* Catherine tried to take in the enormity of the sudden option, this flood of freedom that beckoned to her.

"I'll need some time," she said.

"Fine. Only Moreno needs to know by tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" The sore place behind her right shoulder announced itself again.

Joe's voice assumed its best big-brother tone. "Cathy, look. You don't say no to this kind of job, because it doesn't come up again. Not like this. And if it does, it won't be for a long time."

Catherine stared at him. Flattered, flummoxed, and flat-footed. This letter was her ticket out of the bull pen. It offered a divergent path. A chance to do something with her life that mattered. It left her speechless.

Joe waved bye-bye at her, smiling hugely. Catherine wandered out of his office, holding the job offer in both hands. *Everyone will be as surprised as I am. Dad, Jenny, Nancy, Edie. This changes everything. This simplifies everything. I think I'm happy about this chance. This means leaving the foot-soldiering behind.*

She reached her desk and dropped into her chair. *And this means leaving New York behind,* she realized. Thinking of the city led her to thoughts of the world beneath the city. Catherine's happiness evaporated. This job would mean leaving Vincent behind.

She set the packet of papers on her desk, telling herself, *I can't think about that now. I have to get to that deposition.* She reached for her satchel. Her life suddenly seemed much too complicated again.

III

19 March 1987
Thursday Morning

"Next slide please," Hughes called.

Blank light illuminated the lecture bowl until the slide dropped into place. The murky red tones from the new frame darkened the white faces of his three colleagues as they sat gazing up at the screen. Hughes looked up at the image. This was the creature from the park, just as it began to turn toward the camera. The long flattened nose was most apparent in this image.

"Here you can clearly see the nose pad and the slant of the eye. Notice that while the nose seems feline, the eye is the wrong comparative size. A little larger than, say, human eyes, but definitely simian in its proportions. Next please!"

The final image appeared. Hughes had saved the closeup shot of the creature's face for last.

"This is the best angle," Hughes said, smiling. "Extraordinary isn't it?" He let the men take it in, then he directed, "Lights, please!" at the back of the room. The overhead lights came up. Hughes looked expectantly at his audience.

Burt Clark crossed his arms and glanced at Neil Pierson. Pierson returned the look. Hughes couldn't tell what they were thinking.

Burt Clark was the anthropologist Hughes had deemed most potentially open to this discovery, now that Alexander Ross was gone. *Clark is the better man for this situation anyway,* Hughes thought. Ross had always entertained a fascination with all things mysterious, but Clark was more credible in the eyes of the administration. He wielded some political clout.

He and Hughes had also worked well together over the past two years, coordinating in-state ecosystem studies with Native American culture preservation. They had become interdepartmental allies. Hughes felt lucky that Clark had been available to attend this meeting; next week, Clark would be in Egypt, joining Theresa Drang and her archeology students on a dig

during spring break. As for today, Hughes hoped he had intrigued Clark with the possibilities presented by a *bona fide* wild-man-creature, even if only to confirm local folklore.

The other two men came from Hughes's own departmental subsection in the Fairchild Annex. Neil Pierson was the biologist working with Hughes on the urban owls survey. He was also the closest thing Hughes had to a personal friend. The third man was Leland Quint, the department head Hughes answered to. Hughes waited out the silence, fidgeting with the hem of his sweater.

At last, Quint removed his glasses and looked at Hughes. "You have something more?" Quint asked. When Hughes didn't answer, Quint said, "You can't seriously expect me to go to the Provost with this, Edward. A research team? Funding? For what? Our own Loch Ness Monster? I'd be laughed out of the office."

Hughes saw that Quint was trying not to laugh right then and there. "I'm not asking for a grant," Hughes said, hurt.

"I know you're not."

"I'm asking for time to investigate. A week, maybe two at the most. In our own backyard."

Quint looked around at the others.

Please take me seriously, Hughes thought. *And you two! Why are you just sitting there? Say something!*

Hughes had invited Clark and Pierson in an attempt to weight his presentation against Quint's authority. However, neither of his almost-friends offered to support him. Hughes felt his stomach begin to ache.

"I'm sorry, Edward," Quint said, shaking his head as he stood up.

"But you saw the evidence!"

"A four-second video clip and some inconclusive enlargements?"

"I was *there*, Leland. I saw the creature! I looked into its eyes." The wonder of that moment thrilled in Hughes again as he spoke.

Now Quint began to patronize him. "You're wasting your time," he said, "*imagining* things."

Hughes couldn't bear the humiliating prod. "At least I'm not *blind* to them!"

"Edward—" Pierson warned.

But Hughes wasn't finished. "How many times in history have true scientists believed the unbelievable, and revealed the unimaginable? Think of the platypus, the gorilla! Impossible creatures, to short-sighted minds, and yet they *are* real! Then look at us. Already old men. Myopic, prejudiced. And, if someone has a new idea—heaven forbid!—we beat him down and then claim it as our own!"

The amphitheater got very quiet after his outburst. *Oh, no,* Hughes thought, looking at their startled faces. He dropped his gaze quickly to the floor. He'd gone too far.

"Forgive me," he said softly. "I didn't mean that."

Quint stopped trying to be even superficially tolerant of him. "You're here largely because this University has chosen to humor you."

Hughes looked up at Quint's black-browed, gray-bearded face, all his old resentments sizzling within him. "This University owes me something."

His voice now openly contemptuous, Quint replied, "We owe you nothing. You haven't published in God knows how long. You're still full of self-pity because you think someone else received the credit for your work fifteen years ago."

"*Stole* the credit," Hughes snapped.

Quint just smiled at him. But his eyes didn't smile. "Well, I'm sorry Edward, but it's ancient history." He turned away and sidestepped along the row of chairs to the aisle. Clark looked sympathetic, but said nothing to Hughes as he followed Quint out.

See if I ever do YOU a favor again, Hughes thought at the back of Clark's shiny bald head. *I'M the one who helped you find storage for your out-of-the-blue supply order on short notice. Without me, you wouldn't be packing for your Egyptian getaway right now, or learning that mysterious creatures are running wild through Central Park. No: you'd still be scurrying about, looking for a secure storeroom.*

There was a shortage of those over in Anthropology at the moment. Police detectives were still prying into the affairs of the late Dr. Alexander Ross. Cops kept showing up at all hours to cart off anything "suspicious" to wherever it was that the police deposited confiscated evidence. For the officers assigned to the Ross case, just about *everything* qualified as suspicious.

Hughes turned away from the detestable Quint and the unreliable Clark. Pierson had remained behind and showed no inclination to leave. Not just yet. Smiling sadly, he patted Hughes on the shoulder.

Pierson was a good man, an honest man. He didn't take shortcuts. He always spoke kindly to Has-Been-Hughes—he was always nice to everyone. Pierson was a genuine Nice Guy. The students liked him; he took the time to learn their names and he played student band demo tapes (a little too loudly, Hughes had always thought) during his office hours. He spent every Tuesday evening visiting his mother in the nursing home, and he volunteered his services at the Humane Society two or three times each month. He also didn't drink, or smoke, or take risks. All the same, Hughes wished the man had been willing to back him up today. He wished *anyone* had been willing.

"You know," Pierson said, "it was a good try. But I have to agree. These images are scarcely enough to fuel speculation."

"Then what does the creature look like to you?" Hughes asked.

"At a guess? Some homeless person in the park. I really can't make out the face at all. Can't even tell if it's a man or a woman. If you see something strange there...well, there are plenty of homeless with deformities, or injuries. Maybe this unfortunate got a mashed-in nose at some point. Life is hard on the streets."

Hughes hung his head, outmatched. Pierson's niceness felt just as bad as Clark's indifference, and Hughes found that it depressed him even more than Quint's mean-spirited mockery. This kind of charity went beyond humiliation. It was out-and-out demeaning. His grandparents would never had stood for it, but what choice did Hughes have?

"Tell you what," Pierson said. "I'll come by and pick up the logbooks and the night camera this afternoon. Take over the survey from here. You have enough to think about right now."

"You believe I'm crazy," Hughes said, and thought, *They all think I'm crazy. Why did I ever hope they would understand?*

"No." Pierson shook his head. "No, Edward. Just a little tired, maybe. I know you've got the seminar coming up. You should focus on that. Get your lectures in order. Get plenty of sleep. Okay?"

Hughes shrugged. Pierson patted him again and walked away. Hughes felt very small.

After a moment to gather his wits, he called out to the projectionist, a random student he'd pulled in from the hallway who said he had a half-hour to spare. "You can go now. I'll be up for the slides in a minute. I'll put everything away."

The red-headed student raised a hand at him, acknowledging. Hughes perched on the

back of a seat with his arms folded across his chest, fighting the urge to break down into tears. He had no threshold of tolerance for disappointment anymore, no defenses against strong emotion. *I wonder if I dare to even make a hobby of it,* he thought. *Go to the park on my own time and keep watch.*

He sniffed and stood up, telling himself to just let it go. *No one's ever cared about my dreams before. No one. Ever. Why should I expect people to start caring now?*

He trudged out to the aisle. He had a stack of reports to grade. It was time to get back to his office and shut his dream away again.

Hughes thought: *At least I got to taste the possibility, one last time*. *How many people get even that, at this point in their lives?*

But as he plucked the first slide out of the projector, the taste seemed very, very bitter to his overshadowed soul.

IV

19 March 1987
Thursday, Noon

Catherine removed the disposable plastic cover from her salad as her friend sat down beside her on the long bench. The trendy frills of Edie Tyler's marbled gray skirt fluttered below the hem of her black-and-white zebra striped jacket. Catherine thought the cafe's outdoor seating made a nice change. She'd gotten tired of greasy-spoon food and rickety vinyl-covered chairs. Spring sang in the breeze and the sunlight actually felt warm on her hair. She enjoyed the open air, even if Edie had other preferences.

"If you ask me," Edie said, "we should be celebrating at '21' over *Dom Pérignon*, as opposed to having this great debate over *a couple of Diet Pepsis*."

"I don't know, Edie. I don't know if this is something to celebrate or turn down. It's more complicated than that."

"It is?" Edie dropped a plastic accordion straw into her cup and sipped her soda.

"I just don't want to make the wrong choice." Catherine sighed. "Leaving my father's firm for the DA was easy because I *knew* it was right. You know? I felt it. But this is different." Unladylike, she stabbed at her food with her fork.

"Well...you made your list yet?" Edie asked.

"What list?"

"Your list where you take the issue, you write out your pros and cons. Little trick my therapist taught me."

Huh, Catherine thought. "Does it work?"

"For seventy-five dollars an hour, it better work!"

Catherine laughed and Edie smiled, happy to have made her laugh. Catherine's favorite computer magician waved one hand in the air. Her vermilion nails sparked against the shadow-dappled white wall of the building behind her.

"O-kay," Edie said in her let's-get-down-to-business voice. "We know it's the right career move, so we must consider the emotional-slash-romantic side of things."

She reached for a sprig from the flower arrangement on the table, holding the blossom to her nose in a melodramatic imitation of lovestruck maidenhood.

"Ha." *Here it comes,* Catherine thought, and asked, "Such as?"

"Well, let's face it. For eight million people, New York is a hell of a lonely place. Who knows? Maybe a new city would be good for you."

Catherine considered the idea. It was true. Was she lonely? Yes. Especially because she felt a cold distance growing between herself and Vincent ever since her brush with the Vodou cult. Although the rays of sunlight warmed her body no less than they had a moment ago, Catherine shivered. *I refuse to think about that right now,* she thought.

Edie was still driving her point home. "It could give you a chance to meet somebody worthwhile."

"Maybe."

"At least it could get you out of taxi range, you know, away from some of those old flames who just won't let go."

"Maybe," Catherine said again.

Edie meant Elliot Burch. Not that Elliot ever took a cab anywhere. If he wanted to, he could simply ride his limousine or helicopter over to Providence. But Edie was right about this, too. Rhode Island was not Elliot's turf.

"Okay then, we can set aside the romance, or lack thereof. Here's a thought, girlfriend: exactly how *safe* do you want your job to be? I mean, what you do here? It gets you into fistfights with thugs. You almost got blown up, and more than once. You have been drugged, kidnapped...Cathy, you even got shot."

This was Edie at her most serious. She took Catherine's pale hand in her soft brown one. "You're out on the front lines here, Cath."

"And maybe it's time to try a different position on the field?" Catherine asked.

"Maybe, maybe not. I'd guess Rhode Island is safer for you, but who can tell for sure? Providence is the toughest town on the eastern seaboard. You'll have your work cut out for you. But everybody knows you *like* it out on the edge, here or anywhere. Of course, over there, you'll have to start over with figuring out who you can trust. Here, you've got at least a few friends you know you can count on." Edie tossed her braided hair with a flourish. "And you and me? You are *never* gonna be able to replace *me*. 'Cause Edie and Cathy make one fabulous dynamic duo."

Catherine smiled.

"The point is, what is it that *you* want out of life?"

Catherine clasped Edie's hand and then pulled away. "That is the sixty-four thousand dollar question."

Edie's sense of humor rebooted. "Well, if that's the case, when you finally find your answer, feel free to send half of that sixty-odd thousand my way. 'Cause I am breaking my brain trying to help you out here."

"I know, Edie. Believe me, I appreciate it."

"Okay, okay," Edie said next. "I know what to do. We chill a couple of days until the right decision comes to you."

"Moreno needs an answer by tomorrow."

Edie's face scrunched up. "Nice of him to let you sleep on it!"

"The last thing I'll be doing tonight is sleeping." Catherine pictured her impending evening. She thought: *I know who I have to talk to about this. I need to go to him as soon as I can, after work. If he's paying any attention at all, he's probably thinking I've gone stark raving mad today.*

Catherine didn't know how long that conversation would take. She found that she wasn't looking forward to it. This was a strange feeling for her. She had thought she believed that

talking with Vincent had become one of her greatest pleasures in life.

I'm hesitating because this will hurt him, she thought, feeling a guilty sorrow descend upon her. *Vincent's father may have been right when he told me I could bring Vincent nothing but unhappiness. How many times have I hurt Vincent, fumbling around, trying to get my life on track? Trying to get past my fears?*

How many times can I ask him to save me from myself, before we're both too wounded to go on together? And as for "together," I don't even know what that's supposed to feel like for us. Vincent told me himself once, that he fully expects me to live another life someday, and to dream another dream.

She looked at Edie, who sat unusually quiet at her side. Her friend gave her a commiserating nod. "This is a hard one, huh?"

"Yeah."

"If you want, I know this great astrologer. Have you ever heard of Madame Sharanova?"

Edie was so good at making Catherine smile. "I don't think so, Edie."

They grinned tenderly at each other.

Catherine set her hand on Edie's shoulder. The fully-lined zebra fabric of Edie's jacket felt sun-warmed and a little scratchy. Catherine could never have gotten away with wearing Edie's wardrobe, but Edie looked perfectly at home in her playful zig zag stripes. "If I do decide to go," Catherine said, "I'm going to miss you."

"I know." Edie brushed a strand of hair away from Catherine's cheek. "Who else you gonna get to do all your work?"

V

19 March 1987
Thursday Afternoon

Cullen's construction crew filed down toward the Maze, talking and joking as they went. Vincent carried the two longest lengths of wood for the frame they were to build. Kanin and Cullen carried the heavy beam between them. Michael carried Kanin's lantern, along with the two bracing struts for the frame and a shorter wooden pole, the three wood pieces wrapped together in a tight bundle. Each of the four workmen also wore a small rucksack, their tools and packets of food divided evenly among them. Michael puffed a little as he walked and Cullen heard him.

"I told you not to eat so much at lunch," the gangly carpenter and woodcarver called back to the younger man.

"It's just a long way down," said Michael. "A long way to go so fast."

Kanin and Cullen were the pace-setters, as they had to coordinate their load together, and Vincent knew they were indeed pressing ahead with unusual speed. He wondered which of them had initiated the hurry to return to the Inner Circle. Olivia, alight with Father's welcome confirmation of her first pregnancy, would be waiting for Kanin's return, and her smile was worth rushing home to. Cullen, on the other hand, was working on a secret carving project in his chamber, which claimed all of his spare time. Vincent decided that between love and art, it was possible that *both* craftsmen felt eager to finish today's task.

"And it's a long way to go on a full stomach," Cullen went on. "You know, I really

thought you had a hollow leg. You've been growing like a weed lately."

Michael challenged Cullen with good humor. "Yeah? What kind of weed?"

"*Vernonia noveboracensis*," Vincent murmured from the rear.

"Vernonny *what*?" asked Cullen.

"Ironweed," Vincent said.

"Ha ha," Michael called, sarcastic. "You're on lepidopterans in science class, aren't you?"

"Yes. It's the appropriate season."

"Do I look like butterfly food to you?"

"To a butterfly you might have," Vincent teased, "the morning Sandra's baby smeared grape jelly in your hair."

Cullen snickered. "Skinny, and purple-headed and taller every day. Like I said: a weed."

"Ha ha some more," Michael said, but Vincent could hear the smile in his voice. The younger man was pleased to be performing this duty alongside his elders. He valued their acceptance, feeling necessary and quite grown-up. Michael walked quietly for a moment, thinking. Then he asked, "Vincent, do you always match your lessons with the seasons?"

"I find it useful to do so for biology," Vincent said.

"Does it help with teaching literature?"

Vincent smiled at the back of Michael's head. "Sometimes. Although wintertime stories during the colder months can become tedious for a reading group."

"I'll keep that in mind." Michael liked teaching, and he liked to try out any technique that might improve his rapport with his students, who were also his friends.

"*A bove majori discit arare minor*," Vincent intoned, feeling deep kinship with the young scholar.

Michael laughed. "From lepidopterans to bovines, Vincent?"

"Noble creatures, all."

"Watch out for these two," Cullen mock-whispered to Kanin. "They're talking that Greek stuff again."

"And Latin," Vincent and Michael said at the same time. Ahead of them all, Kanin chuckled.

While they talked, they passed through canyons and caverns carved by ancient waterways. Schist walls glittering with specks of mica replaced smooth cement constructions as their path took them deep into the stony confines of Manhattan bedrock. They walked far below the subways, down past the Perimeter of gates and blockades the underground community had installed over the years. The sounds of earth-funneled winds and seeping damp whistled and gurgled in the darkness beyond the light of their lantern. Vincent's ears could still detect the distant rumble of trains and the rumor of coded conversations tapped out on the pipes system by Tunnelfolk and Helpers. His friends probably could not hear these sounds now.

They came to Father's warning signs: DANGER, and KEEP OUT. The letters had been refreshed with white paint after the cave-in. The torches Vincent always arranged to be kept alight above the signs blazed orange in the black tunnel.

"I'd sleep better if we could just brick up this front entrance and be done with it," Kanin commented.

"Yeah," said Cullen, "but without this outlet we'd still be bailing ourselves out of December's floodwaters." Cullen raised his voice to call back, "Unless Vincent and Mouse want to engineer us a new and improved drainage system for the lower Tunnels."

In Vincent's imagination, Father responded to Cullen's jest with a shudder and a *Dear*

God, no! Vincent smiled. Mouse made a highly creative engineer, but he frequently failed to understand the logistical difficulties imposed by the Undercity's scarce resources.

"The *engineering* is not the problem," Vincent said.

"I know," Cullen answered. "It's the hundred workmen and unlimited tools we don't have."

Vincent thought, *Yes. Thus, we close off the worst sections of the Maze and leave the main channel open.* He knew this decayed canyon led past the Maze's winding passages to a slope which plunged some two hundred feet down into a brackish underground lake. The winter flood Cullen had just recalled to everyone's minds had raised the small lake's water level considerably. But Cullen had also spoken the truth: at least the water had somewhere to go once the influx from that broken city line had stopped. Better to deepen a lake few people visited than to endanger lives and homes.

They passed the painted warnings and continued on into the Maze. Arriving at the Needle's Eye, they set down their loads. Kanin added fuel to the small lantern. He used its light to peer into the dark opening in the rock. He and Matthew had come down here yesterday to carve preparatory niches in the stone. Vincent and Cullen had shaped the beams and braces last night in Cullen's workshop. Today's foursome would set up two posts, top them with a heavy lintel, and brace the resulting frame from within the narrow passage. Cullen and Michael would return tomorrow to nail heavy boards across the front of the frame, sealing this section of the Maze.

A shortage of nails prevented them from completing that final stage of the work today. José had gone Above this afternoon with a collection of empty bottles and cans retrieved from the trash and litter of the city. The redemption value for the glass and aluminum should give José enough money to buy nails for Cullen's project and a few necessary ingredients for William's pantry. Sometimes their blacksmith, Winslow, made new nails in his smithy, but they were experiencing a shortage of scrap metal at the moment. The community's master smith and mechanic had used up the last of his stock to forge an urgently needed gate for one of their newest Tunnel entrances, along with a centerplate for the Inner Maze barricade. Half of the foraging teams were under orders to bring home mostly metal goods for the next fortnight or so.

Cullen said, "Okay. Let's get the tools unpacked. Vincent, you rig the pulleys, first thing."

Vincent nodded, removing nonessentials from his rucksack before he slipped his arms through the straps. He knotted the waist ties behind his back so that the pack rested against his chest. Ducking a little, he entered the passage. He straightened again as he passed beneath the granite overhang that would support the front of their frame. A few yards beyond the low rockface, the passage narrowed and the ceiling rose up to a point about twenty-five feet above Vincent's head. Plenty of space to work vertically, though it was close quarters on the horizontal plane.

Vincent checked his pack to make sure it wouldn't catch on anything, then he gazed up into the shadowy heights, his night-sighted eyes estimating distances. The others were organizing gear back beyond the bottleneck, Cullen and Kanin efficient, Michael obeying directives and asking the occasional question about an item's use.

"I'm going up," Vincent called to them.

"Gotcha," Cullen called back.

Vincent crouched, balanced, and sprang upward. At the peak of his leap, he thrust arms and legs out to wedge himself between the stone walls of the passage and the upper angles of the overhanging segment. Twisting, he set his back to one wall and shuffled his feet along the other until he was braced and comfortable.

He reached into his bag for his mallet and one of Winslow's handmade pegs. The way Vincent's eyes interpreted shapes in the dim space made it easy for him to choose the first pulley's anchor point on the overhang. He tapped the iron anchor into the stone. So far, so good. He tested the hold. It was solid.

Vincent enjoyed this work. It involved far less dust than shaping rock, and he saved the group a lot of time. With Vincent along, they didn't need to bring ladders or extra ropes and lanterns just to install their pulley system. He thought, *The fewer people and objects in this narrow place, the better. It's safer this way.*

He leaned toward his knees, reaching for another peg as he selected his second anchor site. He heard a footstep on the stone floor below him. Looking down, he saw Michael holding a candle out to push back the darkness. The young man's eyes were wide in his upturned face.

Ten feet above his star pupil, Vincent stopped moving. "Michael," he said, amusement and fond exasperation in his tone. "Do you realize that if I should fall, or drop something, an unpleasantly heavy weight will land on your head?" Even a peg dropped from this height would hurt a bystander below. And although Vincent felt confident that he was in no danger of falling, he knew his own 16 stone would simply crush the boy, should some bizarre accident occur.

"Sorry!" Michael pulled back into the outer portion of the passage, taking his light with him.

Vincent sighed and waited for his eyes to readjust to the dark. He could see very well in dimness, but transitioning between different light levels took a little time. Vincent heard Cullen and Kanin explain Michael's upcoming responsibility for the rope: how to watch the line, how to hold it, how to raise his end of the beam in sync with Cullen's.

I wonder how Catherine is doing now, thought Vincent. He remained uneasy about the torrent of emotions he'd sensed from his dear friend throughout the morning. Her anger and hatred, early on. Then a moment of baffled pleasure. Then a flash of hope followed by uncertainty. Catherine's doubt, sorrow, and fragmented joy swirled within him now. It did not distract him as forcefully as it had before the noonday meal, for Catherine's feelings were not the focus of her attention at the moment. But something important was happening in her life. Vincent wished he could be a part of it as it happened, rather than waiting, waiting, waiting for nightfall to share her troubles and triumphs.

Perhaps one of her cases was finally going well. Perhaps she was resolving the case about the terrible man who preyed upon young girls. Vincent narrowed his eyes, abhorring a man he had never met, nor would ever meet. Shaking his head, he hefted the mallet and returned to the simpler matter of driving an iron spike into a crevice in the rock.

Vincent finished setting the second anchor. He slid carabiners through the eyeholes of both pegs. "First rope!" he called. A kerosene glow shone brightly as Kanin's hand held out the lantern below, lighting the way for Cullen.

The woodcarver emerged through the entry. He threaded the rope he carried through the roller of the first pulley, then the second. Taking the sawed-off broom handle that Michael had brought down with the frame braces, he hooked the top pulley onto the repurposed pole.

"First rope coming up!" Cullen called. He pushed the pulley unit upward so Vincent could move it from Cullen's pole to Vincent's peg. Vincent checked to ensure that the carabiners were closed, the pulleys secured, and the rope aligned. Then he and Cullen repeated the process with the second line.

"Looks good," Cullen said. He retreated past the overhang. Vincent dropped to the ground. Michael watched through the entry while Vincent took off his rucksack and handed it through to Kanin. Vincent made no reaction to the young man's silent admiration, but Kanin

noticed Michael's expression and spoke up.

"You've seen Vincent do the same thing playing hide and seek with the kids," he said, setting Vincent's pack on the stone floor beside the others.

This was true, but the change of context made a difference to Michael. He glanced at Kanin, and turned back to Vincent. "Do you do that all the time? When you're working out here in the rock?"

"I do what I can to complete each task as I come to it," Vincent said softly.

He was not put off by Michael's question. This was as much a part of maturing from Tunnels child to Tunnels Elder as was joining an adult construction detail or accepting new teaching duties in the community. These were things Michael wanted—and needed—to know: *Of what are adult bodies capable? Of what am I capable? Which actions are expected of whom? And how do I fit in?*

Vincent felt deeply sympathetic to the boy's underlying concerns. He told his younger friend, "A work crew must coordinate the strengths of its members. We are each given the work we are best suited to perform."

"Not much different from the kids taking turns at Kitchen Patrol or Messenger Duty," Cullen added. "Only, the jobs get more convoluted for us oldsters. We definitely get to pack around heavier loads." He clapped Michael encouragingly on the back. "Now, let's get the top beam trussed up and move the other pieces in."

They were making swift progress, even with an inexperienced worker in their midst. Father was right: the three "experts" knew their business and cooperated without needing to talk things through at each stage of the work. Instead, they could move smoothly from one task to the next, saving their words for Michael, teaching as much by example as by explanation.

They set the two posts in the hollows Kanin had excavated in the floor yesterday, letting the lengths of wood lean a little into the narrowing passage. Once they fitted the lintel onto the posts, Vincent could pound that beam back against the overhang, guiding its ends with alternating blows along the grooves Kanin had also carved into the walls, until the entire frame stood upright and flush against the rock. The concluding interior struts were the only parts of the frame that required nails.

Cullen and Michael went to the ropes. The woodcarver took position a little behind the young scholar. Together they pulled the beam up off the floor until Kanin told them to hold steady while he examined the fit of the wood against the rock. Vincent stood close by with the mallet.

"Are we ready to set the joints?" Vincent asked.

Kanin eyed the second groove. "Not yet. There's a spur here that's going to hold us up. Let me take it out." He raised his tools and tapped at the stone. Fine chips fell away. Kanin ran his hand over the results of his work. "That should fix things," he said. "Okay, Vincent, now we're ready."

That was when Michael cried, "Whoa!" Vincent felt the boy's alarm break over him like a pane of glass. The suspended beam dipped downward.

Vincent dropped his mallet as the pulleys above Kanin squalled. He lunged forward, intending to snatch his friend away, acting on pure instinct. But he saw that the angle was bad in the enclosed space, and the beam on Michael's side was falling too fast. So he shoved Kanin against the tunnel wall, pinning him there. Instead of cracking the stone cutter's skull, the beam slammed down onto Vincent's left shoulder.

Dazed, Vincent staggered but stayed upright. He heard Cullen's shout, and the creaking of Cullen's rope behind him as the beam began to slip through the loops. The pulleys rattled and

groaned above them. Vincent and Kanin stared at each other, both of them scarcely daring to breathe. If Vincent moved, the tilted beam precariously balanced on his shoulder would smash into Kanin's chest. Vincent blinked hard. Kanin grabbed him by the vest, steadying him.

"Michael! Nonononono!" Cullen shouted. "Stop! Okay, get a good grip on the rope first. You got it?"

"Yes," Michael gasped.

"You're sure."

"Yes."

"Good. *Now* pull it back. Easy."

The punishing weight lifted up and Vincent dragged Kanin out of the narrow place, pulling them both away from danger. Cullen and Michael lowered the beam until it clonked down on the ground.

"Okay," said Cullen. "Wrap your rope around that rock. Don't let it tangle. We don't want someone tripping over it." Michael mumbled something as he complied.

Vincent sank to his knees and hunched over his numbed left arm, clutching his shoulder with his right hand. Kanin knelt in front of him, panting.

"Kanin," Vincent wheezed. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine. *You're* the one who's hurt, Vincent."

"Vincent?" Michael scrambled to his side. "Vincent! I'm so sorry. I wasn't watching. The rope slipped."

"How bad is it?" Cullen asked, leaning over them all.

Vincent looked into Michael's ashen face and frightened brown eyes. "Winded. A moment. Please. Oh." Vincent bent forward, but Michael had seen his grimace. The young man began to weep.

"Hey," Cullen said. "Now calm down."

Vincent breathed into the pain, quiet, until the gray creeping in at the edges of his vision receded. Then he sat up again. Michael needed him.

"I'm not angry with you, Michael," he said. Gingerly, he rotated his arm. The joint in his shoulder crackled, but it had not been dislocated. He flexed sensation back into his left hand.

"Anything broken?" Cullen asked.

Fingering his collarbone, Vincent answered, "Apparently not."

Kanin sighed.

"Here." Cullen held out their water bottle. Vincent nodded his thanks and took a long drink, pouring cool water into his mouth. He passed the bottle to Kanin. Michael had covered his eyes with his hands.

"I'm serious," Cullen told the young man. "Calm down."

Vincent touched Michael's arm. The scholar's inner world had turned dark with shame and fear. "It was an accident. Do you understand? We're all right, Michael."

"I'm so sorry, Vincent," Michael moaned. "I'm no good at this. I...I shouldn't have thought I'd be any good at this."

"No one is good at this on their first day doing it," said Kanin.

Michael just shook his head, refusing to look at any of them.

"Kanin," Vincent murmured, "tell Michael what happened the first time I tried to help you cut a chamber entry." Michael needed this story. He needed a reason to stop feeling like a clumsy stranger in their company.

Surprised, Kanin laughed a little. "I had forgotten all about that." He set the water bottle aside and turned to Michael. "Vincent was a couple years younger than you are now. The first

time he put chisel to stone, he missed his mark with the mallet. He smashed his own hand instead."

Michael took his hands away from his eyes and blinked through his tears at Kanin, then at Vincent.

"I was so startled, pulling the mallet away," Vincent added, "that I lost hold of it."

"The way I hear Winslow tell it, you chucked it over your shoulder," Cullen said.

"I don't remember *what* I did with it. I was busy thinking about my injured hand."

Kanin continued the tale. "Yes, but meanwhile, the mallet hit Winslow in the face. He was the one standing behind Vincent."

"Not the wisest place to be," Cullen said, with a touch of irony. "Right behind the new kid."

"What happened then?" asked Michael. He rubbed away his tears with a fist.

Vincent tipped his head to one side. "Then," he said, drawing upon Father's expansive vocabulary for the ending of the story, "Winslow demonstrated how to combine numerous expletives into unique and unforgettable epithets."

While Michael digested this, Vincent let Cullen help him to his feet. He breathed deeply and held his shoulder. Cullen gave him a questioning look. Vincent shook his head at him. The ache was fierce, but not crippling.

"You're trying to make me laugh, aren't you?" Michael said, also standing up.

"Is it working?" Vincent asked.

Michael gave a watery chuckle. "Yeah. I guess it is."

Disaster averted, Vincent thought. He sensed that Michael was regaining control of his emotions.

The four of them looked at the disordered work site. "I suppose you should go see Father," Cullen told Vincent.

"This is a four-person task," Vincent said. "You'll need me for fitting the joints. And also to take down the ropes when we're finished."

Cullen pointed out, "You know, Vincent, there's this *amazing* invention from Above. It's called an extension ladder. Using one of these ingenious devices, any one of us short people could take care of the ropes."

Kanin said, "Hey. Watch who you're calling short." The Tunnelfolk all considered Kanin a tallish man. And Cullen was tallish, too.

"I think you just don't want Father fussing over you with his doctor's kit," Cullen said to Vincent, smirking.

Michael ventured, "Or worse, Mary."

"Or, if Mary's busy, there's always Brizo," Kanin said. "She'll have you diagnosed, doctored, and discharged in six words or less."

Cullen grinned.

Vincent glanced at his friends. "It's true to say that if I go up to the Inner Circle now, I won't be coming back down here again today. But there are other projects waiting on this one. I'd rather stay and finish."

"Are you fit to work?" Kanin asked, serious again. "Fit to climb?"

Vincent dropped his hand from his shoulder. "Yes. As long as no one presses me to hurry."

"Right now, I think slowing down some would be a good idea," said Kanin.

Vincent thought, *I'm glad someone else has finally reached that conclusion.*

"Right, then." Cullen clapped his hands together. "Fun time is over. Back to work." He

grabbed Michael by the elbow. “Come help me retie the ropes on that beam.”

Michael looked over one shoulder at Vincent, uncertain. Vincent nodded at him and the young man walked to the beam with Cullen, who was already doling out instructions.

“Everyone makes mistakes,” Kanin said in a low voice, shaking his head. “Although, I have to admit, I’m glad Winslow’s not down here today. If he were, I doubt Michael would ever pick up a rope or a hammer again.”

Yes. Vincent agreed that Winslow could be somewhat—overbearing. Especially when he became frightened or angry. “That’s another reason we should finish this now,” Vincent replied, matching Kanin’s quiet tone. “For Michael’s sake. This is something you taught me.”

“*I* had to wait until Father took the cast off your hand,” Kanin said.

“But I did learn your lesson. I don’t fear the mallet anymore.”

Kanin smiled his characteristic thin smile. Vincent took a step toward the others.

“Vincent?”

Vincent stopped and turned to look at their world’s best stonemason. Kanin was slender for his build, but strong. He was three or four years older than Vincent, a man who had arrived Below during a troubled time in Vincent’s life, and one who had taken it upon himself to learn a new craft by doing—and by teaching.

Now that I think of it, Vincent thought, *our first project together was expanding that crack in the corridor wall outside my bedchamber, so we could carve out the bathing chamber that became my own. Our work helped me reconnect to the world outside myself, and Kanin’s friendship tethered me gently to that world. He reminded me that a multitude of good people are part of my life.*

Kanin put a hand on Vincent’s uninjured shoulder. At the contact, Vincent felt the other man’s relief, the way his nerves still hummed with tension from the close call—and his immense gratitude. Kanin had always been reserved about touching people, or letting others touch him. His gesture communicated powerful thanks.

“You’re a good friend,” Kanin said. “To all of us.”

Cullen called to them. “Okay, you two. Are we doing this, or what?”

I think it’s turning out to be an “or what” sort of day, Vincent thought. He hoped no further unpleasant surprises lay in wait to ambush those he loved.

Kanin walked forward and picked up the fallen tools. He held out the mallet. Vincent rolled his shoulders and returned to the work.

Chapter Three: Hand of Providence

I

19 March 1987
Thursday Evening

Hughes set down the last packet of papers from the stack and passed one hand across his face. He rubbed his tired eyes. He smoothed his mustache. He thought, *It's a good thing I won't have to stay late tonight. My attention span is shot to hell*. Tomorrow he would return this batch of student reports to one class and collect the next batch from another. This was a trick he'd learned over the years: rotate assignment due dates between his classes whenever he could, so he could keep moderately busy throughout the term—busy but not inundated.

Hughes sat back in his chair. Freed from the reading work, he let his mind fully engage the ideas that kept returning to him despite his best efforts to stifle them. They were let's-pretend ideas, what-ifs detailing how he might go about catching a large unidentified beast, should the opportunity present itself to him.

The first thing to consider: preparations. He'd have to make arrangements to keep building custodians out of his lab. He'd need to install an examination table that could hold the creature's weight, and then he needed a way to keep the creature on the table. Straps, adjustable cuffs, maybe some kind of collar or harness. Then he'd need plenty of blank video tapes and camera film. The cameras were no problem. Pierson had, as promised, collected the owl observation gear (night camera included), but Hughes still had both his Polaroid camera and his regular camcorder tucked away in his little storage nook.

He fiddled with the objects on his desk, repositioning his desk lamp and office phone by a millimeter or two, then putting them back where they had been. What next? Ah, yes: Hughes would need a way to move the creature from one location to another, a way to bring it through the building up to his lab. A medical gurney. Good. All of that seemed right. What else?

A cage, he thought. *A mobile cage to keep it in, once the preliminary examinations are complete. A cover for the cage, to hide it during transit. And a sheet to hide the creature while it's on the gurney. I think that's all. Everything else is already in place*.

Hughes kept his lab well-stocked. Projects came and projects went. Before the owls, he'd been working for Lucy Arnold's coyotes study; before the coyotes, Nale Coburn's drug study, and before that, a lengthy stint evaluating the efficacy of a new program to breed chimps for research stock. Throughout it all, Hughes had his interdisciplinary ecosystem study with Clark. This flexibility kept Hughes useful. His attention to his supplies kept him flexible. Using his connections with the Bronx Zoo and a couple local wildlife rescue groups, Hughes felt he could rustle up the equipment he lacked without too much trouble.

The real trick is keeping supply acquisitions below everyone else's radar, he thought. Quint and Pierson were two primary people he must avoid, but Felicia Durgan would be a special bother. Durgan was the self-important IACUC veterinarian who looked in on whatever work Hughes conducted in his own lab. As far as Hughes could tell, Durgan was less interested in Animal Welfare Act compliance than she was in making extra work for Hughes and his colleagues. And she liked to stick her nose in where it didn't belong.

Well, my ill-fated proposal got rejected, Hughes thought. *If no one ever sees the cage, she'll have no reason to come sniffing around my door. The owls research is all video*

documentation. No live specimens.

Hughes drummed the fingers of one hand on the back of the other. *Not that Durgan would know what to make of my creature if she did find out about it. I think she must be even more unimaginative than Quint, if that's possible.* However, the woman would have no qualms about handing the creature over to some other researcher, maybe in Comparative Medicine. She might even be vindictive enough to call in the USDA. Hughes could just picture Durgan cackling away from his lab with the creature strapped to the back end of her broomstick.

Stay out of Durgan's way, he told himself, *and she'll stay out of my business.*

Aside from his need to escape undue notice, Hughes felt his greatest obstacle must be park-to-campus transportation. He knew the van would be ideal, but Pierson had charge of that now, and anyway, at the present time, the van was also full of all their night watch gear. Hughes supposed he could rent a van, but a typical rented vehicle would lack the off-road modifications of the department's rig. He wasn't sure how to address the vehicle issue.

It's all a mental game anyway, he thought, smiling sadly. *Shall we pretend I have a van at my disposal? Poof! There it is.* His smile fizzled out. *And while I'm wishing for the moon, let's also pretend I have no trouble darting this thing and moving it around all by my small self.*

During the chimpanzee project, he'd learned just how cumbersome a large unconscious primate could be. The thing he'd seen in the park was at least man-sized and probably larger, heavier. *Poof!* Hughes thought. *I have a trustworthy assistant to help me.*

He sighed. Hughes didn't believe in magic. Legends, certainly, but not miracles. Not really. Miracles were for younger men, stronger men. Like justice, all things miraculous had always slipped through the fingers of Edward Hughes.

He thought: *I've paid my pound of flesh for the debt I owed to Canton...for the privilege of being mentored by him. Now I can't escape his shadow. And today Quint shaved off another pound, just for the fun of it.*

Hughes knew it was going to be hard to live down the morning's presentation. Quint wouldn't let him forget it for a long time. Hughes expected to be the butt of many jokes from now until the Christmas party. Oh, all-in-good-fun jokes, to be sure. Everything from *That's what comes of night owl operations, har har*—to Bigfoot references and Nessie jibes. He wished desperately that no one would resurrect the old Ucumar-zupai gags from the '70s. But with his luck, it was probably inevitable that someone would drag those out again. All in good fun.

Hughes would have to smile and maybe laugh a little at himself and quietly gulp spoonfuls of Maalox to calm the seething fire in his stomach. Lines written for a character he understood all too well flowed through his thoughts. *He hath disgrac'd me and hind'red me half a million; laugh'd at my losses, mock'd at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies. And what's his reason?*

Quint's reason was that he hated dreamers. He loved to kill dreams, that was it. Dreams were not profitable to the University. Thus, dreams had to go.

Stupid Quint. And stupid Clark for just sitting there, his silence helping Quint to murder hope. And even stupid Pierson, too. It felt like the whole world was bound and determined to laugh at Hughes, and Hughes had every reason to feel sorry for himself. So he sat at his desk for a while, doing just that.

Hughes saw great resemblance between himself and that character from *The Merchant of Venice*. Like Shylock, Hughes felt he'd become a tragic figure thrust into the midst of a jolly comedy. No one cared about his concerns. It made everyone happy as clams to cast him in the role of the foolish villain and stamp out his every hope for a dignified life. There could be no satisfaction for Hughes—*no revenge; nor no ill luck stirring but what lights on my shoulders; no*

sighs but of my breathing; no tears but of my shedding.

Hughes sighed again. He took hold of reality and pulled his thoughts back to more mundane matters. Moping over Shakespeare wasn't going to snare his creature for him, or convince anyone that Hughes wasn't crazy, or resurrect his career from its dead end. *So I'm betrayed again,* he thought. *By myself, by my past, by my own department. By colleagues I thought were my allies. By the inexplicable appearance of that thing last night. What of it? Life goes on.*

He sat up and began gathering books and loose pages to pack into his briefcase. He felt tired. He was getting hungry for dinner, he'd put in a full day's work, and it was time to go home. He quietly set Shylock back on the mental shelf reserved for him. *Grandpa would laugh to know that I still remember passages from those plays,* he thought.

To his knowledge, Grandpa Norris had never read any of Shakespeare's works, but when Hughes was a boy, the jovial old man had liked to find aged editions of famous books to give to his over-curious, muddleheaded grandson. Hughes doubted, however, that anyone in his family would be happy to discover how accurately certain situations from those plays defined his life. They might feel that the aberrant Ed Hughes had finally received his just desserts—but they would not be gratified by this knowledge. In all likelihood, they would only feel ashamed of him.

II

19 March 1987
Thursday Evening

Vincent added half a jar of Olivia's herbal concoction to the cold water in his ceramic basin, feeling a shiver run along his spine. He hadn't bothered to light any fuel briquettes in his small brazier and the bathing chamber felt chilly after his shower. He soaked a washcloth in the basin and wrung it out, thinking about how Mouse kept promising to figure out some way to pipe running water into this room—hot and cold. He also thought about how Father had thus far rejected all of the young man's proposals. Vincent remained content with his water cistern, bathing pool, and shower pail, but Mouse always insisted that Vincent deserved more advanced accommodations.

"Long way to the closest well," Mouse pointed out once, watching Vincent empty two buckets into the heavy marble vessel at the head of Vincent's bathing pool. "Mirror Pool? Chamber of the Falls? Far away. Lots of water to carry. Big jar to fill."

"A stone jar this size is an 'urn,'" Vincent corrected, "or a 'cistern.' And I don't mind. When I was a boy, I helped my friends carry water to the Kitchen before and after every meal."

"Got that fixed a long time ago." Mouse handed over one of the buckets he had carried in. "Easier to fill big water tanks through the new pipes. Fixed the big bath chamber too. Need to fix Vincent's chamber now. Maybe connect to the upper intake..."

"Another day," Vincent told him.

But that day never came. There were always more important projects to complete. When he wanted a bath, Vincent heated kettles of water on his spirits stove and unlocked the pivoting iron framework of the cistern so he could tip cold water into the shallow pool, moderating the temperature of the bath. For a shower, he filled and hung the perforated pail Winslow had made for him. For every other occasion pertaining to hygiene and first aid, Vincent had his ceramic

pitchers and washbasins, keeping one set in his bedchamber and the other on a wooden stand in this room.

He shook the saturated cloth over that basin now, ignoring the chamber's stone-born chill. He wouldn't stay in here for much longer in any case; Catherine would be leaving her office soon. Pressing the wet cloth to his aching shoulder, Vincent inhaled the fragrance of rosemary and arnica. *This* coolness, at least, felt wonderful.

"Vincent?" a voice called to him from the corridor.

Vincent sighed. He dropped the cloth back into the basin and pulled the sleeve of his robe up over his shoulder. He directed his reply toward the entrance. "In here, Father."

He listened to Father's familiar three-part step as the older man walked from Vincent's bedchamber to the bathing chamber. Father came in and stopped just inside the curving entry passage. He seemed in no way daunted by the expression he saw on his damp—and slightly annoyed—son's face. "Michael said you were injured," Father stated. "I came to see if you need medical attention."

"And your timing, as ever, is impeccable." Vincent stood still, water dripping from the ends of his hair, waiting for Father's next move.

"Mm-hm." Father raised his eyebrows. "Which shoulder is it?"

A doctor's son can escape neither his physician's prerogatives, nor his father's parental instincts, Vincent thought. He tapped his left shoulder with his claws and sat on the bench which bordered the bathing pool. Father approached. He set his medical bag beside the basin and began to investigate Vincent's injury with careful hands.

"Does this hurt?" he asked.

"No."

"And this?"

Vincent turned his face away.

"That's a yes," Father said. He tested reflexes and then kept a light hold on Vincent's arm as he observed his patient's full range of motion. He also explored Vincent's back, paying close attention to Vincent's ribs and spine. After this examination, he announced, "There is some swelling, but nothing seems broken. Any trouble moving your arm?"

"None."

"Well, that's a relief." He sat down beside Vincent, letting his son take him by the elbow to support him as he settled on the bench. "You've had enough trauma on that side."

Vincent said nothing. He had nothing to add to Father's sentiment. It was the same shoulder the gang had struck and stabbed, the same shoulder Vincent wrenched when they hit him with their car. Vincent was more than ready to stop dreaming about that car.

"I had hoped that, since you didn't come to me yourself, you were not too grievously harmed," Father said.

Vincent reached across to the basin and retrieved his compress cloth. "No. Nothing rest cannot mend."

"And you *will* rest tonight, won't you?"

Vincent finally smiled at him. "Try not to worry so much about me, Father."

"Oh, I *do* try. And yet half of these gray hairs have appeared on your account."

Vincent tucked the washcloth beneath his robe and pressed it to the bruised place above his collarbone, where his skin was bare of fur. "I like your gray hairs," he said. "They make you look distinguished."

"I'd settle for an *un*distinguished peace of mind," Father grumbled.

Leaning toward him, Vincent kissed Father's temple. "There are as many dangers Below

as there are Above, Father."

"I know."

Vincent waited, sensing that Father was talking around something. After a moment, Father said, "You do know that you can come to me, always, at any time, whenever you need help?"

Vincent studied his father's face, surprised. "Of course, Father. I do come to you for help. I always have."

"Catherine, too."

So this is not only about my shoulder, Vincent thought. Aloud he said, "You are still uneasy because I brought Catherine to Narcissa. When Catherine needed help. When *we* needed help."

Father released a held breath. "Frankly, yes."

Sometimes it took Father a while to process events to the point where he could talk about them. Since the cave-in, and especially since Margaret, Father was treading very carefully whenever the subject of Catherine came up. In the matter of involving Narcissa in Catherine's troubles, Vincent had not shared with Father more than Father asked to know.

That had been a bad night for Catherine. A bad night for Vincent as well, although his first thought was for her suffering, rather than his own. Her mind and body had been in danger, succumbing first to a self-styled Vodou sorcerer's influence, and then to that evil man's drugs, and at last to the sorcerer's attempt to kill Catherine in some horrific ritual sacrifice.

Catherine's hateful words to Vincent that night had seared his heart. It still hurt to recall all the things she'd said. But those words were spoken from the depths of Catherine's fear, Vincent knew, from unhealed places in her soul where the Shadows lurked. Acquainted as he was with his own darknesses, Vincent never let her animosity toward himself deter him from protecting her. On that dark night, part of this protection meant bringing Catherine to his world's resident mystic: Narcissa.

Vincent stood and crossed to the basin, re-wetting the washcloth until it was cool to the touch again. He placed it against the back of his shoulder this time. To Father he said, "Do you want to know my reasons?"

Father nodded.

"First, I did not come to you because it was very late, and you needed your rest." He held up a hand to curtail Father's protest. "No, let the doctor take his own medicine. You were only just beginning to get out of bed again."

Father remained grudgingly silent.

"Second, Narcissa already knew I was Above trying to save Catherine. She was prepared when I brought Catherine Below. Furthermore, Narcissa recognized the drugs Catherine's enemies used against her. And she understood the injuries they inflicted upon Catherine's mind."

"Perhaps," Father said, "but her superstitions could also have caused further damage. Especially to a person in such a suggestible state."

"Narcissa's beliefs notwithstanding, she knew the right words to speak into Catherine's pain. Her faith allowed her to meet Catherine where neither you nor I could go." Vincent wrung the washcloth in the basin. Cloth to shoulder, he rejoined Father on the bench. "In her own way, Father, Narcissa is as skilled a healer as you are."

Father poked a floor mat with the end of his crutch. "There is faith, and there is faith, Vincent." He looked up at his son's face. "I've never imposed my own beliefs upon anyone down here. I've never agreed with the aggressive missionary ethic so prevalent in most of Christendom. Our world is a place where anyone of any creed may explore as much or as little of

the spiritual realm as they desire. But Narcissa is so bold in her...declarations."

"She doesn't proselytize. She goes her own way, alone, and apart from the rest of us."

"She also caters to that which is most primal in human nature, Vincent. She adheres to a worldview that might best be left behind, lost in the dark histories that civilization has struggled to overcome for centuries."

"We can never escape the past," Vincent said, "as much as we might like to sometimes."

Father closed his eyes, a man who until recently had wanted very much to do just that. A man who had devoted his life to setting aside the past in order to build a wholly new future for himself and for hundreds of other broken people Below.

Vincent set the cloth aside and touched Father's arm. He sampled the good doctor's emotions with his heart, just as he might test the wind with other senses to learn what sorts of things walked abroad in the night. "I did not go to Narcissa because I believed your *faith* couldn't help Catherine. Is that what you fear, Father?"

Father opened his eyes. "Fear? No. I don't know. For me, God is love. I remain convinced that love can heal anything. I suppose it frightened me to see you turn away from that, seek out a path that might lead you—and Catherine—away from that."

"Not away," Vincent said. "Never *away* from love. Only along a side trail unfamiliar to you."

Father looked at him again. "And do *you* find such side trails familiar?" Vincent felt Father's curiosity and his trepidation.

He weighed Father's question in his mind. "I have faith in beauty," Vincent said, thoughtful. "In whatever form it might take. Sometimes there is great beauty in the dark, in the wayward places. And sometimes we must emerge from darkness to truly see what light is. I cannot say that I am *familiar* with the side roads because so often I'm surprised by what I find along the way. But I'm not *afraid* of those paths. I understand your devotion to your loving god. I share it. Does this god abandon us when we most need divine love? Or do we carry that love within us, regardless of our beliefs?"

Father became pensive. "In my lifetime, I have felt abandoned. I have also seen miracles unfold before my eyes. Do you know, Vincent, that I enjoy being a part of miracles?"

Vincent smiled.

"And do you know that I would never turn Catherine away, never deny her medical aid?" Father came back to his original concern.

"Yes. I know that." Father still harbored misgivings about Vincent's attachment to Catherine, but Vincent could not conceive of Father doing any less than his utmost to save her life, should he be called upon to do so a second time. "Father, there's one more reason I did not come to you."

"And what is that?"

Vincent hesitated. Dignity was important to him, an aspect of freedom that he held close and defended at every opportunity. He found it difficult to infringe upon even this much of Catherine's dignity, even to explain himself to Father, even to speak of it without describing it in detail.

"I did not want you to see Catherine as she was that night," he said quietly. "Not in the condition I found her. She was...resisting my care. I am not sure she would have accepted yours. I brought her to someone who could help in all the ways we've spoken of...but I also brought her to a woman." Vincent gazed into Father's eyes, hoping Father would understand. "Catherine needed a strong woman's care. She needed a mother. I brought her to Narcissa."

Father thought about that for a moment, then he nodded. Vincent felt that this final reason

helped Father to accept all the others Vincent offered. He brought the washcloth back to the basin, sopping up the last of the herbal soak. In the world Above, Catherine was feeling an apprehensive anticipation. Vincent guessed she was now preparing to leave her office—earlier than she often did, but still almost an hour past five o'clock.

"I must get ready to see Catherine," he said to Father. "Her workday is ending."

"Yes. Well." Father set his crutch and heaved himself upright. "If you would, do try to be back in time for supper. I'd like to join you in the Commons. Care to escort a decrepit old man as he stumps his way to the distant Dining Hall tonight?" He caught up his medical bag in his free hand.

"Of course, Father. I will come for you."

Vincent stood quietly, shaking his head at Father's back as the "old" man departed. Father was neither old nor decrepit. Vincent doubted whether Father would be "old" at seventy, or eighty. There was too much life in him.

Glancing around the small chamber, he thought, *When I offered him the use of this space, I never dreamed he would join me in here to have a conversation about his philosophy of religion.* Well, that was Father. Vincent loved him tremendously.

III

19 March 1987
Thursday Evening

Catherine glanced at her watch. Vincent had signaled back to her on the pipe fifteen minutes ago. She walked to the other side of the space Vincent called the Junction Chamber, tapping her flashlight against her leg. The longer she waited, the more uncertain she became. How could she begin?

Vincent, I need you to help me know exactly what I'm feeling. He was good at that, and about talking her through her feelings. *He'd make one hell of a psychiatrist,* Catherine thought, but the idea annoyed her. She had never been to see a psychiatrist, and she certainly did not want to talk to one tonight.

Vincent, I need you to tell me what I should do. That was no good either. Elliot Burch could do *that* for her. Or Tom Gunther, her most recent fiancé. Or any of her other past lovers, for that matter. Men like Russell Yarborough (a short-term mistake). Steven Bass (another past fiancé, no less). Jack Stilton (a six-month-long fling). And many others over the years—too many, really. Catherine turned and walked across the underground space again. Her track record with men was awful. Pathetic.

That's another thing that makes Vincent so special. I, charming Cathy Chandler, care about him, and yet he's unlike every other man I've ever had the misfortune to be attracted to. He's the best person I've ever known.

She paced to the gate and peered through the bars. The secret door wasn't closed tonight. Catherine guessed this was to allow a little stream of springtime runoff to trickle through. *Imagine!* she thought. *Drainage tunnels that do what they were built to do. They're not just an elaborate camouflage for this entrance to the world Below. Vincent and his people really do live in sewers and drainage tunnels.*

She saw no sign of Vincent on the other side of the gate. She turned away and paced

some more, thinking, *That's not entirely true. The home Tunnels are rock chambers below the sewers. Below the subways. Miles and miles of chambers and passages. They live way down there.*

Some of those chambers opened deep, deep underground. Catherine thought of the old woman's chamber. *Narcissa*. She stopped her pacing, standing still, fighting shame. Narcissa had helped her when she most needed it, but it hurt Catherine to know how much trouble Vincent went through to bring her Down to Narcissa's home.

She thought: *I love a friend I can hardly stand to look in the eye anymore. A friend who keeps seeing me at my worst, but relentlessly draws out the best parts of me. A friend who gives and gives while I take and take. And this is a friend who knows city sewer lines and drainage grates the way I know Fifth Avenue boutiques.*

Catherine returned to the gate. *Our worlds don't match. Our lives don't match. The things I can give are things he doesn't need.*

That didn't ring quite true, but Catherine felt too distracted to map out what was wrong with the thought. That was why she needed to speak to Vincent.

Where is he? Catherine bent down and looked into the tunnel again.

Apparently, Vincent was about three yards away from her, a shadow among shadows, his eyes glinting in the dark like a cat's. Catherine stood transfixed. *Oh, hell,* she cursed silently. *How long has he been standing there? And what must he be thinking?*

Vincent spoke from the darkness, his words colored by familiar qualities of timbre and pronunciation more subtle than any accent. These traits manifested physically as an audible thickening of certain sounds whenever Vincent mouthed syllables around his long canine teeth and past his cleft upper lip. Linguistically, his speech was marked by the care with which he chose each word, and also by the complete investment of himself in everything he said.

Catherine always noticed his verbal mannerisms. She had come to love them, because they were distinctly characteristic of *Vincent*. His voice sounded like none other in all the world. For Catherine, listening to Vincent speak felt like hearing a world-class cellist improvise sublime music on a perfectly-tuned Stradivarius instrument.

"You look like an angel, standing there." Vincent's velvet-on-granite voice sounded gentle and sincere.

Well, that answers my question about what he's thinking, Catherine thought.

She felt the hurricane inside her die away. Not long ago, she had tried to deny the fact that Vincent loved her. It was impossible to believe otherwise now. *Above all else, he's a friend who loves me. A friend who is IN love with me.*

She did not know what to do with his love. She had never in her life encountered its like. Vincent was still watching her from the shadowed tunnel.

"I wanted to see you," Catherine said, because she had not thought up a better way to begin. "I have a decision to make. And I need your help."

He came to her at once, moving with eerie quiet to the gate, which creaked open at his touch and closed behind him with a clang. He leaned his shoulders against the bars and waited for her to talk. Catherine looked up at his peerless face, finding comfort in his instant willingness to be a help to her.

She saw that he had dressed simply tonight. He wore a heavy hand-knitted gray sweater over an old white shirt—the sleeves of the sweater a little too short, and the ragged sleeves of his shirt a little too long—loose canvas trousers roughly patched at the knees, his suede-wrapped boots, and his ever-present mantle draped across his shoulders and fastened below his throat with knotted leather laces. The ambient light of the chamber shimmered around him, reflections from

the stream of water splashing silver upon Vincent's long golden curls. His face was calm and watchful.

He is the angel here, Catherine thought. She remembered a rescued cleaning lady's words to her: "A terrible angel." Once, Catherine had believed those words described her friend. She knew Vincent better now. *A beautiful angel,* her heart amended.

Vincent was still waiting for her.

"I've been offered another job, Vincent. A much better job." She tried to make her own voice sound as gentle as his. "With more responsibility."

He looked down at the ground, still listening, but perhaps schooling his expression. Vincent knew what Catherine felt, even if she was confused by it. He knew what must be coming.

Catherine pressed on. "A chance to use my training, and to help people more than I'm able to now." She hesitated, afraid of what his reaction might be. "But...it would mean...leaving New York."

Vincent blinked at the stream, then raised his eyes to meet hers. "Where would you go?" he asked.

"Providence. Rhode Island."

Hearing the destination, Vincent's muzzle quirked in his unique variation on a smile. "Hmm. *Providence* is when...something is meant to be." The smile stayed on his face. It was a genuine smile, one that reached his eyes. Catherine had never seen any duplicity in him whatsoever. Why did his graceful honesty always surprise her so?

She turned away from him, frustrated. "I don't know what's meant to be." Catherine wanted the change. She didn't want the change. The conflict was tearing her in two. She planted her feet and faced him. "Vincent, I care about you so deeply."

She saw that he'd been gazing at the water again. Now he looked up, as though about to say something. Catherine rushed ahead.

"But part of me is unhappy. And I'm not sure why. That frightens me." She gripped her flashlight until her hand ached. A line of tension shot up along her arm to that painful spot in her back. "Vincent, I'm tired of feeling frightened."

"You want this new chance to grow beyond your fears. And at the same time, to continue to help others grow beyond theirs."

"Yes!" Of course he understood her. Vincent always understood her.

The water drew his gaze once more. "Well then, you don't have any choice." Catherine saw that he had to struggle to look at her.

She thought, *Dammit. This IS hurting him*. She stepped closer to him and said, "But I do have a choice! That's why I'm here."

His struggle abruptly ended. Vincent's blue eyes pierced through to her very soul. "You didn't come this far, Catherine, to turn back now."

Catherine moved even closer to him. "I came this far because of *you*. I don't want to leave you behind."

His answer to her came like a clean wind, sweeping the dregs of winter aside. "Catherine. Beyond these tunnels...beyond this city...lies a world of possibilities. And wonders. And...and things calling out to be done."

She listened to him, concentrating, feeling his words pour into empty places inside her. Her muscles relaxed. Her fears dissolved. Beyond the fear, Catherine found a simple sorrow waiting. And excitement. And also a great relief that Vincent wasn't at all angry with her, that he didn't think her ungrateful. "You owe me nothing," he had told her once. "I'm part of you,

Catherine. Just as you're part of me. Wherever you go, wherever I am, I'm with you."

His early January insight remained true tonight.

"All these things I could only dream about," Vincent was saying now, "until *you* came into my life. This freedom is yours to claim, and because it is yours, it can also be mine. Catherine, don't you understand?"

Now he stepped away from the gate and crossed the remaining distance between them. "If you stay in this city—here, in *our* city—you must stay because the possibilities of New York allow you to flourish. But if Providence gives you the open opportunities you need, then you *must* go."

Catherine realized, *He's bolstering my hope. He's showing me—yet again—his vision of the world. And his viewpoint is one of truth and joy.* Vincent's honest words were working, too. The silver shimmer in this junction of tunnels intensified as tears welled up in Catherine's eyes.

"You must see, you must do, *everything* you were meant to do. For me. For both of us." Vincent took in a long breath. "And then: I can truly be with you. Always." A hint of the smile remained in his eyes.

Be with you. Their greatest romance of spiritual unity had also become the ultimate thorn in their relationship. So much separated them. So much bewildered her. So much isolated him.

Yet she saw true love in Vincent's face as he looked down upon her from his imposing height. Catherine knew this for love now, and believed she could never deny it again. *He smells like springtime itself,* she thought, a little intimidated by the power of his presence and his focused attention. *And his eyes are full of hope for me. Vincent believes in providence.*

Still, doubts whispered in her heart. "There's no other way?" she asked.

"No." Vincent shook his head. "Not for us."

He backed away from her then, and retreated behind the gate. He pulled it shut, turning his face toward her so that his action could not constitute a rejection. As he closed what was essentially the front door to his home, his gesture showed her that his love had nothing to do with captivity. Being loved by Vincent meant colliding with unfettered freedom during moments when Catherine least expected to be set free. Vincent turned toward the shadows and walked slowly down the tunnel.

Catherine stood where she was for a long time, watching him go, and then watching the darkness after he was gone. Vincent had not helped her sort out her feelings. Nor had he told her what to do. He did far more for her than that. He had loved her unconditionally. He released her from fear, to feel everything that lay beyond her terror of the uncharted future. He absolved her of the guilt that too often afflicted the favored and the fortunate, celebrating her freedoms and reaffirming their unparalleled connection to each other. He restored to her a faith in her own ability to choose wisely. He reassured her that whatever course she chose, Catherine would never again be alone in the world. Vincent would always and truly be with her. He made her feel...safe.

How does he do that? she wondered, amazed. Catherine knew no answer to her question. That was simply Vincent's way.

IV

19 March 1987
Thursday Evening

Far behind him, Vincent felt Catherine return Above at last. She felt calmer now, more at ease with herself. Not happy, but also no longer trapped in a self-defeating cycle of doubts and fears. Vincent felt the seed of desire take root in her heart. As they moved away from one another, respectively descending and ascending into their separate worlds, her hopeful desire began to grow.

Vincent knew this feeling, and recognized it as a hunger for adventure. Once fear of the unknown was cured, courage and curiosity took its place. Many of Vincent's other loved ones had felt this desire, before they passed out of his life and into the world beyond his own. Catherine might not know it herself yet, but she wanted Providence. She had already decided to go.

Fear of the unknown. Providence. Desire. The words tangled in Vincent's mind the way feelings had tangled up Catherine's heart. *She wants so badly to trust*, he thought. *To trust herself, and to trust me.*

Catherine trusted herself enough to desire this new dream for her life. She trusted Vincent enough to listen to his words of hope for her, inasmuch as his words aligned with her own hopes for herself. Vincent stopped walking, closing his eyes. Yet she continued to fear him. She didn't want to, and she felt ashamed of her fear, but it was still there, a misery reawakened by her recent Vodou assailants. Vincent felt it in her when he came near to her tonight, just as he sensed the bodily hurt from her still-healing gunshot wound that she didn't want to share with him. He had longed to touch her hand, to hold her close, to comfort and protect; to breathe in the scent of her satin-soft hair.

He could do none of these things without harming her. Without limiting her. Without frightening her even more, and perhaps without also angering her, as he had angered her several times in the past when he tried to express his thoughts and feelings about her choices. In that critical moment at the Junction Door, to act upon even his most well-intentioned desires would hold Catherine back from her present decision. Vincent could never do that to anyone *(she was in pain in my presence)*, and least of all to the woman he loved *(she was afraid).*

Vincent opened his eyes and continued to walk away from the Junction Door, and from *her*. He knew he appeared a fearsome creature in the eyes of other people, and that his way of life must be very frightening to those who dwelt in the world Above. Catherine was tired of being frightened. She deserved a life free from fear. Vincent wanted her to have all that she deserved, and all that he could give to her, and *more* than he could give her—all the best things life had to offer.

In the Surface world, as she crossed the park to her apartment building, Catherine's desire grew stronger. She felt eager to go home. There was something she wanted to do when she returned there. She embraced the weight of her decision now. She could think clearly about her options now.

Vincent walked down the tunnel, slow, and slower, and slowest, until he was shuffling his heavy feet through the damp sand on the tunnel floor. *This is what it must feel like, to be old*, he thought. Then he turned the corner into a different tunnel and all words left him.

His own pain—his own loss *(abandoned! beloved! gone!)*—cornered him, staggered him. He put out a hand, to keep from falling. He took another step and could go no further. Vincent slumped against the tunnel wall, unable to breathe, his heart not beating in his chest, but clenching like a fist and trembling there. He pressed one hand to the spot, gasping—aching from shoulder to heels. He held very still, staring at nothing, waiting to either die or go on living, and not knowing what life or death would feel like once the issue was decided.

He guessed he must still be alive when words rekindled in his mind. He thought: *And this*

is what cardiac arrest must feel like.

Vincent breathed. And he breathed. And he breathed.

Pipetalk roused him from his agonized trance, quick encoded words pinging merrily along their metal conduits. One of their Helpers, Coretta, was inviting one of the Tunnels children, Lana, to join her daughter for a tea party tomorrow afternoon. Coretta's daughter, Amy, used a wheelchair to negotiate her world. She could enter only one or two of the Tunnel thresholds—"I guess the city builders weren't thinking of wheelchairs when they built the sewers," she had once told Vincent with a cheeky grin—so, her friend Lana almost always went Above to visit her. Lana accepted Coretta's invitation.

Another message, this one from Olivia to Luke: *SUPPLIES AVAILABLE. FRESH AND DRIED HERBS. SATURDAY GOOD?*

Luke to Olivia: *YES. PICK UP WHERE?*

Olivia to Luke: *WONG. CHINATOWN.*

"Wong" was Dr. Wong, Olivia's mentor and the successful proprietor of an herbal apothecary on Mott Street.

Then Pascal tapped out the hour and an *ALL'S WELL*. This was followed by William summoning all interested parties to the Dining Hall for supper. Families and others who chose to take their food back to their chambers had already been served, or had picked up ingredients for their evening meals earlier in the day. Communal fare was now ready for everyone else.

Vincent's interior reality may have collapsed around him, but the world which allowed him to exist at all continued, peaceful, unaltered and thriving.

Food was the last thing he wanted now, but Father was waiting for him. Supper tonight would be Father's first meal at the common tables since the cave-in. Vincent turned, his right shoulder sliding against the wall, and he moved homeward. He thought, *I must be able to stand, before I come to the sentry station. I am not prepared to explain this. I must not worry anyone. I must not frighten Father.*

As he kept walking, his shock retracted into coldness, but his pain remained. Catherine was a free woman. She was his friend and more than his friend, but also not *his* Catherine Chandler. She had a life Above apart from him, and she loved her life, loved her work, loved the challenge of helping people who needed her help. From the beginning, Vincent knew that his dream of time together with her—and of love together—must be subject to the immutable constraints upon his own life. Their dream also balanced itself against Catherine's limitless possibilities—and found its counterbalance in her astonishing generosity.

This past January, a little over eight months after their first meeting and parting, Vincent had presented himself to Catherine on her terrace, unable to stay away any longer. He had needed to see her in person. He beheld her healed, radiant face for the first time. He confessed his dream. He told her that he was connected to her—and that he always would be. He tried to wish her well that night, and to let her go.

But Catherine reached out for him. She offered her small white hand to his large, clawed grasp and asked him to stay. "Don't leave!" she had said, and her heart whispered to his, *Be with me,* and, *Welcome home.*

So Vincent stayed, and he dreamed. Catherine joined him in this dreaming. For nearly three wintry months, Vincent savored every moment of the joy brought to him by their dream. Now Catherine was ready to awaken and depart.

Vincent thought of the way she had stood at the gate tonight. She had been delicately silhouetted in the golden nimbus of light spilling down from a lamp post, through a grate, and

into the storm drains Below. To Vincent's eyes her image appeared angelic.

If this is her journey—her destiny—then I will rejoice for her, Vincent vowed. *She shall do great things. Her life will be a beautiful gift to all who know her.*

He stood up straight and stepped away from the wall. Pulling his hood up over his not-quite-dry hair, he began to walk properly. Vincent passed the Junction Level sentry (Matthew tonight) and took the right-hand passage to the Spiral Stair. There, he paused at the first step, head bowed. *I am the one unready to wake,* he admitted to himself. *How quickly I've come to depend upon her possibilities, and her willingness to share them with me!* When the stairs no longer wavered in his sight, Vincent began the long climb Down.

V

19 March 1987
Thursday Night

"Coming through, coming through. Make way! Hungry man coming through." Winslow thumped his plate and his tankard down at the end of the table and waited for Marc and José to make room for him on the bench. Sitting between them, he sighed.

"Sometimes William just kills me," he told the end of the table at large. "He's been roasting these things all afternoon. Hammer and tongs, I've been drooling all over my work."

"Thanks, Winslow," Jamie said from a few places down. "I'm sure everyone is really looking forward to carrying that new gate over to East Harlem now."

Winslow pulled his fork and knife from his vest pocket. "Nothing to worry about, girl. Spit evaporates on hot metal. Didn't you know that?"

Jamie rolled her eyes.

José tipped the end of his fork in Winslow's direction. "You know, some of us are trying to eat here?"

"Uh huh. I know. Hungry people like me." Winslow leaned over his hot roasted chicken and set to with a will. They didn't get fresh meat like this too often. Canned and salted stuff, sure, home-raised grubs, and soybean curd, and sometimes chicken eggs. But, short of holiday feasts, not whole roasting birds. Glancing around the Dining Hall, Winslow saw that everyone dined in fine spirits. He knew that after all the latecomers had been served, William would make his appearance and receive a hearty round of applause, if not a thunderous standing ovation.

Sipping his beer, he looked up as a commotion began at the other end of the hall. Had William come out here already? *Ah hah. No,* Winslow said to himself. *Not William. Father*. He smiled.

So, Vincent had finally managed to pry Father out of his Study. It was good to see the old man up and around again. Really, *really* good as far as Winslow was concerned. He—and many others Above and Below—had been very worried about Father for a while there.

Now Father was getting mobbed by children and more than a few adults as he gimped his way across the room. Vincent made an admirable escort, holding Father gently by one arm and stepping just a bit in front of him, clearing a path with his outstretched free hand while making it look like he was simply gesturing Father ahead. Father tried to wave all the attention away, but the shine in his eyes told Winslow that he was touched by this reception.

Getting smashed up by that rockfall sure hasn't helped Father's bad leg any, Winslow

thought, watching the old man's cautious movements. *I wonder if it's better to walk off the stiffness, or to keep on resting, like he has been.* Well, Father's medical care wasn't up to Winslow. That was Mary's and Vincent's department.

Michael and Stephen rushed to pull Father's dining chair to the table. Once Vincent got Father settled into it, Mary clapped her hands and insisted that all the children return to their suppers at once.

"Please," she called. "Father wants to eat too."

The crowd thinned, although everyone sitting at that half of the table seemed to lean a good four inches toward Father's end for the rest of the meal.

"It's great to have him back," Marc murmured, lifting his mug in a salute to Father.

"Hell, yes," Winslow agreed.

Father had always been the only living father in Winslow's life. He meant the world to everyone Below. How many times had Winslow heard from his mother: "Son, you could do a lot worse than having the Doc to look after you like he does—" ("Doc" or "The Doc" being what everyone had called Father, back when he was a newcomer to the Tunnels.) "—In fact, I don't see how you could do better in this city. Lord knows how he got that way, but when he looks at you, Doc sees the boy before he sees the color of the boy. I know you don't understand right now what that's going to mean to you down the line. But in the meanwhile, you pay *attention* to him, and you read every last book he gives you to read. By the time he's through with you, my Winslow is going to be *literate*. I can't tell yet whether you'll turn out to be a man of letters or a man of honest labor, but you are going to know how to read and write and think for yourself. *That* man'll teach you how to do those things. Mind him."

Aside from all his doctoring and surrogate parenting and teaching, "that man" was also a born leader, keeping tabs on the needs of the whole community, and good at organizing people to get those needs met. Vincent, Ezra, and Mary had picked up the slack lately, while Father had been stuck in bed, but people were used to listening to *Father* about logistical stuff. Various supply shortages had cropped up as a result. During the past couple weeks, as Father began to sit at his desk again for longer and longer periods of time, things were finally starting to get back to normal.

Vincent brought Father's plate from the serving table, cupping Father's wine and water goblets in one big hand. He casually raised the food above the heads of Dustin and Nicholas as the two boys stampeded past him, heading for the desserts.

"Hey," Cullen's voice called after the giggly kids. "Slow down before someone gets hurt!"

Winslow snorted. He'd heard what happened with Cullen's crew today. The woodcarver was a fine one to talk, when he couldn't keep his own team out of trouble.

Or maybe it's just the Maze pulling her old tricks, Winslow thought. *My mama always said that place was cursed. Maybe it's true. Who knows?*

Nights like this, when the food turned out especially good, he ended up thinking a lot about his mother. She'd been one of the first Tunnel Elders, a valued (if strident) voice among a small gathering of fellow outcasts—broken people who cared nothing for age, or accents, or a person's upbringing. Not even the skin color of a desperate mother-to-be. After Julia became a Tunnelwoman, she helped to build the world Below. She raised her only son in that world. And she fed the community, from their early days of watery soup and starvation rations, into a more comfortable era, after the community improved their cooperative scavenging skills. Yeah, William might be a king of a cook, but in Julia's time, she'd been better on her worst day than William could manage on his best.

Take this chicken, Winslow thought. *Grand as it is, falling off the bone, Mama Julia would've topped William's work, put some extra seasoning on it, made it special as a holiday parade. Like that one Winterfest feast. Oh, Lord, that one truly beggar'd all description.*

She was sixteen years dead and buried, but Winslow still missed her, volcanic temper and all.

Not that I'm complaining, here and now! he thought as he skewered his last green bean on his fork. *But only Mama Julia's food will ever drum up Shakespearean praise from this son's heart.* He mopped his plate with a hunk of hearty bread and looked around to see whether everyone had got their fair share so he could go back to the serving table for seconds.

Father was entertaining a rapt audience at his end of the table, telling a story about the day the Tunnelfolk discovered the Pipe Chamber. *Pascal should be here to help him,* Winslow thought, standing up. *He does the best imitation of his dad's accent*. But Pascal was on duty in the Pipe Chamber tonight.

Winslow was turning toward the serving table, empty plate and empty tankard in his hands, when something on the far side of the hall caught his eye. He took a better look. Two small amber lights glowed from a shadowed spot near the chamber wall.

"Okaaay," Winslow muttered. He glanced back to where Father was still storytelling between bites of chicken and potatoes. Sure enough, Vincent had not taken the seat beside Father. Nor was he at any place along Father's table. Nor was he at any of the other tables. Winslow set his plate back down.

"Watch this for me," he told José. "Don't let William or the KP kids get efficient with it."

"Sure thing," the young man replied.

Winslow went to the wooden keg of beer and poured himself another tankard of William's fine lager. What William couldn't quite match in terms of his predecessor's expertise in the Kitchen, he more than made up for with his mastery of the Brewery. William always saved his best stuff for formal feasts, but Winslow thought the man's ordinary brews were stellar. He'd tasted several varieties of what got served Topside. None of them remotely compared to the supper service William set out on Saturdays—or whenever Fortune graced the world Below with a mid-week smile.

Winslow crossed the cavern, rounding the end of the last table just as William his own self emerged from the Kitchen. The applause did prove enthusiastic, and several children stood up on their benches to whistle.

William held up his hands. "Now then, thanks now, yeah. But you gotta clap for Deborah, if you're gonna clap for me. She's the one who arranged the food delivery."

Everyone cheered for the absent Deborah, their miracle worker of a Helper who brought them many a windfall. Then Father raised his cup to toast William's good health—and his good cooking—and William strode into the throng to receive the full adulation due him. Winslow moved into the shadows, watching the two lights ahead of him transmute from amber to coppery-green as his angle of approach changed. He joined Vincent, who was sitting on a spare bench with his own mug in his clawed hands. The mug was one of Cullen's handcrafted pieces, and looked like a miniature wooden barrel with a handle tacked onto its side.

One whiff told Winslow it wasn't beer in Vincent's round mug, but a straight-up ginger root decoction. *And steeped strong enough to burn every last hair out of a man's nose, let alone the taste buds on his tongue,* Winslow thought. He plunked himself down on the bench, hoping that his companion had at least sweetened the drink with a little honey. Vincent looked up at him. This close, his eyes were clear unwinking blue, and not glowy at all.

"Vincent," Winslow said to him, "I don't know how you drink that stuff."

In answer, Vincent raised the mug with both hands and sipped his ginger tea.

Okay, Winslow thought, trying to read his friend's mood. *Got to walk on eggshells until I get him figured out.*

So he just sat quietly, tending to his own drink and watching the goings-on where the room shone brightest. After a while he tried, "I'm surprised you're not over there celebrating Father's return to the land of the unbedridden."

"Father has plenty of celebrants to contend with at present."

Winslow chuckled. "Yeah, well, if you're waiting on a tray to take back to your chamber, it looks like it's gonna be a while." The grin on William's round, red-bearded face implied that Ezra, Judge, and Sara were hoisting the cook up to Cloud Nine with their praise.

"I'm not waiting for a tray."

Now Winslow followed the line of Vincent's gaze and watched as a long-tailed shadow detached itself from a wall to sidle along the end of their bench. William's big blue tomcat, Hannibal, glanced at Winslow, dismissed him as unworthy of further notice, and eyeballed Vincent with reluctant respect. Vincent returned the look until the scar-faced ratter twitched his ears at the sound of laughter from the common tables and sauntered off toward the tunnel that would take him into the Split-Rock Chamber.

Vincent looked over at Winslow again. "You don't need to worry about me." He said this quiet enough that Winslow had to lean a little closer to hear him.

Like hell, Winslow thought, but didn't say. Instead, he observed, "But you're not eating."

"I'm not hungry."

Winslow set his mug on his knee. "You. Not hungry for roast chicken. And you want me not to worry."

Vincent downed more ginger.

"And you're sitting here alone in the dark. What's with that?"

"I'm not alone. You're here."

Winslow grunted his annoyance, thinking, *This should be Pascal-the-eternally-patient sitting with him on this bench*. When Vincent decided on *taciturn*, talking with him was like trying to drag an explanation of Newtonian physics out of a rock. Sure, you could chuck the thing downhill, but you couldn't make it tell you why it flew, or why it fell back to the ground after a while.

Vincent relented. A little. "It's very...noisy...over there. Maybe a little later...I'll try to eat."

Okay, thought Winslow. *Noisy. I can follow that*. It wasn't just the loud voices, Winslow knew, although that alone would be enough to bother his sharp-eared friend. No, the noise surely went deeper than that, to where Vincent could feel it inside his head. It was Molly who had first explained that one to Winslow, back when they were all still young kids together.

"Pretend you're mad," she'd said.

That wasn't hard. Winslow had inherited his mother's temper.

"And pretend Pascal is happy. And Ike is sad. And Livvy is pouting. And Devin is trying to be clever. And Father is suspicious. And Sara is pulling out her hair because one of us did something stupid. And...um...and pretend your mom just found out she's got a basket of rotten eggs in the Larder."

"Oh my *God,*" Winslow said, wanting to be nowhere nearby if and when *that* ever happened.

"Yep. Now stand in the middle of all that and pretend that you know exactly who's feeling what, all at the same time, before anyone says anything, like everyone's screaming what

they're thinking at the top of their lungs."

"Okay. Weird. A lotta no fun. So what?"

"So that's why Vincent hates crowds," Molly said. "I'm telling you *that's* what it's like for him. So if you *ever* push that little kid into the middle of one of your stupid cave-football tournaments again, I'm gonna tar and feather you in your sleep."

In her younger days, Molly must have gleaned a few too many rough-and-tumble notions from her readings of *Huckleberry Finn.*

"Where you gonna get tar down here?" Winslow asked her.

Young Molly tipped her nose up and replied, all haughty, "I don't need tar to get the job done. I know where Old Sam keeps a whole jug of wood glue."

There is nothing like a good friend to tell it to you straight, Winslow thought, rolling his mug between his hands. He turned back to Vincent. "I heard about Michael and you lot in the Maze today," he said. "You're not hurting, right? Father patched you up okay?"

Vincent was silent just a little too long. "That hurt will heal soon," he said.

"Oh. Uh huh. So this is about a different hurt."

No answer at all, which, coming from Vincent, was as good as a yes.

I am Pascal, Winslow thought. *I am a patient passenger on this train of thought. I do not spook the man after he's as good as told me something really wrong is going down. And I say to him—*

"Okay. So who sucker-punched you?"

Vincent blinked down at his tea.

"Need me to go smack someone on the head for you?"

Now Vincent slowly turned to outright *stare*, wide-eyed, at Winslow.

Yep. That proves it. I'm not Pascal.

"Winslow?" Vincent said.

"Yeah?"

Vincent set his mug on the bench and stood up. "When Father asks, tell him I'm out on patrol."

Winslow could have smacked his own head. *Good job, son. Damn it!* But out loud he sighed and said, "Sure. I'll tell him."

Vincent took a step away, stopped, and spoke over his shoulder. "And Winslow? About your...offer?"

Winslow waited.

"No. But I thank you for your concern." Then Vincent was out the northeast entryway and gone before Winslow could say anything else.

"Huh boy," Winslow huffed. "Well, I tried." He got up and snagged Vincent's empty mug to bring it back to the Kitchen. People were picking over the serving table now. Winslow walked back across the Dining Hall to see what might be left.

If Molly were still around, I think I'd find myself up against a jug of glue tonight, he thought. *Or worse.* But as he spooned more potatoes onto his plate he couldn't help but wonder what in hell was going on with Vincent. *He'll talk to Father. Eventually. And maybe I should go talk to Pascal.* That, anyway, seemed like a very good idea.

VI

19 & 20 March 1987
Thursday Night & Friday Morning

Catherine set her pen between the two sheets of paper on her dining table. Edie's advice about the list was good—as far as it went—but Catherine's pros and cons seemed to cancel each other out. It was Vincent's advice that ultimately helped her decide.

"Follow your heart," he had told her one night—after she returned home from her memorable first evening with Elliot Burch. "Follow your heart, Catherine. You must."

And now, as Vincent had also told her, Catherine must see, and must do, everything meant for her to see and do. She touched the paper to the left of her pen: her two-column list. At the bottom of that page she'd printed, GO TO PROVIDENCE, and circled it.

On the other page she had written a carefully composed letter. It read,

> Vincent,
>
> I'm going to Rhode Island. I'll resign from my job immediately and pack my things this weekend. On Monday, I'll travel to Providence. I'm ready for this—for the change and for the challenge. You've given me that strength. I know you will be with me in spirit.
>
> Thank you, Vincent, for all that you have given me. I am grateful for your hope, and your courage, and your love. You've shown me that the best moments in life are also the most unexpected. My heart will forever be where you are.
>
> If you can come, I want to see you again before I leave. I want to say goodbye. Be well.
>
> Always,
>
> Catherine

I'll call Benny first thing in the morning, Catherine thought. *He'll be the fastest messenger. Then Vincent can decide which of the three nights will be best for him to come Above. I want to part on the terrace. It all fits together that way; it will give us closure. Because that's how he came to me again, after my new life started.*

Catherine stood up and went to the doors which opened onto that space. She stepped out and took comfort from the magical borderland that was her balcony. The city lights glittered around her. A breeze lifted her hair from her neck.

I'm ready for this change, yes, she thought, *but I'm going to miss New York. And Dad. Even Joe.* Catherine choked out a little laugh. *I'll even miss Joe. And all my other friends.*

Tears slipped down her face and she rubbed them away as they fell.

She knew there would be new friends waiting to be made in a new city. This was the capstone moment of her healing. Catherine felt this was the only way to finally defeat her fears.

True independence would provide what nothing else could give her: full freedom, full confidence in herself, and complete control over her own life.

Writing out her list, Catherine saw for the first time how her web of personal relationships had become very like a cage. A comfortable, invisible cage. She had to know what lay beyond that cozy confinement.

She told herself, *I want to know who I am when I'm truly out there on my own. And, as Vincent puts it, who I am to become.*

She knew he would be sad. He would miss her. But Catherine was glad that he always so readily respected her need for freedom. *He recognized this need in me long before I did,* she thought, appreciating Vincent's empathic guidance. *He won't have to be strong for me anymore. His life can return to his peaceful contemplation of his books and he won't have to worry about protecting me every night. I'm sure all the children Below will be glad to see more of their teacher, their friend. And Vincent's father can stop worrying about us.*

Catherine sighed. *But still, among that woven tapestry of my own friends, I'll miss Vincent most of all*. She turned away from the skyline and pulled the doors closed behind her.

In the morning, the DA's Office was as much a madhouse as ever, with that hallelujah-it's-Friday air adding a bittersweet dimension to the frenzy. Catherine had several cases to tidy up for reassignment, and her formal resignation letter to Moreno to deliver, and her ID card to turn in, and her desk to clear of personal items—but she made her first order of business a visit to Joe's office.

She knocked on the closed door, which was the safest way to approach Joe. Catherine would never understand why he hung a dartboard on the inside wall, right beside the doorjamb—and then frequently hurled darts at it from behind his desk. Admittedly, Joe had decent aim, but Catherine could not escape a lingering dread of being punctured one day, should she ever barge in on him unannounced.

Joe's voice called to her from beyond the door. "Come in!"

Catherine entered and paused for a moment to absorb what she saw. At a quarter to eight in the morning, Joe's desk was already a juridical demolition zone, spread thick with perhaps half a dozen open law books, sheaves of paper, and a rumpled spreadsheet printed out on tractor paper. Joe looked at her, his sleeves rolled up and his perennially loosened tie dangling piteously from his neck. If he went home at all last night, he hadn't stayed there long.

Joe leaned back in his chair. He gave her a commiserating half-smile. "Oh, you look terrific," he said.

Catherine knew that. She guessed she'd gotten about as much sleep as Joe. She nodded as she crossed the room. "You look pretty good yourself."

Joe swept his hands above his desk, his half-smile widening into a half-grin. "The Alberti case, believe it or not. Guy's got a pair of pit bulls for attorneys, but we'll beat 'em."

Joe is a very hardworking, very lovable man, Catherine thought. *A knight in ink-smudged armor*. She smiled at him. "We were a pretty good team, weren't we?"

Joe lifted his eyebrows, questioning her choice of words.

"I'm going to Providence, Joe."

That made him swivel in his chair, chuckling to himself.

"What?" Catherine asked. "What's so funny?"

"I don't know. I guess I was kind of half-hoping you'd go the other way."

Catherine felt her smile fade from her face. "But yesterday you said—"

"Yeah. Yeah, I know what I said yesterday." Joe looked a little sheepish, a little regretful. "I even meant it." He got out of his chair and came around the desk to meet her, sleepless eye to

sleepless eye. “But I’m not too crazy about losing you,” he said.

Catherine looked into his face and knew it for the face of a friend. *Is it going to be this hard to say goodbye to each of the people I care about?* she wondered.

“Thanks, Joe,” Catherine said. “For everything.”

“You made the right call, Radcliffe.” He held his arms open and smiled that New-York-Joe smile of his. “Congratulations. I’m gonna miss you.”

Catherine hugged him. She would definitely miss Joe, too. And yet—his regretful reversal implanted a sliver of new doubt into her careful case construction. One of the “pros” on Catherine’s list was, JOE THINKS IT’S A GOOD IDEA. He still did, only now his approval came with reservations.

He’s a lawyer, Catherine thought, *and he’s a lawyer in a case-cracking mood.* She stepped back, smiling again. *Take his words at face value, Cathy. This is the right call.*

Chapter Four: Dreams Denied, Dreams Attained

I

20 March 1987
Friday Morning

The message arrived after the breakfast hour. Reading it, Vincent was glad he had eaten nothing. He refolded the paper and returned it to its envelope, taking care not to damage these fragile pieces of Catherine's world, marked as they were with her lively cursive handwriting. He tucked the envelope inside his vest, where he could carry it next to his heart. Then he sat silent in his chair, staring at Father's table without seeing it.

Father sat across from him, pointedly not watching him, sipping tea. A medical reference lay open on the table in front the good doctor, but Father also did not read the words on its pages. He waited for his son, giving Vincent the space of that silence to collect himself.

Vincent needed collecting. He wanted to find a deep, dark hole and hide in it. He wanted to throw something. He wanted to run to Catherine. He wanted to tear out the impossible pain in his chest and fling it away from himself.

Since he could reasonably do none of these things, Vincent remained where he was in the timeworn red chair in Father's chamber, tired from his all-night patrol through the furthest reaches of the upper Tunnels, but wanting sleep even less than he wanted food. He wanted his dream. He wanted Catherine.

More than anything else, Vincent wanted her to be happy. He wanted her to be whole. Yet her choice toward wholeness left him incomplete and alone again. If he could no longer share her possibilities, what was left for him?

His nightmare Above, on the night the gang caught him there, had shown Vincent once and for all that the world Below was a beautiful haven, his sanctuary and his salvation. He would never again view the Undercity's tunnels and caverns as his Topsider-enforced prison, as he sometimes had, when he was younger. But losing access to Catherine's native freedom now—losing his direct contact with *her*—reduced even his precious haven to a walled garden of limited compensations. Visiting the gates last night, checking the entrances, prowling the tunnels, Vincent felt that the world Above had barred those gates against him once more. He felt shut away and locked out.

Cast aside.

He'd felt this way many times before now, although only a few times in recent years. His feelings formed a natural response to the gravitational allure of the world Above, a force which pulled the people he loved out of his reach, and a force which reshaped their dreams into beauties and greatnesses to which Vincent could never aspire. The civilized world Above did not permit him such aspirations. It would not even permit him the reality of his own life, should that world ever discover his existence.

The daylit world refused him admittance into the achievements of both its history and its present-day activities. This exclusion always intensified the impact of crossroads moments, those times when changes and choices confronted Vincent with his conflicting fears and desires. During the past months, Catherine had given him a new way to view his feelings, and she had given him the hope to move through them.

I believed myself finally at peace with this issue, Vincent thought. *Perhaps I was wrong.*

It was an old problem. One of his oldest wounds.

"You're just too little to get the real story," his dearest childhood friend, Devin, had told him, when Vincent was very young. Devin had been a pale boy with dark eyes and a wide grin, a lover of adventure stories—especially his own. He was Vincent's senior by two years and had long ago taken Vincent under his wing as a foster brother and satisfactorily imaginative playmate. But Devin had also been irked with him that day.

Vincent was attempting to read a book over Devin's shoulder and Devin had gotten tired of the younger child's small, furry face breathing down his neck, asking questions about the meanings of those words Vincent had never read before. So Devin insulted Vincent's parentage. In defense, Vincent parroted Father's story about how Vincent had been found at the snowy back doorstep of St. Vincent's hospital.

Vincent was *trying* to refute Devin's assertion that Vincent belonged in a zoo. If someone had brought him to a *people* hospital, it meant Vincent belonged in a place where *people* lived, not a place where animals were kept. At that point in his life, Vincent had never seen a zoo. He'd never so much as glimpsed the world Above. But only the week before, Ezra had read *Curious George* to the children at storytime. Vincent was still having bad dreams about that book. And Devin, because they shared a bed back then, knew it.

"Doorstep whatever. You're too little. You don't know that's just the *nice* version of the story," Devin said.

"What's a version?" asked Vincent.

"A different way to say the same thing. Now take a hike, would you?"

But now Vincent was curious. "Tell me, Devin."

"Kid, you're too little."

"Not."

Devin grumbled and twisted around in his chair to look Vincent in the eye. "I tell you, and you leave?"

Vincent thought about Devin's asking price for the new story, and nodded.

"On a cold winter day, you were born," Devin said. He wanted very much to return to Doyle's *Lost World*. "And yes, when you got picked up, it was outside St. Vincent's."

"Wrapped in rags—" Vincent said. He didn't get to add Father's descriptive, *like a present.* Devin was too quick for him.

"Wrapped in dirty, *bloody* rags. Somebody else didn't want you hanging around like a pest, either. So after you were born, you got wadded up in grody rags and tossed out in a dumpster behind the hospital. Someone from the Tunnels heard you squeaking in there and dug you out. They coulda taken you off to the zoo right then and there. But for *some* reason, they decided not to. That's how you ended up Below. The end."

Vincent cocked his head at his brother. "What's a dumpster?"

"It's a big, huge metal box where Topsiders put garbage."

"What's a garbage?"

Devin sighed. "Stuff like Julia puts in the compost barrels, okay? Gross stuff. Things nobody wants around. They threw you in the *trash*, get it? Now if you don't scram, I'm gonna put you right back where you came from and slam the lid."

Vincent had scrammed. Winslow came upon him in the Split-rock Chamber half an hour later. Vincent's small clawed hands covered his nose and mouth, and he was staring at the community's three big composting drums and five medium-sized boxes of earthworms. He side-stepped out of Winslow's way and stood behind the braziers that kept the chamber warm enough for both the worms and the microbes to do their work in a timely manner. Winslow emptied a

bucket into the nearest barrel and gave the younger boy a strange look.

"You in here for a reason, V?"

Vincent shook his head and silently followed Winslow back out of the cave that smelled like rot and ruin. He crept through the Tunnels into Father's Study, because Devin was still reading in the chamber Vincent shared with him, and Devin did not want him there. Father looked up from the letter he was writing and saw Vincent's face.

"Vincent?" Father asked, worried.

Vincent mumbled that he wanted to ask Father about something Devin had said.

Father frowned. "All right, Vincent. What did Devin tell you this time?"

But after listening to what Vincent had to say, Father did not dismiss the story as just one more of Devin's tall tales. "No," said Father sadly. "He should not have told you the way he did, but Devin spoke the truth."

Vincent could only stare at the floor. "So I am not a present," he said in his soft, slightly gritty voice. He had dreamed sometimes of the people who might have been his mother and his original father. Those dreams died that day.

"I'm a garbage," Vincent whispered.

At that, Father got out of his chair and took his son into his arms. He said, "No. You are not. People are afraid of what they don't know, Vincent. You were a gift that the world Above could not understand. In our world, you are one of many treasured children whom the city refused to accept and cherish, as it ought to have done. You are the greatest gift the world Above has ever given to me."

Vincent stayed silent. He knew he was not the only foundling child who lived Below. Molly had been brought into the Tunnels from the streets, and also Vincent's younger friend Candy, and no one knew where Rennie came from. He just showed up one day, walking slowly Down out of Brooklyn from their 4th Avenue Entrance, cradling a broken wrist and sporting what Winslow termed, "the mother of all shiners."

His friends *were* special people, but Vincent didn't feel like a gift anymore, no matter what Father said. Vincent didn't know enough words to tell Father what he felt, or even to tell himself. Close to three decades later, he still didn't have the words. The feelings Vincent had first experienced all those years ago were returning now—and his pain was terrible.

But this isn't about me this time, Vincent thought. *It must NOT be about me. This is Catherine's journey. Catherine's story.*

Even so, the ugly voice of his pain kept whispering inside him. *Cast aside. Just as Devin said. Just as Devin DID, in the end. Left behind. Just as Catherine said. Just as she's going to do.*

His shadowed thoughts were *shameful*. Ignoble. Useless. Vincent propped his elbows on the table and pressed his hands to his brow.

Father broke his studied silence. "Vincent? What is it?"

I wanted something for myself, thought Vincent, wearily. *I wanted the chance to share a dream with someone. With Catherine. I knew this day would come, but I wanted to pretend that it would not. That's all, Father. I took the risk of wanting. And, once again, I pay the price for that risk.*

"You saw Catherine last night?" Father asked, giving Vincent a starting place. "Is she well?"

"She is leaving," Vincent said.

"Leaving." Father pushed his book to one side and bent forward over the table.

"Catherine is given a chance for a better life, better work, in another city. She is leaving

New York."

Father took that in, and all its implications. "Where is she going? When?"

"Providence, Rhode Island. Her message says she's preparing now. On Monday, she will be gone."

"Vincent—" Father reached across the table for him.

Vincent could feel Father's complicated sorrow on his behalf, and Father's mournful understanding, because in Father's youth something like this had happened to him—and Vincent also felt Father's sneaking relief that this business with Catherine Chandler might finally be ending.

Father felt deeply grateful to Catherine for many things, and he no longer saw her as a blight upon his son's well-being. He knew that Catherine and Vincent loved each other, and he understood a great deal about the bond they shared—but thirty-five years of his own pain lay behind his response to Vincent's hurt. He had also borne a father's burden of witnessing his son suffer through the many dangers Catherine brought into Vincent's life during the past year. And on top of everything else, his beloved Margaret had died less than three weeks ago.

It was like setting two mirrors opposite each other in the same room. Vincent could not endure the amplification of both their griefs. He got up before Father could touch him and began to pace around the chamber.

"I'm sorry, Father. I need...a moment. To think. Please."

Father leaned back in his chair again, nodding, knowing. He gave up on his book and picked up his mug of tea. Vincent paced, but he could not outpace his thoughts and he could not think clearly.

After several silent minutes, Father set his empty mug on the table and stood up. "Vincent, come. Sit down." He caught Vincent by the arm as Vincent paused halfway through another tour of the chamber. This time, Vincent let himself feel beyond Father's concerns, and beneath them, to the unshakable love that had nourished Vincent all his life.

Vincent sighed, drinking in that love like cool spring water. The weight of his aloneness lifted a little and he could breathe deeply again. Father steered him to the red chair and pressed at the shoulder that was not injured until Vincent sat.

"Tea," said Father, pouring some into Vincent's cup. This morning it was one of Dr. Wong's spicier blends—brewed as dark as coffee, and lemon-free.

Vincent accepted the mug, but did not drink from it yet. "You are a true Englishman," he told Father.

"Eh? Why do you say that?"

"You believe tea fixes everything."

Father brushed at his beard with his fingers. "Well, doesn't it?" He gave Vincent a wan smile.

Vincent could not smile back, but he bowed his head to inhale the herbal steam. After it cooled a little more, he drank Father's panacea. It didn't help.

Vincent remained in the chair for perhaps an hour, absently listening to the clanging chatter on the pipes, steeling himself to decide which night he should go to Catherine, to fulfill her final request of him: to say goodbye. After a while, Father left him there and went to his secondary rolltop desk. The older man put on his reading glasses and reviewed supply ledgers, turning a page now and then, or scratching a notation with his fountain pen. Above their level, a subway train rattled by, the echoing roar accompanied by the squeal of its wheels upon the rails. The train passed. Air currents soughed in its wake and then all became quiet again. The ordinary sounds of his world at peace with itself set Vincent's teeth on edge.

He had to *move*. He bolted to his feet with a growl—swiftly silenced—and paced to the other side of the chamber.

Saturday, he thought. *Tomorrow night. There. Done.* He returned to the chair, but didn't sit in it.

Pity and annoyance flashed from Father's end of the Study. Vincent grasped the arms of the chair, digging into the upholstery with his claws. He hung his head so that his long mane curtained his face. He didn't like to displease Father, but he could not deny his own heart. He fought for control of his thoughts.

I am stronger than this, he told himself. *I must be stronger than this. I have classes to teach today...mine and Michael's. Sara and Rebecca want help moving their new batch of candles to the Lower Supply Chamber. I must post the rosters for patrol and sentry duties in the Long Gallery, add Destiny and Rico to the afternoon lamplighters list. Winslow wants me to fit a new handle to his sledgehammer while he's away installing the Paladino Entrance gate with his crew. I'm needed today. And I need these tasks today.*

"Vincent." Father's eyeglasses clicked as he folded them in his hands. "The pain you feel now will lessen in time, and finally pass. You'll cherish the gift of these past months in your memory. You'll find new peace after the pain. Then all will be as it was. Before."

And Father's words returned Vincent's heartbreak to the foreground of his scattered thoughts.

"That I promise," Father said, trying for stolid honesty. He spoke the way he treated injuries. He was kind and he was competent, and he was as quick about it as possible. Father also undid Vincent's tenuous hold on his slow-kindled temper.

Vincent jerked upright to glare at his guardian. "So, the best I can hope for is to forget her?" Father didn't bat an eye. Vincent turned away, goaded into restless action. He went to Father's wide office desk on the other side of the room. His hand caught up a random book. "Forget everything?" he demanded of his listener.

Father said nothing, but a sense of assent from him angered Vincent. He slammed the book back down onto the desk and whirled to face Father. "Mine was another life before Catherine! I'm changed! Forever!"

Now Father's annoyance flared into anger. Vincent realized he had just shouted at his father. He turned away from the older man, angry with himself.

"All right!" Father said, not shouting, but quite loud all the same. "Then accept the change! Learn from it!" Father's anger resolved into exasperation. "But you *must* let the woman follow her own path!"

Which was what Vincent had been doing, or was attempting to do, anyway. Vincent wondered, *Does Father think I would ever stand in her way? Does he believe I tried to dissuade her from this course?* The possibility that Father *might* think this of him *hurt*. Vincent raised his hand to ward off Father's advice—and lowered it again at once.

Too much, he thought. *It's too much. I am not fit to be seen like this.* His wounded anger was becoming dangerous. Vincent turned his back and stormed toward the short flight of iron steps that would lead him out of the Hub toward Winslow's empty workshop.

"*Vincent*," Father called.

Vincent stopped on the first step.

Father was not angry now, and not annoyed. Only worried about his son. "Let her go. For *your* sake," he said.

Why is dreamlessness always a good thing, for my sake? Vincent asked silently.

He answered himself, *Because what I am precludes a freedom to dream many dreams. I*

don't need Father to remind me of this fateful fact.

He looked over his shoulder. Father sat on the edge of his seat, unhappy. Waiting.

Vincent spoke his heart. "Those are just words, Father. Shadows of feelings. They offer no consolation."

He continued up the steps and out of the Study. Father called after him, but Vincent didn't look back. A sledgehammer with a broken handle loomed large in his immediate future, awaiting his tender mercies.

II

20 March 1987
Friday Morning

A scrap of an idea had Hughes flipping through his folder of article clippings. He muttered around the pencil clenched between his teeth, "I know it's here somewhere. The one about cars hitting low-flying screech owls." The clipping eluded him.

Hughes started over, searching more carefully from the top of his collection. Someone knocked on his office door. "Come in," he said, not looking up. There it was! He jotted down the article's title and author in his notes.

The door opened. "Professor Hughes?" someone asked.

"Yes?" Now he skimmed through the clipping for the statistics quotation he needed. He gnawed on his pencil some more. He was supposed to be polishing his first seminar lecture, not adding new material to it, but he'd just remembered this issue, and it was the perfect illustration for—

"My name's Jonathan Gould."

Hughes looked up and took the pencil out of his mouth. The door had opened just wide enough to admit a young man's head, as though his visitor didn't want to interrupt important work, or intrude uninvited. It was an oddly endearing gesture.

"I'm a grad student," said the head. "I'm in your section this semester."

"Yes?" The young man might have a question about his term project. Questions often came up like this right before the spring break, while students tied up loose ends as part of their holiday planning process. Hughes nodded for him to come in. "How can I help you?"

The young man entered, closed the door, and grinned at him. "You may have that backward."

Um, what? Hughes set down his pencil. *He has a peculiar smile,* the professor thought.

The young man looked about thirty, but he might be younger. His stocky build somewhat disguised his age. He was tidy in blue chinos and a plaid button-down shirt. He wore wire-rimmed glasses, and his red hair had been cropped into an unstyled boyish cut. He seemed a charming kid. Hughes had no idea what he was trying to say.

Standing against the closed door, the young man—Gould?—saw the professor's confusion and forgave it. "I was there yesterday. In the lecture hall? You asked me to run the slide show for you."

"Oh!" Hughes sat up a little. "Oh, yes. Of course. I'm so sorry. I've been...preoccupied."

"I understand," Gould said, still smiling. Then his smile gave way to grave sobriety. "Leland Quint is a fool," he said.

Hughes did not disagree, but it surprised him to hear the words spoken so fearlessly.

"Do you mind if I sit?" Gould asked.

Hughes shook his head, liking the young man's manners and his opinion about Quint.

Gould moved a chair from its place beside the door and brought it closer to the professor's desk.

"So, ah, you were saying?" Hughes said to him as he sat down.

"I was only saying that Quint is a department head, an administrator, not a man of science. He only believes in dollar signs and board meetings."

"But *you* believe me?" Hughes asked.

"I believe you saw something incredible that night," Gould said. "I've been thinking about it ever since your presentation. And I'm curious enough to want to find out what it is. Any scientist worth his salt would be."

Hughes was warming to the man. *Curiosity is the first prerequisite for this line of work,* he thought. *At least, for someone who wants to accomplish anything of value in this line of work.*

"So," Hughes said. "What is your interest in this matter, exactly?"

"The truth. I'm only interested in finding out the truth."

Hughes smiled. "The truth is an abstraction."

Gould leaned closer, blue eyes bright. "Yes, but that creature is no abstraction."

Hughes felt his own smile broaden and thought, *It's like looking at myself at that age. Eager to take the world by storm. Maybe only another dreamer can see past impossibilities, and accept evidence impartially.*

"It's *real*, isn't it?" Gould sounded delighted.

Hughes reigned himself in, thinking, *Yes. But sometimes the world isn't ready for reality.* He wanted to help this young man, to warn him away. No sense infecting someone else with his own lifetime of bad luck.

"I appreciate your enthusiasm, Mr. Gould. I once felt that way myself. Believe me." Hughes chuckled. "Probably before you were born."

Gould gave him a little nod, accepting the distance of years between them, but not bothered by it.

Hughes continued doing the responsible thing. He said, "But I think it would be wise to forget it."

Gould stopped smiling. "I can't do that."

Hughes saw the man's unwillingness to renounce his curiosity. He looked away from that earnest young face. He thought, *Now who's the one smashing dreams? Maybe it's Quint who is contagious.*

"I can forget it," Hughes lied. "And I believe you should too."

Gould looked confused now. "But think of what you saw. What it would mean."

Hughes wasn't brave anymore, if he ever had been. "I've already jeopardized what little is left of my career." He spoke as though to his younger self. As though he were Albert Canton—if Canton had been generous enough to caution the young Edward Hughes, rather than take advantage of his energy and idealism.

"Take my advice. You're young. Don't chase after abstractions. They won't hold up under close scrutiny. Don't make the same mistakes I did."

Gould just looked at him for a moment. His bright face clouded over with disappointment, and perhaps more than a little embarrassment. "I guess I'm wasting my time." He stood up and turned away.

What chilled Hughes to the bone was that *look*, that stymied expression. Gould had come

seeking Mystery, and an ally who would join him in the quest for it. Hughes couldn't bear to let him walk away like that. He *could not* do it.

By God, he decided, *I will not be a Canton or a Quint. I won't even be a Pierson. This Gould went out of his way to say that he believes me. I cannot tear him down for that.*

Gould was almost to the door when Hughes called, "You don't understand." The young man turned back to listen. "You see," Hughes muttered, unable to meet Gould's eyes, "there's, well, no support. No funding." He glanced up to see what Gould made of these obstacles.

The young man surprised Hughes by smiling again, all optimistic bravado and conspiratorial good cheer. "With all due respect, Professor Hughes, I do understand. That's why I'm here." He returned to the chair.

Hughes looked into Gould's eyes, and the offer of fellowship he saw there reignited his hopes. "All right then," he said. "Okay."

We've tested each other, and found that our dreams match, Hughes thought. He closed the clippings folder and set it on top of his lecture notes. That could wait for a while.

Gould sat down in the chair. "Professor, I want to help. How can I help?"

The bits and pieces of his idle daydream came together as Hughes organized his thoughts. *Poof!* he thought. *The assistant appears!* Hope exhilarated him. The only missing piece was—

"What would you say if I told you that all we'd need is a four-by-four vehicle? A truck or a van. Something with mounted lights that can go off-road."

Gould grinned again, very wide this time, and it made him look crafty. Impish. "I would say, 'Let me tell you about a friend of mine who likes to throw late night beach parties, up the coast.' He has a van like that. I'm sure I can convince him to lend it to me for a few nights."

Hughes could scarcely believe it. *Abracadabra,* he thought, floored.

"Mr. Gould—" he began.

"Jonathan. Please. Call me Jonathan."

"Jonathan, then. May I tell you what I have in mind?"

"By all means, Professor." Jonathan folded his hands on the edge of the desk and leaned in. "I'm all ears."

III

20 March 1987
Friday

Michael's reading group essentially taught itself, which was a blessing. Vincent had only to facilitate the discussion, steering it when it drifted off-topic, adding to it when his own knowledge of history and Russian literature became useful to the question at hand. He felt very proud of Michael and his intrepid band of readers, very grateful for their cooperative scholarship.

Brooke and Stephen were the most vocal members. Vincent took care to make sure that quieter souls like Mandy and Sovaan also had the chance to speak—Sovaan in particular, because Vincent knew the boy wanted to practice speaking English, but remained uncomfortable with the social rhythms of conversation in a culture that was still strange to him.

Overall, however, the session went well. Afterward, Vincent felt calmer, comforted because Dostoevsky understood the problems of freedom and choices—and love. Tucking Catherine's letter inside his copy of the book, reviewing the session in his mind, Vincent even

smiled. He'd arranged the group into pairs, so that each pair could read a section aloud as partners, one taking Ivan's lines and the other taking Alyosha's. The only snag in the session occurred when Brooke and Poe were reading.

"*For any one to love a man, he must be hidden, for as soon as he shows his face, love is gone,*" Brooke read.

Then Poe stepped in with Alyosha's reply, but stammered to a halt at, "*...he, too, said that the face of a man...often hinders many people...not practiced in love...from loving him.*" The boy glanced up at Vincent, his dark eyes troubled.

Although Poe had spent almost four years Below, he remained hypersensitive to Vincent's appearance. *It's because Poe is a very lonely person,* Vincent thought. *He never knew love until he came to the Tunnels. He feels singled out by his own face.*

Poe had always called himself "a half-blood son of no tribe." His life before the Tunnels had been blighted by the cruelties others heaped upon him for what one social worker had called his "American Indian ancestry." Poe knew little of his mother's history, and nothing at all about his father. The city's Administration for Children's Services held all of his papers and records. Poe refused to return Above. He said he'd rather die kinless than get shuffled back into foster care.

"*But yet there's a great deal of love in mankind,*" Vincent prompted from across the room, where he sat on his bed, listening.

Poe remained quiet for a few seconds longer, then he continued reading until Stephen interrupted with a question. The moment passed. They concluded just before lunchtime at one o' clock, and Vincent reminded them all that Michael would resume his teaching work next week. The young people assured Vincent that he'd done just as good a job as Michael, and that they would tell Michael so when he got back from the Maze.

And so I leave the Grand Inquisitor to my apprentice, Vincent thought, as he returned his chamber to its pre-reading-group state. *Which means Michael's going to come to me asking about the Dante Alighieri and Victor Hugo references. I'll need to have those books ready for him. I have the one. Father has the other.*

He glanced at the taper candles in his heavy brass candelabrum, automatically noting how much of the wax had burned away since the reading class began. *I've gone over two hours without thinking about Catherine,* he thought. In the world Above, Catherine herself had settled into a poignant sadness. Vincent felt grateful she was calmer now, too.

He sighed and crossed the room to the glass-fronted hutch where he kept many of the books that belonged solely to himself, rather than to the whole community. Most of Vincent's books were gifts from loved ones, with inscriptions written in many different hands upon inside covers and end pages. Vincent opened a cabinet door and stood looking at the rows of titled spines within.

On impulse, he took *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* from a shelf. It was a beautiful leather-bound volume, a get-well gift from Father. Vincent had received it when he was fifteen, during the time he'd spent recovering from a long, horrific illness. This was Vincent's favorite book and one of his most treasured possessions. Holding it provided comfort.

Vincent also picked up his journal and his hand-tooled leather folio of drawing paper. He added Dante's *Divine Comedy* to the top of the stack and brought his selections to the table. Sitting down in his heavy chair, he looked at the many books already piled onto his tabletop. *They seem to leave the shelves of their own accord,* he thought, shaking his head. *They gather, like old friends at a hearth, asking to be listened to. They have many stories to tell.*

He rearranged a few of the piles and placed his journal on the cleared space in front of

him. After a few minutes spent staring at its cover, Vincent pushed the journal aside. He found he wasn't ready refine his thoughts and feelings into written words.

Instead, he opened the drawing folio and took a stub of charcoal from the metal lozenge tin he used to store his small collection of chalks and soft pastels. *I need to find or make more coloring sticks soon,* he thought. He was down to tiny pebbles of pigment again.

Vincent mentally rehearsed the process of mixing powders and binders to form thick block crayons. This might be a project he could combine with an upcoming art lesson for the children. He considered how to organize a small adventure for his students as he marked dark lines onto a fresh sheet of brown paper.

Vincent worked slowly, watching the closed gate at the Junction Door appear beneath his fingertips. He shaded in shadows and left lighter spaces to indicate cloudy shafts of light. He sketched the shape of a slender woman beyond the gate. He drew her hand resting upon the lockplate of the barred door. He gave dimension to the long coat she wore and tried to capture the play of light across her hair as she bent beneath the low brick arch to look into the dark tunnel. Carefully, Vincent blessed the paper with the image of Catherine's face.

He re-created her soft mouth and sharp chin. He smoothed the lines of her jaw up to her cheekbones. He tried to portray the sadness and strength that shone in her eyes. *How long have I loved her?* he wondered. The dusky charcoal eyes gazed out from the paper, not seeing him. They were only an image from his memory and imagination, and not a part of the woman he loved. The image blurred and Vincent bowed his head. *When did my love begin? When did hers?*

He wasn't sure. He knew he'd felt compassion for her from the moment he found her in the park. He'd also felt her pain and her tentative trust during the ten days Catherine spent Below, healing, talking with him, sharing her memories of the world in which she lived. He remembered his own pain when he led her to the newly made entrance into the cellar of Catherine's apartment building. At the gap in the brick wall, Vincent tried to find the words to say goodbye to her. He never found them that day.

At that threshold, Catherine had stopped. She moved close to him and lay her sutured face upon Vincent's shoulder. Her hand touched his chest and her heart opened to his inner sight, shining a golden light of gratitude and acceptance into Vincent's soul. Surely his love for her had begun earlier than that moment, a silent secret thing to carry with him after Catherine left his world. But when she held him that way in the shadows beneath her home, Vincent dared to hold her too.

He thought: *This is when I knew*. *So my answer may as well be: eleven months and nine days.* Vincent's love for Catherine had changed him completely—as had his sudden unexpected hope for himself.

Vincent signed his drawing out of habit and closed the folio, thinking, *I'll look at the picture later. I can't...I don't want—* He clutched the arms of his chair. His calm was leaving him. He needed it to stay.

He raised his head to look at the books on his table. He saw *The Brothers Karamazov*. He saw Catherine's letter marking his place in that book. He turned his face away, absently rubbing black dust from his fingers. His gaze settled upon Dante's epic poem resting quietly beside his journal.

Vincent reached for the battered tome the way a drowning man reaches for flotsam floating on the stormful sea. He opened the book. An old friend's world-weary scrawl struggled across the inner cover.

For Vincent. Winterfest 1982.

“Ever the Love which quieteth this heaven
Welcomes into itself with such salute,
To make the candle ready for its flame.”

Hold fast to the light, dear boy.

Vernon

Old grief settled heavily upon new. Vincent turned pages quickly to hide those handwritten lines from Longfellow’s translation of *Paradiso*. He thought, *It’s the* Inferno *Michael will need to see.* He thumbed past the table of contents. Thus inspired, Vincent found the first line describing Dante’s descent into Hell and began to read.

Vincent could recite many passages from this book. He knew many passages from *many* books. Over the course of his life, Vincent had often committed entire volumes to memory.

But nothing can replace the act of taking a well-loved book into one’s hands, he thought. *The magic is irresistible.* He walked beside Dante and Virgil as the two poets explored the medieval abyss of vanquished hopes. Three hours later, Vincent’s class of amateur logicians found him still engrossed in his reading.

“Guess what! We solved your puzzle,” Samantha declared, waving the group’s battle-scarred themebook over her head.

“Did you?” asked Vincent, setting Dante aside.

“And we made one for *you*!” Eric said. He wore a mischievous grin.

“Come and show it to me then,” Vincent said, and all nine children trooped into his chamber to gather around his table.

After an hour, they trooped back out again, a whole page of notes and two new puzzles copied into their notebook via Samantha’s looping D’Nealian. Geoffrey whispered that *next* time they must think up a harder one for Vincent to try, and Vincent followed them into the corridor, amused. The children invited him to come play tunnel stickball with them, but Vincent told them he had chores to do.

He made it halfway to Sara’s workshop when he met Ezra, who was on his way to Father’s Study in search of books. Ezra stopped to greet him and to pass along the summons to a Council meeting after supper tomorrow night. Pascal had some ideas about repositioning several communications outposts, and Kanin had an unknown request he wanted to make outside of Olivia’s hearing.

“My best guess?” Ezra said, eyes twinkling in his smooth-shaven brown face. “He’s finally found a cave he thinks Olivia will like and wants our blessing to claim it and carve out some improvements.”

Vincent promised to attend the meeting.

“One more thing,” Ezra said, as Vincent turned to go. Vincent stopped and listened while Ezra informed him that two of Ezra’s students were just about ready to move into the group that Vincent instructed. Cassie was eight now, Porter almost eight and a good reader. “You let me know when your kids are getting started on a new book,” Ezra said. “I’ll send these two your way.” They always transitioned children into a reading class before including them in the other subjects being taught. Sharing a good story unified a learning group as nothing else could.

Vincent agreed to this, and waited to see if Ezra had any other news to share. Ezra did

not, but taking a long look at his former pupil's demeanor he asked, "And are you all right, my friend?"

Not sure how else to answer, Vincent admitted that he felt tired today. Ezra advised him to get some rest. Vincent said he would try to rest in a little while. When they parted, Vincent felt Ezra watch him walk away.

He went on to the Candleworks to help Sara and Rebecca. If either woman noticed Vincent's distracted state of mind, they made no mention to him about it. On his return from bringing the last load of candles to Sara's chosen storage chamber, Nicole, 'Randa, and Holly stopped him in a tunnel to ask whether they needed to bring any bugs to science class tomorrow. Old Dolores had found a bunch of moths in her armoire and was busy exterminating them, so if Vincent wanted the girls to save any he'd better tell them right away.

Vincent suggested that Dolores might not take kindly to any rescue efforts in favor of the insects, and that the girls need only bring themselves to the lesson. Two tunnels beyond that, Mary caught up with him. She wanted him to move a broken bedstead from the Orphans' Dormitory to Cullen's workshop, and Vincent listened while she bemoaned the fact that Dustin knew better than to jump on his bed, that he was far too big for such things now, but sometimes he got so overstimulated—surely Vincent saw how the boy was running around the Dining Hall last night!—and perhaps Vincent could have a word with him, since Dustin looked up to him so?

On the way back from Cullen's shop, Vincent heard José and Destiny talking in low voices as they walked together some distance ahead. He heard them stop, and he sensed the moment when their sweet exchange of compliments segued into the amorous glow of a stolen kiss. Vincent turned down a side passage to avoid interrupting them and took the longer way into the Long Gallery, where he came upon Kipper and Nicholas. The boys were squabbling over a couple bumblebee marbles. They asked Vincent to arbitrate the matter of rightful ownership before the issue came to blows.

Once he was safe (for the moment) in his chamber again, Vincent lay down on his bed and firmly squelched the desire to pull the blankets up over his head. He felt tempted to take Ezra's advice and rest quietly amid his many pillows and quilts until he fell asleep—but Vincent did not want to deal with the dreams that must surely come if he did that. Instead of giving in to sleep, he thought: *I need the sky tonight. The Mirror Pool won't be enough. I need the park.*

He stared up at the stony heights of his chamber, lightly massaging his sore shoulder. When the stiffness there had eased somewhat, he thought, *I went without rest last night, and now I've overused my shoulder today. After the park, perhaps the other half-jar of Olivia's herbal treatment will be in order.*

Vincent sat up, the prospect of open air Above filling him with an ache akin to thirst. He looked around the chamber, seeking some reminder of other tasks he must complete before making his nightly security check of the Tunnels and gates. He glanced at his books and collected curios, his restored wooden furnishings, the multicolored glass shades of his lamps, the miniature electric jukebox sitting silent beneath the balanced scales of Lady Justice. The weathered bronze statue stood her impartial watch at his chamber's main entrance, holding her sword aloft in her graceful right hand. She reminded him of his remaining freedoms. Beyond tonight's watchman duty, Vincent was free to do as he pleased.

I'll complete my patrol now, he decided. *When I'm finished it will be dark outside. I'll take a moment for myself. Then I can come home while the night is still young. Perhaps go to Father. Explain a little more to him. Apologize.*

Vincent arose and pulled his cloak over his shoulders.

I can see Catherine's windows from the park. There is that, too.

He wasn't ready to sleep and he wasn't ready to see *her* again. Catherine might treat such a visit as the time to say her farewell. Vincent intended to endure that tomorrow.

He moved through the Tunnels at a steady pace, out beyond the Perimeter, up to the outer gates. He did not make the full circuit of his previous evening, but he visited the passages the Tunnelfolk most often used, watching for signs of structural danger, trespass, or other troubles—and finding none. He finally began to feel hungry. His shock at Catherine's announcement was tempering into deep sorrow.

Sorrow he could live with; sorrow he could bear. It was kinder than the anger, far more gentle than his initial horror. Sorrow would let him breathe, and eat, and sleep—and heal.

Vincent assured himself, *She'll move past her uncertainty, and her own sorrow. She'll build a new life. She'll find fulfillment there, in her new home. She has her own dreams. I will find my peace in the knowledge that Catherine has made her way out into the world again, and that she is happy in it. For me, it will be no different now than it's been with any of my other friends who have gone away.*

But it *was* different. This time, it was *very* different.

Vincent ended his patrol then, and moved toward the Park Entrance. It was long past nightfall now. He could slip Above and let the sky work its enchantment upon his heart and dampened spirits.

The night drifted cool and misty outside the drainage tunnel. Vincent breathed in the scents of greenery, and dank cement, and the unexpected stench of diesel exhaust. Sometimes mist and fog captured such smells and held them suspended in the air for a while. He came out into the open, turning his steps toward the Ramble.

Soft earth beneath him, rather than rock or concrete, grounded his thoughts. Uncovered space around him relaxed the tension in his body. He ambled, thankful.

Then he halted. Was there a sound in the darkness? Vincent scanned the area ahead of him, alert. He knew people often came to this place at night. For that reason, the less-frequented North Woods were safer for him, but he liked this tangle of paths and secretive thickets at the heart of Central park. Lovers liked the Ramble too, for its concealments. But also, hateful hunters sometimes came to harass the lovers, breaking up trysts with violence and taunts. More than once, Vincent had pulled attackers off the backs of beaten men, thumping a few of those attackers' heads against trees before melting back into the shadows to watch the lovers stagger to their feet and hurry away.

Sometimes those he rescued left together, each man supporting the other, tender in their mutual fright. Sometimes the men slunk away separately, hurt and ashamed. Vincent never bothered to pursue their hunters once the lovers were safe. The hunters angered him, but he only kept them from following after their prey.

The sound—if there had been a sound—did not recur. Vincent continued on his way. The evening quiet was good. He wanted no fighting tonight, no descents into the violence that people so often inflicted upon dreamers and lovers of all persuasions. He turned inward, receiving the peace of the park into his soul.

Then, in a flash: sudden light transfigured the world, glowing white upon the mist and illuminating shiny leaves.

Shadows leapt up around Vincent like sprung traps. Vincent turned to look for the source of the light, stopping where he was, dazzled by the brightness. He tilted his head so that his hood shaded his eyes—he raised his right hand to block the glare—

"Oh!" he cried: a bolt of pain lanced his left shoulder. Something had struck him, had pierced even his cloak and heavy vest. Vincent looked down, not understanding for a moment

what he saw: a white-tufted metal cylinder, its sharp end embedded in his clothes, and in his skin.

It is...a dart, he realized. Vincent took a step backward. He grabbed hold of the dart, looking toward the light again. He saw several sources. Headlights, and big lamps above the headlights. Long and mean in front of one lamp, the barrel of a rifle gleamed at him.

His heart lurched as he thought: *I am shot!*

The barrel was withdrawn. Vincent heard a click-chock as whoever held the gun reloaded it. Vincent bared his teeth, unbelieving, and outraged. He tore the dart out of his shoulder and threw it away from him. An engine coughed to life, revving. Vincent thought, *These hunters have come for me. They are prepared to pursue me.* He spun toward the cover of the little wood and fled.

And his blind leap up an embankment did not take him as far as it should have.

"Let's get him!" a man shouted from behind.

The engine roared and sped toward Vincent. The large vehicle powered by that engine splashed through the soggy field behind him, bringing the terrible lights closer. A man's booted feet trampled grass and sticks, chasing Vincent by the light rolling along the edge of the wood.

After the brightness of the lights, Vincent's eyes were slow to adapt to the dark again. He looked for shadows that denoted trees, tried to feel changes in temperature that would indicate stone or vegetation or dirt ahead of him. Sounds were deadened by the humid night. The mist hindered all his efforts to anticipate the terrain.

Vincent thought, *It is Broome Street all over again. Being chased by hunters I cannot fully sense. Being caught Above—no. I cannot—I MUST not—let that happen a second time.*

Dodging tree trunks and low-hanging branches, Vincent gained the high ground and flat out *ran,* but his breath did not settle into a steady rhythm. He felt heavy. It became difficult to clear minor obstacles on the ground—stones, roots, trash. A strange chemical taste filled his mouth. It kept Vincent from smelling his way through the dark.

The dart, he thought, beginning to feel frightened. *Something in the dart.* Vincent feared his pursuers far less than he feared whatever foreign substance might now be coursing through his veins. His body reacted in unpredictable ways to such things. There were certain foods he could not eat, certain medicines that made him violently ill.

The man on foot was closing in. Panting, Vincent stumbled to a halt, casting about for a solution, for an escape. *I am a Hunter too,* he remembered.

He abandoned his course and pressed his back against a tree, working to quiet his breathing, letting the tree's shadow hide him from the lights trolling beyond the periphery of the wood, and hopefully from the man following him.

The man clambered up the slope, looking for him. Vincent waited. The man came closer, his head turning from side to side, his gun held ready in his hands. Vincent waited. Now the man stood beside him, not seeing him—yet.

Vincent snarled at him and cuffed him across the face with his left hand. His shoulder hated him for doing this. The hunter's violent lust for his prey crashed upon the boundaries of Vincent's awareness, a scarlet wave breaking over ancient stony shoals. The copper-salt scent of his blood assailed Vincent's nose. Vincent ground his teeth and clamped his right hand over his wounded joint. The hunter tumbled back down the embankment, head over heels, spiraling a hot emotional trail of surprised fear as he fell. Vincent kept running.

After a minute, he stumbled to a stop, gasping now. *Where am I running to?* he asked himself. *The other side of the Ramble? There's no good cover beyond it, and no easy way Down to the Tunnels.* He looked back the way he had come. The Ramble kept turning around him, even

after he stopped moving.

Not good, he thought. *Move. Move quickly. While the hunters are still looking for me in the other direction.*

But he had underestimated the man with the rifle. As Vincent passed the place where he'd knocked the man down, even as he gave the crest of the embankment a wide berth, the man popped up from behind a bush. A killer's triumph gushed out from his mind in a sudden flood of malice. He fired his gun. His new dart struck Vincent's throbbing left shoulder from behind.

Vincent detoured, furious. He came straight at the man with a full-throated roar. In abrupt terror, the man backed hastily away and dodged to one side, out of Vincent's lumbering grasp. Arriving at the place where the man had been standing, Vincent set his foot down upon emptiness and pitched forward.

It wasn't a long fall, but he landed hard, prone, the air knocked from his lungs. Vincent thought, *That need not have happened. I should have expected the trap. No, I should have kept running. I...must get home, not chase my hunters.* He coughed and heaved air inward and coughed again.

Behind him, last year's half-dry dead leaves crunched underfoot as the Stranger approached. A wrathful voice inside Vincent's mind whispered, *And this man should have stayed away.* Few opponents ever correctly estimated the range of Vincent's reach. The man came close enough: Vincent kicked the man's legs out from under him and the hunter went down the embankment again, sliding farther than Vincent had fallen.

Vincent clawed his way to his feet. He ran from the man and his gun, skirting the inner edge of the wood. A root tripped him up. Vincent stumbled forward, but he didn't fall. He turned again toward the way he wanted to go—and he ran into a tree.

If ever a shoulder could scream, Vincent's did. He staggered on, doubled over. *Enough!* he thought. *The wood itself is a danger to me now.* Vincent stood up and left cover, striking out toward the distant drainage tunnel across open ground.

Except, he wasn't exactly running now. Vincent reached behind him and pulled the second dart out of his back, dropping it onto the grass. He could no longer hold a straight course.

He jogged unevenly, jarring his shoulder with every step. It became hard to see. What he saw didn't seem to match the ground he covered. He felt sleepy, which was strange because one did not sleep while running. Sleep was for beds, and for quiet places, restful places. Sometimes Vincent took a bedroll to the Chamber of the Falls, where the sound of clear water pouring over the precipices could lull him. Other times he found a deep cave and built a little campfire there, curling up near the flames with a book, his warm cloak wrapped close about him. He would doze off to the crackle of the friendly light, and wake to the pure silence of Underground.

There were times when his soul needed that silence more than his physical body needed the softness and warmth of his usual bed at home. But, no—no!—he was Above. Vincent never slept Above. He had never wanted to. The danger was too great. The notion was absurd. He was out in the open, in the park. No magic existed for him here, no peace.

Muddily, Vincent thought, *Catherine is going away. The park beneath her balcony is a bad place to be now.* It was difficult to think.

I should have stayed Below tonight. Should have gone to sleep in my chamber—

He lost his footing, or his footing lost him, and he fell down. Vincent caught himself by sheer reflex, pulling his left arm to his chest to protect that aching shoulder, and shoving himself back up with the strength of his good right arm. He forced his body to keep running.

Home, he thought. He could hear the musical stream of water ahead of him. He could see the round opening of the tunnel, yawning in the misty light, or in his misting eyes. *Home. I must*

go to Father (my father! my father—), and he will help me.

And then the big vehicle with the bright lights—it must be a van—streaked across his path, rolling to a stop between Vincent and safety. A door opened in the side of the van and a Shadow slithered out. The Shadow projected strong, dark emotions across the space between itself and its prey. Its insatiable heart seemed to call out the words of Goethe's Erlking in a deadly phantom voice: *"I love you! Your beauty provokes me, your all; / And as you are unwilling, by force I'll enthrall!"*

The lights shone in his eyes, blinding him again, but Vincent knew the way. He didn't need to see this part of the landscape to follow it past the Alder King's Shadow and into the tunnel. Vincent lowered his heavy head and charged forward. He had to get Below.

IV

20 March 1987
Friday Night

Hughes looked out the windshield at the bright circle cast by his spotlights and watched the creature's shape emerge out of the mist. *Jonathan was right,* Hughes thought, recalling the way the frantic young man had leaped recklessly in front of the van, waving Hughes toward the storm drain beneath the bridge. *The creature doubled back.*

In point of fact, the creature was now headed straight for him. Hughes opened the door of the van and jumped out of the driver's seat. He leaned against the inside of the door, gazing past the open window frame. *It's undeterred by the van, and the lights,* Hughes thought. He reached for his dart pistol. *And, my God, but it's fast.*

The tranquilizer was clearly taking effect. The creature wove a staggering course across the lawn—but it was fearless in its approach. And it ran like an Olympian athlete.

Even as Hughes watched, amazed, the creature closed the distance between them in a sudden burst of speed. The professor tried not to panic. *It knows it must get into that warren of drainage pipes. It might even make it there.*

This was a frightening thought. *The drugs are taking it down, but the creature is simply not going down fast enough.* He aimed the pistol, resting his hands on the door frame to keep them steady. *I can't let it get past me!* he thought.

The creature hurled itself onward with the single-minded power of a blitzing linebacker. Hughes exulted, *This beast is magnificent!* and he squeezed the trigger. The dart hit the creature's chest, dead center.

The impact gave it serious pause. The creature reeled back, raising one paw toward the dart but doing nothing more than pressing its claws against its abdomen. It was fully *clothed*, Hughes saw. That blanket-whatnot was present again, covering its head and flowing down from its shoulders—and there were also other garments. They looked tattered and cobbled-together in the flat light, as though the creature had donned an assemblage of rags. Metal pieces gleamed here and there. Hughes thought suddenly, *Oh, God! Was Pierson right? Is this just some ugly homeless person?*

The thing tipped forward again and the light spilled over its face. Hughes breathed a little easier. He was not mistaken: that face was in *no* way human. Its fangs flashed very white as it doddered forward, its mouth hanging open. The creature wasn't running now. It looked like it

could barely stay up on its feet. And still—

It—just—kept—*coming*.

Hughes jammed another dart into the firing chamber of his pistol. He could *not* let it escape him. This was his creature. His chance. Maybe his very *last* chance. Hughes brought the pistol up to the door frame. His eyes bulged. The creature stood less than three meters away from him.

Hughes fired. His aim was much worse this time, but the dart still hit home, striking the creature low on its left side. It uttered a grunting growl and shut its eyes. Then raising its head, it opened its eyes again and took several halting steps forward. Hughes took several steps back, frightened, thinking, *This thing is still standing after three darts!*

The professor didn't have any more ready. He'd taken two and Jonathan had taken two. The case containing empty cartridges and the unmixed tranquilizer components lay on the front seat of the van. *If it comes any closer—* Hughes could not decide what he should do.

But the creature did not come closer. It stopped, seeming to stare at Hughes with glazed eyes. Hughes knew it was doing no such thing. It wouldn't be able to see him behind the lights. By now, it shouldn't be able even to focus its eyes.

Yet it *felt* like the creature saw him. Something like helpless accusation smoldered in that gaze. Nervous, Hughes thought, *It's dangerous to anthropomorphize any animal subject. Even this one. Maybe especially this one.*

The creature swayed on its feet and blinked stupidly at the lights.

"That's right," Hughes urged, whispering dry-mouthed to his quarry. "See? You're tired. Just lie down."

As if the creature had heard and comprehended his command, its broad shoulders sagged. The feline face blanked and the creature's eyes rolled back in its head. It gave a groaning sigh and fell to earth like a dead tree: deceptively fast, heavy, and heedless. Hughes heard the beast's harsh breath rushing in its throat. He crept closer, peeping around the open door of the van. The beast did not get back up. Its limbs flexed for a moment—perhaps it was *trying* to rise—and then it went completely still. Its respiration slowed, and slowed, and became quiet at last.

Hughes crouched down near the motionless body. From half a meter away, he could feel the *heat* of the thing, smell its earthy musk, hear air move in its great lungs. Everything in Hughes paused, open, receptive, reverent. Triumphant words resounded from the deepest regions of the professor's soul: *Mine. At last.*

Then Hughes heard footsteps pounding the wet earth of the drainage field. Jonathan hurtled out of the dark and stood over the two of them: wondering man and slumbering beast. Hughes saw that Jonathan was bleeding from his nose. The sight shocked him back into the present. Hughes glanced around. He didn't want to be seen. There were always people wandering about the park. He didn't want anyone to take his creature from him now.

"I'll kill the lights," he said. He ducked around the door and flicked switches until the misty dark closed in around them again. He returned to stand beside Jonathan.

"Are you all right?" Hughes asked.

"Yes. I think so."

"What happened to you?"

"It ambushed me. Then, after it came back around, it attacked me again and ran off." Poised to jump back, Jonathan reached down and snatched the darts that stuck out from the creature's chest and side. "You shot both your darts?"

"Yes."

Jonathan dropped the cartridges in the mud. "Me too." He pulled a tissue out of his

pocket and wiped his face with it.

Jesus, Hughes thought. *Not three darts. Four. And we still had a very close call. The beast almost got away. We should have used something that works faster.* But they'd prepared for this stakeout with what Hughes had on hand in his lab—his favorite blend of incapacitating agents. And anyway, it had all worked out. The creature lay anesthetized at their feet, theirs for the taking.

Gould interrupted the professor's private reflections. "I thought one dart was supposed to be enough. You said, *maybe* two, if the thing really took off."

Hughes considered the heart-pounding events of the past few minutes. "I think one *would* have been enough," he said. "But it didn't take effect *fast* enough. The creature almost made it to the bridge."

Jonathan regarded Hughes in silence. The young man's manner had changed. It became—subtly disapproving. "Let's just hope we end up with a *live* capture, Professor."

The unexpected reproof stung. "How else was I supposed to stop it?" Hughes asked.

"You couldn't head it off with the van? Honk the horn, wave your arms?" A sudden biting sarcasm entered Jonathan's voice.

"How much attention do you want to draw to this scene?" Hughes snapped.

Jonathan backed down at once. "You're right. Of course. You're right, Professor. I'm sorry. It's...my nerves. I'm still shaking."

Hughes immediately forgave his assistant's inconsiderate remarks. He was feeling shaky himself. "You're sure you're okay?" he asked.

"Yes."

"All right then." Hughes took another glance around. "We need to get him in the van. Quickly."

Jonathan nodded and stuffed the bloody tissue into his pocket. "I'll pull out the gurney."

It was not quick work, and it was not easy work. Upright, the creature had stood taller than either of them, and now its prostrate body turned out to be very heavy, its rigid arms and legs very long. In the end, Hughes was glad the beast wore its odd assortment of clothes. They had to grab handfuls of the fabric to drag the creature into position. Once they strapped it down on the gurney, however, the most difficult stages of the capture were over.

Jonathan sat in the rear of the van with the creature while Hughes drove them back to campus, religiously obeying every traffic light and street sign along the way. Outside the Fairchild Annex, they covered their beast with folded cardboard pieces to disguise its shape, and pulled a cotton sheet over the cardboard to hide everything from view. They rolled the occupied gurney into an empty lecture room on the ground floor.

Hughes stood in the shadows beside the gurney while he waited for Jonathan to park the van. His blood rushed in his ears. He felt terrified of discovery and ecstatic that they'd come this far at all. *We caught my creature on our first night out!* he wanted to crow. Hughes shifted from one foot to the other, impatient to get to his lab. He was dying to see the creature in some decent light.

After two ice ages, Jonathan came in. They walked together to the elevator. Jonathan pushed the gurney from one end, Hughes steered from the front.

The professor spoke quickly to his assistant in the privacy of the elevator cab. "There's a sink in the lab. You can clean up a little. I've got a lab coat for you, but not another shirt."

Jonathan's shirt was bloody from his nosebleed, and streaked with mud. "That's fine, Professor. Don't worry. I'm all right. Really."

Hughes nodded. "We were lucky."

“Yes. What do we do with the creature now?”

“We’ll have to remove all the things it’s got on. That will probably be easiest while it’s still on the gurney. Then we get it on the table and see what there is to see.”

The elevator dinged for their floor. “Sounds good,” Jonathan said.

They rolled out into the maintenance hallway, which was quiet and empty. Hughes watched every shadow and doorway as he walked. There could be custodians anywhere.

He saw no janitors (or anyone else) in the dark corridor. Catching their beast on the Friday night before vacation had its advantages. Reaching the double doors that led into the back of the professor’s lab, Hughes stopped. He opened the lock, swung the doors outward into the hall, and waved Jonathan forward.

Hughes switched the lights on in his lab and helped Jonathan move the gurney through the outer vestibule, past the spare equipment he kept there, past the large cage he’d brought in just before lunch, past the inner set of double doors, and into the lab at last. They maneuvered the gurney parallel to the examination table they had bolted to the floor that afternoon. Hughes went back to close and lock the doors.

When he returned, Jonathan was uncovering the creature, pulling off the sheet and lifting away the pieces of cardboard. “We should document what he’s wearing first,” Jonathan suggested. “Photos or video?”

“Both,” Hughes said. “Which camera do you want?”

“Your hands are steadier right now,” Jonathan replied with a little smile. “I’ll take the video camera.”

So Hughes snapped shots of various angles while Jonathan hefted the camcorder onto one shoulder and panned back and forth across the unconscious creature on the gurney. Satisfied with his pictures, Hughes set the Polaroid and his snapshots on a table and began examining the creature’s clothing up close. Jonathan leaned in to catch all the details.

“Interesting,” Hughes said. “Look. No buttons on the shirts. They’re tied closed with cords. Makes sense, if it dressed itself like that.”

“Why?” Jonathan asked.

“How do you think those claws would handle buttons?”

“That’s a good point—*if* it dressed itself. Maybe someone did it *for* the creature.”

Hughes frowned. “Perhaps.”

Hughes saw that cords and thin leather strips wound through all of the creature’s clothes. They seemed to hold the garments together: in the crude stitching throughout, in the gathered rolls of fabric where smooth hems and seams would have finished commercial garments, in the heavy reinforced pads stitched over the trouser knees, in knotted strands of fringe that seemed almost decorative in their arrangement.

They found the same stitch-work on the suede wraps covering the creature’s boots, and more cords binding those wrappings to the long lower limbs. The creature’s ankle-high boots were insulated with scraps of stitched fur. *What kind of fur?* Hughes wondered. *And where did it come from? Does the creature hunt for its own food and clothing, like Neanderthal?*

Hughes lifted up the edges of top-layer garments to glimpse what lay beneath. The creature wore a long-sleeved woolen shirt and handmade linen breeches under all of its other clothes. Its thin blue overshirt looked like part of a repair man’s company uniform rescued from a trash bin, and it was too small for the creature, the buttonless cuffs reaching only just past the creature’s elbows.

Unbuckling the belt and raising one half of their subject’s vest aside, Hughes and his assistant saw that the overshirt had been enlarged across the shoulders by added scraps of

flannel, also blue but of a darker hue. The heavy brown canvas vest was primitive but functional, with inner pockets. The worn twill trousers (dark blue on its way to a faded slate gray) were the ordinary manufactured sort, featuring snapped flap pockets, although they had been altered by the knee patches and leather cording around the waist. The creature's belt had been fashioned from crimped segments of dark leather strands, and it didn't have a real buckle, only a metal hook on one end and a ring on the other. Simple to fasten, simple to remove.

The blanket-covering intrigued Hughes the most. It was a marvel of creative reclamation, something between a long cape and a long coat, ankle-length, one-sleeved, and hooded. "Imagine the effort that went into combining all these pieces," he said, running his hands over the stitched lines. "Do you think it was designed to look this way? Or did it just evolve as the creature found new materials to add to it?"

"You're still assuming the creature made these clothes itself," Jonathan said. "I really think it's more likely that someone else knows about it and gave it all this stuff."

"And dressed it too?" Hughes disliked the idea that anyone else might know about his creature.

"Maybe. Do you think one of the street people would take pity on a thing like this? Give it some extra clothes?"

"I don't know." Hughes knew nothing at all about New York street people. He only knew that it would be a great bother to track down homeless witnesses and interview them about his creature's habits. That was Clark's sort of work. But Hughes did not want Clark—or even Pierson—involved in any part of this project. If the time came, Hughes could send out Jonathan Gould. It felt nice to have an assistant working for *Hughes,* for a change. Nice to have someone who could be counted upon to handle such subsidiary tasks.

"Perhaps park regulars see this thing all the time and don't like to look at it uncovered," his assistant was saying now.

"I really don't know," Hughes repeated.

With the curious construction of the clothing caught on film, it was now time for the two of them to get a look at the creature uncovered, street people or no street people. They worked together—indeed, they worked *hard* together—Jonathan lifting one long limb at a time, or levering up one side of the creature's body while Hughes pulled the clothing off, layer after layer. Hughes didn't want to cut any of it away. These were important artifacts.

At last, it—no, *he*, Hughes confirmed—yes, his miraculous male creature was freed of the ragged garments, a solid figure lying quiet upon the gurney. Jonathan panted from the exertion. Both professor and assistant were unused to manual labor.

"Okay," the young man said. "We'll move it over."

Hughes nodded and reached across the examination table, grasping the creature's upper limb with one hand, working his other hand beneath the wild yellow mane to grip the opposite juncture of neck and shoulder.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Pull," said Jonathan.

Hughes pulled and Jonathan shoved. The creature's upper body slid from the gurney to the table.

"Good." Hughes released his hold and moved down to the long legs.

Jonathan stood ready to lift and push the creature's hips from the far side of the gurney.

Hughes nodded and they shifted the creature's lower body. When it—*he*—lay centered upon the table at last, Jonathan rolled the gurney out of the way and they stood together, looking down at their prize.

“It’s real,” Jonathan said softly. The expression on his red face communicated an excitement that Hughes gratefully shared. “It’s really here.”

“Yes.”

Hughes felt the purest mysteries of the world open for him once again. Now, this time—*this time*—things would go the way he meant them to. He had so much to observe and explore. So many questions to ask and answer. He had the proper means, the private space, a capable assistant, and technology that hadn’t existed fifteen years ago. This was his vindication. This was his salvation.

He reached for his notebook. “Get the camcorder,” he told Jonathan. “I’ll record initial vital signs. Then we’ll survey superficial anatomy.”

Chapter Five: Revelations

I

21 March 1987
Saturday Afternoon

"Thanks, Dad." Catherine hugged her father. "And thanks for lunch."

"Well, I don't get to treat you very often anymore. I guess I won't have the chance again for quite a while."

"Dad, I'll still be in the same time zone. Providence isn't so far away. It's only one state over."

"It's far enough," Charles Chandler said, but he was smiling. "You're sure you don't need any help packing?"

"I'm sure. I'm taking care of all my special treasures, and the moving service will be here Monday morning for anything I don't get around to. My realtor says the storage facility in Providence is ready for the delivery."

"It sounds like you've thought of everything. You'll call me, before you go?"

"I'll call." Catherine gazed up into her father's amiable pink face. His eyes were green like hers and his short silver-white hair was the color that Catherine's would probably become one day. She loved him very much and hoped he understood her decision. He had not fought her when she left his law firm, but he certainly expressed his doubts regarding the wisdom of that choice. Catherine wondered what he thought of her now.

"I'll even call you after I arrive at the hotel," she said.

He kissed her. "When you get settled, I'll come up for a visit. See your new place."

"Sounds good."

Dad turned toward the door. Catherine opened it for him. "I love you, Cathy," he said. "And just so you know? I'm proud of you."

Warmed, she watched him give her a jaunty little half-salute and walk down the hallway toward the elevator. Catherine shut the door. *Love you too, Daddy. Talk to you again soon,* she thought.

She turned from the door and looked at the insurgency of boxes in her apartment: packed, half-packed, and as-yet-unassembled. Her dishes, fragile decorations, and clothes were going to take the longest to box up. The breakables consumed time because they required protective packaging. The clothing made quite a chore because Catherine's closet occupied one full wall of her bedroom—and was completely full. Most of the drawers in her bedroom furniture were also full of clothing and decorative accessories. Despite the magnitude of the task, however, Catherine wasn't worried. Over the years she had developed a successful game-plan to streamline this kind of work. When the movers arrived on Monday, Catherine would be ready to go.

Moving again, she thought. *Moving on.*

Catherine sat down on the nearest couch. She'd said goodbye to Joe and her co-workers. She'd said goodbye to her father. She had left a message on Jenny's machine, telling Jenny to call her so she could say goodbye to Jenny. Catherine had yet to call Edie, but she'd get around to it soon. And every farewell drenched her heart with new doubts and redoubled sorrows.

Catherine looked across the room to the open doors of her balcony and thought, *This*

seemed like such a grand adventure...at first. I'm following my heart, right? So what's changed?

Maybe nothing. Maybe something important. As she sat there, feeling quite literally boxed-in, an unpleasant image swam up from the murky depths of her imagination: a young Catherine running away from a gaggle of girls who laughed at her hasty departure. Old schoolmates, giggling at her because she had been so small, such a tiny pixie who never gained an inch of height without her fellows gaining two inches just to spite her. Catherine could still hear them chanting:

Wee Cathy Chandler running through the town
Up the stairs and down the stairs, in her nightgown!

It was silly and it was stupid. The teasing had also cut her to the quick. Catherine remembered running to her mother, crying that it wasn't fair. She never meant to be *(who let you out of kindergarten, Cathy! go play in the sandbox with the rest of the babies!)* so small!

"Do something!" she had begged Mom.

"Cathy. Sweetie. Don't let those girls tell you what to think of yourself."

"But they won't *stop* telling me!"

Mom just sighed and hugged her tight. "I'll talk with Daddy. We'll see what we can do."

Her parents' solution had been to transfer her to a new school. Thinking about it now, Catherine knew her mother and father must have spoken with all the appropriate adults before her first day of class. Children were what they were, playmates, bullies, or snobs, no matter what school they attended. Yet Miss Farthingale's Academy for Girls seemed a refuge of friendliness to Catherine, because no one there made fun of her.

She watched the little girl in her memories turn tail and run. Uncomfortable with the image, she abruptly realized, *You know what, Cathy? That's what you've done ever since grade school. Whenever life gets too painful, or too complicated, the answer is just to move away and start over as though nothing untoward has happened. Good God.*

That was how she'd left for college after her high school sweetheart's heartbreaking fare-thee-well. Later, she came home again from college, frantic after both graduating and breaking up with her newest boyfriend, Simon, in the same week. Another starting-over happened when she moved out of her father's house a year later, feeling smothered by his plans for her life, but enrolling at Columbia anyway, to pursue the career he'd chosen for her. She'd been looking for a fresh start when she moved into the SoHo walk-up with Steven, on the rebound from the calamity named Russell Yarborough. And Catherine was *dying* for a new beginning after she broke off her engagement with Steven. So she fled back to her father's house and tried to get on with her life.

After Catherine graduated from Columbia she decided she *had* to get out of New York. She toured Europe with friends. She came home, did not like life as an associate at Prasker, Chandler & Coolige and left again to travel through Asia. Trunks, suitcases, shipping crates, haversacks: Catherine became a specialist in the art of packing and unpacking her possessions. She came home in time for Christmas in 1983, and her father's holiday gift to her had been a promotion to junior partner in his firm.

Catherine decided to try that for a while (and "a while" turned out to be two years), but she had quickly moved into the Central Park West apartment she sat in now. It had been bad enough that she was Daddy's Little Lawyer at the office; she could not come home from what little work she did there and share the brownstone with him too. Running. Always running away.

So, what now? What was Providence, really? If all the historical patterns of her life

defined Old Cathy, how did Providence truly fit into the life of New Cathy?

She got up and went to the dining table to look at her list. After a moment, Catherine picked up the pen that still lay beside the paper. She drew arrows to move a couple items from the "pro" side to the "con" side. She set down the pen.

I want to talk to Vincent, she thought. *That's what New Cathy does. She doesn't run away, she seeks wise counsel.*

Her fingers began tapping the tempered glass tabletop. *Oh, yes? Indeed? I thought New Cathy was also moving to Providence so she could be independent. So she could prove to herself that she doesn't need one friend or another to make her decisions for her. So she could lose those "old flames who won't let go" and start clean.*

Now she was arguing with herself.

Catherine snatched up the list and crushed it into a tiny ellipsoid. She tossed it across the room. It bounced off the edge of a box and wobbled across the floor into the bedroom.

"Sorry, Edie," she called after the paper missile. "Maybe you should ask your therapist for a refund."

She went into the kitchen and began packing her assorted pots and pans into a box. "And 'follow your heart'?" she muttered. "What kind of wise counsel is that? The heart is a mixed up, fickle thing. How can *it* know what's best?"

She wanted to talk with Vincent anyway. She hoped he would come tonight. She clanged lids onto pots as she taped matching pieces together. Sunset was several hours away. If she could just keep busy enough, maybe the time would pass without aggravating her too much.

And don't be too disappointed if he doesn't come tonight, she thought, trying to be just as damned fair to the longed-for Vincent as she could. *You're the one who left three whole nights open-ended to accommodate whatever his schedule might be.*

In retrospect, that seemed like a stupid thing to do.

"God!" she growled. She was sick of second-guessing herself. And that sad vision remained with her: a hurt and angry little girl, lace-trimmed skirt frothing around her knees, long ponytail trailing out behind her as she ran. Little Cathy ran looking back over her shoulder because she needed to see what she was running away from. It never mattered what lay ahead.

For the first time, Catherine thought, *Maybe it does matter. If what I run to looks exactly like what I ran from—only cleverly disguised in the new season's fashions—is that really an escape? That's not a solution, Cath. That's the next mistake waiting to happen.*

Kneeling on her kitchen floor, Catherine stopped packing the box, a rarely used frying pan held forgotten in her hand. "Well," she said to the smooth tiles beneath her, "I just trashed the pros and cons. Let's look at this another way. What, exactly, do I think I'm running away from?"

After a silent minute, her heart began to speak to her. She was not surprised to find that the voice of her inner counselor sounded like black velvet and distant thunder. What *did* surprise her was how honest she could be with herself, even when the real-life owner of that voice was absent.

II

21 March 1987
Saturday, Late Night

Hughes shut the door quietly behind him. Jonathan looked up from the microscope and shook his head. “No change.”

Hughes frowned. “It’s been too long.” It was, in fact, twenty-six hours since the creature’s capture in the park. He lay unconscious on the table, still fully anesthetized.

Jonathan’s otherwise boyish face could have been carved from stone. “Yes, but we did exceed the expected dosage, didn’t we?”

Hughes heard reproach in Jonathan’s voice. It might even be—contempt. The young man meant that Hughes had acted the trigger-happy fool the night before, out there by the tunnel.

Hughes gave his assistant a suspicious glance, but—no, Jonathan was not accusing him. He was busy writing in the logbook. Hughes shook his head, knowing he had every reason for paranoia, but also knowing that he could not let it overtake him. There was too much at stake. Jonathan had merely communicated an explanation.

Hughes told himself: *I must work to solve this problem, rather than worry about how others may or may not judge me for creating the problem in the first place.*

“Perhaps we should intervene,” he said. “Try to wake him. Maybe cold water—”

Jonathan looked up again and readjusted his glasses on his nose. “I don’t think that’s necessary, Professor. Vitals are stable. He’s not in distress. We should simply use the time to gather further data. And it might be useful to know how long it *does* take for his system to metabolize the tranquilizer.”

“True,” Hughes murmured. “Yes. That’s true.” And it *was* true. They had *much* more to learn before the creature became responsive. Hughes gave himself a mental shake. First paranoia, and now impatience. It would not do. It would not help. His study of waking brain activity could wait—*would* wait, of course—until his subject awoke of his own accord. The results would be more accurate.

Hughes moved to the foot of the examination table and gazed down at his creature, feeling renewed and reoriented by the gift of him. The creature was morphologically beautiful, a thing apart. A perplexing chimera.

Neither scientist could classify him. They didn’t know if the creature was a natural genetic outcome, or a carefully conceived and manipulated one. The creature was a beast, yes. But what sort of beast, exactly? They had yet to answer that question.

Hughes walked around the table to stand at the creature’s side. He ran his fingers along the creature’s chest, up to the shoulder, and down the long arm, over those sections that were not covered by the padded restraining plate and institutional straps. He watched the creature’s slight abdominal expansion and deflation as his magnificent body breathed. Hughes moved his hand to stroke that warm, furred belly, admiring both the softness and the strength he felt there. Then he let his fingertips caress chest, shoulder, and arm again, drawing parallel lines through the creature’s fur. It gave Hughes great joy to touch this Mystery. He welcomed both the pleasure and the privilege.

Smiling, Hughes thought, *I’ve worked with many species over the years, but nothing so physically intriguing as my creature. Supple skin, healthy fur, wide variation in hair length, texture and coloration. And God, his teeth!*

Hughes smoothed the coarse fur above the leather cuff binding the creature’s forearm to the examination table. He doubted that his creature would let him do this once the tranquilizer wore off, so Hughes petted him while he could. He knew his self-gratification must be as nonobjective as a researcher could get, and Hughes didn’t care. He loved to touch his beast as much as he loved to look at him.

The creature was covered by a dense coat of luxurious fur—except for parts of his face, all of his neck down to clavicles and upper scapulae, and the undersides of his hands and feet. His ventral fur grew short and fine, tapering along the belly to plushy yellow down on the lower abdomen, and darkening along his sides until it merged into dorsal fur on his back. There, the guard hair grew thicker and longer. The creature's coarsest fur coated his forearms and lower legs in layered tufted lengths that brushed the backs of his hands and the tops of his feet. The hair which covered those hands and feet (along with the mane crowning his head) felt like rough silk to the touch. The shortest fur on his body grew over his compact genitalia, his snout and jaw, and his large round ears.

Hughes thought the creature's coloring quite beautiful, too. The fur on his back glowed fiery red-gold, with a dark red ochre stripe running along his spine. His limbs were a brighter copper-tinged gold, shading at hands and feet to a burnished intermingling of reddish and yellowish hues. Across his chest and belly, the color paled in a subtle gradation from golden ginger at his sides to corn silk yellow at his center. Where his bare skin showed, he was tinted lightly bronze with rose undertones. The hair on the creature's face offered a dusting of color only a little brighter than his mane.

His unlikely profile evoked the face of a lion, mostly *because* of that full mane of hair—rich saffron shot through with amber locks and ginger strands. But while he had a modified carnivoran jaw, the nose leather and philtrum were not quite a lion's. The creature's snout was more North American cougar than African lion—although he lacked the tactile whiskers of either genus *Panthera*, or genus *Puma*.

No, I can't be that specific, Hughes thought. The two research partners must work back through the nomenclature to *families*. True, the creature's lack of vibrissae and penile spines, combined with his upright stature and overall body structure, indicated a close association with human physiology—but the presence of so many nonhuman traits prevented a straightforward answer to the question of his heritage. The researchers saw plenty of obvious characteristics common to animals of the family *Ursidae*, of *Hominidae*, of *Felidae*.

Hughes wondered aloud, "Can you imagine what would it take to breed this thing?"

Jonathan did not look at him as he answered, "Lots of test tubes."

Hughes snorted laughter. "No, I mean, what made him? And what would his progeny look like?"

"Not questions we can answer."

"For now," said the professor.

Jonathan muttered a dismissive, "Umph," and kept looking into the eyepiece of the microscope.

Hughes imagined the creature's face smaller, rounder, the features pert and immature. He could not hold the vision for long. He resumed his consideration of the creature's adult face: similar to an ape in its large cranial size and general dimensions, with the upper planes of its features and the lower lip bare of facial hair. But the hair distribution clearly departed from an ape's, because of the flat feline nose, the feathery "V" of bristle ascending from that nose to mark the creature's brows, and the velvety fuzz that covered the lower half of his face like late-day stubble. Touching the creature's cheek now, Hughes thought, *This IS fur, weighting our balance of definitions from ape toward cat again.* He looked from the creature's face to his stiff-fingered hand—and those claws.

The creature's claws were not catlike at all: they were not retractable. They were not even like a cheetah's, a cat which did not completely sheath its claws. In some ways the creature's nails resembled the grooming claws of prosimians, but a hooked claw grew over *every* terminal

phalanx. The claws were also not a primate's flat nails, and they were not filed or otherwise shaped into their dagger-like points; they grew that way from his nail beds.

Apart from his claws, however, the creature's gnarled fingers and toes resembled *human* digits. His thumbs were opposable, and his long toes were not. Indeed, his entire skeletal frame compared closely to a modern human's. Yes, the creature's flexible torso had a paradoxically felid shape. And yes, his hands and feet were disproportionately large for his 1.93 meter height. Yet his thewy legs and pelvic structure were made for running upright—and he had no tail.

He was fully bipedal, although the curvature of his spine and elongation of his pelvis suggested that he might also be capable of extended quadrupedal movement as well, probably with a bear's lumbering gait. He was a little too broad in the shoulders and a little too deep in the chest; a little too flat at the waist; a little too long down the back; a little too narrow at the hips—but under ordinary conditions, the creature traveled upright like a man. His body used plantigrade feet for walking and prehensile hands for grasping. It looked like he did a great deal of both: his palms and soles were leathery with thick calluses, worn smooth by long use, tough as the pads of any predator's paws.

And just how much walking did he do anyway? How extensive was his territory? How far could he travel in one night and still return to his Central Park bolt hole before the city woke up each morning?

He's heavy, Hughes thought. *The soles of his boots have unique wear patterns. There will be distinctive tracks out in the park. I should check the weather reports. Go take a look around the area before we get more rain.*

Now Hughes imagined deep imprints in the mud. His hand tightened on the beast's arm. The weight of the thing was all bone and muscle. Hughes had not yet acquired access to an appropriate scale to weigh the creature, but X-rays revealed a solid skeletal system. This meant that like a bear or a lion, the creature was a sprinter, not a marathon runner. Hughes hoped to get a better idea of the creature's bone density from an ultrasound exam. He'd been fascinated by the many healed cracks and fissures he saw in the X-rays, marking old breaks. The creature had seen his share of hard action over the years. A knitted line marking an incomplete transverse fracture in the creature's right femur held special interest for the professor. That break looked like the most recent one. Hughes was curious to know what could have caused it.

The creature's musculature amazed even more than his bones, as he was massively built. Neuromuscular electrical stimulation generated intense muscle contractions. So intense that, without waking, the creature had sighed and moaned each time they activated the electric current. This worried Hughes at first, until Jonathan pointed out that the powerful effects of their experimental manipulation could simply require the creature's body to initiate a corresponding increase in oxygen intake. Jonathan had then gone so far as to suggest that the creature's strength might rival a gorilla's. Hughes had his doubts about that, but no direct evidence (yet) to counter Jonathan's belief.

Regardless, the creature was assuredly very strong. In his present cataleptic state, the creature's entire torso, front and back, felt almost stony to the touch. No, he wasn't bulked-up like a human body-builder; his strength simply matched his everyday way of life (whatever *that* might be). Beneath his skin, the creature's skeletal muscles felt thick and strong, but not excessively so. He seemed hale, if a little too lean. Perhaps he had not been getting enough to eat. As far as the scientists could determine, the creature's gastrointestinal tract had been empty when they captured him. Hughes wanted to know how the seasons affected the creature's diet, and whether food was easier to come by, once winter and early spring had passed.

Hughes also wondered what the beast ate. Felid-like papillae coated the surface of his

tongue but he possessed a true omnivore's teeth. His molars featured sharper edges than human grinders, and they seemed ursine in shape, although smaller than any bear's. Both pairs of cuspids were long and wickedly sharp, the eyeteeth measuring 2.8 centimeters. These teeth looked very unlike a bear's or gorilla's and more like a large cat's. But his carnassials were underdeveloped compared to true felines, and the creature's incisors appeared simian in size, shape, and placement.

The beast was a puzzle, made up of pieces that shouldn't fit, yet, anywise, did. He lived. He existed. He amazed.

Hughes and his assistant were making good progress in their efforts to solve this puzzle. As they went, they filmed sufficient video footage to document their work. They also amassed a useful collection of photographs, which Hughes added in sequential order to their project photo album.

During the past twenty-six hours they had measured every part of the creature and clipped yellow claw points from a hand and a foot for composition analysis. They collected seminal and lymph fluids, blood and urine, gastric secretions and saliva, freezing some samples with liquid nitrogen, preserving other samples on microscope slides or in glass vials. They were incubating the rest for microbial culture and analysis. They had to wait to collect any more such specimens, until the creature's body regained its non-sedated homeostasis, and they would get no stool at all until the creature awakened and ate some food.

In the meantime, they swabbed the creature's mouth for epithelial cells and oral bacteria, retracted his prepuce, palpated his joints, lymph nodes, pelvic cavity and abdominal structures. They peered into his eyes (endowed with *tapeta lucida*), ears (such ears!), and nostrils (opening into perfectly feline nasal passages). They snipped bits of hair from each region of his hide and adhered those tufts to the grid of a labeled chart. They took generous skin scrapings from several locations on the creature's body.

They tended the bruises they found on the creature's left shoulder and dabbed preventative cerate where their darts had hit him. They photographed all these injuries to record the creature's rate of healing. They noted the hairless pink lines on his skin that seemed to indicate recent wounding, and mapped the white or silvered stripes where his fur had grown back around older scars. They puzzled over what looked like newly healed claw marks on his chest. Hughes had wondered aloud whether the creature lived alone in that drainage tunnel, or whether more creatures vied with him for food or territory. Jonathan only wanted to know if the creature had injured himself for some reason.

They established an IV line when the creature showed no signs of waking after nine hours in their care. They attached electrodes for the pulse oximetry, respiration, ECG, and EEG monitors. They took hourly blood pressure readings and used multiple methods to measure the creature's body temperature, trying to identify patterns they could use later to determine his circadian rhythm (if he had one). They tested the creature's reflexes without quite knowing what they should expect to see. He demonstrated a peculiar mixture of primitive and developed muscular reactions.

Slowly, they were collecting an impressive data array. There was, of course, much more to learn, as Jonathan had just pointed out. *I'd love to get the full ultrasound exam before the creature wakes,* Hughes thought. *Look at abdominal organ placement and dimensions, his bones, check his reproductive system, his heart, the eyes. Joints, too—see how those limbs move. I'll have to clip away some of that fur for the scans. And I'd like some good photographs of his teeth.*

Hughes looked at his watch. *I'll have Jonathan help me with all that. Then I'll go to the faculty room, grab a couch, get some sleep. Come back in at about four-thirty and let Jonathan*

go home for a while. If we keep working in shifts, we won't overtire ourselves.

Satisfied with his plan, Hughes walked around the examination table to share his ideas with Jonathan. In some ways, this cooperative effort with his new assistant offered a mirror-image of his old relationship with Canton. However, many things differed from the prior pattern, and all to the good, as far as Hughes could tell.

For one thing, this was 1987 and they didn't need to leave New York to study their living Mystery. For another, *Hughes* was now the mentor, and Hughes was not selfish, but beneficent. He was here for the sake of the knowledge to be gained. He was also willing to share *every* aspect of the journey with this helpful young man. *Our experience will launch his career,* Hughes thought. He hoped Jonathan Gould fully appreciated these gifts, and that he dared to make the most of them.

III

21 March 1987
Saturday, Late Night

"Nothing," said Pascal.

"There can't be *nothing*," Winslow retorted. "Someone's *seen* something, *heard* something."

Pascal shook his head, tapping one of his metal signaling rods against his shoulder. "Every outpost has checked in. The call has gone out five times. Vincent hasn't answered. If he's Below, he's either not near the level of the pipes, or he can't get to the pipes to send a message back to us."

Winslow folded his arms and glared around the Pipe Chamber. The humongous cavern served as the clanking, plinking, ponging heart of Tunnels concatenation. Hundreds of pipes twisted and turned at all angles and heights to form a large-scale latticework, like a jungle gym for a loony giant. Pascal, who was the furthest thing from gigantic Winslow could think of, served as the chief operator and organizer of their communication system. He spent his days and nights darting along the candlelit stone shelves and contrived catwalks, surrounding himself with the constant cacophony of pipetalk from all over the city, listening and transmitting, guiding encoded conversations. If there was anything to know about the world Below, Pascal knew it, and he usually knew it before anyone else did.

Watching Winslow's unhappy face, Pascal tried out, "Or maybe Vincent *won't* come to the pipes?"

They both knew that sometimes Vincent went off alone, went *deep*. Winslow guessed only Mouse knew where Vincent went during those times, and Mouse always refused to reveal even the theoretical locations of those deep places. "Have to keep it a secret," Mouse had always said, whenever anyone asked. Winslow often wondered whether Vincent had warned the boy, or whether Mouse held his twitchy sort of peace out of a sense of loyalty to his tall, blue-eyed idol.

At any rate, when Vincent got gone, he damn well *stayed* gone until he was ready to come back up. His record was twenty-seven days. That had been, what—fifteen years ago? More than? It was after Molly—died. That time had been plain hell for everybody Below, but especially for the crew of Tunnelkids who grew up with her. Winslow let those memories alone for the time being.

“Thing is,” he told Pascal. “Vincent’s *never* gone off without saying so to Father. He ditched both of the groups he was supposed to teach. He missed *a Council meeting*. He didn’t even leave a note.”

“Notes can get misplaced,” said Pascal. “Have you *seen* Father’s desk since the cave-in? Either of his desks?”

Winslow snorted. “Vincent ain’t that dumb. He’d have left it where Father could find it.”

Pascal nodded. He was done playing devil’s advocate. The look on his face said, *I’m worried too.*

“Well, you up for this?” Winslow asked. Once they sent word—or the lack thereof—to Father, a full-scale search would begin. And about this eventuality Winslow thought: *I don’t think our world has ever seen the likes of what’s coming*.

Winslow and Randolph would lead the efforts below. Maria, one of their Helpers, who knew the ins and outs of all sorts of weird places, would lead the search Above. Pascal would be here in the plumb middle of everything, coordinating both sides until the search was over—or until Father called it off.

“Yeah,” Pascal said, squaring his small shoulders for the huge task. “I’m ready.”

“Tell me who you need where. I’ll send them to you.”

“Right. Keep the outpost roster going.” Pascal was now a general delivering orders to his adjutant. “Anyone on the comm list can’t be in the search parties. I’m going to put out a System Alert on the pipes, and I’m going to need every outpost up and running. Send me Rebecca and Poe. They can help in here. And I want Laura on the Hub Main. She can take charge of that one pipe and she never misses anything. They’ll need cots and personal gear. Lots of paper, lots of pencils. I want Zach for my errand-runner. And whatever you do, keep Mouse out of here.”

“Like we can keep Mouse out of anywhere,” Winslow growled. “But sure. I hear you.” The boy would want to help, but the flurry of sound and motion in the Pipe Chamber would only upset Mouse worse than he already was.

“That’s it,” Pascal concluded.

They looked at each other. “I feel like we’re going to war,” Winslow said.

“We’re going to help a friend.”

Winslow grasped Pascal’s arm. “Yeah. I guess we are, at that. One way or the other.”

“We’ll find him,” Pascal said.

Winslow heard no doubt in the pipe master’s voice. You had to love Pascal for that. He had always been a realist, but he was a hopeful realist.

“Do me a favor,” Winslow said. “When you tap out the news to Father, tell him I’m heading his way.”

“I’ll do that. Godspeed, Winslow.”

“Same to you.”

Winslow left, listening to the clanging begin as Pascal got to work. They were helping a friend, yes. But it was a very big deal for Winslow and Pascal, and they both knew it. From the moment sickly baby Vincent got rescued from the bitter cold of a long-ago January afternoon, the kid had become the secret core around which their little world revolved. Winslow knew of no soul Below, nor anyone in their network of Helpers Above, whose life had not been touched—and changed for the better—because Vincent was their friend.

He’s more than a friend to US, though, he thought. *To Pascal and me and Olivia. ’Cause we’re the last four left Below. The last of the original Troop.*

Winslow thought it more than a little weird, the way that camaraderie had come about. If he considered things chronologically, Winslow knew Vincent shouldn’t have been part of the first

batch of Tunnelkids at all. When he was just a newborn, the rest of the Round One kids ranged from mobile toddlers (Devin and Olivia) to five- and six-year-olds (Winslow and Pascal), with half a dozen other rug rats in between. Any other baby brought Below at that time would have just settled in happily with the Round Two cohort.

Well, *Vincent* was no ordinary baby. Father got him past his first awful illness and handed him over to the person who had found the kid in the first place, loudly freezing to death outside a Topside hospital. Later on during that difficult year, Father took Vincent back from his original foster parents, seeing how they'd turned out to be wholly inadequate guardians. After the major communal tumult from this street-style custody battle had died down, the Undercity's doctor moved Vincent into the Hub to raise as his own, and Vincent got to know all the other Tunnelkids.

At about eight or nine months old, the athletic little kitten-boy rejoined the central Tunnels community already knowing how to walk, jump, and climb. Once Vincent figured out how to *run*, he had no trouble keeping up with his older friends. And since Devin liked to hang out with those same friends, and since Vincent worshiped the ground Devin walked on, where the big kids went, little Vincent went too.

Later, after Round Two caught up with Vincent in matters of walking and talking and getting into mischief, he had a crew roughly his own age to pester. But by then he had become a blood-brother among the Elderkids and nobody could ever take that away from him. Not that anyone had ever wanted to. Vincent's presence in their collective childhood was so entrenched, it was geographical. Vincent was just *there*, like the Chamber of the Winds, or the Atlantic Ocean. Winslow couldn't imagine life without him.

The pipes were really ringing now. Father had gotten on the line, summoning, sending, and safeguarding. The week was getting off to a very early start.

What bugs me most, Winslow thought as he walked, *is that damn near everybody saw Vincent before he disappeared. The older kids saw him, the little kids saw him, Ezra saw him, the ladies saw him, hell—the sentries saw him go out on patrol.*

But no one saw him come back.

Winslow suspected Vincent had gone Above after his gate check. He did that. Lots of nights. *And I guess he might've gone Up to see Catherine, as well,* Winslow thought, and scowled. He was still kicking himself over his Thursday night dunderheadedness in the Dining Hall. It was Pascal who clued him in, when Winslow went to confer with him in the Pipe Chamber. *He said Catherine sent for Vincent on the Junction Door Pipe. Said Vincent went Up and came back pretty fast. Now there's a little bit of knowing I wish I'd had that night.*

Word was out now, of course. Vincent's Catherine was going away. No wonder the man was practically crawling out of his own skin.

Winslow told himself: *If whatever's happened to Vincent has anything to do with Catherine, Father is going to make Mount Krakatoa look like a naming-day candle.*

But as far as Winslow was concerned, Catherine should be one of the first people from Above to be told that there was a problem down Below. If Father didn't think of that himself, Winslow intended to suggest it to him. With patent emphasis.

IV

22 March 1987
Sunday, Late Afternoon

Catherine remained alone after her father's visit. No one came to her, at any hour of the afternoon or evening (or during the night) and no one called her on the phone. She didn't even get Edie when she called her friend. Just another answering machine. She left a message, but Edie never called her back. Catherine switched off her light a little after one in the morning, heartsore. When she woke again, the packing proceeded at an introspective crawl.

She found herself looking at her belongings with a detached eye, asking herself, "Do I really need this?" and, "Why do I still have that?" and sorting many things into three catch-all boxes to donate to charity. She decided she didn't like her set of loveseats anymore. She could donate them too. If the realtor in Providence found her a place with a larger living room, Catherine might buy a full sofa. Something with New Cathy colors.

Three or four of the paintings could go. Maybe if Jenny ever called her back, Catherine could talk her friend into picking up the art for charity auction. Maybe the movers could transport her donations.

No, she thought then. *Wait a minute. I know exactly where these things will be most appreciated. Tonight, when Vincent comes, I can send those boxes Below with him. He can have some friends come Up for the paintings, if they want to take them. I'm pretty sure they will. The Tunnel People love artwork.*

She felt both uneasy and annoyed that Vincent was waiting until her last night in town to see her. Trying not to feel jilted, Catherine thought, *I didn't expect that.* She wrapped one of her delicate glass eggs in tissue paper and bubble wrap.

But maybe I should have. Vincent feels what I feel more deeply than I do myself, sometimes. Maybe I've needed these past couple days to be alone and to think. Maybe he knows that. And so he gives me space I didn't believe I needed.

Catherine smiled. That would be just like him. Vincent always responded to her confusion with kind wisdom. She didn't always agree with him, but by now she knew she shouldn't dismiss his reactions out of hand, just because she didn't understand them yet. This was their developing pattern of give and take, speak and listen, touch and release.

She knew quite well that theirs was a wary, courteous dance. From the beginning, Catherine had taken the lead, her own spontaneous response to Vincent's kindness drawing them both into a slow choreography of steps that might take them anywhere, or nowhere. *From the start, I was surprised to hear the compassion in his voice. He was so calm, so present with me in my pain.*

At first, Catherine didn't know that Vincent was so personally kind to *everyone*. She was too wounded from the accident that overturned her life to see beyond her own needs. She had believed Vincent gave her special care because she was so badly hurt, because she was a veritable princess from the world Above, and because what happened to her was so random and outrageous that she warranted his devoted medical concentration. She never thought of all this in terms of what she did and did not deserve, only in terms of the trauma's scope and scale for her own life. Catherine felt genuine gratitude, bewildered by the generosity of strangers Below—after other strangers from Above proved the world to be an insane, evil place.

So when Catherine thanked Vincent beneath her building that first time, stepping close to hug him from the side, and when he slowly curved his long arm around her back to complete the embrace, she hadn't known that it was *she* who gave *him* extraordinary notice. Eight months later, when Vincent first appeared on her terrace, Catherine refused to let him say goodbye to her forever. On that magic January night, she still had not understood that her own affectionate acceptance had sealed their amazing bond.

She knew a little more now than she did in January. Now, Catherine led the dance. Vincent was more than an equal partner for their music, but he always mirrored *her*, he always echoed *her*. That was the way Vincent best knew how to love.

Yesterday afternoon, it took her a long time to think through all this—and more—while she meditated on the kitchen floor. Catherine nestled the wrapped egg amongst others in her current packing carton. *So now maybe Vincent's absence is his echo of our last conversation,* she thought.

She stopped reaching for the next glass egg, a new possibility occurring to her. *Or maybe when we spoke by the secret door, he was already saying goodbye. Just because I sent him word of my decision doesn't mean he owes me a reply. Merely talking about my choices before I made them hurt him. I saw that. Now I have to ask: will he come to me at all?*

Her investigation into the crimes of the Subway Slasher had taught Catherine that Vincent was not—in any way—at her beck and call. He was fully willing and able to refuse her summons, should he feel it to be the best course for both of them. He also seemed acutely sensitive to even her unspoken judgments of his motives. Catherine couldn't blame him for that. She had as good as accused Vincent of murdering those people on the subway. She had judged him for his physical capacity for violence and suspected him of—less then noble intentions toward herself.

After a gruesome conversation in his chamber, when she pulled away from his fierce beast-face (and all that it represented), Vincent withdrew from her. Well, actually no, it was not a withdrawal as anyone else would have performed it. He did not hide himself away, or berate her, or pout, or deprive her of things she needed from him, or demand anything at all of her. Other men Catherine had known would have employed such tactics. Tom Gunther came to mind.

Vincent, however, continued to visit her often, pleased with her company, romancing her in his hopeful, quiet way, so very gentle with her slow-to-heal soul. He protected her, and she protected his world's secrets. They solved strange problems together. They read poetry to each other. They talked late into the night.

But unless he was dragging her out of yet another dangerous scrape, Vincent did not touch her, even when she touched him: to take his hand, or to wrap her arms around his warm, strong body, or to turn his face toward hers with her fingertips so she could look into his jewel-colored eyes. He never resisted her, and he also never reciprocated—as he used to, in the very beginning. At least, Catherine couldn't *remember* any reciprocation from her present vantage point. She'd have to delve deeper into her memories—or ask Vincent about it—to be sure.

Then the cave-in happened. The dance changed again. On that day, her fears *for* Vincent surpassed her spectral fears *of* Vincent. Catherine fought for his life. She had known for weeks that she loved him. Her feelings during the cave-in proved her love to herself. When Vincent was safe again, she told him about her love. The distance between them vanished as though it had never existed (if it had existed). Thereafter, they were easier together, unburdened, tender. Friendly and more than friendly. Dreamers once more.

Then Joe Maxwell assigned Catherine to the Coleman case. Catherine had gone to Columbia University in search of an expert who could evaluate a murder suspect's alleged Vodou trance. And Professor Alexander Ross blasted through the new foundations of Catherine's life the way Elliot's plastic explosives had blasted through the rock that imprisoned Vincent and Father Below.

Catherine closed her eyes. She could feel Alexander's hard kiss on her mouth. Shuddering at the dim memory, she opened her eyes again. She abandoned her collection of glass and ceramic dainties. She sat down on the steps between her open dining area and her living

room. This was another kitchen-floor discovery. She mulled it over in her mind.

I now believe that I'm running from my memories of Alexander Ross and his modern-day sorcery. I'm running to a job that will protect me from that kind of foot-soldierly snare. What Ross did to me—

She didn't want to think about it anymore. She also didn't want to bring Alexander's ghost with her to Providence. *I'm sorting through my mind while I'm sorting through my apartment,* she told herself. *I need to pack my heart as if it were another cardboard box full of crystal figurines.*

So Catherine took a deep breath and admitted in a whisper, "What Ross did to me was a kind of rape."

She heard no echoes from beyond the grave, yet her words hung in the room like smoke. She looked around at her cluttered floors and vacant walls, the carpets recently cleaned by maintenance, the walls recently scrubbed and repainted. The Vodou cultists had vandalized her home. They smuggled snakes and spiders into her personal spaces. Ross, their charismatic leader, had lied to her, drugged her, nearly seduced her, and nearly murdered her.

He tore away all her defenses and exposed all her fears. He used her as a weapon against herself. And because Vincent shared everything she felt during these attacks, Ross ultimately turned her into a weapon against Vincent, too.

Catherine folded her hands on her knees, sitting prim and silent in the unhaunted space which nevertheless reeked of blood and exotic spices whenever she let down her guard. As was happening right now. She remembered the sound of a Haitian voice groaning a slow incantation from a jail cell. Just another of Ross's victims trying to protect himself from the *bokor's* curse.

Fè le majik papa Hougan.
Fè majik la, Grand Chemin.
Mwen ka wè,
Mwen pa ka pale.
Tout se pa bon.
Revoker la majik.

Catherine refused to tremble.

"You have the strength, Catherine," Vincent's remembered voice said to her, interrupting the chant. He sounded almost stern, a friend imparting an inarguable truth. "You do." The strength to stop running. To conquer her fears. To go to Providence because it was the right thing to do, and not because it was the easy way out.

Catherine thought of the little girls she had interviewed for the Ehringer case. She now empathized with those children as she had not when she began that investigation. Meeting each child, she had known she was a survivor of brutal violence, like those girls—because of the men who cut her face—and she'd become a survivor *many* times over since she started working for the DA. But after Ross, she understood much more of what the girls and their families *felt*. Ehringer had taken from them what he wanted, for his own pleasure, believing it his rightful due. Ross had done the same thing to Catherine.

Sickened and ashamed, she thought, *Professor Ross is the reason it's painful to even look at Vincent anymore. Alexander made me his creature, and Vincent saw me like that. Vincent FELT me turn into that.* It was astronomically worse than everything she'd ever heard or feared *(what I can see, I cannot describe)* about being possessed.

Vincent had tried to explain to her his ideas about evil spirits—how real or unreal they

truly were. Catherine couldn't remember what he'd said about them. The wounds were still too raw. She had not been courageous enough to listen to him.

(You have the strength, Catherine.)

She released a dejected sigh. Ultimately, the evil in her spirit was hers. Catherine knew that. The ugliness that she hid behind a mask of physical beauty remained *her* ugliness. Unleashed, she was vicious and disgusting. She didn't have even Vincent's primitive innocence when *he* let loose.

The God of Death that Vincent became was also a God of Justice. Vincent protected. He responded in proportion to the crimes committed. He defended love with his life.

And Catherine Chandler? What did her primitive side do? Catherine asked herself, bitter as wormwood. *She spat in his sorrowing face and called him a demon—and other things too, ever-so-much worse things. In Narcissa's chamber, I called Vincent UGLY, and I called that wise healing woman a hellacious witch.*

Vincent was back to not touching her again. Except for utilitarian purposes. Like taking Alexander's stupid magic seashell away from her, for example. And this time, Catherine couldn't bear to touch Vincent, either. Maybe that was why she had become afraid to examine her memories of her precious moments with Vincent too closely. If she did find more occasions of loving contact than she expected to, then how much pain would she have to feel, now that she no longer felt worthy of his love?

And if she found fewer memories of his love than she hoped for? That possibility hurt her even more. What had she been doing with her past year, anyway? What did she think she'd been doing with her whole life?

"I am trying to run from my own ugliness," she said to the apartment. The silence answered:

Nou se zetwal yo tou.
Nou travay nan mitan lannwit,
Men nou toupatou.
Jou a se lannwit.
Fen an se nan konmansman.
Fè la majik.

"I know your heart, Catherine," Vincent's voice whispered within her.

To drown out the incantations, she thought of the sonnets Vincent loved. Shakespeare's sonnets. How did that one poem go? The one that began, *They that have power to hurt, and will do none...*? Vincent could have recited it for her.

But Vincent was not there.

Catherine got up and went to one of her living room bookshelves, bringing an armful of books back with her to the dining table. *Two birds with one stone and all that,* she thought. One of the books was the sonnets collection Vincent had given her after her wrenching breakup with Elliot Burch. She slid the volume out from its cardboard sleeve and returned to her place on the dining room steps, scanning the pages for the opening line she wanted.

There it is. She read the words silently. Her memories stopped chanting at her. So she read the poem again, out loud.

"*They that have power to hurt, and will do none,*
That do not do the thing they most do show,

Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow;
They rightly do inherit heaven's graces,
And husband nature's riches from expense;
They are the lords and owners of their faces,
Others, but stewards of their excellence.
The summer's flower is to the summer sweet,
Though to itself, it only live and die,
But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester, smell far worse than weeds."

Catherine closed the book, hugged it to her chest, and *cried*. Shaken by her sobs, she thought, *Ross the base infection*. *And I the festering lily.*

She cried because she'd fallen for it—again—the falsehoods, and the fear. She cried because she had always wanted to be lovely, and clearly was not. She cried because there was no escaping the evil in the world, and because so many attempts to battle evil failed. Badly. Hopelessly.

She cried because she was still afraid, and lonely, and motherless when she most needed a mother. She cried because her closest friend, the lord and owner of his face, had not seen fit to comfort her for two entire nights. She cried because she caused that friend pain at every turn. She cried because she was tired. She had bad dreams. She hurt. She was haunted. She was raped in her soul.

The tears cleaned her out as nothing else had done since she woke up in Narcissa's bed, only eight days ago. As her outburst subsided into shuddering sighs, some long-buried part of her kindled a light and stepped out of the muck within. It spoke Vincent's words in her own voice. Catherine, quieting, listened.

It's not a nightmare. It happened. And what you endured will make you stronger. And better

Better? Better how? Catherine asked.

Better than a childhood dream. She saw the faces of two children, Ellie and Eric Peterson, brought to safety and reunited by Catherine herself. *Better than a legend.* She saw Jason Walker, a hero worthy of King Arthur's round table, and just as doomed. She saw Jason's bestial painted mask and knew that by uncovering his secrets, she had prevented the Subway Slasher from making a deeper descent into violence for the sake of violence.

Better than a porcelain-faced débutante, the inner voice continued. Catherine saw Elliot Burch retreat into his limousine, and a crowd of elderly faces smiling at her after she fought beside them to save their home. *Better than a silent witness.* She saw Jack Sweeney stand up to corruption on the docks. She saw Mitch Denton handcuffed and removed from a courtroom, convicted and sentenced.

Better than a maid of honor. She saw Margaret Chase take Vincent's arm as he escorted her Below to await Father's release from the Tombs. *Better than a helpless bystander.* She saw herself, flung joyfully into Vincent's dusty arms, while the Tunnel People she had rallied to the rescue surrounded them.

And better than any dark spirit. She saw Catherine Chandler spiritually assaulted by the black heart of a murderous cult. She saw Alexander's protégée finally accept responsibility for

the horrors they had contrived, submitting to arrest and instructing her lawyer to relay her guilty plea to the court. She saw Vincent crush an unmagical shell in his hand and gaze into her eyes, wordlessly affirming that Catherine had not lost his love. She had not lost him.

You make a difference, Cathy, said the One who held the light. *Don't be afraid. Wherever you go, you can always make a difference.*

Catherine sat on the steps, unmoving, accepting this truth about herself. After her time of stillness passed, she thought, *He was right. I have the strength after all.* Catherine wasn't sure where this strength had come from. She suspected Vincent first imparted it to her during her blind and bandaged days Below. She knew he had nurtured it throughout the months that followed. But it was hers now. Hers to wield as she chose.

Catherine got up. She returned the book of sonnets to its sleeve, and then to the stack on her dining table. She crossed her apartment, heading for the bathroom to blow her nose and wash her face. Refreshed, she hung her towel on the rack again *(don't be afraid)* and looked into the large bathroom mirror that had twice shown her a mutilated face—once in truth, and once in seeming.

Her fair skin was whole and healed. Modern medicine had done its job. She was unmarked except for one pale scar along her jaw, just below her left ear.

"I'm not running away now," she told her reflection. "I'm leaving New York so I can keep making a difference. So I can make a *bigger* difference in the world."

She knew she was completely free to do this work, and to do it well. She gave the image of her tired-eyed face a tiny smile, thinking: *I'm free to do anything I want with my life. And what I want is to be a light for others who have lost their way in the dark. That's a good way to live. That's a good life to have.*

She switched off the bathroom lights and went back to her dining table. She looked at the stack of hardcover volumes. Selecting an empty box from the floor, she began to fill it with books. Keeping her dining table clear was important to her organizational strategy.

She came to *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare* again. Catherine picked it up and removed the sleeve. This time, she didn't open the book to any of the poems, but to the hand-written inscription on the front flyleaf. She read:

With love's light wings
did I o'erperch these walls;
For stony limits cannot
hold love out...

Vincent

Catherine knew that balcony scene by heart; it was from her favorite of Shakespeare's works, a fact Vincent knew when he left the book for her. She completed the inscription's reference in her mind. *And what love can do, that dares love attempt.*

Did Vincent fancy himself her Romeo? He had a passionate (and winningly sincere) romantic streak that surfaced when he was in the right mood. Catherine turned toward her own balcony. *I still hate to leave him behind,* she thought. *I wish it were night. I wish he would come.* Surely, he had felt her pain and her victory today. Surely, he would come as soon as he could, to console, to praise, and to say goodbye.

A knock came at her door. Catherine set the book down and hurried across the living room. Opening the door, she saw no one in the hall. But a blank envelope waited for her on the

floor outside the door sill.

Catherine smiled. At last! She took the envelope and stood in her doorway to open it. She expected word from Vincent, conciliatory, poetic, naming the hour she could expect him on her terrace. Or perhaps he wanted her to come Below. That would be a little disappointing (not to mention unromantic) but the point was not the stage dressing for her imagined leave-taking scene. The point was to see Vincent face to face. If he *did* want her to come Down to him, she could bring a box of donations with her—

The note was not penned in Vincent's bold, left-handed script. And it was very short.

> Catherine, please meet me Beyond your building. I must speak with you immediately. —FTR

"FTR" stood for "Father," and "Beyond your building" meant the tunnels beneath her building's subbasement. She had never seen Vincent's father in that place. And why did Father want to meet with her apart from his son? Catherine frowned. Should Father even be out of his chamber, wandering around the Tunnels? Vincent had told her that Father was still recovering from the cave-in.

Catherine put Father's strange note on her mantelpiece, grabbed a jacket and a flashlight, snatched up her keys, and sallied forth. The code-phrase in the note didn't specify how far she had to go into the Tunnels to meet Father, so once she arrived Below, she simply walked along the most recent course she knew. The Tunnel People routinely changed paths and entry points into their secret domain. Catherine hoped Father remembered that no one kept her informed as to which paths were rerouted, and when.

It seemed that Father did remember. Catherine reached the first major junction of tunnels. She swept the beam of her flashlight ahead of her and saw Father's square shape waiting in an entryway. Catherine joined him there, pointing her light downward to avoid shining the beam in Father's eyes.

She didn't know what kind of reception to expect from him. He had always impressed her as a formal, forbidding man, benevolent but austere. In spite of his rag-wrapped crutch, Father had a regal bearing and an authoritative presence. All the people Below were unswerving in their loyalty to him. Vincent, she knew, *adored* Father. But to Catherine, Dr. Jacob Wells was the man of urban legend, standing between his child and his child's first prom date with a loaded shotgun in his hands.

Knowing the old man's real name and his tragic history made it no easier to meet him under any circumstances. Father's was a keen mind and a protective heart. Catherine felt that he had never approved of her appearance in Vincent's life—although since Margaret, and the cave-in, he seemed to hold her in much higher regard than before. He certainly spoke more gently to her.

Father said nothing in the way of a greeting. Catherine took the initiative. "Your message said it was urgent."

His three-word reply turned her already disarranged world upside down. "Vincent is missing."

His words punched at her ears like cold fists. Stricken, Catherine watched Father's grave face, and he watched hers.

When it became clear that neither one of them knew what to make of this horrible fact, Father added, "He's been gone since night before last."

Catherine counted back through the week. "I saw him Thursday night," she said.

"I know."

"I haven't seen him since."

Father sighed at a long shot quashed. "And now the second day is almost done. We've had no word from him, found no sign."

Catherine considered her basic store of personal observations about Vincent—his shy retreats, the melancholy he experienced when he was hurt or frightened. After the street gang attacked him, and after Father pronounced him well enough to leave his chamber again, Vincent had gone away somewhere for a few days.

"The people Below are my family," he told her one night, when he returned to her terrace to visit her. "I care for them all. But their lives often wash over me so that my own thoughts are swept away in the deluge. I must leave them sometimes."

This was Catherine's first clue that being an empath was not always a gift.

"Is there somewhere he might have gone?" Catherine asked Father. "To be alone?"

"No," Father said, certain. "He would never cause me such undue worry." He shook his head. "We've searched everywhere we might expect him to be. We're expanding the search tonight. Just in case—" Father stopped and cleared his throat. "But I believe Vincent is nowhere Below."

The news sank in. Two days, two nights. Nowhere Below. Catherine felt stunned. "Why did you come to tell me?" she asked.

Father raised his eyebrows, surprised by her question. "Because I know you care," he said. "I know you love him too."

Catherine stood silent, not knowing what to say.

After a moment, Father began again. "Vincent...was not himself after he spoke with you."

Catherine met his level gaze and saw no accusation in his eyes. "About my going away?" she asked, hesitant just the same. She wondered what "not himself" had looked like.

Father nodded. "Mm-hm." He waited for her response.

"I'm only doing what we both thought best."

Father gave her a brief, sad smile. "Once, I thought I knew the answer. No longer." It was like watching the man unload his shotgun and return the weapon to his gun cabinet. *Are you resigned now?* Catherine wanted to ask. *Or is this acceptance? Now that it's too late.*

"We must find Vincent," said Father. "Quickly."

Or maybe this is simply Father at his most worried, Catherine thought. Aloud, she asked him, "What can we do?"

"Our friends Above are searching the city. Beyond that, I don't know." He sighed again. "Safe journey to Providence, Catherine." He stood quietly, studying her face once again, perhaps waiting for a reply.

Did he want to hear Catherine's farewell? Or a renunciation of her travel plans? An apology? An offer to assist in his world's search for Vincent? Catherine wasn't sure. She didn't know how to answer Father's grieved silence because she didn't know how to break through her own fright's sudden silent incursion into her thoughts.

Without further contribution from Catherine, Father seemed to have nothing else to say to her. He reached out and touched her hand. Gentle, kind, the way he had touched her face after the cave-in. Then, lowering his eyes, he turned and began to limp up the passage toward a branching tunnel, his shoulders slumped, his graying head bent. He departed with surprising speed.

Catherine stood where he left her, sharing his fears. There were very persuasive, very *practical* reasons why Vincent lived where he did: far below the city streets. She thought of the Silks, the gang that had nearly beaten Vincent to death. She thought of Jason Walker and his

eagerness to battle the great-hearted Beast of street mythology.

If Vincent is nowhere Below, then he's somewhere Above, she thought. *And God help him up in my world.* Catherine turned away from the empty tunnel and slowly walked back to her basement.

V

22 March 1987
Sunday Evening

Happy, Hughes watched the monitor over Jonathan's shoulder while Jonathan switched between displays. "The tranquilizer seems to be wearing off," Hughes commented, "and his resting heart rate is still constant."

"Thirty-one beats a minute," Jonathan agreed.

"Remarkable!" Hughes smiled at Jonathan. They both moved close to the examination table. "His lungs are just as powerful, the blood so highly oxygenated. No wonder he's such a swift runner."

"And a swift predator."

"Maybe." Hughes stood over the table, looking down at his creature's face. "He is a miracle. Like nothing I even dreamed of."

"He's definitely nothing anyone has ever seen before," Jonathan said. "At least not anyone official. Do you think he hunts in Central Park every night?"

Hughes glanced up at his assistant. "Hunts? What is there in the park for a creature this size to hunt?"

"The park, the city. You can get the picture, can't you? There's plenty of stray animals everywhere. Rats for sure, in those drainage tunnels. And I've been thinking about the way he doubled back, the way he lay in wait for me...his methods of attack. We didn't expect that. I took another look at your photos of the clothes. A camouflage technique?"

"How would those clothes camouflage him?" Hughes asked. "They don't look anything like the cover available in the park—or in the streets."

"No, Professor. Not for the cover, but to pass for a transient. To get close enough to unsuspecting victims."

Hughes frowned. "What do you mean?"

"No one would miss hobos, street people."

Hughes didn't like Jonathan's suggestions. To Hughes, the clothing, and the objects they found in the creature's pockets, indicated that their beast must be a scavenger, not a high-level predator. He'd been wearing patch-worked rags and castoffs, Hughes was sure. And he carried odd things with him, baubles and other objects that might interest a creature possessing at least a crow's curiosity: four cat's eye marbles (each one featuring different colors), two smooth flat pebbles, a pigeon's long flight feather, a small green candle stub, eleven wooden matches someone had wrapped in a scrap of oilcloth and wound about with twine (maybe he liked the mineral smell of the match heads?), broken chunks of yellow sidewalk chalk (also wrapped in a fabric rag), and a six-centimeter length of rebar.

But no weapons and no tools. No keys, no papers and no currency, Hughes thought.

The professor suspected that his creature toured gutters, trash cans, and dumpsters in the

surrounding neighborhoods and only denned under Central Park by day. Impossible as it was for his creature to exist at all, Hughes found it even more impossible to believe that a beast like this could hunt human beings in the middle of New York City without being discovered long before now. Living that way, the creature would never have made it to adulthood. Yet here he was.

"I don't think so, Jonathan," he said. "I don't think humans are his natural prey. As for his behaviors during pursuit, I expect he's really quite intelligent. Basic problem-solving skills may have come into play that night."

"What, great ape intelligence? Great cat intelligence?"

"Jonathan, we saw him running. Complete bipedal locomotion." Hughes smiled down at the creature, remembering. "That can only suggest one thing."

Jonathan scoffed. "Human? You think he's *human*?"

Hughes looked up. Was Jonathan—laughing at him? No. There was only an enigmatic smirk on the young man's face. *Jonathan is also happy the creature's finally waking up,* Hughes thought.

"Well, I've been thinking about this too, Jonathan. At the very least, I have to believe he's closely related to *Homo sapiens*. Consider his morphology, all the structural similarities. Take into account the fact that he *was* clothed—however he got that way, whatever his level of cognition. He wore *clothes*. He stood upright. What other conclusion could you draw?"

Jonathan apparently drew the opposite conclusion from different—albeit perfectly reasonable—facts. "Enlarged upper and lower canine teeth, four vestigial nipples located on the abdomen and not the thorax, exaggerated musculature, extensive facial and body hair: an animal."

All right, Hughes thought. *Point. All defining aspects of an animal.* Out loud, he added, "But with anthropomorphic features." On the table between them, the creature turned his head to one side. Hughes looked forward to the creature's wakeful state, now that he was in a controlled environment.

"Professor. We're only speculating. Both of us. And even if you're right, we'd have to do a complete cellular analysis to determine his DNA code. We don't have that kind of equipment here." Jonathan folded his arms and rested his elbows on the head of the examination table.

Now the creature sighed and tried to bend one arm. The restraints fulfilled their purpose. The creature's arm relaxed. Hughes watched his every movement. Jonathan's talk was becoming an unwelcome distraction. What was the young man going on about? They had plenty of equipment to continue introductory work. Why did Jonathan seem so concerned about DNA this early in the process?

"We don't need it," Hughes said. Then as a concession to the eventuality: "Yet." The creature squirmed again and then became still. "We'll finish all the preliminary tests first. We'll continue to compile a body of knowledge." Hughes smiled, enjoying the thought.

"Why wait?" Jonathan asked. "Why not issue a public statement *right now*?"

Hughes looked at him. Jonathan smiled broadly. Hughes thought, *He's overexcited. Getting ahead of himself.*

"Tomorrow, we could have the entire scientific community at our feet!"

The professor felt sorry for his naïve assistant. *No, my young friend,* he thought, *that's not how it works, however tempting it may be to rush things.* Hughes looked back to the creature. His discovery was too precious, the situation too fragile.

"I can't risk it," Hughes said.

Not understanding at all, Jonathan asked, "What's at risk?"

"Jonathan, don't you see? It could happen again. They could take him away. Steal what's

mine. They could steal my work. The benefit of my research—" Hughes pushed down the overboiled pain that steamed in his stomach. "Like they did before."

Jonathan had to know about all this. Every student in the department knew about Has-Been-Hughes. It made amusing gossip to impart to freshman, first-year grad students, and other newcomers. What the students never grasped—and what Jonathan wasn't grasping now—was that it could have been *anybody*, any one of *them*: underclassmen, upperclassmen, graduates, professionals. If they drew premature attention to their project, it could be Jonathan losing this chance right alongside Hughes.

Jonathan gave Hughes a calculating look. "He's *ours*, Professor. Not yours. And *we* will decide what to do with him."

Jonathan's words prodded the professor's paranoia into slithery distrust.

"Remember that," Jonathan said.

The creature moved again. His hands twitched. He licked his lips. He turned his head the other way.

Hughes had no intention of amending their arrangement: Jonathan had agreed to provide his necessary assistance in order to receive equal credit when the moment arrived to unveil their research results. Why should Jonathan think that Hughes did not remember their agreement?

Hughes nodded to his assistant. This ended the conversation, or the argument, or whatever they were having. The time had come to begin their brain wave study. Hughes decided to let the unsettling moment pass.

Jonathan left the table and helped Hughes load a fresh roll of paper for the graph readouts. They worked in silence. Afterward, Jonathan went to the table to prepare a fresh set of tranquilizer darts (just in case they needed them) while Hughes removed the IV line and double-checked the creature's physical restraints.

They didn't speak again until Jonathan offered to go fetch them both some coffee. After his assistant left, Hughes murmured, "I'd never do that to you, Jonathan. I'd never treat you the way Canton treated me." He walked back to the examination table and looked at his exquisite creature. "And I won't ever let anyone take *you* from us."

The creature only sighed again in his sleep, oblivious to the professor's promises.

Chapter Six: Second Thoughts

I

22 March 1987
Sunday Evening

Catherine walked. The setting sun radiated unseasonable warmth on her back. A playful breeze teased moist air across her hot skin. Big clots of cloud leapfrogged their way across the sky. It might rain later tonight, or tomorrow. She walked, unable to face the enclosed disarray that had once been an elegant, tastefully decorated apartment. She walked and breathed the open air. She listened to the city in the middle of its transition between daytime and nighttime.

Catherine thought, *I can walk for as long as I want to. I don't have to rush off to the office tomorrow morning.* She didn't need to rush anywhere. The movers were coming to her. They would pack her up and carry her off. New Cathy could leave all of Old Cathy's baggage behind.

But: Vincent belonged to both Old and New. It was one thing to part with him, to take her leave and act upon a mutual affirmation of Catherine's freedom. She felt that both she and Vincent could live with that. It was something else altogether to learn that Vincent had dropped off the face of the earth.

(Vincent was not himself after he spoke with you.)

No accusations from Vincent's father. No lecture. Only an unvarnished fact, tactfully articulated.

She wished Father had been less tactful and more informative.

Catherine walked.

She found herself meandering along the East River in Carl Schurz Park, moving among the joggers, the young couples strolling hand in hand, and the mothers pushing strollers or perambulators along the promenade. Catherine watched a tug boat chug by. She remembered something Vincent had tried to tell her, before she got shot by that goon, Mitch Denton. It had been something she didn't want to hear because it sounded too much like the voice of her own fear, telling her to pull back, to leave danger behind and find some safer way to proceed.

He told me he didn't want me to die. He told me to stop. And I was angry. I wouldn't listen to why he wanted these things.

Catherine sat down on a bench to observe the steady progress of the tug as it traveled downstream. What had Vincent said? She needed to recall his words. He was not himself after he spoke with her.

"If I ever lost you—"

That was the beginning of it, yes. And Catherine interrupted him, to talk about herself. To rebuke him for retreat, after she'd put so much effort into the longshoremen's case, and after so many innocent people had died, trying to make life better for those men. Vincent didn't fight her. He told her what he wanted, received her anger in silence, and released her to follow her own path. That her path ended at the door of an emergency room was something Vincent never discussed with her afterward.

Catherine caught hold of the memory. She saw Vincent turn on her terrace to look out at the park and the city. Vincent was speaking in a near-whisper—

"A life without you...would be unbearable."

Catherine's blood ran cold. *No,* she thought. *No. He wouldn't—*

(Vincent was not himself.)

"He's stronger than that!" she muttered, furious with herself for even imagining the possibility. She crossed her arms against the breeze, which suddenly felt a little too chilly. "He has his whole world Below."

(Does he fancy himself my Romeo?)

"God!" It was absurd. He wasn't *losing* her. And she wasn't moving to Mars. She had strong ties to this city. Her mother's charitable foundation relied on her presence at many of its fundraising events. And she was still working to fulfill the final request Margaret Chase had made of her. Even beyond these obligations, Catherine had every intention of returning to New York often. Her father lived here. Her oldest friends lived here. Her new friends Below lived here. Catherine knew no reason why she couldn't visit them whenever she wished.

Also, she wasn't severing her bond with Vincent. No animosity existed between them. He had saved her life—many times over. She had saved his, during the cave-in. Their bond was as much about celebrating *life* as it was about enjoying one another. Sad as it was to leave him, she knew that future happiness for the both of them depended upon their present courage to live as fully as they could. Vincent had said as much. Catherine agreed with him.

But once the idea ignited in her mind, Catherine couldn't get past the image of the poisoned lover, dying for want of his Light, his Sun.

(Drunk all. Poison. Thus with a kiss I die.)

She felt vaguely unwell. Why had she ever liked *Romeo and Juliet*? Running the fingers of one hand over the slats of the bench, Catherine decided that she hated the play's ending. It frightened her. Or—*something* frightened her. A dreadful sensation buzzed in her ears, in her *mind*, a substitute sound like that of hot light bulbs in a quiet room: once noticed, impossible to ignore, and damned irritating. She frowned.

(That buzz—a pulsing tone—blip blip blip—rhythmic and mechanical—unease shearing into terror—)

"Cathy! Hi there!" A cheerful voice snapped Catherine back to the present—the river, the twentieth century, and the garnet-colored sky. Catherine looked up.

Brandi Payne jogged in place a few feet away from her. Catherine knew the woman's name, but it took a moment to place her. She wore a trim purple sweatsuit and Catherine had never seen her outside the office before. Brandi worked in the Rackets Bureau. She and Catherine had joined forces to coordinate witness protection placement for Jack Sweeney and his family.

"Hello Brandi," Catherine managed.

"Taking a break?" Brandi asked. "How's the packing going?"

"I...I don't know. All right."

"When do you take off?"

"Tomorrow I guess. The movers are coming tomorrow."

"You guess?" Brandi gave her a closer look, then a knowing little smile. "Cold feet, huh?"

This roused Catherine's ire. However, she put a polite smile on her face and said, "No. Not cold feet."

"Okay. Well, good luck, Cathy. *Bon voyage*!"

"Thanks. Have a good run."

Brandi waved at her and jogged away.

Catherine stared after her, feeling blindsided and unreal. It was not a strange conversation. At the same time, it seemed irreconcilable with her thoughts and feelings over the

past few days. *Bon voyage indeed*.

Catherine inhaled a long, jagged breath. If nothing else, Brandi's chipper visitation had snapped Catherine out of the depths of Shakespearean tragedy. Common sense, feeling very *uncommon* as it applied itself to the secret commune beneath the city, offered a conclusion about Vincent's absence that should have been obvious to Catherine from the start.

She thought, *I would know. If he were dead, I would know.*

Whatever bond existed between them, whatever their interweaving of dreams and love and empathic resonance, Vincent seemed far better prepared than she to experience it, and to interpret it. All the same, Catherine did receive her own occasional glimpses into Vincent's heart through that bond. If there ever came a time when he was not on the other side of it, Catherine felt certain she would know.

Vincent is missing. Father's words undulated in her head. It felt almost like a headache *(beneath long bars of unsteady light)*, but the pain wasn't physical.

Catherine overrode the Tunnel patriarch with her own thought. *I can't leave like this. Providence can wait another couple days. I can't leave with things as they are. I need some answers.*

The chief among her questions being: *Where is Vincent?*

Catherine stood up and started home. She found herself looking into dark corners as she walked, although she knew it was still far too early for Vincent to be out in the alleyways—or, at least it would be too early if this were *(missing! where? why?)* an ordinary evening. Catherine had to stay, to be part of the search.

If only she knew where to begin looking. Even in her toughest assignments at work, she always had a starting place. Now, though, she was free as a bird, which meant she was also completely on her own: cut off from her professional resources, separated from her most dependable support, and God alone knew what had happened to her friend.

"Vincent," she whispered like a prayer. "Be well."

Car horns bleated in the distance. Questions pounded in her head. She thought about the phone calls she needed to make in order to postpone her Providence plans. She also needed to get in touch with Dad, so he wouldn't be waiting for the promised calls she wouldn't be making tomorrow. Her stomach grumbled at her; she'd forgotten to eat lunch and her body wanted dinner very much. Catherine walked. She needed a place to start.

And it came to her. She could think of one person she trusted completely who kept an ear open to the action on the streets. Catherine walked faster. She saw a payphone on the corner up ahead. This phone call couldn't wait until she got home.

II

22 March 1987
Sunday, Late Night

The electroencephalogram was so strange it was indecipherable. Hughes bent over the paper strip as it rolled past the recording pens. The creature's posterior basic rhythm measured well within the theta range, at 5 hertz, which might match normal activity in young human children. Beyond that, the graph didn't match any human or animal patterns Hughes knew.

The pens jumped. Wave activity surged at all frequencies, producing spikes and irregular

dark bands of ink on the paper. Hughes looked from the readout to the creature on the examination table.

The heavy clawed hands clenched and relaxed. A strap creaked against the vinyl surface of the table as the creature tried to bend his right knee. The creature's head turned from side to side in sharp jerks. He gasped and panted in his sleep, responding to internal stimuli that Hughes could not observe.

Why, he's dreaming! Hughes thought.

The creature lifted his head from the table, long neck and broad shoulders straining. Hughes leaned in for a closer look, but the creature's eyes remained closed. After about ten seconds, the golden head dropped back again. His hands twitched for a few more seconds before becoming still. All these movements distorted the EEG results, but Hughes wasn't concerned about that. Right now the awakening was the most important thing.

Hughes felt buoyant *(close now! close to waking!)* as he wondered what his creature dreamed about. This dream obviously agitated the beast. Hughes wouldn't be surprised if the creature awoke in the same mood he'd exhibited during his capture. The creature might not understand that he had been moved to a new location. He might be dreaming now that he was still running through the dark. They would have to be careful with him, and calm him quickly, in order to continue their present study.

The creature tilted his head at an odd angle, dislodging a subdermal electrode from his scalp. His face turned toward Hughes. Then he relaxed again. His eyes rolled beneath his eyelids.

Hughes quickly swabbed alcohol on the site where the electrode belonged. He sanitized the needle and returned it to its position among the creature's yellow curls. *Jonathan needs to hurry back, or he'll miss out on all this,* Hughes thought. His assistant had needed a break, and Hughes had needed more coffee. So Jonathan had left the lab to attend to both of their requirements.

Hughes walked to the creature's side. He took one more blood pressure reading before removing the cuff from the creature's upper arm. *This must be closer to normal now, as he becomes more active,* Hughes thought. He went to the logbook lying open on the table to enter new numbers into the record.

His task completed, Hughes paused to skim through the entries in that notebook. Although the professor's instinct told him the creature *had* to have some human ancestry, none of the creature's internal body systems had proved normative for human physiology. His body temperature measured higher, his heart and respiration rates much lower. The ultrasound indicated that his intestines were shorter than a man's, while the X-rays confirmed two extra ribs and thoracic vertebrae, and two extra lumbar vertebrae. The creature's blood was unlike anything Hughes had ever seen. And now, as the beast regained consciousness, the EEG revealed that his brainwave patterns were just as anomalous as everything else.

Behind Hughes the creature moaned softly.

The professor listened, his curiosity titillated. Thus far, all the creature's vocalizations were breathy and brief. *Jonathan said the creature roared at him in the park,* Hughes recalled. If Jonathan's report could be believed, it implied the presence of a leonine hyoid bone in the creature's throat. Their X-ray image of that region had not turned out very clear. Hughes planned to take another soon. In the meantime, he wanted to know what other sounds the creature might be able to make—

And even as he thought this, Hughes heard the creature behind him say: "Catherine."

The professor's internal chittering of facts and questions ceased. He turned to look at his creature, thinking, *Oh, my holy God.*

The creature lifted his head from the table surface.

Hughes thought, *HE CAN SPEAK!* It was more than a marvel, and more than a miracle. It changed everything. It meant—*everything*. Hughes came closer, hoping the creature would speak again, hoping to connect with him, hoping to learn from him.

Hoping.

Hope energized the longsuffering professor—*deified* him. Ecstatic, Hughes waited and watched. The creature opened his eyes and began to look at the room around him. Jonathan should be on his way back to the lab by now, but Hughes felt suddenly glad that Jonathan had left for a little while. Hughes wanted to be the first thing—the first person—his creature saw.

III

22 March 1987
Sunday, Late Night

Waking, Vincent almost felt like he'd been dosed with ether. Or maybe laudanum. Or both. The groggy dolor in his head rivaled his previous experiences with Father's tincture of opium.

Or it almost did. His awareness of *place* was strange. He perceived that he was not lying on the ground, and yet not lying on a bed. This did not make sense. Father only used ether in very specific settings. Father only gave Vincent opiates under stringently controlled conditions. Father's practical rationale for his precaution was tantamount to ironclad medical Law in the world Below.

Smells wrong, some part of Vincent whispered from the depths of his mind.

It had been a *very* long while since he had last wakened to such murmurings from the dark, bestial aspect of his psyche. This dangerous voice spoke in a way no voice should be able to speak, conveying unrefined concepts, which Vincent absorbed and translated without needing to think about it. He was never sure how far he could trust this voice, but the whisperer had a point. Vincent's throat and sinuses did not feel sore and sticky, an effect ether always occasioned for him, nor did he smell any hint of the compound's volatile vapors. Also, he couldn't remember sustaining an injury severe enough to require strong analgesics.

I was injured in the Maze, he thought. Then, *No...Father saw my shoulder. Father did not worry too much.*

The place *was* wrong. This was not Father's Study, not the gallery antechamber where Father sometimes performed emergency surgeries, not Vincent's chamber, not the Hospital Chamber. Vincent did not smell beeswax or tallow candles, or kerosene or olive oil lamps, or stone, or damp earth, or any of the people he knew. Unfamiliar scents, sharp chemical and electrical smells, bayoneted his nose. The world gleamed, painfully bright.

He turned his head, squinting against the white light. *I was walking in a room,* he thought, his recollections torpid and opaque. *A place where heavy dark and heavy light hindered me. I wanted to read a book. There was a mirror.*

The whisperer in him growled, annoyed. *You were dreaming.*

Then perhaps I am dreaming still. But it seems very real. This light hurts.

Yes, the Other agreed, no longer whispering. *Our flesh hurts too. Awake! Something is wrong. We are not safe!*

Vincent tried to sit up, and a constraining pressure held him down. He could only raise his head a little, looking for anything familiar, any landmark to orient him in the midst of his confusion. He saw shapes and shadows beyond the light, but the solid white rays formed a weighty canopy, enclosing him within a luminous bubble.

Then a tall Shadow rose up against the periphery of the light. Vincent did not like the shape of this Shadow. Tall man-shadows had always bothered him. They heralded the arrival of Strangers. Outsiders. Fearful people who might see Vincent's face—and not understand.

But *one* such Shadow, alone in the light (as this shape stood alone) meant more than the threat of an Outsider to Vincent. Fairy tale villains rustled in the black space beneath the whisperer's domain. *Wake up!* Vincent demanded of himself.

For as far back as he could remember, worse things than even the whispering Other had plagued his dreams. Vincent knew what happened when the Shadows of his mind worked loose. *Bad* things happened then—to Vincent, and to those Vincent loved. Vincent must wake. He must learn if *this* Shadow was a bad thing from within trying to get out—or a bad thing from the waking world, trying to get in.

The Shadow leaned closer and a wave of emotion slavered out from it. Which meant it was a person—and not a Shadow. It was a person separate from Vincent's inner reality. It was an *overjoyed* person.

Vincent concentrated, focusing his eyes upon this person's face. The face leaned even closer and Vincent caught its scents, physical and emotional. It was a man. Vincent didn't know him. The man gazed down at him, enraptured. Vincent pulled away, pressing back against whatever he was lying upon.

No! Don't look! he thought. *Don't see me!* But of course, it was too late. Vincent lay fixed in place somehow. By the light. By the pressure across his waist and chest and shoulders. He was awake, and the Stranger was real. Vincent was caught. He was held and seen.

(How 'bout if I cut you a little bit, huh? Make you bleed!)

Fear rocked him to his soul.

(If you can't talk, maybe you can howl for us, man. It's a full moon! Howl for us! HOWL for us!)

Not again. Not that living nightmare *again*. Vincent remembered the brutal gang. He remembered waking like this in the gang's urban fortress, concussed and blinded, half-deaf from a pipe bomb's explosion.

He'd been chained so tightly to a steam pipe that his hands had gone numb below the wrists and he couldn't step away from the wall behind him. Vincent remembered violent men and women torturing him for hours, attacking him *en masse* during his escape, hounding him through the night, a pack of relentless hunters screaming for his blood. Now a confused memory coalesced in his mind: a similar race, much more recent, through the tangled brush and trees in the park.

I must go. I must get up.

He could not get up. He raised his head again and attempted to move his limbs. Something tethered him. He struggled against whatever held him down. Dull pain flared in all his joints.

The man was speaking to him, crooning words that lost themselves in the thunder of Vincent's rising panic. *Don't burn me,* Vincent thought. *Don't cut me. Please, don't even look. Please turn away, Stranger. Please let me go!*

Bah, growled the Other. *So polite, even now? Get up! Get away from this man, this place!*

But that depth of himself, the Other Vincent, was also frightened.

Vincent's limbs shook against the force that prevented his escape. He lunged forward and fell back again. He had no leverage. Angry bolts of pain shot through his chest and midsection. He heard the creak of thick leather as he moved. Looking down at his body, he saw straps, buckles—and something like a padded breastplate crushed against his tawny fur.

Restraints.

No.

He had been restrained like this once before *(no!)* when he was young. Vincent had fallen ill. His family strapped him to his bedstead in his chamber, to prevent that Other side of himself from doing harm.

A harness. Straps. Ropes. And later, in full seclusion: chains.

After the madness passed, Vincent couldn't bear to sleep in his bed again. The very sight of it sickened him—its leggy shape, and the places that had been rubbed smooth and bright by the friction of the ropes—and the sound of it, the way it creaked.

Father removed that bed from Vincent's chamber. Vincent thenceforth slept upon a broad arrangement of stacked mattresses. No frame. Nothing that could be used to hold him down like that, to imprison his body. Not ever again.

As he was now imprisoned.

NO!

Stark terror launched the Other beyond the internal boundaries Vincent set for himself. Vincent feared limitations to his freedom, feared being caught, being trapped. But that shadow-side of Vincent's soul hated—*hated*—all vestments of captivity. He would do *anything* within his power to free himself.

Vincent could not hold back the beast within. He could only hope to moderate his fear and his rage. Vincent accepted the power these emotions imparted. He understood that they might well secure his survival. He had walked this knife's edge all his life. Surrendering full control to his deepest instincts, sharing his awareness, Vincent walked the knife blade now. He heard the voice of his pain snarling not-words inside his mind.

Bad bad bad. The enemy has done something bad, stolen my strength. The voice—his own voice, his own darkness—sounded strong and angry but even at the Other's command, his body remained unable to break free.

Then hush, the gentler aspect of his soul advised. *Be still. Conserve what strength we have. Keep still and watch.*

Easy for you to say!

No, it is NOT easy. This state of affairs is terrible.

In complete agreement with himself regarding the issue, Vincent stopped fighting. He lay quietly, loathing the bands across his chest and belly that restricted his breathing, but enduring the discomfort in silence.

Two man-shadows hovered above him now. Two unknown faces goggled at him. They were speaking to each other. Vincent didn't bother to sort out their ensnaring strings of words, but he sensed mistrust between the two men. Disbelief in one, indignation in the other. He bared his teeth at both of them.

The disbelieving man reached out and pawed at Vincent's leg. Vincent recoiled from his touch. This man was full of a darkness Vincent did not understand. The hairless white face of the man displayed a thin-lipped smile. Vincent snarled at him, knowing him for a predator. The man snatched his hand back.

Good, Vincent thought. *Get away. Don't touch me. I will kill you if you touch me again.*

Vincent tested the restraints. He felt the strap holding his right wrist stretch and give, a

fraction of an inch.

Pull straight out from your sides, both arms at the same time, the civilized part of himself suggested. Vincent heeded the thought. That brighter side understood tools and other human objects, mechanisms of cruel bondage among them. In the past, he had freed animals from such bonds. He had released mistreated children. He had released himself from straps and chains, too.

Now the two men were arguing. Vincent gathered his will, and his strength, and watched them. As they spoke, and as Vincent listened, their words began to penetrate the fog of his fear and bewilderment.

"We haven't finished with the EEG."

"I think there's plenty of graph to decode. I'm giving him ten CCs."

"We don't *need* it, Jonathan. The creature is secured."

"For now."

"Jonathan, listen—"

"No, *you* listen. I'm the one who almost broke my neck, falling down that hill. I've *felt* his strength, Professor."

"If he can speak, we can *talk* to him. It opens up a whole new dimension to explore."

"He's no more articulate now than he was the night we brought him in," said the predatory man.

Vincent saw that the man held objects he knew. Father and Peter and Mary—the healers of his world—had taught him to fill hypodermic syringes from small glass ampules in just that way.

"I'm telling you, he *spoke*," the joyful man said, no longer joyful now, but frustrated. "The name of a woman: Catherine."

That word sang in Vincent's blood. He did not like to hear these men say *her* name. Vincent bared his teeth again, a low growl droning in his throat.

"It's probably mimicry," said the man with the syringe. "He heard the name somewhere and learned to reproduce it."

"But the cortical areas of his brain are developed enough for language!" the other man objected.

The man with the syringe set the bulbous little bottle on a table and moved past his companion. "If what you say is true, then why doesn't he speak now and explain himself?" He stood over Vincent, mocking him, challenging him.

Vincent growled, meeting the challenge. He watched the hand holding the syringe: the man's chosen weapon. Poison.

"He's disoriented," said the first man. "And afraid."

"And dangerous. Who knows the extent of his strength?"

"Don't." The first man startled Vincent with his sudden pity. Vincent chanced a glance away from the poisoned needle. The pitying man grasped the challenger's elbow, looking at Vincent with a deep longing. A concern.

Now it was the poisoner who felt frustrated. Vincent turned his attention back to the nearer threat. He must not allow these emotional currents to confuse him.

"We have to keep him sedated!" the poisoner said.

"He has intelligence, Jonathan."

"You're romanticizing him. We don't know that."

Vincent continued his low growl, thinking: *Don't touch me. I am warning you.*

The needle moved toward Vincent's arm.

Vincent prepared to fight, but his unlikely advocate tugged at the poisoner's arm and the

needle moved away. Vincent held still.

"I'm telling you, he's not what you think."

"Oh, what," the man with the syringe sneered. "You think he fell from the sky?" He brought the needle down again and took hold of Vincent's arm.

"Jonathan!"

Vincent's soul reviled the poisoner's touch. The things that fermented inside this red-haired man were abominable. Intolerable. The poisoner's dark heart injected malodorous hatred and ravenous hunger into Vincent's mind. Vincent felt like he was being poisoned before the physical needle could prick his skin. He jerked his arm out of the poisoner's grasp, stretching the strap which anchored his wrist, and he smacked the syringe away. His growl rose to a snarling roar. From the two men at his side: surprise and fright.

Yes! Vincent thought, furious with them. *You should be frightened now! In fact, you should be running now!* He roared again as he snapped his wrists free of their bindings. He gasped at his left shoulder's pained protest. Thick leather cuffs around his wrists weighed down his hands. There was something wrong with his left hand. He couldn't move it properly. But he would see to that later. Vincent must first get out of this white room.

The poisoner just stood there, gawking at him. Vincent clubbed the man's chest and neck with a backhand swing. Not a killing blow, but it tumbled the man across the room. The poisoner overturned a metal cart as he spun to the floor. Wicked silver instruments clattered onto the white tiles. They made Vincent think of metallic teeth prised from monstrous jaws. The older man—wisely—scurried out of Vincent's way to cower in a corner.

Vincent slashed his claws at the bands strapped around his waist. He sat up, tearing his legs free of their bonds and ripping the harness from his chest. That was better. He could breathe freely now. He became silent as he disentangled his aching body from a net of wires and straps and plastic tubes.

Both sides, *all* sides, of himself still growled inside him. *All bad. Everywhere. Get it off.*

Something was pulling at his head, which hurt him. Vincent ran his claws through his mane. He found more wires, and needles—*needles!*—in his hair. He started to tear at his scalp, but his rational inner voice had a better idea.

Break the wires. Deal with the needles later. It's the wires that link us to a machine, the wires that pull at the needles and cause the hurt.

Vincent gathered his mane into one fist. He wrapped his other hand around the bundle of wires which straggled past the ends of his hair, and he gave the bundle a hard pull. The wires broke. Unattached from everything at last, he swept wires and straps away from himself.

Then he tried to stand. But as he slid his feet to the floor, the room pitched and yawed. He suddenly felt five times as heavy as he should, and every organ and muscle in his body rebelled against his movements. His feet hit the floor before he expected them to. His knees *(why can't I feel my legs?!)* buckled beneath him. Vincent caught the strange padded table behind him before he could fall flat on his face.

Very. Not. Good.

Dizzy, he dragged himself upright. Vincent felt profoundly ill. *I must get away. I must get home,* he thought, trying to see past the sickening spin of the white room, trying to find a door or a window, a grate in the floor, a vent in the wall. He wanted nothing more than the serene security of his own lair, the warm solace of his own soft bed.

Breathe, his inner twin commanded. Father's pride and joy. A doctor's son. *We're blacking out.*

So he breathed, clinging to consciousness and digging his claws into the table-thing, until

he heard a sudden percussive hiss. Something stung his chest, striking him hard between two ribs. The pain tipped him back against the table. He raised his heavy right hand toward his left shoulder. Wasn't that the part he'd hurt, down in the Maze? Surely it was his shoulder that hurt so now.

No, he thought. *This is a new hurt. A now hurt*.

He staggered. Something had gone wrong with the textures his tingling hand encountered as it reached across his chest. Something was missing. The light around him faltered and a shrill whining tone filled his ears. *Worse than an ordinary dog whistle,* he thought. *The gentle one needs to track that down. Discover which of the children brought one of those infernal things Below this time*.

We're. Not Below, the gentle Vincent reminded him, sounding slow and distant.

Damn. He looked for whatever was still stinging him. His hand slipped down along his chest until it encountered the foreign object. Touching it sent a sharp sizzle along his nerves. A needle. The poisoner's weapon. Angry, Vincent yanked it out of his flesh.

He looked around for the poisoner. He found him a few feet away, sprawled on the floor, aiming a gun at him. Vincent braced his legs and released the table. He managed to take a tiny step toward his enemy.

A second needle stabbed him below his sternum.

He thought, *And here I believed the first one hurt*.

But the fresh pain was already fading. Indeed, everything was fading. He was jarred back to awareness for a moment when he dropped to his knees. He saw a shape before him, manlike and spider-like at the same time. Shadowy. Sheltered beneath a silverish table.

Enemy.

He canted forward, raising his claws toward the enemy's face. But his left arm was disobedient and numb. He fell, helpless, toward the man.

No! They will catch me again! They will bind me again! They will put metal things into me and make me feel pain! I will die in their power!

The prospect was altogether too much for him. He retreated into himself—and found that his bright-minded counterpart, that portion of Vincent-self who so preferred to take charge of everything, was already incapacitated. Only his dark being remained to face what felt like death.

Stop it. Don't hurt me anymore. But his mouth could not form the words.

Now something was slipping away from him. Something precious and irreplaceable. Some slender strand in his heart that he must not ever lose. He caught the end of it as he dropped into the clutches of his poisoner. He clung to it with the last of his feral strength. The something had a name. *Her* name.

Words were impossible to hold onto. Yet he must hold this word closest of all.

Her name... he thought. *Her name is...*

The space around him shone so bright and so dim. He did not like this paradox. He felt sick. The taste in his mouth was dry and loathsome, bitter dust from the darkest tombs of the Catacombs beneath the city. He tried to curl up, to protect himself from the onslaught of all these terrible afflictions. A coldness swept over him and he seemed to fall and fall and fall. He was relieved to meet true darkness when it came.

IV

22 March 1987
Sunday, Late Night

Jonathan was correct, Hughes thought. *The creature can roar. Sweet Jesus.*

Hughes peered over his shoulder at Jonathan, who lay miraculously unharmed beneath the now insensate creature. The professor and his assistant just looked at each other for a second or two, both men catching their breath. Jonathan spoke first.

"Intelligent, all right."

Jonathan's face was serious, but his voice sounded mocking. He reached a wary hand around the furred shoulder and pulled his second dart from the creature's abdomen. The wound bled a little. The bruise from that shot was going to be spectacular.

Hughes frowned. Jonathan's implied I-told-you-so rankled. Hughes had watched the creature's eyes during the whole exchange: those brilliant blue eyes had been warning them off. More to the point, the creature *had checked his first attack* when Hughes pulled Jonathan—and the hypo—away from the creature's arm.

Jonathan only saw an animal, growling incoherently. Hughes saw intention. Why were young people always so sure they were right? That overconfidence had cost Hughes everything in the past. He didn't want to see Jonathan go through any of that. He also didn't know how to help the man. Jonathan was stubborn and ambitious. What could break through those qualities except heartbreaking disillusionment?

Hughes got to his feet, brushing his hands over his knees. The restraints hung from the table in shreds. It would have to be the cage, after this. The cage would limit their access to the creature, but they had no other choice. Jonathan had been correct about another thing too: the creature was far, *far* stronger than Hughes had anticipated.

"Professor?"

Hughes turned to his assistant. "What is it?" he asked.

Jonathan carefully dragged his legs out from under the creature's body. Freed, frowning, he pointed at a wet patch on his pants leg. "Hypersalivation?"

Hughes looked from Jonathan to the creature. Jonathan's movements had rolled the creature's head to one side. The creature now lay curled loosely on the floor beneath the brushed-steel table, his eyes open but empty—and yes, clear fluid drained from his mouth in a thready stream.

"That didn't happen before," Jonathan said.

Hughes nodded. Then professor and assistant both jumped as their specimen stirred. Jonathan reached for the table and the case of prepared darts.

"Stop!" Hughes ordered.

Jonathan glared at him, but Hughes made a sharp gesture with his hand. "It's all right. He's not getting up. Those movements aren't conscious."

The two men watched in silence for a full minute. The creature's twitching limbs stretched in slow sweeps across the floor. His fingers, trembling minutely, flexed and extended. His feet and toes curled and straightened.

"That didn't happen before, either," Jonathan said.

"Yes, I know." Now the creature's shoulders twisted and those sharp claws scraped the floor tiles. This writhing was slow, sinuous. Mesmerizing. "These new reactions may indicate a sensitization."

“Do you know what’s happening?”

Hughes nodded. “It looks like choreoathetosis. Athetoid movements are listed as a possible side effect of my main anesthetic. I’ve just never seen this before in any subject.” Granted, his most recent darted subjects had been eastern coyotes from upstate, and none of *them* had ever received a doubled dosage of the professor’s tranquilizing solution—on top of whatever remained in this creature’s system of a quadrupled dose.

Hughes thought, *He went down so fast. What took long minutes that first night, took seconds tonight. I think Jonathan shot straight into the creature’s bloodstream this time. And now these odd reactions—*

“We should get new blood samples,” Hughes said, worried. “Check the drug concentrations. And we need to clean all this up, take those cuffs off him. Remove the electrodes. Get the cage ready.” He leveled a steady glare at Jonathan. “We can’t use the tranquilizer on him again.” Which of them was the trigger-happy fool now?

Jonathan opened his mouth, but Hughes never found out what his assistant might have said to him in that moment. The body at their feet jerked convulsively and both men leaped away. Jonathan thumped against a wall. Hughes stumbled into the examination table behind him and only just caught the end of it as he fell.

He scrabbled at the vinyl until he got a decent hold, then pulled himself up. Gasping, he looked down in time to see the golden head snap back. The creature’s spine bent backward in a painful arc and all ten fingers hooked into rigid talons.

“Oh, no,” Hughes breathed.

And then the muscles beneath that red-gold pelt rippled and bunched in tight clonic contractions. The range of motion remained surprisingly confined, given the creature’s size, but that only exaggerated the violence of each sharp contortion. Hughes lunged around the opposite side of the examination table to get at the overturned cart on the other side of the room.

“Clear all that debris away from him!” he cried, pulling the cart away before the creature’s heels could strike its metal frame.

Jonathan kicked fallen objects until they scattered beneath a tall supply shelf, or into the corner of the room. “Now what?”

“We get him out from under the table.”

They grabbed the creature’s ankles and dragged him away from both the table and the steel shelving unit beside the table. Both scientists stared down at him, spellbound. Hughes saw that the creature’s lower lip and the skin beneath his flickering eyes were turning pale blue. Almost a minute had passed. Hughes counted the seconds.

Another illimitable minute went by. The professor’s pounding heart ached for the creature’s plight. He could see muscles and tendons straining in the creature’s neck, his forearms, the backs of his knees down to his heels. The creature began to make a throttled coughing sound. His nose pad took on a pallid blue-gray color.

Muscles in his chest and throat nearing tetanic contraction, thought Hughes, frozen in place. *No air getting in. Oh, God, no. Don’t take him like this! He was mine! He was supposed to be MINE!*

Jonathan said, “We could try reversal. The antagonist—”

Hughes pinched the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes shut against the spectacle on the floor. “There is no antagonist. I designed this tranquilizer to be perfectly safe, highly predictable. I’ve never had any problem with—”

“Well we have a problem now, *Professor*, don’t we?” Jonathan’s voice was scathing.

Hughes opened his eyes and ran his knuckles across his mouth. A new idea arrived in his

mind. “There’s phenobarbital in the drug locker. Give him that. *Don’t* overdo the dosage. I can get oxygen for him.”

Jonathan nodded and walked quickly across the room. Hughes hurried to the narrow cabinet where he stored the oxygen canister. He attached the clear plastic hose to the tank nozzle, unwrapped the adjustable elastic strap from around the nosecone, and attached the cone to the other end of the hose. Jonathan returned to the creature with a filled syringe.

Hughes looked at the plastic mask he held. *I should have done this sooner!* he thought. *And...I think a mask for a human subject would fit his face better.*

But this was the equipment Hughes had to work with.

“Done,” Jonathan said.

Hughes brought the oxygen to his creature. He glanced at Jonathan. “Get me a towel.”

Jonathan looked around, found one, and placed it in the professor’s outstretched hand. Applying his full weight to the action, Hughes pulled the creature toward him, rolling him forward by jolting degrees until the feline face tilted at a downward angle. Froth dribbled from between the creature’s lips.

“Now get down and brace him from behind,” Hughes said. “I don’t want him to aspirate any of this.”

Jonathan did as the professor told him, although Hughes thought a look of resentment passed across the other man’s features. Hughes couldn’t care less. He was too preoccupied with his creature to worry about polite phrasing. Hughes wiped that strange mouth with the towel and twisted the valve open on the oxygen canister. He pressed the nosecone over the creature’s damp snout.

“Look. I think it’s ending,” Jonathan said.

Hughes felt a flash of pure horror. Then he saw that the creature’s muscle contractions were weakening into myoclonic jerks. Jonathan meant the seizure was ending, not the creature himself. Hughes released a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding.

The creature’s muscles *(finally! mercifully!)* relaxed and he lay still. Hughes could feel fasciculating tremors running through the creature’s body, but he believed the creature was entering a postictal state. He *needed* to believe it. He held the nosecone in place with one hand and felt the pulse in the creature’s neck. They watched and waited. Hughes sighed when he saw a light film of mist form, and fade, and form again inside the plastic mask. Each beat of his creature’s heart was, *Thank you Fortune. Thank you God. Thank you. Thank you—*

“Well,” Jonathan said. The mocking tone in his voice had returned. “That was fun. I wonder what his next trick will be.”

Hughes stared at him in disbelief. “None of this would have happened if you had just listened to me in the first place!”

Jonathan’s face turned bright red. He opened his mouth, stopped, and closed his mouth again.

“Now you *listen to me*!” said Hughes, fierce with his fright. “We have *got* to slow down. We have to be *careful*. *Much* more conservative with our resources. We will collect our data *slowly.* We will be attentive to *the creature’s* responses, and that way nothing like *this* will happen again. I can’t lose him, Jonathan. Don’t you understand? I *won’t* lose him: not to the government, not to any other lab, and certainly not to our own mistakes.”

Jonathan opened his mouth again, but Hughes didn’t let him get started.

“Yes, a mistake. *This* mistake. Sedating him again so soon was *a mistake*. Do you want to stay with this project?”

Jonathan nodded, a quick up-down movement. “I want to...help.”

“Good. We get him stabilized. We get him in the cage. We observe and we learn. That’s the plan.”

For a long moment, Jonathan didn’t say anything. Then he smiled his peculiar smile and said, “Of course, Professor. Good plan.”

Hughes nodded. It was well. He needed Jonathan, and he needed Jonathan clear-headed. This project would be next to impossible without him.

Looking down at the creature, Hughes found that the cyanotic coloration had not faded from the creature’s face and his pulse was slowing fast. The condensation in the nosecose showed that the creature was breathing, but Hughes could not visually discern any movement of the creature’s chest or abdomen.

“Respiration shallow and slow,” Hughes said, his own lungs laboring to keep up with his thumping heart. They monitored the creature for another minute. His condition continued to deteriorate. This was not mere sedation. This could be the prelude to coma—or something worse than coma. The professor swore.

“Damn it all. That’s the anticonvulsant. We have to keep him on the oxygen until we see marked improvement.”

Jonathan agreed. “Then what?” he asked.

“Help me position him here,” said Hughes. “I’ll get amphetamine for him. That should increase his heart rate. Then we’ll unbolt the table from the floor and move the cage in. We’ll need—” Hughes thought about what they needed to do. “We can use a blanket to drag him inside. We’ll keep the cage door open until he begins to wake again.”

He looked at Jonathan to see if the young man would accept these directives. Jonathan only nodded.

They settled the creature onto his left side and Hughes gave him his new injection. Jonathan left to find a wrench, returned, and went to work on the floor bolts. Hughes observed the quiet creature for twenty minutes before he became satisfied that pulse and respiration were increasing to less alarming rates. The creature began to shiver, but Hughes had seen that before in some of his previous captures. He draped a blanket over the creature’s body. The excessive salivation also continued. Hughes tucked the folded towel beneath the creature’s chin and got up to help Jonathan move the unbolted examination table against the far wall.

After they rolled the gorilla cage into the lab from the rear entry vestibule, Hughes called for a hiatus in their preparations. He set Jonathan to cleaning up the lab while he sat down, notebook in hand. With methodical precision and professional detachment, Hughes wrote everything down. Everything except the arguments. And the panic. And his assistant’s increasingly unsettling disposition.

Part Two: Uncommon Definitions

Chapter Seven: Serpent and Bee

I

22 & 23 March 1987
Sunday, Late Night & Monday Morning

I'm dreaming, Catherine thought.

She knew this must be true because she had caught Isaac Stubbs in a hammerlock and he wasn't breaking free. In her dream, Isaac laughed. He was a sturdy black man wearing a sweatshirt and jeans, a friend with a chip-toothed smile and a heart of gold. He said, "I told you this would work! You always underestimate yourself!" Catherine released him and they stood up.

They were in Isaac's converted third-story loft on Pell Street, sparring just as they always did during Catherine's self-defense lessons. But instead of punching bags and life-sized dummies hanging from the rafters, Catherine saw human corpses dangling around the two of them. She didn't need to look at the faces. She knew them all, from mug shots and from other dreams she'd had. If she thought about it, she might know the dead men's names. She didn't want to remember their names.

"You know, they're gone because of you," Isaac said, cool as a cucumber. He gestured to a group of bodies swinging heavily in front of the window. "When that crowd cut your face open? They let out the lion you locked away. This is your meat now."

He jumped on her and Catherine threw him off. He posed no greater threat than a playful Chihuahua—all bark and no bulk. Isaac bounced to his feet and grinned at Catherine. He pointed behind her.

"But not that one. Someone else strung him up."

She turned to look. Something hung from the end of a rope a few feet away from her. She saw, not a dead man-shape on that rope, but a tiny bundle with dangling arms and legs and a head of scraggly golden hair.

Catherine's heart shuddered and began to pound. "Isaac! They've hanged a child!"

"Not all the way," Isaac said. "Not quite."

The small form rotated slowly and as the pale light touched its face, Catherine realized that it was a cub of some kind. The strange baby animal opened its eyes and looked at her. It had been beaten. Rusted red stains streaked the fur on its chest and tummy. Fresh blood dripped from its mane and its little ears were torn up. The cub had been crying: the fur on its face had darkened where damp lines ran from the corners of its eyes. "Catherine," it said in a plaintive, broken little voice. Those blue eyes pierced through to her soul.

Isaac held a sword up to the rope. "He's gonna fall now. You ready? You ready to catch him now?"

Catherine held out her arms and Isaac swung the sword—

(...Catherine...)

She gasped and sat bolt upright in bed. She threw the covers aside and sprang for the doors to her terrace. "Vincent!" she cried.

Her terrace was empty. The night was cold. He had not called to her. He had not come. Her friend was lost somewhere.

"It was a dream," she told herself, rubbing her bare arms as the wind gusted. "That's all."

The image of blue eyes full of tears and pain and terror haunted her as she returned to her bedroom and shut the French doors behind her. She turned on every light in the room, straight away. Then she wrapped her warmest robe around herself and went to the kitchen—where she tripped over her box of pots and pans before her fingers could find the light switch. Stagger-dancing across the floor, she finally regained her balance and stood still, breathing hard.

"It was a dream!" she said again. "Only a dream, Cath!"

Catherine turned on the light and turned on the stove. She filled her kettle with water and set it over medium heat on a front burner. She dug into one of her cardboard boxes until she found a china cup and saucer. Her hands shook as she opened her canister of Trung Nguyên instant coffee. She spooned the dark powder into her cup. She also ended up sprinkling a liberal amount of black granules across her kitchen counter.

"Jeepers creepers," she muttered, then laughed a little. The phrase was one Eric Peterson had exclaimed in her car after Catherine released the boy from a locked detention room in the Bridgemont Youth Home. Eric had stared at her from the passenger seat, his eyes enormous behind the lenses of his glasses. "Lady, that was so great! Who *are* you?"

"I am one sleepless, not-quite-employed Manhattan crime fighter. Rescuer of small children even in my dreams," Catherine said, rubbing the soft plush sleeves of her robe. She waited for her kettle to begin hissing with steam. It took a little while. She was okay with that. Her heart still fluttered beneath her ribs.

It's because I called Isaac earlier, she thought. *Those hand-built dummies in his Academy of Streetfighting have always been jeepers creepers material.*

That had not been a long conversation. Catherine simply asked her instructor if he'd heard of anything strange going on at street level. When Isaac told her he'd heard nothing stranger than usual, she asked him to be on the lookout for her. If he would be so kind.

"What sort of 'strange' are we talking here?" he said. When Catherine didn't answer right away he asked, "February-the-twelfth strange?"

Catherine hesitated, then spoke a soft, "Yeah," into the payphone receiver. "A friend of mine is missing. Again."

"You sure lose track of your friends a lot," Isaac said.

"Not intentionally."

"You're okay though, right? You need me to come help in person?"

"No, Isaac. No, I'm fine. I just need...I don't know. A place to start looking, I guess."

"Okay then. Don't worry. I'll keep my eyes and ears open for a while."

"Thank you."

"By the by, is this, um, the *same* friend, of February run-around?"

Remembering their midnight search for Vincent after the Silks' bomb went off, Catherine hesitated again. Then she said, "Yes."

"Don't forget to check the newspapers then. You'd know better than me what you're looking for, but in my time I've found 'starting places' more than once in the good old daily news."

He gave excellent advice. Catherine felt curious about what sort of life her friend had led before setting himself up as a personal trainer for a mostly working class clientèle. Honorable and discreet, Isaac had kept the promise he made to her during their grueling adventure: he never asked Catherine any questions, not then and not later. Catherine also wondered exactly how

much he had seen or surmised during that long February night.

But all she said was, “Thanks, Isaac.”

“Hey, I’m here for you. If you need to talk or anything, you know where I live.”

Catherine took emotional refuge in the faint aroma of her powdered coffee. She rubbed her eyes. Her other eventide phone calls hadn’t been nearly so cryptic. Now, with the move on hold, and no office to dash off to, and no expectations to meet, Catherine was left alone with her boxed-up belongings and herself.

I wanted to be completely independent, she thought. *It’s not half as much fun as I thought it would be.*

The kettle began to splutter. She poured steaming water into her cup and went out to the living room to curl up on a loveseat. She drank her coffee hot and bitter-black and stared at the chaos around her. It wasn’t just the apartment. It was kind of her whole life too.

Seeing this, Catherine thought, *In a few more weeks, it will be a year. I’ll be able to say that I was attacked and left for dead a whole year ago. How things have changed since then! My work has changed, my tapestry of friends—even the things I dream about.*

She sat up until dawn, reading through books pulled at random from one box or another, sipping coffee, snuggling in her robe. When reddish morning rays streamed in through her balcony doors, Catherine got up and switched off all her lights. She opened the doors between the terrace and the dining room to let in more light and air. The oceanic clamor of traffic driving over rain-wet asphalt swept in on the breeze as the city awoke and got on with business as usual.

Catherine dressed and assembled a breakfast of toast and applesauce from the slim pickings in her refrigerator. She turned on her automated coffee maker and brewed a pot from freshly ground Zambian beans. Once the day advanced past rush hour, she intended to make her way to a newsstand and see how well Isaac’s advice might pay off for her. In the meantime, she found herself back on the couch with Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* in her hands.

She began to read the book from the beginning, taking the poems in order, which she had never done before. *Goodness,* she thought, a dozen sonnets in, *I had no idea so many of these were about...well, I suppose one could call it the natural outcome of lovemaking. Bearing children. Creating heirs.*

According to the poet, children were the very *point* of love, and of beauty.

(Isaac! They’ve hanged a child!)

Her cases involving children always affected Catherine more strongly than any other part of her work. Joe had asked her once if that sensitivity indicated a ringing biological alarm. The short answer was no. She’d never given much thought to what the longer answer might be. Catherine’s future had never interested her as much as others thought it should. Perhaps this was because her future had always seemed outlined for her in advance, a reincarnation of her parents’ happy life.

Now that my future is wide-open, I should think that issue through, she thought.

Someone knocked on her door.

Catherine bounded off the sofa, then stopped to set down her book and compose herself for company. It was not necessarily word from Below. It could be anyone, on any errand.

It turned out to be Edie.

“Got your message,” Edie said the instant the door was open. “Then I got Yvonne’s message.” Edie glanced around at Catherine’s mid-move mess. “Change your mind?”

Yvonne was Brandi Payne’s good friend. The city justice department’s inter-office grapevine must still be in good working order. “More like second thoughts,” Catherine told Edie.

Edie closed the door behind her. “I just thought I’d come by on my way to work, find out

for myself what's what, so I don't have to rely on nasty rumors."

Catherine guided her friend around a pile of boxes and watched Edie dump her huge purse, her denim jacket, and a stack of magazines on Catherine's coffee table. It felt good to have Edie in the same room with her.

"Well, I'm still here," Catherine said.

"I noticed."

"You want some coffee? I just made a fresh pot."

Edie smiled. "Yeah."

Catherine went to the kitchen to see if she could find a second cup and saucer in her box of packed-up china.

"Long as it's the real thing!" Edie called after her. "That decaf makes me nervous."

Catherine couldn't find a cup and saucer on short notice, but she did find an artisan coffee mug, striped with muted earth-tone glazes. It belonged to a set of four that Nancy had sent to her as a housewarming gift when Catherine moved into this apartment, three years ago. She filled the mug, stirred in two spoonfuls of sugar, and returned to the living room. Edie had picked up the book of sonnets. She sat inspecting the book's inscription with furrowed brow.

"So, who's this Vincent?" Edie asked as Catherine set the mug on the table beside Edie's purse.

Catherine thought, *I've been asking myself that question from the moment I first heard his voice.*

"Come on, girl. Out with it."

"A friend," Catherine said. She sat down on the other sofa.

Edie looked up at her. "Does this 'friend' have anything to do with these second thoughts you're having?"

Edie asked a logical question. A handwritten line from *Romeo and Juliet*, in a book of poetry, given to Catherine by a man? But Edie was always far too interested in Catherine's love life. She seemed to think that Catherine went out of her way to maintain glamorous connections to New York's rich and famous. Catherine did not feel inclined to humor her.

"Sort of," Catherine said.

Edie picked up her coffee mug. "You want to talk about it?"

"Not especially."

Edie set the sonnets back on the table and sipped her coffee. "Nice!" she said. Catherine assumed she meant the taste of her drink. Compared to the charred sewage which the powers-that-be percolated in both the DA's office and in the NYPD Data Center, *anything* would have been nice—if not fabulous.

Catherine glanced over Edie's choice of reading material. *Ms.*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Essence*, *Vogue*. And a local tabloid newspaper. Catherine wouldn't have given this last periodical a second look—except her bad dream and Isaac's advice were still rattling around in the back of her mind. Edie's purse covered most of the paper. Catherine saw one headline printed in the top corner of the front page: HOW TO ESCAPE THE RAT RACE AND KEEP YOUR JOB!

Catherine harbored no affection for New York tabloids, having all too often found herself the subject of inane articles written by society column reporters who couldn't (or refused to) keep their facts in order. Edie's gaudy newspaper looked barely one evolutionary step above the primordial ooze, snapping bites at everything from celebrity gossip to blatant science fiction. But Catherine saw that "monster" made part of the main headline, and that word had acquired new meanings for her in recent months. She pulled the paper out from under Edie's bag. GRANDMA

SEES MONSTER CAPTURED, read the full proclamation.

"Now don't give me a hard time about *that*," Edie said, instantly defensive. "I only read that to keep up with the soaps for my aunt. She's deaf."

Catherine turned to page twelve and skimmed the monster article. Phrases jumped out at her as she read. Ferocious beast. Unidentified men. Hot pursuit. Central Park.

My starting place just walked in through my front door, Catherine thought, feeling bowled over.

"Cathy? You okay?"

"Edie, can I borrow this?"

"Sure," Edie said, sounding more than a little concerned. Catherine guessed that she was disturbing her friend's understanding of Catherine Chandler's sensibilities. "In fact," Edie went on, "if you tear out the soap opera summaries for me, you can keep the rest of that rag."

Catherine got up. She went to the dining table and did as Edie requested, flattening the paper to make an even tear down the middle of an inside page. "Edie, you're a lifesaver!"

"If you say so," Edie said.

"I do."

Handing the soaps section to her friend, Catherine felt her mind click into legal-investigator gear. She began rehearsing questions, planning phone contacts, and estimating the cash she needed to carry for cab fares. If it felt good to be in the same room with Edie, it felt even better to have a foot soldier's mission to gnaw on.

Edie commented, "Looks like you've moved past second thoughts and into third thoughts. What's got you up and running so fast?"

"Must be my own morning coffee catching up with me," Catherine said. "And just for the record, I've never tasted decaf in my life. I wouldn't dream of brewing the stuff at home."

Edie gave Catherine her biggest grin. "I knew there was a reason I like you so much."

"I think I've got some disposable cups in the kitchen," Catherine told her. "Would you like another coffee for the road?"

"Bring it on, girlfriend," Edie said.

II

23 March 1987
Monday, Noon

"That's the second time now," Jonathan said. "We need to lock the door."

"Just a moment," Hughes replied. "Just one...more...moment. Okay."

He looked away from his watch and unwrapped the blood pressure cuff, hearing the hiss of air escaping through the tiny valve. Yes, it *was* the second time the creature had raised his head—just a few centimeters—before dropping back onto the pillow Hughes had donated to the cause, so to speak. Hughes had liberated an extra cushion from the overwrought sofa in the faculty break room. He didn't think anyone would miss it; several other threadbare throw pillows decorated the mismatched furniture in there.

Hughes backed out of the cage. Jonathan swung the door shut. Hughes handed him the stethoscope and blood pressure cuff and reached into his pocket for his key ring. Once Hughes locked the door, they both breathed easier.

“Heart rate and blood pressure are both lower than I would like,” said Hughes. “I think he’s overly sensitive to the phenobarbital.”

Jonathan shrugged. “All we can do is see what happens next, Professor. Nature is good at self-correction. It’s only a matter of time.”

“I hope so.” Hughes entered the new information into their logbook. *At least he’s waking up,* he thought. *And this time he’s not taking two days to do it*.

Hughes looked at the cage when the creature’s claws rattled across the corrugated steel of the enclosure’s floor. Professor and assistant watched those massive shoulders hunch and flex as the creature slowly raised his upper body. His mane hung in twisted locks to either side of his face. His arms shook and his dull eyes remained unfocused. His head bobbed several times. Drops of saliva fell onto the floor between his hands each time his chin dipped downward. It reminded Hughes of domestic cats he had seen in this semi-conscious condition, recovering from general anesthesia.

He took notes. The creature didn’t try to move, and didn’t look at them. Indeed, he seemed unaware of them, even when Jonathan approached the cage and tapped his knuckles against the bars. After eight minutes and twenty-two seconds, the creature sighed. He lowered himself onto the blanket and curled up into a tight trembling ball. His respiration (still shallower and slower than Hughes preferred to see) settled into a steady rhythm. He fell asleep.

Or, Hughes thought, *then again, he could take his full two days. But perhaps his sedation won’t be so pronounced this time.*

Jonathan looked disappointed. “I was hoping he’d be more active.”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t we inject more amphetamine? That might wake him sooner and—”

“No,” Hughes said.

“But—”

“We can’t make an accurate estimation of his intelligence if we continue to apply that level of intervention.”

Jonathan frowned. Hughes thought he might try to keep arguing, but the young man only stood quietly, watching the creature sleep. After a moment, Jonathan shook his head and turned to Hughes.

“I’m sorry, Professor. I have to leave. I have an appointment that can’t wait.”

“That’s fine,” Hughes said. He glanced at his watch again. “I have an appointment of sorts, too. I need to go deliver a lecture after the lunch hour. I should head over there and get set up.”

“During spring break?” Jonathan asked.

“It’s not for a class, it’s for my seminar. The conservation symposium.”

Jonathan put his hands into his pockets. “Oh. I didn’t know you were part of that. I wasn’t planning to attend.”

Hughes smiled. “If you get the chance, you should pick up a program, see if any sessions are of interest. You might learn something.”

“I think I have plenty to learn about right here,” Jonathan said.

“Very true. We both do.”

They looked down at the creature. Jonathan seemed reluctant to leave. “What if he wakes while we’re both gone?” he asked.

“I doubt he will,” Hughes said. “But if he does...do you have time to set up the camcorder before you go?”

“Yes.”

“Do that. Now I can be back here at—” Hughes scrutinized his schedule in his mind. Lunch, his lecture, the Q-and-A. Quint expected him to attend the afternoon plenary session. Hughes could forgo the evening reception. “I can be back around four-thirty, assuming I can get clear of the evening meet-and-greet.”

He usually could. No one would miss him at a social function; not many people knew his name. And Albert Canton, PhD, would not be in attendance this week. Hughes had checked.

“I can be back by then, or a little after,” Jonathan said.

“Good. Go ahead with the camera. I’ll be in my office.”

“If you give me the keys, I can lock up for you, so you can get moving now,” Jonathan offered.

“Thanks,” Hughes said, smiling, “but I’d rather do that myself. Just don’t take too long.”

The contemplative expression stayed on Jonathan’s face, but he nodded and began to move toward the video station in the back corner of the room.

Hughes went into his office. He hung his lab coat on the stand he kept near the laboratory door. Gathering his lecture notes from his desk, he tried to gather his thoughts as well. Nocturnal birds. Hunting patterns. The potential impact of urban pollutants upon local populations *(I don’t think I’ll ever forget the creature’s eyes when he saw me for the first time)*. Adaptations to territory encroachments *(and he DID speak a woman’s name)*, or inability to adapt.

Unfortunately, owls were not what Hughes wanted to be thinking about. Sighing, he gave in to the stronger attraction of his newest research project. *I do wish Jonathan hadn’t bulldozed my creature’s return to wakefulness,* he thought. *The beast was already frightened and then Jonathan made threatening gestures. Has this young man had ANY field experience, I wonder?*

Those startling blue eyes had looked *more* than frightened, really. The creature had seemed shocked—no, *terrified*—to see a stranger’s face bending over him. Hughes was sorry the creature felt afraid. Was it that Hughes, personally, was a stranger to him? Or that all people were?

Hughes countered his own questions. *Well, Jonathan believes someone clothed the creature. Or taught the creature to clothe himself. Or maybe I can apply Jonathan’s mimicry hypothesis to our issue with the clothes. Is the creature simply imitating appearances and behaviors of people he sees in the park? I think this is the likeliest scenario, given the rags he was wearing. If so, it says something important about his level of intelligence.*

The fact of the clothing remained a difficult conundrum.

If he does know how to imitate people, it’s not a bad thing. Mimicry can be useful during training and experimentation. But speech is another puzzle entirely.

Hughes closed a file folder around his thick packet of papers and returned a couple pencils to his desk drawer. He rearranged two of the sculpted figures that sat beside his desk lamp. One was a miniature reproduction of an Ucu statue that Hughes had acquired during his fateful trip with Canton. The other was a stone carving of Bast that the late Alexander Ross had given to him, a token of gratitude for Hughes’s help with some botanical research a few years ago. Hughes felt better. The surface of his desk remained cluttered, but at least now it looked orderly.

And what sort of a den lies inside that drainage tunnel? he wondered. *Should I investigate? The creature’s living space should be observed. What if...really, what if there are more creatures like him, living in those huge pipes out there, under the very noses of everyone in the city?*

Hughes shook his head. Owls. Right now he needed to be thinking about owls.

The door behind him opened and Jonathan stepped through. “All set,” the young man

said.

"Thank you." Hughes locked the door to his lab, then opened the door to the hall, inviting Jonathan to exit before him. "I'll see you later this afternoon."

"Yes," Jonathan said. "I'll be here."

The young man walked away. Hughes closed the door to his office, locked it, and walked in the opposite direction, riffling through his notes. His problem was, he just didn't care about owls anymore.

III

23 March 1987
Monday Afternoon

Shut away. Moonless.

Voices burbled like running water.

Fetid darkness. Thirst.

Something touched him. He sensed a change in his own shape. He felt unsafe. Something had hold of him, somewhere.

Shadows. Ogres.

One voice made very quiet sounds. The voice sounded angry. It did not want to be overheard. The something touching him became impatient. Disobedient. The touch broke through his skin and stung.

Poison.

The lone voice went away. The unclean touch left him alone. A rhythm quickened inside him. More feelings began to happen. All his feelings were bad.

Cold. He felt cold.

All around him and deep inside him: the nameless Cold. His first terror. Beneath all thought. He heard the closing of the wordless Door. His second terror. And his third, the tall, tall Shadow, walked away.

At first, these things did not come to him in any sensible order. They did not define themselves in any syntax he knew. Then the parts of him responsible for sight began to work again. Light, shape, and shade joined the nonsense in the part of him responsible for thought. Slowly, thought congealed into separate words. The words made patterns in his mind. Names for things began to mean something to him again. He began to know he was a self again.

A named self, he thought. *A father's son. Don't like this place.* He heard a creaking moan. After a moment, he decided that he himself had voiced this sound. *I am waking,* he thought. *I am waking in a bad place.*

And Vincent's first impression was that everything hurt.

He lifted his head and blinked at the bleary shapes around him. Vertical lines, a too-bright light, whiteness, unfamiliar objects. Hadn't he recently been trapped in such a place? A hellish notion of a dangerous white room flitted through his mind, but he didn't like that image. He reached for a different memory instead.

A place of brightness and shadow? Yes, the apartment. *Her* apartment.

(Why was I there...how did I come there...does it matter?)

Vincent let his heavy head rest upon the hard surface beneath him. His memory of the

apartment seemed both vivid and surreal. Easier to think about than the dangerous whiteness. A *good* place to think about. Catherine lived there.

(A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
And blue spurt of a lighted match,
And a voice less loud, through its joys and fears,
Than the two hearts beating each to each!)

He had walked into her home. The large main room (she called it her living room) had been dark as he turned from her terrace doors. The doors were closed. Vincent must have closed them when he entered. That was unlike him. He hated being shut in.

The darkness had been thick and soggy; it was slow work to move through it toward a book Catherine had left open on the square table between her two small sofas. He took the book into his hands. He thought it might be the *Sonnets* he had given her. Or was it *The Merchant of Venice*? Shakespeare, anyway.

He looked up from the pages of the book. He wished his sight was not so strangely dim. Catherine kept beautiful things in her home. Unbroken and unmended furnishings filled her living room. She liked clear glass and crystal. She liked silk flowers. Vincent wished it was not so dark. He wanted to read the words in the book. He wanted to see the astonishing colors of Catherine's things. The darkness cared nothing for what Vincent wanted.

He returned the book to the low table and walked through the darkness toward a silver-blue light, his booted feet sinking into the sumptuous pile of Catherine's puce-colored carpeting. Everything in her palatial home gleamed soft and straight and clean and fragile. Perhaps the light would help him view this place clearly. Perhaps it would help him find the person he most wanted to see. Vincent left the living room. He felt drawn into the room beyond Catherine's white louvered doors—her bedchamber.

Vincent stopped in the new room. Had there been a sound? He stood alert, wary. Catherine's belongings seemed unused, and her rooms abandoned. The blankets on her bed looked sculpted in place. He turned about, and the light in this room pressed heavier than the darkness in the living room. This moonish light resembled that which filtered down into the cellar of Catherine's building, creating a curtain of illumination between the threshold Down to his world and the doorway Up into hers.

Vincent seemed to remember thinking: *The light at the threshold Below separates me from Catherine's world. In this room the light separates me...from her bed. Her dreaming place.*

In the memory, he swung away from that thought and went to Catherine's dressing table. A shrine to her beauty. He touched the objects she kept there. Trinket boxes. A silver brooch. A cup bristling with fine brushes and capped pencils. The box of colored powders Catherine used to decorate her face. A glass perfume bottle. A comb. A hairbrush. Vincent lifted the hairbrush to his nose, breathing deeply, seeking her fragrance. It was not there.

He set the brush down, reverently. How many times had he looked into her home through the panes of her terrace doors? How many times had he climbed onto Catherine's balcony, and tapped his claws against the glass to tell her that he was near? On these occasions, Vincent loved the moment when she knew he'd come to see her, for he always sensed a spark of joy in Catherine's heart, no matter what other troubles she faced, no matter what dangers oppressed her. The knowledge that his presence alone gave her joy took Vincent's breath away.

Each time he came to her on her terrace, Catherine heard him, or saw his shadow, and

was pleased, and rushed to join him outside. He offered his hands, and she held them. She reached to embrace him, and he pulled her close. They would stand or sit together, breathing the same air, sharing the same heartbeats.

From these fleeting moments, Vincent knew her things, the garments and jewelry she wore, the scents of her spaces, the vibrant colors of the paintings on her walls. He never dared to come too near to her possessions, and only twice had he entered the apartment to visit her—once after Catherine returned home from Lang General Hospital with a bullet wound in her back, and once on a night some weeks later when the sluicing winter rain drove them indoors. Vincent hardly ever dared to touch even the things she kept on her terrace—her painted iron chairs and tables, the living plants she grew in pots, her stone sculptures and outdoor wall hangings—and even then he touched her possessions only to leave gifts for her to find later. A rose on her bench. A book of poetry on her table. A written message weighted by a flowerpot against the midnight breeze. It was the greatest blessing of all for Vincent, when Catherine's heart was willing, simply to touch *her*. He loved to hold her.

Vincent looked again at her dressing table. He saw a shape in the glowing mirror: a consummate stranger to Catherine's inner sanctum. The shape was the image of his own face.

He met his reflection's quiet blue eyes. *What does she see?* he wondered, as he sometimes wondered during the darkest hours of the night. He saw a broad face with a long, flat nose and a wide, down-turned mouth. The spectral light bleached all color from Vincent's fur, and from the long mane which curled in strands around his cheekbones.

If it was unlike him to shut himself into a room Above, it was equally unlike him to gaze into a polished mirror like this. Somehow, he was never prepared for the sight of himself. He never knew how much of the man he would see—nor how much of that which was not Man at all. Mirrors often prompted debates with himself about himself, and these could become both painful and tiresome. Vincent usually had much better things to do with his time.

Now a flicker in Catherine's mirror startled him. Something behind him had moved. Vincent whirled away from his reflection. His heart soared: Catherine stood before the bedroom's terrace doors, smiling at him. She wore her soft, white nightclothes, lovely loose garments of satin and chiffon. Her hair framed her smile in relaxed, unstyled waves. She stood watching him, her very gaze a pronouncement of her love. Catherine, postponing sleep to await his visitation. Catherine, gentle in her joy.

Elated, thirsting, Vincent walked toward her, unable to *not* go to her, and as he walked, he saw that every step he took aged her. Her smile never faltered, but her face grew lined. Her hair changed from soft honey-brown to gray to white. She seemed to shrink into herself until Vincent stood only a half-step away. Catherine stood silent, old, frail, and sad. Then she began to dissolve into mist. Her ghostly face never stopped smiling at him. She disintegrated into the tarnished night.

Gone. She was gone. Vincent stood alone in a shaft of failing light. When the light died at last, he would die with it.

But I did not die, or I would not be here, wherever here is, he thought. Vincent did not remember leaving Catherine's apartment. *Surely I left her apartment. And went...where?*

No, that wasn't right. That space, *her* space, and his wandering through it, bereft, hadn't happened. That was only a dream. Someone had told him that was only a dream.

Yes, but I'm not dreaming now.

Vincent shuddered, which pulled his attention back to the steady ache present throughout his body, the separate points of pain in his chest and left side, the heavy throbbing in his head. He raised himself up onto one elbow. The joint in his shoulder cracked. The sound was loud in the

blank whiteness of the evil room. He tried to breathe deeply, past the aching, beyond the vertigo. Eyes blinking slowly, he tried very hard to think.

There had been running and bright lights and trees. A fiery stinging and a cold descent into darkness. A light above—he turned his face upward: yes, that very light. Some sort of framework separated him from the light.

There had been a face. More than one. Strangers. *(Ogres.)* A dark voice whispering to him, a frightened presence failing to effect its own rescue. The last thing Vincent remembered? A brutal discovery: he had pressed his hand to his breast to comfort a sudden sparking pain and had not felt cloth beneath his fingers. He turned his head now, and his clouded gaze identified the shapes of his bare arms, moved down the length of his body, saw that he lay naked upon a cold metal floor.

(Where am I? What has happened to me?)

The framework he had noticed above him extended down to meet that metal floor at regular intervals.

(Vertical lines.)

Vincent pressed his hands to the floor and pushed until he knelt (more or less) in the space the framework enclosed. His arms trembled beneath his weight. His right wrist felt sprained. His left wrist felt nothing at all.

No— he thought. *No, it's not a framework, not pipes, not scaffolding.* A sudden coldness washed over him. The vertical lines were steel bars.

He was in a cage.

Vincent shrank away from this knowledge, horrified. The coldness bit into him like needles. Like claws. The bars shut him into a very small space.

Stiffened muscles complained as he sat up. His heart galumphed at a madcap pace inside him. He stared around him, thinking, *I am caged!*

The room beyond the bars had a sterilized look and smell. Vincent had seen photographs in books and magazines, images of places where people went to doctors for help, where researchers studied microorganisms in the hope of curing devastating diseases, where scientists conducted experiments to further their knowledge of the world and how it worked. This place evoked memories of such photographs. *Laboratory*. The word came slowly into Vincent's mind.

"You know, you have the soul of a doctor," a beloved voice spoke into his frightened thoughts. Since the cave-in, that voice had begun to tell stories to Vincent, sharing memories long kept hidden, describing the work a young physician had once performed Above, detailing his training and his experiences in rooms like this one. The kind, British voice in Vincent's mind continued, "When I studied medicine, they wouldn't admit 'minorities.' I wonder what they would have done with you."

The coldness developed into a physical presence, a sullen sickness that pricked at Vincent's throat and along his spine. It turned his rushing pulse into a distant drumbeat thudding beneath the ringing in his ears.

"Let's not even think about it," Father said.

Vincent's stomach clenched. He half-lunged, half-collapsed toward one side of the cage. His hands gripped the bars on either side of his face as his body convulsed. He vomited, gasping between painful spasms, until there was nothing left to bring up. He knelt, shaking, panting, waiting.

When he opened his eyes, he thought, *At least most of it seems to have ended up on the other side of the bars*. He realized that saliva still dripped from his open mouth. He swallowed, wincing as he tasted acid and bile, and a horrid sawdusty bitterness. He carefully spat. Drawing

the back of one hand across his mouth, he leaned away from the outer edge of the metal floor.

He told himself to *breathe deeply*. He did so, and these long breaths seemed to ease his many pains. He listened to the whiteness around him. The room came alive with furtive activity.

He heard a pervasive sound of air blowing through ventilation ducts. A chorus of electric hums surrounded him. He heard the lamp above him, and many electronic devices, and a white cube beneath a nearby metal table. He saw a long handle attached to the cube's hinged front panel: it must be a small refrigerator unit. These sounds and shapes reminded Vincent of Mouse's chamber. He wished that he was in the Mousehole now.

His wishful thinking halted there. *That* was something to consider. Maybe he *was* in the Mousehole. Maybe something—interesting—had happened, like the time he'd walked in on Mouse just as the young tinkerer connected one of his new inventions to an electric current. It was possible that in another moment, Vincent would open his eyes and pick himself up off the floor and find his friend doing the same thing, a few feet away. "Vincent! Almost got it working this time!" Mouse would say. And Vincent would shake his head at Mouse's guileless grin, wondering how to tell him that the young man's eyebrows were singed. Again.

Vincent blinked hard, but the white room stayed where it was. The steel bars remained between him and the room. He looked at the space within the bars. Not a large space at all. Vincent would not be able to stretch out at full length even if he lay along the diagonal. He was beginning to feel that he would like very much to lie down, but it would be uncomfortable to sense his head so confined by the corner of the cage, and so exposed to—the door beyond. Vincent's gaze rested upon the wooden door which would lead out of the white room. A word was printed on the frosted glass of the door's square window, but he could not seem to read the word. *Anyway,* Vincent thought, *the door is out of reach.* He returned to his examination of the cage.

A blanket had been placed in here with him. The beige fabric was thin, unpatched, trimmed with a smooth polyester hem. A fat, square object lay on top of the blanket. Vincent blinked. It was a reddish lump. He tilted his head at it.

More fabric. Ill-used, and older than the blanket. Many scents upon it. A bulgy cushion. A —a *cushion*. Something one might find on a bed, a settee, or a well-worn chair. A comforting accessory. Vincent's mind stuttered over the cushion. Electrical instruments and bare white walls and cold bars and the reek of his own sickness all around him—and a faded red cushion on the floor, not two feet from his thigh, incongruous and ridiculous.

But the cushion suddenly made the situation real. Vincent would never have imagined it into being. All this was truly happening.

"If they caught you...if they found you...they'd put you behind bars and make you wish you were dead." Father's scolding words. Father's absence.

Vincent's fingers slipped against the metal they grasped. He jerked to keep from falling. He groaned and swung around to grip the bars with both hands, appalled at his weakness. His hold on the bars now kept him as upright as he was. Every part of him seemed to tremble with the effort of holding, and of kneeling. *I don't think I ran so fast or so far that I should be this exhausted,* he thought. Vincent rested his forehead against the steel and breathed.

After a moment, a few more memories settled into place. Darts. Two men had fired darts at him from guns. He was ill now because those darts injected unknown drugs into his body. Drugs rarely boded well for Vincent.

And it had been more than one dart. More than a few darts. More than one incident. Vincent considered the bruised places that felt knotted against each breath: places at his center, and left of his center. *They must both be right-handed,* he thought dismally, *that their aim should*

so favor the one side.

He felt stiff, itching spots on his head, too. Carefully, he released one steel bar to touch his scalp with his fingers. This was a strange exploration. The fingers of his left hand did not feel the many small unhealed sores all around his skull. His fingers felt nothing. His *ears* heard the changes of texture in his skin as he moved his hand. It was his head that felt the little pains provoked by his own touch.

Did Vincent remember needles? And his terror at finding metal spines embedded in his skin, wires worming through his hair? He did, and he did. He thought: *I wounded myself because I didn't know the needles were there. Why did they put NEEDLES there?*

Vincent's claws snagged a tangle. His mane was surely an unmitigated disaster by now, but, as Father would also have said, this was the least of his worries. Vincent pulled his trembling fingers free of his hair. His claws tinked against a metal bar.

He raised his head to look more closely at the bars themselves. Long, cold, and solid. Vincent saw a square gray panel attached to the bars on his left. He studied the panel, which was flat and bare. His eyes traced the outline of the paper-thin gap running bottom-to-top around this section of the bars. He found the shapes of hinges on the right side of the frame. The set of bars he held must be the door to the cage.

Vincent grabbed one bar with his numbed left hand so he could touch the panel with his more awakened right. Perhaps this panel contained a latch. He reached through the bars to touch the other side of the flat plating. He felt a keyhole. So, not a latch. A lock. He pulled his hand back and leaned his full weight against the bars. The door didn't even creak.

He sighed and let his aching head rest against the cold bars once more. His ears kept ringing. Then his vision dimmed. The space around him tilted and the tremor in his muscles—in his very bones—threatened to topple him. Vincent did not resist the trembling or the faintness, but breathed into it, pulling air in and releasing it again, drawing breath as one draws water from a deep well: with patience and at a measured pace.

He breathed this way until the dimness brightened. The sense of spinning slowed, although his trembling did not. He heard a deeper quiet settle over the room as the flow of air from the high ducts hushed and stopped. Now he heard only his breath and the subtle hum of electric currents.

After some indeterminable while, Vincent opened his eyes, becoming aware of his body's newest—and suddenly urgent—need. Raising his head brought back the dizziness, but he tried to ignore that. He must empty his bladder. Vincent glanced around at the cage interior, then at the thick spatter of milky slime which soiled the very edge of the metal floor panel, and the room's white tiles beneath that.

Surprised, he thought, *The cage is higher than the rest of the floor. Raised up on posts? Casters?* It didn't matter. He had already fouled this part of the room. This section of the room's floor would do. So Vincent pulled himself higher, resigned to the indignity and determined not to make a mess of it. In that, at least, and despite an unpleasant stinging sensation, he succeeded. Finished, he released the bars to move away from the door. He settled down into a leaning crouch, his elbows locked and his poisoned body still shaking.

How long have I been here? he wondered. *Where is HERE? Somewhere in the city? Somewhere beyond it? Have I been missed? How can they know where to look for me...my people, my family?*

Thinking of the Tunnelfolk, Vincent feared for their safety. *I was caught too near the Tunnels. My hunters will want to know where I came from, where I was running to*.

This constant danger accompanied Vincent during all his forays Above. He risked his

own life each time he went Up to the Surface, but if ever he failed to be vigilant, he also risked the exposure of many other lives. *If I've brought harm to them with my carelessness, my idle stargazing—* Vincent pressed one hand to his head. *Our children. Our old ones. Our young families. My closest friends.*

And Father. Vincent sighed again. *Father will be...well, Father will be beside himself.*

And, of course, there was also Catherine. He was supposed to go to her. She wanted to see him. To say goodbye. He wanted to see her.

Catherine— Vincent blinked. He couldn't feel her. *Why have I no sense of Catherine?*

An unvoice whispered back to him, *Because: Catherine is gone now.*

Everything stopped. Thought and time, his breath, his heart—the revolution of the Earth around the sun.

No. This can't be.

But it was.

Catherine. Is gone.

Breath returned to him like a storm. One elbow gave way and he crashed down upon the merciless metal plate beneath him. Vincent wrapped his arms around his chest and his side, stunned by the woundedness of his dart-pocked flesh, hurting in other places that had never known hurt before, and terrified by the emptiness surpassing all of these physical pains. His emptiness consumed that deep space within where he so treasured Catherine's presence and, yes, *her love*—and his love for her.

He reached for Catherine, through that inexplicable sense which bound them to one another. He found only the haziest traces of *her*. Gasping, Vincent strained, reached, desperate.

He met nothing more than that maddening shadow of sense. He shook his head, clenching his teeth at the new pain which stabbed through his temples. Darkness encroached again. This time, it claimed him.

It was darkness he wanted, he decided, after he realized he'd been staring up into the rude white light of the lamp for a very long while. He looked away from the lamp. A bright spot lingered across his field of vision, obscuring everything else in the room for a length of time he couldn't measure. When he could see again, Vincent let his gaze wander across the upper walls of the room. He saw the lines of the bars that topped the cage. The air vents. Shelves containing what looked like medical supplies. A bulletin board on one wall, papers tacked to it in a precise patchwork.

He looked at a long line of small rectangular windows. More frosted glass. Beyond reach. Diffuse daylight filtering through.

(The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars
As daylight doth a lamp; her eyes in heaven
Would through the airy region stream so bright
That birds would sing and think it were not night.)

He found another window, larger than the others, set in an interior wall. Closed blinds protected whatever lay beyond it from Vincent's view. There was also a second door, or rather, a set of *two* doors, in the wall opposite the entrance he had initially noticed. The double doors lacked the self-closing hinge of the main door. Perhaps this other entry led to a closet or storage room.

What do Topside doctors store in laboratory closets? Articulated skeletons, perhaps? The thought struck him as funny. He drifted through the funniness, unable to laugh, but beguiled

nevertheless by a brief vision of human skeletons tap-dancing to the Saint-Saëns symphonic poem, *Danse Macabre.* The closeted skeletons jiggled in a clattering chorus line amid tight-wedged racks of glass beakers and Petri dishes. Silly bones.

Oh, and look, Vincent thought, *there is the skeleton of a cat on that table even now.* But the cat remains on the shiny tabletop across the room were not silly. Not funny at all. The delicate feline bones held quite still and did not dance. The cat was simply dead.

Vincent observed with detached interest, *A small animal*. *Near the size of my own cat, from when I was younger. She was always so brave, trusting me to never hurt her. I did not keep her bones after she died. The black earth of the park clothes her now. My Paradox. She was a good friend.* Vincent looked away from the cat skeleton.

He saw a framed diagram hanging on the wall which faced the locked cage door. An artist's indecipherable signature graced the lower right corner of the piece. Watercolor images illustrated Linnaean taxonomy: six animal classes and twenty-four plant classes. The artwork was beautiful. Vincent liked the image accompanying *Insecta Classis*: a small painting of the Pipevine Swallowtail.

Battus philenor, he thought dreamily.

He imagined a garden filled with bright butterflies, each taking its turn to tipple at every blossom.

Flowers. Gardens. Growing things.

His community wanted to expand their underground garden into new caverns. The Tunnelfolk already grew endives and edible mushrooms, sprouted grains and seeds, and raised mealworms and waxworms in boxes. Now that their access to city electricity had proved relatively stable, their creative self-confidence led them to dream of growing some root crops, and possibly strawberries, if Mouse and Winslow were able to rig an adequate lighting and ventilation system. Talk circulated of cultivating greens and flowers as well. Maybe other fruits. Maybe they could add grasshoppers to their insect husbandry.

Vincent liked to eat fresh greens, when William could get them. He liked peppery nasturtiums and candied violets, too. Looking at the diagram, Vincent began to wonder if the Tunnelfolk could get pollinators, bees and butterflies, to thrive in a carefully constructed ecosystem Below. All the children were excited by rumors of the planning team's ideas. Vincent would love to watch flower-feeding insects float freely through some special cavern Below.

That painting on the wall is an accurate portrait of the butterfly, Vincent thought, recalling other pictures he had seen in books. In the teaching supply cupboard in his chamber, he kept photocopies from Michael's research expeditions into libraries Above, the hues of lepidopteran wings faithfully superimposed over the black and white images with precious colored pencils.

Vincent had been teaching his Saturday science class to identify butterflies from these pictures. As the weather warmed, the children would be pouring out into the city, into the parks, irrepressible as the tide, and they would return with reports of their sightings. A few might bring specimens back Down with them, although Vincent gently discouraged that.

"The Tunnels are no place for butterflies to live," he told the children every year. "These creatures need daylight and fresh nectar from their favorite flowers."

Yet every year, a few young ones always rushed in with a leafy twig and its accompanying caterpillar stuffed inside a glass bottle—or else a scrubbed plastic peanut butter jar, the lid screwed on tight to prevent a colorful captive's escape. Vincent looked at the luminous blue wings of the painted figure. He imagined those wings closing to show the dark undersides and the line of orange spots edging the lower wing. He saw those wings fanning with despondent

slowness at the bottom of a sealed jar—

He rolled onto his side and dragged himself to the cage door again, retching. Nothing came up, but the sickness wracked his guts for what felt like forever. At last, the attack ended.

Gasping, Vincent pulled one palm to his belly. The dart wounds there hurt badly. And—something else wasn't right. His fingers found those ulcerated places too easily. Too much of his skin felt strange to the touch. His mind worked very slowly to decipher the new problem. It took Vincent some while to understand his skin's strangeness. He found that over many parts of his body, his soft fur was—gone.

Dumbfounded, Vincent thought, *They have...shaved me.*

He stared at this evidence of inexcusable violation. His hair had been cut away in haphazard swaths and patches, in tender and intimate places. Vincent could not imagine why his captors would do such a thing.

Did they use razors? Shears?!

The thought of large, silver scissors *(listen to it: click shick scree)* slicing through his fur, exposing his skin to the cold air *(a Shadow cutting more than hair, cutting FLESH)*, was anathema to Vincent's mind.

(Sharp shiny bad.)

Gradually, he understood that he had curled into his smallest shape against the cage door. One hand covered his right ear. Vincent couldn't remember moving his hand from his abdomen to his head. He couldn't remember changing his position in the cage. He felt the two notches in the uppermost curve of his ear. These were his oldest scars. Vincent lowered his hand and pressed his palm flat upon the floor.

I must finish it, he thought. *Finish my own triage, so I can stop thinking about scissors.* Inhaling, he reluctantly analyzed his perceptions. *Two man-scents on my skin don't belong to anyone I know. These men, both of them...they worked together to do this to me.*

And the two men had done much. Vincent sat up and began to know that moving was hard for him because his legs were just as numb as his left forearm. He looked at his body and found raw spots where not only had the men removed his fur, but also the uppermost layers of his skin. He had dark bruises everywhere. He saw fresh puncture marks on his arms and legs, spaced in little clusters or long tracks, like marks he had seen on the bodies of drugs addicts in the streets Above, or recovering among those who dwelt Below.

His dart wounds truly looked terrible. Some were still smeared with what Vincent hoped was an antibiotic ointment. The bruising around each darted puncture showed mottled black and purple, the two marks above his stomach and left hip spreading out into shapes larger than his hand. He felt he'd been hurt on the inside, too. His internal malaise encompassed every part of himself that he could name, from bitten places inside his mouth to overworked muscles in his hips and lower back. The parts that did not feel pain felt nothing else either. This selective numbness was worrisome.

Miserable, Vincent looked away from his abused flesh to eye the vomit and brownish urine on the floor. His head began to throb again—or perhaps he began to *notice* his head throbbing again. He felt revolted and ill. He felt angry. He glowered up at the equipment arranged on tables beneath the illustrated diagram's frame ("Gizmos!" Mouse would have called the many scientific instruments). Something snared his attention. Vincent stopped breathing. Claws of ice pierced his heart.

One boxy object sat affixed to the top of a tripod stand. A tiny flashing light pulsed red and a wide lens gleamed at Vincent from across the room like a blank unblinking eye. His ears caught that low electric hum, along with the slow, almost silent whicker of winding magnetic

tape within the device.

It was a video camera.

Vincent could not remember another moment when he so greatly desired the concealing folds of his cloak. The video camera eclipsed even his most ghastly memory of Catherine, during that terrible silence in his chamber, after she screamed at her first sight of his face—when the horror in her heart smote him with unendurable pain. Even *that* paled in the present glare of the video camera's eye. The camera saw him with perfect, inarguable accuracy. It *captured* him as he was and held him for review, for anyone to look at, for as many times as they cared to look, and for as long as they chose to look.

An irrational thought screamed inside him: *What if CATHERINE should see this recording?!?*

Vincent turned his back to the camera with a low cry and crawled to the opposite end of the cage. His heart chugged wildly inside his chest with the berserking drumfire clamor of a runaway locomotive. It made breathing very difficult. He cradled his head in his shaking hands. He shivered against the bars. Her name sighed across his thoughts with each ragged breath. *No, Catherine. No, Catherine. No. No. Catherine.*

He didn't know if he fainted or if he slept, but whatever had happened, it helped. He woke thinking, *This is the inner side of it...a reaction to the drugs. This is the emotional side of it. I am sane. And this shall pass*.

Vincent reached out for Catherine. This was instinctive now, be she near or far. Their connection was still muted, but not from her side. It was as though *he* were the one fumbling at the link. Again, Vincent sensed a shadow of her radiance, but he could not follow it to the living woman. His illness, his weakness, his confusion—brought on by these Strangers, these enemies—

Vincent had expected that when Catherine left the city for good, he would experience the meager comfort of knowing her griefs and her joys, as she claimed new dreams for herself and followed her heart to fulfill them. Now, these men had taken even that distanced means of connection to her. They had damaged Vincent's empyrean bond to the woman he loved.

He felt his lips begin to draw back from his teeth and he pressed them firmly together. The video camera—these men—they would not see him crouched in this cage, snarling like a cornered animal. They would *not*.

Swiftly, he reached for another connection. Another kind of bond, one founded upon memory and long association. He heard Father's voice speaking lines of poetry. He anchored his sanity in an exchange of rhyme between father and son.

This was an old, old game they played. It began in Vincent's earliest childhood, when he first tried to shape his mouth around fluid sequences of words, longing to speak as he heard others speaking, longing to experience the wondrous, evocative images conjured by poetic phrases.

The fabric of fingerless gloves skiffed across paper as Father covered an open book to hide the words from both of them. In this way, they learned many poems together, reading, reciting, talking through the thornier images, laughing at the funny ones.

"*Anger in its time and place / May assume a kind of grace.* Come now, Vincent. What's the next line?"

Vincent, ever an eager pupil, worked to pronounce his words as clearly as Father did. The child's voice spoke in its quiet, careful cadence, "*It must have some reason in it.*"

"Good!" A remembered hand tousled his hair. Father's voice continued, "*And not last beyond a minute.*"

"Anger," thought Vincent, *by Charles and Mary Lamb. How fitting. Ethical precepts for the child, now applied to this crisis of the man. Father would be thrilled.*

A sudden click interrupted the humming stillness. Vincent looked up. In the space beyond the interior window, a door opened and closed. Footsteps sounded, and a swish of cloth as someone pulled on a garment over other garments. The footsteps approached the door to the laboratory. Vincent saw now that the word printed backwards across the opaque security glass in the door read: PRIVATE. A key snicked into the lock.

Vincent got his feet beneath him. He settled into an unsteady crouch. Holding onto a bar with his right hand for stability, he let his left rest (as casually as a shaking, benumbed hand *can* rest) upon his bent knee. He peered out from behind the thick curtain of his hair as the door opened and a man walked in.

The man moved with restive energy, closing the door, snapping the bolt to lock it. He reached for a switch on the wall. Fluorescent bulbs flickered to life within their ceiling fixtures. Vincent winced at the flickering, and the electric hum intensified to a buzz in his sensitive ears, but he did not look away from this Stranger in the white canvas coat.

The man turned his face toward Vincent and stopped moving, his eyes widening. Vincent felt the man's surprise and a bolt of greedy glee, but dimly. His sense of the man's feelings seemed as muted as his sense of Catherine. He guessed that he could sense this man at all only because the man stood so near to him.

In a way, this insight inspired tremendous relief. Not because he feared whatever empathic impressions he might have received about the Stranger (although Vincent's own feelings toward this person were unequivocally hostile), but because it meant that Vincent's condition did not separately affect his connection to Catherine. His total perceptive *ability*, and not their bond, was wounded, because Vincent's body had been wounded. He could hope to regain his full sense of Catherine after he recovered from his poisoning. Such knowledge provided an unexpected gift in this terrible place and Vincent was grateful.

The man had a broad white forehead, which bulged above a narrow, inquisitive face. He gazed intently at his prisoner. He began speaking to him, the man's voice bright and eager. Vincent did not look into the Stranger's eyes, refusing any personal contact.

"You're awake. I was worried, but I guess Jonathan was right. Just a matter of time. Nature taking her course and all—" The man stopped speaking, and frowned, as he saw the puddles on the floor.

"Oh," he said. "I see. Yes, Nature indeed."

If to further lengths it go,
It does into malice grow.

Vincent breathed, and watched, and channeled all that he felt into his mental recitation.

'Tis the difference that we see
'Twixt the serpent and the bee.
If the latter you provoke,
It inflects a hasty stroke,
Puts you to some little pain,
But it never stings again.

The man edged around the cage and the fluids on the floor, bumping his hip against a

thing which appeared to be a cross between a flattened chair and a sectioned table. Vincent let the man pass from his line of sight, listening to his movements, pinpointing his location in the room. The man opened the double doors and stepped beyond them. He rummaged for something and handled something else that squeaked: a faucet. Vincent heard the splash of water filling a container and the heavier splash of something the man placed in the water. Then the man was coming back, pushing a bucket on tiny wheels and gripping the long handle of a mop.

Vincent's eyes had not looked away from the chair-table. He could see no remnant of the restraints, but Vincent remembered now. They had bound him to it. They had strapped him into a *harness*, had pinioned his wrists and ankles, and tied him to the table-thing. Looking away from the abominable table, he saw that his left hand now gripped his knee. Vincent slid his hand out of the position it had assumed, before his claws could draw blood. The poem. He took refuge in the poem.

Close in tufted bush or brake
Lurks the poison-swellèd snake
Nursing up his cherished wrath...

"There," the man was saying as he worked. "Nothing that can't be fixed with a little elbow grease." His false cheer was galling. He kept sneaking quick little glances at Vincent.

In the purlieus of his path,
In the cold, or in the warm...

The man had added something to the water, a chemical detergent with an odor noxious to Vincent's senses. Vincent's eyes began to water and dropped his chin to his chest. There was nothing comfortable here. The smell only added one more bad thing to a multitude of evils. He supposed it was less humiliating than the odors of his own waste, but it was no less offensive to his nose. Or to his stomach.

"I don't want you to be afraid." The man now swabbed at the small section of the cage floor which stood in need of his ministrations. He jabbed the mop head through the bars. "I want to be your friend. All you have to do is show Jonathan that you can speak. Do you understand? Just say something, anything. A word. Well, probably more than one word. Different words. Do you know more than one word?"

The man worked in silence for a moment, thinking. "Or you could imitate me. If that's what you need. Maybe...even gesticulation, sign language. They're doing remarkable things with gorillas. I could send Jonathan to get a dictionary from the library—" He shook his head and stopped mopping. He leaned forward a little, trying to get Vincent to look up at him. "No. I'm sure you can speak. You spoke on your own, without prompting, and you weren't repeating either of us."

Vincent blinked, trying to arrange his garbled memories into something that made sense to him. Had he spoken? He didn't know. *Whatever words came to me in a drug-induced stupor, they could not have been very coherent,* he thought. What on earth had he said?

Vincent speculated doubtfully, *Perhaps I didn't speak in English.* That might confuse the laboratory Strangers. He had long ago lost count of how many books he had read in their original languages.

"What words do you know?" asked the man, wriggling one hand near his chin to pantomime a mouth opening and closing. "Please, say something now."

Vincent remained quiet. He did not want to encourage the hand-flapping. He felt he would discover a special level of lunacy if he had to watch this awkward Stranger try to sign things to him out of an ASL reference book.

"Do...you...talk?" the man asked next, bending low and exaggerating his enunciation. "Do...you...speak? Hel-lo. Say: hel-lo!"

It seemed lunacy didn't need a signed invitation after all, to let herself in.

Disturbed, Vincent thought, *This is a childless man. And a man with no animal companion at home. Or, if he keeps a pet, he's never trained it to obey commands.* He did not answer the man. Any child would be offended by the Stranger's gross assumption of mental deficiency in his listener. Any sentient animal would be annoyed by his foolish chatter. And Vincent was not a little child. He was not merely an animal. This man was not his friend.

The man sighed and finished his cleaning work. He was shutting the double doors behind him when Vincent heard the door in the outer room open and close. Vincent turned his head toward the sound and sensed the man behind him watching. The man jumped when whoever had entered the other room rapped on the laboratory door. The weight of the man's gaze returned to Vincent for a moment. Vincent felt his eyes on his back. That bright glee flashed again. Vincent suppressed a sigh of his own.

The acuity of my hearing seems to please the Stranger, he thought.

The man stepped carefully across the wet patches on the floor and called, "Jonathan?"

"Yes," said a voice from the other room.

The man in the white coat unlocked the door. He locked it again behind the man who entered. This younger man had red hair and a square face. Round-lensed eyeglasses rested on the bridge of his nose.

"He's awake and aware," the man in the white coat told the newcomer. The red-haired man looked down into the cage. Vincent had to clamp his teeth together to quell the growl that threatened to shatter his defensive silence. The younger man—Jonathan—despised him. Vincent tried to go back to his poem.

Mean him good, or mean him harm...

"So, it looks like the phenobarbital has worn off," Jonathan said *(in a lone Ogre's voice).* A secretive glint animated his eyes. "Your tranquilizer too."

In Vincent's mind, the sing-song structure of words collapsed into gibberish. Vincent knew the sedative drug the younger Stranger had named. Amazed, he thought, *They have given me barbiturates. Why am I still alive?*

"Yes. Maybe now we can convince him to speak to us," said the older man.

The younger man turned to the elder. "Are you still stuck on that, Professor?"

"No," the first man—the professor—said. "I'm just trying to show you that I'm not mistaken here. You said you still want to assist with this project. To help."

Vincent couldn't quite decipher the emotion that rippled through this Jonathan's mind, but it had an ugly fetor.

"I do, Professor. I am. I told you. That's why I'm here."

"Okay, then," said the professor. "You can begin by handling the video record. It's a shame we couldn't be here when he woke up. Those initial interactions might have been useful."

"Now that he's not tied down?" Jonathan asked.

"Yes. Now that he's in the cage."

Vincent was busy breathing. Slowly. Calmly.

Jonathan walked across the room. He touched buttons on the video camera and removed a black cassette from it. He wrote something on the cassette's yellow label, then he moved to a corner of the laboratory where Vincent had seen a set of square, glass-screened monitors. Jonathan sat down on a rolling chair. He scooted somewhat behind Vincent's shoulder, beyond his peripheral vision. The wheels of the chair rattled and squealed. The professor approached the cage with a notebook in his hand and began scribbling quickly, glancing down at Vincent every few seconds, recording what he saw.

Vincent relaxed his jaw and ran his tongue over his dry lips. This was always difficult for him, even under far more ordinary circumstances: being stared at, being witnessed and interpreted and unable to explain. He knew his appearance could be useful; while a Stranger stopped to stare, Vincent was free to flee, or to attack, or to decide what words he should say to begin a dialogue. But for most of his life, the Strangers who got a close look were people preparing to join the community of outcasts Below—Outsiders on their way to becoming Insiders. At these times, Vincent could do nothing but endure each person's first few encounters with him, and wait, hoping to be seen for who he was. Who he tried to be.

No two people ever had quite the same reaction to the way he looked. In the end, every astonished (or terrified) moment always passed, and a relationship either blossomed or withered. Sometimes introductions produced an ongoing fascination, or deep-seated fear, or something like this professor's effervescent cycling between pity and anxiety. These things always saddened him when he felt them in another person. Vincent patiently anticipated the moment when initial reactions gave way to everyday experiences: recognition, pleasure in his attention or his company, friendship, appreciation, humor, sympathy, love.

These were responses any man could expect from those who knew him, from his friends, his family. Being known was a hallowed state. *People who know me do not stare,* he thought. *They don't mark my differences, and don't seek to exploit me for their own unfathomable purposes.* A darker part of his mind added, *And "friends" do not ambush me in the dark, strip me of my clothes, and imprison me in a steel cage.*

Here, these Strangers held more than his height under scrutiny, more than his unruly mane of hair, his hands or his face. These men did not need to imagine the sordid details of Vincent's frame as it filled out his many layers of carefully—and lovingly—tailored garments. In this laboratory, they had put Vincent's entire body on display, in plain view, these witnesses who had a camera and bright lights to aid their surveillance. They were privy to his every gesture, his every weakness, his every need. Vincent wanted darkness. He wanted his cloak. He wanted his *clothes*.

He wanted out.

His trembling was getting worse now. On any other day, Vincent could crouch for hours in one position, then rise with fluid speed, or shift to a new posture without thought. However, calling *this* an ordinary day was (to borrow a phrase from his friend Winslow) like calling nuclear fallout a minor irritation. Vincent's weakened limbs could not hold his pose any longer.

He did not look at either Stranger as he leaned back against the corner bars. Vincent drew his legs up to his chest, wrapping his arms around his knees. He could feel the professor's eyes absorbing each movement he made—from the uncoordinated shuddering of his muscles, to his ungainly jerk against the bars when he almost overbalanced. Vincent had not expected the act of sitting down to hurt. Hot anger welled up inside his chest and he acknowledged its presence, remembering the poem.

It must have some reason in it. If ever there existed a reason to feel angry on his own behalf, here it was: staring down at him with the imperious confidence of a Henry Jekyll making

notes to himself about his diabolical chemical solutions. Vincent closed his eyes. He accepted the image and the anger, and then released both.

Anger's true grace resides in the strength it provides, helping us to admit that an evil thing has happened, Vincent thought.

It was that simple. Vincent had been wronged. It was done. His captors' malice, whether ignorant or intentional, need not be his.

Vincent opened his eyes again as the first man, the professor, moved across the room. The professor put his notebook down and picked up a box-shaped device. He held the device in front of his face. He triggered it and a light flashed.

Vincent winced at more than the physical pain behind his eyes. The professor held another kind of camera. A photograph slid out from a slot beneath the lens of the thing.

"We may need to get another album," the professor said, as though to himself. "This one is filling up quickly." The fact pleased him. His preoccupied companion grunted in reply.

The professor turned toward one of the long metal tables. He opened a large book which sat on the table's surface, fanning his photograph in the air and turning thick, cream-colored pages. He affixed the image to a page some three-quarters of the way through the book. Muttering to his wristwatch, he wrote a notation beneath the photograph.

Vincent shut his eyes and kept them shut. A book almost *filled* with such photographs! *Breathe,* he told himself. *Just breathe.*

He heard a small choked sound from behind him, followed by a low cough, and the scratching of a pen across paper. This was secret laughter. The man in the corner, the professor's helper watching the video recording, Jonathan, was *entertained* by what he saw.

Vincent's breath caught in his throat. His vaporous sense of that man roiled through him: smug and violent amusement. Unbidden, another enemy rose up in Vincent's memory: a black-haired Stranger, a laughing man, a man who mocked him and threw bourbon at his face, a man with a darkness inside him like Jonathan's.

(How hard d'you think I had to hit him to break that bone right there? Heh heh heh!)

A man who beat Vincent with a crowbar and stubbed out cigars on Vincent's chained hands.

Wheresoever fate may bring you,
The vile snake will always sting you.

Vincent's present nightmare Above menaced him a thousand times worse than the one that nearly claimed his life a month ago. This time there were no kindhearted Strangers at hand to offer him the help he needed. This time there would be no Catherine to seek him out, to strengthen him with her determined love, or to soothe his hurts with her delicate hands. She would not be there to pray for his safety or to see him home at the end. Today, he could not limp away from danger; he lacked even the strength to stand. And in any case, Vincent had absolutely no idea how he was going to get out of this cage.

Chapter Eight: No Such Liberty

I

23 March 1987
Monday

"No, I don't want the section editor," Catherine said for at least the third time. "I know the name on the byline, and it's Byron Trask. Can you please transfer my call?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't just give out the personal information of our reporters," said the voice on the other end of the line.

"I don't want any of your reporters' personal information," Catherine said, speaking slowly to keep her tone even. "I want to talk to Byron Trask in your office."

"Is this about a story?" the woman's voice asked. "Because I'm supposed to send those calls to the third floor."

Catherine massaged her forehead with one hand. Either this young woman was very new or very stupid.

"Yes, this is about a story—"

"Uh..." There was the sound of paper being shuffled. "Let me see if Janet Powell is here today. She's supposed to be the one who works with new contacts."

"No, this isn't about a *new* story," Catherine said.

"Say, what?"

"I am calling about a story that ran in today's paper. It was written by Byron Trask. I want to speak to him now, please."

"Are you dissatisfied with the article, ma'am?" the woman asked. "Look, I'll connect you to Retractions."

"No!" Catherine's hand slapped the table.

"Oh. Then our legal department."

"No, thank you," Catherine sighed. "Never mind. I'm sorry to have wasted your time."

Catherine hung up the phone. *Where in the world did they find that girl, and why in the world did they hire her?* Maybe she was from a temp agency. Or maybe she was connected with someone important to the newspaper's hierarchy. Catherine understood that particular situation all too well.

She read the headline again. The story was sensationalist drivel, of course. Yet it contained too many uncomfortable details. The alleged incident had occurred on the correct night. A window overlooking Central Park *would* command a view of such a capture, especially if the woman who had witnessed the event used binoculars. And the part about the "blond wolf-man," whose "patched and tattered clothes hung from his hulking shoulders as he transformed from man to monster—" That part resonated.

The funniest thing, Catherine mused, *is that I've never thought of him as blond*.

"Blond" was simply too mundane a word for the golden corona wreathing Vincent's face.

Catherine took the paper with her on her trip to visit the exalted offices of *The National Star Confidential*. She read the headline over and over in the cab, trying not to squirm with impatience. When she arrived, the receptionist informed her that Mr. Trask was not in.

"When do you expect him?" Catherine asked.

"I don't," the woman replied. "Not today. He's out of town on assignment." Thankfully,

this woman was not the person Catherine had spoken to on the phone. The front desk receptionist was an older woman with silvering black hair and tired brown eyes.

"Do you expect him tomorrow?"

"Yes. Barring unforeseen and unusual circumstances."

Catherine wondered if that statement was a private joke for the woman, given the everyday subject matter of the newspaper she worked for.

Catherine asked, "Can you tell me what time? Morning? Afternoon?"

"Try after lunch," the receptionist said. "Mornings are a mad dash around here and the lunch hour is even worse."

Catherine smiled at her. "That's how it is at my office too. Thank you."

"Welcome, hon."

Catherine stepped out onto the pavement and began walking in no particular direction, and with no particular destination in mind. She reflected that twice this morning she had referred to her office environment in the present tense—once in her mind, and once in conversation. *I still think of myself as a part of that place, that frantic legal community,* she thought.

She wondered when she first began to feel she might belong there. Was it when Joe put her on the Flynn case, sending her out to investigate mob crime on the docks? No, it must have been earlier than that, because on the day Elliot Burch rolled his catered lunch of lobster and champagne into the DA's office, Catherine had felt dismayed by the way Elliot's attention separated her from the rest of her co-workers.

She shook her head sadly. That really *was* a sweet gesture. Romantic, even. Very satisfactory bait. Had Elliot tried that tactic while Catherine still worked at her father's firm, she might have given into him then and there. Long before her accidental run-in with knife-wielding criminals, Catherine knew she would never feel comfortable among the people employed at Prasker, Chandler & Coolige's West 57th Street offices. She had always stood apart from their crowd, always knew, deep down, that she could never fit in.

It's an underrated social truth, she thought. *A person cannot be easily culled from a flock when she's running at the center of the flock. Predators try to separate misfits from the fringes. They catch us in the open when we're most alone.*

Her forefinger tapped the newspaper in her hand as she walked. Culling. Stalked by predators. Monster hunters. Catherine remembered the long and horrendous night she'd spent searching for Vincent through one of the worst neighborhoods in the city, towing Isaac along with her, feeling sick with dread. They had not been the only ones hunting Vincent that night. The Silks had pursued Vincent with implacable hatred, taking him apart piece by piece, and losing one gang member after another as Vincent defended himself against their attacks.

Vincent later told Catherine not to blame herself, but blame seemed to waylay her in her nightmares. Waking to darkness after these terrifying dreams, she could never deny the fact that *she* was the catalyst to that entire tragedy. Every single murdered body had died that night because Catherine rejected the warnings of strangers and friends alike—including Vincent. It had hurt a lot to finally acknowledge this truth, but Catherine felt her pain did nothing to negate her responsibility.

She had not understood the world of gangs and street wars. She thought interviewing a gang leader on his own turf would be a good way to retest her mettle after getting abducted and shot by Mitch Denton. She thought it was good way to prove that no corner of the city could ultimately escape the light of justice.

She'd found out that she was wrong. About every assumption she had made. Vincent saved her from her terrible blunder. And then Vincent paid the full price for her mistake.

Catherine recalled the many news reports about that night, most of them published in more reputable venues than the *Confidential*. She counted the days and nights that had passed since then, thinking, *God. February-the-twelfth strange. Was that really only last month?*

Vincent had barely recovered from that ordeal when Father went missing. Catherine had helped Vincent find Jacob Wells, helped Jacob Wells find Margaret Chase, and then helped bring the estranged couple home to each other. Catherine was, at any rate, pretty good at finding people.

"Finding and taking," as Vincent's young friend Mouse had told her on yet another harrowing day in the all-too-recent past. The three months since Vincent had come back into her life were the most eventful months she'd ever known. Between the crises Above and the catastrophes Below, Catherine sometimes felt like the knot at the middle of a tug-of-war rope.

But no, that wasn't fair. That wasn't fair to herself. And it wasn't fair to *him* at all. On Thursday night *(the night before Vincent disappeared!)* Catherine told him about the newest pull from the world Above. Providence had pulled her, and Vincent had not pulled her back.

No, he stood there and just smiled his beautiful, singular Vincent-smile. He encouraged me to see the gift in the opportunity. Then he set me free, to go or stay, but above all to go out and live my life for all it's worth. As Vincent always did. As he always had. It wasn't the underworld itself that pulled at her, but her own growing love for that place, and for the strange, gentle man who belonged there.

Catherine knew that no one had ever loved her the way Vincent loved her, and also that she had never felt for anyone else what she felt for Vincent. It was an unprecedented kind of love. His was an unbelievable world of hope and healing. Vincent was an unearthly would-be lover. And together, theirs was an unfamiliar dream that had frightened her, because around the time her mother died, Catherine had stopped daring to dream much of anything for her own life. It now struck her as a sad thing, that a ten-year-old girl should fail to dream deeply for as long as Catherine had. Even after she grew into a woman, living on her own in New York, she remained an unpracticed dreamer.

She walked along Sixth Avenue, heading north, toward Central Park. She let her thoughts slide out of investigator mode, allowing herself to view the upperworld with a dreamer's open heart. She asked more philosophical questions of herself. What did it mean to dream about the future, anyway? And to be free to dream? Was freedom a kind of existential disconnection? Did it mean cutting herself off from the people she knew and loved?

Walking, Catherine came upon Rockefeller Center, that vast complex of Art Deco grandeur. She realized with a nostalgic twinge that this place had given her thirty magical Christmas trees over the course of her lifetime. She remembered glittering winter nights out with her parents and grandparents, then just her mother and father, and then Daddy alone. Crossing West 47th Street, she glimpsed the corner jewelry store where Steven Bass had purchased the diamond engagement ring he couldn't really afford at the time, yet had been so proud to present to her. She regretted their youthful engagement now, but knew she would forever remember their loveliest romantic night together, and the tenderness of his proposal.

Onward, and onward, and across West 54th Street the Warwick Hotel's distinguished stonework greeted her with memories of the year her friend Aude Valois arrived from Paris like an auburn whirlwind. When had that been? Autumn of 1982, the busiest social season of Catherine's adult life, spent arm in arm with the most vivacious fashion diva she had ever known. "*Venez me retrouver à l'Hôtel Aude!*" had been their playful battlecry, an almost daily prelude to ravishing evenings out on the town, surrounded by their admiring entourage.

She walked another block, then decided she did not want to end up on West 57th Street, in

full view of her father's law firm—indeed, within sight of the windows in Dad's office suite. Catherine turned west, her heart full of old friends and old flames, family now lost and a father still living. Truly, her past was nothing that ought to be forgotten or abandoned. Her experiences comprised the essential accumulation of moments and memories that had made her who she was today.

To remove herself from her own history, to try to start over someplace else—that wasn't independence. That was isolation. And what did it prove? Was Providence Catherine's chance to show herself that she didn't need friends—or their love—to be a functional adult in the modern world?

Standing alone in the dark like a lighthouse for lost souls seemed a noble dream. It was also a very *lonely* dream. That identity might offer a meaningful life to a certain kind of person. But as she walked through cloudy springtime sunlight in the city she loved, Catherine decided that she wasn't meant to be a lighthouse. For her, that would be an empty-hearted life.

What is my life worth, anyway? Catherine asked herself.

All her ruminations over the past several weeks rose up like a tidal wave in her imagination. Catherine gripped her purse strap with one hand and her newspaper with the other and let the wave come down. It submerged her past and her future, her fears and her joys, her friendships and her enemies.

What Catherine saw when the wave receded was a young woman standing in an open field at the edge of a high cliff. She paced a round section of well-trampled grass and stared out at the world through a ring of bars that wasn't truly there. This fashionable thirty-year-old had willed a cage into being in her own mind—a cage comprised, not of relationships as she had at first believed, but rather the *trappings* of relationships, the consequences of connection and of disconnection in the world she had inherited from her ancestors.

The bars of Catherine's cell were traditional Heathcott and Chandler family mores, her 1974 debut during the International Debutante Ball at the Waldorf-Astoria, and an endless stream of latter-day evenings spent entertaining self-interested people who complimented Catherine's prettiness and occasionally her cleverness. Women gave her introductions to eligible bachelors, and running commentary about other guests, and invitations to other gala celebrations. Men gave her small gifts to demonstrate the respective depths of their bank accounts, and also theatre tickets, and the best seats at benefit concerts.

Cathy Chandler's well-mannered charms won her many an admirer, and many more acquaintances, but few close friends. With all her might, she pretended this cage of social obligation was not there, and she shipped herself (first class, of course) to Europe, to Asia, to the Caribbean, to Mexico and South America, to anywhere that was not home—only to meet disappointment there because wherever she went, she was *never* home.

In flight from that homelessness, Cathy-in-a-cage took up the devious shuttlecock game of advising high-finance corporations, mediating mergers and settlements, leveraging buy-outs and negotiating smooth sailing for city development companies—all while escaping the windowless junior office at her father's firm whenever possible. Last July, trading corporate law for criminal law gave Catherine a new challenge, put her skills (she felt) to better use, but her new job had also locked her into the insanities of urban crime. She still relied upon her cage to give her an illusion of security from all the uncertainties that life piled on top of her at every turn.

Feeling sad for her prisoner-self, Catherine thought: *The biggest uncertainty I've ever met is the beautiful being who goes by the name of Vincent. I've been running from my world's violence, and my own history, and the dark places in my own soul, and the closest friend I've ever had...or will ever have. And you know what? All the running has only taken me around and*

around in a little tiny circle.

She relaxed her hands and lifted her chin. *I am Catherine Chandler, and my life is worth much more than that. I have so much more to give the world than one more woman caught up in one more cage.*

Catherine stopped walking. "I'm not going to Providence," she said aloud. The words spoken, she felt better—more settled—than she had for days. Maybe weeks.

"Good for you!" a man's cheerful voice answered her.

Catherine looked at the man who had spoken to her. She was standing in front of a street hawker's folding card table, a squareful of sunglasses delineating the space between herself and the elderly entrepreneur. He slid his own set of shades down his nose as he looked her over. "Ain't no place like this place," he added. "Can I interest the pretty lady in a new pair o' specs?"

Catherine shook her head. "Not today."

The man nodded sagely. "Your shinin' eyes? I wouldn't cover 'em over either. And never for reading *that*. Strain would do you in!" He pointed a wrinkled but clean white index finger at the newspaper Catherine held. Then he placed his hand over his heart and astonished Catherine with a poem.

"*Rest Master, for we be a-weary, weary*
And would feel the fingers of the wind
Upon these lids that lie over us
Sodden and lead-heavy.

"*Rest brother, for lo! the dawn is without!*
The yellow flame paleth
And the wax runs low.

"*Free us, for without be goodly colours,*
Green of the wood-moss and flower colours,
And coolness beneath the trees.

"*Free us, for we perish*
In this ever-flowing monotony
Of ugly print marks, black
Upon white parchment.

"*Free us, for there is one*
Whose smile more availeth
Than all the age-old knowledge of thy books:
And we would look thereon."

The man held his hands out toward Catherine and she couldn't help smiling a little. His dramatic recitation had drawn a little gathering of people from along the sidewalk. Other pedestrians avoided the onlookers, hurrying by without looking twice.

"Ezra Pound, ladies and gents," said the man. "In honor of life's true delights and the eyes we got for lookin' at it all." He took a bow to scattered applause. He winked at Catherine. "Finuh woids was nevuh inked intuh print," he said, exaggerating Brooklyn brogue into verbal parody. Now he snapped his fingers and called, "Lemme just tell everybody, you gotta be

judicious with your *eyes*! Take this pair of shades here..."

Still smiling, Catherine slipped away. She turned toward the street and raised her arm to hail a cab. In the aftermath of her inner tidal wave, practical thoughts sprouted and blossomed again. Her one lead toward finding Vincent had dead-ended, at least until tomorrow. The most productive thing she could do with the rest of her day was to go home and unpack.

II

23 March 1987
Monday Evening

Five minutes after Hughes set the bowl of water in the cage, the creature was still staring at it. To put it more accurately, he hadn't moved a muscle since the professor slid the second small white melamine bowl between two bars of the cage door. Hughes kept a set of three such bowls in his lab. They came in handy whenever his research projects required him to care for live animals. The bowls were small for a beast of this size, but using these dishes meant they could keep the cage door shut and locked at all times.

Watching the creature, Hughes wondered, *Does he understand that I've introduced food and water into his environment? Or is he merely studying these new objects...the way he examined the other things in the cage when he woke up?*

The video footage was *very* interesting. The creature definitely possessed far more than a crow's curiosity. His intense concentration continued to suggest *intelligence* to Hughes. The professor just didn't know what kind of intelligence he was looking at. He felt puzzled by the creature's silence and stillness.

He stopped all his explorations when we rejoined him in this room. And now he won't even look at us. Why?

Just as Hughes started writing his questions down in his anecdotal logbook, the creature's stillness suddenly ended. Hughes put his pen into the front pocket of his lab coat. The creature gave his head a little shake and twisted his body to the side, grasping the bars for support. He crept across the cage floor on his knees, moving his hands from bar to bar, until he knelt beside the water bowl. He disregarded the dish of slivered beef.

Hughes compared these blunt movements to his memories of the creature's fleet agility in the park. This present performance—the muscular tremors, and the dysmetria Hughes witnessed as the creature reached for the water and missed the bowl—proved that the creature had not recovered from his tranquilization.

And besides all that, the seizure's neurological aftershocks could hinder our research for hours or days to come, Hughes was annoyed to know. *Jonathan hasn't done any of us any favors in that regard.*

The professor was surprised when the creature did not bring his snout to the surface of the water. Nor did the creature dip his hands to lift palmfuls of water to his mouth. Instead, he picked up the bowl and drank as if from a large cup, spilling a lot of the water in the process.

Hughes felt his anxieties diminish. Wonder filled him again. Anthropomorphic features, yes, and at least the vestiges of encultured behavior. This creature understood the function of the bowl as a *container*.

Jonathan should be seeing this! Hughes thought. But Jonathan had stepped out for a bite

to eat. Hughes regretted not starting up the camcorder after Jonathan left. He glanced around the lab. The Polaroid was close by. Hughes snatched up the camera and snapped a picture.

The creature set the bowl on the metal floor panel after only a few swallows. He bowed his head and resumed his physically quiet demeanor, his right shoulder leaning against the hinged side of the door frame. After a moment, his rate of respiration increased and he bent forward, turning his face toward the floor outside the bars.

"Oh, you're not going to be able to keep it down, are you?" Hughes commented to himself as much as to the creature.

To his dismay, Hughes watched his prediction come true.

The creature tried to drink twice more, each time meeting the same result. Finally abandoning the empty water bowl, he returned to the back of the cage to sink down upon his crumpled blanket. He lay on his right side with his head resting on his outstretched arm, not quite panting, eyes shut tight. Hughes completed his written observations. He took another picture, added both of the new photos to his collection, and went to his storage space again for cleaning supplies.

"Perhaps we should try an anti-emetic," he muttered. "Balance things out a little." He thought about his stockpile of pharmaceuticals as he worked. Whether he gave an injection or administered capsules, he faced substantial risks to his own safety, not to mention his subject's safety if the creature became agitated by medical intervention. It would be best if the creature voluntarily ingested his medication. Hughes thought it might be possible to mix powdered pills into the creature's food, or he could dissolve them in drinking water.

He frowned, thinking, *The creature doesn't look like he's ready to try eating anything.* Hughes considered injection as he returned the mop and bucket to the storage area. *Maybe I can just walk around to the back of the cage and give the creature a shot while he's resting.*

It was worth a try.

Hughes came back into the lab. He went to the appropriate supply drawer and took out a disposable hypodermic. He was reaching for the drug locker when he stopped, arrested by a sound from the cage. He turned. The creature faced him, raising himself up on one elbow, glaring. A low growl vibrated in his throat. He wasn't showing his teeth; he was watching the professor's hands. He was—

"Warning me off?" Hughes asked. He looked down at the hypo he held. Curious to see what would happen, Hughes set the syringe on a shelf and stepped away from it.

The growling stopped.

He remembers! thought Hughes. *He recognizes the hypodermic as a thing he doesn't want, associating it with past events! One sighting, one experience, and he knows the purpose of specific objects!*

The creature was still watching Hughes, although now he dropped back to lean against the bars rather than upon his elbow.

And...also...he just communicated his objections...to me! He initiated the interaction this time! It's a beginning beyond mimicry!

Hughes felt childlike. It could be Christmastime, with new surprises behind each paper door of the advent calendar and gifts piling up beneath the tree. All he had to do was unwrap his presents in the right order. He envisioned his long-term studies. The documentation. His papers. Publication. Acclaim. He knew he was grinning. Ecstasy lightly lobbed his rejuvenated soul into Wonderland.

The creature still wasn't looking into his eyes, Hughes noticed then. He pulled his scientific self back down to earth. *That is such a strange thing,* he thought. *The beast never looks*

me, or Jonathan, directly in the eye. What is the significance of that behavior? Many animals (and most predators) looked to the eyes in order to gain important information about intent, or to communicate with another animal. This creature looked at everything *except* his examiners' eyes: gesture, movement, and posture, most likely. And rather than speaking to Hughes, he growled.

The professor pushed further questions to the back of his mind. He had a different puzzle to solve at the moment, a *vital* puzzle. He needed to figure out how to help his creature take in nourishment.

He decided to reward the creature's demonstrative vocalization. He tried the pills-dissolved-in-water scenario rather than injection. But when he set the treated bowl inside the cage, the creature glanced at the water and turned his face away from Hughes, refusing both man and bowl. Hughes had anticipated the creature's unwillingness to try drinking again so soon. But this deliberate gesture of rejection meant something else.

Tantalized by the new puzzle piece, Hughes left the bowl in the cage and took up his notebook. He recorded all that had happened, wrote out his questions, noted his speculations. *A miracle. Yes, a real-life miracle and a magnificent riddle. I've never felt so happy,* he thought.

There came a knock at the door. "Professor Hughes?" Jonathan called.

Hughes let him in. An aroma of hot food wafted in from his office.

"I thought you might want something too, so I got takeout," Jonathan said. "You like Chinese?"

"Right now, I like anything." Hughes felt pleasantly surprised by the young man's thoughtfulness. This must be Jonathan's way of apologizing for their previous misunderstandings. "What do I owe?"

"Whatever you'd like to contribute. Come eat while it's hot. Or is he," Jonathan nodded at the cage, "doing anything interesting?"

Hughes set his notebook on a table. "The creature himself is fascinating, but he seems to be resting at the moment. I'll tell you what you missed over dinner."

Jonathan made an avid audience for both the professor's anecdotal observations and the stream of questions they inspired. He expressed his own strong interest in the creature's growling. He believed it proved his hypothesis about the creature's potential for true speech.

"Again, Professor: if he can, why doesn't he? He's not sedated now."

"He's also not fully recovered," Hughes countered. He set a take-out carton on his desk and reached for his Styrofoam coffee cup.

Jonathan shook his head. "You have to stop making these excuses. There's no evidence, there's no data—"

"I *heard* him."

"The occurrence hasn't been repeated and can't be verified, so it doesn't matter what you think you heard."

Hughes leaned back in his chair, cup in hand, exasperated. The young man was starting to remind him of Leland Quint. Hughes didn't like to make this comparison, but there it was.

"You act like he's going to stand up at any moment and start quoting Shakespeare," Jonathan said. The mocking tone was creeping into his voice. He dropped two empty cartons and his plastic fork into the professor's wastebasket. "Look," he said. "Let's go in there and settle this."

Hughes didn't know what Jonathan had in mind, but he followed him into the lab, both of them slipping into their lab coats as they walked. Hughes locked the door behind them, as usual, and stood beside his assistant. They surveyed the room. Things had changed.

The food and water bowls were no longer inside the cage. They now sat on the floor of

the lab, half a meter from the bars. A smear of moisture across the floor showed the track the water bowl had taken when the creature pushed it away. Some of the water had spilled, but the creature did not simply tip the bowl out of his space, nor did he accidentally drop it. Likewise, no meat had spilled out of the second bowl, and none of the meal was missing. The creature had not eaten any of it.

Maybe he doesn't like cooked meat? Hughes thought, although that made no sense if the creature lived by scavenge in this city.

The creature had also arranged his blanket along one diagonal of the metal floor, and moved the cushion into a back corner of the cage. Looking at the tidy geometry of the creature's work, Hughes thought, *He's folded that blanket by quarters!* The beast now reclined upon his bedding, his wide shoulders resting against the corner bars. He gazed fixedly at the taxonomy diagram on the wall across the room from him.

"He's organizing his environment!" Hughes gasped. He rushed to his notebook.

Jonathan buttoned his lab coat and said, "While you're writing that down, be sure to get this, too."

The young man walked toward the creature until he stood an arm's length from the cage. He tapped on a steel bar. "Hey! Look up here."

The creature did not respond.

Jonathan repeated himself three times, then he went to the shelf where Hughes had left the hypodermic. He picked it up.

The creature did not respond.

Jonathan brought the syringe to the cage and waved it across the creature's line of sight.

The creature looked at the cage floor.

"Hypodermic," Jonathan pronounced. "Hy-po-derm-ic. Hy-po. Needle. Neeee-dle."

Nothing.

Jonathan glanced at Hughes and returned the syringe to the supply drawer. He resumed his position in front of the cage. "I'll try something different."

Hughes continued to take notes.

"Catherine," Jonathan said.

The creature closed his eyes.

"Cath-er-ine. Cath-er-ine. Catherine Catherine Catherine. Come on. Speak up. Say 'Catherine.' *Catherine*."

The creature remained mute.

Jonathan turned to Hughes. "I'm sorry, Professor. There's nothing to see because there's nothing there."

Hughes pointed to the bowls. "*That* is an intentional, intelligent act. And the bedding—"

Jonathan rolled his eyes. "Gorillas make nests from surrounding foliage. And we don't know what happened with the bowls. Maybe he doesn't like to sleep near his water source. Maybe the medication has a bitter smell or taste. Maybe he was trying to cache his food. You should have left the camera running during dinner."

Quite true. If Hughes was ever going to overcome Jonathan's point of view (and his rationalizations) then Jonathan had to witness the creature's most puzzling behaviors for himself —in person, or on tape.

"Yes," Hughes said. "That's fine. Let's set it up now."

So they did. They stood beside the camcorder on its tripod. And they watched.

The creature opened his eyes after a few minutes. He stared up at the diagram. For approximately twenty-five minutes more, nothing else happened. They talked to him. They

pretended to ignore him, and talked to each other. They coaxed him with pieces of meat from his bowl. They hallooed at him and waved their arms.

Nothing.

At that point, Hughes got down on the floor beside the creature and reached through the bars to run his hand over the creature's mane—this against Jonathan's warning that the creature could easily take the professor's fingers off at the knuckles with one bite. Hughes pointed out that the creature had been perfectly docile all day. Jonathan rolled his eyes and kept one hand on the grip of the dart pistol. When had he found the opportunity to load the thing again? Hughes told Jonathan to get away from the gun. Jonathan frowned, but did so. The creature vindicated the professor's philosophical position by not biting him.

"See?" Hughes murmured to the creature, feeling his heart thump hard from both the danger and the delight. "It's all right. We're all friends here. Aaaall friends. Try that: say, 'friends.'"

"*Amigos*," Jonathan remarked from a few feet away, where he now stood frowning with his hands in his coat pockets. "*Druzya*. *Amis*."

The creature breathed a little faster and pulled a few millimeters away from Hughes, then he stopped and held still. He looked at neither scientist. He didn't speak.

"Get a picture, will you?" asked Hughes. "It's good to establish some comparative scale in the record." Jonathan flashed the Polaroid at them.

Hughes continued to stroke the creature's head for a while. It felt different, now that the creature was awake. An energy pulsed beneath the professor's fingers, a responsive potential. This was like touching a live leopard, a bear, a gorilla—some wild *thing*, large and masterful and marvelous.

The creature began to tremble beneath the professor's hand. "Okay. It's okay," Hughes murmured. The creature might be getting frightened, or angry, and Jonathan's warning was not unwarranted.

"Still friends here," Hughes said. He got up and took the photo from Jonathan. The picture went into the album, and Hughes made more notes in his anecdotal log. The creature stopped trembling. He made no further movements and no sounds at all.

"Professor, why don't we just agree to put the language issue on hold for now?" Jonathan suggested at last. "We have other responses to look for."

Hughes sighed, but he nodded. Setting his notebook down, he got up from his lab chair and worked alongside Jonathan to discover how the creature would react to an ordered succession of new experiences. He or Jonathan snapped photos at appropriate intervals.

To start, they clipped a plastic mirror to a meter stick and passed it through the bars. They held it up to the creature's face. The creature didn't look at his reflection, or at the mirror. He didn't even refocus his eyes, but seemed to be looking *through* the plastic piece. When they withdrew the mirror, the creature resumed his contemplation of the diagram on the wall as though there had been no obstruction to his view.

Next, they introduced a tennis ball into the cage. It rolled out and bopped in tiny bounces across the floor of the lab. Hughes picked it up and rolled it into the cage more gently the second time. It nudged the creature's hairy fingers and came to rest against the pillow beneath the creature's elbow. The creature took no notice. Jonathan poked the ball out of the cage with the meter stick, and prodded the creature for good measure, but the creature didn't move.

"Ever see a dog that wasn't in the mood to play?" Jonathan asked. "At some point, it *does* get annoyed. This animal doesn't react at all."

"So I can see," Hughes said, thinking, *And it's the damnedest thing, too*. He wrote out

more questions in his notebook.

They tried noisome stimuli. Jonathan whistled at a loud, taxi-hailing pitch, which met with no response. Hughes taped a piece of sandpaper to the end of the meter stick and traced lines with it down the side of the creature's face, which—surprisingly—also met with no response. The creature didn't even turn his head away. Jonathan stood in front of the diagram on the wall. The creature looked *through* him. Hughes flashed the beam of a penlight at the creature. Finally, the creature did something: he closed his eyes.

Then he kept his eyes shut. No matter what the two scientists did. For over an hour.

"I think he's asleep again," Jonathan said.

Hughes wasn't so sure, but didn't say anything. He sat down on the lab chair and jotted his thoughts onto paper, reflecting,

> It's as if he's holding back. Deliberately remaining silent. If so, it's an act of will—intention again. Perhaps even more intentional than the growling. Creature's spontaneous demonstrations keep adding pieces to the puzzle. Basic evidence of executive skills, learning and memory abilities, possible language skills—but all demonstrations are few and far between. We must discover positive reinforcers to consistently engage the creature's attention.

"Professor," Jonathan said, interrupting his written thoughts, "It doesn't matter if he's non-responsive right now. We have plenty of data to get started. Enough to publicize our find—"

Hughes stood up and snapped his notebook closed.

Jonathan subsided, but Hughes thought he looked querulous.

"Listen," Hughes said. "It's late. We're both tired. Let's go home, catch some sleep. We'll leave the camera running and see what we have in the morning."

Jonathan looked like he might have something more to say just then, but he only nodded his head.

Hughes removed the evening session's cassette from the camcorder and put in a blank tape. Meanwhile, Jonathan picked up the rejected bowls. He daubed at the remaining splatter of water with a towel and put the beef in the mini-fridge.

"Just leave him fresh water," Hughes said absently, as he filled out the label on the evening's recording. "Don't add anything to it. If you're right about the smell, he might try to drink plain water later."

At last, his records locked in their drawer, all the lights except one overhead lamp switched off, and the camcorder rolling, Hughes followed Jonathan out of the lab. He turned in the doorway for one last look at the mysterious creature in the cage. Then he closed the door and locked it. It had been a long three days. Hughes felt he had earned a good night's rest.

III

23 March 1987
Monday Night

The search Below was over. Father ended it after Winslow told him the search parties had explored every conceivable underground location. Winslow had asked him if Father wanted them to spread out and search the unlikelier places.

"No. If Vincent is below the city in some *inconceivable* place, then we have no hope of finding him this way. It's better to concentrate our efforts on supporting the search Above."

Winslow had agreed, not liking the way things were turning out, but knowing that what Father said was right on track with reality.

"And Mouse?" Father asked then. "Has anyone heard from him?"

No one had seen their eccentric young friend since the search for Vincent began, when Mouse announced that he alone knew all the best places to look. "No," Winslow had said. "Mouse is out on his own mission." In a way, this was the most helpful thing the kid could do, but at the same time—

Father understood Winslow's fears. "I know the boy is distraught. But perhaps he's our best searcher Below. If *Mouse* can't find Vincent down here, I don't believe anyone else will. Mouse will turn up when he needs us again." Father chose that moment to sit down in his chair with rheumatic slowness, clenching his jaw to stretch out his bad leg.

Winslow had watched this without commenting, knowing Sunday's jaunt Topside had taken a lot out of the old man. Father had spoken with Catherine below her apartment house that day. He had also gone to Maria to talk to her in person. Then he went down to Wall Street and nosed around beneath the Faber Mutual Trust, one of Vincent's favorite rooftop perches in the city Above.

Deborah had already visited that building's roof and found nothing but pigeons. In the underlying tunnels, Father found nothing but rats. Working his way home from there, Father looked in on those Helpers who made their homes south of Central Park. No Vincent. No trace of Vincent.

Geoffrey, who had accompanied Father on this pilgrimage, reported that by the time they came back through the Whispering Gallery, the man was limping worse than Geoffrey had ever seen him do. Father had asked for a moment alone. The boy left Father standing at the center of a bridge, staring silently into the Abyss.

Some of Father's silences could delve deeper even than Vincent's.

"Call everyone in, Winslow. Our people need stability more than ever right now. Find out which of our search party members would be willing to join Maria's teams Above. Then let's try to get things back to normal in the Tunnels. We'll see what we can do to assist our Helpers, Topside."

Precious little, Winslow thought now, mopping his face with a rag. They got plenty of news from Above, but it was all the same message: *We've looked for Vincent here, we've looked for Vincent there, and we've found neither hide nor hair of him*. It was maddening. Winslow didn't understand how Pascal could stand to receive and relay that bilge, over and over and over again.

For Winslow, getting the Tunnels back to normal meant picking up the Maze Barricades Project where they'd all dropped it. This late hour found him sitting with his transport crew at the entrance to the Inner Maze, ringed by the stacks of materials they'd brought down with them. They needed to rest here for a few more minutes before they returned to the upper levels for the night.

Winslow was not a happy man. None of them were in a good mood. It was like the night when Father up and left the Tunnels, getting himself arrested by the police, with no way to get word Below. It was also like the time when Devin disappeared, and the Tunnelfolk had combed

the Maze, fearing to find the boy's body buried beneath a slide of mud and stone. No one ever found him.

Men and women spoke in hushed tones around the blacksmith, worrying about the missing members of their community. At any other time, everyone expected Mouse and Vincent to take care of themselves. But Mouse had been very upset by the search. And Vincent never just *vanished*.

Winslow rolled his head from side to side, rubbing the back of his neck. It had been his job (with Luke's help) to lug the heaviest metal piece through the narrow passages into this place. He felt plenty glad he'd augmented the cumbersome centerplate with a set of removable wheels in his workshop. Being able to roll the thing over smooth sections of the tunnel floor cut their transit time in half. All the same, the centerplate weighed more than a couple hundred pounds and Winslow was tired out.

He thought, *It would've been Vincent on this crew, handling that, if Vincent were here. He'd have fit better through those twisty spots in the Goosechase Passage*. Vincent was big, but Winslow was bigger—and, well, heftier. Winslow was a lot less flexible, anyway.

José handed the bag of gorp to Winslow, who chewed a couple handfuls before passing the bag on to Jamie and Michael. "So, we're done down here, right?" José asked.

"Yeah," said Winslow. "The delivery team is done delivering. Send the water around and then we'll head out." He watched his dejected crew munch William's trail mix, and sip water, and murmur in low voices.

Jumping back on his original train of thought, he groused to himself, *And once we let go of The Case of the Missing Mouse, Father passed along the news that Catherine had no idea where Vincent might be. Hadn't seen him.* Winslow still wasn't sure what to make of that.

He believed Catherine's revelation was really the most worrisome version of not-hide-nor-hair. How well he remembered the way that fierce woman threw herself into getting Vincent out of the cave-in, coming Down on her own like that! Catherine had backed the best rescue plan right away, and she'd run difficult supplies in for them on a moment's notice. Then she stood her ground in front of a crowd of strangers—hell, she stood up to Winslow himself!—pleading for everyone's help, uniting their divided efforts to save Vincent and Father before their air ran out in that collapsed pocket of the Maze.

Winslow didn't doubt for a second that Catherine made one hell of a lawyer. She could probably give Vincent a run for his money—and that was saying something. Winslow had spent quite a few Council meetings butting heads with his logical friend. He figured, anyone who could match Vincent in rhetoric must be a force to be reckoned with in the city Above.

He thought: *A classy lady like that...I get why Vincent loves her. And they've got that crazy-strange connection between them. If Mouse can't find Vincent Below, and Catherine doesn't know where to look Up Top, what's left? Jersey? Florida? The moon?*

Winslow looked at the salvaged beams and boards in their barricade supply pile, and told himself not to get stupid. *Got to stay real now,* he thought. Then he had to add, *Well, as real as a body can get where Vincent is concerned.* And this set him to pondering some of the more unreal elements of the situation.

Like the fact that some people know about Vincent's uncanny internal reckoning, while other people don't, except maybe by distant rumor. Winslow was definitely one of those in the know. It wasn't comfortable knowledge, but he'd become accustomed to it over the years. Plenty of other people had done the same, and when they talked about it among themselves, they were careful with what they said.

Winslow understood that being in on the crazy-strange tended to set you apart. At first,

sure, it kind of messed with your ideas about the way the world ought to work, but Vincent in general did *that*. After a while, you just got used to Vincent, and to his extant impossibility. If you ended up getting friendly with the man, you also got used to the fact that Vincent *knew* things about people. If you stuck around long enough, you found out that his hunches and premonitions usually played out just the way they came to him. And if you were an old-timer, you might even develop your own counterpoint to Vincent's sixth sense.

Devin had something like that with Vincent, back before Devin went missing. Old Vernon too, during the man's sundown years. Vincent and Mouse could talk to each other in Mousespeak without any trouble. Vincent and Rebecca hardly needed to talk to each other at all. And Winslow was convinced that some kind of *big* crazy-strangeness stretched between Vincent and Father. Watching the two of *them* get to talking was a lot like listening in on a piped conversation tapped out in one of Pascal's experimental codes: heavy on the abbreviations, light on the coherence for the uninitiated.

Catherine had known about all this stuff for such a very little while, yet she'd already tuned in to Vincent's ways. It didn't creep her out. She'd stuck around. Winslow was sorry she wasn't going to stick around longer.

A man doesn't cross paths with a woman like Vincent's Catherine more than once in a lifetime, Winslow felt certain. *If that. But...I guess Vincent does have a knack for befriending some of the strangest people in New York.*

Winslow thought of Vernon, originally a homeless veteran wandering a beggar's circuit around the city (and maybe the only Outsider Winslow had ever liked on sight). This was the man who tamed himself a night-rambling boy named Vincent and then followed the Tunnelkids' trail into the city's upper drainage system. Vernon had claimed their world as his rightful home the instant he set foot Below.

Then Winslow thought about 'Dox, that smart little marmalade tabby Vincent brought down from the park one night—and the fight Vincent put up to keep her. Vernon himself had backed the kid up on that one. Talk about crazy-strange: Vincent and that cat brought a fresh spark of life into the Tunnels, although which of that pair had been the protective shadow and which the enlivening flame, Winslow could never decide.

Thinking about stealthy shadows brought Rebecca to Winslow's mind. He remembered the night he'd taken Vincent and Mitch Up Top to root through a demolition site's piles of scrap and broken masonry. Vincent had caught a skinny little girl trying to sneak out from under a jackstraws scatter of rotted beams. The boy stepped right in front of the silent waif, blocking her best escape route. They looked at each other, looked *into* each other. Then the boy held out his hand like a courtier and when Rebecca dropped the heel of stale bread she was holding, Vincent escorted her Below, not a spoken word passing between the two children.

Winslow also remembered the sultry Midsummer's Eve of 1971 (a quiet hiatus in the middle of a genuinely FUBAR time for the Tunnelfolk), when a Helper brought Laura Below. The tiny deaf girl cowered away from everyone—except for Vincent. The youth gave her his first smile in many long months and let the child pet his face.

Vincent liked to keep his eye on tons of other kids in both worlds. It was Vincent who carried Amy Renloft home after he chased off the teenage muggers who broke her wheelchair, trying to steal it from her—yeah, the girl's *wheelchair*. Vincent was the one who had stalked, caught, and civilized Mouse, a high-strung, off-the-wall boy who had a way of capturing the hearts of everybody who knew him. Vincent had always been a popular visitor in the Nursery too, soothing frightened little ones, reading bedtime stories, and resolving disputes with impressive patience and fairness. He taught classes and tutored individuals. He played hide-and-

seek or tunnel stickball like a gung-ho ten-year-old. He was a total kid-magnet. Children loved him.

Vincent also kept watch over the community's elderly Helpers, and sent visitors to them when he could not go himself. And he often knew by name many of the individual vagabonds who bedded down on the city's grates and benches Above, those more-or-less trustworthy individuals who did not shun Undergroundlings out of hand. Certain denizens from some of the other underworld settlements knew Vincent—or knew *of* him—from the anonymous deeds of kindness he had performed to help them out, although none of these Outsiders knew precisely where their mysterious benefactor lived; Vincent guarded his secrets well.

Another thing he was good at: delivering sick and wounded Streetfolk to hospitals and clinics around the city—without betraying anyone's secrets along the way. He had a definite thing for protecting anyone who got lost in New York's darkest, loneliest byways. Most recently, this was Catherine Chandler: left for dead in the park, but nursed back to life through Vincent's steadfast care.

Winslow thought, *If only someone could look out for Vincent the way he looks out for his strays. Lord knows, I tried.*

Once Devin got gone, and especially after Mitch took off, Winslow *sure* tried. Even during the years Winslow spent living Above, learning his trade and figuring out what he wanted from life, he made sure to check in with his young friend Below. They even exchanged Helper-delivered letters for a while, like pen pals. Then, once Winslow got his fill of Topsider dreck, he came home. That was back in 1980. Winslow had gone Topside maybe ten times since then.

The Tunnelfolk welcomed Winslow as a much-needed smith and heavy mechanic. He found that his intuitive childhood friend had taken over Tunnels security from their previous warden, Vernon. The new blacksmith and the new chief watchman often shared complementary tasks. Working together to maintain their entrances and Perimeter gave Winslow a solid appreciation for the man Vincent had become.

Those eight years Above had changed Winslow, making him eternally grateful for the quiet, peace-loving world his mother had bequeathed to him. He came back Down ready and willing to stay there for the rest of his life. The eight years Below had changed Vincent too. The quirky tag-along kid had grown tall, in body and spirit. The new Vincent was soft-spoken, yet eloquent when he did speak—and he'd become more enamored with forbidden wonders from Above than ever. The new Winslow was content to settle in and let the Topsiders cart themselves off to hell in whatever handbasket they chose, so long as they left Winslow and his folk alone.

Yes, Winslow thought. *Rebecca's got me pegged a homebody, and I'm proud to be so. But Vincent's still got that wayward spirit of his, dragging him skyward so he can ogle the moon. It's never mattered that he can't have the moon. It heartens him just to know it's up there, where he can go look at it now and again. He meets an awful lot of his strays by its light.*

Winslow hoped his friend's wanderings would lead him home ASAP, but the longer Vincent stayed missing, the surer Winslow became that Vincent had gotten into some bad trouble. The man was wily, streetwise as any of the Tunnelkids—and armed with razor-sharp claws, and a seriously scary set of long, lion-like fangs. But Vincent was only an army-of-one against a world full of psychos. And he wasn't a militant army at all.

In fact, Vincent was really more like a peace-corps-of-one. That was what made him the best possible security warden. Even better than Vernon, in a lot of ways. Vincent never flew off the handle, wanting to pick a fight. *Hell,* Winslow thought, *but when it DOES come down to a fight, you want to be sure as sunrise that Vincent stays on your side of it!*

He shook his head, thinking that over. Even the best fighter could be overpowered if the

odds were stacked high enough against him. Winslow had *seen* his friend the morning after that Broome Street gang got through with him. Vincent had been cleaned up, and he'd had a few hours to start healing—and Vincent always healed *fast*. He still looked like he'd gone up against a Sherman tank.

"Close," Vincent had told Winslow that day, his voice weak and full of pain. "Felt like a tank, anyway."

Winslow could see it must be hard for him to talk. Vincent's mouth was bruised up on one side and he had nasty flash burns all over his face and neck, scorched and blistered spots on his throat. Also, he couldn't take a deep breath. According to Father, Vincent had six broken ribs. Five, all on the same side. There was a lot more wrong with him, but Winslow didn't get the full butcher's bill until much later.

"There was a car," Vincent said.

"You got hit by a car?" Winslow, who know how it was to be a Black boy caught Up Top in the wrong place at the wrong time, very calmly wrapped his hands around the book he'd brought with him into Vincent's chamber.

Then Vincent coughed, and his bloodshot eyes teared up because he hurt so bad, and Winslow's fingers had clenched indentations into Thornton Wilder's *The Ides of March*. Better to squish up a book than to explode. Winslow knew if he exploded, Vincent's faithful ice-eyed Doberman of a day nurse, Rebecca, would kick Winslow out and he probably wouldn't get to see his friend again for a week.

"A big car," Vincent elaborated, when he could inhale again.

Winslow had a rough job bedeviling information out of Father and the sentries who helped Vincent home that night. If Winslow understood things aright, there had also been: a bomb, switchblade knives, shotguns, revolvers, chains, a crowbar, a butane torch, cigarettes and cigarillos, several glass bottles, a couple bad falls, and a lot of hard fists. Rumor had it (originating from Catherine's account) that the tripe-visaged, bunch-backed brutes had beaten Vincent so hard, they'd *bent* their crowbar.

Four days passed before Vincent got out of bed again, and Father didn't have to do anything special to keep him there. So, yeah. As Vincent's first stray, Vernon, might have said: the sharpest sword—though it be finely wrought, with many jewels agleam in its long scabbard, though it be a noble tool in the hand of a valiant knight, and though it slay many a foe upon the honorable field of glory—was no goddamn match for a Howitzer at point blank range.

The canteen made it around to Winslow. He took a deep swig. He began to think about what his night should look like once he got back up to the Hub.

Mary's probably frazzled by now, he thought. *She needs to rest so she can look after the kids tomorrow without breaking down. If they're not already on top of things, I'll talk to Sara and Ezra about checking in on everybody in the Nursery. Father's bound to be caught up in a blizzard of maps, rosters, and notes from the Helpers. I can hang tight in the Hub for a while, maybe convince him to get some sleep.*

If nothing else, Winslow might just sit in the Study with the old man to keep him from going totally bananas. He could brew tea on Father's little Trangia stove and listen to him when he needed to talk. Winslow sighed. When Father got stressed out, he was not an easy man to listen to.

It's not just the heavy lifting jobs in skinny passageways, V, he thought out into the night at his friend. *It's everything else, too. I'm not all that good at filling your boots. They're too big for me. Come home, man.*

Winslow drank more of the water and stood up. "We all rested?" he called to his transport

crew. Nods and uh-huhs answered him. “Okay. You lot did good work tonight. Homeward, folks.”

The group stood up and packed away the food and water. Then they retraced their route, moving steadily upward in a long line. Winslow brought up the rear, taking a careful headcount before he fell into step behind everyone else—just to make sure no one got lost, or left behind.

IV

23 March 1987
Monday Night

Vincent lay quietly in the cage, admiring a compound microscope fitted with a binoviewer. His captors had left the microscope on one of the laboratory’s polished metal tables, just to the left of the bulletin board. It looked like a self-illuminating version of Father’s microscope. Both the model Above and the model Below were far newer than Vincent’s own monocular instrument. Vincent liked microscopes. They were useful. They enlarged his perspective. They showed him that the world functioned according to underpinnings that had nothing to do with the madness of Topside humanity.

Vincent looked at this valuable tool of science, and not at the professor’s video camera. He was thinking about the day he sat at the table in his chamber, observing the inhabitants of a drop of water through the lenses of his antique Asahi microscope. In that water droplet, a larger amoeba discovered and devoured a smaller amoeba, each creature enacting the eternal struggle for life beneath Vincent’s curious eye.

Examining his memories of combat often felt like that to him, like he was watching victories and defeats unfold on an exotically minute scale. After they were over, most of Vincent’s battles felt illusory, as though they could never have happened. As though *Vincent* could never have been the one to take a stand and either win or lose a fight. And yet these inconceivable conflicts seemed to be Vincent’s lot in life. Herein lay one of many facts he’d come to accept about himself. Fate, and many wise friends like Vernon, Elizabeth, Ezra, Dr. Wong, Narcissa, Rebecca and Pascal, had helped him understand that there were innumerable ways to become embroiled in battle. The easiest way to get drawn into a war was simply to be what Vincent was: different from everyone else.

Yes, he thought, *the first thing Vernon ever taught me is that there’s no such thing as a clean fight. Be there complete victory or swift surrender, or even a final stalemate, fair play never enters in on its own initiative.*

Vernon’s Law continued to hold true. Vincent’s present opponents held every advantage over him, and they exercised their power with great enthusiasm. Vincent still reeled, body and soul, from the preposterous scrimmages of this day.

I feel like I’ve stumbled through a hidden gate into the world of The Plague Dogs*, and now I can’t unlock the door that lets me go home. There is no escaping the whitecoats here. They infiltrate my every refuge. I have no strongholds in their world. I scarcely have a resting place.*

In truth, Vincent had begun to fear that his captors would allow him no rest at all. Once they started doing things, there seemed no end in sight. They were relentless. Obsessed.

Vincent had used the short time of privacy their supper provided him to prepare the most comfortable pallet he could. He removed the drug-contaminated water and onion-contaminated

meat, and shaped the blanket into a narrow mat. He tried to situate himself on the blanket, all the while hearing the two men puzzle over him in the next room. It took a few minutes to find a position that did not twist him into an intolerable shape. He found that if he kept his left knee bent, the dart wound in his side hurt less.

In the other room, the professor and his helper came close to arguing over several points. They were not good at listening to each other. Vincent held his breath when the professor asked his companion what he thought of going back out to the park to explore "the creature's haunt," but Jonathan was not interested in this topic and quickly turned the conversation back to Vincent's verbal shortcomings.

People are always so frightened by silence, Vincent thought, *and by words they do not know, ways of speaking they do not themselves understand.*

Self-concealing silence held his one remaining advantage. So he kept still through the rest of his captors' meal and their return to the laboratory, stewarding his strength, keeping his mind busy by silently factoring polynomials—until Professor Hughes screwed up enough bravery to put his hand inside the cage. The man's touch smashed Vincent's concentration and set the stage for all that followed. Vincent felt he had rallied a little by the time the men took their tennis ball away at last, but the professor's small flashlight tipped the balance in their favor once more.

And the rest of that ludicrous encounter went downhill from there.

The helper's whistling had hurt him, his vicious screaks stabbing into Vincent's ears and temples, and the strobing light from the camera's flashbulb was a painful nuisance—but the bright beam Hughes shone at Vincent's eyes sent what felt like shards of glass deep into his head. Even now, Vincent did not dare lie down. Not yet. The shards might grind together if he did that.

Long after the two men departed for the night, Vincent stayed exactly as Hughes and Jonathan had left him, struggling to hold himself together in front of their camera. When he opened his eyes at last, he looked at the painting of the butterfly, and other images on the Linnaean diagram. He looked at microscopes and supply shelves. He fought to remain a named self and a father's son, and not to become what his captors sought to make of him.

Vincent did not know what manner of scientific protocol these men thought they were undertaking with him. Their antics were *nothing* like the work Father performed at need. Father had once been a research physician in his old life Above. He had always employed efficient methods to study and solve the many problems presented by life underground.

Father diagnosed diseases. He tested the water quality of the wells and springs. He analyzed rock and soil samples. He probed into the archaic mysteries of their underworld landscape: the Abyss, the ancient stairs and apertures carved from stone, the possible identities of the silent dead laid to rest centuries ago within the Catacombs. He used his medical wisdom to untangle secret traumas from the minds of community members. He helped the children tell him where and how much something hurt. He treated illnesses and injuries with customized mixtures of herbal remedies, medicinal simples, and modern drugs.

Vincent often helped his father with these investigations. Frequently, he had himself been the subject of Father's science—and his own—for no reference books existed to teach them that onions and other alliums destroyed the hemoglobin in Vincent's blood, or that the barbiturate drug Father and his friend Peter administered during Vincent's adolescent madness would stop their patient's heart, or that a fortnight's rest could mend a broken bone if Vincent had been eating well. Every time Julia (and later William) brought an untested ingredient into the Kitchen, Vincent and Father appropriated some of it, experimenting to determine its safety or danger to Vincent's body. Father's training had given Vincent the methodological tools he needed in order to learn many things about himself that he would otherwise never have known.

But *these* two men, costumed in their spotless white coats and brandishing their metal drawer full of needles, these men were—arbitrary. They didn't seem to know what they wanted, beyond provoking a reaction from their object of inquiry. Or beyond measuring their object's observable attributes. They did not respect their object at all.

Vincent thought, *These men are like the gang. The only difference is the sanitized world they choose to live in. And the weapons they use to do harm.*

Not looking at them during that final span of time required all of Vincent's courage. He could feel their eyes on his body. He could hear the click and whir of their little camera, the flash shining scarlet through his closed eyelids. He listened to their observations and speculations, trying not to imagine how he must appear—unwashed, uncombed, uncovered, and with so much of his lustrous fur stolen in such a way as to make what remained of his coat seem hideous.

Instead of drenching him in beer or burning him with a welding torch, his new captors used their science to transform their prisoner into an object of scorn. Their jargon said nothing more than, *He is ugly and he is not human.* Vincent wondered how long they would persist in stating and restating the obvious. He wondered how long he would have to endure being made ugly by men who *needed* him to be so. He did not understand their need. He knew only that their obsession was real in their own minds.

They had taped or clipped more things than sandpaper to the end of their long ruler. Vincent remembered feeling something sharp like scissors *(please no more scissors)* or a small knife, which surely loomed larger in his mind's eye than it did in real life. Then something sticky pulled at his remaining fur with each contact until the adhesive surface became covered with hair and stopped tearing more out of his skin. An empty Chinese food carton, smelling of grease and salt and more poisonous onions, tapped against Vincent's nose and mouth, and this almost made him gag. Something cold and wet touched him—a sponge or a damp rag? The younger man was given to poking Vincent with the bare measuring stick while the older man prepared the next object for attachment.

They might have used more objects than Vincent remembered. Once or twice, he lost track of what the two men were doing. He supposed their trespasses cut so deeply into his sickened heart that he simply blanked out. He had emotionally retreated from the gang too, during his worst moments of pain at their hands.

In this Vincent found a medical parallel between the professor's laboratory and the gang's hangout. On that other terrible night, Vincent's head injury accounted for some of the blank spaces in his memory. The gang's direct acts of violence against him accounted for the rest. Now, imprisoned in this horrible white room, Vincent must endure his captors' inquisitive absurdities, along with the damage wrought upon his nervous system by their injected poisons.

Physical injury always magnifies emotional harms, Vincent reminded himself.

He knew the two men finally gave up playing their antagonizing game when he heard them set their ruler on the nearest metal table. Neither man picked it up again. The professor came close to the cage. Vincent listened as Velcro crackled from the other side of the bars.

"What are you doing?" the professor's helper asked.

"Checking vital signs."

"Hughes—" Jonathan's voice held a warning note.

"I need to know how he's doing. This has been a rocky recovery." The older man, Professor Hughes, wrapped a flexible band around Vincent's left arm. Air puffed and the band uncrinkled as it tightened. It was a blood pressure cuff. It was another intrusive touch.

What can they take from me though this new inquiry? Vincent thought. Hughes smelled like strange chemicals and fried shrimp. His hand felt hot on Vincent's sore shoulder.

What would my reactions give them? Is it worth a fight? Worth more darts, more needles? Their drugs already gave them Catherine's name. I would have fought to keep her name safe from them, but they've already taken it from me.

Vincent hated the fact that these two men knew her name.

He wanted to give them nothing more. Not even his humiliation as he lay exposed before them. Not even his abasement as he was wheedled and petted like an obtuse mongrel. Not even his anger as the men jabbed a stick at any part of him they pleased. Vincent decided that resisting their new attack would only give the two men access to more information—more weapons to use against him, and potentially against those people Vincent had sworn to protect. So he breathed. He became a sculpture in a cage. He became silence.

The cuff squeezed Vincent's upper arm. This should not have hurt him, but it did. Pain limned down from his shoulder and dead-ended with all other sensations at his left elbow. Hughes, unaware, called out numbers for his helper (and for the video camera) to record. A stethoscope eavesdropped on Vincent's chest and aching belly. "Heart rate is up," the helper observed, turning pages in his notebook. A beeping thing was pressed beneath Vincent's arm. "And thirty-seven point two, Celsius," the professor said. The beeping thing must be a thermometer.

"Unchanged," Jonathan commented, his pen scratching paper as he spoke. "It looks like I was right. That's normal for him."

Vincent thought, *Axillary temperature. Some while after their suppertime; so, an evening measurement. It's a full degree too cold. Nearly two degrees two cold by the Fahrenheit scale.*

"Let's just compare it to tomorrow's reading, shall we?" said Hughes. He sounded like he didn't want his helper to be "right" about Vincent's body temperature or anything else.

Jonathan noticed the professor's rather petulant mood. The younger man's voice honed its own angry edge as he asked, "And tonight? Do you want to collect more blood?"

Vincent waited for the professor's answer, testing the limits of his will. He didn't think he could submit himself to a needle. Not quietly, anyway.

But, "No," Hughes said. "We'll do all that again in the morning."

"The complete battery?"

"Yes."

"New scans, blood, urine, semen...your full workup will be problematic," Jonathan said. He closed the notebook he held. "And I definitely don't see how you're going to extract more of the latter without tranquilizing him. Unless your plan for tomorrow excludes the internal electrodes?"

"I have different sedatives we can use," said the professor. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Vincent's vertigo returned as Jonathan's words plummeted into his mind, sending shock waves through his sense of self in a circular ricochet. Extract more. Of—the latter. *More*.

Hughes grew bolder then. His hands palpated Vincent's abdomen, moving downward from Vincent's ribs. Electrodes. More of the latter. Different sedatives. The professor's exploration became everything Vincent did not want: a remorseless, unending assault upon his person, his senses, and his soul.

Consider, a dark voice whispered in Vincent's mind, *how close this man has brought his carotid arteries to our hand.*

Caught between inner and outer voices, Vincent felt a heavy wooden beam drop onto his shoulder like a bludgeoning omen. He felt Father's body go limp in his arms as the wounded man blacked out, leaving Vincent alone with his fear in the dust-choked darkness. Vincent felt

cold stones from that cave-in, crushing his chest beneath their weight. He felt the blows of a metal bar as a malicious man struck him from shoulders to knees, down one side and up the other. He felt a lascivious woman pinch him with her lacquered nails; he could almost hear the woman hiss at him while the rest of the gang laughed. He felt Catherine's agony as a bullet tore into her back, the shot fired from the gun of a man who had once been Vincent's friend. And Hughes was very nervous—or excited; the professor's bony hands were damp with sweat. A visceral loathing of suffering and bloody death sank tenebrous roots into Vincent's psyche. He withdrew into himself and shut his memories away, his skin crawling.

No, Vincent answered himself. *I will not follow my pain into misjudgment. Violence can only beget violence. Be still. There are other ways to fight. This man's blood will not release me from his cage, nor show him that he was wrong to cage me.* Vincent weighed air with his lungs: a slow breath in and a slow breath out, one breath at a time. The whisperer stopped whispering to him.

The professor's helper set the notebook down somewhere and also came near to the cage. Jonathan's clothes reeked of tobacco smoke, although his breath did not. His underscent was sharp and vinegary. The younger man's hands gathered instruments for the professor and unwrapped the blood pressure cuff. Meanwhile, the professor's fingers parted the fur low on Vincent's left side, over that puncture wound. The bruised and torn skin griped at the man's salty touch.

Both men moved with caution, but their hands were well-acquainted with Vincent's body. Vincent wondered again how long he'd been their prisoner. How long had they kept him bound to their table—and how long had he lain locked inside their cage? How often had they put their hands on him like this, transferring their scents to his hair and his skin? How many times had their needles and wires insulted his flesh, and what poisons had they put into him?

Vincent commanded himself to turn aside from these questions.

"I think he's asleep again," Jonathan said.

If their own examination cannot tell them otherwise, then let them think it, Vincent thought. *Better still, fulfill that expectation. Go to sleep.*

Impossible.

When they stopped touching him and left the room, Vincent blessed his abrupt isolation for the first time in his life *(tomorrow they will come back)*. That blessing felt *(tomorrow they will do this again)* as painful to him as his light-splintered head *(they will take what they please)*.

The electrical things in the room hummed. The overhead lamp kept him visible to the video camera in the otherwise darkened room. Shadows from the bars of the cage stretched out across the laboratory floor, forming white troughs that reminded Vincent of long moonlit pools. He wished the white shapes were actual pools of water. He would willingly bear whatever pain his head gave him, in exchange for the chance to drink at leisure from the water's edge. Vincent swallowed—and that hurt too.

The professor's helper, Jonathan, had not placed water in the cage. It was possible that he simply forgot to do so. Jonathan did not impress Vincent as a man accustomed to thinking about the needs of others. It was also possible that Jonathan chose to express his vexation with Hughes by ignoring the professor's instructions. Vincent couldn't be certain whether the helper's omission had been deliberate or accidental. His inner sense of both men had gone now, dissipating over the course of the evening from dim insight into an obscuring internal brume.

This gradual insensitivity felt like going blind, or deaf, or undergoing amputation. Vincent claimed the blessing in the injury as soon as he understood what was happening. He became grateful he could no longer feel the besotted scientist's possessive daring, nor the

henchman's hungry disdain. Their manhandling was nerve-racking enough without adding the intrusion of their emotions into Vincent's consciousness. But with the obstruction of his empathy, Vincent also lost all sense of Catherine, and *that* loss pained him very much.

(Speak up. Say, 'Catherine.')

Never to you. Never to either of you. Never.

(There's nothing to see. There's nothing there.)

Mine is the heart that loves her more deeply than you can begin to imagine. This is not nothing. Her love is everything.

For she was Catherine. Pure, clean. From the Greek.

Her integrity is just as Plato described, Vincent thought. A passage from *The Republic* opened like a new book in his mind.

She is like one who, in the storm of dust and sleet which the driving wind hurries along, retires under the shelter of a wall; and seeing the rest of mankind full of wickedness, she is content, if only she can live her own life and be pure from evil or unrighteousness, and depart in peace and good-will, with bright hopes.

The bars behind him began to hurt his shoulder. Vincent turned onto his right side, little by little, resting whenever his uneven movements caused too much discomfort.

Now Providence has drawn her toward a State suitable to receive her gifts, his mind went on. *I am...I feel proud to have known her. I feel...the beautiful Buddhist virtue of mudita. In Catherine's absence, I must trust the peace of this feeling that glows within my own heart.*

Wherever she dwelt tonight, Vincent was with her in spirit. He felt glad Catherine knew this, that she had written about it with such clarity, bravely trusting the strength of their bond. A part of Catherine must also reside where Vincent was; she had also written this to him. It *must* be so. And yet, Vincent could not help but desire a sense of her presence. He wanted *any* sense of her, however slight or dim.

He thought, *Father and I have learned that sleep helps me heal. To escape my dark cloud, to regain Catherine's light, I must rest—*

Vincent blinked, becoming aware of a new gap in his perceptions. Air moved through the ventilation ducts again, but he had not heard the soft sounds which should have preceded this change. Not a good sign. *So, something else is wrong with me,* he thought. *Something I cannot trace to this night's direct provocations. A thing my jailers have already done.*

The cloud inside him seemed denser and colder now. The lamplight shone bright, but not warm. The camera stared. The thin shapes stretching across the floor could be watery windows into other worlds. They seemed a little like the Mirror Pool in the world Below, that perfectly calm body of water, which reflected the sky through a secret crevice in the earth. Did the Mirror Pool display stars tonight? Or only black beclouded space?

Katharos. Uncorrupted philosophy. Justified peace. Unselfish joy. Clear glass. Pure water.

Vincent licked his lips.

He was back to water.

Vincent sighed. He knew physical thirst was going to give him just as much pain as the thirsts of his soul, and long before the night ended. He looked away from the stripes of light on the floor. His throat felt raw. If only he could have a taste, now and again, a few drops to moisten his dry mouth—even if he couldn't swallow more than that. Clean water, untainted by drugs—as Hughes had directed Jonathan to provide—

(Katharos.)

He must think about something else.

Polynomials were safe, but Vincent felt too distracted to try to keep positive and negative

integers straight in his mind. Chess stratagems? No. He wanted no more battles, not even those from his favorite game. Not here. He might try transposing a musical composition from one key to another—but he wouldn't want his private music to clash with the tones of the humming electrical things in the room—or worse, become sonically aligned with the noise. He considered formulas for metric system conversions. These also seemed wearisome.

(Fahrenheit and Celsius.)

He remembered the numbers Hughes had read out from the medical instruments. "Normal," Jonathan had said. His captors could not be more wrong, about any of their readings.

Vincent thought, *Were I home, Father would be worried enough to have someone stay at my bedside tonight.*

But he was not home. His bed was now this cage. Black ice crystallized around his heart. Vincent shivered. No healer dwelt here but himself.

If I am my own doctor, I am also my own patient. The good doctor pays me a visit. He assesses the damage. He tells me to save my strength. I breathe deeply. Air is still something I can give to myself.

Vincent flexed his fingers, gauging the sensation. His joints were swollen, his muscles weak. It was difficult to fully extend the last two fingers of his right hand. It was hard to move *all* the fingers of his left. His right wrist and forearm no longer stung where the restraining cuffs had bruised him; in the same way his inner sight had clouded over and guttered out, the full lengths of both arms were going numb. So far, he retained his ability to move all four limbs. He just couldn't *feel* them anymore.

Vincent came close to wishing that his left shoulder would follow suit. It still hurt almost as badly as his head. Truly, *everything* else still hurt, no matter how careful his movements, and no matter how slow. Arranging the contents of the cage had proved a chore he did not want to repeat anytime soon, and his captors did nothing to improve his situation.

He curled his body inward and rested his head against the side wall of the cage. His right hand found a resting place between his thighs. The new angle of his arm eased the tension in his neck and shoulders. Good. His wide hand shielded himself from the camera's eye, comforted the ongoing hurt that Jonathan had reawakened when he took a spiteful jab at Vincent's scrotum with the measuring stick.

Vincent slipped his left hand beneath his cushioned elbow, supporting the joint, conserving body heat within the self-embrace of his crossed arms. He relaxed his muscles. His body rested, stable at last upon the cage floor. Vincent had improved his situation for himself.

Herein, I find the mote of good in my present dearth of water, he thought, closing his eyes. He had now found the one position that least offended all his body's discomforts, and, with nothing to drink, he had no reason to move again for quite a while.

"Why don't it move?" a child's voice demanded in his mind, the words emerging from Vincent's memories of a hot summer night, many years ago. "Its eyes are open, so it isn't sleeping. Why don't it move?"

Six children had been standing at the bars of a gorilla's cage, gazing solemnly down at the captive animal. The gorilla lay on her back, staring up at nothing. It was Mitch who had asked, because Mitch had wanted to come, and he hadn't expected the gorillas to be so—boring.

Why don't it move?

Vincent, quiet in his own cage, felt closer to an answer now than he'd been during that long-ago night. He was learning that sometimes physical action became too costly. When the world shrank to the size of an inescapable closet, opposing his enemies became a declaration of war that overreached Vincent's available resources. Simply shifting position from one corner of

the cage to another became an arduous journey to a new hemisphere.

I am beginning to think like an incarcerated gorilla, he observed. *Father would not be pleased.*

But Father wasn't here. No one who cared about Vincent was here. No one could possibly know where to find him, or even that Vincent needed them.

Vincent wondered if Mitch's boring gorilla had longed for the comfort of family, before her zoological prison murdered her mind and heart. He wondered if the gorilla had been born in captivity, or if the creature had been captured in the wild and imported to New York. She was the only gorilla Vincent had ever seen. Afterward, he dreamed about the great ape's sorrowful cinnamon-colored eyes more than once.

Vincent recalled that Devin had arranged that particular adventure. Devin was the best among the Elderkids at hatching schemes, and Devin had actually been to the Central Park Zoo during the day, so he knew the terrain. Vincent alone knew that Devin also felt sorry for Mitch. Both brothers wanted to help the new boy have some fun that July.

Mitch, the only son of one of their Helpers, had been a recurrent guest in the Tunnels for about a year, staying Below whenever his father's health took a bad turn. During that slow-flowing summer of 1962, Sam Denton gave Mitch into Father's care indefinitely and Sam checked himself into a long-term nursing facility. No one had explained to the children exactly what was wrong with Sam, only that he was very, very sick and couldn't take care of Mitch anymore. Devin and his friends were trying to help Mitch settle in, but Mitch was—well, "temperamental" was as good a word as any to describe the eight-year-old boy.

"Betcha he's not moving because it's so hot," Ike said. "If I had all that hair on a night like this, I wouldn't want to move around, either."

Vincent was aware of both Devin and Pascal checking his reaction from the corners of their eyes, so he made none. Besides, it was true. Vincent was running at half speed in this muggy heat. It must be much worse for the animals imprisoned in this place.

Mitch made monkey faces at the gorilla. Ike and Devin both laughed and Mitch grinned at them. Vincent decided not to interrupt his friends by pointing out that the gorilla was neither an "it" nor a "he." Ike hated to be corrected, and Mitch would probably ask how Vincent knew what he knew. Vincent wasn't in the mood to explain.

"I want to see an elephant," Molly said. So they journeyed on.

Vincent didn't pay much attention as they crept through the shadows. Ike and Mitch were pretending to be the first explorers to reach the unassayed heart of an Indian jungle. Devin played the navigator (and lock picker) for their game and Molly toted their small pack of provisions. Pascal lagged behind with Vincent, who, being the youngest, served as their nominal rearguard. Mostly, Vincent watched his own boots. He looked into cages and enclosures when the others stopped walking, and he helped to boost the other children up when they needed to look through the windows of different buildings, but he had nothing to add to the running conversation between Mitch, Ike, and Molly.

He was glad his friends were enjoying themselves. He could be patient, for them, until they all left this place to have a late-night picnic in the park. Somewhere away from the zoo.

Pascal touched his arm. "You okay?" the older boy asked. Pascal was beginning to worry about him.

Vincent looked up into his friend's face. "I'm all right. But I think...the animals here, they...they are not..." He didn't know what words to put to his impressions. All these zoo animals —it hurt Vincent to feel their many strange, unhopeful hearts beating at his mind from all sides. He didn't know how to share this with Pascal.

For Vincent loved animals. In the three years since he'd started venturing Above with his friends, Vincent had forever changed the way Father and the rest of the Council did things Below. Nothing Father said about it could curb his son's tendency to find sick or injured animals in the park and then carry them back with him into the Tunnels. Vincent cared for his foundlings until they were well, then released them Above—or buried them if they couldn't survive.

The adults had changed their "No pets Below" rule to: "No permanent pets Below." Devin said even *that* rule would change, as soon as Vincent brought Down a stray he wanted to keep. Vincent had read books about children who kept pets. He had listened eagerly to Elizabeth whenever she recounted stories which had inspired the paintings of animals in her murals. Sharp-nosed foxes with cream-tipped brushes for tails had been the field companions of Old Sam's country boyhood. One very beautiful mural featured the sleek, collared fishing birds that Dr. Wong called cormorants in English. The birds Elizabeth painted dove into a narrow mountain stream and surfaced with fish in their craws, fish which a young Wong Hin Yuen and his father extracted and placed in their baskets to bring to market.

Sara had once told Vincent that when she lived Above, she kept a shining betta fish in a clear glass bowl. The little flit-finned creature used to rise to the surface of the water to kiss Sara's fingertips when she dipped them in. Young listeners who remained attentive to Judge's daily expostulatory midrash of sacred texts were rewarded with amusing anecdotes about the little hounds Judge had once bred and trained for seasonal huntsman, putting himself through law school with his earnings and acquiring, he said, a more substantial understanding of human nature from his dogs than from his "congenially small-minded neighbors."

All these stories led Vincent to believe that a real animal friend of his own might be fun. But the animals in this zoo weren't pets in any sense of the word. They were shabby and dispirited. Caged. Untame and yet unwild.

Pascal's touch communicated his instinctive understanding of Vincent's problem. "The animals don't look very happy?" Pascal suggested.

Vincent nodded gratefully. "Or very clean."

"Yes. It's awful sad." Pascal fell silent again.

Vincent walked along beside him. He liked being with Pascal. His friend never spoke an unnecessary word, and he always knew just the right thing to say to make people feel better. Vincent considered Pascal's abilities in light of the missing members of their crew. Alys and Nasif were busy with Messenger Duty tonight. Studious Paco had preferred to stay home with a book he wanted to finish. Olivia was not a nocturnal wayfarer. She almost never joined her friends on these sorts of adventures Above. She was fast asleep right now. Rennie flat out told Devin he wasn't interested in going to the zoo, and Georgia didn't want to go, either. Winslow, though, he had wanted to come with them. Winslow needed Pascal's kind words as much as Vincent did.

Feeling a kind of inner echo between himself and Pascal, Vincent supposed that his friend was now thinking about Winslow as well. After they returned home, Pascal would probably slip into the cook's chambers behind the Kitchen to visit the rowdy boy who was Pascal's closest friend. Winslow had said something unwise to his mother after lunch that day. No one expected to see him more than a yard away from the dishwashing sink until Julia's wrath ran its course. Pascal was a good storyteller. His report of their expedition to the zoo might comfort their beleaguered compatriot.

Devin suspected Pascal's comfortable precision with words came from the boy's long hours in the Pipe Chamber—hours he spent guiding Tunnel communications alongside his father. Devin claimed that both Pascal the Elder and Pascal the Younger *thought* in pipecode. Vincent

didn't know whether this was true or not, but he did know that his friend's innate tranquility soothed him as nothing else could. He was clinging to Pascal's generous calm tonight.

Vincent looked up. The group had stopped again. They were at the lion house. Vincent saw a tiger, pacing the confined space just inside the bars of his cage.

The boy tilted his head at the tiger. There was something wrong about the way the tiger moved. He didn't need to see where he was going anymore. He went back and forth, walking the same line, and not feeling anything.

Where are you? Vincent thought, feeling a sly chill prickle along his spine. *Where have you gone?*

Vincent sensed many things about other living beings. These feelings came to him more strongly from some creatures than from others, but *something* always came through. The tiger's agitated emptiness bothered Vincent. He did not understand it. He did not like it.

Father always called Vincent's peculiar powers a "gift." No one seemed to know how Vincent had come by this gift, any more than they knew who had brought him into the world in the first place. But his empathy helped the soft-hearted boy care for those small animals he kept bringing home with him. For the most part these were squirrels and alley cats, sometimes pigeons or other birds.

One time, Vincent had come upon a duck, half-strangled by the string of a discarded yo-yo. Another time, a wounded rabbit who had escaped the jaws of a marauding predator. Once he found a dying puppy who had been hit by a car. When he brought the little dog Below, Vincent made her as comfortable as he could, and then Father showed him what chloroform could do. They gave the puppy a gentler death than the streets would have provided.

Through these experiences with his furry or feathered patients, Vincent knew his sensing didn't work the same with animals. From animals, Vincent seemed to catch general moods or physical needs, rather than the intricate webs of emotions he sensed in human beings. Thus, he could know when a creature was hungry, or ready to play, even before the animal's actions began to reveal such things.

This tiger was different. There was nothing inside him for Vincent to find. Glimpsing the tiger's eyes as he turned for another pass was like watching the Abyss glide by.

Vincent reached suddenly for Pascal, who looked down at him with concern and wrapped one arm around his shoulders. Vincent pressed himself against the older boy's side, feeling safer there. In later years, Vincent dreamed about the tiger more than once too.

"Big cat," said Molly, also watching the tiger.

"Betcha he's a man-eater," Ike replied.

"Nah," Devin said. "They wouldn't keep a man-eater in the middle of the city."

"Yeah." Molly was quick to agree. "What if it got out?"

A little farther along the path, Mitch laughed, pointing at the occupant of another cage.

"Ha! Hey, come see these ones."

They joined Mitch, climbing over the visitors' railing to stand in a line before the exhibit. Two lions gazed back at them from adjacent cages. One lounged on his side, looking sleepy. The other sat on her haunches close to the bars, her head cocked a little to the right.

"Why are they funny?" Ike asked Mitch.

Mitch laughed again. "They just are. That one sitting there looks like Vincent."

The other children stopped moving. Vincent felt Pascal's arm tighten around him. Looking at the lions, Vincent thought, *Please not this.*

"No, wait." Mitch continued, oblivious. "That one there's gotta be the *lion*. So *this* one—" He giggled, a shrill sound in the quiet place. "Ha ha! Guess what! Vincent looks like a

girl lion."

"Take it back." Devin arrived beside Mitch in one stride. Ike edged away, not wanting to get caught in the crossfire.

"Huh?" Mitch turned from the lions, startled.

"Take. It. Back." Devin's dark eyes grew stormy.

"What back?"

"What you just said."

Mitch looked around at all of them. His gaze settled on Vincent's face. Awareness dawned in Mitch's mind.

"I didn't mean nothing," he protested. "I was just saying—"

"Yeah," Devin cut him off. "And now you're gonna unsay it." Devin was angry.

Vincent felt Mitch's own anger, almost always simmering just beneath the surface of the older boy's thoughts, flare up. It was hot and putrid, streaked through with pain. Vincent flinched away before Mitch even drew breath to speak.

"You want me to take back that he looks like a stupid scrawny lion, or that he looks like a really ugly girl?"

Devin shoved him, hard, and Mitch fell down. Mitch slowly lifted his hands from the paving stones and turned them over; they were scraped and bleeding. He looked at Devin, furious tears starting in his eyes. Devin clenched his hands into fists and took a step forward.

Vincent pulled away from Pascal to catch hold of Devin's wrist. "Devin. Don't."

Devin scowled at him. Vincent felt his foster brother trembling with barely restrained emotion—a complex mishmash of rage and guilt. He looked into Devin's eyes, doing his best to convey both the calm he'd drawn from Pascal's presence, and the quiet sorrow he'd been struggling with all night.

"Please," Vincent said.

Devin turned back to Mitch. He took a deep breath. "Take back everything you said, and I won't beat your face in like you deserve."

Vincent let go of Devin's wrist. It was the best offer Mitch was going to get tonight.

The group waited through a long, smoldering moment before Mitch bowed his head and muttered, "I take it back."

"Everything?" Devin insisted.

"Yeah. Take everything back."

They all relaxed a little. Devin shook his head at Mitch, disgusted, vaulted easily over the visitors' railing, and strode away. Cold with her own outrage, Molly followed him. Ike stayed close by while Mitch stood up, sniffling loudly. The two friends climbed over the rail more slowly.

"Molly's got the water bottle," Ike said in a low voice. "We can get it from her. Rinse off your hands."

"Whatever."

Mitch accepted the handkerchief Ike pulled out of a pocket and used it to dab at his skinned palms. He noticed Vincent watching and shot the younger boy a black look. Then he turned his back on Vincent and Pascal.

"I don't like lions anyway. They stink," said Mitch, and he walked on, Ike shuffling beside him.

Vincent knew Mitch wasn't talking about lions. He couldn't make his legs move. The way Mitch had glared at him—the sad ending of his friends' fun—and, yes, now that Mitch had brought it up, the unwholesome smells of the zoo—

Vincent felt sick. He turned away from the angry hearts of his departing friends, turned toward the cage—and found himself bare inches away from the lioness Mitch had laughed at. Caught up in all the bad feelings whirling around him, Vincent hadn't realized he'd moved so close to the bars.

Wide golden eyes stared into wide blue eyes. Vincent saw something in those feline eyes that touched him more deeply than even Pascal's gentle friendship. This lioness was not like the tiger, not like the gorilla, not like any of the other animals they had visited. Somehow, this lioness was not dead inside. She did not feel broken.

I can see you, thought Vincent. *I hear your big heart beating.*

Her eyes never leaving Vincent's, the lioness leaned down and pressed her face to the bars. Air puffed from her nostrils in soft gusts. By slow increments, Vincent leaned forward too, until his nose touched hers. His response to her invitation pleased the lioness.

Vincent inhaled warm lion breath and they breathed together, both of them holding very still. The scent of the lioness was meaty and pungent, but not unpleasant. Her cage *was* dirty, but that was not her fault. She made a rumbly purring sound deep in her throat. She felt curious about her late-night visitors.

I've made a lion...happy, Vincent thought. Her huge golden eyes redefined his world. His heart filled with wonder. Then his lioness *chuffed* softly and stood up. She butted her head against the bars, folding one ear over. The lioness gave a great sigh and padded deeper into the cage on silent paws.

Vincent backed away until he stood next to Pascal.

"Wow," Pascal whispered.

"I know."

They watched the lions together. The lion in the other cage shook his mangy head, yawning. Vincent's lioness lay down on her side and meditatively groomed one forepaw. When she finished, she gazed out of her cage, meeting Vincent's eyes again.

"Psst!" Devin hissed at them from the end of the walk. He waved his arm in a come-this-way gesture. Time to leave.

They turned and climbed over the railing. Both boys looked back as they walked away. The lions watched them go.

"Vincent?" Pascal whispered.

"Yes?"

"Do you know how cool you are?"

Vincent looked at his friend. Pascal was blushing, but he was completely serious. Vincent ducked his head.

The six of them regrouped in the park, milling around beneath a tree. Ike wanted to go home, but Molly said she was hungry.

"Anyone else still want the picnic?" Devin asked.

"I do," Pascal answered.

Devin looked at Vincent. Vincent nodded.

"Mitch," Devin said, his voice as neutral as he could make it. "Want a sandwich?"

Mitch hesitated, then said, "Yeah. Sure."

So they sat down together on the sun-crisped grass. Molly opened her pack to distribute a meal of turkey sandwiches and dried pear slices. They didn't talk much, and they remained quiet as they walked back to the tunnel entrance that would take them home. After they crossed the threshold between Above and Below, Devin pulled Vincent aside, letting the others get a lead on them.

“I’m sorry you had to see all that fall through,” Devin said. “Mitch was a jerk.”

“Mitch is still new.”

“Not *that* new,” Devin grumbled.

“I’m all right,” Vincent said, feeling this was what Devin really wanted to know. “Are you?”

Devin shrugged. “Yeah, kid. I’m okay.” They started walking again. “You and Pascal had a nice long visit with the lions,” he said conversationally. Vincent knew his brother was trying to leave the almost-fight behind. “Those cats say anything interesting?”

Vincent thought for a moment. “One of them did.”

“Yeah?”

“Mm.”

Devin didn’t press him to put the experience into words. What words could *ever* describe that moment at the lion house? But now, nearly twenty-five years later, the words did come—in lines from a poem Vincent knew, which suddenly matched the memory. A lion’s wisdom breathed within him: *Stone walls do not a prison make, / Nor iron bars a cage.*

Vincent thought, *I must hold to that, somehow. I must believe it. I must let those words believe in me. As my lioness did. This is how she freed herself.*

Freedom was a thing Vincent had never—never, in all his days—taken as a matter of course. He always had to fight for it, nurture it, insist upon it—for himself and for dozens of others who came into his life over the years.

It was freedom he protected when he did battle on behalf of his city’s forgotten or forsaken people. It was freedom that restored his soul when he left the Tunnels to roam the parks Above, the high places overlooking the city, or the darkened streets and alleyways. He embraced freedom when he held Catherine in his arms. He had honored freedom when he encouraged her to go out into the world he could never know, to discover her own destiny and to become everything her beautiful self longed to become.

I must find my freedom now in hers. I must not accept the bars around me as a cage for my mind. Nor can I allow my own frailty to confine me, to kill my hope. I must not permit my captors to destroy my faith in humankind.

Vincent knew this was a fragile resolve. He was tired, and he seemed to be grasping at heavy memories with weakening hands. But he would try. It was the only thing left for him to attempt, this holding fast.

So he repeated the words to himself for a long time, lying beneath the unforgiving glare of the laboratory lamp, and the unrelenting eye of the video camera. He absolutely did not think about dire thirst, or nausea, or hard metal floors leaching cold up through too-thin blankets, or rank indignity, or cages, or horribly aching heads, or shaking limbs, or breaking hearts.

Eventually, Vincent slept.

Chapter Nine: Scientific Progress

I

24 March 1987
Tuesday Morning

Yawning, Hughes walked into his lab, juggling his keys, a paper sack, and his coffee thermos. His wristwatch put the time at a little after six-thirty. He hadn't gotten much sleep, but he felt it was enough to revive him for a new day. He went to the cage, first thing, and looked down at his miracle.

The creature huddled against the bars in a back corner of his cage, awake, but making no reaction whatsoever to the professor's return.

Par for the course, Hughes thought, disappointed. *I was hoping he'd be more interested in us. He showed more more spirit, lying on the examination table. The video footage told us that he exhibited more potential when he first woke in the cage. Grandpa Norris would have said was still"doped to the gills," but at least the creature had some curiosity.*

Hughes meant to review that Recovery tape again this morning, along with the one he'd left recording in the camcorder last night. He wanted to get a better feel for the creature's aptitude with objects. The professor looked at the way the creature sat holding his arms crossed over his chest like a grumpy little kid.

He thought, *I wonder. Maybe his disinterest is simply boredom. I could get him some toys. Even if he's unwilling to interact with me or Jonathan, he might want to explore new stimuli in his immediate environment. Maybe after I've left the room...I could watch from the office, leave the camera rolling.*

Hughes reconsidered the things they had found in the creature's pockets. Familiar objects might be a good place to begin. Soon. First, he had other tasks to take care of.

He held up the paper bag. "Your breakfast and mine," he said to his uncommunicative beast. "Are you hungry?" Hughes lowered the bag, taking a closer look at the cage interior. He bent down to peer at the white linoleum beneath the floor panel. "Where did you put your water bowl this time?"

The creature made no answer and Hughes didn't see the missing white bowl anywhere on the floor. *Odd,* he thought. He set his bag and thermos on a table and took the video cassette out of the camcorder. Hughes marked the label, OVERNIGHT, before inserting the cassette into his VCR. He pressed the rewind button and left the machine running while he saw to the creature's needs.

Hughes was glad he didn't need to mop the floor around the cage this morning. *I really must give some thought to housing him long-term,* he decided. *It's going to become more difficult and more dangerous to keep him in here as time passes. I can't keep the janitors out forever.*

He took a quick photo with the Polaroid to continue his photographic timeline. He finished placing the picture in their project album, and went to the storage shelf for the third bowl, to serve the creature his fresh food. Hughes pulled up short when he saw that *two* bowls waited there, one resting in the hollow of the other. Jonathan must have cleaned the water bowl last night, and put it away.

"I don't understand," Hughes said to the empty plasticware. "I know I told him to refill it." He snatched up the bowls and went to the little sink in the corner of his lab, muttering,

“Damn it all. I can’t think of everything, or attend to every minor detail. That’s why we *have* assistants!”

He filled one bowl with cold water. He brought it to the cage and thought: *The young man seemed so dependable at first! But Jonathan Gould is not as open-minded or project-oriented as I expected*. Hughes set the bowl on the cage floor, just inside the bars. He stepped back to watch.

Today, the creature didn’t hesitate. He unfolded his limbs and, quaking, crawled on knees and elbows to the water. Hughes noticed that while the creature didn’t raise his bowl from the floor this time, he still cupped his hands around it as he lowered his head to drink.

Again, making full use of the container, Hughes observed. *With or without Jonathan’s help, I really should go down into that tunnel, take a look around. See how he lives down there. I’ll bet anything he has other trifles, like the things from his pockets. Maybe he has scrounged containers down there too.*

Hughes listened to the fervid lapping sounds as the creature drained the bowl. He felt a little ashamed for not checking the creature’s water situation last night. Jonathan’s oversight irritated him. Frowning, Hughes thought, *Subjecting my creature to this kind of distress is unnecessary and inhumane. By God, Felicia Durgan would have a field day.*

The creature leaned away from the now-empty bowl. He touched his forehead to the floor panel and seemed completely absorbed in the business of breathing.

“That’s right,” Hughes said soothingly. He reached through the bars and retrieved the dish. “See if you can keep that down today.” The creature was not immediately sick, so Hughes walked away from the cage.

He set the water bowl beside the sink and opened the paper bag he’d brought in with him. He took out a sandwich (wrapped in cellophane), a box of Mallomars (unopened), and two packages of chicken (chopped necks and whole livers, wrapped in butcher paper). Hughes brought his breakfast and his coffee to the video station. Small portions of the chicken parts went into the creature’s food bowl.

“Here,” he said to his beast. He put the new bowl in the cage. “You’ve got to be hungry by now.”

The creature backed away from the food. He returned to the rear corner of the cage and wrapped his shaking arms around his midriff. Then he buried his blunt snout in the fur covering one bicep. His mane obscured his face.

The body language was unmistakable. Hughes hastily removed the food. “Too soon? I’m sorry.” He put the bowl and both meat packets inside the mini-fridge with yesterday’s uneaten beef. The fridge would keep the food cold, but the door also had its magnetic seal to block the smell. That done, the creature did seem to breathe easier.

It’s a shame he’s still uncomfortable, Hughes thought, *but at least now I know his olfactory sense is as keen as his hearing. I’ll give him an hour or so. See how he’s doing then.*

But an hour later, the creature continued to refuse both the raw chicken and the cooked beef, and he demonstrated no interest in more water. Hughes took all three bowls away again. He sat on the lab chair in front of the cage for a while, entering his thoughts into his notebook. He wrote:

> Creature moved his pillow to the front of the cage while I reviewed last night’s video record. I took another look at Recovery video. Fascinating. Creature demonstrates strong sense of self-awareness. He also possesses a fluent comprehension of objects. Locates,

identifies, and manipulates them easily—when he wants to. Will first introduce the marbles and feather from creature's inventory. Note: Remember to videotape!

Tried to check vitals after second offer of food. More defensive gestures, but no words yet. Creature turned his back to me and kept his arms pulled in around his torso. He continues to avoid eye contact. No growling this morning. No other vocalization. Thought it best to try the exam again later, prior to specimens collection. Will need Mr. Gould's assistance. Left full Overnight video analysis for JG as well.

Overnight video indicates short intervals of sleep all night. Up to two hours at a time. Not sure if this is normative sleep pattern. Startle response initiated several waking periods. Clear disorientation during awakenings after 2:00 (cf. Video Log, pp. 99-105, initial fast-forward review). Creature seems sluggish this morning. Tremors continue, cause unknown. Possibly intention tremor? But if so, why do all muscle groups seem affected? Creature's unwillingness to move makes observations inconclusive. One bowl of water has satisfied him. I'll continue to present the meats. Might try fish tonight—see if he prefers canned or fresh.

Questions: What food is he accustomed to eating? From what sources? Does he eat plant matter? Vegetables?

The creature now lay stretched out on his side across his blanket, the throw pillow beneath his right shoulder, and his chin resting on that arm. He had closed his left hand into a fist between the pillow and his chest, and in that position the hand looked very paw-like to Hughes. The creature seemed to be staring at the linoleum. The fingers of his right hand twitched against the bars of the cage door. Another sign of boredom? He maintained his morose silence.

Hughes got up to check the cultivations inside the lab's small incubator. That analysis would be another task he'd assign to Jonathan while Hughes fulfilled today's obligations at the symposium. He made notes for Jonathan, so the young man would know what needed to be done. Then Hughes returned to his lab chair with the anecdotal log and continued writing. Putting his questions down on paper always helped him to clear his mind for other work.

At five minutes past eight, Jonathan knocked on the door to the lab. Hughes let him in, a little surprised to see the young man so early. Jonathan brushed aside both the professor's greeting and his questions about water bowls.

"We need to talk," said the young researcher without preamble.

"Go ahead," Hughes said, cautious.

"I need to know what your intentions are. For the creature. For us."

"My intentions?" Hughes felt a little confused. "Why, to study our find. To learn everything we can. You know that. My intentions are the same as they've been all along."

This didn't seem to be the answer Jonathan was looking for. "Professor Hughes, let's be realistic. With only the two of us working on these studies, whatever else we learn is going to

come at a snail's pace. We have enough information to write a solid preliminary report. We can go public. Get more help. Get actual funding."

Hughes was shaking his head. "Certainly not. We are a long, long way from that point."

"What more do you need to know?" Jonathan asked, pointing at the cage. "He's a biologically stable hybrid that no one, anywhere, has ever seen before. Don't you want the credit for capturing him alive?"

Hughes picked up a folder of printouts. "Of course I want the credit, but now is not the time. Look at what we have, Jonathan." He shook the documentation at his assistant. "Unprocessed data. Anecdotal observations. A few days' worth of gathered facts. What about diet, metabolism, behavior, history, habitat? What about cognition? What about origins?"

"All things we can't study in-depth with the equipment we have."

Hughes clutched the folder in his hands. Jonathan had completely missed his point. "No, no. We don't need to go 'in-depth,' as you put it. I'm trying to gather the *breadth* of his reality. Get the big picture."

"What, you think people are going to be interested in your 'big picture' when they find out about this thing?" And there was that tone again, that cocksure precocity.

Hughes pressed his lips into a thin line. He could feel his morning meal begin to churn in his stomach. *I can't afford to get angry with him,* he reminded himself. *I do need this man. He's been invaluable. How do I reason with him about the issue of timing? The issue of credit where credit is due?*

Hughes gave the matter swift and careful thought. He had to set things straight once and for all. These disagreements were distracting them both from the science. As much as Jonathan seemed to be tiring of the process, they had work to do.

Jonathan stood before him, waiting for his answer.

II

24 March 1987
Tuesday Morning

That's a new one, Vincent thought, listening to the two men argue. *Biologically stable hybrid. I haven't heard that one before.*

He closed his eyes as a slow wave of pain assaulted his innards and migrated to his back. Hughes had brought him water, and Vincent had been helpless to do anything besides drink it. For perhaps an hour, he was unsure whether his new pains were any better than the thirst. But the stomach cramps were weaker now, and decreasing in frequency, so Vincent decided to tally the outcome as a small improvement. He wished his other aches would also abate. Along with the savage shaking in his muscles whenever he tried to move.

He turned his thoughts away from troubles he could neither help nor change. *One thing at a time,* Vincent instructed himself. *I drank water today. That's a positive beginning.*

Professor Hughes was either at a complete loss for words, or he was taking time to arrange his case in his own mind before presenting it to his companion. Vincent did not believe either one would convert the other to the opposing point of view. He felt thoroughly disgusted with both men.

"Feel like talking yet?" Hughes had asked Vincent only a little while ago. The professor

had rattled his rolling chair across the floor to sit outside the cage door. He chewed the last bite of one of his chocolate-covered cookies. Dark breadcrumbs from his pastrami sandwich flecked the creases of his russet bow tie.

Vincent's head swam with half-remembered dreams of blindness and blood, bones splintering between his jaws, wet heat soaking the fur on his hands. Darkness had carried him away from the crack of gunfire toward the hisping punch of enormous white-tailed wasps. In his nightmares, the swarm hummed menacingly from the blackness extending between himself and a wooden cup of water someone had set on the ground to bait him. As he tried to escape the danger and the temptation, he fell into a deep furrow filled with scaly pythons. Then he woke half-convinced that his body still smarted from the crushing force of the serpentine coils.

The professor's camera had regurgitated another photograph. Hughes waved the picture in the air as he waited for the image to appear upon the small white square of film. "I wouldn't object to a little casual conversation today," he said, smiling as though he had made a clever jest.

Vincent felt so sick and so tired, he had to bite back the Winslowian retort that Jamie shared with him a couple weeks ago: *If I thought it would do any good, I'd sing you a hymn.*

Several other pithy Winslowisms came to mind now, but Vincent chose not to indulge himself in this way. *Don't take the bait,* he thought, opening his eyes. *Best not to feed the serpents. Bear the bee stings and let the snakes slither off into the weeds.*

"People are going to be interested in the truth, Jonathan," Hughes said at last. His voice took on a pedantic certitude as he spoke. "People will want to know the full extent of what is possible. They'll *also* want answers we can't give them yet. Don't you understand? It's not only about credit for the find, it's about being the ones who can provide answers as to *what* we have found."

"You have a very high opinion of people's capacity for possibility, Professor. Not to mention their sense of fair play. Now look. We *have* to get our names associated with this specimen before someone else figures out he's here and beats us to the press release."

"Press release!" Now Hughes sounded alarmed. "I've been talking about peer reviewed journals. What in the world are you thinking?"

"No, what are *you* thinking? You're only a small-time professor and your lab isn't exactly Fort Knox. If anyone else sees this thing before *we* break the news, the announcement is going to bypass the lowly scientists and the *institution* will get the accolades by default."

"Listen, Jonathan. I know we have to find more suitable facilities, but this is bigger than whose name gets printed in an article. This is about the creature too. I need more time with him, for all the reasons I've already mentioned. We must plan for the long-term. The big picture!"

Jonathan scoffed. "This thing doesn't have a 'long-term' in store for him. Few *lusus naturae* do."

It surprised Vincent to hear the old Latin phrase spoken in this modern white room. He thought, *I haven't heard that before, either. Not applied to myself in my hearing. The first time I encountered the term, Father and I were discussing Aristotle's* Politics *with Judge.* He closed his eyes again, dividing his attention between inner and outer sources of sorrow. The laboratory's abiding pastrami-and-oversweetened-coffee miasma did *not* help him.

Oh. Please just accept the water, he begged of his body. *I promise I won't drink so quickly next time.*

The row of pens lining the professor's breast pocket clicked together as Hughes leaned closer to his helper. "We've brought him this far. What makes you think we need to rush our investigation? Hurrying through this process is how stupid mistakes get made. Need I remind you of that?"

“All right!” Jonathan said, raising his voice. Shoe leather creaked and white canvas rustled. Hughes had straightened, pulling away from the loud words. Jonathan immediately resumed a more moderate approach. “Fine. Let’s take a look at your long-term scenario. Just for argument’s sake: let’s say you’re right and he’s some kind of human variant. Ever heard of Stephan Bibrowski? Robert Wadlow? John Merrick? No?”

“That last name, Merrick, sounds familiar,” Hughes said, as if unsure of where Jonathan might be going with the topic.

“He was better known as the Elephant Man.”

“Oh. Yes. *Him*. Well, *that* sort of thing isn’t really my area.”

So what IS your area, Hughes? Vincent wondered. He opened his eyes. His captors still faced each other a few steps away from the bars. Their feet were positioned near Vincent’s eye-level. Both men wore brown leather shoes, although of different styles. Both men stood rooted to the floor like stunted trees, neither one of them backing down.

“So maybe you don’t know that the Lion-Faced Man barely made it past his thirties,” Jonathan said. “The Alton Giant, the Elephant Man? They didn’t even *make* it to their thirties. Deviants tend to have limited life spans, Professor.”

Vincent knew the story of each man Jonathan had named. He also knew that Jonathan had gotten Merrick’s name wrong. This was not surprising; most history books got Merrick’s name wrong. *For someone who looks into this cage and sees an animal, Jonathan seems rather well-versed in the biographies of unique human beings,* Vincent thought. *Unless...he believes they were not really people.*

Jonathan kept talking. “And this thing? You *must* know there are not going to be any more specimens of his kind once this one is gone. The odds are against you here, Professor. Crunch the numbers however you want: there are *not* multiple subjects waiting for you out in the park. He’s a one-shot anomaly with all the genetic potential of a mule. He’s sterile. We’ve determined that.”

“We’ve determined no such thing!”

“Multiple tests say otherwise.”

“But we don’t know what factors might affect his reproductive cycle. Seasons, diet, time of day—we don’t know—”

“Exactly. *We don’t know.* We don’t know how vulnerable his immune system is. We don’t know if his genetic composition can sustain him through your ‘long-term big picture,’ or if he’ll start degenerating before we can complete our studies. We don’t know the rate at which he ages, but we *do* know he’s reached sexual maturity. Every species out there only declines after this stage.”

The professor made a sound, beginning to object, but Jonathan wasn’t finished. “*However*. I don’t believe you’re right about this, Hughes. Our unprocessed data? Our facts? Our observations? All of the *evidence* tells us the creature is *not* human. You need to stop thinking about him like he is. It’s the worst trap a biologist can fall into.”

“I’m not in any trap,” Hughes said, sullen.

“Look,” Jonathan said again. “His activity level has already decreased. Drastically. Have you got him to eat yet?”

“No, but he drank a bowl of water a while ago. Jonathan, about last night. I think you forgot—”

Jonathan ignored the professor’s attempt to change the subject. He said loudly, “Do this *my* way, and he’ll probably have a longer run. There will be better veterinary support for him. And it will be because everyone who hears about him will want to see this monstrosity for

themselves."

"Jonathan—"

"Morbid curiosity is a compelling motivator, Professor. You want time? Publicity will buy you that. So let's take advantage of what we have! Let's roust out Quint. Show him up for the fool he is, and submit a joint statement. When do you think we should call the Bronx Zoo? They could help us with the facilities problem."

Vincent was too tired to repel an emotion as powerful as dread. The helper's suggested level of mortification shattered his hope. Vincent felt struck down—*gutted*—by the man's ugly words, and by the unpalatable kernels of truth contained within those words. Having tethered their futures to a thing they did not know how to name, both these men stood outside their area now. Their prisoner was not wholly Animal, and he was not wholly Man. He was a descendant of his city who had grown to the superficial size and shape of an ordinary man, but who could never live like one, nor love like one.

(Or be loved.)

In truth, he was a beast-bodied self who had from birth endured the special mystery surrounding the number of hours, days, months, years, wherein he could expect to draw breath in health and comfort. For decades he had also known that although he took great delight in the company of children, he would never see, or hold, or name, or guide, or lavish affection upon his own. That his captors, uncovering these facts for themselves, should stand there hemming in Vincent's most closely guarded griefs with their piecemeal harvests of his flesh, their faulty data analyses, and their divergent opinions regarding his nature—it transformed them all into *lusus naturae*, leaving no one free to laugh at the joke.

I am my body and I am more than my body, thought Vincent, working to reassemble his own definitions of himself. *I am both my Darkness and my Light. For you, I am nothing but a murky mirror of yourselves. In me you see the best and the worst of your own natures unmasked. I feed your vanity. I challenge your faith that nightmares cannot touch you in the waking world. So few—*

(if anyone at all)

—so very few people—can look into my face and see ME there. This is the burden I must carry, this my solitary fate. To be a person in my world, and not to be a person in yours—and to know that I am so. To know that my beginning is unknowable—

(unthinkable)

—and my ending a finality with no reprise beyond it.

Hughes reached out one hand toward his helper, changed his mind, and squeezed his folder instead. The paper creaked in his hands. "Jonathan, this creature is a modern-day miracle. I'm sorry you can't see that. I tell you, there is a *mind* there. Certainly it doesn't work like ours, but it's worth investigating. We won't get that chance if we aim for 'publicity.' If we bring Quint into it. That would be a disaster. Are you even aware of all the regulations we've ignored? And the zoo will want their own people involved. *We will lose control of this project*! Please! Be patient! Whatever happened to the painstaking process of scientific inquiry?"

"Scientific inquiry will end your miracle faster than popular scrutiny," said Jonathan, unimpressed by the professor's best arguments. "Our subject isn't responding well to the process. At his best, he's uncooperative. At his worst, he's violent. It might be simpler to study him if he were reduced to bones and tissue samples. But *I'm* not ready for that. Are you saying you are?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Hughes snapped.

Vincent's throat constricted. It didn't matter which man won. For Vincent, either course promised a direct route into the bowels of Hell.

“One way or another, there’s going to be a public display. We have every reason *not* to wait any longer.” Jonathan went quiet. He seemed to take the professor’s measure and find the man deficient in good sense.

“You think you can just keep doing this indefinitely, don’t you?” he asked. “You think you’ve got a permanent resident here. That you can keep your miracle all to yourself. You can’t possibly be that naïve, Professor.”

“What do you mean?”

“You talk about long-term scenarios? The big picture? But what happens after spring break? Or what will you do once the semester ends? You’re not looking beyond the end of each day, are you? When the research is completed and the articles published, what do you think happens then?”

Vincent thought: *Wadlow at Madison Square Garden. Bibrowski at Coney Island. Ota Benga in the Bronx Zoo. And then?* He glanced up at the table where the cat skeleton skulked behind an open case of microscope slides. *Joseph Merrick’s bones in the Royal London Hospital. Byrne’s at the Hunterian Museum. The public display will never end.*

Hughes must have come to a similar conclusion because he was quick to stammer, “I-I won’t allow it!”

Jonathan’s voice became shrill. “There won’t be any choice!”

Hughes responded to Jonathan’s outburst by lowering his own voice. He tried a different line of reasoning. “When you first introduced yourself to me, you said you were only interested in the truth.”

“Yes.”

“Well there it is!”

It, Vincent repeated silently. *That one is not new.* He felt a tear slide down his face.

“Why do you insist on perverting and degrading it?” Hughes demanded.

“The truth isn’t meant to be hoarded like a secret—”

Hughes returned to his original point. “Nor is it meant to be twisted and exploited. *Yes,* the creature is extraordinary and should be shared, but *only* when we know what we’re dealing with first!”

“I’ll tell you what we’re dealing with!” Jonathan tramped to the cage. Vincent felt the hair stand up along his spine as the man glared at him. He didn’t need empathic powers to sense Jonathan’s repulsion.

“It’s a freak of nature. A malformed outcast. A genetic accident.”

It hurt. Vincent had never been able to marshal an inner defense against such words. It didn’t matter who spoke them.

“A killing machine,” Jonathan concluded. “You saw what he was capable of.”

Hughes shouted, “He was *provoked*!”

They all held still for a moment. Then Jonathan spoke again, quiet but angry. “You really believe this *thing* has a conscience, don’t you?”

Hughes didn’t need to answer that question.

“Well, for his sake, I hope you’re wrong. For his sake, I hope he’s an imbecile.” Jonathan looked down at Vincent and addressed his personal ticket to fame. “Because like it or not, the world’s about to make a circus act out of him.” The man walked toward the laboratory door.

“Where are you going?” asked Hughes.

Jonathan turned around. “You and I made a deal, Professor. Now it’s time to see it through.” The doorknob rattled beneath his hand.

The professor startled Vincent with a sudden wild charge from his side of the room to

Jonathan's. "*Please*!" Hughes cried. Vincent turned his head a little. He heard a thump as Hughes used his own body to block the door, trying to prevent his helper's departure.

"Out of my way, Hughes."

"No! I won't let you do this!" That was panic—terror—in the professor's voice.

Jonathan shoved Hughes away. The older man fell heavily to the floor beside the cage, his folder of papers scattering in a flurry across the white linoleum tiles. Jonathan slammed the door behind him.

Vincent heard Hughes crush crisp pages beneath his hands as he sat up. The prickle at the nape of his neck told him the professor was looking at him. Vincent turned his head back to a more comfortable angle.

Whatever comes next is going to be unpleasant, he thought, trying to soothe himself with Father's penchant for understatement. It didn't work, because it was all too true. And also because it wasn't Father's voice speaking to him—

Vincent shut his eyes to breathe through one more internal complaint. This present wave gave him less pain than the others had, but it broke over him as he lay stranded in the cesspool of his captors' venomous words. *I am not what they believe I am,* he insisted. More tears traced hot tracks across his skin.

Oh, but he wanted Father. He wanted to feel Father's arms around him. He wanted Father to bring him true medicine. He wanted his father to call him by their community's names for Vincent. He wanted to know himself as his family knew him. To the Tunnelfolk and their Helpers he was protector and councilman, friend and scholar, stonemason and chess master, artist and architectural engineer, brother and teacher. And with Father, he was son.

I want my father's dry, accented voice to wake me from a terrible dream, assuring me that all is well.

Instead, he heard Hughes moving around behind him while the little man scrambled to collect his papers. *Nor iron bars a cage,* Vincent told himself, but the dictum lacked conviction. His mantra was wearing thin. Vincent was wearing out.

III

24 March 1987
Tuesday Morning

Hughes stuffed the printouts back into his folder, watching the creature from behind. *Such a tiny gesture,* he thought. The sound of the lab door slamming shut boomed in his ears. *A tiny turn of the head*. And yet the movement seemed to speak volumes to Edward Hughes.

He mentally reviewed each example of the creature's physical vocabulary. The creature growled at hypodermics. He refused medicated water. He retreated from cameras, or at least from flashbulbs. He held still for hours at a time, making no attempt to groom himself or arrange his bedding whenever others were in the room. He never looked into his caretakers' eyes. He did not go out of his way to watch either Hughes or Jonathan walk around the lab.

He didn't move at all, the whole time we argued, Hughes thought, *but he turned his head when we fought over the door—the same way he turned his head when he heard Jonathan come into my office yesterday afternoon.*

Hughes stood up, his heart pounding. One more puzzle-premise fell into place. *The*

creature is very interested in doors...the door to his cage, and the door to the lab. He knows what doors do. How they work.

He had to leave. Jonathan would be back, and Hughes must remove the creature before that happened. But first: this final piece to the puzzle. Hughes reflected, *He IS intelligent. I think he was playing dead last night until we went away. I think the video record shows that. And...he is always silently attentive, focused...wary.* Hughes stared at the back of the creature's head.

The creature is always listening.

Hughes spoke to him. "You understand every word we say."

Silence.

"Don't you?"

Again, silence. Again, physical stillness, but Hughes perceived intention in that quietude. He thought, *I'm not imagining it. And I'm not romanticizing him. This thing comprehends.*

He had no time for a closer examination of the issue. Every second counted now. The question was: *Where*? Where could he take his creature, to hide him, to keep him safe? Hughes looked around the room, thinking hard. Thinking fast.

And his answer bloomed in the professor's mind like the season's first daffodil: *Burt Clark is in Egypt.*

Hughes hugged his file folder, thinking, *Clark's not here to use the storage room in the basement. Which is actually MY storage room—mine and Pierson's, but all our wildlife surveillance equipment is currently—*

In the van. Thus, when Clark received that last-minute supply shipment for their next follow-up with the Iroquois League, Hughes suggested that he and Pierson could offer him *(one good turn deserves another)* their unused storage space.

Clark had thanked them profusely. Pierson gave his key to Clark. Hughes still had the duplicate key. The situation was serendipitous, to say the least. One might almost be tempted to call it—

"Miraculous," Hughes said aloud.

The decision made, Hughes got moving. Jonathan had thrown him a curve ball, but Hughes was flexible. He knew what to do. He knew where to run.

First base: he grabbed an empty plastic bag out of a supply drawer. He tossed in all the cultures from the lab's incubator and all the biological samples from the freezer. He tied off the bag and rushed through his office into the hall to drop his collection into the big trash bin outside his office door. *I can always get more samples later,* Hughes consoled himself. He scattered discarded papers and Styrofoam cups from the trash bin over the top of the incriminating bag.

Second base: he hurried to the long bookshelf under his office window and dumped stacks of student papers out of two file boxes. Several stapled packets dropped into untidy fan-shapes on the floor, but Hughes let them lie.

Third base: back into the lab, to transfer all of the creature's artifacts from a locked drawer into one of the file boxes.

Home plate: all records pertaining to the creature went into the second box—video cassettes, print outs, notebooks, the photograph album, X-ray films, sonograms, data logs, slides of the creature's fluid and tissue specimens in their padded case, the bagful of fur Hughes and Jonathan had shaved from the creature's hide.

Hughes looked around the lab for anything else he needed to secure. He picked up the Polaroid camera and put it in the second box. How much more time did he have? Just how small had his second chance become? Hughes wiped the sleeve of his lab coat across his forehead.

"God. A little more time. Just a little more?" he muttered, not realizing that he spoke the

words.

He had the time, if he was brave enough to seize it. He only needed to keep moving. He was doing well. He was on his way.

(Just a little more time.)

He brought both of the jam-packed cardboard boxes into his office and rammed them under his desk. This was the best he could do with the time he might or might not have left. If Jonathan came back while Hughes was moving the cage, the young man might not think to look there for the research records.

"And Jonathan Gould will find no trace of my creature in the lab," Hughes said to the Ucu on his desk.

Time did not merely press the professor now; it nipped at his heels. Hughes dashed into the lab again. What next? Cover up the cage. Yes. Hughes took the cover out of a high cabinet, shook it open, and flung the brown canvas over the steel frame. The creature looked up when Hughes jumped for one of the thick hems and pulled it down over the bars.

"*Now* you pay attention to me!" Hughes shook his head. "Well, we're leaving the lab. I can't risk anyone seeing you." He evened the cover's edges on each side of the cage. He heard the creature shift inside.

Hughes opened both sets of doors to the maintenance hallway. He unclamped the wheels beneath the cage and shoved. *It was unwieldy when Jonathan and I moved it in here,* Hughes thought, remembering. *Now the creature's weight only makes it worse.*

Hughes closed the back doors to the lab, trying to look in all directions at once. "We're moving through public spaces," he whispered. "You just do what you do best, all right? Stay quiet."

Halfway to the elevator, Peg Cooper, one of the Annex custodians, came out of a room and stood aside in the hall to let Hughes pass.

"Impressive," she said. "Need any help with that?"

"No, no," Hughes said, trying for nonchalance. "Just moving some equipment to a different lab."

"Okay, Professor. You just let me know if you need anything."

"Sure thing!" Hughes answered. Did he sound too bright, too eager? She gave him a queer look as he hurried away.

Peg didn't follow or interfere. That was what counted. The service elevator doors whumped shut and Hughes took a couple deep breaths. Not scot free yet, but a long way out of Mr. Gould's line of fire.

The basement corridors were quiet. Hughes inwardly cringed at the rumble of the cage as he rolled it over the cement floor. He was perspiring heavily. *Get to the storeroom,* he was thinking. *Get the cage inside. Lock the doors. Go back up. Get the boxes. Assuming Gould and possibly Quint aren't waiting for me. Come back down. Take stock.*

Voices echoed in the distance. Hughes pulled up short, grabbing the bars through the canvas to brake the cage with his own weight. He was not a very big man. The momentum nearly heeled him over, but Hughes held on. He didn't fall. A split second later, the cage wrenched him forward another full stumbling meter as the unseen creature crashed into the door. Hughes heard a sound which might have been an aborted yelp.

"Sorry," Hughes whispered. He rushed to a better angle and pushed the cage into a dim side corridor. Easing it up against the wall, he could only imagine the picture he made. *My life was a farce to begin with,* he thought, resisting the sudden urge to laugh. *So nothing whatsoever has changed.*

He hid behind the cage, listening. The voices came closer. Peeking around the canvas, Hughes saw two men walk past the hallway intersection, one wearing a maintenance worker's coveralls, the other wearing a suit and tie. Neither man looked his way. Their voices faded and a door opened and closed. A moment later, the door opened and closed again, the voices and footsteps resumed, and the elevator pinged. Hughes sighed. The whooshing doors cut off the voices. The basement became quiet.

"Not far now," Hughes muttered. He badgered the cage the rest of the way to the storeroom's double doors. He didn't realize his hands were trembling until he pulled his key ring from his pocket.

Almost there, he told himself. *Almost secure*. He didn't feel anything close to security until the cage stood in the center of the room, the wheels stationary and locked, and he had bolted the storeroom doors from inside. Hughes leaned against a wall. *If I were still a religious man, I'd be chanting psalms right now,* he thought.

He looked around the room. Open packing crates lined the bare concrete walls and various tools lay scattered about. Clark had invested enough time to get his shipment down here, and to check the order, but he hadn't bothered to unpack anything. No matter. Hughes wasn't interested in Clark's goods.

The utility sink in the corner opposite the doors drew his attention. He crossed the room and opened the cabinet underneath the sink. He saw a dusty assortment of rags and empty containers inside. *This will be a good place to put my boxes,* he thought. He moved a few oddments to the countertop, making room.

Then he heard a sound from the cage: claws clicking on the metal floor. Hughes stood up. Right. Creature first. Then boxes.

Hughes dragged the cover off the cage, gathering the canvas into folds before dropping it into one corner of the storeroom. "How did we do?" he asked.

The creature crouched as far from Hughes as he could get, shaking, his right hand gripping his left shoulder and his left arm held tight across his stomach. Hughes opened his mouth to speak again, but the creature glowered up at him through his tumbled mane. Words died unuttered on the professor's lips. Those eyes scorched Hughes with blue fire.

Hughes backed away, thinking, *If looks could kill, I'd be incinerated where I stand*. He hastened out the doors and went back up for the boxes.

As it turned out, Jonathan was not in the lab, and not in the office. Hughes found no evidence that the young man had returned. He began to hope: *This might actually work. It won't be convenient anymore, but my research doesn't need to stop.* In the midst of his anxiety, balancing the box of creature-clothes on top of the box of documentation, Hughes felt his new-found joy wax within him again. *I am a capable researcher. I am a self-sufficient scientist. My dream lives.*

He met several people on the way back down: Tim Warren, biochemist. A pretty little TA that Hughes didn't know very well. Peg again. And Robin Kilroy, a department secretary. Noting these people in passing, Hughes thought, *Foot traffic increases. The day is underway*. *If I want to make things look normal, I need to get all this squared away so I can get to the morning plenary session on time. It won't do to be late today. I wish I could just skip it. My afternoon lecture and the discussion panel, too. Maybe I can get out of the panel. Why did I ever volunteer for that in the first place?*

When he returned to the storeroom, he saw that the creature had settled against the corner bars at the back of the cage, sitting with knees clasped to chest, forehead pillowed on his arms. Hughes couldn't see the creature's face and the creature did not look up at his arrival. Hughes

checked his watch.

"I think I owe a psalm or two," he said wonderingly. "Just look at that." His watch told him that he had just enough time to take the first steps toward continuing his work in their new setting.

Hughes pulled his Polaroid out of the second file box and took a picture. He didn't have photo corners with him so he wrote on the photograph itself, to label it. Then he brought out his anecdotal observations log and updated his record. He placed his new photo inside the composition book's front cover for safekeeping.

As he wrote, he thought, *I've done it. This is me. This is Edward Hughes coming out on top at last.*

"*Thou call'dst me dog before thou hadst a cause*, Jonathan Gould," he declaimed, feeling a self-congratulatory smile tweak at his mouth. "*But, since I am a dog, beware my fangs*."

In the cage, the creature turned his head toward Hughes. His long, unkempt mane still covered his face, but Hughes could see reflected points of the storeroom's low light glimmer from the creature's shaded eyes. Hughes put the notebook beneath the sink.

"You liked that, did you?" he asked. The beast remained silent and motionless, but Hughes wasn't discouraged now. He had time again, to draw his creature out. He had all the time in the world.

Hughes said, "*I'll not be made a soft and dull-eyed fool, / To shake the head, relent, and sigh, and yield.* History shall not repeat itself. No one can take you from me now."

He felt a stupendous exhilaration, having outmaneuvered Jonathan Gould, and Leland Quint, and the whole unhelpful world. *Endorphins kicking in,* he thought. Nothing whatever wrong with that. Heading up to his office again a few minutes later, Hughes felt cheerful enough to whistle as he walked.

IV

24 March 1987
Tuesday, Early Afternoon

The newsroom gabbled, clacked, hummed, and stank. The air above several desks swirled with cigarette haze. People wearing nonstandardized variations of professional attire walked around the room, busy with their separate errands. Passing through the clamor, Catherine approached the doorway of a small office. She listened to one half of a loud telephone conversation as the man inside the office complained to whomever spoke to him on the other end of the line.

"You never gave Gerald this much trouble, did you? That's no excuse! I need to know which sister the guy left with. Yeah? Then ask the bloody doorman. Of course he'll tell you. For two thousand dollars, he damn well better tell you!"

The reporter was middle-aged and balding, with saggy brown eyes and bloodless lips. He twisted back and forth in his swiveling desk chair as he spoke. The cigarette he held between two fingers dusted ash over the carpet whenever he made unconscious gestures at his phone correspondent.

Catherine waited until the man hung up the receiver before she walked in. She watched with distaste as he dragged on his cigarette and tapped ash into his ashtray. She had always

shared her mother's and grandmother's disgust for all forms of tobacco.

"Excuse me," Catherine said.

The man slid his glasses down from the top of his head, settling them on his nose to look at her. Catherine carried her dark leather gloves in her hand and held, folded over one arm, her overcoat of swirling stormy-day hues: violets and blues merging into magenta moments. She wore a stop-sign red *crepe de chine* blouse and a black pencil skirt, adding three inches to her height with sleek black Versace pumps. The reporter seemed to like what he saw. He smiled.

"Are you Byron Trask?" asked Catherine.

"Yes, I am."

Catherine gave him a little smile of her own, just to keep things friendly and polite. "I'm Catherine Chandler, with the District Attorney's Office." It was a fib now, but she thought she could use all the firepower she could bring to bear. Getting a reporter to reveal his unnamed sources could be a very trying process.

This time, though, bringing up the DA had been a mistake. Trask's smile dematerialized. He pushed his glasses back up over his forehead and swiveled away from her. "See my editor or my lawyer, but leave me alone," he said in a flat tone. "I'm busy." He picked up a pen and began writing on a pad of paper.

Dammit, Catherine thought. "Wait a minute," she told Trask quickly. "You don't understand. I'm not here for that." When Trask looked at her again, cautious, Catherine took yesterday's folded newspaper from her purse. She handed it to him so he could read the headline.

"What about it?" he asked.

"Did it happen?"

Trask returned the paper to her. "It's there in black and white, isn't it?" He picked up his pen, starting to go back to his writing, but then he stopped and took a deep breath. He put his glasses back on and looked at Catherine through the thick lenses.

"Miss Chandler, we many not be *The New York Times*, but we are a newspaper. News is our business. News is what I write." He selected one of many pieces of paper from his desk and unfolded it. Catherine saw the familiar formatting of a press release.

"Did you know that this morning at the Bronx Zoo, an orangutan saved his keeper from choking on a bagel by applying the Heimlich maneuver?"

Catherine shook her head, no. It made a weird illustration for his point. Perhaps that *was* his point. Weird news was still news.

"Now, where do you think an orangutan learned the Heimlich maneuver? Hmm?"

Catherine shrugged. *I didn't come here to listen to stories about orangutans,* she thought. But Trask was on a roll.

"Television!" he said, triumphant. "It's the truth. It's the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"Did you believe this woman?" Catherine cut in. "This grandmother that you mention in your article?"

"It's my job to believe her," Trask said.

Sadly, Catherine understood that. One did not spend any amount of time practicing corporate law without accepting Trask's statement as a fundamental principle of such work. It was one of the many things she did not miss about her father's law firm.

Catherine looked Trask in the eye. "Did you believe her?" she asked again, bringing the question past the level of Trask's profession, and into the range of his personal opinion.

Trask saw something in her face, or heard something in her voice. He gave her an honest answer. "I've come to know the old woman quite well," he said. "She's what you might call a

voyeur. But she's not a liar."

Okay then, Catherine thought. *Here comes the hard part.* "I need to talk to her," she said.

Trask looked surprised. "Whatever for?"

"Finding out the truth is my business too."

He looked at her for a long moment, his whole face a question mark. He tapped more ash from the end of his cigarette. "What's it worth to you?" he asked.

Catherine frowned at him.

Trask inhaled smoke and blew it out again with a little laugh. "I know what you're thinking. That's not what I meant." He leaned forward in his chair. "I've become fond of the old woman. It'll do her good to have some decent company. But you have to understand: *she's* the piper you'll have to pay if you want to get any truth out of her."

Catherine sighed. "How much do you think she'll ask for?" Catherine would pay any amount, because she had no other choice. This was all she had to go on, truth or not.

Trask shook his head. "You still don't understand." He stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray and reached for his pen. "But you will."

He began to jot down contact information on a Post-it note. "You're a lady with manners. I'm sure she'll like you. Here's my advice. If you want her to make any sense at all, dance to her tune." He peeled the Post-it from his notepad and held it out to her.

Catherine took the paper square, feeling suspicious and curious at the same time. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," Trask said. "You haven't met Anna Lausch."

Chapter Ten: Conclusive Evidence

I

24 March 1987
Tuesday, Early Afternoon

Hughes ended his lecture and glanced at the clock on the wall. He had filled his scheduled time. He wanted only to escape back down to the storeroom to be with his creature. His creature was responsive now. Hughes wanted to see what he could do with that.

"So. Are there any questions?" He looked out at his audience.

He saw no hands raised. The faces out there looked skeptical. Or bored. Or they were not turned his way at all. Several young people were busy gathering their things to leave. Older men and women were already chatting softly with each other. A very small group had come to hear him speak today.

"Any comments?" Hughes tried. He was used to covering his bases in a talk, so he was also used to answering only a few questions when he was done speaking. But he had never received *no questions at all*.

Until now.

"All right then. Thank you. Um, that's all for this session," he said, knowing that he sounded—lame.

I guess I've been pretty distracted, Hughes thought. *Did it show too much? Or did I fail to adequately prepare for this lecture?*

No, his preparations were not at fault. His delivery was flawed. Hughes sighed and gathered his notes into his folder. He switched off the podium microphone. Everyone had an off-day now and then. Today, his mind focused very much elsewhere.

"*I* have questions, Professor," a voice beside him spoke up.

Hughes jumped. Turning, he saw Jonathan. The young man's face was expressionless. He just stood there, arms at his sides, waiting for Hughes to notice him. Hughes felt his heart begin to gallop in his chest. His assistant's eyes burned with anger—and hatred.

"J-Jonathan!"

"Yes. Jonathan. Want to hear *my* questions, *Professor*?" Jonathan took a slow step forward. Hughes took a step back and bumped into the podium. "Where is he, Hughes? What did you do with him?"

Hughes glanced around the lecture room. People were filing out now, still chatting. Two girls were rubber-banding packets of symposium pamphlets together and zipping them into bookbags. A few people glanced his way, but no one seemed to think anything of the stone-faced graduate student standing behind the podium with him. Why would they?

"Jonathan, I can't tell you what you want to know unless you agree to proceed with our project at *my* pace," Hughes said, pitching his voice beneath the noise level in the room.

"*Our* project is over," Jonathan said, not emulating the professor's auditory example. "We have everything we need. We can either move on to the next stage and start a new project with the creature...or we can go our separate ways. I don't care. But I'm not giving that thing up. I'm not letting him go. So you have to tell me where he is."

Hughes thought of his secret triumph, moving the creature to safety all by himself. He thought of how the creature was looking at him now, and *listening* to him. Hughes had solved the

beast's silent riddle and changed the dynamics of the situation. Jonathan's interference would unravel the delicate connection Hughes was building. Hughes drew a little strength from his secrets, a little confidence and a little anger of his own.

He looked into Jonathan's eyes and said, "No."

Jonathan frowned. He looked like a red-headed gargoyle. "I went to Quint."

The professor's heart stumbled in its race, then galloped along even faster. He took a deep breath in order to speak calmly. "I expected that you might."

"I brought him with me to the lab."

"I expected you might do that, too."

"You took everything." Jonathan stepped even closer. "*Everything*. You made a liar out of me. Do you have *any idea* how humiliating that was?"

"Yes. I do." Hughes truly did know, because his entire life had been one long series of humiliations. He thought, *I'm trying to break the cycle, young man. This is me, living my life, my way.*

"You wouldn't have *any* of that research without *me*!" Jonathan's cheeks and forehead now blazed as red as his hair.

"And *you* wouldn't even know there was anything out there to research in the first place...without *me*," Hughes retorted.

They glared at each other until a voice from the front row of seats called, "Edward?"

Professor and student looked down at Quint, who stood between the chairs and the stage with his hands on his hips. "A word," Quint said.

"This isn't over," Jonathan hissed. "I am watching you, Hughes. You just remember that. Jonathan Gould is watching you! Sooner or later, I'll find out what you've done with my specimen!"

There was nothing in Jonathan's manner of the cheerful young man Hughes had met a few days ago. No fellowship. No curiosity. Only a dark, bloodthirsty greed. Shocked, Hughes watched Jonathan Gould tromp away.

Your specimen? Hughes thought in disbelief. *Yours?!*

Quint was tapping his foot on the floor.

Hughes joined his department head in front of the chairs. Quint looked put out. "I know what you're trying to do," Quint said. "It isn't going to work."

"What am I trying to do?" Hughes asked, fighting the urge to cover his heart with one hand. He was beginning to feel shaky. What did Quint know? How many of Jonathan Gould's accusations had Quint believed?

"Don't play games with me. And stop wasting my time! Riling up students now? In the middle of all *this*! We've got people coming in from Japan today. *Verghese* just got in from Bangalore last night. They've come here to talk about *science*, Edward. Are you trying to impress me? You've failed. Or to *pressure* me? I don't like being manipulated and I will not have you manipulating our students to further your own ridiculous ends."

"I'm not manipulating anyone."

"Sasquatch in the park, Edward? A yeti in a cage? That boy's head was full of your bullshit and I will not have *either one of you* embarrassing this department or this institution. You drop this insane notion of yours, or I will drop you! Do you understand?"

Hughes did not understand. *Drop me?!* he thought, terrified. *What do you mean?* For a moment, he thought Leland Quint was threatening his life.

"I'm serious, Edward. I will fire you so fast, your head will spin."

Hughes felt so relieved, he nearly laughed. That would have been a bad thing to do, just

then. He bowed his head to keep Quint from seeing whatever might be passing across his face.

"I understand," he said.

"Good." Quint let out a disgusted sigh and walked away, shaking his head.

Hughes hugged his folder of notes to his chest, glaring after the man. *How I hate him!* he thought. *Petty, loud-mouthed, dream-smashing nitwit! When you DO learn the truth about my discoveries, you'll never talk that way to me again. I will see you eat crow that day!*

He returned to his office, frightened all over again. He felt like he was being watched from every angle. Hughes told himself, *I'll have to wait until the building clears out, before I go downstairs. I can't let ANYONE see me go down there. Word might get back to Quint. Or Jonathan. And Jonathan might even be spying on me right now.*

Hughes looked all around as he walked, but saw only the expected scattering of people in the halls. Only the familiar corners to turn as he approached his office. Only the ordinary drinking fountain and trash bin in the hallway outside his door.

And—he stopped walking—an *unusual* piece of folded paper taped to the window of that door, just beneath the black letters that spelled out his name. Hughes pulled the paper off the glass and unfolded it. He recognized Jonathan's precise block printing from the logbook entries and video cassette labels the young man had written out over the past few days.

> P.S. Your lecture was execrable, by the way. You are, bar none, the most deplorable educator I've ever seen in my life. —Gould

Hughes pressed his lips together. *Well to hell with you too...Gould.* He unlocked his office door, shoved his way past it, and banged it closed behind him. He crumpled up the note and threw it in his wastebasket. *To hell with all of you!*

II

24 March 1987
Tuesday Afternoon

Vincent forced his eyes to focus on his hands. He was finding it difficult to construct a list of events in his mind. He kept losing track of his memory sequences. Vincent started over, keeping count on his fingers this time.

I was an infant. When Helpers first brought me to Father in the Tunnels, I was very sick. Father and Peter diagnosed panleukopenia. The disease nearly killed me, but Father saved my life. One.

The underground gas leak happened when I was five years old. All the children playing in that tunnel on that day fell ill. Then the tunnel collapse hurt or killed our rescuers. Two.

There is the day Devin dug me out of that rock slip in the Maze. I had hurt my legs. Father gave me acetaminophen for the pain. Vincent shuddered. *Father never gave me acetaminophen again. Three.*

That dog bit me in the park. Vernon pulled him off me after I fell out of the tree. Infected wounds. Four.

The skating accident on the pond. I saved Alys from the water, but caught pneumonia myself. Five.

He began to count the fingers of his other hand.

The time after Lisa left; the dark time after intruders attacked Molly on her way home from a foraging run. Vincent shied away from those memories. *One*.

After Julia died and chaos corrupted the Kitchen. The food poisoning put half of us in the Hospital Chamber. Father was livid. Two.

And now. Three.

Vincent looked from one hand to the other. Five and three. He couldn't seem to combine the two numbers into one.

I teach arithmetic, he thought. *I teach geometry and algebra. I teach calculus. I bested Benjamin in our Scholar's Debate last month, and his interest in quantum mechanics is far greater than mine. Five and three! Why can't I calculate this sum?*

He looked from his left hand to his right. He re-counted the fingers which quivered in tiny spasms, because he was trying to hold them straight. Eight. Okay, good. Okay, fine. He had his answer.

He rested his hands in his lap and let his fingers relax. They stopped shaking. This was also good, also fine. Vincent didn't like the fluttering shadows cast by his claws whenever he moved his hands.

"Let the numbers go," he muttered under his breath. "Shadows too. They'll keep." He hoped that he would find everything where he'd left it, when he could think once more.

Vincent sat quietly, waiting for his mental fog to lift. It came and went in misty interludes, like clouds scudding across the moon. If he concentrated, he found it possible to work his way through a misty time, but he was running out of reasons to try.

When he opened his eyes, he felt awake again. He remembered his list. He picked up his thoughts where he'd left off. *So. I've been desperately ill eight times in my life.*

"I wonder—" a terribly familiar not-voice interposed from behind him. "Do you think we'll get the chance to count more than eight occasions?"

Vincent tried to sit up, to move away from the bars of the cage, but muscles in his back and shoulders shriveled into insoluble knots, and vertigo doused him in weightless gray. He stopped moving and groaned. "Please not now."

"You have a more convenient time in mind?" the Other Vincent asked. He crept around Vincent's legs to squat in front of him, a dark, disheveled, snaggletoothed Beast. Vincent looked upon that feral face. He saw that it was not smirking, nor was it snarling, nor glaring silent accusations—as it often did whenever this particular apparition confronted him.

His Shadow-self looked wretched. He was haggard and hollow-eyed. He rocked a little, back and forth, his hands balled into fists beneath his chin. The Other's eyes appeared inky blue and badly frightened. The Other Vincent was always at his most dangerous when he was frightened.

"There is no where else to go," the Other whispered. "There is no time but now."

"What do you want?" asked Vincent.

"Out." The Other stared through the bars at the cement wall, looking beyond the wall, contemplating diminishing possibilities. He pulled his arms tight against his shorn chest, making himself smaller. "I hate this place. I hate this cage. I want out."

For the first time he could remember, Vincent felt a hesitant affinity for his darker half. This was the part of himself he tried to overcome, yet could never leave behind. One could not escape one's own undersoul—short of that final escape from which none ever returned. And perhaps not even then.

A powerful dreamer, and one used to private visions in the dark, Vincent was sometimes

visited by this manifestation. When this happened, if they spoke at all, they argued. If they did not speak, likely they fought, tooth and claw. Vincent's Bright-self feared the Other's aura of violence and death. The Other's Dark-self resented Vincent's strict renunciation of his innate ignomy and *kilesas*. But trapped here together in this frigid place, Vincent saw an aspect of his own being enduring a prisoner's pain—and understood him. Vincent accepted the risk involved: he listened.

"We are beginning to die, aren't we?" the Other said with his characteristic artless candor.

"I'm certain that we're not beginning to heal," Vincent answered.

The Other stopped rocking. "Death approaches, Brother."

And Vincent sighed. "I know."

He could not even escape the Other's truth; he knew he was slowly buckling beneath its weight. All physical movement had become a trial. None of his muscles worked right anymore. His stomach had finally surrendered its reason for rebellion, but Vincent considered that loss a critical defeat. His flanks ached. His throat burned. The pain in his head only seemed to be getting worse. He was hardpressed to stay awake and unable to sleep. Vincent received some relief whenever the world deflated into blank insignificance around him. But then he would come back to himself and find his body a little more dysfunctional than when he'd left it.

These peculiar misty episodes started not long after the professor's first departure from the basement storage room. They proved more insidious than last night's blank spaces had been. Vincent didn't realize anything had changed until he came to himself, face-down on the floor of the cage, clinging to the unexpectedly wet blanket with hands that couldn't feel the cloth.

He jerked away from the smells of excreta and the filmy dross of the professor's chemical cleansing solution. Vincent found that he had fallen hard: he could see new bruises beginning to discolor the shaved places on his right knee and left elbow, places he had not struck against the door when Hughes mishandled the cage. The cushion lay a few inches from his face, damp with rejected water and gleaming mucous. Near his hip, the blanket displayed a separate dampness, having absorbed a miserly amount of fluid from a different source. This stain was dark red. Vincent's nose detected ammonia, blood, and bitter chemicals within his body's personal scent-signature. He had no memory of being sick in these ways.

He had stared at the little bloodstain, his fear transporting him into whatever arid place lay beyond dread. The ache radiating from the middle of his back acquired new meaning. He believed his kidneys were bleeding. And he did not know what he could do to stop it.

He turned the cushion dry-side up and pushed it toward the right side of the cage. He left the rumpled blanket lying near the bars of the door. Favoring his very unhappy shoulder, Vincent dragged himself to the back of his mobile prison cell. There, his emptied stomach let him assume a marginally upright position against the corner bars. Sitting up helped his headache. The professor's brief return to the storage room did not.

Vincent paid more attention to his sense of self after that. He was not so bodily ill again, but the debilitating misty incidents kept occurring. They felt like condensed versions of his original confusion, when he first awoke in the cage. He guessed this new misery had been happening to him for a few hours now. Whenever his mind cleared, he understood the significance of his symptoms. Vincent had now become too weak to heal. Internal organs were succumbing to his dire circumstances. His damaged nervous system was deteriorating.

And there was nothing he could do. He doubted whether Hughes could do anything to help him, either. Listening to the man prattle through his panic after Jonathan's desertion, Vincent began to believe that Professor Hughes lived locked inside a deep emotional scar. He was a man who could not see past his own pain. Observing another creature's suffering only

recalled to the professor's mind echoes of his own hurts.

"He's a coward who only sees what he wants to see," the Other growled, angry and unsympathetic. "He believed the poisoner a trusty friend."

"I believed no less of Mitch Denton for many years," Vincent replied. "How can I judge Hughes for another man's deceptions?"

The Other remained unmoved. "You can blame him for his *own* deceptions. Master and apprentice make a game of keeping secrets from each other."

Vincent almost laughed. "Do you think *Hughes* is any kind of a *mentor*?"

"I think he is a willing fool. When we vomited at the bad man's feet, *he took it in stride*. He thinks his poisons will fix us. He thinks he's safe from the circus down here."

"Whatever else is happening in the professor's heart, he is *not* feeling safe," Vincent said.

The Other cared nothing for this insight. "I know he wants to keep his special *pet* in this cage forever. He wants to teach me tricks. 'Sit there! Fetch the ball! Eat spoiled meat off the floor! Good Creature! So obedient! Now speak! Say Hel-lo!'"

"I know that, too."

The Other's eyes grew darker. "The metal bars don't stop his hands," he whispered.

Vincent said nothing. There was nothing to say to that.

"Do *not* let him touch us again."

"And how do I prevent him if he tries?"

The Other looked at the floor of the cage. "Tell him not to try."

This was new. "My language-abhorring Shadow wants me to *speak* to my captor?" Vincent asked.

Vincent's Shadow looked up, hearing the challenge in Vincent's voice. "The enemy isn't looking at us with his own eyes."

Once again, Vincent had to agree with him. Hughes seemed to love his cameras.

The Other unfisted his claws and spread them wide to indicate the shapes of bones, which showed beneath his filthy skin. "He isn't seeing *this*. You must give him what he wants. You must trade what he wants for what I want. You *must* do this. What good were all your books if you won't use your words now?"

"*If an insolent man thrusts a sword of speech against you*," Vincent answered, relying upon a book to spite his imaginary twin, "*Oppose him with your patience, so you may break its edge*."

The Other ignored this. "Make him see us!"

"Hughes sees," Vincent said.

But the Other had brought up another good point. On his own, could Hughes accurately interpret what he saw? It pleased the professor to stare at Vincent (and photographed images of Vincent) for hours on end. And yet the best Hughes could think to offer his ailing captive were his dubious medicines for nausea, some inedible cuts of meat, and all-too-occasional rations of water. Even the professor's hungrily sneering helper, in his great hurry to put Vincent on display before all the world, understood that Vincent was sick. Hughes did not. Or perhaps he *chose* not to understand.

The Other waited for Vincent to do something productive with the silence.

It's not a good sign that my Other self is showing himself to me like this, thought Vincent, looking at him. *Hallucinations rising up out of the mist. Coherent thought descending into it. Sleepless dreams and dream-shattered sleep. Lightless candles in a lower storage chamber. Shylock reciting poisonous anthems between two locked doors.* Vincent sighed. *I'm tired.*

Strange how the Other remained perfectly clear while everything else began to soften at

the edges.

Vincent looked past the Other to the melting bars of the cage door. He thought of carnival taffy. And bubble gum, stretched into long pink cords by small, sticky fingers. Julia's caramels cooling on the Kitchen's marble slab. For a moment, he heard the sounds of children laughing. Vincent didn't laugh. He didn't like soft, stringy candies. He blinked at the bars until they looked more like metal rods again.

In the cold room beyond the door of the cage, the light became silver-blue to Vincent's eyes. It began to billow restlessly, like sheer curtains in a nighttime wind. A shape appeared behind the light.

"Please no more Shadows," Vincent said, frightened and helplessly cornered. With the Other already escaped from Vincent's depths, the way had opened for even darker phantoms to follow. Vincent felt like Pandora, wrestling to keep the lid of a dangerous box shut—and failing.

The shape didn't hear his plea. It stepped forward. Vincent's fear sank into sorrow.

Vincent knew the face he saw. Vincent loved that face. "Catherine!"

She didn't answer him; she didn't hear him. She gazed out toward horizons Vincent would never see. It hurt to look at her, to know she wasn't truly there. But how could he ever look away?

"I'm sorry, Catherine," Vincent told her. "I begrudged you the farewell you wanted. I was wrong to do that. You deserved better."

Catherine's image slowly turned her back to him.

"I meant to come to you. I meant to say goodbye. I wanted to say many things. To give you everything I could. Everything, Catherine."

She left the light, becoming a blue silhouette, and then a distant shape, and then an empty space.

"Be happy," Vincent whispered. The light began to die. Vincent shut his eyes to keep from seeing that death. Steel bars touched the back of his head. Clammy mist engulfed him.

Vincent opened his eyes, shivering. *Thirsty,* he thought. *Cold.* He blinked. His Dark-self still crouched beneath the lock of the cage door, hating everything. The Other was also shivering.

Vincent looked at the space behind the Other, at the quiet little room beyond the bars. *So much straw on the floor,* he thought. *Break a crate. Get some dry wood.* He looked at the cabinet in the corner. *If I could get to my matches, I could make a fire.* He rested his head against the bars behind him. *Though, if I could get out to reach my matches, I would not need a fire. I wouldn't stay in this room.*

Chill air in Vincent's lungs robbed him of warmth with every breath. That air seemed thin now. He had to breathe quickly to stop the sensation of being slowly suffocated. Faint, Vincent wondered, *Have I ever felt so ill?* He supposed everyone always believed that a present sickness was the worst one.

With a carefully apportioned fragment of his remaining strength, Vincent reached past the Shadows of his heart to scrape at the bottom of Pandora's box: *But even now, it might not be too late for me.* The care provided by Father, and Peter, and eventually Mary, had allowed Vincent to survive his past injuries and illnesses. The three medical experts for the world Below had become adept at finding creative solutions to the problems posed by Vincent's unique physiology. If Vincent could get to Father, he might have a chance—

The Other broke into Vincent's thoughts. "If you could make fire. If you could go home," he growled weakly, obliterating Vincent's last vestige of hope. "We're caught in this damnable cage and no one knows where we are. Not your *people*. Not your *father*. Not *her*. Not anyone. Only the bad man in the white coat."

Vincent raised his head to glare at his unwanted companion. “Will dwelling upon these facts help us in any way...*Brother*?”

The Other bared his fangs and hunkered down into an even smaller shape. “I don’t want to die here. I don’t want to die alone.”

“We all must die alone,” Vincent said.

The Other suddenly began to cry.

Because they were in truth his own tears, Vincent felt the wetness on his own face. He tried to be sensible, thinking, *I cannot afford to weep about this. I cannot replenish the water I lose*. *The energy.*

It was no use. In this place, sense could not overrule sorrow. Eons ago, it seemed, he’d prayed for Catherine in the midst of her own tumults, that she might regard her ability and her being with gentleness. Now he took that memory to heart for himself.

Vincent slid a hand across the floor toward the Other. The Other Vincent cringed away. “Come,” said Vincent. “It’s all right. I understand.”

The Other tilted his bedraggled head, mistrustful. Then he slowly extended his own claws toward Vincent. *Is this what it takes to call a truce between us?* Vincent wondered.

But something happened before Dark and Bright could touch. When Vincent awoke, he found himself flat on his indignant back, arms and legs akimbo, caught up in a murky impression that white light had exploded around him. He felt a new pain in his mouth; his teeth had cut the inside of his right cheek. The Other was gone.

Fog ensnared him again, gummy and gray, hard to breathe through. Even after the fogginess passed, a long time elapsed before words returned to him. When they did flicker into his mind again, it was—of all people—Cullen’s voice that exclaimed, “What the *fuck*?!” inside his head.

Not as innovative as Winslow, Vincent thought, clutching his harrowed skull with his unfeeling hands, *but apt for the circumstances.*

He rolled onto his side, onto the dry part of the blanket, and tugged the red cushion closer by minuscule degrees until it no longer sat squashed against the side bars. He pulled this one defense against the hardness of the cage floor beneath his right shoulder and lay gasping, spent. Vincent had no idea what had happened to him.

Some strange new fainting spell? A vision his mind could not comprehend? It left him aching all over, enfeebled, and besieged by a violent thirst. His frantic heartbeat throbbed in his gums. He swallowed only with difficulty. It felt as though the muscles in his neck had forgotten how to cooperate. His throat felt very dry.

Vincent needed water. He *coveted* water. He glanced at the fire hose coiled behind a small glass door on one wall. He looked up at the top of the cabinet in the corner. His nose could track the slow current of air in the little room. His mouth could taste the traces of moisture that wafted to him from the sink.

He thought, *If I look at that distant faucet for very long, I shall go mad.*

So he hid his face against his arm and ransacked his memory for any words that could possibly defend him against insanity and despair. *Shakespeare,* he decided. *Go to him for that.*

And, of course, as always, and unabashed, the Bard bespoke truth unto Vincent’s soul.

Tired with all these, for restful death I cry,
As to behold desert a beggar born,
And needy nothing trimm’d in jollity,
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,

And gilded honour shamefully misplac'd,
And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
And right perfection wrongfully disgrac'd,
And strength by limping sway disabled
And art made tongue-tied by authority,
And folly—doctor-like—controlling skill,
And simple truth miscall'd simplicity,
And captive good attending captain ill:
Tir'd with all these, from these would I be gone,
Save that, to die, I leave my love alone.

Vincent was crying again, but without force or even a halting breath. He thought, *I entrusted my Love with my hope. And with my freedom. Can I muster the faith to be content with this: Catherine's bearing my joys and our dreams up and out into daylight?*

He felt the shadows of the metal bars mark his body like brands, burning cold lines into his flesh. Or perhaps they were long razors, cutting the rest of his fur away. Vincent missed the secret protection of his thick winter coat. He missed wool and leather, corduroy and quilted canvas. Most of all, he missed his hooded cloak. His poverty soaked into his bones. Still shivering, Vincent drew his feet up onto the blanket. He was not comforted. The sparse layer of soiled insulation did little to deflect the warmthless steel—but that little help was better than none.

As his tears dampened the fur on his arm, Vincent thought, *If all I can do now is lie here and love Catherine, then I will do that. Whatever life is left in me, I can devote to honoring my memories. I can love all the brave and loyal people who have dared to love me. I defy the cage. I reject it. This cage cannot keep love out, and it cannot keep love in.*

It can keep YOU in, the whisperer muttered. *It can keep you in until it kills you, for all your desire to transcend the steel.*

I receive your truth, Vincent thought to that shade, *but I embrace mine*.

He guessed the inner quiet that followed indicated acceptance, if not agreement.

III

24 March 1987
Tuesday, Late Afternoon

Catherine surreptitiously looked around the room for a place to set her cup and saucer so she wouldn't have to drink any more of Anna Lausch's weak breakfast tea. The saucer had been broken at some point and then glued back together. Catherine could feel the lumpy line of the dried adhesive as she held the dish in her hands.

"Did you know that if you only dip the teabag in the pot seven times, you can make it last two days?" Mrs. Lausch was saying. "The teabag, you understand. Not the tea. You see, I drink the tea. Seven is a lucky number!"

Catherine spotted a tiny square of unclaimed space on a nearby shelf of knickknacks. Moving slowly, she placed her undesired beverage on the spot and settled back in her chair again. Mrs. Lausch's own "tea," sat on the edge of the old woman's antique table, steaming in a

mug with a fantastical bird painted on one side. She had brought out her favorite china pieces to serve her guest and Catherine felt guilty about putting her to the trouble.

"Yes, Mrs. Lausch," Catherine said. "I was wondering, though, about your hobby."

Mrs. Lausch looked at her with bright, happy eyes. The old woman sat in state, wrapped in a creamy white crocheted shawl and a plum-colored knitted scarf, an ivory cameo pinned to the collar of her lacy blouse. All around her, a lifetime's accumulation of mementos crowded the room.

From where she sat, Catherine could see candy-striped hatboxes, photographs in dustless silver frames, fringed lampshades, hand-stitched samplers on the walls, an immaculate chenille counterpane covering the old woman's bed, and even an ivory-handled magnifying glass lying beside an open volume on Mrs. Lausch's polished mahogany table—*Gone with the Wind*. The book looked old enough to be a first edition.

To Catherine, all of this seemed a museum exhibit's homage to a bygone era. To Anna Lausch, it was home. She enjoyed sharing stories about her faded remnants. She also seemed proud of her most prized possession: an antique brass spyglass mounted on a contemporary adjustable tripod. The spyglass pointed out the window, overlooking a gorgeous corner view of Central Park.

"Well!" Mrs. Lausch said. "It all started with birds. Franklin was so very delighted to see the birds. We would go down to the park with a picnic basket, and he would watch and watch...watch and watch. He made these long lists of all the sweet feathered things he saw. But I like *my* pretty things close up where I can talk with them." She looked behind her at the small white bird preening in its ornate cage.

"Yes, Daisy? We sing together sometimes. La, la!" Then she cheeped at Daisy.

Catherine folded her hands in her lap and pulled her foot farther away from the fat little dog on the floor. *Mrs. Lausch is old,* she said to herself, *with no one to talk to, and nothing to do but spy upon unsuspecting people.* Catherine felt sorry for her, but she also hoped that her own apartment building lay beyond this woman's line of sight.

"Franklin passed, God rest him. I still have the telegram from the War Department. There was no reason anymore to pack up this fine piece and move it around. I used to have a different stand for it. Rickety old thing. But that nice Mr. Trask gave me this new one for a Christmas present. Wasn't that good of him?"

"Yes," said Catherine, adding to herself, *Not to mention self-serving.* Well, that was between Mr. Trask and Mrs. Lausch. Catherine wondered which war had claimed Mr. Lausch's life—and how long his widow had been living alone up here with her overfed pets, her husband's spyglass, and her age-worn treasures.

"I have watched and I have *seen*," the old woman said. "Oh, there's so *much* to see! It's all so *interesting*. All those people, going about their day. All those stories...all those lives...rushing to and fro where I can watch them. Better than the movies!" She touched Catherine's arm, a smug little smile on her face.

New York is home to the most unusual people in the world, Catherine thought. *There will never be a shortage of work to do here, nor characters to interview. Why, ha ha, did I ever want to leave?*

"You would be surprised, the things you see. If you sit here long enough. Winnie knows, don't you Winnie?" Mrs. Lausch addressed her dog, who looked up at her expectantly, then put its nose between its paws when Mrs. Lausch turned back to Catherine.

"So much better than the birds, too!" Mrs. Lausch patted the spyglass. "With this, I can see all over the park. Many different people. I look down on all of them. Here, try for yourself."

"Voyeur," Trask murmured in Catherine's mind. "No, thank you," Catherine said.

"Go on!" Mrs. Lausch urged. The brightness in her eyes took on a brittle sheen.

Trask advised me to dance to her tune, Catherine reminded herself. *I need to know what this woman really saw Friday night. And I think she needs someone to talk with today.* The bird chirped from its cage. *A human someone, that is.* Catherine stood up and peered into the eyepiece, a polite guest wanting to please her hostess.

The focus was perfect. Catherine could count leaf buds on trees if she wanted to. She waited until an appropriate amount of time had passed (she hoped), then she sat down in her chair.

"Did you know I once saw Greta Garbo?" Mrs. Lausch asked. "She was walking—"

It was one more story Catherine had not come to hear. She interrupted gently. "Mrs. Lausch. I need to know what you saw *that* night." Catherine had endured as many pleasantries as she could stand. She'd already explained that the news article had brought Catherine Chandler to Anna Lausch's door.

"The night?" the old woman murmured. Her face changed. Her periwinkle eyes took on a dreamy expression. She turned to gaze out her window. "I watch the night too. When the noises hush like children...and on come the street lamps...and the people of the dark."

Catherine felt her face start to assume the expression she usually wore to tedious cocktail parties. Mrs. Lausch deserved more of her heart than that. *Patience, Cathy. Go softly. This is all Mrs. Lausch has.* She interrupted again. "Mrs. Lausch, try to remember. What did you see?"

The old woman turned toward Catherine again. "Oh? I saw everything!" She took up the new story, illustrating it with dramatic gestures as she spoke. "Two men were running. And a truck was following...with a bright light. Fast!" She fanned our her fingers to either side of her white face.

"It looked like a delivery truck, only it was driving on the grass." Now she became caught up in the recent adventure, seeing it happen as she talked. "They all go one way along the trees, almost in a line, and then they go the other way. Like a strange dance. And they go down by the tunnel, and the man turns, and I see his face...a terrible *animal* face!"

Hence, the wolfman description in Trask's article, Catherine thought, holding her breath. *But is it...was it—?*

"Such a face!" Mrs. Lausch went on. "In such *pain*. And then the other man in the truck, he comes...and he...he..."

"He what?" Catherine prompted.

"Shoots at him."

"*Shoots* at him?" Shooting was not in Trask's article. Catherine's heart raced as though she were the one running from *(men with knives, men throwing me into the back of a van)* nocturnal pursuers. If it *was* Vincent, and if someone *shot* him—

Mrs. Lausch was watching her. She saw some of Catherine's fear. She said, "And then...the light went out."

"Could you show me where this happened?" Catherine asked.

Mrs. Lausch looked into her spyglass and swung it into a new position on its tripod. "There," she said, and sat back so Catherine could use the instrument.

For a second, Catherine forgot how to breathe. Mrs. Lausch had aimed her spyglass at the Park Entrance tunnel. Everything fit.

Vincent, she thought. *Oh, God.*

Catherine stood up. "Thank you, Mrs. Lausch." She reached down to take the old woman's hands.

“You will come back and see us, won’t you?” The lonely old woman smiled at Catherine, nodding hopefully. Her grip was warm and firm.

Catherine thought: *Mrs. Lausch, if I can find out what happened to my friend, the next time I come to visit you, I’ll bring more fine teas with me than you could brew in a year.* She smiled, and nodded back.

“Good!” Mrs. Lausch said. “Say goodbye now, Winnie. Daisy? Say goodbye.”

Catherine left as quickly as she could without seeming rude. Once she made it outside the woman’s building, Catherine rushed into the park.

(An animal face. A terrible animal face. In pain. The man shoots at him.)

At the drainage tunnel, Catherine slowed down. She walked back and forth across the area, scanning the ground for anything out of the ordinary. Tire treads. A scrap of cloth or leather. Bullet casings. Blood.

She found nothing. No hint of a chase or a capture. There were no unusual marks on the cement beneath her feet, and nothing on the embankment wall. It had been raining off and on all week, and again earlier this morning. Any signs left from Friday night were surely washed away by now. She kicked some damp grocery boxes aside. They flumped out of her path—and something clinked on the ground.

Catherine stopped and looked. She saw something metallic. A tuft of wet fluff clung to one end of a silver cylinder. A sharp needle stuck out of the opposite end. Catherine picked the thing up. It was some kind of a dart. She held it, thinking.

No bullet casings. No reports of shots fired. No mention of a shooting in the article. No police involved.

She didn’t know what version of the story Mrs. Lausch had told Byron Trask, or how Trask had distilled it into his lurid tale of werewolves and monster hunters in Central Park. But enough of the details fit together. And this object, this dart, told its own story.

A few feet away, a second white tuft caught her eye. Catherine picked up that object. Holding two darts in her hand, she looked around for more. She found none.

These must be tranquilizer cartridges, she thought. *If those men shot Vincent, and if they didn’t use bullets, they might have used these.*

If the darts *had* been fired at Vincent, it meant the men espied by Mrs. Lausch had wanted Vincent alive. Catherine studied the cartridges. Rolling them in her hand, she saw that each had been imprinted with a serial number.

Bingo!

Catherine looked up, and across the park, toward Mrs. Lausch’s fifth story window. She thought she could just make out the glint of the spyglass lens, and a dark woman-shaped shadow sitting behind it. The old woman was still watching. Catherine had become one more collected memory in Anna Lausch’s comprehensive visual history.

IV

24 March 1987
Tuesday Evening

After-hours was a quiet time. Hughes stood in the open doorway of his office, taking a careful look outside. The hall appeared empty: no Jonathan Gould and no one Gould might have

enlisted as a spy. Hughes removed his key from the door knob lock and stepped back inside his office, shutting the door as he went. Locking his office door made him feel better.

He looked at the lettering of his name marching across the window of the door. It read backwards from his side of the glass. He thought, *If I can't figure out how to handle this situation —and quickly—those black letters won't be there much longer.* He rubbed his forehead with the heel of one hand. How had everything spun so wildly out of control?

He retrieved his lab coat from the back of the desk chair, where he'd flung the coat before going down to the seminar earlier in the day. The coat was the one thing in his office he hadn't touched all afternoon, as he feverishly sorted books and papers, and reorganized his desk. He'd missed his three o' clock discussion panel to do this work, but the good results in his office were worth the hassle of apologizing to Gabby Benson, the woman coordinating things for local symposium participants.

Hughes looked at his tidy desktop and he frowned at the telephone. His phone had been ringing off the hook ever since he got in from his ill-fated lecture. Hughes had chosen not to answer it. And twice that afternoon, people knocked on his door. Each time that happened, Hughes worried that accusing visitors would invade, demanding explanations of him. Or that Gould would come back. Or that Quint would barge in with a letter of dismissal, cutting off building access before Hughes had the chance to find a new home for his creature. But each time Hughes didn't answer the knocking, whoever stood outside the door went away.

Holding his lab coat now, Hughes felt comforted by its weight in his hands, by its whiteness—by its implications. In the light of objective truths, no one else's opinion about him mattered. Nothing real or imagined could interrupt his calling. This coat was the mark of his profession, and his professionalism. He put it on. Now he was ready to continue his research.

Hughes made sure to check the maintenance hallway with the same care he'd used to reconnoiter the main corridor. The back hall was also empty. Hughes hurried to the stairwell (to avoid providing clues to any ne'er-do-wells by running the elevator so late in the evening) and went down to the basement.

Cool air gusted out when he opened the door to the storeroom. Hughes locked it behind him and looked at the cage. His creature was lying on the floor again—or rather, lying on the blanket spread out across the floor. The creature's knees were bent so he could cuddle up close to the cage door, both feet braced against one bar of the cage wall. He'd tucked one fist beneath his chest again and stretched his other arm across the sofa pillow. His right-hand claws dangled beyond the bars of the door.

Hughes thought, *I'm glad I put that pillow in the cage for him. He seems to like it.*

The creature had hidden his face in the crook of his outflung arm. Hughes could see only a rough tangle of yellow curls, and the variegated colors of red fur and white skin on his back. The creature lay motionless. Hughes had to watch for several stomach-churning seconds before he could be certain the creature was breathing.

Don't be ridiculous, he told himself. *He's safe down here. For the time being, at least.*

Hughes set his keys on the countertop and took his camera from the box beneath the sink. One more picture. He scribbled the date, time, and basic circumstances on the white space below the photographed image of the creature. Then he got out his notebook. He tried to write, but after describing the present conditions, he found there was nothing else to note. Nothing else to see. He tucked his snapshot between two pages. Closing the notebook, he set it beside his keys.

"Are you asleep?" he asked.

No response. But Hughes believed it was not an *empty* silence. He felt sure the creature was listening.

Hughes watched and waited. Still no response.

He left the sink and knelt at the cage door. The zooish smell of the creature was strong in this small room. Looking through the bars, Hughes could see one half of the creature's face. A track of moisture ran along the side of the beast's flat nose.

Hughes frowned. He considered environmental reactions. The change in temperature. Possible allergens in the packing material from the crates. Or perhaps the faint mustiness inherent to basements.

The creature blinked. A new tear slipped down his snout.

It occurred to Hughes then that this might not be a physiological response to microscopic irritants, nor even to removal from the moderated conditions in the professor's lab.

In sudden astonishment Hughes thought: *Is he...crying?*

A creature who could *listen* was also a creature who could experience more complex emotions than instinctive fear. Hughes felt sorry for the beast. *Everything that's happened this week must be very confusing for him. Especially if he's as aware of his circumstances as I think he is.*

The creature continued to ignore the man crouching in front of him.

Hughes gripped the bars. "Speak to me," he said. "Please."

Nothing.

"I know you can. I heard you."

More nothing.

Frustrated, Hughes leaned in as close as he could. "You've *got* to let me help you."

Still nothing.

"I *want* to help you!"

"Then release me," said the creature.

Hughes felt colossal relief at the sound of that deeply resonant voice. Part of his mind registered that the creature's tone also conveyed weary resentment. He let his attention skip past this detail. The important thing was the *speaking*. He was right, and *Gould* wrong. Hughes smiled.

"So you *can* speak!" He pressed his face against the bars. He wanted to catch every nuance of the creature's expression—what little of it he could see. "And you can understand what I say?"

"Yes."

As he had suspected. The confirmation elated him, but the timing was—too late to do Hughes any good. "*Why* did you keep silent in front of Gould?" he asked, almost pleading.

Hughes discerned a light tremor in the creature's voice now, as if more tears were on their way. "The other man...means me harm. No words could change that."

Something in his words bespoke a rudimentary gentility, a presence of mind both alien and honest. The creature's statement also neatly summed up the professor's entire problem with Jonathan Gould. "*I* never meant you harm," Hughes told him quickly. He needed his creature to know that he was nothing like his vainglorious research assistant. "You must believe me."

The creature blinked at him but said nothing.

Hughes swallowed. His throat was getting dry. "Do you have a name?"

The creature closed his eyes, then answered, "Vincent."

Hughes smiled again. "Vincent," he repeated. A very non-accidental sort of name. His hands tightened around the bars as he put his thoughts in order. "My name is Hughes. I have so many questions."

Vincent kept quiet, so Hughes set about asking *the* question that had plagued him ever

since the creature—Vincent—woke up on the examination table.

"You spoke the name, 'Catherine.'"

That *did* get a response. The creature inhaled and looked up at Hughes. The professor saw a strong emotion glow in the depths of those eyes like blue embers.

"Who is Catherine?" asked Hughes.

"She is...everything...but she lives..." Vincent paused for a new breath. "Only in my heart."

It's love, Hughes abruptly realized. *That luminescence in my creature's eyes is...love.* He caught hold of a new possibility. With whom—or with what—would a beast like this find *love*?

With whom or what, indeed!

So there MUST be more creatures like him, Hughes thought. *At the very least a family unit that produced him. The question of my creature's fertility is irrelevant so long as other creatures exist who ARE capable of procreation.*

The professor's imagination sped past mere documentary papers and boring symposium speeches. He dreamed up a state-of-the-art research center, something like a sanctuary or preserve. Carefully selected researchers would work under his confident supervision. Hughes could imagine a pack (a pride?) of *Inspiro vincentius* growing annually through the nurturing auspices of his successful breeding program. All this and more arrived with the revelation of a *female* Vincent loved.

"Is she like you?" Hughes asked, eager to know. "Another of your kind?"

But Vincent sighed. "There is only me."

Hughes had never heard any voice sound so forlorn. Not a mate, then. Not even a mother or a sibling. Not live offspring. Thus, not a family of Vincent-creatures denning in the storm drains beneath Central Park—and no swift road to intellectual prosperity for Hughes.

It's a painstaking process, he reminded himself. *I can't let Gould's derangement infect my own approach to my work.* The professor immediately discarded his disappointment and returned to his primary task: dialogue with his phenomenal *(speaking!)* subject.

"Who named you, then? I mean, how did you...um...well, your mother, your father? Who are they?"

Vincent hesitated, then he said, "I never knew them." As Hughes began to consider the ramifications of this answer, Vincent asked a question of his own. "Do you know *your* parents?"

Startled, Hughes said, "Yes," and privately added, *Two country mice who never wanted to even clap eyes on the city*. He abandoned that line of questioning. He didn't want to talk about his parents. There were other things he wanted to know.

He asked, "And did you...have you ever been inside another lab? A room like mine, upstairs?"

"Are you asking if I was...born in a laboratory?"

Articulated that way, the professor's question seemed—inelegant—but it was exactly what Hughes wanted to know. "Yes," Hughes said.

Vincent sighed again. "I don't know how I came to be born. I've never seen a...lab, like your room. Before now. I have never been...locked inside a cage before."

Hughes pulled his face away from the bars. This was another tangent he did not want to pursue. "So then, how did you learn to speak?"

"I learned. The same way you did. Many years of practice."

Hughes smiled. The creature did not. *His facial musculature must not permit smiling,* Hughes thought, but he also heard no smile in Vincent's voice. Maybe his mind was not capable of appreciating something as nuanced as irony or humor. Hughes moved on to his next question.

"Vincent—" he began, and he stopped. How should he ask *this*? There was no polite way, really. So Hughes simply said it. "What *are* you?"

Vincent took a little while to think about the question. Then he answered, "I am only what I am."

Hughes said nothing. Vincent continued very softly, speaking one phrase at a time.

"If you cut me, I will bleed. If you strike me, I will strike back."

Hughes, stunned anew, recognized the essence of Shylock's most famous soliloquy. *Intelligent*? Beyond all expectation! Exulting, Hughes thought, *Not quoting Shakespeare, Mr. Gould, but certainly paraphrasing him!*

"And. If you keep me in chains," Vincent was saying now with slow emphasis, "I will die."

Hughes felt his ballooning thoughts decompress back into the present moment. These latter words were not cheering or amusing. The creature spoke them with a wholly distasteful gravity.

"What do you mean?" Hughes asked.

The creature only gazed up at him as though Hughes ought to already understand.

Hughes tried to shush his clamoring questions. He tried to probe his way through the creature's opaque references. His beast's manner of speaking seemed idiosyncratic, full of thick consonants and heavy vowels, private meanings and subjective allusions. Hughes shut his eyes, working at the puzzle in his mind.

Chains, death. Strike, and strike back. Cut, bleed. Action and reaction. He's been afraid, confused and sad. I certainly know what it's like to be scared half to death. Hughes thought about the scares his assistant—no, his *former* assistant—had given him today.

Jonathan asked me, "What do you think happens then?" And I assumed that my own quick refusal could prevent the machinations of the authorities from overtaking us all. Maybe that was a stupid assumption to make.

When it came to dealing with a completely new species, most assumptions were stupid.

All at once, Hughes knew that his hopes could never stand against the way the world worked. He began to comprehend the world's unstoppable countermeasures to his own best intentions. Even Canton hadn't had to deal with this problem.

For *this* specimen, this one-of-his-kind Vincent, what else *could* there be—what besides publicity and cages, collective scrutiny and chains? Gould, damn him, was right. Once the world knew about Vincent, the world would do what it inevitably did. And yes, certainly, all of *that* would kill any sentient being's spirit. This sort of stress had greatly injured Hughes, after he and Canton returned to the States, and Hughes wasn't even the focus of all that unscientific attention.

Hughes had never liked the idea of freak shows—those tawdry holdovers from the days when science had been so easily confused with chicanery. The everyday media circus offered only the newest incarnation of mass ignorance in action. Hughes felt all carnivals demeaned everyone involved with them.

Did Vincent *understand* this aspect of modern human society: the relentless appetite for novelty and profit? He *must* understand at least some of it, for he had lived secretly in the heart of a metropolis without being caught before now. And he had been so frightened to discover himself in the unexpected care of strangers. He must still be frightened now. Once again, Jonathan Gould had clobbered both of them with—how did Vincent put it? Threats of harm. And the creature had heard every last word of that conversation. No wonder Vincent was crying down here.

Hughes could commiserate. The poor thing.

He analyzed their situation. *The thing to do,* he concluded, *the only way...is to keep the secret for as long as possible, to conduct my studies alone. Be extremely selective with my partnerships and publications...and the timing for both. I can't make any more mistakes. I'll have to find a facility immediately, and plan for transportation on short notice. This is going to be very difficult—*

Vincent's voice derailed the professor's thoughts. "*Look* at me," Vincent said.

Hughes opened his eyes. Vincent had turned his head so the overhead light could fully reveal his features—

And Hughes stared.

Those jewel-blue eyes had become sunken and glassy. The miraculous face was tear-streaked, sallow, almost white. The flat pad of Vincent's nose and his lower lip were dry, the skin there beginning to crack.

Vincent had not spoken metaphorically.

Hughes quickly shut his eyes again. He'd been on the wrong track, to believe that his creature's words were the same sort of riddle as the creature himself. Vincent was speaking as plainly as he knew how, and the empirical evidence supported his main point.

Hughes remembered the sympathetic pain he had felt when he pressed the oxygen mask to his creature's face. The fear from that moment returned to him as well. What if no one needed to *take* Vincent from him for Hughes to lose his one and only second chance?

He hated to consider this, but—*Gould may have been right about this, too. About the creature's stamina. About his lifespan. How much time do I have, before—*

But the death of this dream, this time, was beyond unimaginable.

No! Not yet! Hughes wanted to shout at the Fates, or at God, or at any power responsible for his insurmountable dilemmas. *I MUST have time to complete my work. How shall I go about finishing my work?*

"I don't know what to do!" he blurted. He heard Vincent move on the other side of the bars. Hughes opened his eyes to see what the creature was doing.

With an obvious effort, Vincent raised his head. "Let me go."

"I can't!" It wasn't that simple. Nothing about this situation was simple. "Not now, not yet."

His singular specimen reached for the bars with hands that had not stopped shaking since the night of his first waking. The night of his seizure. Vincent pulled himself forward and sat up to look into the professor's eyes. His breath came in ragged gasps.

"I still have so many unanswered questions," Hughes tried to explain. "I—"

"*Hughes*."

Hughes stopped talking.

Vincent leaned nearer. Mere centimeters separated the face of the man from the face of the beast. His eyes shone overbright, boring into Hughes from dark sockets.

"I am dying."

Hughes gaped at him until Vincent's head dropped forward against the bars. Hughes closed his eyes to shut out the sight of matted curls and heaving shoulders—but he couldn't block out the frightful sounds of Vincent trying to breathe. He opened his eyes again.

He still didn't know what to do.

Dying?

Slowly, he lowered one hand to stroke the crown of Vincent's head. Vincent shrank from his touch, folding himself toward the floor without speaking. "Sorry," said Hughes at once. And he *was* sorry, for his creature and for himself.

Dying?!

"Can I...um, Vincent, can I get you anything?"

Out of his mouth, the words sounded so puerile. It was the only new question that came to mind. Hughes waited, wondering what his creature might say. He wondered if Vincent would ever say anything more to him.

He could never have anticipated Vincent's eventual answer: "My clothes."

Hughes let go of the bars and sat back on his haunches.

Clothes.

He stared down at Vincent's exquisite fur-covered body. It had hunched to conceal as much of itself as possible, was positioned to keep the blanket between itself and the metal floor of the cage. The shaved spots and stripes on Vincent's pelt looked bare in the hard light.

Sudden heat rushed to the professor's cheeks. *Clothes*. Such a *human* request.

A creature who wants clothing...because he's not wearing any...that's a creature who knows that he is naked, Hughes thought. *Isn't that a...biblical definition? Knowledge of good and evil? By God, he has more than a conscience, Jonathan Gould. My creature has a soul.*

A *soul*?

(Woe unto him that giveth his neighbour drink, that puttest thy bottle to him, and makest him drunken also, that thou mayest look on their nakedness!)

This revelation sat uneasily in the mind of Edward Hughes.

(Woe unto him...)

The professor had undressed his creature, yet had not seen nakedness. Creatures—animals—were not naked. The creature's pieced and patchy rags had been a mere curiosity, a whimsy. A puzzle.

(Thou art filled with shame for glory: drink thou also, and let thy foreskin be uncovered: the cup of the Lord's right hand shall be turned unto thee, and shameful spewing shall be on thy glory.)

The creature's clothes puzzled in the same way remnants from the stone age could intrigue a modern observer, or traditional dress in contemporary primitive cultures. It was amusing in the same way it amused Hughes to see how some dog owners dressed their pets in little doggie hats and sweaters and walked them around in the park like that.

(Woe...)

Yes, Hughes had used Vincent's clothing as supporting evidence in his arguments with Gould, but he never thought about what those garments might mean to the beast himself. He'd left Vincent unclothed in his cage. His subject's nakedness had proved expedient to his own scientific needs and purposes.

Now the creature wanted this situation to change.

I asked and he answered, Hughes thought. He shook off his spiritual apprehension in order to apply much more important fundamentals of behavioral psychology. *I must follow through, or he might not answer me again.*

Hughes got up and opened the cabinet under the sink. He reached into the first box, the one containing the creature's artifacts, and he pulled out wadded fabric. He brought an armful to the cage and pushed the articles of clothing through the bars. Stepping back, Hughes stood and watched. His professional curiosity compelled him to see what happened next.

After a time of silence, Vincent's left hand released the bar it held and came to rest upon the rumpled pile. He raised his head again and looked at the professor's face, but not into his eyes. Hughes could not look away.

I will see it through, he thought. *Everything I can learn, I must learn. My body of*

knowledge is all I'm going to have, in the end. Whatever that end might be. Hughes folded his arms, waiting.

This time the expression in Vincent's eyes, rather than the tone of his voice, communicated weary resentment. He turned his back to Hughes and pulled on the blue trousers, knitted socks, and loose white shirt that Hughes had granted him. He began to gasp for air as he did this, and his ataxic movements were slow. Toward the end of the process, Hughes moved around the cage so he could watch Vincent's dogged efforts to knot the laces that would hold the shirt closed over his chest.

It was apparent to Hughes that Vincent must be used to dressing himself (something else Gould was *wrong* about!), and also that he was *unused* to doing so with clumsy hands while he tried to balance on his knees. Unfortunately, the creature's condition seemed to imply more than a physical reaction to the tranquilizer. Much more. Much *worse*. Hughes feared he might be looking at some kind of degenerative neuropathy. The creature's motor difficulties might even indicate a cerebellar lesion. When had *that* happened? Hughes pinched the bridge of his nose, worrying.

He looked into the cage again. Vincent was kneeling on the floor with his mane hanging down over his face. His large hands rested upon the thick quilted patches at his knees. Hughes thought Vincent looked strange in these garments. He saw visual dissonance between the fabric and the fur. It was like watching an overgrown kid play at dress-up with Papa's old handkerchiefs and one of Gran's homemade and balding fur coats.

"Do you make your own clothing?" Hughes asked.

Vincent didn't answer.

Hughes cleared his throat. Vincent turned his head sharply. The sound had caught him unawares.

"Can I get you anything else?" Hughes asked. This question still felt absurd.

"Water," Vincent whispered, close to inaudible, and this request did not puzzle Hughes in the slightest.

"Oh! Oh, yes. Of course." Hughes shook his head like one waking from a frightening daydream. He went again to the sink. Here was something he'd completely forgotten in his mad dash to preserve his own autonomy.

All the same, he felt a guilty variation of hope as he looked in the cabinet for a water container that would fit through the bars of the cage. Perhaps the creature's condition, uncomfortable though it might be for Vincent, was not as dire as it seemed. The professor's thoughts picked up speed.

Yes, that is probably the case. Why, that is certainly the case! I wish I'd been more on top of this issue! Why didn't I bring the bowls down with me? An unanticipated famine is stressful to any creature's body.

Hughes latched onto this explanation. It accounted for Vincent's unsteadiness. It accounted for everything. It was also fully reversible. Dehydration was a problem Hughes could solve. As was hunger. Hughes needed to feed Vincent soon. The poor creature was probably feeling hypoglycemic, becoming disproportionately frightened by faintness. Genuinely hungry people always looked awful. Now that the beast was speaking, Hughes could ask him about his diet.

The questions returned, full force. What did Vincent eat? How often? How much? The creature's size, muscle mass, and body temperature all indicated a high metabolism. Hughes remembered the X-ray and ultrasound images now stored in the box beneath the sink. He wondered how many kilograms of food the creature could put away in one sitting. Three

kilograms? Four? Did he gorge himself like a lion, or did he have trouble scavenging enough food to facilitate a feast? Hughes suspected the creature had a distensible stomach like a lion's or a wolf's. However, those mismatched teeth should allow the creature to consume anything—not just meat.

Apples. Captive gorillas ate apples. Maybe he should try to feed his creature some fruit.

Hughes couldn't wait to watch Vincent eat. Would it be the same as the way he drank? Lifting the bowl to his mouth? Or would he use his claws to pick up bits of food? Or, considering his attachment to his clothing, did Vincent use other elements of civilization—utensils like forks and spoons?

Hughes pulled a dusty coffee mug from the dark recesses of the cabinet. On his next trip down here, he'd bring the bowls, but this mug should suffice to meet their present need.

He rinsed the mug twice, then filled it with cold water. In the cage, Vincent hadn't moved. Hughes reached through the bars and set the mug on the cage floor. Hughes stood up. Vincent turned around. He took the ceramic cup in both his hands. Water splashed over the rim.

Vincent drank so slowly, he might have been emptying the cup one drop at a time. Hughes watched in silence for over half an hour. It was, Hughes knew, the right way to go about it if the creature wanted to keep the water in his stomach after all the unexpected pressures of this day. Perhaps Vincent had learned from yesterday's trouble, back in the lab. Did he implement this new strategy by instinct, or by design? Hughes went to his notebook again, jotting his thoughts until Vincent set the mug on the cage floor. Hughes stopped writing to see what would happen next.

Vincent was holding onto the bars of the cage door. He looked from the notebook to Hughes. The awareness in his eyes bordered on accusation.

Hughes worked moisture into his mouth. He needed a drink of water too. "Vincent, you'll never know how...how grateful I am. How much I want to learn...from you, about you. You have so much to teach mankind. It's a noble thing, to be a teacher. To impart knowledge. Do you understand?"

Vincent said nothing.

"Do you want more water now?" Hughes asked.

"No."

"Food? There's still meat in the lab. I could bring that. The beef. Or...the chicken? Or I could bring...something else. Anything you like. Anything. Do you like...apples?" Hughes dried up. Meeting that gaze was exacting work, but with Vincent looking steadily at him, Hughes didn't dare to break eye contact. He hoped it could keep Vincent talking.

"Vincent," he tried again, "what *do* you eat?"

Vincent tilted his head a little to one side. Hughes thought he saw sorrow in the creature's posture. Vincent spoke, his words slow between breaths, but enunciated with care.

"Hughes, I am...*fed with the same food...*and...*hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer...*as you are."

Hughes became aware that his mouth had fallen open. He closed it. His teeth clicked together.

"Do you know these lines?" Vincent asked.

"Shakespeare. Shylock," Hughes whispered, and thought, *Mimicry, Jonathan? Oh, no, no, no*.

Vincent moved closer to the cage door. Hughes took a startled step backward, but Vincent wasn't reaching for him, as Hughes had, for an instant, feared. No, Vincent was gripping the bars

with his long fingers. He hauled himself to his feet, one tremulous hand-span at a time, until he stood leaning most of his weight against the door, drawing long draughts of air into his lungs.

He was clothed now, standing upright, and reciting Shakespeare. Vincent could have been throwing his observer's own words back at him: *Am I human? What other conclusion could you draw?*

Hughes, agog, thought, *He makes EVERYTHING possible.*

"Hughes," said Vincent, trembling behind the bars. "Earlier, you said...you want to help me. I am ill. I need your help. I need...you to...unlock this door. And let me go home. Hughes, please: set me free. Save my life."

In the professor's heart, awe crumbled and terror replaced it. From the core of his soul, he knew his answer must be: *Never*.

If Hughes freed the creature, he would lose him forever, along with this last chance to reclaim all that had been taken from Hughes throughout his life. *Free* Vincent? *Free him*?! The professor's mind whirled.

No. There was too much at stake. For science, yes, but more so for Edward Hughes.

Without Vincent, Hughes could not redeem his father's parting castigation: "Son, how *could* you? Why d'you want to give up everything we've worked to build here? The business? The house? Think of your mother's health. Your brother'd *never* go and turn his back on the family like this. I can understand a lot, Ed, more than you think—but you pick the most godless thing to do with your life that you can conjure up—and now you want my *blessing*? Son. Eddie. Take time to *think*."

(You don't understand a thing, Papa. You never understood a single,"blessed" thing.)

Without his Vincent-creature, Hughes could never escape his dusty memories of Grandpa Norris's roadside antiques shop. "I'nt this life good enough for you, Ed? Don't enough fine books pass through your hands here, that you got to go off in search of more?"

(Dead poets don't answer my questions, Grandpa. No book you give me replaces the real world. Your Good Book can't hold me here.)

Alone, he could not prove that he'd been right to pursue what his family dismissed as esoteric inquiries into the workings of Creation. "Best left undisturbed by the likes of us," Gran had told him once. And Grandpa said, "What's God's business i'nt none of yours." Without tangible, physical proofs, the University professor of the present day could not finally escape the tattered chrysalis of the young Ed Hughes, a misfit kid who got a decent education against all odds, the first of his family to earn a college degree. He could not blot out the fact that not one of them came to his graduation ceremony.

(So who turned out to be the godless ones in the end? Who was heartless? Dreamless?)

Without his creature, Hughes could not justify the *years* he'd spent happily groveling at Canton's heels. He could not live down what happened to him after long weeks of tracking and documenting a species previously unknown to science. He could not wipe out the betrayal he'd felt when his supervisor—his mentor, his *friend*—outright *stole* his research, fifteen years ago.

(You settled for the easy out, Albert. If your dream was ever true, then you sold it cheap and stuck me with the bill.)

If he released his unique specimen, Hughes could not receive, at long last, recognition for his present work with his recent discovery. He could never prove Gould and Quint, Clark and everyone else—even Pierson—wrong.

(I told you: our own backyard. He was there. I SAW him. And here he is now, right HERE. See for yourselves!)

If he set this beast free, he could never satisfy his soul's eternal longing to decode

Mystery. He could never show the world that he was *someone*, that he had something new to say, that *he*, Edward Hughes, had found something new to share. He could never hope to be understood for his passions, his ideals, his dreams. Fortune, or God, had given Hughes a second gateway into untrammeled territory.

(Genetics. Psychology. Evolutionary Theory. The very nature of human identity. This completely original THING brings it all into question. I am poised to find out the answers. This is the true cutting edge! The data and the dream that change the world!)

He could not let that go.

"I can't," Hughes said.

Vincent lowered his chin. He looked at Hughes, and *into* Hughes, intruding upon the professor's self-imposed isolation. By his silence, Vincent refused to let Hughes stand in this room with a caged *specimen*, however unique. His protest demanded that he be acknowledged—as an equal, and as a *man*.

He is, and he is not, Hughes thought, feeling sick to his stomach. *My self-defining Jew. My chimera. My last hope.*

"You don't understand!" Hughes said. "You don't know the whole story! I *can't*."

Vincent did not look away.

And, well, there's also this, Hughes thought. *If you prick us, do we not bleed?* Hughes looked at Vincent's hands, each one clenched around a bar of the cage door. He looked at Vincent's gnarled digits and sharp claws.

Those hands had made *Gould* bleed, on the night of the creature's capture. Those hands had *shredded* the creature's restraints when he sat up on the examination table. So, more to the point: *And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.*

Hughes had indeed seen, as Gould put it, what Vincent was capable of. He had also seen the blue fire in Vincent's eyes when Hughes moved him out of the lab. Vengeance was not beyond this creature.

(If you strike me, I will strike back.)

Yes, Vincent was clearly more than an animal. But the claws and the teeth, and his prodigious strength—even lessened by days spent in the cage—these remained formidable weapons. It was more than unwise to *ever* consider unlocking that door. It was stupid. It might even be suicide.

"You...you're not dying. I won't let you die. Don't worry about that," Hughes told his creature. "Don't worry. I can see you're hungry. I'll bring food. Let me just...I'll check my drug locker. I've got medications that can make you more comfortable. Do you know what medications are? And I can't keep you in this room much longer anyway. I'll make arrangements. A larger space...maybe a bigger enclosure. "

Hughes saw his words snuff out the clear light in Vincent's eyes. The beast bowed his great shaggy head. His hands loosened around the bars. Shuddering, Vincent slid to the metal floor of his cage.

"Vincent," Hughes took a step closer. "I can't just let you go. There are too many things I don't know. Too many things I *need* to know. My questions—these are *everyone's* questions."

Vincent was silent.

Hughes shook his head. "I can't."

"Stop. Lying to yourself," Vincent said. Although he spoke quietly, the words hit Hughes with startling force. Vincent might have reached through the bars to slap him. Hughes cringed.

"What—do you mean?" he choked. He wished he could see Vincent's face.

“The problem. Is not. That you cannot. Open the door. To this cage,” Vincent said, breathless. “The problem is that. You *will* not.” He moved his head away from the bars. Hughes saw a single blue eye glitter from behind the creature’s lank strands of hair. “Hughes. Do you...understand the difference?”

Hughes almost did, and did not want to.

He tossed his notebook and camera beneath the sink, kicking the cabinet shut. He bumbled his keyring off the counter and rushed to the storeroom doors. He unlocked them, swatted the light switch off, rushed past the doors, and locked them behind him. He stood beside the doorjamb with his back to the wall, fighting terror.

Hughes had wanted the creature to speak and the creature had spoken. Now Hughes was done listening. It was getting late. He needed—rest. Yes, sleep. To help unclutter his thinking. So he could figure out how to move Vincent off campus, and where to take him.

He smoothed his mustache and thought, *I’ll resign, submit my notice as soon as I no longer need building access. That will put Gould off my track. That will put them all off my track.* Then he could study his miracle in peace. His work would continue. His dream would not die. Here was his chosen course. For now Hughes only needed a little sleep. And just a little more time.

Chapter Eleven: Leave to Go from Hence

I

25 March 1987
Wednesday Morning

He was a paradox in a cage.

Heavy and weightless. Dark and Bright. Not asleep and not awake. Unseeing and night-sighted. Very cold and not feeling the cold. Parched and not thirsty. Empty and not hungry. Hurting and numbed. Lost, and yet exactly where one broken little man knew to find him. Alive, but not for long.

Vincent knew he would die in this cage. The knowledge didn't matter to him anymore. He had squandered the last of his strength on a fruitless plea. He fought that grueling, hopeless battle because it was *right* to oppose these men. Right and wrong ended for Vincent the moment Hughes locked the storage room door behind him. Vincent had nothing left to fight for now, and nothing worth fighting against. Beyond right and wrong lay only death.

Knowing all of this, he was now thinking (and not thinking), *Save that, to die, I leave my love...I tried, beloved...save that to die...my love alone...tired with all these...and iron bars...I did try...but now the dark has come.*

Receiving the loveless professor's final unkindness to him, Vincent quickly discovered that the darkness of his prison did not provide the comforting mantle he had longed for beneath the laboratory's buzzing white lights. No, this dark was a silent and stifling veil, unbearably cold, made sepulchral by the eldritch gleam of a very distant light bulb emanating from a maintenance crawlspace at the back of the little room. Vincent could not see colors in the dark. Nonetheless, his conquered mind tinted the flat shapes he saw with a mouldered greenish hue. *The color of ruin,* he thought, after his eyes adapted to his newest deprivation. *The color of broken dreams and abandoned hope.*

He began to lose himself in that darkness. Turning inward, he groped for links to anyone —to *anything*, any least dream of light. His despoiled hope betrayed him. Too little of himself remained to contain his need, to direct his mind, and one desire devoured him. One impossibility. All through the night, the only thing Vincent wanted was *water*. Even the deadened parts of him cried out for it. Water, and his lack of it, consumed his floundering thoughts.

In Vincent's imagination, he and Devin skipped broken subway tiles across the placid surface of the Mirror Pool—and then they knelt down together, slurping water as cold as starlight from the Pool's edge. He dove into the inlet above the Great Waterfall in the Chamber of the Falls, surfaced among his laughing friends—and opened his mouth so water could flow into him, clean and pure. He set down his tools to accept the work crew's canteen from Kanin's calloused hands—and he drank his fill while his companions sat around him, enjoying a well-deserved rest from their work. He quaffed his last festive taste from the half-cup of mulled wine he permitted himself at Winterfest, for in his own way, Vincent liked to join in the toasts proposed at the feasting tables—and he held his empty cup out to Laura, as she made the rounds with the water pitcher.

The lovely girl wore a mint green gown, which she and Rebecca had embroidered with snowflake designs for the midwinter feast. «Water?» she signed. Vincent nodded. Smiling, Laura came to him. She filled his polished pewter goblet to the brim.

Vincent tried to drink from that cup, but, to his great sorrow, it was not real. He tried to swallow, and found he could not do that either. He coughed, strangling on dry arctic air, and wheeled away from the terrible light of his aqueous memories. He plunged into darkness. He found no help there.

Panting, blind, he stumbled through the night, his mouth and nose assailed by the fumes of liquors and beer that the street gang had flung at his face. Chained to a wall Below in the Seclusion Chamber, he howled himself voiceless, unable to accept any comfort from the few friends Father allowed into the room. As he hacked abhorrent gunk from his lungs until his muscles seized up, his fever peaked at one hundred and ten degrees and he thought it might be better to drown beneath the Topside pond's scrim of ice than to burn up where everyone could watch it happen. Standing outside Father's Study, his mouth dry as dust after his race Down from the Central Park Carousel, Vincent waited for Father to finish chastising Devin for their latest misadventure.

The strife between the two most important people in Vincent's life choked him with tears. The fact that they were fighting about *Vincent* turned his heart into a frightened bird, beating broken wings against its confining cage of bones. The accusing voices were raised in anger, growing louder and louder, until at last Devin cried, "I hate him! He's a little *freak* and I *hate* him!" And the world as Vincent knew it ended.

When Vincent forced his mind to stop remembering such things, his physical senses took over and not even Shakespeare could save him from his thirst. The sink in the corner of the room was redolent of water. Vincent could smell the moisture that remained after Hughes ran the faucet. He knew splashes and droplets were silently evaporating. He could taste the fresh water in the air. It was easy to imagine the sound of the faucet running, and to hear the pattering of water as it filled a container.

(Here lies the water—good. Here stands the man—good. If the man go to this water and drown himself, it is, will he nill he, he goes, mark you that. But if the water come to him and drown him, he drowns not himself. Argal, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life—)

Vincent knew that last ration had not been enough to save him. He longed to drink again from the cup Hughes had put inside the cage. But the cup was empty and Vincent could not refill it himself. This, too, no longer mattered. Vincent had lost the mug.

Some while after the professor fled the room, Vincent had tried to tip the last few drops of water from that mug into his mouth. The vessel had slipped from his hands and rolled over the edge of the cage floor onto the bare cement below. A ceramic chip fell from the rim, but the rest of the mug did not break. Reaching for it, Vincent only pushed the thing beneath the cage. He mashed his face against the bars and looked across the room at the unattainable water faucet. He looked at the floor outside the cage door, where two drops of water had spilled from his cup.

He lost control. His hands scratched at the cement floor, trying to catch hold of those tiny dots of water. The bars of the door blocked his way. He attacked the hinges on the right side, the lockplate on the left. He flung himself at the bars. His teeth rang against the steel. The dried skin split over his lips and his mouth began to bleed, leaving liquid iron blotches on the bars. His claws shrilled over the tempered metal. He could not get out.

He hooked one hand beneath the floor panel, reaching for a wheel. He could not sense the locking mechanism by sight or by touch. Panting, he gave up on the wheel and tried to find the mug beneath the cage. His hands could feel nothing. He could rescue nothing.

So Vincent let the cage's deepest shadows devour his cup. He retreated from the edge of his cold little world. He sucked at his nerveless fingers and the sleeves of his shirt, where the fine

fur and ragg wool remained damp from the water he spilled as he drank beneath the scientist's implacable gaze. He looked down at the fallen splatters of water on the cage floor, places that shone wet in the pestilent not-light. After his assault on the cage door, many of these wet places seemed little more than scummy smears across the boreal steel. Weeping a little, Vincent brought his mouth to the metal panel and retrieved what water he could with his swollen tongue.

He tasted high-grade iron alloy. He tasted grease and alkaline dust. He tasted the soapy antiseptic from the professor's mop water. He tasted his own seeping blood. Then he lost his balance and fell against the bars. He rested there, wiping his fingers across his face to lick salty tears from his fingertips. These were the last tears he was able to shed; when he wept again later, his eyes were too dry to cry.

His world's water sources consumed, Vincent had crept back to his rancid cushion. He curled up on the side that hurt the least, pressing his icy hands between his knees. Shivering, he stared at the dark. He got lost in the dark. His need for water did not leave him, but when, after a long, *long* time, his body stopped shivering, his desire for water finally disintegrated into the fog. Given over to paradox, he knew many hours passed. He did not care to know how many.

Now, something had changed. He had nothing better to do, so Vincent noticed this change. A deeper lassitude began uncoiling within him: a slow, spiraling ebb that pulled him toward a vast blackness. Exhausted but unafraid, Vincent did not resist. It had been a hard descent, to this ultimate aloneness. That his ending should be so quiet granted a blessing Vincent had not expected.

(...O, here
Will I set up my everlasting rest
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh...)

He knew he would never behold the sky again.

But I wanted to see the stars, one last time.

This was Vincent's first complete thought to emerge out of the new-found stillness inside him. He could vaguely remember the night sky, and his love for the lights it contained. *The skies are painted with unnumber'd sparks,* he thought, mouthing each word slowly, soundlessly. *They are all fire and every one doth shine.*

He considered the imagery and calmly observed: *Yes,* Julius Caesar *was always Winslow's play. I think there is much to be learned about a man through knowing which works of Shakespeare mean the most to him. One can find out what kinds of wisdom a person is likely to live by.*

Vincent had come to understand over the years that Winslow's was the wisdom of anger, driving the big man to say or do the needful thing, although rarely the prudent thing. His impassioned contributions came straight from his heart, his voice always calling out for action to benefit the whole community Below. This did not necessarily make him agreeable company, but Winslow always spoke the truth as he saw it.

(For let the gods so speed me as I love
The name of honor more than I fear death.)

He had given Vincent one such important truth during the time Vincent came down with pneumonia. The worst of the illness had passed, and Vincent's friends were taking turns to sit

with him, caring for him in shifts during his slow convalescence. One night, after supper, Winslow had entered Vincent's chamber, striding in behind Mary, who carried *(Mary, Mary, good-hearted Mary)* a heavy-laden tea tray.

When Mary first came Below, she'd been a very nervous person. Any little difficulty made her fretful. She had rattled the dishes on the tray. She gasped when 'Dox jumped down onto the bed from the top of Vincent's wardrobe. She fussed over Vincent. She bumped into the table and gave a frightened little laugh as one of Vincent's many stacks of books cascaded to the floor. Then she puttered around the chamber, picking up books and making general tidying-up overtures that Vincent had been powerless to stop. Finally, Winslow shooed her out, saying he had this night-watch well in hand.

Mary gone at last, the tall young man looked down at Vincent, who lay on the bed, propped up by a multitude of pillows, cocooned in blankets, and so weak he could barely turn his head toward his visitor. Vincent gazed up at Winslow in mute gratitude.

Winslow just shook his head at the younger boy, chuckling, "Hell, Little V. When you go down, you go down *hard*."

And that, Vincent reflected now, *remains true*. *Perhaps I should not have struggled for so long.*

Yet it was his nature to honor life—his nature to pursue love unto his last breath.

Vernon once told me there is no shame in defeat which comes despite all efforts to prevail. Grief, yes, but not shame.

He remembered Winslow's strong hand lifting his head so Vincent could sip Dr. Wong's medicinal tea from a china cup. "Here you go," Winslow said. "Take it slow." That hand—hardened by labor in the primitive forge Below, and in the mechanic's shop Above where Winslow worked weekends, back then—had been none too gentle. But Vincent knew this was the hand of a good friend.

"I'm thinking you don't want food just now," Winslow murmured, returning the empty cup to the tray.

Vincent closed his eyes briefly, agreeing with Winslow's assessment.

"Uh huh." Winslow dragged a chair over to the bed. He sat where Vincent could see him and pulled a book out of one wide vest pocket. He tapped the spine of the book against the arm of the chair.

"Father would probably kill me if he knew I aim to read this to you," he said. "A story too heavy for the sickroom, you know?"

Vincent felt the corners of his mouth twitch. Winslow saw and grinned.

"But this is worth the heavy parts. There's a brother and sister in this book—Jem and Scout Finch are their names—and the boy ends up about the same age as you. I think you'll understand them." Winslow cleared his throat and opened the book to the first page. He then proceeded to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* aloud, pausing every hour or so to offer Vincent and 'Dox tidbits of food from Mary's tray.

Winslow didn't stop until he'd finished the novel, and when Father arrived to check his patient after breakfast the next morning, Vincent was careful to give no indication that he had not slept during Winslow's shift. Winslow only nodded to them as he got out of the chair, stretched, and walked out.

Boo Radley, Vincent thought, naming the mockingbirds. *Tom Robinson. Scout and Jem. Dill Harris. Atticus. A loving father. Crime, justice, mercy, revenge. Choices.*

Vincent treasured his memory of that night. He wished he could hear Winslow's rich baritone voice again. Or any of their voices. He recalled their faces: his friends, his family, all the

children.

(There's not going to be any more specimens of his kind. We've determined that.)

He imagined drawing portraits on the flat cement walls to make the faces stay where he could look on them and love them. They would be stars for him in his skyless prison. They, his good fortune, they his wealth, his light in the watery shadows.

(Let those who are in favour with their stars
Of public honour and proud titles boast,
Whilst I, whom fortune of such triumph bars
Unlook'd for joy in that I honour most.)

But chalk and charcoal rinsed so easily from aggregate surfaces, and Vincent was too tired to draw them all a second time.

(Hearts, hands, noble souls.)

The faces of those who knew Vincent best adhered most strongly to the walls.

Devin as a fourteen-year-old rogue, jaunty with a rascal's grin, his dark eyes full of mischief.

Pascal, gentle and sincere, darting about the Pipe Chamber, contentment and concentration playing across his features.

Rebecca, smiling, holding Vincent's mended cloak out to him, finally daring to speak aloud, her first word to him a merry, "Surprise!"

Mouse with his bright eyes and boundless energy, running up to Vincent with flashlights strapped to his head, eager to share his discovery of a new passage into the Honeycomb Caverns.

Laura, her graceful hands and expressive face interpreting the final draft of her illustrated poetry chapbook for her most devoted listener.

Michael, studious and serious, a big brother to all the younger children, staying up late to talk with Vincent about Shakespeare, and translating their discussion for his reading group the following day.

Ellie, a newcomer surprised by love, protective sister to her younger brother, Eric; both children gifted by Catherine to the world Below, both looking to Vincent for security in their new home: the boy grinning as he rolled a toy car along the footboard of his bed, and the girl gazing at Vincent with trustful eyes, a glowing star clasped in one hand.

Even these faces began to lose their shape; their importance; their reality. Dark waves were washing them away. Vincent met the soft edge of the blackness. It foamed around him, promising quiet. Promising rest—

(...a necessary end...will come when it will come...)

Words, faces, himself: departing.

(...to sleep! perchance to dream...)

Two mirages remained with him the longest.

Jacob Wells, the man Vincent had always called *Father.* Grizzled and gray, going silver at the temples, he blustered over a chessboard as Vincent announced, "Checkmate," but he was proud of his adopted son's affinity for the game. Father: smiling. Father: scolding. Father teaching Vincent everything. Father kissing him goodnight.

(Suns of the world may stain when...when...suns...or sons? Father, I don't remember the rest. I can't remember the rules.)

And Catherine. Dearest Catherine Chandler. So beautiful of face and soul, growing strong. So passionate for justice, yet struggling to trust. Her heart saved space for such a thing as

Vincent. Her hope and her courage led her to dream a better world for herself, and for him, and for all people. Catherine reaching for him, and letting him hold her close. Catherine helping people in need, speaking out for the wounded and the wronged. *Catherine*.

(I loved you. This was what I wanted to say. I loved you so.)

The venerable man and the beloved woman became distant from him, as all the other friendly voices and beautiful faces had done. Friends from Above, friends from Below. Vincent envisioned the crowd of good people who had once claimed him as *theirs*.

They were gone. Lost to him. Each and every one.

Vincent wished them all well, and safe, and happy.

That final duty of the heart served, Vincent sighed. All tension drained out of him. One hand slipped down across his thigh and thudded to the floor. In his mind, the loving faces foundered into shadow. He thought he heard a hollow sound, as the lid of a big, huge metal box dropped into place, blocking out the sky, shutting him inside this dark, cold, foul tomb forever.

He was alone. As he had begun, so would he end.

Despair smothered him. Vincent let it. He had no reason not to. He was no one's creature now. His world had become a malignant place where evil things ate the light. His world contained no safe places. No safe people. There were no gods, nor even any demons, to interest themselves in his existence, or in his failure to exist.

(...despair spiraling into madness...)

His life was a wasted argument against a foregone conclusion: he was a mistake, an accident, an outcast, best abandoned, best forgotten, best cast aside with the rest of the city's stinking refuse. He was a singularity that should never have been. A creature that deserved to be spat upon and punished. A nasty, beastly thing that caused others to scream and flee at the first sight of him. A bad thing that hurt people, a thing that others rightly feared. No matter that he had never wanted to: he killed people.

His terrible hands had killed *many* people, throughout the course of his life. Far too many, in these most recent months. Too many rendered dead as he fought to keep *her* alive—to keep *himself* alive in her world, a world that instinctively hated him. The deaths took many forms.

For he did not need to touch someone to kill them. People killed each other as they hurried to get away from him—or as they acted upon their desire to expose him for profit. In their haste and horror, people sometimes even killed themselves. They killed their own bodies, falling from windows or racing out into traffic, heedless of greater dangers in their flight from him. They killed their own minds, trying to explain him. They killed their own souls when they tried to accept the lie that his being there served some higher purpose in the world. It took a quieter consciousness to sense the truth beyond such lies.

Thus, animals always knew him for what he was. Only those too sick or hurt or insane to run had ever let him near. *They* knew he was poison. The baying of the city's dogs proclaimed him more than deadly.

(...since I am a dog, beware my fangs...)

Even "Freak" could not begin to describe him, for at least *that* word related him to other living beings, connoting differences in light of similarities. But into which part of the Freak Show did *he* belong? The troupe of human oddities? The midnight menagerie? The cordoned section of the Ten-in-One reserved for the star attraction? If not *the* oldest profession, this was one of the oldest. Exceptional men and women had always been paraded through the centuries, some cruelly exploited—certainly—yet many others finding work and play, family and friends through the exhibition of their talents and physical variations.

But there it was again: his ridiculous dream of belonging. He was too dangerous for all

public venues. No performer of tricks, he could only provide a spectacle beyond all imagining.

Yes, ladies and gentlemen: hearken, all, to the showman's cry! Hear his promises of a vision not to be missed, a face no one could ever forget, a body no one could ever forgive. And then comes the collective gasp to replace the barrier of a rising curtain, the outbursts that follow a revelation for which no words can possibly prepare an audience—

Turn rather to the anatomist's laboratory, to the researcher's eyes and his mechanical eyes, and the scientist's hands and the sterilized tools held by his hands. Document the dissection, peer into the inner workings of this alien flesh. And when stripped to bare bones, permit even these naked remains no dignified privacy, no recess of earth or stone, no departure, no peace, no rest. Fossilize the Oddity, publicize the Curiosity, deconstruct its life and death into paltry, isolated elements. In the name of science, for the sake of inquiry—

Else hear the professor speaking in his lecture room, see him point his stick. Hear the silence of his students' pens, for no amount of scrivening can paraphrase their subject in its cage. The Creature is merely a visual aid, illustrating the professor's gathered facts, proof for preconditioned theorems: the Human is Nature's apex, enlightened Man her paramount. This Deviation here displayed, this monstrous Beast, this anti-human Rival to jealous monopolies of moral sentience, must be explored, explained, all prized and patented academic truths defended against empirical impositions—

The truth—*his* truth—must stand forever outside each viewer's grasp. Name him as they pleased, all reactions came down to fear of The Threat that was himself. The Topsiders were right about him, whether or not they understood the true Why underlying their rightness. They had always been right. The lethal fact of their entombing cage confirmed all their fears of him, all their violence, all their terrible rightness—all his unendurable wrongness.

So it was no wonder, after all, that *she* had left him. Now that he comprehended the foolishness behind his hurt, he felt only sorrow that she had not escaped him sooner. For she had every reason to be afraid of him, every right to save herself and get away. She had spoken most of this truth when, uninhibited, she pushed him from herself, calling him Demon and Brute and Bloodthirsty Monster and *La Bête Noire* and I-Hate-You and Ravaging Lecher and Ugly Freak and Devouring Beast.

No single word existed to contain the abomination of what he was. Everyone, everything, who saw him knew that he was Not Us. He was The Ruin of Us. He was The Hand of Death. Ruinous, deadly, Other, Outsider, he should have died in the snowy garbage as an infant, just as those who left him there had intended him to.

Even so, surviving, he had wanted to love the world, had once dreamed of giving the world something beautiful of his own making, one friendship at a time, one act of kindness after another. But his dreams of love could not sustain a life lived at the expense of everyone else's nightmares. He had no right *not* to hate himself for giving the world merely one more thing to hate. But alas, he remained too unschooled in hatred to deploy it even at his ending. He had become too weak and disconnected to try. His final failure. His ultimate abandonment.

No dream of even freakish life could dwell inside him now. He had learned his lesson at last. His only valid definition: cries that denied his miscreation—or else a silence that rejected his very possibility. He found that he preferred the silence.

The monstrosity closed his eyes. So unnamed and silenced, his aloneness crushed him. He was not a paradox anymore. He was a mirror reflecting nothing, and his nothingness was the only good thing about him. His love had proved barren. His hope had died. His faith, his will, his strength: all of himself, lost. Even his words for these things had gone. He was emptied. He was done with false chances allotted to him by the omnipotent Shadows of merciless men. He was

ready for his hurt to stop. He wanted to become free beyond recall.

No. Not free. Only not there.

Alone with this final thought, the nameless defeated thing drifted quietly out of its cage and into the Stygian void.

II

25 March 1987
Wednesday Morning

Jonathan Gould ambushed Edward Hughes at the bus stop. Gould didn't say anything. He just stepped out from behind the thick cloud of exhaust as the bus pulled away and stood with his hands stuffed into his pockets, staring at Hughes.

"Go away," Hughes told him. He rushed across the pavement toward the buildings on the opposite side of the campus block.

Gould did not go away. He followed a few steps behind. Stopping on the sidewalk, Hughes turned to glare at him.

"Listen. I'm not going to tell you anything. You might as well go find something else to do."

"No," said Gould. "I won't let you steal this from me."

Hughes quailed. The young man's words touched old putrefied wounds. He had said those very words himself once. Fifteen years ago, Hughes had been the one standing in Gould's shoes.

"Oh, Jonathan, I'm not stealing anything. I'm trying to do what's best. I'm trying to do what's right."

Gould shook his head, cold. "I came to you. I gave you all the help I could. You took advantage. Now you're cutting me out. I do not accept this."

Hughes tried one more time. "Jonathan, the creature's name is Vincent. He has a *name*, Jonathan. He told it to me last night. That, and many other things."

"Sure he did."

Hopeless. "If you won't believe me, then there's nothing more to discuss."

Gould took a step forward. Hughes took a hasty step back.

"Don't you threaten me!" Hughes swung his briefcase between them. The things inside the case thumped and rattled.

"I'm not going to threaten you, Hughes. But I *am* going to find out where you stashed that cage."

Hughes backed away. He turned and hurried to the doors of the Annex, a place that had become more of a home than his tiny apartment had ever seemed to him. The Annex towered in his mind, the welcoming sanctuary of knowledge and inquiry that housed his lab—and his creature. Gould kept up with him, three steps behind. "Go away, Gould," Hughes called back over his shoulder.

Gould crowded him all the way to his office. Hughes shot past his door and shut it quickly. He waited to see if Gould would follow him inside, but the door stayed closed. Hughes dropped his briefcase onto the floor behind his desk and paced across the room, which seemed much too small. Much smaller than his apartment.

He felt trapped.

(You take my house when you do take the prop / That doth sustain my house...)

Gould knew about the maintenance hallway. If Hughes went out the back of the lab, Gould could follow him down to the basement. But Gould couldn't watch two doors at the same time, could he? Hughes stopped pacing.

(...you take my life / When you do take the means whereby I live.)

With cameras, Gould could watch both halls. Or with Quint's help. But someone might question Gould about the installation of surveillance cams. And why would *Quint* waste his time lurking about outside his least favorite professor's doors? He had his Japanese guests to entertain. Also, Verghese was in town.

Ah, but it doesn't have to be Quint, Hughes thought. *Gould could ask anyone to watch me, ask anyone to follow me. A student even. Some kid who had nowhere to go for vacation. Or one who's attending sessions for extra credit. Or even one of the TAs. Pay a college kid enough money to buy pizza and beer, and they'll do any little thing for you. I can't risk it!*

He crossed the room to his window, then back to the office door, then back to the window.

"Damn it *all*!" Hughes cursed. He was free-falling through his paranoia. He wrung his hands. He circled the room.

Then he glanced at his briefcase and began to worry about Vincent. *I shouldn't have rushed off like that last night,* he thought. *I should have at least come back up here to get the food and water bowls.*

Or, Hughes could have moved the creature altogether. It had been Tuesday night. Pierson wouldn't have put off his visit to his mother, owls or no owls. Hughes could have bound Vincent's arms and legs, brought the creature up to the department van, and driven away. Certainly, he could have done that much.

(Could or would? Can't or won't?)

That course of action had required only, what? A mild sedative and some chloroform. Rope. The gurney and the sheet. The department's van. And time.

Hughes had all the time in the world last night, and he misspent it. Last night, he had everything he needed—all the pieces of the puzzle—but he couldn't put them together fast enough.

We could be safe in another state right now! Hughes berated himself. He stopped at his window, looking out at the people meandering below as another day began for the unmindful University.

But, damn everything, the creature brought up Shylock. I lost my head. Hughes rubbed his forehead. He felt a dull ache brewing there.

Did he really speak to me? Did I only imagine it? Oh, God, how do I define such a beast...a creature who speaks soul-to-soul? What produced this miracle? And God, why are You snatching him away from me after so short a time?

Time. It always came back to time.

Hughes went to his office door and opened it. Gould stood outside, a half meter away, frowning.

(What did you expect, Ed? There's only one road to salvation, and i'nt it SUCH a narrow way?)

Hughes glared at Gould, thinking, *What would YOU know? Blake died and all of you might as well have followed right along after him! Do you think THAT'S what he would have wanted? My brother had dreams too!*

Gould's frown looked exactly like Grandpa's.

Hughes slammed the door in the gargoyle's face.

He jittered around the room, muttering to himself. "I was a *fool* to trust a man I've never met outside a classroom!" He stumbled against his desk. One of his figurines wobbled. He caught it before it could smash onto the floor.

"Fool!" Hughes moaned. He put the little statue back where it belonged. "Stupid. Oh, my God." He rushed back to the window. Nothing had changed, even after his night of broken sleep and his morning of frenetic shopping. He still didn't know what to do. He had too many paths to choose from, too many options—and none at all.

I only wanted truth, he thought to the manicured campus landscaping. *I only wanted to uncover the truth and share it for the benefit of all,* he pleaded to the skyscraper-fringed expanse of the sky. *Is that so wrong? Is that too much to ask for? We define ourselves by our understanding of what is and is not human. We define truth by what we do and do not know. I only wanted to be part of that discussion.*

Heaven and earth held no answer for him. His creature, his Vincent, by the bare reality of his existence, broke through all definitions. Hughes had no inkling anymore what lay beyond the categorical. That mythic land stretched in all directions beneath unheard-of constellations. Call the star formations Mystery, and Miracle, and Unnamable. Call the uncharted countryside El Dorado. Call it Shangri-la. Science could bear witness as to its own inability to explain such exceptions to its rules. It was up to great men of science to dream beyond accepted conventions of thought—politics, religion, geography, even biological fact.

Hughes had believed himself poised to explore his dream. He saw now that he'd been mistaken. He had long ago lost the knack for perceiving inherent meaning in happenstance. That had become the province of monks and lunatics, not scientists, and certainly not Edward Hughes. In order to reposition himself to complete his *magnum opus*, he needed time he didn't have. Or—

Hughes stopped and listened for the new idea.

Or he needed Vincent's cooperation.

Inspired, he thought, *I'm going down there now. I'm going to talk to him again.*

Yes. That seemed right. Hughes hurried across the room to pick up his briefcase. He opened the lab door and jogged through his private workspace to reach his storage vestibule. He yanked open the doors to the maintenance hallway and stepped out—and walked right into Gould.

Hughes shrieked.

"Steady, Professor," Gould said. That was all he said.

Hughes retreated, shutting and locking the doors behind him. He backed into his lab, staring sightlessly at the white space around him. *A deal with the Devil,* some high voice squealed in his head. *A deal with the Devil and now the debt is due.*

Gould called through the doors. Hughes could make out the words quite well. "I'm not angry, Professor. Be reasonable. Show me the way and we can forget this whole thing. Or tell me where to go. Professor?"

It was the voice of the grad student who had come to Hughes in the beginning. Curious, confident, respectful. Hughes went back to his office, shutting that voice out so he wouldn't have to think about this new betrayal. And so he could not be tempted to capitulate.

Returning his briefcase to its place behind his desk, Hughes crossed to the window again and rested one hip on the low bookshelf that stretched beneath the sill. He trembled and thought, *No one in my department—or out of it—speaks even that respectfully to me anymore*. *Maybe that's why it was so easy to listen to Gould. When he came to me that day.*

Hughes observed the indifferent world through his window. He was caught in here, with nowhere to turn, and with no one to turn to except his own harried conscience. He had nothing left but what he already knew—and his questions about what he wanted to know. He didn't think he could bear to go on if he lost his dream a second time. *When I am calmer, I will consider this situation,* he decided. So he sat, and he watched passersby outside go to and from seminar sessions, and he waited.

Crafty fingers tapped the glass in his office door. Hughes did not look around. The door did not open. Gould was only reminding the professor that there would be no escaping him.

Hughes began to grasp at straws: *Maybe Gould will get tired of running around between the two hallways. Maybe he'll give up.*

A deeper part of his mind maintained that this was an unlikely outcome.

III

25 March 1987
Wednesday Morning

Catherine made her way through the little gathering of chitchatting people, her eyes fixed on the door ahead of her. The name printed across the glass read, EDWARD HUGHES, and that was the name of the man she'd come to see. She did not know what she would find when she met him.

Tracing the darts this far had been straightforward enough—a basic research operation that required her to spend her previous afternoon feeding the payphone outside a copy shop, retrieving fax printouts at irregular intervals from the shop clerk within. But walking through the Fairchild Annex building was becoming more difficult with every step. Doors lined the halls, labeled with people's names or with room numbers—or lab numbers. Passing one of the labs, she had seen a young man with a bright orange mohawk fasten two buttons on his wrinkled white coat and enter the room. Catherine glimpsed rows of cages containing white or brown-splotched guinea pigs before the young man shut the door.

She had shuddered and kept walking, thinking that each lab must contain the stuff from which nightmares were woven. She didn't want to be thinking about nightmares. All night, her dreams had been infested by the half-formed shadows of hunters who chased her through the dark. They blew spines at her through hollow bamboo poles. Their knives glinted in whatever light gloomed over her dreamlands.

Waking a little after dawn, Catherine's mind seethed with television documentary footage she'd seen over the years. The image that most haunted her portrayed a team of men in South Africa, shooting a white lion with tranquilizer guns in order to lock a radio collar around the animal's neck. They meant to study the lion's patterns of travel, applying their best science to accomplish this task. The prostrate lion had no say in the matter. A nagging fear accompanied these images. Catherine had been unable to sit still all morning.

Something is very wrong, she kept thinking. *There's too great a silence inside me.* Her worried heart had never felt more alone.

Now, walking toward the door of a biology professor's office, her thoughts returned again and again to her science classes throughout her days as a student. She felt she'd been capable enough when it came to the academic aspects. She had even enjoyed some of the labs. Chemistry

was fun for her—*As was my lab partner during my high school course,* she thought distractedly. *What was his name? Buddy's friend. Andy.*

Biology labs were another matter, however, because she hated dissecting things. One particular incident involving a pig's heart produced a memory she preferred to keep safely shut away from the waking world of her thirty-year-old self. Admittedly, Catherine had always been squeamish about certain animals: frogs, snakes, spiders, worms, rats. But it also bothered her to know that lab specimens had died in the name of science, and that she would be graded on how well she dismantled each little corpse (or organ) on her labeled trays.

She honestly didn't know what else biologists *did* with the animals they captured. Back in college, her self-righteously political boyfriend Simon liked to regale their group of friends with an endless sequence of anti-Establishment diatribes. Some of these tirades denounced what went on in research centers. But that was Simon, in the mid-'70s, and what did any of them truly know about the work of vivisectionists? Did the scientists cut into their animals right away? Did they keep them alive somewhere for observation, maybe in kennels?

How long had those guinea pigs lived in their cages and how much longer would they go on living? Catherine supposed it all depended on the purpose of whatever study they were involved in. She'd never needed to think about these details before. Her thoughts made her feel queasy. She passed a flushed, red-headed man who was bending to drink from a water fountain. EDWARD HUGHES: here was the door.

Please, God, Catherine entreated silently. *Please don't let it be too late.*

She knocked on the door. Receiving no answer, she added, *And please let this Professor Hughes be in today.* She knocked again.

A man's voice snapped at her from within the office. "Leave me alone!"

Catherine moved her hand away from the door. These were not words one expected to hear from college faculty. "Professor Hughes?" she called.

The voice called back to her uncertainly. "Who is it?"

Catherine stared at the closed door. She had conversations like this sometimes—through doors, windows, and even car windshields—with witnesses who didn't want to deal with officials of the law. She hadn't expected to meet this response today. Only very frightened people spoke to their visitors without *first* opening their office doors. *Or,* she knew, *people with something to hide*.

"My name is Catherine Chandler," she said to the door, trying to sound calm, professional, and nonthreatening. "Please, may I speak with you?"

A very long silence answered her. Then, from just beyond the pane of frosted security glass, the voice muttered, "Catherine." The doorknob turned.

He's heard my name before. The thought created a glimmer of hope. She took a deep breath. The door swung open.

"Thank you," Catherine said softly. She stepped into the professor's office. Edward Hughes closed the door. He turned to face her.

Hughes was a thin, graying, nervous little man. His curly hair had once been a sedate, sandy brown, and his fearful eyes were the color of unfinished oak. He stood not much taller than Catherine. He looked tired and disheveled, despite his perfectly knotted black bow tie, which (Catherine could not help but notice) topped off his bachelor's ensemble of blue checked shirt, rumpled green-gray khakis, and navy college blazer. Hughes looked like a senescent Mr. Fred Rogers having a very bad day. He kept glancing down, away from Catherine's eyes.

"How can I help you?" he asked.

Catherine gave him the simplest introduction to her problem. She reached into her purse

and pulled the two spent tranquilizer cartridges from an inner pocket. Wordless, she held them out to Hughes, dart points away from both of them, as though passing scissors to him.

The professor stood a little straighter and pressed his lips together, accepting the darts. He stopped looking at her altogether. Catherine watched him closely.

"I traced the serial number through the supplier in Albany, to the University...and then to you," she said.

Hughes gave her a slight nod.

"He's here, isn't he?"

Hughes made no reply.

Catherine asked, "Is he alive?" She held her breath.

Hughes moved away from her, toward a window, with the darts rattling in his hands. "He's spoken of you," he said. He set the darts on top of a cluttered bookcase and gazed outside.

Catherine exhaled, thinking, *Thank you, God.* She pursued Hughes and stood looking up into his conflicted face. "Take me to him."

"I can't do that," said Hughes. "I'm sorry."

"Please!"

Hughes squeezed his eyes shut. "I need time!" he burst out. A patina of sweat began to shine on his forehead. He covered his eyes with one hand, hunched his shoulders, pinched the bridge of his nose. He stammered, "E-everything's happening too quickly. I—" Hughes lowered his hand and looked directly into Catherine's eyes for the first time. Drawing himself up a little he said, "There's more at stake here than you think!" He turned away from her. He walked across the room, putting his desk between them.

"No!" Catherine called after the little man. "There is only *Vincent*."

Hearing the name, Hughes drooped over his desk chair.

"If you've spoken with him, I know you understand that," Catherine persisted.

"My whole career, my reputation," Hughes muttered, listing his high stakes. "The respect of my *colleagues*."

"Is that worth the *pain* he must be suffering?"

"There's still so much to learn from him. So much we don't know." He was darting those little glances at her again. Professor Hughes said nothing to deny that Vincent must be in pain.

He knows what he's doing is wrong, Catherine thought, stunned into silence. *He's ashamed. But he won't stop.*

"You know that he's...he's *amazing*," Hughes said. When he saw that Catherine listened to him, he began to speak quickly, urgently. It sounded like a rotted stopper had imploded inside him and now he simply *must* share with her every single shiny fact he knew.

"An absolute miracle. It's not a case of hypertrichosis, you know. Not lionitis, not any human *disease*. He's not deformed. And he's not like a gorilla. It's true *fur*. All of it. Remarkable! I don't even think he's, well...a *mutation.* Not some kind of throwback, either. He's not human. There's *nothing* like him in verifiable history...nothing in the fossil record. I've worked through every conjecture I can think of, but...he's a perfect genetic blend of completely disparate species. I *must* understand how it happened, how that *works*. I must discover what the creature *is*! Do you realize what it could mean?"

Catherine gaped at the man as he babbled. Throwback? Mutation? *Creature*? Not human! His words shot her far beyond mere outrage. Hughes was an affront to humanity and a menace to one she loved. She suddenly knew how Vincent felt whenever he raced to confront enemies who threatened her life.

"I've only completed the most basic tests," Hughes went on. "Only preliminary

examinations. A portion of his brain, I don't know why it's there! And I don't understand his teeth, I mean, what does he eat? And how different are his sensory capacities from ours? His thought processes? There's been so little time to observe behavior. I need time. I just need...I need *more time*! He only started speaking to me last night. Speaking! It wasn't a fluke. It wasn't mimicry. I still have so many questions to ask! So many answers to pin down!"

Catherine crossed the room, her hands clenched into fists. This hurt her back. She didn't care. "Who gave *you* the right?!" she demanded.

Hughes swung to meet her advance, his face agonized. Catherine stopped. The professor's erratic mood swings scared her.

"It's too late!" Hughes barked at her. "Don't you understand?"

No, she thought. *I don't understand at all! Too late? Oh, please, why too late?* Catherine's fury sharpened into fearful consternation. Hughes watched her, hands clutching the edge of his desk.

Catherine held still. She realized that he was desperate. Close to panic. His fear fed her fear. She had to resist his emotional contagion with all her might.

"Another man's already seen him!" the professor cried. His new statement meant something terrible to him. It seemed to explain the crux of the matter—for Hughes, at any rate. Not for Catherine.

Dismayed now, Catherine thought, *Professor Hughes is not sane. Whether this is a kind of hysteria or whether it's a full-blown mental illness, I can't say. But I've got to find a way to get through to him.*

She reached into the depths of her heart. She found there the precious—the *sacred*—bond she shared with that incomparable *being* who was *Vincent.* He was her friend. He was her patient mentor and her wise counselor. He was Catherine's healer and her confidante. Vincent was Myth, and he was Beast. He was a chivalrous champion. He was a courteous suitor. He was a beautiful man. He was someone Catherine loved.

If Catherine lost her connection with Vincent—if she lost their relationship—what would her life become? And what would Vincent's life become, if he remained this man's imprisoned test subject? The dark possibilities terrified her.

She thought to herself: *Do not panic.*

"Professor Hughes," Catherine began, her voice unsteady with emotion. "I don't know how to explain this to you...I don't even pretend to understand it...I've never been able to explain it to myself. But Vincent and I are connected."

She swallowed back her tears. Hughes listened. Catherine continued to make the most important rebuttal of her life.

"Yes. I *know* him. And I know that, whatever he is, he's also the best part of what it means to be *human*."

That was Vincent, she realized. The essence of Vincent. The most human being on Earth. The most loving and lovable person Catherine could imagine. Hughes had hidden him away somewhere. And while they argued about his humanity, Vincent suffered.

She was crying now. That didn't matter. All that mattered was her speaking clearly enough to convince Hughes to see Vincent as a person—to see Vincent, if only for a moment, through honest eyes.

So she told Hughes, "And if you take away his freedom, then you take away that very part that makes him *most* human."

Catherine stopped speaking. She had thrust her greatest truths, her most treasured secrets and epiphanies, into this stranger's hands. She watched the man behind the desk.

Hughes stayed quiet, internalizing her words. He began to look saner. Older too, and sad. Long seconds passed. Finally, slowly, his manic attitude faded away.

"He's told me something similar," Hughes said. A faint smile touched his lips. "He even invoked my favorite Shakespearean play."

Oh, yes, *that* sounded like Vincent. Blinking tears away, Catherine relaxed her aching shoulders.

"He also...well, he asked me to let him go."

"Can you blame him?" Catherine retorted.

Hughes looked down at his desk and stopped smiling.

"Professor Hughes, please. Let me see him."

Hughes rubbed his forehead, thinking. Then he stood up straight and came around to Catherine's side of the desk. He held out one hand, but didn't touch her. "All right. Come with me. Carefully."

He led her, not to his office door, but to a door behind him marked, PRIVATE. He held the door open and allowed her to enter first into the room beyond.

Catherine glanced around, pressing the back of her hand to the corner of one eye, where a tear threatened to spill over. The room was a bright, tidy laboratory. Metal tables and shelving units lined the walls. It smelled strongly of disinfectant. Vincent wasn't there.

Hughes closed the door to his office and began to cross the room. He passed over a badly scuffed section of the floor. Catherine saw that someone had recently drilled small holes into the linoleum, leaving a circle of dark spots like a fairy ring in the middle of the lab. The holes had ragged edges. Scrapes and scratches marked many of the surrounding floor tiles.

These are fresh marks, Catherine thought. *They're not old enough to have collected dirt stains or detritus.* As she looked up from the floor, her gaze gravitated toward the opposite wall of the professor's lab, where a long black object seemed out of place in the white room.

An examination table. The shape of its pedestal base explained the ring of holes in the floor. Catherine moved closer. Deep punctures and more long scratches marred the vinyl that covered the table's padding. In a few places, the covering had split. Yellow foam oozed out in jagged lines.

She suddenly understood that all of these marks *(tests, Hughes said, examinations—in this lab)* had been made by *claws*.

"What happened here?" Catherine asked, touching the gashes on the table with her knuckles.

"Um, well, my assistant...my *former* assistant...ah, provoked...Vincent. A few nights ago." Hughes seemed very nervous again. Guilty, even. "Things got...a little rough."

Catherine frowned at him, knowing equivocation when she heard it. Hughes glanced down, unable to meet her eyes—and he looked away just as quickly from the damaged flooring. So: there had been a fight in this room. And this spineless biology professor had won. Catherine wondered how in hell he had managed to do that.

"There are very few '*things*,'" she informed Hughes, "that '*provoke*' Vincent toward violence."

Hughes stood silent before her, disconcerted and shamefaced.

Catherine took her hand from the table. *I have to let it go,* she thought. *I need Hughes to show me the way. I can dish out reprimands some other time.*

When Catherine said nothing further to him, Hughes went to the double doors on the other side of the lab. He opened one, waving at her to follow. They passed through a dim space

containing a utility sink, cleaning supplies, a high cot on wheels, and unfamiliar machines. At the other end of this little passage, Catherine saw the outline of another set of doors.

"This leads to the maintenance corridor," Hughes said in a hushed undertone. He unlocked the doors and opened one, peering out into the hallway. He seemed satisfied with whatever he saw (or didn't see) out there, and held the door open for her. He said, "It's a bit of a trek, but it's this way."

He shut the door behind them. They walked together through the empty hallway, past a long row of closed doors, to a stairwell that took them into the building's basement. Down there, the quiet closed in on them and their footsteps echoed on the concrete floor. Catherine wondered what sort of room Hughes had found that would hold Vincent inside it, as close as they were to the Tunnels and Vincent's potential safety.

Hughes began to ask her questions as they went along. Catherine wanted to keep them moving toward Vincent, so she did what she could to keep Hughes talking. Their conversation seemed to make him happy, but the rapid and complete changes in the professor's frame of mind only made Catherine feel deeply uneasy.

"Did you teach him to speak?" Hughes asked.

"No."

"Are you the one who clothed him?"

"Clothed him?" Catherine repeated, startled. "No."

"He makes his own clothes?"

That was more difficult to answer. "I think he lives by foraging for things thrown away by others," she said at last.

Hughes nodded, pleased, a man who had solved a vexing mystery. "Scavenge," he said. "And do you live with him? Under Central Park?"

Catherine shot him an incredulous look.

"No," Hughes answered himself. "Of course not. But is that where you want to take him? How can you get there without being seen?"

Catherine had no safe answers to these questions, so she asked one of her own instead. "Is it much farther?"

"Oh," Hughes said. "Not far at all. We're nearly there."

Catherine stifled her irritation. She walked faster.

After another moment, Hughes asked, "Did you know that he can quote from *The Merchant of Venice*?"

And just about every other book he's ever laid hands on, Catherine thought. Aloud she said, "I'd be very surprised if he did not know all of Shakespeare by heart."

"Fascinating," Hughes murmured, meaning it. He stopped in front of a new set of doors. "Here we are." He took keys from his pocket and worked at opening the lock.

Catherine narrowed her eyes at the metal doors. When he needed to, Vincent tore brick walls apart with his bare hands. He ripped doors off their hinges and smashed through windows without a second thought. *How has Hughes kept him in here?* The question left her feeling both angry and afraid.

The professor's answer to Catherine's private query surpassed her worst suspicions and tapped into her deepest fears. Hughes pushed one of the doors open, revealing—nothing. The room beyond the door was pitch black. The air that puffed out into the basement passage felt so cold on her shins, Catherine had to wonder if the room had been refrigerated.

Vincent is in HERE? her heart moaned. *Hughes just LEFT him down here, alone in the DARK?*

Hughes took a step inside and swept his hand across the inside wall. Light filled the room. Once again, he held the door open for Catherine with obsequious, old-fashioned good manners. She strode past him into a dry, enclosed space full of boxes and packing crates. Wads of whitish straw littered the floor like unmelting patches of alien snow. A tall cage stood in the middle of the little room. It looked like the sort of maneuverable construction that might contain a big ape at a carnival. And lying lifeless at the bottom of that cage—

Catherine's heart cried, *My God. No!*

Catherine flew to the cage and crouched down at the door. Her purse dropped onto the floor beside her. Hughes closed the solid metal door and walked over to her, his footfalls very loud in the silent room. Catherine gripped the cold bars with both hands, as though she could shatter the steel with her horror alone.

Vincent did not acknowledge either Catherine or Hughes. He did not respond to the sudden advent of light. He lay on his side as though he had been petrified in that position. He didn't move. He didn't rouse. He appeared—flattened-out, two-dimensional. Vincent actually looked *small* to her.

"*Vincent*!" Catherine reached through the bars. She brushed her fingers across his forehead.

Cold as clay, she thought. *Please, not dead. Vincent, PLEASE!*

He was not dead. His eyes opened at her touch. He blinked and squinted, and seemed to see the two people bending over him. Pain, or an anticipation of pain, disfigured his face. He began to pull away from them—and stopped, as he recognized Catherine. Open-mouthed, Vincent lifted his head from a stained and dingy red throw pillow jammed against the bars, utterly astounded to see her.

Catherine thought, *He's as white as his shirt! And for pity's sake, where are the rest of his clothes?*

Pity had no part in whatever had been going on in this room. Vincent's eyes drifted shut and he lowered his head to the pillow again. He had not made a sound.

Catherine felt rage building up within her as she watched Vincent struggle just to *breathe*. He began to suck in long, deep, slow breaths. Catherine could tell that each throaty rush of air must be an excruciating act of will. She turned to unleash her monumental enmity upon Professor Edward Hughes.

"Let. Him. Out of here! *Now*!"

Hughes only stood there, bent over a little, resting one possessive hand on the cage. "Where will you take him?" he asked, curious.

Catherine couldn't believe it. *WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU?!* she wanted to scream. But she saw that screaming would be a wasted effort. She had talked Hughes into bringing her here. She'd even heard him imply that he was willing to release Vincent into her custody. Apparently implications weren't enough. Catherine had no doubt now: this sad little shell of a man was never going to open the cage of his own accord.

IV

25 March 1987
Wednesday, Late Morning

She touched him. She named him. *Vincent,* she said.

Her touch gave him light. Her voice gave him words. Her scent, her face, her presence—was bliss.

Katharos. Consecrated.

This is not a hallucination. This is a thirteenth revelation worthy of the mystic Dame Julian, Vincent thought, summoning the strength to open his eyes again. *She* was still there, resplendent as an archangel in her wrath. Catherine was Nirvana. She was Eden. She was Everything. Her hair floated in a golden halo around her sublimely sculpted face. Her brilliant green eyes impaled Hughes where he stood.

Vincent thought, *Man and beast Thou preservest, O Lord. How precious is Thy lovingkindness, O God!*

Hughes began to wither in the light of those fathomless eyes. His question languished in the air, an absurdity which warranted no response. Then the little man cringed at the sound of a door closing behind him. The chilling voice of the professor's helper broke their three-way silence.

"He's not going anywhere."

Vincent heard the sound of a bolt sliding home. The man whom Hughes now called Gould rather than Jonathan had locked the doors. Catherine leaned to look around the professor. Gould's footfalls sounded soft and slow. He was a hunter stalking forewarned prey.

Every instinct howled at Vincent to rise!—to prepare!—to defend! He *knew* violence, he knew its weight as it descended upon a battleground, knew its very taste. His chest ached as he forced more air into his lungs. The blackness still swaddled him with cold.

Gould's voice came closer now. "Give me the key," it said.

Hughes refused.

Shoes clapped the cement floor. Gould must have pushed Hughes. Blackness hummed in Vincent's ears. *Not now,* he inwardly protested. *Let me go. Let me up.* He concentrated on Catherine's face, saw her disquiet as she too sensed the escalation of violence in the small room.

Gould pushed Hughes again and again, shoving the little man across the floor until he had pressed the professor's back against the wall by the sink.

"Give me the key!"

"No!"

"Give me the key!"

"No!"

They are like quarreling children, the Other said out of the blackness. He sounded weak but also darkly amused. *At this point, were they Tunnelkids, we'd be stepping in to take the disputed toy away from both of them.*

Catherine stood and flattened herself against the cage door. Vincent approved, thinking, *Yes. Make of yourself a small target.* To the Other his mind snarled, *These men are NOT children. Help me get up!*

For a wonder, his depth obliged. The full remnant of Vincent's strength flowed through his mind and heart. There wasn't much strength to be had, but it was enough to compel his muscles to obey him.

Vincent shifted in the cage, lifting his head and shoulders off the cushion. Blackness pounded at his temples with swift hammer blows. Vincent bit his already lacerated tongue until the pain propelled him past the dark fog in his head, and he didn't fall back down.

"Listen to me, will you?" Hughes was shouting. "You don't know about—"

"We've gone too far, Hughes. Both of us!"

“You don’t understand! He *does* speak!”

Gould tried to get at the professor’s pockets, while Hughes struggled to shift the younger man’s bulk.

“I think he’s more human than not! Gould!”

“*Give me the keys*!” Gould screamed.

Vincent pushed upward until he could lean on an elbow. Catherine clutched the cage behind her with her arms outspread, a sheltering gesture. *No, Catherine,* he wanted to tell her. *You must not be my shield. Remove yourself from danger!* He couldn’t voice the words. He had no breath to spare.

Hughes seemed to have gathered his keyring into one fist and Gould was attempting to prise the fingers open. Hughes made a sound, “Gaah!” as Gould pressed his forearm across the professor’s throat.

“New data,” Hughes choked. “Full conversation.” He fumbled for a packing crate with his empty hand and grasped something. A small pry bar? He struck Gould on the head with it. Gould’s eyeglasses clattered into the sink.

The younger man staggered backward and crashed into the fire hose casing. The glass in the case door shattered, raining shards down on him as he flopped to the floor, stunned and bleeding. Gould rolled over onto his back.

“A matter of truths,” gasped Hughes. “Definitions.” He dropped the pry bar. It landed on the floor with a resonant clang. The professor’s face suddenly expressed something close to regret. He looked down at Gould, who was shaking his head from side to side as he tried to clear his vision.

Hughes rushed to Gould’s side, patting the other man randomly. “I’m sorry Jonathan,” he said. He seemed sincere. “I’m so very sorry, but I can’t let you do this. Not now. Not with what we know.”

Gould snatched some long, thin object from the floor and lurched to his feet. Hughes rose with him, trying to catch him, support him, perhaps to convince him of his veracity, or perhaps to hold him back from the cage. “We have no right—” Hughes began.

Hughes, thought Vincent. *Somehow you’ve never come to understand what to do with your latent sympathy.* And then Gould jabbed the object—a tool of some sort—into the professor’s solar plexus.

Hughes wailed, a surprised cry full of anguish. Vincent winced. Gould drove his weapon in deeper. The professor sagged in his murderer’s arms, his face a mask of agony.

The keys fell from the skewered man’s hand, chinking upon the floor. Gould heard the sound and dropped his bloody victim. Quivering, Hughes lay with his hands pressed to his stomach, his fingers locked around the handle of the weapon Gould had used to fell him. *Dark blood,* Vincent saw, and surmised, *but not from the liver. Inferior vena cava, and everything anterior. Bleeding out*. It was a mortal wound.

Catherine sprang away from the cage to snatch up the fallen keys. She had no time to open the lock on the cage door. Gould swung about, ponderous, his own blood dripping off his forehead and the professor’s blood dripping from his hands. His hungry eyes found Catherine.

“No,” Vincent gasped, but he knew he went unheard.

“Give me the keys,” Gould said in a quiet, emotionless voice. He took a step toward Catherine. Catherine took one step back.

Vincent grabbed onto a bar and pulled himself to his knees. *NO!*

Catherine assumed a knife fighter’s stance, wrapping her fingers around the head of one key. The shank stuck out from her fist like a tiny blade. For a moment, wonder touched Vincent’s

sprinting heart as he watched her.

Catherine held her fist out, punching forward to keep Gould at bay. Her feet moved with surety beneath her as she circled the man. *Her fighting teacher should be very proud of himself,* Vincent thought, awed and terrified at the same time. He saw that Catherine was positioning her opponent, setting the man's back to the cage—and to Vincent within the cage. She needed him to do the thing he most hated to do.

His darkness did not retreat from hate. *The poisoner,* hissed the wrathful Other, *is mine*.

Not until he's within reach, Vincent replied. *If I let go of these bars before then, I'll fall down. Then I'd be worse than useless to her.*

Catherine stabbed the key at Gould and this time Gould took a step back. Then he lunged forward again. He caught her in his arms, crushing her, trying to overpower her with his superior weight and strength. Catherine struggled wildly, twisting in his grasp.

Vincent watched his worst nightmare play out before his eyes.

Please! he prayed. *PLEASE!!!* he begged. *Catherine!* He could not reach her, could not help her, could not save her, no more than he could save himself.

But his beloved, ferocious Catherine was still fighting—for her life and for his. She stamped the pointed heel of her gray shoe at the instep of Gould's right foot. The man squawked and his hold loosened just enough for Catherine to bend forward, jerking him off balance and moving them both closer to the wall—

Gould resettled his grip and hauled Catherine off her feet.

The Other was a frenzied shape in Vincent's soul, flitting like a taloned bird in the Shadows, screeching and snarling. *The poisoner is hurting her! The poisoner is killing her! Stop it! STOP IT! STOP HIM! STOP!!!!* Vincent held as steady as was possible, feeling the numb intimation of his legs threatening to fold beneath him. His hands slipped on the bars. Vincent clenched his teeth and willed himself to remain upright, balanced on knees he could not feel.

He saw Catherine set one foot against the wall and push off. Gould's back slammed against the door of the cage. Catherine flung herself away as Gould lost hold of her.

The man's sweat splashed Vincent's face. Vincent's claws caught the weave of Gould's sweater. He couldn't tell if his fingers had closed upon the man's shoulders or not. *I can't hold him!* Vincent thought.

The Other swept his higher self aside, answering, *No need.* He didn't waste breath on a growl, but he bared his teeth in a frantic grimace. He pressed his hands upon the captured man and let gravity have its way. Vincent's superior weight pulled them both down.

They thumped to their respective floors. Vincent reached his right hand around to catch Gould's jaw. His strength was waning fast. Again, gravity was his ally. Vincent leaned back from the door, applying terrible leverage. He jerked his shoulder backward. His hand snapped the poisoner's neck. He heard ligaments rupture and cervical bones crack. The man's dislocated skull revolved with sickening ease within Vincent's grasp, twisting the delicate spinal cord. Breath ceased. The body went limp and the man's head fell forward over the back of Vincent's wrist.

Vincent held the body against the bars for one of those endless mortal moments while the body's heart stopped beating and blood drained from its perishing brain. He was aware that Catherine must watch the face of the poisoner as he expired. She must watch Vincent's face as he killed the poisoner. The heavy body began to slip from the grasp of the Beast in the cage.

(It's probably mimicry.)

Vincent let the man go.

(He was provoked!)

Gould spilled sideways, dead. Vincent dropped against the cage wall, striking out

reflexively with one foot to wedge his body between the parallel sets of bars. Thus, he remained sitting up, but his arms fell limp at his sides.

Adrenaline can't do much for me at this point, he thought. The Other withdrew, satisfied, into his inner Shadows. Vincent blinked down at the dead man on the floor. *I did that.* This thought came automatically. He was too tired to feel anything about the kill.

Catherine. He looked for her. She met his eyes from across the room and got up from where she'd fallen, rather winded herself. She rattled a key into the lock. The wards clacked and the door swung open. The bars no longer blocked him in. Vincent sobbed for breath, tearless and faint.

Through a misty haze, Vincent saw Catherine kneel down onto the floor of the cage. He heard his own heart thunder in his chest. He heard the professor's breath failing in the other man's lungs.

Catherine touched him, caressing, pressing at his face, waking his skin. *Liberating angel,* Vincent thought. *Beloved. I don't know by what miracle you have come, but—my dearest Catherine—how I cherish your courage.*

Drawing new strength from her tender touch, Vincent turned his eyes to his captor. There was one last thing he must say to this man. One last thing he must do to end the nightmare.

V

25 March 1987
Wednesday, Noon

The young woman, Catherine Chandler, leaned into the cage. She touched Vincent's hand, brushed tangled hair from his wizened face, caressed his sunken cheek. Hughes closed his eyes against the agony in his stomach and the emptiness in his soul.

He thought, *This wasn't supposed to happen. Not to any of us.*

With his eyes shut, the emptiness became red and humid. Hughes opened his eyes quickly, afraid. He saw at once that Vincent's blue eyes were not looking at Catherine now, but at Hughes. Their gaze locked.

Hughes thought of Shylock. The line resounded between the creature in the cage and the fool on the floor, as though someone had spoken it aloud: *The villainy you teach me, I will execute; and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.*

"I am instructed," Hughes whispered. He saw that the blue eyes understood him. It was well. It was *just,* that Hughes should die in Vincent's sight. Yet even such small justice could not remove the sense of desolation in the professor's heart. Hughes was a stupid, broken, dreamless man. It shamed him to know that at his end he was nothing less than that, and nothing more. The blood-red nightfall floated across his vision. Hughes thought, *God, but this hurts.*

Then Vincent's rough and weakened voice swept through that terrible pall of pain like a quiet wind. "Hughes."

Startled, Hughes rolled his eyes to his left, toward the cage. He watched Catherine realize that Vincent was looking behind her. She glanced back over her shoulder. The professor's surprise changed to shallow shock when the young woman actually pivoted away from Vincent and came toward *him*. Hughes looked to Vincent, not understanding.

"*The...quality...of mercy...is not strained*," Vincent rasped.

In Vincent's eyes Hughes saw neither hatred nor pity. Only a grave and open regard offering him a compassion deeper than thought or emotion, a grace beyond even instinct or need.

Though justice be thy plea, thought Hughes, enveloped by truths he had never dared to claim for himself, *consider this, / That in the course of justice none of us / Should see salvation.*

Catherine had said: "I know that, whatever he is, he's also the best part of what it means to be human." Hughes saw now just how truly she had spoken. He had spent his life and abandoned his soul, searching for Catherine's truth. But he had not recognized it when he finally found it.

He had grasped at the *potential* for truth, had tried to snatch it from the air like a boy with a butterfly net, chasing after the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He tried to pin down hope and dissect authenticity. His violent curiosity had injured an innocent creature. *I tried to classify a miracle. I reached for salvation and discovered myself damned.*

But now: his captive specimen, found and freed, interrupted that damnation. Vincent, dying, sent from his side the woman who meant *everything* to him, that she might comfort Vincent's fallen enemy.

Catherine came to Hughes.

She lifted his head so he could see her face. One gentle hand rested lightly upon his chest. Her green eyes were calm and sad.

Hughes thought, *I've misread so very many things. I didn't have to make the same choices Shylock did. Why did that never occur to me?* He let the question go, unanswered.

"Forget me," Hughes told Catherine. "Take him away. Far away."

"I will," she answered. Her words gave him both a promise and a benediction.

"I wish...I cou—" Hughes swallowed painfully. "Could have known him better." He wished this now with all that remained of himself.

Catherine listened, accepting his words and his regret with unexpected sympathy. Hughes, grieving as the last of his strength bled away, hoped—prayed—that he had not brought Vincent beyond the reach of this beautiful woman. He wanted Vincent to be healed in her care. He wanted Mystery to live and love, safe from men like himself—and from monsters like Jonathan Gould.

"Vincent," Hughes called, or tried to. "Forgive me." Darkness pulled in around him. "Forget...me."

Hughes closed his eyes. He released his truths and his curiosity. He escaped shame and fear. He abandoned speech, air, breath. A woman's hands seemed to press him slowly into sleep. And as he went, a memory of deep-set blue eyes affirmed, one fading man to another, that Edward Hughes was known and understood.

Part Three: Qualities of Mercy

Chapter Twelve: Unconfinèd Wings

I

25 March 1987
Wednesday, Noon

Catherine returned to Vincent, taking a huge step to avoid the second dead man's sprawled legs. She gritted her teeth when the cold steel of the cage floor bit her knees through the soiled and stenchy fabric of a blanket that had been made wet and then dried without the benefit of laundering. Vincent sat propped up against the bars, breathing like he couldn't get enough air. It was wonderful to touch him, to press her hands against his woolen sleeve and feel his presence, to assure herself again of his reality. It was also horrible to look at him. Vincent was pale, wasted, almost emaciated. The circles beneath his eyes were dark as bruises.

"Catherine," he said, his voice hoarse. "Are you hurt?" The familiar faint impediment to his speech sounded more pronounced than Catherine had ever heard it before, nearly a slur. She guessed it must be painful for him to move his mouth; three or four small cuts nicked his upper lip, and his chapped lower lip was bleeding a little after his tussle with the red-headed man.

She wanted to laugh bitterly at his words—*Vincent, you look like death on toast, and you're worried about ME? What did these two monsters do to YOU?*—but she saw fear in his eyes: overwhelming fear for her. He needed her reassurance now, not her sarcasm. She had already learned that lesson—from Father, of all people.

Father told her many important things, on the night the Silks had tried to murder his son. After Vincent was home at last, and asleep, Father had sternly pulled a somewhat hysterical Catherine into his Study. He sat her down in Vincent's favorite big chair and told her in no uncertain terms that if she couldn't give back to Vincent the things her world stole from him, then she had no reason whatsoever to remain Below.

"You say that you care about my son," Father said at one point, gruff but straightforward. "Well and good. But, while you were busy just now bewailing your faults and belittling his concerns for *your* safety, did you happen to notice that *Vincent* was doing his best to comfort *you*? My son walked home blind and bleeding, on a broken leg. And you're worried about placing blame? Burdening him with your own fear? Is this the sort of care you have to offer? For God's sake, when someone is frightened, you must help that person feel safe! You've worked with *children*, Catherine. I *know* that you know how to set aside your own anxieties."

Father as good as told her to gird up her loins and set her priorities straight. It remained very sound advice. So she told Vincent, "I'm not hurt. You stopped that man from hurting me. I'm all right."

Vincent closed his eyes. "Good," he whispered.

"Vincent." Catherine caught him by the shoulders. He didn't answer her. She shook him a little—a very little. She wasn't strong enough to budge him. "Vincent!"

He didn't wake.

There shall not be three deaths in this room today, Catherine vowed. *I—Catherine*

Chandler—forbid it.

She touched his face, fingering the sunset velvet of the fur on his cheek. His dry skin stretched tightly over his bones. He was *freezing* cold.

Catherine leaned close to speak directly in his ear. "Vincent."

His eyes opened and focused on her face, inches from his. Was Catherine mistaken, or did the corners of his mouth turn up? He began to speak, haltingly, yet certain of each word.

"*When Love with unconfinèd wings*
Hovers within my gates;
And my divine Althea brings
To whisper at the grates;
When I lie tangled in her hair,
And fetter'd to her eye,
The birds, that wanton in the air,
Know no such liberty."

Vincent fell silent again.

"What was that?" Catherine asked.

"A poem," he said.

This surprised Catherine into a small laugh. "I know it's a poem."

"Lovelace," said Vincent. "King's champion. Cavalier. To Althea." His gaze settled on something across the room from them.

Catherine turned her head and saw the bloody body of Professor Hughes. She thought, *We can't stay here. Somehow or other, I have to get us out of here*.

"Professor Hughes is dead," she told Vincent. "We need to go."

He was still staring, quiet. He had not heard her.

"Vincent?"

Now he blinked and turned his face back toward hers. "From Prison," he said.

Worried, Catherine wondered, *Is he drugged, delirious, or dying? Or all of the above? Please, not all of the above.*

Vincent tilted his head toward his shoulder. "Catherine. You're here."

"Yes."

"How?"

"I...I've been searching for you."

She saw he was trying to make sense of that. "From Providence?"

"No, from here, from Manhattan. Your friends have been scouring the city for you. Father sent me a message, saying he wanted to see me. He told me in person that you were missing."

Vincent squinted at her again, confused. "Father? Saw you? In Providence?"

"*No*. Vincent, I never went to Providence. I changed my mind. I never left New York."

The confounded expression on his face broke Catherine's heart.

"Vincent. My God. You didn't know. I'm sorry! You couldn't tell? You couldn't...feel me stay?"

Vincent raised his left hand from its resting place on his thigh. Catherine watched his entire arm shake with the effort. "I cannot. Feel. My own hands. Catherine."

This was worse than horrible. It was atrocious. Catherine could think of nothing to say, so she leaned against his chest and hugged him. After a moment's hesitation, Vincent wrapped his arms around her and rested his jaw upon the top of her head. Held close like this, Catherine

shared his trembling with him, and sensed the way his lungs strained to absorb what he needed from the air.

Oh, Vincent, Catherine thought. No other words beyond his name seemed appropriate for the situation. Catherine's embrace pulled Vincent's shirt down a couple inches, giving her a close-up view of the mirrored lines of his collarbones. His body felt as cold as his face. And he didn't even smell like himself. No candle smoke, no leather, no woodsy, gingery tang, no wholesome earthiness. His skin smelled briny, his shirt musty. His breath was acrid and metallic. The disinfectant odor from the professor's lab permeated Vincent's tangled hair.

His arms were too weak to hold Catherine for long. Vincent let her go. Catherine hugged him tighter. The pressure of his chin increased. He wasn't holding up his head's weight anymore. "Vincent?" she asked.

"Mm?" His throat worked as he swallowed. "Cathin?"

I think he was falling asleep this time, Catherine thought, not sure what that might mean for Vincent. "We can't stay here," she said.

After a few seconds, Vincent answered, "Yes."

Catherine felt the labored rise and fall of his chest and winced to feel the clear outlines of ribs beneath his shirt. She listened to the sound of his heart, thudding at a rate she would have called ordinary in these circumstances—were Vincent an ordinary man. His heartbeat wasn't nearly as slow as it should be. *Leaving this building is going to be very hard for him,* she thought.

"Catherine?" Vincent whispered, taking great care with her name. "How long?"

Catherine understood what he was asking. "You've been away from home since Friday night. Today is Wednesday. So, five days and nights."

"And. Where are we?"

"Columbia University. Morningside Campus."

"Science? Buildings? Upper campus?"

"Yes. Fairchild Annex. Do you know a way into the Tunnels?"

Vincent sat quietly for a while, thinking. Then he said, "Wide maintenance corridors. Roughly. North to south. Many passages beneath campus. Access to our Tunnels. Is sporadic. If you. Can find a way. Down. I can guide. Homeward. Look for floor grates." He paused, his attention focused inward as he searched his memories. "A mechanical room. I think."

That sounded reasonable, but she'd have to leave him to go exploring. "Vincent, I can try. But can you walk?"

"I must," he said, his reasoning irrefutable. Catherine certainly couldn't move him. His explanations encouraged her. Vincent seemed more and more *present,* the longer they talked.

Catherine ran her fingers over the laces of his shirt. "They've taken your other clothes," she said gently, thinking, *And that can't have been easy for you to tolerate.* "Do you know where they put your things?"

His chin moved against her hair as he nodded. "Cabinet. There." Catherine sat up and looked beyond the professor's shoes to the sink in the corner, and the cabinet doors below the sink.

"Hughes. Placed his. Research there, too. He did not. Trust Gould."

With good reason. Catherine didn't mourn either man's passing, but of the two, the thought of the red-headed man sent a chill through her. Facing off against him, she saw nothing but mindless evil in his eyes.

"Were there only the two men?" she asked.

"Yes. Although. The younger man. Gould. May have spoken. With others."

Catherine nodded. *Okay*. Now she knew where they stood.

She leaned back out of the cage. Catherine already hated the barred space and the cold little room. She stepped over the body of the second man—Gould.

Furniture, she thought. *Think of him as misplaced furniture*.

Only—furniture didn't bleed, didn't die, and didn't kill people with screwdrivers.

She skirted the professor's feet and opened the cabinet, sizing up the pertinent contents in one glance. Two cardboard file boxes: one full of fabric, the other full of paper. She pulled both out, and carried the professor's records to the storeroom door. She went back to bring the box of clothes to Vincent.

"Can you...manage without me?" she asked. If he couldn't dress himself, couldn't leave the cage under his own power, Catherine wasn't sure how to help. Perhaps get Below, find her way to a pipe and try to tap an SOS to bring Tunnel People to their aid—all before someone came looking for the two scientists?

But Vincent said, "I can manage."

Catherine glanced at the—furniture. "I don't like leaving you here."

"I don't fear. The dead," he said.

The realistic side of my wisest friend, Catherine thought. *His father's son. Well, if Vincent is still brave enough to face what's happened in this place, I guess I can stop thinking about furniture and do what needs to be done.*

"I'll do this quickly," she told him. "I'll be back soon."

Vincent dipped his head in a tiny nod.

Catherine gazed at him, angry and sad. Then she hurried to the doors and twisted the lock open. She looked out into the hallway, as cautious as Hughes had been upstairs in his lab. All seemed quiet. Moving back into the room, Catherine thought about what to do with the box of papers. *I can take that with me,* she decided. *Tell anyone I meet that I'm delivering something. We can't leave such documents behind.*

Catherine picked up her purse. She dropped it into the midst of the professor's collected notebooks and folders, to make everything easier to carry. Picking up the box, Catherine stayed where she was for a moment longer, looking at Vincent. She felt outraged all over again as she watched his shaking hand reach into the clothing box at his side. "Back soon," she whispered, and left the room.

II

25 March 1987
Wednesday, Early Afternoon

Finding their escape route was not as difficult as Catherine feared it might be. There were actually helpful signs posted on the walls, identifying some of the rooms. *What do you know?* she thought, as she approached one particular door. *This one says, "Mechanical."* She set the file box on the floor. *But is the door locked?*

Yes, it was locked, but the door handle was a lever type. Catherine considered her options. In the end, she reached into her purse and pulled out a credit card.

It took her three tries, not because the card gimmick wasn't working, but because she repeatedly mistimed her pull to open the door and the spring-loaded lock kept clicking back into

place. *Isaac made it sound so simple,* she thought, and made herself slow down to try again. Catherine had once asked him about how to get past doors if she was being chased by an assailant. Isaac gave her detailed instructions for several scenarios and even helped her practice with some old theater set pieces he brought up into his loft for her next lesson. Following her friend's advice as she remembered him giving it, Catherine finally got the door open.

Within the mechanical room, she found the grates in the floor. Beneath the grates, a tunnel. Beyond the circle of bright light from the entry shaft—she had no idea. Catherine could only trust that Vincent's mental map of the city's underground landscape would bring them to his home.

She listened to the contents of the professor's box slide and settle as she placed it on the ground against the tunnel wall. *There's more than paper in there,* she thought. Catherine reached into the box and picked out a college-ruled composition book at random. CENTRAL PARK SPECIMEN – ANECDOTAL LOG – MARCH 1987, had been written on the cover in permanent black ink.

Catherine dropped the terrible notebook back into the box. She rubbed her hands against her skirt, but she couldn't wipe away the feeling that she had touched something slimy and poisonous. It was that word, "specimen," that sickened her.

And to think...a few minutes ago, I was feeling sorry for Hughes. Catherine leaned over the box. At the bottom of the space she'd uncovered when she moved the anecdotal log, Catherine saw a row of labeled video cassettes in paperboard sleeves. Dates and time frames were printed on the labels, alongside concisely phrased titles. SUPERFICIAL ANATOMY, she read. EXAM 1. EXAM 4. HKTP-38 RECOVERY. COGNITIVE ASSESSMENT 1.

Catherine backed away from the box. She felt queasy again. *God, Vincent. What did they do?!*

She left the box in the tunnel and climbed up into the mechanical room. After blocking the door open with her folded jacket, she headed back. So far, no one had seen her.

As she walked, Catherine told herself to think hard—to think of everything. Two men were dead. She had to protect Vincent and she had to protect herself. *Fingerprints,* she thought. *What have I touched, and where?*

In the storeroom, she'd touched the cabinet doors and the cardboard boxes from within the cabinet. She'd touched the storeroom doors and doorknobs. She'd touched the cage: the bars, the door frame, the lock. Also, the keys. She couldn't think of anything else. In the lab? She'd touched the examination table, but not with her fingertips. In the professor's office? Nothing.

"Except the darts," she whispered, stopped cold. She had given the darts back to Hughes. Professor Hughes had done *what* with them? Catherine sighed, "He set them on the bookcase by his window."

She had to go back for the darts.

Catherine walked quickly. She glanced at the doors to the storeroom as she passed, but she didn't stop to check on Vincent. She didn't know how much time she had, and it was a long way up and back again. Catherine retraced the route she and Hughes had taken. Once she reached the maintenance hallway, she began trying doors one after the other because she couldn't quite recall which rear entry belonged to the lab she needed. She twisted doorknobs with the hem of her sweater between her skin and the metal knobs.

At last she found the way into that dim closet-like space she'd seen before. She entered Hughes's lab warily, but the room was empty of witnesses to her intrusion. She crossed to the inner door. *A little more luck in my favor, please!* she thought, aiming the request heavenward.

She opened the door and stood still for a moment, lingering at the boundary between the lab and the office. The room was just as she and Hughes had left it. Catherine looked in at the professor's furnishings. Nothing seemed out of place, or out of the ordinary. Except—a closer look revealed what was missing: personal photos. Framed faces of friends and loved ones, students or colleagues. Hughes didn't even have a picture of a favorite pet. Instead, he had decorated his office with an unusual assortment of small statues. The sculptures cluttered the professor's desk and shelves. Catherine saw a bronze bust of a Paleolithic man, his face caught somewhere between that of an ape and that of a human being. She saw figurines that she recognized as Egyptian gods and goddesses, and other shapes that looked Meso-American.

"Huh," Catherine said, taken aback.

The theme of the professor's collection was not lost on her. Each figure combined elements of human and animal features. Each sculpted image attempted to transport Myth into the real world, representing intangible dreams through physical media—clay, metal, or stone.

"I think Hughes was looking for Vincent long before he found him," Catherine whispered to the cat-faced carving that stood guard over the professor's desk calendar. "But why did he believe he had to *kidnap* Vincent once he did find him?"

She had no way to answer that question. Professor Hughes was dead. He couldn't explain himself to Catherine, or anyone else. He would never return to this room, or sit behind his desk to grade another paper. He would never turn his calendar pages from March to April. He would never see his many mythological artifacts again, or add to his collection.

Catherine wasn't sure how to feel about the man's death. He had seemed so frightened and alone, and so confused. Part of her knew the compassionate response would be to pity him. The rest of her still wanted to throttle him.

I don't have time to get upset about a man who isn't alive anymore, she thought. *I'm already pressing my luck just by coming up here. And by staying so long.*

Catherine left the doorway of the lab. She went to the bookcase under the window, and: *Yes!* She grabbed the darts and clutched them tightly in her hand. Catherine looked around the room one last time. There was nothing else for her to do. So she walked back the way she had come, closing doors quietly and leaving everything the way she had found it.

As she returned to the storeroom, Catherine reminded herself to move with caution, to be inconspicuous. If anyone saw her now, this would be hard to do: she was holding two tranquilizer darts in one hand, and her heart was in her mouth. Halfway to the stairwell, Catherine heard a door open and close in the distance, but no one approached her in the hall. She remained alone in the basement passages.

Not that I have any objections, but where is everyone? Catherine thought.

She had seen the sign boards on the ground floor that announced some kind of symposium this week. Other signs posted throughout the building seemingly directed visitors to various rooms in this and other campus locations. Yesterday, Columbia's switchboard operator had warned her that Hughes might not be in his office because of this event. Maybe everyone was attending classes or conference sessions right now. Catherine thought about the quality of the light that had been visible through the professor's office window. She pulled up her sleeve and discovered that she'd forgotten to wear her watch today.

I'm guessing it's a little past noon now, she thought. *Lunch hour. Everyone might be out, eating. Or, sometimes conferences have luncheon banquets catered for them in dining facilities.*

If this was so, the mostly empty building counted as a stroke of good fortune for herself and for Vincent. Catherine felt grateful for each ray of hope that lit their way.

At last, she reentered the cold little basement room. She stood with the closed doors at her

back, absorbing the grisly scene. The aftermath was—cleaner—than other conflicts she and Vincent had survived. Even so, Gould lay prone with his head twisted at a grotesque angle, and Catherine could smell blood, and a dank intestinal odor. That would be Hughes, stabbed through the guts.

Furniture...furniture...furniture, Catherine's mind repeated. *I can't help it, Professor. That's only your corpse now and I'm the one who's left behind in this place. I'm the one who has to cope.*

The cage, and the cardboard box lying on its side within the cage, were both empty. Catherine glared at the dirty beige blanket and misshapen red pillow on the cage floor. *Such generosity,* she thought. Fury burned her stomach. But when she turned toward Vincent, her anger melted away.

He sat on the floor by the sink, his back to the cabinet doors and his left knee bent to avoid touching the body of the professor. Beside him lay a resealable sandwich bag full of Tunnel People paraphernalia. He wore his boots now. He also wore a blue overshirt and a heavy brown tunic-vest over his woolen shirt, although these outer garments were not laced up. His belt lay draped over his right knee. He looked like he had fallen asleep, waiting for her.

Catherine felt a wave of tenderness for him: Vincent's long arms, crossed at the wrists, clasped his bundled mantle to his chest. His hands held stiff folds of leather in loose fists, and the cloak's black hood was tucked beneath his chin. He looked tired, and sad, and young, holding onto to the one thing in the world that might bring him any comfort, any warmth.

I don't even know how old he is, Catherine realized. *I've never asked him.*

She crossed the room to the cage. Tipping the empty cardboard box right-side-up, she dropped the darts into it. Then she went to Vincent and knelt beside him.

"Vincent. I'm back now. Wake up."

He muttered something. Catherine only caught the word "doors."

"Vincent?" She touched his hand.

He turned his head to look at her. Even this small movement appeared difficult for him; he visibly began to shake. From the cold? From fatigue?

"Father was right," Vincent said. His voice sounded like dry leaves rustling over pavement.

"What was Father right about?" Catherine asked.

Sadness and gratitude shadowed Vincent's face. "Something. Father has told me. Many times." He pushed the cloak down to his waist.

"I tired. Quickly," he said next. He rested his head against the cabinet behind him. His shaking stopped. "I. Tried to reach. The water."

Oh, hell, thought Catherine. *I didn't even think about whether he's hungry or thirsty.* "Can I get some for you?" she asked.

"There is. A cup. Beneath the cage."

Beneath? Catherine swallowed hard, but she got up and leaned over Gould's body, grasping at the darkness under the cage floor until her fingers found a smooth handle. She pulled out a chipped yellow coffee mug and thought, *I don't even want to know how it got there*.

Catherine stepped past Gould, and around Hughes, and over Vincent's legs, and twisted the spigot with her sleeve pulled down over her hand. *There are far too many sprawling limbs strewn about the floor.* She tried not to laugh at her inane observation. She had to get them out of here as soon as she could, for her own sanity if not for Vincent's. Catherine returned to his side.

Vincent raised his hands to accept the cup, but he couldn't hold them steady.

"Let me?" Catherine offered.

Vincent lowered his hands, so Catherine held the mug to his mouth. Vincent had his own method for drinking from things like coffee mugs. He had to rest his lower lip against the outer surface of his cup, farther below the rim than was usual, and close his mouth around each portion of liquid to swallow it. Catherine knew this about him from the night of the Silks. Before Father finally expelled Catherine from the Tunnels, Vincent had taught her how to hold a cup for any thirsty patient. Then he'd taught her how to hold a cup for him.

I'm sorry that lesson is so useful to us, so soon after that night, Catherine thought, trying not to hurt his cracked lips with her handling of the mug.

Vincent swallowed two tiny sips. This was enough to choke him. He sputtered, coughed, and looked at Catherine with apologetic eyes. *Don't you dare be ashamed,* Catherine thought. *None of this is your fault.* She held the cup, and held his gaze, and Vincent drank slowly. After a while, he leaned his head back with a sigh.

"The faucet. Has been a torment. I could smell. The water. Out of reach."

And the horrors just didn't *stop*. Aghast, Catherine asked, "They didn't give you *water*?"

"Hughes did. Four times. No, five times. But I've been. Too ill. To drink very much. I did not drink when. He put drugs. In the water."

Catherine's anger toward Hughes returned and began to spin toward hatred. "I suppose they didn't feed you either."

"Hughes offered cold meat."

Catherine watched the muscles in Vincent's throat contract at the memory. It was enough to tell her that Vincent hadn't eaten anything at all. It was past time to leave. "Do you want more water?" she asked.

"Better not to," he said. "Not yet."

"All right. Vincent, let's go now. I found a way Down."

He took several uneven breaths. "I'll try."

III

25 March 1987
Wednesday, Early Afternoon

Vincent wondered if a crutch, like Father's, would be a help in their present situation. Not one of Father's walking canes, nor the stick Father used to make his way around the Inner Circle on good days, and not the cumbersome underarm prop Vincent had used after the gang ran him down in the street—but the Lofstrand crutch with the forearm cuff. Or would even that be too much to hold onto, too heavy to use? Vincent felt the air around him thicken into quicksand as he moved. *Like the light and the dark in Catherine's home,* he thought, the words coming slowly to him. *In my dream.*

Vincent reached the wall beside the doors and leaned against it, not quite upright, but on his feet and determined to stay that way. He watched, mystified, as Catherine went about her business, scrubbing at numerous surfaces in the room with a rag from beneath the sink, and also sweeping it at places on the floor—for hairs, she said. Catherine said something else about fingers, which made no sense to him, but Vincent wasn't worried about that because her presence made no sense to him, and the vacated bodies made no sense, and the senseless cage was empty now and that was good—empty except for the repugnant beige blanket and red cushion.

He thought: *Gould would not have given me these things. Hughes must have provided them. Scraps of comfort. A small semblance of mercy. So even in the beginning, his own depth saw more than a beast in me...and in himself.*

Dark and Bright, Beast and Man, Vincent was a paradox again. It was not pleasant to return to this state. He watched his hands make flat shapes upon the hard wall. The blackness pulled at him. Now that he chose to resist it, the weight of that blackness was painful.

Only Catherine's nearness buoyed him up. Whenever she touched him, their connection suggested itself to Vincent's heart. This not-quite-silence between her soul and his made sweeter music than he'd ever heard in all his days. It renewed him. It centered him beyond himself. Vincent craved Catherine's touch like water, and he craved his tenuous inner sense of her like air.

She held me, in the cage, Vincent thought. *She called me back, away from the black place. I awoke in her arms.*

Catherine used the rag to scoop a little pile of dust and straw from the floor. She placed the rag and the dust inside the empty cardboard box, placed objects on top of the rag, and she picked the box up, tucking it under one arm. Vincent liked the way she moved. Her fingers were nimble. She was graceful and elegant. She came toward him. She said something to him and grasped his wrist. The darkness loosened its hold. Catherine spoke his name and drew him to the doors. The haze returned as she released him and turned away. Vincent breathed, waiting patiently.

"The hall is empty," Catherine said. "Are you ready? We'll have to go as fast as we can."

She's so generous, to say "we," when I am the slow one, Vincent thought, but he told her: "Ready." Catherine's hand on his wrist strengthened him again.

Vincent shambled forward. The door closed behind them. They walked in the direction Catherine chose to take them.

He seemed to wake suddenly as Catherine pulled at his arm. "We can't stop," she was saying. "Come on. A little farther." Vincent didn't know when he'd stopped walking. He followed her.

They came to another door. Catherine stooped for something on the floor and pushed him into the room beyond the doorway. She used the same something—a garment?—to polish the door and its handles on both sides.

"I doubt anyone will bother to check this one for fingerprints," she said, "but better safe than sorry." She joined him in the room and dropped the fabric something into the box. "The grates are this way."

A moment later, the opening to an underground passage enticed him downward. "Take your time," Catherine said. "I'll follow. And watch your step down there. I left the other box on the ground somewhere to the right."

Vincent knew he was shaking as he climbed down into the shaft, toward a meagerly lit tunnel below. He could see the hem of his hood tremble from the corners of his eyes, and hear his boots rattle against cement and metal along the way. He used his forearms more than his hands to move down the iron rungs. He could not trust his impliable hands to close around each bar.

A little safer, now, he thought. *She'll replace the grates behind us and—*

Catherine was calling his name.

Vincent tried to look up, but found he didn't need to: Catherine's face hovered inches from his again. He was lying on his side and his left shoulder smarted beneath him. If he could have felt the rest of that arm, it would probably be accusing him of unjustified abuse. The dart wound above his left hip burned. *She sounds frightened,* Vincent thought. The fog in his mind

began to clear. He must have made some small sound because Catherine leaned closer to him.

"Vincent!"

He was pleased she came so near, but breathing in this folded-up position made his stomach hurt. So he sat up, slowly, which made his head hurt even more than it already did. There wasn't enough air. Or he couldn't take in enough air. He shifted toward the tunnel wall and set his back to it.

"What...is wrong?" he asked.

"You fell," said Catherine. "I've been trying to wake you. God, you scared me! Are you all right?"

And to that question, Vincent could only lean his black-bitten head against the wall and laugh, a slow rusty sound.

"Vincent?"

"Yes and no," he gasped out. "A paradox." He sobered, seeing how worried she looked.

"I'm sorry, Catherine. I don't mean. To frighten you. I'm not. Laughing at you."

"I know. Shh. Rest. Catch your breath. We're safe out of sight now. Below."

"Not Below, proper," Vincent said. "People use. These campus tunnels. Not safe yet."

"All right. But at least we're closer."

"Yes." Vincent closed his eyes and rested, but he couldn't catch his breath. He still felt thirsty. When he opened his eyes, he saw Catherine watching him, gently chafing one of his hands between both of hers. Vincent couldn't feel his hand, but he could feel *her*, a faint radiance piercing the numbness in his mind. *How strange,* he thought, wondering. *And yet how beautiful.*

"You found me," he said. "Catherine. You came to me."

Catherine nodded and began trying to warm Vincent's other hand. "I only wish I could have come sooner. I've been afraid for you."

"You are still. Afraid for me."

"Yes. You...don't look well."

Vincent laughed again. "I imagine not."

"Vincent?" Catherine asked, hesitating. "I saw the examination table...in the professor's lab. And when I met Professor Hughes...the way he talked about you...and then, that cage—" She shook her head. "What did they do to you?"

She had asked him this question once before, on the night the gang caught him. Vincent and Catherine were following Father home, all three limping along for separate reasons. That night, he'd said, "They hurt me," and left it at that because Catherine was too distraught to hear more, and because Vincent was too shaken to say more.

Today, the most succinct answer would be, *They caged me,* but Catherine was stronger now. She deserved more truth than that, and Vincent needed to talk to her while he could still speak. If they somehow managed to get within the Perimeter, and then to Father, she might well need to speak *for* him. Vincent knew he was very weak, and it was a long way home.

He did his best to explain. "I am poisoned," he said, direct as a singletap message on the pipes.

Catherine's green eyes went wide. "Poisoned. You mean...drugs? An overdose?"

"That is. Possible, too. I know they gave me. A strong sedative. I've reacted. Badly. To this kind of drug. In the past. Catherine. You say I've been. Gone. Five days?"

She nodded.

"Then I've been ill. Five days. I think I've. Received many. Injections. Probably other poisons. They had...they had guns. That shot darts. They had. Needles. I hardly remember. The table. Father should see. Things Hughes wrote. To learn. What happened then."

Catherine nodded again, her face sad and *very* worried now, listening.

"In the cage—" Vincent stopped. What could he tell her about that? What could he ever tell anyone? He still saw shadowy bars leering in his peripheral vision. His black escape from those bars still pulled at him. Vincent could scarcely credit the reality of this conversation with Catherine.

"In the cage," he said at length, "I was. Subjected to their. Differences of opinion. About me. About. What they should do. With me. Those men. Didn't take. My mortality. Seriously."

"Mortality," Catherine repeated. Her brow creased.

"Yes. Catherine, please tell. Father. My shoulder has not. Healed. He'll need to know. That, too."

"Your shoulder?"

"Mm." He swallowed. His dry throat hurt.

"Vincent, you can tell Father yourself, when we reach his chamber."

He let her be brave for him. "Perhaps. If I cannot. You must."

"All right," she said, but she sounded unhappy about it.

"We should go now," Vincent said.

Catherine looked like she was about to say something more, but thought better of it. She released his hand and moved around him to where the two cardboard boxes sat side by side on the gritty cement.

"The one box can hold everything," she said, noticing the way Vincent watched her. She put on the jacket that she withdrew from the emptier box and transferred Vincent's belt, a plastic bag containing several small objects—and the chipped coffee mug—to the research box.

"I thank you," Vincent said, bemused, "for remembering. My belt. But the cup?"

Catherine shrugged. "It's not hard to miss prints on a shape like this. And your mouth left blood on the rim when you drank the water. And...well, a cup is easy to carry. Easier than..." She shook her head. "I thought it might be safer to just take both boxes and the cup away from that room."

Because of the dead men. Because that room was a crime scene now. Catherine was in danger of being implicated.

"You've risked too much. For me," he whispered.

Catherine touched his hand again. "And tell me, Vincent, what is it you risk for me, time and time again?" She looked at him with eyes that loved him.

Receiving her touch and that look, Vincent felt some broken place deep inside himself begin to mend.

Catherine stood. "Here. Let me help you up." In slow stages, Vincent got to his feet, bracing his right shoulder against the wall and entrusting his balance to Catherine's hold. Victorious, he ignored the blackness and savored her approving smile.

Catherine lifted the research box and came close to him, so Vincent could settle his left arm around her. He also ignored the twinges of pain from his side and shoulder. Catherine's presence emblazoned Vincent's world with living light. Vincent looked into her eyes.

You are my life, Vincent thought. *You are my world.*

Her body warmed him. She was not wearing perfume today. Vincent could smell the detergent she used to clean her clothes, the waxes and minerals of the cosmetics she applied to her skin, the sour aftermath of battle as perspiration dried on her brow. Beneath these things: the celestial scent of *her*.

Catherine's touch gave Vincent the softly glimmering presence of her spirit, waiting for him beyond the mists and shadows of his sickness. Her soul seemed to beckon to his. Herself,

pressed close to his wounded side, beheld him in his sorry state without fear and without fascination. Catherine looked at him, and she saw him, and—somehow—she loved the creature she saw.

For a few everlasting seconds, Vincent stood motionless between Catherine and the tunnel wall. He was uncaged. Completed. He loved this woman with every fiber of his being.

Ethereal in her beauty, Catherine smiled.

"Which way do we go?" she asked.

Several more seconds passed before Vincent was able to speak. He nodded to the south-southeast. "We...shall find a hatchway. To take us Below. This way. Lower tunnel. Brings us to one of our. Gates."

"Okay."

"Take care. We'll pass. East side of Uris Hall. Workers. And students sometimes. They explore down here."

"Okay," Catherine said again.

It wasn't difficult to set most of his weight against the wall rather than upon Catherine's slender frame; Vincent's equilibrium veered off-center, dragging him persistently to the right. The wall was solid. Catherine gifted her generous strength to him. They took one step after another, each step bringing them closer to his home.

Catherine walked quietly at his side, for once adjusting *her* stride to match *his* mincing gait. *She said she changed her mind,* Vincent thought. *She didn't leave the city. She stayed to search for me.* He felt grateful and troubled. More paradoxes. *I can think about that later.*

He focused on finding and counting the covers and hatchways in the floor as they passed them. It had been years since his nights of tunnel exploration traced out the underground paths beneath Columbia. *I was perhaps sixteen then? Seventeen?* Vincent still knew the best routes to the largest libraries very well, but he rarely had occasion to go elsewhere.

Don't take that wrong turn to the active steam pipes, he instructed himself. *Fifth hatch goes Down to the lower tunnel, bypass the first sewer access. Take the second turn beneath College Walk and out the West 116th Street Tunnel. Get to the Portcullis beneath the park. Then the Morningside Stair down to the Narrow Caves.*

They reached the fifth hatchway. "Here," he whispered.

Watching Catherine wrangle the stubborn metal door, Vincent wished he could help her. It offended his sense of courtesy to stand by, holding up a wall while the one he loved dirtied her hands like that. *Of course, if I were to topple onto the floor, trying to be useful, I'd also offend what little is left of my dignity, and at the same time become a greater nuisance to her,* Vincent thought. So he rested until Catherine got the hatch open.

She crouched over the entry, looking into the lightless depths. "I can't see a thing," she said.

"I can." Vincent left the wall and sank down beside her. "I'll go first again."

She caught his sleeve before he could attempt a descent. "I don't want you to fall this time."

Vincent tried to smile. "Then I shall do my. Best not to."

And he almost succeeded. He had gone over half-way down when his arm slipped off a rung. His legs alone couldn't support him. His overtaxed body couldn't rebalance itself.

Vincent fell away from the wall, and it was many feet down to the tunnel floor. He pulled in his arms and legs before impact and rolled across a thin layer of sand, saving himself from a sprained joint, or worse. He lay panting until Catherine called down to him.

"I'm here," he said, as loudly as he could. "It's. About fifteen. Feet. Down."

"All right."

He watched her silhouette try to drag the box with her.

"Catherine. Let the box. Fall."

"But it might spill. Or break," she called.

So let it, Vincent thought. *It's a fair enough idea to let Father wring medical clues from that box, but it's not worth your life or limb to bring it to him.*

"It's just a box. Catherine." Vincent said.

She remained where she was, considering. Then she asked, "You're clear of the ladder?"

If Vincent could help it, Catherine would never know that he'd fallen clear of her drop zone by at least two yards. "Yes," he said.

The box dropped with a thud and a clatter. It didn't break. Folders and video cassettes bounced out.

"Vincent?"

"Still here," he said.

"Okay," he heard her mutter. She climbed down a little way, then reached up to pull the hatch shut over her head. She took a deep breath and felt her way down from rung to rung, slow and tentative.

Vincent waited for his eyes to adjust to the removal of light from the upper tunnel. Now only the faintest lines glowed through the cracks around the metal hatch. After a moment, it was enough light for Vincent to see in the new passage. *But not enough light for Catherine,* he thought.

Vincent reached for his pocket and found it empty. Like all Tunnelfolk, he carried certain things with him at all times. A candle end, a packet of matches, sometimes a morsel of food, a tapping-key to send messages on the pipes, chalk. He recalled the plastic bag Catherine placed in the research box. Hughes and Gould had removed Vincent's supplies from his pockets and collected them together in that bag.

Vincent crawled to the box, seeing its lines and angles clearly. The bag was one of the things which had fallen out. Vincent's fingers proved useless with the bag's interlocked seal, so he held the plastic between his palms and ripped through the clear film with his teeth. Above him, he heard the quiet sounds of Catherine's feet on the rungs.

"Vincent? Can you see? Is it far?"

He remembered how during her stay Below, her face hidden by bandages, Catherine confessed that as a child, she'd been afraid of the dark. The quaver Vincent now heard in her voice told him this shadow of fear remained in her heart. He pulled his candle and matches out of the torn bag.

"I can see," he said. "You're four feet down. Keep coming."

He stuck the candle into the mixture of sand and silty dirt on the floor and unwrapped the matches. *This will be interesting,* he thought, lifting the packet to his lips to single out a match with one corner of his mouth. He returned the other matches to the bag, and the bag to the box.

He thought: *I'm glad I had matches with me that night in the park. Using my pocket tinderbox would be impossible today.*

Vincent pincered his chosen match between his right thumb and the side of his palm. Holding it that way, he didn't drop the match. He found that by pressing the heel of his other hand against his thumb, he could hold the match head against the tunnel wall tightly enough to strike a spark. Light flashed and dimmed, emitting a smoky whiff of sulfur. Vincent brought the fire to the candle wick. He let the match fall and die in the sand.

Careful not to blow out the flame he had made, Vincent lowered his tormented body to

the ground beside the candle. Above him, Catherine had stopped. She'd come another four feet. Now she gazed down at him and his mote of light.

"Better?" he asked, watching her.

Catherine smiled at him. "Much." She started down again, faster now, with greater confidence.

Vincent lay quiet, just breathing. If he didn't move, he didn't shake. His ears rang. *I love to see her smile,* he thought. He wanted to sleep.

A warm hand touched his face. The touch conferred a sense of blessing, of heat and life. Vincent opened his eyes.

"How do you feel?" Catherine asked.

"Comforted." There. He'd made her smile again. "You give me. Strength," he told her.

"Take all you need."

Still generous. Still his light in the dark. "I need. To get. To Father."

"Could we send for him instead?" she asked.

"Too many. Inquiring ears. At Columbia," Vincent said. "No master pipes. Into our system. Until after Amsterdam."

Catherine turned her face upward. "Amsterdam Avenue? And where are we now?"

"Beneath Saint Paul's Chapel."

"Really?" Wonder entered her voice. And sudden curiosity. "Vincent, does this way go beneath Greene Hall?"

"South of it. When we reach. 166th Street. We'll pass by. Our gate is below. Morningside Park."

"This is so funny, in a way," Catherine said, brushing a lock of her hair out of her eyes. "I finished school here."

"Yes? The Law School?"

"That's right. It's strange to be *beneath* places I used to know so well."

"Hm." He imagined Catherine younger, girlish, studious in the law library. "What was it like? To be a student? At Columbia?"

"Oh, I was never much of a *scholar*. I did very well when I was interested, and only a little above average when I wasn't." She chuckled sadly. "Daddy's social butterfly."

"And yet. Your father's butterfly. Graduated. Passed her bar examination."

Catherine looked at him. "Yes. Mostly, I think, because it's what my father wanted."

"What did. You want?"

"That's just it. I didn't know." She took his hand again. "And I kept not knowing until last spring."

Her smile became wistful. "I did have some good times in school, though. I enjoyed a lot of my classes. My studies brought me closer to my dad for a while. We could talk in the same language."

Vincent understood that. When he was younger, reading medical references had brought him even closer to his own father.

Catherine changed the subject. "You seem to know your way around down here. Quite well, in fact."

"I've been known. To lead raids. Upon the libraries," Vincent murmured. "Now and again."

Her brilliant smile came back.

"I was pleased. When I discovered. So many. Books up there." Vincent stopped to breathe for a moment. "When I was. Boy. I once spent. Whole day. Dreaming about. What it might be

like. To attend classes here. A friend. Brought down. Academic catalog. For someone else. I. Borrowed it."

Catherine's smile faltered. "What did you want to study?"

"Everything," Vincent sighed. "So it's just as well. That I could not attend. I'd have been. One of those. Permanent residents. Of Butler Library. University would. Never have been rid. Of me."

Catherine shook her head. "And what do you know about student 'residents' in that library?"

"I've had to evade them. Sometimes. At night."

Catherine laughed. Then a quietness fell between them. They rested together in the circle of light, strangely at ease, glad of one another's company.

Vincent looked at the candle. They were using it up and getting nowhere, talking—and not talking—like this. "Catherine. The light won't last. We. Should go."

She nodded.

But it took him two tries, even with Catherine's support, just to sit up.

"Vincent," she began. "Maybe this isn't—"

"At least. To the pipes," he said. "Please." And once he regained his footing, if he could continue on to the Portcullis, he would do so with every ounce of will left to him. Vincent wanted as many tunnels as possible, and a closed gate, between himself and that little room back there.

They did get him on his feet again. Vincent reminded himself to take each step with care, and to keep his knees bent in the right direction. It would be all too easy to injure himself without feeling it, by rolling an ankle, or twisting a knee. He scowled at the blackness while Catherine repacked the box and picked it up.

I can make it to the pipes, he thought. *I can make it to the gate. No such liberty. My Love has reclaimed me.*

His mind began to chatter as they started walking. *I wonder what Father will scold me for first. Going Up into the park at all that night? Or foregoing my meals? Or my incaution outside the Park Entrance Tunnel?*

Vincent would welcome Father's stern reminders. Hearing Father reaffirm Vincent's responsibilities to his community, to his family, and to Vincent himself would mean Vincent had come home. It would mean he was still a part of them, connected and reunited. He walked beside Catherine. They took the correct turn. Vincent didn't look at the shadows of the steel bars, keeping pace with them.

My Althea. My katharos, he thought. One step at a time. Catherine held the candle. *My light.* They needed the light. Even to Vincent's eyes, this tunnel was very dark. And growing dimmer.

IV

25 March 1987
Wednesday Afternoon

Catherine's fear became ever more difficult to contain because she knew she was alone with it. Vincent seemed unaware of her emotions. He seemed more and more unaware of himself

with each passing minute, and he was probably losing his awareness of their surroundings too. Catherine didn't think Vincent knew that several times, he just stopped walking mid-stride, where he stood breathing hard for a moment before squaring his shoulders again to take one more wobbly step forward, then another, and another.

Back beneath the science building, after his fall, Catherine watched him raise his shaking hand to his head. She was afraid he'd struck it, and she feared injury, perhaps concussion. But Vincent had made that same gesture in the professor's storeroom, after he stood up for the first time, and he seemed equally unconscious of doing so. There was also the moment, by that second ladder Down, after Catherine resettled his cloak over his shoulders for him, when Vincent actually tripped over his mantle's hem. Catherine (and Vincent's half-braced stance against the wall) kept him from crashing face-first into a cobwebbed brick column. Vincent stood up as straight as he was able, his hand covering a spot low on his left side, as though he had been injured there. He stared down at the dark cloth and leather, surprised to see the long patchwork coat covering him.

He is gravely ill, Catherine thought, trying not to notice the ache that radiated from the bullet scar in her back. She wished she had not postponed so many of her appointments with her physical therapist—but this was not the time to get caught up in her own discomforts. Vincent needed her help. He was practically staggering beside her, favoring his left leg and dragging both feet. Frightened by these signs, Catherine thought: *He'd be weaving us from one side of this passage to the other if he didn't have the wall. I don't think he'd be up at all if I wasn't here.*

She guessed that, in some way, their bond must be fueling his determined movements forward. She could feel a subtle sensation of *drain* as she walked beneath the trembling weight of Vincent's arm. It reminded her of the inner contact she occasionally sensed from him—as she had connected with him on the day Vincent and Father were trapped Below by the cave-in—only, today's impressions were very faint, very fleeting. Catherine was not sure whether the dark weariness she felt creeping over her was Vincent's feeling or her own.

His, she decided, after a moment's reflection. *I think I'm doing okay.*

Except for the perfectly natural tiredness she felt—as she supported Vincent from one side while lugging a heavy box and trying to hold a tiny unsheltered candle in one fist without dropping anything—in spite of all *that*, Catherine felt that her strength would see her through this journey. Vincent, on the other hand—Vincent could barely walk. He could barely *move*.

Supporting him felt much worse than trying to walk an inebriated man home (a situation Catherine had found herself participating in more times than she wanted to count). It was worse because Vincent's condition was not something he had done to himself. He was also fighting off more than the effects of tranquilizing drugs. Catherine hated feeling his bones through his clothes. She hated hearing pain in his voice whenever he tried to speak. Vincent was working so hard just to form coherent sentences. What did it cost him to continue walking beside her? She couldn't know the answer to this question because she didn't dare to ask Vincent about it.

Catherine had *never* seen him in such a state, not even on the night the Silks chewed him up and spat him out onto Broome Street. Yes, she had seen him wounded, on more than one occasion. She had seen him dirty. She had seen him angry, downcast, worried, tired, afraid. A few days after the terrible night of the Silks, she had seen him drowsy with painkiller. But she had never seen him like this: slipshod and blundering, so easily confused—and so intensely ashamed. It hurt her to think about what this must be doing to the spirit of a man who valued self-control and independence as much as Vincent did. Catherine thought, *I know he's not a proud person, but he is a very dignified one.*

She listened to the way he was breathing and looked up at his colorless face. Vincent

appeared skeletal in their will-o'-the-wisp light. Catherine wanted to weep for him. *My friend, my love. Have you been suffering like this all week? God, Vincent, how could Hughes do this to you?*

But that was one question Catherine *could* answer. She had met the man, had listened to Hughes die begging Vincent's forgiveness. Like every other malefactor in Catherine's world, Professor Hughes could do what he did because he was willing to ignore his responsibilities, as a human being, to another living—creature.

It's as Vincent said, Catherine thought. *They just...denied his mortality. In that office full of little house gods, Hughes bent over backward to deny Vincent's very humanity to my face. And he knew it was wrong. The ignorance I saw in Gould's eyes...I did NOT see that utter lack of understanding in the professor's. I honestly believe Hughes forgot what it means to be human. Until too late.*

Those words, the professor's phrase, "too late," struck Catherine hard and deep.

She looked back over her past several days, thinking about denials and ignorance, needing to confront her fears so she could keep moving toward Vincent's sanctuary Below. Had her riverside thoughts of Romeo been some kind of premonition? Or had her bond with Vincent communicated his dangers to her that evening? Maybe so. *(No, be honest, Cathy. Probably so.)* Her friend had needed her that night, just as he had needed her on the day the Maze caved in on him. But this time, Catherine had failed to understand the message.

You have to leave that alone, she told herself, borrowing Jenny's most generous turns of phrase. *There was nothing you could do that day by the river. You followed the trail as fast as you could, Cath, and you've come in time to help him now. So just BE helpful.*

Catherine intended to do what she could, but she felt woefully unprepared for the task. In all they'd been through together, Vincent was always *Catherine's* support, *Catherine's* stability. He approached her like the cavalier poet he'd mentioned, a graceful wildness in his manner, a kindhearted guide from a far-away-and-long-ago enchanted land. Vincent had become Catherine's supplier of inexhaustible strength and compassion.

Even in the middle of this present travesty, down here in the dark, he was *still* trying to give to her, apologizing whenever he realized he'd stumbled them to a halt, careful not to lean upon her more than was necessary, even lighting the candle for her during that long climb down into this tunnel. *Who supports him?* Catherine wondered suddenly. *He's not a god, for all his courtesy, for all his strength. Who gives this much to him?*

Beside her, Vincent stopped. He gazed into the space ahead of them, swaying against her as he breathed. Catherine waited for him to start walking again, but he didn't move.

"Vincent?"

"Look," he said.

Catherine held up the light. She saw a metal grid at the end of the tunnel. "What is that?"

"Gate."

"Already?" she asked, although it seemed like they'd been down here for ever and a day. "Weren't we supposed to come to some pipes first?"

Catherine glanced at the walls. She saw no pipes at all along the sides of this tunnel. A new fear gripped her heart: *In his condition, does Vincent truly know where we are?*

Twice before, Catherine had lost her way in the underspaces beneath the city. On both occasions, chance alone (and, the first time, Vincent's awareness of her presence Below) brought her aid before serious harm could befall her. *If we get lost right now—*

"Pipes," Vincent said.

Catherine set the box on the ground and raised the candle to look at him. “Vincent, where are we?”

Vincent lifted his head in a sharp upward movement, inhaling deeply. “Morningside. Drive.” His voice sounded weak, but Catherine heard no doubt in it, no hesitation. “At the Port—cullis. Gate. Sorry. I forgot. The pipes.”

Catherine stared at him. *He just confirmed where we are by the scent of the place,* she thought.

“They are. ’Bove us. Catherine.”

“What? Above?” Catherine shook her head and looked, raising the candle stub higher. There they were: three fat pipes, attached to the high curve of the tunnel. Vincent could reach them. Catherine could not.

“Here,” she said, “let me find something you can use to send a message.” She began to look for a loose stone, a brick, or a chunk of metal debris.

“Tap-key,” Vincent whispered. “With...matches. Box.”

Catherine looked more closely at her companion. His heavy-lidded eyes were lusterless in the candlelight. He leaned against the wall with his knees locked, his body trembling. Vincent’s thickened speech was becoming like the pipecode he described to her: short fragments of thought.

She thrust the light in his direction. “Can you hold the candle for me?” she asked, hoping to keep Vincent involved in their journey—to keep him *present* with her in the darkness.

Vincent blinked at the light and Catherine saw the fingers of one hand curl partway toward his palm. “No,” he said.

Catherine frowned, not understanding this refusal.

The look on her face clearly hurt him. “Cathin. Am sorry.” Vincent straightened his back. “I...don’t think...I can—” He tried to step toward her. Catherine saw him shudder suddenly, and close his eyes. Then he crumpled sideways against the wall and slid to the ground along a jutting seam between two sections of tunnel.

“Vincent!” She reached for him without thinking. At her quick motion, the candle guttered in her hand.

No! she thought, halting her movement at once.

But the flame died, leaving Catherine in absolute dark.

“Oh my God oh my God!” she gasped. She clenched the wad of hot wax in her fist, then let it go. It was a worthless thing now, anyway. Even if she dug Vincent’s matches out of the box, even if she was able to resurrect the crushed wick, or improvise a new one, the remains of the candle wouldn’t last long enough to do them any good.

Catherine silently screamed at herself. *What was I thinking?! What have I done to him now? Why, Cathy—WHY do you always take too much from him?*

Catherine scuffed her feet forward, hunched double, hands reaching blindly in the black. She moved to where she’d last seen him, toward the harsh sounds of his breath. “Vincent!”

He didn’t answer her.

Catherine’s fingers brushed fringe, fluttered over stitched suede, and grabbed onto his cloak. She dropped to her knees. “Vincent. Are you all right?” She pressed her hands against him, not quite sure what she touched—his shoulder? His elbow? She felt the heavy, snarled silk of his mane, slipped her hands through it and found his neck and the side of his jaw. “Vincent?”

He shook, his muscles hard beneath her hands. *Shivering,* Catherine thought. *Violently*.

“I’m here,” she said. “I’m here with you.”

His shaking seemed to wind down as she spoke. Catherine heard the shiver in his

breathing, and faint intermittent moans. The sounds reminded her of February twelfth, and how terribly the gang had injured him. Suddenly, Vincent jerked away from her with a soft cry and some part of him struck the wall.

"It's me," Catherine said, keeping her hold on him. She hoped again that Vincent had not just hit his head. "What's happening? Where are you hurt?"

He still wasn't answering her. Perhaps he couldn't answer. He *felt* hurt. His racing heartbeat drubbed Catherine's fingertips at the pulse point in his neck. Vincent's entire body toiled for air.

Catherine thought of frogs in biology lab. She imagined incisions *(torn ears)* and stitches, exploratory surgery *(it's too late!)*, blood loss *(Belmont's men cut my arm, destroyed my face)*, scars *(don't you understand?)*.

"Many injections," Vincent had said, and, "Other poisons." The man Gould had raged at Hughes, "We've gone too far! Both of us!"

She had taken too long to find Vincent. Her rescue gave him too little. And it came too late.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Catherine whispered into the dark.

She heard Vincent's boots scrape the tunnel floor to her right. "Gaffin." It was a vague attempt at her name.

"I'm right here. Can you see me at all?"

Vincent coughed. His words ghosted to her through the dead calm of the underground space. "Black," he said. "Cold."

Catherine stroked her hand across his hair until she touched fabric. She brushed his mane away from it and pulled his hood up and over the back of his head. It was all she could do. She couldn't see how he'd fallen, didn't know how well or poorly the rest of his mantle covered him. She leaned over his body, orienting herself by lightly resting her hands on Vincent's cloak. She didn't want to hinder his battle for breath with her weight, but she hoped she could in some way warm and comfort him.

"Cathin. Sh-should've. Given. Matches. You."

"When I need the matches, I'll find them. Stop talking. Breathe."

Vincent gasped and trembled and was otherwise too still beneath her hands.

The louring darkness pressed much too close now, too silent. Where were the echoes of subway trains, or even of traffic in the streets above them? Catherine began humming to Vincent, and to herself, some tune from her childhood, rubbing her hand along his side. She didn't hear the way her voice warbled with fear and unshed tears.

What do I do? she thought. *I can't leave Vincent here alone. And I can't reach the pipes. Maybe I could make some kind of torch out of the papers in that box, but even if I did...if I did...leave? I don't know where to go. The gate? It's a Tunnel People gate. It will be locked. I don't know how to get past it. He could run out of time before I figure out how to call for help. Oh, God.*

Vincent spoke again. "Meant. Be."

Catherine leaned closer and stopped humming. "Vincent? What?"

"Prov—dence."

"Hush about that."

But he would not be hushed. "Must. Know. Cath—rine. I want. Freedom. For us. For you. Always."

"I know that," she said.

"Your. Choices. Follow. Heart."

This was important to him. Catherine listened.

"But. *My*. Heart." Vincent went quiet for a long time. Then, very low, carefully pronounced, "Catherine?"

"Yes."

"I. Wanted. You to. Stay."

This desire confessed, Vincent stopped speaking. Catherine's eyes ached as she tried to see him in the dark. *What does that matter now?* she wondered. *I didn't go to Providence, I told him I'm staying. Why tell me this now?*

The answer seeped into her mind, cold and terrible: *Because he wants you to hear his secret truth, before he takes his leave of you.*

No, Catherine thought at that marrow-freezing voice. *No! I forbid it.*

"Vincent," she said. "You have what you wanted. I stayed. I'm here. Now you listen to me. I want *you* to stay. Don't go anywhere. Do you hear me? I forbid you to leave."

Vincent sighed, an unutterably weary sound. "P-providence. Catherine. Has. Its way. Thankful. You came. Beautiful." His voice was fading. "Blessing." He whispered this last word like a farewell.

Catherine wanted to tell him, *No!* But she knew she could never reject his truthful heart like that. She could not turn away his honesty, nor his parting gratitude, no matter how much it hurt her to hear it, knowing that Vincent gave it to her because it was all he had left to give. Catherine refused to give him a pointless argument in return.

She fumbled through the dust on the ground. Finding his cold, limp hand, she clasped it in her own. *He said he couldn't feel his hands,* she thought, in an agony of pity and terror. She moved her other hand up across his cloak, past the sateen edging of his hood, and rested her fingers on his temple.

"Gift," Vincent whispered. "Not. Alone."

"Not alone," Catherine agreed.

He said something else. It might have been, "Love." His trembling stopped.

"I love you too," Catherine said, but she didn't know if Vincent heard her.

He became quiet. They breathed together in the dark. After an unmeasured time, their rhythm merged. Catherine curled over, pressed her forehead to his, and set the pace for their breathing: deepening it, steadying it, willing it to *be* and to continue.

So often, too often, this has happened the other way around, she thought.

She wondered if Vincent had felt this way about her, when he found her cut and beaten in the park, slowing bleeding to death on the wet grass. Was it like this when Vincent gathered up Catherine's gun-shot body from a waterfront alley's oily pavement, and held her in his arms, and raced through the night to bring her to a hospital door? Or when he leaped down into a gang's barrage of bullets because they both felt the moment when Catherine's half-healed shoulder wound speared her back, and neither one of them knew whether or not she was hit again? She had been unable to ask him what he felt when he tore her away from a ruthless sorcerer's knife, walking undeterred into Catherine's deepest darkness to salvage her spirit and bring her home.

Catherine thought: *Love with unconfinèd wings. Love like breath, insistent and essential. Vincent calls this a gift. It's one I've overlooked—or overthought—time after time. But there is providence in breathing. I must not take this for granted again. God give us one true miracle. Make this peaceful for him, or give him back to me.*

Vincent shivered.

But, God, just so you know? I'd give anything to keep him breathing.

Vincent moved his head. The fur on his long nose tickled her lips. Catherine sat up, her

own body stiff and cold. She felt dampness on her cheeks. She hadn't known she was weeping.

"Light," Vincent breathed. "Nearby."

Catherine wanted Vincent to stay the hell away from any lights he saw. She wiped the back of one hand across her face. "What does the light look like?" she asked.

"A...lantern."

Catherine blinked away her tears. She realized she could see him, very dimly. Vincent turned his head a little more and his eyes shone amber-gold in the dark.

"People. In tunnel. Behind. Us."

Even more fear clamped down on Catherine's heart. "Vincent. Do you know them?"

He appeared to be listening. He closed his eyes. Catherine could hear them now, lilting voices distorted by flat echoes in the closed-in passage. She looked back the way she and Vincent had come. Yellow light swung in an arc like a pendulum.

"Vincent?"

"I...know them," he said.

"Who are they?" Catherine asked.

The light remained delusive, but Catherine thought she saw the hint of a smile appear on Vincent's face. "Tunnelkids," he said, all in one word. "Must. Be. Fourth Wednesday. In month."

Catherine prodded her stunned mind into action, calculating. "Yes. It is. Why?"

"Recall," said Vincent. "Library. Raids?"

"Um...yes." She had difficulty thinking of that as a *recent* conversation. Vincent made a determined effort and shoved his body a couple more inches upward against the tunnel seam. He opened his eyes to gaze over Catherine's shoulder at the oncoming light.

"I've. A. 'Prentice. In that. Art."

"Visiting libraries?"

"Yes."

"An apprentice, you said?"

"Yes."

"Who?" Catherine asked.

"Michael."

Catherine, still holding Vincent's hand, turned to watch as her miracle arrived in the form of four startled teenagers, two boys and two girls. She realized she knew the girl who held the lantern. Catherine smiled up into that light as the girl came closer, the others crowding at her heels, all of them abruptly silent.

Then, "Oh, wow!" Jamie said.

Chapter Thirteen: Tunnelkids

I

25 March 1987
Wednesday Afternoon

Vincent twisted on the sandy floor, turning himself toward the light and its most welcome bearers. It felt good to sense more back than shoulder against the seam behind him, and now he could rest his head against the stonework. This was all he could accomplish. He couldn't straighten his legs, or sit up any higher, or do more than turn his head after that. The lantern seemed very bright. Vincent closed his eyes again, thinking: *Almost reached the gate. Tried. No matter. My friends have brought light for Catherine. Day full of blessings. Life. Hope. Catherine. How could she know? About the wonder, the comfort. My lioness.*

Hands were touching him. Voices sounded around him. One hand gripped his left shoulder. A now-familiar dull pain arced between his neck and upper chest. Vincent drew a quick breath. "Stop. Please." He opened his eyes. It was Michael, abashed and in immediate retreat.

"Your shoulder isn't better?" the young scholar asked. He sounded guilt-ridden.

"No," Vincent answered. "But. Failure. To heal. Not your. Doing."

"Oh, wow," Jamie said a second time as she knelt in front of Vincent. She set the lantern on the ground beside Catherine.

"Vincent!" That was Brooke's voice. "Vincent, where did you go? Everyone's been searching for you!"

Looking toward Brooke, Vincent also saw Stephen, Brooke's best friend and Michael's best student. The boy stood behind the girl, bent over the top of Brooke's head while she settled onto her knees next to Jamie. All the dear young faces encircled Vincent, sheltering him within a haven of light. Catherine remained close at his side. Vincent saw that she was holding his hand tightly in hers. Catherine met his silent gaze, and answered for him.

"Vincent was trapped Above. He couldn't come home."

"Trapped?" asked Stephen. "Like the cave-in?"

More like the zoo, a dark not-voice growled in his head. Vincent ignored the voice. "No rockfall," he said. "Two men. Held me. Prisoner."

The young people looked astonished and angry. "Where?" Jamie demanded.

Vincent exchanged another look with Catherine. He needed to breathe more than he needed to talk. Catherine understood.

"The University," she said, pointing at the tunnel behind the young people. "We were trying to get Below, but—" Catherine glanced at the box and the spent blob of wax that had been their light. "Vincent was tired. And the candle went out."

"Have you sent word to Pascal?" Michael asked. "Father's been really—*really*—worried."

That went without saying. Vincent looked at the upper curve of the tunnel. *Should not have forgotten the pipes,* he thought. There was so very much to remember just now—and at the same time, so much he wanted to forget. *Something was bound to get lost in the tangle. I'm sorry, Father.*

Catherine shook her head at Michael. She explained, "We lost the light. And, well, *I* can't quite reach those pipes up there."

The four library raiders turned back to Vincent, who *was* tall enough to reach—when standing upright, at any rate. Stephen opened his mouth to say something. Jamie poked the boy in the ribs.

"I know," Vincent said. "As. Catherine. Said. Tired."

"We can see that," Stephen said.

Michael frowned at him.

Stephen held up his hands in surrender, all youthful honesty. "Sorry, Vincent, but you do look awful."

This time, Brooke slugged Stephen with a backward thrust of her elbow.

"Hey," Michael warned.

But Vincent said, "I can. Guess how. I look. Hard week." He swallowed, wincing at the dry click in his throat.

Catherine noticed. "Do any of you have water?" she asked.

The others shook their heads. "You're thirsty?" Michael asked Vincent.

"Thirsty" was a completely inadequate word for what he felt, but Vincent gave the young scholar a small nod.

It was Jamie who guessed, "You didn't have anything to drink where you were?"

That was another complicated yes and no. Vincent just looked at her.

"No water?" Brooke asked Catherine, Vincent's new interpreter.

"No," Catherine said.

"What about food?" Stephen bent closer.

"No food either," Catherine said.

This provoked a general horrified outcry. Hands went to pockets and produced a veritable feast. Jamie held out one of William's seed-and-granola travel bars, wrapped in a fraying linen napkin. Brooke had a crinkling red package of something that smelled sugary. Stephen pulled out a plastic pint bottle of red juice, half empty.

Vincent blinked at their offerings. His friends were wonderful people. He couldn't reach for any of it. Vincent looked to Catherine for help.

"Here," she said. She turned away from everyone and rummaged in the box. She pulled out the coffee mug with the chipped rim. Vincent stared at the thing, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. Catherine held the mug out to Stephen. He poured his fruit juice into it.

"See?" Catherine said with a small smile as she held the mug out for Vincent. "It *was* a good idea to bring this with us." She was right, of course. The small mouth of the plastic bottle would have been a challenge for Vincent to drink from. He had difficulty just moving his head away from the tunnel wall.

"What's? In this?" Vincent asked, before he drank any of Stephen's contribution. The liquid smelled glorious, but if it contained oranges, or lemons, or one of those pernicious industrial sweeteners—

"I dunno," Stephen said. "It's fruit punch." He looked at the label on his plastic bottle. "One hundred percent fruit juice. Apple, grape, and cherry. From concentrate. What does that mean, anyway? Concentrate?"

"It means they took the water out of the juice to make it and then put it back in to sell it," Michael said.

"Warped. Why do they do it that way?"

Jamie shrugged. "Why do Topsiders do anything?"

Vincent tasted the juice—ruby sweet—and waited to see what his body would do with it. When the fruit punch was not rejected, he drank more of it, and nibbled at the travel bar

Catherine took from Jamie, and crunched two or three of the sharply sweet red and purple capsules Brooke shook out of her wrapper into Catherine's open palm.

"And what is that?" Vincent asked.

"Skittles," Brooke promptly replied. "It's candy."

"Ah." Topsider candy. Industrial sweeteners galore. And resins, and artificial food dyes, and chemical flavorings—

Still, those two or three pieces shouldn't hurt him, or so Vincent hoped. His habitual caution was of little use to him when clear thought made such slow work.

"Each color is a different flavor," Brooke informed him.

"I noticed."

Brooke stage-whispered, "I trade with Dustin for this stuff. I bring him lots of old subway tiles and skipping stones for the Mirror Pool. He brings Skittles from Up Top. Oh, and just so you know? Dustin and Kipper are trying to beat your record."

"Hmm."

Vincent thought, *The children love to do that. Best me at something. I wonder what the logic class made of my puzzles. They'll have worked out a new one for me by now. The day they invent the puzzle I can't solve alone, Father will be a very happy man. I'll hear about it during every game of chess I play with him thereafter.*

It felt so strange to expect a thereafter for himself.

Vincent's friends watched him eat, which under other circumstances would have unnerved him. Today, however, these gifts were the choicest delicacies in the world and Vincent did not care who saw him enjoying them. *Flavor* overpowered him. Salt and sweet, tart and bitter—each morsel Catherine brought to his mouth provided a wellspring of euphoria.

Vincent concentrated on the task of swallowing. After another sip of the juice, he leaned his head against the stones behind him, closing his eyes. Slowly, he spoke lines he now treasured in a wholly new way.

"When flowing cups run swiftly round
With no allaying Thames,
Our careless heads with roses bound,
Our hearts with loyal flames;
When thirsty grief in wine we steep,
When healths and draughts go free,
Fishes, that tipple in the deep,
Know no such liberty."

Brooke giggled. "It's not wine and fish, Vincent. It's punch and a granola bar."

"It's. A bounty. Unlooked for," Vincent said. He opened his eyes. "The best meal. Of my life."

Brooke and Stephen smiled at him.

Michael and Jamie, meanwhile, were talking, and looking up at the pipes, which they also were not tall enough to reach. Vincent had not attended to their words. Now Michael shrugged out of his knapsack—doubtless, it was full of research notes and throwaways from the University libraries. Jamie left the lantern on the ground and stood up.

"Hey, Brooke." She tapped Brooke on the back. "Come here. You're the lightest. You get to be our Pascal."

Brooke gave her wrapper full of Skittles to Catherine and went to her friends.

“What are you going to do?” Catherine asked them.

“We’re going to get some help out here,” Michael said.

The young scholar bent over and held out his hands with the fingers interlocked. Jamie mirrored him, standing on the other side of Brooke.

“Up you go,” Stephen said.

He took Brooke’s arm, steadying her as she stepped up into Michael’s and Jamie’s hands, one foot in each saddle. These eldest two stood up while Brooke held onto their shoulders. She pulled a long brass wand—the shaft of a broken candlestick—from her pinafore pocket and raised her hand to the middle pipe above her. She reached it easily. Through all of this, Stephen stood just behind Brooke, his hands held up to the small of her back, safeguarding her balance.

Catherine watched this impromptu acrobatic display, delighted. “Your friends are amazing, Vincent.”

He smiled. “Yes.”

And you should have seen them when they were younger, Vincent added silently. *Nothing in William’s Kitchen was safe from them, no matter how high he stored the sweets.*

Brooke struck the pipe with her tapping-key, sending coded words down the line to Outpost Twelve.

“What is she saying?” Catherine asked.

It was Stephen who answered. “‘Brooke and University Party. Morningside Portcullis. To Pascal, urgent, and to Father: Vincent found.’”

Brooke stopped tapping and they all waited. The outpost sent its reply.

“ ‘Received,’” Stephen said. “We’re supposed to stand by.”

“I think Thackery is on duty at that outpost today,” Michael murmured.

“He’s going to be popular in the Dining Hall at supper tonight,” Jamie said.

Catherine asked, “What’s happening now?”

“The outpost will relay the message to Pascal in the Pipe Chamber,” said Jamie. “And Pascal will send it on to Father.”

Father, Vincent thought. The name alone soothed his heart like balm.

While they waited, Catherine offered him more candy, which Vincent declined, then more of the granola bar, which he accepted. He drank juice from the mug. It was half-gone now.

“More?” Catherine asked, quietly.

“Later.”

She nodded and set the mug out of the way, beside the box. She came closer to him, blocking the view of their young friends, should the library group chance to look. A little shyly, Catherine brushed Vincent’s hair away from his eyes.

“How are you feeling?” She sounded hopeful but serious. She looked tired. She looked beautiful.

“Alive,” Vincent said.

“Can you move, at all?”

He rolled his head from side to side, no.

“You’re exhausted.”

Vincent did not disagree, but he knew this near-paralysis must be more than weariness. Breath itself was—expensive. Whatever had happened when he fell, it extinguished all of his remaining strength.

Catherine caressed his face. “You’ll be home soon,” she said. Her touch was a tonic *(home...my garden...my refuge)*, and her words were healing *(my family...my father...home)*.

Vincent closed his eyes to shut in the intensity of his relief, and to conserve his energy.

Catherine seemed to know what he felt. She touched his shoulder—the right shoulder, thankfully—and kept her hand there.

The pipe above them rang with staccato notes. Vincent, resting, let Stephen work out the translation for both Catherine and his transcendent self. He had eaten so little, but he felt full. He was not less cold, but he felt less chilled.

The metal bars, he thought. *The shadows of the bars went away when the lantern light shone on them. Friends. Not alone now. Catherine. There are no words for this.*

" 'Pascal...Outpost Twelve...Brooke,'" Stephen said, announcing the message address route. " 'Confirm: Vincent found? Confirm location: Morningside Portcullis Gate?'"

Brooke tapped her reply. "Confirming both," she called down to everyone.

"And adding, 'Need help,'" Stephen said, listening to Brooke work.

The response came faster this time. *RECEIVED. NAME YOUR PARTY. WHAT HELP NEEDED?*

Brook sent their names, tapping Catherine's name last. "What help should I ask for?"

Catherine's hand left Vincent's shoulder. "Vincent can't walk any farther," she said. "Maybe a stretcher? I don't know what you have down here. Water? Blankets?"

Brooke tapped out the requests.

Stephen said, "She's asking for a medical transport. For Vincent."

Can't take a stretcher through the Narrow Caves, Vincent thought. *And the long way around passes too near that new construction site*. There were other ways to get creative with the route home, but it wasn't his decision to make.

(No such liberty. Sweet as cherries.)

Somehow, he missed part of the conversation. "—one from Father," Stephen was saying. "He wants to know Vincent's condition."

Vincent opened his eyes and saw they were all looking at him, even Brooke, twisting unwisely on the tiring hands of her friends to watch him over her shoulder. Vincent thought of the cage, and of Catherine singing to him in darkness, and felt the present weight of the air in his lungs. He husked, "Father asks this?"

"Yes," Michael said.

The thought of Father at the other end of the pipe, present and waiting, amazed Vincent. *The cage. That little room. I was truly shut away there. I lost my hold on myself and my fears, lost my connection with other people.*

He was slowly reconnecting now, but it was very hard work. He needed Father's best help. And Father needed Vincent's help, to prepare to give it.

Vincent thought about how to tell Father what he needed to know without alarming Vincent's companions and everyone else listening in on the open line. This could well be half the Helpers Above, and almost all the people Below, if Catherine had been right about the scope of their search for him.

He remembered the poetry game and thought, *Goethe. Yes. He'll do. Father will understand. I'd send it in the German, but I cannot ask Brooke to spell the line in a language she doesn't know.*

He said, "Brooke. Please. Send this. From me." He spoke one word at a time to make sure she got it all: "'*My father, my father, and do you not hear / the promise the Alder King breathes in my ear?*'"

Vincent listened as Brooke deftly passed the words along. *One of Vernon's favorite poems,* he reflected. *Though not one of Father's. Perhaps he is right to worry as he does. I have not been an easy son for him to raise.*

They waited. The word came back, *RECEIVED. STAY AT GATE. HELP EN ROUTE.*

Brooke signed off with her own *RECEIVED*. Stephen gallantly took her hand to help her step down. Michael and Jamie stood straight again, stretching and shaking out their hands.

Catherine offered Vincent more of the food and drink. He swallowed a few more mouthfuls, then shut his eyes. Was this a misty moment? He wasn't sure. Did it matter? He didn't know.

The voices of his friends rang like hearsay on distant pipes. His own thoughts were foreign voices fading into the night. Someone tugged at him. Vincent opened his eyes to look. Catherine was smoothing his woolen shirt across his chest, arranging his open overshirt and vest to better cover him.

I must be thankful to Hughes, for finding enough courage in his heart to return some clothes to me. Had she seen me as I was, before that— This thought hurt too much to finish.

"Is that better?" Catherine's quiet voice asked him. "Warmer, maybe?"

Vincent glanced down at his body and saw that he was shivering again. *Strange not to feel that,* he thought. *I am so cold, I don't feel cold. I feel...feel...*

He wasn't sure what he felt. Something like an overwhelming drowsiness. Not the blackness, but a soft current of light.

Vincent tried to say, "The shivering is an improvement." To his ears, it came out: "Shivvine. Impuvmet." He knew this was physiologically true. His body must be using the food to fuel necessary reflexes. But although he didn't feel the blackness now, he knew it remained near to him. "Food. Heps...*helps*. Helping." Vincent listened to himself speaking, frustrated with this weakness of his body and his mind. He hated the sounds he made. He stopped talking.

It's like before, he thought, watching Catherine nod graciously as she began to wrap his cloak more closely around him. *I now lack even the strength to speak past my own teeth, and it's like before.* He shut his eyes again.

When Vincent was very small, the thing he most liked to do was to listen to other people talking. Vincent himself could only say a few words at a time, if he concentrated very hard. The shape of his mouth never seemed to fit around the shapes of the words. He marveled at others who could speak in lengthy sequences.

Sleepily, Vincent thought, *That's how the poetry game with Father began.* As Vincent learned more poems, he came to love the literature for its own beauties. But the game began because he loved the language he couldn't master on his own, and Father found a way to help him.

It stopped being a game when he was about thirteen years old.

Vincent knew that unlike other children, he had been born with teeth. Devin told him so and (more importantly) Father confirmed the fact. When Vincent was perhaps three or four, those tiny natal teeth fell out. He'd been terrified until Father assured him that this peculiar thing happened to all children. Vincent only lost his baby teeth a little earlier than other friends his age. That was all.

"Do you see?" Father had said, bending down to help Vincent brave Father's big dressing mirror. "New teeth are growing in."

Father was right. Vincent's new teeth changed the topography in his mouth. The poetry game helped him adjust to this change. No one thought anything more about it and Vincent's friends went through their own rites of loose teeth and lopsided grins.

But then (once again *unlike* the other children) as a young adolescent, Vincent's teeth fell out a second time. Adult teeth replaced them, but his face and his jaw were far from mature.

Some of his teeth came in crooked, and his new fangs appeared outrageous behind his unseemly lips. Grotesque.

Devin had gone by the time this began to happen, and so was not there to speak for Vincent as he used to when they were little boys together. Thus, Vincent stood alone on the day Ike, fed up with listening to Vincent's gap-toothed stammering, made a cutting remark. Another day—far worse!—Vincent's friend Lisa laughed lightly at something Vincent tried to lisp to her—this being after all four long canines jutted out like walrus tusks. And it was Pascal's mother, Francine, who suggested one evening that Vincent use pipecode to tap out on the common dining table exactly what it was he wanted her to pass to him.

After that, Vincent didn't dare to speak for *weeks*.

Finally, one night, Father pulled Vincent into a chair in Father's Study and sat knee to knee with him, holding tightly to Vincent's hands to prevent Vincent's escape.

"*It is something to have wept as we have wept*," Father said in a gentle but unyielding tone.

Vincent shook his head.

"The next line, Vincent."

Vincent shook his head again, vehement.

"*It is something to have done as we have done*," Father said.

Vincent remained mute.

"What's the next line?"

Vincent dropped his head forward so his mane hid his face.

"No, Vincent." Father reached up to part the long curls. He pressed his gloved hands to Vincent's cheeks. "Look at me."

Vincent obeyed, because he loved Father and because he felt Father's determination. If he resisted, they would be at this all night.

"If ever we are silent, it must not be for fear of silence. This a beautiful poem, Vincent. Share it with me, please." Father released Vincent's face and took his hands again. "*It is something to have watched when all men slept*," Father said.

Vincent answered, only just above a whisper, "*And seen the stars which never see the sun.*"

He'd mangled it, and they both knew it. Sibilants were well nigh impossible for him now. Vincent tried not to weep and failed at that, too. He glared with water-wavered sight at his claws, held lax in Father's skillful hands, hating all the sharp parts of himself.

Father pressed on, undaunted. "*It is something to have smelt the mystic rose*," he said.

Vincent drew hitching breaths until his voice, at least, submitted to his command again. He felt suddenly grateful that Father had taught him this poem. He gave silent thanks for Father's hands and for Father's voice. He breathed in and then approximated, "*Although it break and leave the thorny rods...*" His L's and Th's were particularly ugly, his R's clumsy and growling.

Still, Father remained unfazed. "*It is something to have hungered once as those...*"

"*Must hunger who have ate the bread of gods.*"

"Vincent?" Catherine asked. "What was that? You're hungry?"

Vincent jerked awake at her touch. He looked at her blurring face. Hungry? He thought carefully about what she had asked him. It was important to listen to her. She cared about him so deeply. Catherine had said so.

"No," Vincent said, feeling safe with the single syllable. "Cup."

She brought it to him and he drank the rest of the red juice. It tasted very good. Vincent was grateful for it. He opened his eyes as he felt his chin drop onto his chest. He shook his head,

which did not help to clear the muzziness that filled it. Someone placed something soft behind his neck and Catherine's fingers on his jaw tilted his head back onto this pillow.

Vincent saw Michael crouch before him, no longer wearing his rough-stitched quilted vest. "I. Thank. You. Michael."

The young man smiled a smile that did not spread to the rest of his face. *Something troubling him,* Vincent thought. *Must ask him later. He seems distracted. Sensitive boy. Dear as a son.*

Now the light embraced him. Hands pressed at his shoulders and chest, all of his friends giving strength to him, as Catherine had. Sharing the responsibility that was *Vincent* among themselves. He wanted to tell them that he loved them.

To have seen you and your unforgotten face,
Brave as a blast of trumpets for the fray.
Pure as white lilies in a watery space,
It were something, though you went from me today.

Vincent thought, *Father was always fond of Chesterton.* His breath sounded loud in his ears. He sank into the light, at peace.

II

25 March 1987
Wednesday Afternoon

Catherine waited for the teenagers to finish blanketing Vincent with their coats and scarves. Then she took off her own jacket and spread it across Vincent's chest, unfolding the collar over his throat. Tense moments passed. And then his shivering ceased as abruptly as it had started.

Vincent reclined against the stony seam, his knees drawn up, his left arm resting across his waist beneath the Tunnelkids' outerwear. Gradually, his breathing became quieter. He was asleep or unconscious. Catherine wasn't sure which.

"Catherine?" All four of the teens looked at her as Jamie asked doubtfully, "Is Vincent okay?"

Catherine knew the people Below told the truth to their children. Most of the subterraneans were refugees from one circle of hell or another. It made no sense to try to shield these kids from reality. But Catherine also believed that Vincent had looked to her to be careful with her explanations earlier. And then he sent that private code of a message to Father.

I have to remember to ask for the title of whatever poem that's from, she thought. *There's something familiar about it. I've heard it somewhere before.*

Catherine shook her head at Jamie. "No," she said. "I don't think he's okay. He's very sick."

"Who *are* these people?" Brooke, their telegrapher, asked. She looked angry. "Why did they treat him like this?"

"The people were from the science department at Columbia. I think they did this because they were self-serving men who didn't care about Vincent like we do."

"They didn't see him as a person, did they?"

Catherine gave the oldest boy, Michael, a sharp look. She had never heard anyone so young sound so bitter.

"They thought he was some kind of lab rat."

"Something like that," Catherine admitted.

"Was there really a *lab*?" Stephen asked. "Like Doctor Frankenstein?"

Michael gave the other boy a dark glare. "Stephen, please shut up."

Catherine thought, *Vincent called Michael his apprentice. They must be close if the boy is so defensive*. She reached out to touch Michael's arm. "Stephen is not the one you should be angry with," she said firmly, though not unkindly. Michael nodded and looked down at the ground.

"And yes," Catherine went on, answering Stephen. "There was a lab. It was not like Doctor Frankenstein's. It seemed like an...ordinary doctor's examination room." She had thought of saying: *veterinarian's examination room.* But that association was just too horrible for her to speak aloud. She looked at all of them. "Vincent didn't tell me much else about it. He's Below now. It's over. Now we just help him to get home."

Stephen nodded, and the teens claimed watchful positions around Vincent. For a long while, they sat in silence, each seeming to concentrate on Vincent's labored breathing, as though by paying such close attention, they could, together, will him back to health. For all Catherine knew, they could.

She felt inexpressibly grateful for their presence, their lantern, and their help. She watched the play of the lantern light across their smooth white faces. Energetic Jamie stood out from the rest of them, her dark blonde hair shining in the midst of her friends' brown tresses. Michael had solemn eyes and chiseled features. Brooke and Stephen seemed like a matched pair, both about the same age and build, both with the same unweathered complexions of children who lived in the sunless underworld. All four Tunnelkids appeared worried and disheartened. Michael looked like he was losing an inner battle with a secret fear.

This can't have been a good week for anyone Below, Catherine thought. *And it's not over yet.*

All at once, this felt too much like a vigil. Too much like a deathwatch. Catherine spoke into the quiet to dispel the ominous mood.

"I've been thinking. How is it that all of you happened to be down here today? I tell you, I was at my wits' end here, in the dark."

The Tunnelkids looked up at her. Michael turned quickly back to Vincent. The others jumped at the chance to talk about something else.

"Ezra sent us Topside," Jamie said. "The teachers needed us to bring Down some new reading material."

When the young woman saw that Catherine was truly interested, she explained further. "A group of us will go Up to campus libraries every month. To pick up discarded books, check the periodical collections. Recent articles, stuff we can't get Below. All the teachers give us lists of topics to research, and sometimes other people do. Father always wants something from the medical journals. Mouse likes Xeroxed diagrams and schematics."

"Yeah. We had a good trip today," Stephen commented. "We even snuck into the *stacks*. Spring break is a good time for that. The staff were busy moving new books around and it was pretty quiet."

Spring break. Catherine thought. *No wonder the campus felt deserted. Even a science conference wouldn't make up for the absence of most of the student body.*

"And Michael also took *reams* of notes to bring back for his own classes," said Brooke, sounding proud. "Michael is a *great* teacher."

Catherine looked at Michael, who was still watching Vincent rather than Brooke.

"I see," Catherine said. "What do you teach, Michael?"

"Literature. And English composition. I help Ezra and Mary teach reading in the Nursery. Sometimes I tutor math if the other teachers are busy. Once in a while I team up for a Scholar's Debate." At least he was willing to join the conversation.

"What's a Scholar's Debate?" Catherine asked.

"After-supper entertainment for *some* people," Jamie said, poking Stephen.

"Yeah, yeah," Stephen muttered.

Brooke answered Catherine's question. "One person—or team—takes one side of an issue, and one person or team takes the other side. Then everyone that's watching votes on who explained their side the best."

Stephen added, "Sometimes there's more than two sides. Or sometimes they don't pick an issue. Like, one debate might be about whether anarchy works politically, or not—"

"Oh, God," Jamie interrupted, "You should have *seen* Pascal get going that night. He got a standing ovation just for talking so long in front of so many people."

"And *another* debate," Stephen continued, leaning between Jamie and Catherine to cut off further commentary, "might compare two Russian authors to each other. Or ask which mathematical formula is best for figuring out how to build something in real life."

"One time," Brooke said, "the Debate was about Plato's philosophy versus Aristotle's."

Michael choked and finally looked up at them.

"Oh, come on," Stephen said. "That was awesome."

A little amused in spite of herself, Catherine asked, "Who were the debaters?"

Jamie said, "Father and Vincent."

Now *that* would have been something to see. This conversation offered an unexpected window into ordinary life Below. Catherine was fascinated.

Jamie smiled. "Well, at least until Matthew burned himself on the oven door in the Kitchen. Then Father had to go do first aid stuff. Guess who Father called on to take his place spouting off about Plato."

"I give up. Who?"

Stephen patted Michael on the head.

"I see," Catherine said again.

"Horrible," Michael muttered, but he was smiling now. "Totally outclassed. Do you know how much Vincent *reads*, compared to me? In *Greek*?"

Aristotle. In Greek. Scholar's Debates. Apprentices.

What did Professor Hughes call Vincent? Catherine asked herself, sudden anger surpassing her interest in underworld scholars. *A "genetic blend of disparate species?" As though that phrase could sum up who Vincent is.*

She stopped listening to the Tunnelkids. The heat of her anger took her by surprise and Catherine had to deal with it right away, before it spilled over into the present moment. She didn't want what she felt to taint her efforts to bring Vincent home, or to do any damage to his friends.

Catherine inhaled, slowly and quietly. She released her breath, thinking, *Hughes was amazed that Vincent could SPEAK. Okay, so he wouldn't have known about Vincent's world, or Aristotle, or Vincent's rapport with children. But my God, the SHAKEPEARE should have been some kind of a hint. I'd bet Vincent's STUDENT, Michael here, could have run rings around*

Hughes on any day of the week.

She looked at Vincent's ravaged, unforgettable face. She tried to see what strangers might see, tried to remember what used to frighten her about that face. She even tried to dredge up terrible images from her nightmares, and from her worst hallucinations during Ross's attacks. She deliberately recalled Vincent's face when he gave himself over to rage—and when he struck out with lethal force.

"Part of him is a man," Father had told her once, startling her because she had long since come to see *all* of Vincent as a man. But she wondered now: if she had first *seen* her friend before she heard his voice, before she received the warmhearted care he gave to her, would Catherine not have assumed—like Hughes—that all of Vincent was *not* a man? It was the juxtaposition of his inner qualities with his outer appearance that had so shocked Catherine that miserable April day in Vincent's chamber, when she finally removed the bandages from her face. For people from her world, including herself, Vincent's humanity would always be the easiest part to miss, or to ignore. Because the external part of Vincent, the inexplicable body which clothed his unimaginable spirit, was the easiest part to judge.

They saw a lab rat, Catherine thought. *And yet, when the opportunity came, Vincent tried to free Professor Hughes. He was suffering in a real-world cage and he tried to help Hughes die with dignity.* She remembered watching the life fade from the professor's mournful eyes. *I think Vincent succeeded, too. Right there, at the end.*

As much as she might want to, Catherine knew she shouldn't hate Professor Hughes. Aristotle and Shakespeare aside, *Vincent* had declared Hughes human. Idly, Catherine ran her fingers over the nap of her jacket, feeling Vincent's quiet shape beneath the cloth. *I think my gentle friend is the best judge of who counts as human and who does not,* she thought.

The kids were still at it. Brooke was now rebuking Michael's self-effacing words. The girl concluded: "So you can just stop that. It was a brilliant Debate. Everyone said so. You held your own. I think you were perfect."

"Vincent backed off," Michael countered. "That's the only way I won the vote."

"I did not. Back off," said a soft voice, full of gravel. "You were an. Admirable. Opponent."

The five of them looked at Vincent, who hadn't stirred, but who was now watching them with eyes that glittered in the yellow light. Michael instantly dropped his conversation with Brooke. He took Vincent's right hand in his own.

"You're awake," Michael said.

"And. You're too hard. On yourself."

Michael smiled wanly and nodded, not arguing or contradicting at all.

Michael truly comes to life, talking with Vincent, Catherine observed. *I wonder what the boy's story is. Why he lives Below.* She touched Vincent's shoulder. Vincent turned his head a little to look at her.

"How are you?" Catherine asked.

"Still tired."

"You only slept half an hour," Jamie said.

Catherine had no idea how the girl knew this, but she accepted it as fact. These Tunnelkids were adept at life Below. Their many skills must include accounting for the hours as they passed.

"I...feel better," Vincent said. "For the food. The rest."

"There's a little more food," Brooke offered.

Vincent moved his head in a small gesture reminiscent of a no. "Not right now. Thank

you."

Smiling, Catherine thought, *If the first thing out of his mouth at any given moment isn't an apology, then it's a declaration of thanksgiving.* She loved him for this. She loved him for everything.

Catherine was glad he'd wakened so quickly this time. All of them were glad. But Catherine could not mistake wakefulness for wellness.

She followed Vincent's eyes as he looked at each of his young friends, and at Catherine. He blinked more frequently than Catherine was used to seeing, and he was surveying his companions with a kind of dazed spaciness. *He's been fading in and out all the way down from the cage. He needs more than we can give him. Please hurry,* Catherine thought to the help Father was sending.

Stephen was up now, pacing in little circles through the shadows cast by their congregated group. He approached the box Catherine had taken such pains to bring with her. The boy tapped it with the toe of his boot. "What's this?" he asked.

"Things I'm bringing to Father," Catherine said.

Stephen bent over the box. "You're taking *that* newspaper to *Father*?"

Catherine had forgotten all about her copy of the *Confidential.* It stuck up out of her purse, which she'd left in the box after she and Vincent reached the tunnel beneath the Fairchild Annex—so Catherine wouldn't have to keep both her purse strap *and* Vincent's arm settled across her shoulders.

"What's wrong with the newspaper?" Brooke asked. "Father likes to read newspapers."

"I'm just not sure it's Father's kind of news." Stephen pulled the paper out of the box. "Can I look at it?" he asked Catherine.

"Of course." Catherine turned to answer Brooke. "It's not my kind of newspaper, either," she said. "But it *is* what led me to Vincent when I didn't know where else to start searching for him."

"You're kidding," Jamie said. She held out her hand to Stephen. "Bring it to the light? I want to see it."

By the glow of the lantern, they all looked the paper over. "One of *those*," Jamie said.

"Hey," Michael put in. "It's good for catching drips in the Painted Tunnels. Good for starting a fire."

Stephen chuckled. "Good for a laugh, sometimes."

Brooke pulled Stephen's hand down so she could read some of the headings on an inside page. "*Elvis sighted on Brooklyn Bridge*," she read.

"Check this one." Stephen pointed to another story. "*UFO lands in Sauquoit.*" He snorted. "*Aliens nab gardener for interstellar joyride.*"

"How did this help you find Vincent?" Jamie asked.

"One of my friends had this paper with her a couple mornings ago," Catherine said. "I saw the front headline and talked to the reporter who wrote the article. An old woman saw the men who took Vincent."

Michael released Vincent's hand and pulled at the paper. "Stephen. We want to see the front page."

Brooke was lambasting another headline about aliens. "*Visitors from Betelgeuse assist inventor: patent pending for first commercial hovercraft.*"

Stephen closed the leaves and read the huge headline on the front page, imitating Brooke's melodramatic announcer voice. "*Grandma sees monster captured*!"

After the words were out, the bunch of them went very still. Timid, Stephen peeked over

the top of the page to look at Vincent. “I...um...that is...”

“It’s all right,” Vincent said mildly. “Without. Those words. This newspaper. Catherine could. Not have found. Me. I am grateful.”

The young people relaxed.

Vincent looked at Catherine. “Your search. Put you to. Much trouble.” It was not a question.

“No more than any other investigation I’ve done for the DA,” she replied. “And less trouble than some, as you well know.”

This time, Catherine was sure Vincent smiled.

“But it’s a strange story. Like most of my investigations.”

“I want. To hear. Your story.”

“Me too,” Brooke piped up.

“Yes. Who was ‘Grandma’?” Jamie asked. “Did you meet her?”

So Catherine related her part of the city-wide search, redacting events to the bare essentials. She was a little surprised to find that three days’ work and worry could be reduced to a three-minute summary. “So then I had the darts,” she recounted. “The phone calls about the serial numbers led me to a biology professor at Columbia. The professor never answered his office phone, so I went to visit him in person today. God. Is it still *today*?”

“Getting closer to *tonight*,” Michael said.

“I don’t understand about the darts,” Stephen interjected. “What darts? Like dartboard darts?”

“No.” Catherine moved toward the box behind her. She pulled her purse out of the box and reached into the inmost pocket with care. Below the Fairchild Annex, she had moved the darts from the dusty box which formerly held Vincent’s clothes, returning the professor’s ammunition to her purse. She had wanted to avoid any unintentional stabbing incidents.

“These are the kind of darts people shoot at animals they don’t want to kill. Tranquilizer darts.” Catherine held them out on her palm, displaying the two needle-tipped cartridges, but not inviting any of them to touch. It was ghastly corroborating evidence. The kids hushed as they took a good look.

The strained quiet became sudden and absolute. And that was not okay. Vincent’s uneven breathing had stopped.

Catherine looked away from the teens to find out what was wrong with Vincent. She saw that his gaze had riveted to the darts in her hand. As she watched, Vincent bared his teeth in a silent snarl. His eyes darkened, the pupils dilating until hardly any blue remained. Michael turned toward Vincent—just as a deep growl began to rattle in Vincent’s chest.

Oh, hell, Catherine thought. *That was so stupid of me.*

She closed her hand, hiding the darts with her fingers, and returned the two reminders of her friend’s incarceration—slowly—to the pocket in her purse.

“Vincent?” Michael asked. Catherine noticed that the boy did not touch his teacher.

The growl stopped. Vincent closed his eyes. He began panting raggedly. His lips were bleeding again.

Catherine *did* touch him. She held his nearer arm above the elbow. He was trembling.

“Catherine. I’m sorry.” His voice sounded weak and aggrieved.

“No.” Catherine couldn’t let him bear this alone. “You do not get to be sorry for that, Vincent. I didn’t think. I apologize.”

Oh, yes, she thought angrily. *Let’s pretend that after I took the bandages off my face, and after Vincent fled from my reaction to HIS face, he came back to me with a knife in his hand. “By*

the way, Catherine. We think this is the weapon they used to maim you. We found it in the park. Would you like a closer look?"

She felt disgusted with herself.

Vincent opened his eyes. He looked down at the sandy dirt around the base of the lantern. He didn't speak and Catherine didn't let go of his arm. When the silence spun out to the snapping point, Michael asked, "Those men, Vincent? They shot you twice?"

Catherine didn't expect Vincent to answer, but he surprised her. "No. They did not. Shoot me twice."

The next obvious question hung unspoken in the renewed quiet. Catherine felt grateful no one asked how many times those two monsters *had* shot Vincent with their poisoned darts. This was not the time, and not the place, for Vincent to revisit all that had happened to him.

Catherine supposed that it had been natural for the kids to ask for her story. It was natural for *Vincent* to ask. But she'd been wrong to give them even her abbreviated account. She regretted trying to explain the darts at all.

Catherine hadn't made it to the part about meeting Hughes—and all that happened after that. No one asked her to finish the story now. Catherine did not offer to do so.

I've hurt Vincent again, she thought, feeling ugly guilt settle heavily in her stomach. *I hurt him the same way Dad hurt me, after I got home from my very first visit Below. Like father, like daughter, trying to help by shining the brutal light of justice on an unresolved crime. Dammit, I'm sorry.*

Silence made the minutes seem slower as they passed. None of the teens fidgeted or seemed anxious to speak again, but the expressions on their faces ran the gamut from sad (Brooke) to angry (Jamie). Michael took Vincent's hand again after a while. Vincent continued to stare blankly at the lantern's base. Catherine began to wonder if he was still fully conscious.

She heard a tramping of feet from farther down the tunnel. Catherine sat up. A man's voice called, "Whose light beyond the gate?"

Jamie stood. "Ours," she called back. "And are we glad to see you!"

A metallic grinding drowned out any further words until the gate at the end of the tunnel lifted up to reveal a sturdy young woman and three tall men. Catherine recognized the members of this new party from the day of the cave-in, but she didn't know all of their names. There hadn't been time for many introductions during that catastrophe. She did know the fourth person on sight, however. Big, bald, scruff-bearded, and loud: Winslow was the most physically domineering person Catherine had ever met.

She had not taken a liking to this man. During the cave-in, he had given her a bullying my-way-or-the-highway argument when she asked him to help Mouse blast through a wall of bedrock in another passage of the Maze. Catherine ultimately convinced Winslow to try Mouse's plan, but they had not spoken directly to one another since their confrontation.

Winslow ducked past the lowest bar of the raised gate and stomped closer to loom over the University group. *Fee-fi-fo-fum,* Catherine thought helplessly. The huge black man stood with his arms folded over the open front of a coat that resembled a raggedy patchwork duster. Beside her, Vincent finally looked up from the lantern.

Although Winslow sounded a little out of breath, his voice came out as strong as ever. "You lot *would* pick one of the most out-of-the-way corners to camp out."

The young woman in the new group came immediately to Vincent. Michael and Stephen stood up, giving her room to work. She extracted medical equipment from a shoulder bag and began murmuring to Vincent in a low voice. The other two men hung back, one carrying a lantern, the other carrying a long narrow bundle—the stretcher, Catherine assumed.

"We didn't pick the spot," Jamie said to Winslow. "Vincent and Catherine were already here and we kind of stumbled over them on the way back from our library run."

Winslow's voice became quieter as he turned to Catherine. "You found Vincent, huh?"

"Yes."

"Above or Below?"

Catherine didn't see what difference that made, but she answered, "Above. Technically. In a basement."

Winslow nodded to her. "Just like I figured out with Father. He said, 'If Vincent's Below, it's gonna be Mouse who finds him.' I said, 'If he's Above, it'll be Catherine.' I like being right."

Brooke and Stephen exchanged a glance.

Is this man making light of the situation? Catherine wondered. She had trouble interpreting most of the adult subterraneans she encountered. Their world seemed so vastly different from the one Catherine lived in. Maybe Winslow was only trying to lighten the mood a little. Perhaps he saw that his group had walked in on a bleak moment for the vigil-keepers.

Now Winslow crouched down between Catherine and the young medic. Winslow's infamous scowl appeared on his face. "And you!" he grumped at Vincent. "We've been turning both worlds inside out all week. What in *hell* happened to *you*?"

Catherine felt her face flush as the rage left over from her conversations with Professor Hughes flamed inside her. She thought, *How dare you say that to him! You have no idea what he's just been through, you oafish, ignorant, self-important—* She opened her mouth without the slightest notion of what she was going to say. She knew only that her anger was about to break loose.

But Vincent only gave Winslow a bland, dignified look—and he said softly, "Alien. Abduction."

The young woman stopped reaching the chestpiece of her stethoscope toward Vincent's heart. Michael stopped reaching for his small backpack. Jamie and the other two Tunnelkids gawped. A heavy line appeared between Winslow's eyebrows. Catherine stared at Vincent, who blinked up at Winslow as though the big man were the only one kneeling beside him in the tunnel.

Then Michael, of all of them, snickered. The sound set off Stephen, and then Brooke, who began to giggle. The man holding the stretcher-bundle coughed. An instant later, the Tunnelkids were howling with laughter, almost an hour's worth of tension broken by Vincent's two-word explanation. Winslow turned his scowl from Vincent to the teenagers, which only made the young people laugh harder.

"As if we didn't have enough to worry about down here," he called over the din.

"No really! It's true! You can read all about it! In the newspaper!" Stephen got out.

"Newspaper!" Winslow turned to Catherine, apparently seeking out the sanest person he could find. "What newspaper?"

"It's a long story," Catherine murmured, refusing to even smile, although her heart felt lighter now, relieved of the burden that anger always imposed upon her. Vincent understood his friend and was not afraid of Winslow's brusque manner. He also seemed perversely pleased with the ruckus he'd caused.

The young woman stood up. She nodded her head at Winslow and moved away from the rest of them, back toward the gate. Winslow huffed as he stood. "Catherine? Talk with us a minute?"

"Yes," Catherine said, but before she got up, she touched Vincent's shoulder. When he looked into her eyes, she said, "I'm not going far. I'm not leaving you."

"I know," Vincent whispered.

Catherine followed after Winslow to join his quiet conversation with the young woman. The medic was short and muscular, and she knew which colors to wear to complement the olive tones of her skin. She wore her coarse black hair in a tight herringbone braid.

"We can move him," the woman was saying. She had a blended, clipped accent that Catherine couldn't quite place. Some derivative of South African English? No, there was too much twang in it. Maybe closer to Australian? The woman said, "The trouble isn't moving him, but moving him quickly."

"Anything broken?" Winslow asked. "So we'd have to use the stretcher right away?"

The woman shook her head. "Nothing obviously broken that I can find. You're thinking of the Narrow Caves."

"Yep. Since we can't take him Topside, it's the fastest way back. Hey, Catherine." Winslow took a step toward the gate to give her space, inviting her into their confidence. "I gotta admit, I'm glad you're down here. Now tell us where you found Vincent. What really happened? And don't give me any guff about aliens."

Catherine came close to the two of them and spoke as quietly as they did. "Actually, calling the men involved in this situation 'aliens' would be a kindness they don't deserve. Two men caught Vincent in the park. Central Park."

Her two new companions nodded at her as though she didn't need to speak the name, because Central Park was always, and only, and forever, *the* park.

Catherine hurried on, "They've kept him at Columbia ever since that night. When I found him, Vincent was—" She hesitated. How many times would she have to tell this story? How much of the story should she tell to anyone other than Father? But Stephen had called the newcomers a medical transport. They were also Vincent's adult friends. And they needed to get moving.

"He was in only a little better condition than he is right now. I found him in a cage. He says he's been starved and poisoned. I don't know what else happened to him."

Winslow suddenly looked like he'd stumbled up to the brink of a fatal apoplexy. "Wait...a *cage*?" He said it in a near-whisper, but it was a dark and stormy near-whisper.

The woman touched Catherine's wrist, to draw her attention away from the spluttering Winslow. "I don't know if we've really met," she said. "I'm Brizo."

"Catherine," Catherine said, although Brizo's quick smile told her this was unnecessary. Catherine remembered that Mouse had identified her as "Vincent's Catherine!" on the day she met the young tinkerer. *Is that who I am to everyone Below?* she wondered. Catherine wasn't sure how she felt about the designation and didn't have the time to pursue the issue.

Brizo said, "Starved and poisoned. What about water?"

"Limited, to none." Catherine liked how quickly Brizo cut to the heart of the matter.

"I think that's the most important problem right now," Brizo said. "And I didn't bring gear for IVs."

"What is it?" Winslow asked.

"Water deprivation. Vincent's blood is like syrup in his veins. It can't carry the oxygen his body needs. His heart and lungs are trying to make up the difference and that's tiring him out fast. He's gone into shock, Winslow. We have to get him home." Brizo looked at Catherine. "Do you know what kind of poison?"

"Whatever kind of sedative gets put into tranquilizer darts. I don't know what else they might have given him. I have the written notes the two men made. I was bringing them to Father, so that maybe he could make sense of them."

Brizo nodded. “Okay. One more question. What’s been done for Vincent since you found him?”

Catherine thought back. It had been a *very* complicated day. “I gave him a little water to drink. Then we walked a long way. Too long, but we needed to get Below, and to the pipes. When the kids showed up, they gave him some food and fruit juice. He didn’t eat much. He slept a little. At least, I hope it was sleep. I think he’s...fainted a few times. We’ve tried to keep him warm.”

“So I saw,” Brizo said.

“*Tranquilizer darts*?!” Winslow fumed. Brizo and Catherine looked at him.

At least I’m not the only one who’s furious about that, Catherine thought.

“Winslow,” Brizo said, her dark eyes flashing a warning at the big man.

“I’m here. I’m good. But *damn*!” Winslow took a deep breath, visibly fighting to control his temper.

Brizo started back toward Vincent. “Randolph? Jake? Help me wrap our patient in the blankets?” To the teens she said, “Good job keeping him warm, guys. You can take back your coats.”

Catherine followed the other woman. She knelt beside Vincent and took her jacket away only after the two men unwrapped red flannel blankets from the stretcher bundle. “They’re going to bring you home now,” she said to Vincent.

“You? Coming? As well?” he asked. He looked worried. Many hands were fluttering around him, and many voices were babbling to each other—all talking *about* Vincent, but none speaking *to* Vincent. He lay helpless in the center of all the activity. Catherine knew what that felt like.

“I’m coming,” she assured him. “I’m staying with you. I won’t leave your side.”

Vincent sighed. It wrenched Catherine’s heart to see the naked gratitude in his eyes. *You stayed,* she thought to him. *You stayed with me, in the dark. How can I do any less for you now that the light has come?*

Brizo worked beside Catherine, not asking her to move. Catherine thought through what she knew about first aid. Shock was very serious. And what Brizo said about Vincent’s blood sounded perilous. “Just relax,” Catherine whispered. “Let us care of everything.”

Vincent’s deep-circled eyes smiled. He obeyed her.

III

25 March 1987
Wednesday, Late Afternoon

“Which of you runs the fastest?” Brizo asked the library team while she scribbled words onto a scrap of paper.

Both girls pointed to the same boy, while Michael said aloud, “Stephen.”

“Then Stephen shall deliver this message to Father in the Hospital Chamber. Stephen shall run at top speed. Yes?”

“Sure,” Stephen said.

Brizo kept writing, using the flat side of her blocky kit as a table, her pencil scritch-scratching her bit of notepaper. For Brizo, this must be a lengthy missive. Stephen stood quietly,

waiting for her to finish.

Winslow turned back to Vincent and Catherine. He held up the canteen. “Vincent’s turn,” he said. Catherine had taken her drink already.

“Thank you,” Catherine said softly. She held her coffee mug out and Winslow poured the water. They watched the tiny dollop of white powder at the bottom of the cup dissolve in a fizzing swirl. It was salt and baking soda, on Brizo’s orders. Something about rehydration.

Winslow cared only about getting water into Vincent. If Brizo said this was the way to do it, Winslow had nothing to add or argue. Apart from Vincent, Brizo was their world’s best EMT and the fact that Father sent her with the rescue party did not surprise Winslow in the least. All the same, Father’s “Take Brizo with you and *fly*, Winslow!” had told the blacksmith that Vincent’s message just about gave Father a coronary.

For the rescuers, “flying” had meant scrambling supplies, catching the West Side local at Lincoln Center, riding separate cars up to the 116th Street – Columbia University station, and scuttling across campus Topside. The four of them stayed split up to get to their East Campus Entrance without drawing more attention to themselves than their Undercity garb already did. Once they got there, they found their entrance-concealing drainage grate blocked by an overflowing dumpster.

“Puck and pookas,” Winslow had grumbled. He helped Randolph shove the stinking container out of the way. The dumpster banged and bucked over the uneven concrete, jettisoning trash hither and yon. Brizo looked like a sharp-eyed marmot on pep pills, keeping a good lookout for their group. They’d dropped Below without further trouble and doubled back southward through the North Morningside Passage to get to the Portcullis Gate.

“Brooke said Vincent wasn’t bloodied up,” Jake panted as they went. “That’s a good thing, right?”

“If Vincent needs a stretcher, it is *not* a good thing,” Randolph replied.

“But at least they found him.”

“Catherine’s there,” Winslow said to both of them. “Bet you anything *she’s* the one who found him.”

We just none of us would’ve guessed that she’d find him half-dead from thirst, Winslow thought, still trying to cope with his friend’s desiccated condition. He lifted Vincent’s hooded and blanketed head. Catherine held the cup close to Vincent’s chin. Vincent drank the soda water in little birdy sips. Winslow deemed Father’s response completely justified.

Trying to keep his voice calm and quiet, Winslow said, “Your poetry’s got Father battening down the hatches in the Hospital Chamber.”

“Was. The point.” Vincent’s exhausted blue eyes regarded Winslow over the rim of the mug. It scared Winslow to see the depth of knowledge in those eyes, and to hear the way Vincent was fighting to get air into his lungs—not to mention words out of his mouth. Vincent spoke like a man who’d gotten only scratch sleep for about a month, or else one who’d stayed on his feet one round too many during a boxing match. Winslow wondered: *Is it worse to NOT know how bad-off you are? Or to know it, and watch the Reaper ride your way?*

As far as Winslow could recollect, the last time Vincent looked *this* bad—he’d *died* in Father’s arms. Winslow wasn’t sure how much of that second half of 1970 had stuck around in Vincent’s memory. Vincent never talked about that time. Not with Winslow, anyway. But maybe Vincent didn’t need to remember his worst rock-bottom moment to figure out what was happening to him now. The Alder King and the aliens might attest to Vincent’s strange sense of humor, but Winslow knew Vincent took care with both his plainspoken words and his metaphors. Vincent never exaggerated about the important stuff.

“The Alder King. That was something out of Old Vernon’s head, right?” Winslow asked.

“Goethe’s. Actually. But yes. Vernon. First. Taught it. To me.”

The flow of images in Winslow’s memory got this Alder King (Vernon always called it the *Erlking*) mixed up with the famous ride of Paul Revere and the Headless Horseman chasing after Ichabod Crane. Vernon’s poem had been about some kind of nighttime ride on horses anyway. Winslow might look it up later, if it still bugged him after the dust settled.

The cup emptied, Catherine tucked it into the deep pocket of her thin gray coat, which looked oversized to Winslow, but was probably the height of fashion in the world Above. She slipped her arms into this jacket and watched Brizo hand off the folded note to Stephen. The boy picked up the kids’ lantern. Stuffing the note into his pocket, Stephen took off past the Portcullis. Brizo came over to Winslow.

“We stop every quarter hour,” Brizo said. “Check our patient, give him water.” She looked down at Vincent. “*You* need anything, you say so.”

“Yes, Brizo,” Vincent said, meek as a lamb. His eyes danced a little in the lantern light.

Brizo turned to Jake and Randolph, delivering her orders to them with the same sharp authority.

“What’s funny?” Catherine asked Vincent, whispering.

Vincent looked at Winslow, then closed his eyes. Winslow took that look for an invitation to explain. “Vincent trained Brizo. Did a pretty good job of it, huh?”

Catherine’s surprised face turned Vincent’s way. “Is there anything you *don’t* teach?”

Eyes still closed, Vincent said, “Soapmaking.”

Catherine’s mouth fell open, then she laughed.

The others got ready to go. Michael settled his pack on his back. Jamie picked up Catherine’s cardboard box. Brooke stood between the older teens, waiting for word to head out.

Winslow glanced at his crew. Jake still carried the stretcher bundle and Randolph held up the rescue team’s lantern. Brizo was about to turn around and drop her next load of marching orders on Winslow, but Winslow decided not to give her the chance. He waved Brizo off and handed the canteen to Catherine.

“You can take this,” he said to her. “I got Vincent.”

Winslow positioned his feet and bent low to set one arm under Vincent’s knees, and the other around his broad back. He pulled Vincent to a sitting position. Vincent made no sound, but he tensed up.

“Okay, what hurts?”

Vincent didn’t answer right away. Winslow had the sinking suspicion that, “It all hurts,” might be the full answer to his question. Vincent muttered, “Left side. And shoulder.” If his head hadn’t been right next to his friend’s, Winslow would not have heard the words.

“What? *Still*? *Again*?!” Winslow clenched his teeth. *You just got over a set of smashed-in ribs on that side!* he thought, angry, but he held his peace about it. What choice did he have? It sure as hell wasn’t *Vincent’s* fault if he’d been hurt in the same places so soon after the gang, and the cave-in.

“Okay. I’ll be careful,” Winslow said. He readied his legs for the load and lifted Vincent up. He stood where he was for a second, to adjust his hold, and then he moved toward the gate. Vincent seemed to suddenly understand what the blacksmith intended.

“No,” Vincent protested. “Too heavy. Too far.”

Winslow was already walking. “I’ll have you know that I packed two hundred and forty pounds of plate down for the Inner Maze barricade, day before yesterday. *You* never closed in on two-forty in your whole life. So just let *me* settle what I can or can’t carry to where and how far.”

Besides, Winslow thought, privately measuring his own strength against both his blanketed burden and their chosen route home. *Right now I don't think you could tip the scales at even fourteen stone. Damn, V! How could five days make such a ghost of you?*

Winslow decided he wasn't ready to think about what the answer to *that* question might be.

Meantime, Vincent sighed, giving in. He relaxed, and lay his head upon Winslow's right shoulder. "Apologies, then." Hoarse though he was, Vincent managed to sound resigned.

Winslow looked down at the tattered tangle of Vincent's mane, sticking out from beneath the hood and blankets like ornamental sedge grass in need of a trim. Winslow couldn't see his friend's face. "What are you sorry for?"

"Assure you. Eager to. Reacquaint. Myself. With my. Toothbrush."

Winslow harrumphed. "Vincent, you worry about the weirdest things."

"Mm."

But it felt good to get this smidgen of normalcy from his customarily shipshape friend. It meant Vincent wasn't ready to step out on him just yet. *Yes,* Winslow thought. *He's the just same funny little kitten-kid we all know and love. Though I guess I'm the only one left down here who still gets to call him "little."*

Randolph led the way, setting a brisk pace. Brizo followed, and then Catherine. Next came Winslow with his toothbrush-loving bundle, then the kids, and Jake brought up the rear. Winslow heard the rumble and clang of the Portcullis as Jake closed the gate behind them. Catherine walked backward for several paces to watch the young sentry work the mechanism. She faced forward again after the echoes died away, falling into step beside Winslow.

"That gate looks like it belongs to a miniature castle," she said.

"Strictly speaking," Michael said from behind them, "it does."

"How so?" Catherine asked.

Jamie answered. "Mouse built it. One of the first gates he designed for us. He kind of went through a medieval phase for a while."

"I see."

"He also built a crossbow for me," Jamie said. "It works great, too."

Brizo glanced over her shoulder. "Does Father know you still have that?"

"No idea," Jamie replied. "I figured, since Vincent knew and didn't say anything about it, that it was okay." The girl thought over what she'd just said. "It's still okay, right?" she called to Vincent.

"As long. As your aim. Is still. True."

"Come watch me shoot anytime."

Vincent said nothing more. He didn't need to. Winslow knew Vincent had worked out similar arrangements with a handful of young folks Below. So long as they could prove at any time that they maintained the skills to use a dangerous something-or-other safely, they could keep it. If they faltered in any way, or became careless, one of the Council members confiscated the item, no further questions asked and no arguments listened to. The only kid Below who got granted any leeway in this matter was Mouse—and Mouse had always been a special case.

"The castles and crossbows thing," Winslow grumbled to the man in his arms. "That was all your fault, wasn't it?"

Vincent adopted his innocent tone again. "I read Mouse. A story. Showed him. Value of books."

"Uh huh."

"What story was this?" Catherine asked. She impressed Winslow by how well she was

keeping up with them in the shoes she wore. She was going to have some trouble in a few minutes.

"*The Sword in the Stone*," Winslow said. "You've met the raccoon, right?"

Catherine had to think about that for a moment. "Met? No. Saw a raccoon in Mouse's room? Yes."

"You know the fuzzball's name?"

"Yes."

Catherine had been present, of course, while Mouse was preparing to trigger explosives in an all-or-nothing effort to free Father and Vincent from the cave-in. She'd even offered to take the controller from Mouse and detonate the charges herself, which placed Catherine at the very top of Winslow's short list of real-life heroes. Mouse wouldn't let anyone else do the job. The boy's last-will-and-testament concern had been that Winslow should take care of his pet, if Mouse blew himself up by accident.

"Well, guess who the raccoon is named for," Winslow said to Catherine.

"Arthur," she murmured. Then, "Oh."

They walked without speaking further until they reached the top of the Morningside Stair. There Winslow set Vincent on the ground so Brizo and Catherine could administer more of the soda and water solution. Winslow stood and watched with his arms folded across his chest.

He didn't like the way Vincent was breathing and he didn't like how cold Vincent felt to him. Holding Vincent should have been like packing a portable furnace through the Tunnels. "Should" didn't make it so, however. If anything, *Winslow* was *Vincent's* source of heat. The smith didn't like it at all.

Before they got started again, Brizo brought up the problem Winslow had already anticipated. He gladly let her be the one to do so. The shoes issue was kind of a woman-to-woman thing.

"You might want to take those off," Brizo said, waving at Catherine's feet. "You're going spelunking if you come all the way Down with us. I assume you are. Course, one of the younger people here can always guide you Topside—"

"I'm coming with you," Catherine said.

Brizo flashed her quick smile. "Figured."

Michael leaned down and held out his scarf to Catherine. "Here," he said.

Catherine took the strip of knitted fabric but didn't seem to know why she was holding it. "I need a scarf?"

Brizo pulled medical shears out of her kit. "You do. Take off your shoes. I cut the scarf in half and we make two wraps for your feet."

"But—" Catherine looked up at Michael, clearly reluctant to see his scarf snipped up on her account. Winslow smiled. She was still getting used to their ways.

The boy only nodded at Catherine. "It's what you need right now. Take it."

"Thank you," she said. "I appreciate it, Michael." She touched the boy's hand, then pulled away to hold the scarf taut for Brizo.

Winslow saw Michael blush and scuff his feet on the stone. Well, it wasn't every day that a young man earned the appreciation of such a beautiful woman. They all watched Brizo expertly bandage Catherine's feet and ankles in supportive and colorful new wrappings. Catherine's small pointy street shoes joined the conglomeration of random-looking stuff in the cardboard box Jamie continued to carry.

"Next leg of the journey," Brizo announced as she stood. "Tally-ho!"

Winslow gathered Vincent up and got moving. "Gotta love Brizo," he whispered so only

Vincent would hear him. “Only woman I know who damn near singletaps her sentences. I bet she’s a master of haiku.”

Vincent’s body hitched in what might have been a silent chuckle. He rested his head on Winslow’s shoulder again. “Winslow?” he whispered back.

“Yeah.”

“Missed you.”

They started down the rough-hewn stone Stair and Winslow had to watch where he put his feet—but even in the middle of performing this task, he was touched. “Sure,” he said, with only a small grumble in his voice.

“Did.” Vincent sighed. “Needed. A good friend. And...a good. Locksmith.”

Winslow lowered his voice to a deep murmur. “For the cage.”

Vincent nodded.

They went down and Down. Brizo and Catherine walked side by side, so Brizo could steady the other woman. Winslow’s legs began to burn from the effort of navigating the steps.

Yet Winslow felt that this job was harder on his heart of hearts than on his arms or his legs. The worst of it being the fact that Vincent was *not* too heavy for him. He might have been, a week ago—too heavy for anything besides a fireman’s lift down this Stair, anyhow.

Not now.

“It just kills me,” Winslow told him, trying not to puff. “Knowing they locked you up like that.”

“Kills me too,” came Vincent’s answer.

Winslow didn’t know if this was another joke or not. If it was, Vincent had settled on gallows humor. If it wasn’t, they were walking home way too slow.

Vincent said, “You. Came to mind. Often. Remembered. *Mockingbird.*”

It took Winslow several stone steps to figure that out. “Oh. Okay. The book.” The one he read to Vincent all those years ago.

“Yes.”

“What did you remember about it?”

Vincent went quiet for a while. Winslow began to wonder if he’d fallen asleep—or worse—and how to go about checking on him while they were on the Stair. Vincent finally whispered, “Tom Robinson’s choice.”

And God help him, Winslow understood.

He thought, *I don’t know exactly how this beshitted mess with those two men played out. Catherine stayed closemouthed in front of everybody back there. Right as rain, that. But when I do get the whole story—*

Winslow thought of his workshop. Bright iron glowing on his biggest anvil. Unorthodox uses for his largest pipe wrench. His Vise-Grip. Maybe his recently rehandled sledgehammer. He liked the idea of the sledgehammer. He sensed poetic justice there. Because Vincent had just fixed that for him—

“Winslow.”

“What?” He took a mental step away from his wrathful thoughts.

Vincent raised his head and shifted in Winslow’s grasp. “Can’t breathe.”

Winslow stopped on the Stair, then realized what Vincent meant. Winslow’s arms were beginning to shake as they crushed Vincent to his chest. “Hell,” Winslow growled. He relaxed his hold. “You okay?”

“Everyone. Keeps. Asking that,” Vincent muttered.

Ahead of them, Randolph and the women had stopped. They all looked back at Winslow.

“You guys all right?” Brizo called.

Vincent looked up at Winslow. *See what I mean?* flashed in his blue eyes. Winslow snorted.

“You think *this* is bad?” Winslow asked. “Just wait until *Father* gets his hands on you.”

Vincent only dropped his head to the leather shoulderpiece of Winslow’s long coat. “I. Missed Father. Too.”

I bet you did, Winslow thought. To the ladies, and especially to Vincent’s now-apprehensive Catherine, he called down, “Don’t worry. We’re good. We’re coming.” He resumed their descent, and the group ahead of them moved along too.

At the bottom of the Stair, they halted again. Michael traded his knapsack to Jamie in exchange for Catherine’s box. Randolph added fuel to the lantern. Winslow stretched his back and shoulders.

They all shared the canteen. The women gave Vincent more water, but Vincent turned away from the cup after only a sip or two. Catherine set the mug on the ground and held onto Vincent’s hand.

“Nauseated,” Brizo said. It was sort of a question and sort of a diagnosis.

Vincent looked from Catherine’s face to Brizo’s. “Yes.” He shut his eyes.

Brizo pulled the blankets tight around her patient. “Winslow?”

Winslow was kneeling down as she spoke. Brizo drank the mug’s remaining gulp of water herself and handed both cup and canteen back to Catherine. “Move out,” Brizo commanded. The group hefted the things they each carried and followed after Randolph again. Five yards beyond the foot of the Stair, they entered the Narrow Caves.

“Single file, everyone!” Randolph hollered. His voice echoed through the cavern, and down the passages extending from it like spokes from a wheel hub. He led the group to the one corridor that would take them home.

They followed after the lantern in a line, spaced about two strides apart from one another. Catherine stayed right in front of Winslow. Every little while she looked back at Vincent and Winslow, checking on them. Otherwise, she gazed around her as she walked, taking in the rock formations and the occasional curtains of mineral crystals.

Her face was smudged with dust and Winslow knew by the clean streaks on her cheeks that she had cried sometime today, but an attitude of wonder lit up her features and lightened her steps. Mussed, with damp scarf-stockings on her feet, and a canteen slung over one shoulder, Catherine was still good to look at. She was graceful in a kindly way, and strong. Winslow admired her very much.

“Narrow Caves,” he heard her say to herself. “Beautiful.”

The caves were connected by uneven corridors, gigantic black pearls interspersed along a hollow string. No two caves were alike, and no passage along their route was the same as any other. One very narrow passage wagged back and forth in acute zig-zagged angles, which required the people behind Winslow to march with one hand on the back of the person in front of them, because Winslow and Vincent blocked out their light.

Beyond a new cave, another corridor curled like a side-winding snake to the right. They passed through the next cave and into a short passage which sent them back to the left at a sharp ninety-degree turn. They crossed damp patches where the footing was slippery. Winslow ducked with difficulty along the way to get past several low-hanging stalactites and bulging rock overhangs.

Vincent stayed very quiet all this while. Winslow spoke to him a few times, to make sure he was still there, still aware of things. Vincent made noncommittal sounds in reply. Sometimes

Winslow heard snatches of rhythmic words as Vincent muttered a phrase under his decidedly nonrhythmic breath.

"*Perilous ancient passions. Strange and high. Time of skeptic moths. Something to be sure of a desire. Thunder break on man and beast and bird. And the lightning.*"

Poetry. Always poetry. Well, okay, to do the man justice, not *always* poetry. Vincent could do the same thing with prose, too.

Winslow smiled in spite of his worry. Could Vincent ever! What was the term Father used? Eidetic memory. Perfect recall. There was lots of room in Vincent's mind for more things than poems. Plenty of room left over even after Vincent memorized the collected works of his beloved Shakespeare.

Winslow found himself remembering the day Father sent the Troop into the Kitchen to scrub it out from stem to stern—"Sterilize everything!" had been Father's exact command. At that time, Winslow had been grieving the loss of his mother, and the community was still recovering from the violent food poisoning that had launched itself out of the Kitchen like an Old Testament plague—because Julia wasn't there anymore to keep up her vigorous obsession with sanitation.

As they followed the light of Olivia's candle into the Kitchen, they were a demoralized Troop of six. Devin, Ike, and Mitch were long gone, Undercity runaways. Other Troopers had moved Above, to go to school, to find work, to find love, to chase dreams and live life. Four original Elderkids remained Below: Molly and Olivia in the last years of their teens, Winslow and Pascal at twenty-one and twenty-two. A sixteen-year-old Vincent, apparently feeling sociable that day, moved among them like a panther's shadow. Silent Rebecca trailed in their wake. She was a precocious thirteen that year, and their new tag-along. Vincent had adopted Rebecca into their crew the way Devin had once brought in Mitch. They all stared at the gloomy chamber, holding onto their buckets, mops, and rags like security blankets. Winslow clutched their box of soaps, alcohol, iodine, and other cleansers. The place was a disgusting train wreck. Once folks began to fall ill, no one had either the time or the strength to come in here and clean up.

"Still sure you don't want to tie back your hair, Vincent?" Olivia asked. All the girls had their hair coiled up in braids under headscarves.

Vincent turned his gaunt face toward Olivia and blinked at her. Six months had passed since Vincent's recovery from what everyone except Father called a nervous breakdown—but Winslow still thought the kid looked way too thin. The food poisoning sure hadn't helped him any.

Vincent looked around the Kitchen, then at Rebecca. He didn't need to say anything to the girl. She simply pulled a ribbon from the pocket of her apron and made a twirling gesture with one finger, directing Vincent to turn his back to her. The young adults watched Rebecca stand on tiptoe to bunch Vincent's mane at the nape of his neck. She wound the ribbon around his bundled hair, tying a solid knot to keep her handiwork in place.

Winslow thought, *They've made a good team over the past few years, ever since Rebecca came Below. What with her hating to talk and Vincent not minding the quiet. Now Vincent hates talking too and it's like watching two mimes go about their lives, like there's nothing funky at all about the silences.*

Winslow was less worried about the pair's obstinate quiet than he used to be. For the first time in his boisterous life, he was beginning to understand why Quietness appealed to other people.

That understanding had started right after his mother's funeral, when the Troop had sat down with Winslow in front of Julia's tomb. They didn't talk to the departed cook's shell-

shocked son. They just let the dead stillness bite into the core of Winslow's soul. No one said anything for almost half an hour.

Then Winslow couldn't take it anymore. The sudden loss. The sorrowful platitudes of the old folks at the service. The unfairness of it. The woman had never asked for much. She had only wanted order, and respect. Safety—

And family. From the moment Winslow introduced Mama Julia to his first girlfriend, Mama Julia had embarrassed the hell out of her boy, going on about how she couldn't wait to be a grandmother.

She'd never have the chance now.

Winslow got up. He pummeled the air with his fists. He screamed accusations and unanswerable questions at the distant roof of the catacombs, until there was nothing left for him to say and all he could do was cry. His friends had stayed with him. When Winslow fell back down onto the stone floor, they held onto him, and wept with him, saying nothing. And that was how Winslow and Quiet first got to know each other.

Rebecca finished tying up Vincent's hair. She stepped away from him. Vincent set down his bucket. Olivia lit more candles. Everyone pulled on rubber gloves, gifts from Helpers Above for just this occasion. Molly took charge. She pointed at Winslow and Vincent. "You two get all that junk out of the sink. Then we clean said sink, so we can use it."

"Where do we put the junk?" Winslow asked, eyeballing the grime-encrusted pots with displeasure.

"On the floor for now. Um, over there." Molly pointed to the spot she meant. "We can wash them later."

Molly assigned tasks to everyone else and they all got to work. It was boring, and it was gross, and it was sad. Winslow felt like—hell, he couldn't say what. All this was bigger than he was.

He scrubbed at the sides of the sink and got to thinking that he didn't know how much longer he was going to be able to live Below. It seemed like everywhere he turned, memories jumped out of the rocks at him. Clearing out Julia's chamber had been bad enough. Seeing her Kitchen in a shambles like this—

Winslow shook his head and kept his mouth shut, trying to hold back the mourning hurt that wanted to spill out in a torrent of anger. Or maybe tears.

Finally, Pascal must have figured this Quiet had gotten too heavy. He recited a poem. Winslow would never remember what it was. Just some poem. They all knew quite a few. When Pascal finished, Olivia said, "That was nice."

"Thanks, Livvy," Pascal murmured.

They kept scrubbing and stacking and wiping for a while. Then Olivia made her fateful suggestion. "Vincent. You know poems and things that are long enough for this job. Tell us a story."

They all kind of slowed down their work to look at him askance. Olivia was touching on more than Vincent's most recent problems. He had gone through periodic bouts of willful speechlessness once he hit puberty. Losing Devin had really messed the kid up for a while. Losing Mitch at the end of last year's August, right before Vincent got sick, that hurt him too—although Winslow had never been so happy to see the last of *anybody* as he'd been when Mitch Denton ran away from the Tunnels for good. But the worst loss of a friend had happened earlier that summer, when Father sent Lisa Above.

Father said a Helper had finally found the perfect ballet instructor for the girl, and they had to get Lisa Topside to enroll her in the arts academy before some other student bumped her

off the registration list. Nothing wrong with that on the surface. It's just that the move happened in a big hurry, and Father did not seem happy about it. Winslow wasn't sure what the deal with that was, but losing Lisa turned out to be the last straw for Vincent.

During the terrible months that followed Lisa's departure, Vincent lost his grip on reality and fell deathly ill. Even before the unbelievable thing with Molly, Vincent was clearly on his way down. He got twitchy. He stopped sleeping. He stopped making sense.

After Molly's tribulation, and the things Vincent had to do to save her life, the kid just fell apart. Fevered, frenzied, he lashed out at enemies that no one else could see. He stopped recognizing friends. He started injuring himself. Father tried every medicine he could get hold of, to no avail. They discovered plenty of treatments that made Vincent worse, but not one to make him better. By Halloween, Father gave up on medication. He moved himself and his raving son from Vincent's chamber to the Seclusion Chamber.

This was a small cave on the outskirts of the Inner Circle, and one of the few spaces Below that had been fitted with a door. Ordinarily, the Tunnelfolk used this room to help newcomers transition between life Above and life Below. One of the hardest things Winslow *ever* had to do with a drill had been to help Old Sam twist the screw eyes for two iron rings into the rock walls of that cave. They needed the rings so they could run chains between those walls and the restraining harness Winslow had already constructed at Father's heartbroken behest.

Not long after they chained him up in there, Vincent lost the ability to use all words. Not long after *that*, Vincent came within a whisper of meeting the Reaper's razor-edged scythe. It had been a living hell. For everyone.

Winslow was thankful that dark time was *over*. He felt glad his young friend had come back to them, even if the kid wasn't quite the same Vincent anymore. These days, everyone operated under standing orders from Father to just speak naturally to both Vincent and Rebecca —and not to push either of the youngsters too hard.

If Father's approach was meant to encourage the two of them to talk, the tactic didn't work at all with the girl, but sometimes they could get a word or two out of the boy. Or even a chunk of poetry, on a good day. On a bad day, though, he'd just stand there like a blue-eyed sphinx, and if his questioner didn't look away first, the kid would duck his head and slink off. No one had ever figured out in advance what made a good day and what made a bad one. So none of their crew knew how Vincent would take Olivia's present request.

Vincent didn't meet anyone's eye, but he said, "All right. What kind of a story?"

"Nothing dour," Molly said right away.

"Hmm. All right." Vincent stayed silent while he chose his tale, then he took a deep breath and performed a novel for them all. From memory.

Winslow still didn't know precisely *what* inspired Vincent to give them that particular story that day. Maybe he chose that novel because he'd just finished reading it. He might have chosen it because the story started with a heart attack and a funeral and they were all feeling very near to Julia as they restored her Kitchen to working order. Maybe he did it because the story was set in New York. Or maybe Vincent sensed that Winslow especially needed to be reminded how to laugh. As Vincent kept going, chapter after chapter, Winslow realized that since his young friend's terrible illness, the kid must have taken to reading books that didn't gather dust in the *classical* sections of Father's Library.

From the moment Vincent related the words of the character Norah Muldoon —"Motheragod, the halls of hell!"—the Troop was hooked. Vincent didn't do accents, but his voice had lost its adolescent creak by that stage of his life, and he gave every character a separate intonation. It wasn't long before the lot of them, including Winslow, grinned as they worked. The

chamber rang more and more frequently with their uproarious laughter.

They laughed because the story was hilarious, sure. But it was even funnier, and *crazier*, to hear this story told by their humble, gentle, Father's-son, bookworm-kid-brother Vincent. And it felt damn good to laugh together again.

Vincent reverted to his primary diet of literary-milestones-in-world-civilization as time went on, but Winslow *never* forgot the day Vincent recited *Auntie Mame: An Irreverent Escapade* for them. Winslow later decided that it made him happy to know that Vincent had a touch of rebellion in his soul. Or maybe the deeper truth was that the Reaper had almost caught him, and after that slow ride down the River Styx, Vincent came back to them wanting to live his life in his own way. To live out his dreams and notions just as fully as Auntie Mame lived out hers.

Which was why certain Tunnel Elders could glare and worry and scold all they wanted, but Winslow didn't begrudge Vincent one single second of his present happiness with Catherine Chandler.

"*Hate me when thou wilt. The world is bent my deeds to cross. Spite of fortune. Make me bow. Do not leave me last. Strains of woe. Compar'd with loss of thee. Not seem so.*" Vincent was on a different track now. Winslow jostled him, stepping around a deep dip in the floor. Vincent didn't seem to notice.

It relieved Winslow to know that this was the last unpeopled cave they had to take on today. Beyond the Narrow Caves, the passage widened and they would have a gradual climb to a true tunnel. From there, it was almost a straight shot home.

"*Thou know'st thy estimate. My bonds in thee are all determinate. I hold thee but by thy granting. Thus have I had thee. As a dream doth flatter.*"

Yeah. A *completely* different track.

Catherine took advantage of the wider space in the cave to drop back and walk beside Winslow. She listened to the mumbling.

"*Love is strengthen'd. More weak in seeming. I love not less. Though less the show appear. Philomel. Mournful hymns.*"

"Vincent?" Catherine asked. "What poem is that?"

Vincent didn't answer her. One more thing Winslow *really* did not like.

"I think he's on Shakespeare," Winslow said. "Been there for a while."

Catherine touched Vincent's arm through the blankets. "Vincent."

And Vincent went rigid, as if an electric current passed through him. "*I must...ne'er love him...whom thou dost...hate.*" His head left Winslow's shoulder. He squinted at Winslow. His breathing became a series of haphazard inhalations. Winslow stopped walking.

"Hey, now," Winslow said, alarmed. "Hey. Stay with me, now." He became distantly aware of the kids and Jake crowding up behind him. "Vincent! You hear me?"

Vincent did not. His head fell back, exposing his way-too-white face, and he turned into boneless meat in Winslow's arms. Winslow tightened his hold on his friend. Vincent was dead weight now. *Dead weight.*

"Brizo!" Winslow bellowed. He lowered Vincent to the floor.

Brooke squeaked out, "Winslow?"

"He's passed out now," Winslow said, working hard to keep from snapping at the girl. "Sorry Brooke, but...just keep it together. Okay? Just stay quiet a minute."

Brizo had teleported to Vincent's side from however far ahead she'd been. She didn't bother with her stethoscope. Instead, she touched Vincent's throat to time his pulse. "Jake. Randolph. Stretcher. Now."

The two sentries set Jake's bundle on the ground. They unwrapped the fabric from the poles and helped Winslow place Vincent on the stretcher. "Need the pipes," Brizo grunted as she tugged Vincent's blankets into place around him. "Send for a damned IV. They can meet us halfway."

Jake and Randolph took up the ends of the poles. Brizo picked up the lantern. "See you in the Hub!" she announced. She led her stretcher-bearers away at a trot.

Catherine tried to follow, but right then the end of the scarf-half around her left foot came loose, and she stumbled. Brooke caught her, saving the woman from a nasty fall. Catherine had been tipping toward an awfully rough-looking boulder. The footfalls of Brizo's group died away.

At least I got him through the Narrow part, Winslow thought miserably. *It was the fastest way to come and I got Vincent past these caves.*

The light from the lantern grew distant. Jamie struck a match. She lit a candle from Michael's knapsack, which she'd kept on her back since trading packing jobs with the boy. Catherine turned to Michael.

"Go with them," she urged the young scholar. "Please! In case Father needs the box. Tell him there's...medical records in there. The men wrote down what they did to Vincent."

Michael's eyes got very big, but he nodded. He got a good hold on the box he carried and ran after Brizo's party, rushing to catch up before he lost sight of their light. Winslow, the two girls, and Catherine were left behind to stare into the dim passage ahead of them, all of them shook-up, and all of them frightened for their friend.

Chapter Fourteen: Crash Landing

I

25 March 1987
Wednesday, Late Afternoon

They all tried not to cry. Winslow herded the ladies along, listening to their quiet sniffles and their plodding footsteps. He swallowed the lump in his own throat and shortened his stride to match his smaller companions' pace. Catherine went a little way ahead of them, although she did not outdistance the light of the candle. Her back was ramrod straight and she kept her hands fisted at her sides.

"Dammit!" she'd said once the last glimmer of lantern light had gone. "I promised! I *promised* to stay with him." But they all knew that even in her shoes—maybe *especially* in those sharp-heeled little shoes—Catherine could never have kept pace with Brizo's team. She'd bent down to angrily retie the wrap on her foot.

No one knew what to say to her. Jamie put her hand on Catherine's shoulder and the two women gave each other a long look. Catherine turned away first and trudged onward. The rest of them followed her in silence.

After a while, Jamie took the lead, guiding Catherine unerringly through the turns they had to take, and lighting everyone's way. Catherine eventually noticed that Brooke was still sniffling. She slowed down to rest an arm around the girl's shoulders and she walked beside her for a while.

"Thank you, Brooke—thank you *all*, for your help. You've been a godsend today. You really have."

"We've been so worried," Brooke said, sounding very young and very tired. "We ran out of places to look. And now—"

"Yes. I know."

"Michael said his hands were cold," Brooke whimpered.

"Brizo's taking good care of Vincent," Winslow said. "And Father's waiting. He'll know what to do."

Brooke rubbed her eyes. "It's only that...Vincent's *never* cold. You can just *stand* next to him and get warm. Don't people go cold when they...before they...?"

"Brooke?" Catherine stopped so the girl could really listen to her. "We have done everything we can. The rest is out of our hands. It's our job to hope, now. Okay?"

Brooke nodded. They started walking again.

"You know, Brooke, you are spot-on about that," Winslow said, wanting to ease the girl's mind a little more. "Vincent's always been a walking, talking radiator. When he was little, he was the most popular baby in the Tunnels. Not just because he was *Vincent*. There was that. Likeable tyke. But people actually argued over who got to hold him and for how long. Because he was *warm*."

They were listening to him now, and Brooke was calming down.

"When he got older, old enough to look after little kids himself, there were a lot of winter nights when the children up and *buried* him at storytime. You could look around Father's chamber and see a pile of kids and no Vincent. You had to look closer to see there was a person underneath the little guys and their blankets. This was way before you two girls were around."

“Had to be,” Jamie said. “I’ve never seen that happen.”

Not since that one hard autumn, many years ago, Winslow thought. *A lot of things changed after that time.*

“Why don’t kids dog-pile him like that now?” Brooke asked.

“Vincent grew up, I guess. Now he goes out on patrol most nights.”

For his part, Winslow hoped: *And may he have many more patrols on many future nights. Just...not ones that land him in a cage somewhere.*

Winslow wanted to ask Catherine more about everything that had happened Topside this week, but not in front of the younger girls. It wasn’t a matter of their age or anything. It was a matter of Vincent’s privacy. No one had much of that Below, and Vincent had less than most people. And if there was one thing Winslow knew about gregarious girls, it was how much they liked to talk.

They kept walking. It was great being back in the main tunnel system. They went through another gate, this one a simple hinged door with a latch that had to be turned to a specific position. Catherine asked how much farther they had left to go.

“About a ten minute walk to this end of the Perimeter,” Winslow said. “Then ten more minutes to the Inner Circle. And the Hospital Chamber.”

“Let’s hurry,” Catherine said. She walked faster. No one objected.

Winslow thought up a question he *was* willing to try. “Catherine? Can I ask you something?”

She looked at him. Winslow guessed she might be afraid he’d ask about things she wasn’t ready to share. She gave him a wary, “Yes.”

Well, it was her choice to tell him what he wanted to know, or to hold her peace. Winslow asked, “You were going away, right?”

“Yes. I was.”

“But you’re here now. Does that mean you’re, uh, staying in town?”

Her face relaxed. “Yes. That’s exactly what it means.”

Jamie and Brooke looked at one another, but stayed quiet.

Winslow thought of asking if Vincent already knew this fact about Catherine. He decided it was a dumb question, and one that broke his privacy ethic. If Catherine was telling Winslow and the girls that she wasn’t leaving New York, it meant she’d already told Vincent.

“Thanks for saying,” Winslow sighed. “I don’t want to pry. It’s just...you know, a lot of people down here care about you.”

She looked surprised.

Jamie smiled at Catherine’s expression. “It’s true,” she said. “We like knowing that you’re doing okay.”

“Well, thank you. I often wonder how all of *you* are doing. I care about you too. I haven’t thought much about...what your people think of me. ”

Winslow couldn’t let that pass. “Catherine? People down here think you’re the most amazing thing that’s happened to our world since Mouse got electric lights installed Below.”

Now Catherine looked flabbergasted.

“Catherine. You gave Father back to us,” Jamie said.

“Twice!” Brooke added.

“You gave us Ellie and Eric. You saved Vincent,” Jamie continued.

“Twice now!” Brooke contributed again.

Winslow muttered, “You put Mitch back in prison, where he belongs.”

Catherine threw him a very startled look indeed.

Jamie rolled her eyes. “You put Winslow back in *his* place, where *he* belongs.”

“Hey now,” Winslow warned. But he didn’t rib the girl beyond that. It was true. Winslow didn’t do so well at running the rescue efforts after the cave-in.

“So, yeah.” Jamie rearranged the straps of Michael’s pack into a better arrangement on her shoulders. “We care about you.”

“We’re glad you’re going to stay,” Brooke said.

Catherine got out another thank you, and, “I’m glad I’m staying, too.”

They turned the corner into a new tunnel. Winslow was about to offer Catherine the latest ETA, to help her keep her bearings during their little hike, when the sound of raised voices ahead stopped them all in their tracks. Winslow listened for only a moment before he pushed past his young friends and surged forward.

There was some kind of scuffle going on a ways down the tunnel. It didn’t sound friendly. Winslow heard the ladies behind him, following more cautiously.

“No!” one of the voices called. “Don’t do that—” It sounded like Randolph. Definitely not a good thing to be hearing. Winslow walked faster.

Then Winslow heard a bad sound. Something between a hoarse shout and a yowl. It tapered off into a low snarl and died away. “*Bloody* hell!” Winslow cried, breaking into a run.

He had reached one of the lighted tunnels. He didn’t need Jamie’s candle to see where he was going. He pounded to an intersection, turned toward the noises, and stopped. Brizo’s frightened attitude captured his full attention.

“What’s all this?” Winslow asked.

“Vincent, um, woke up,” Brizo said.

Clouds of steam, dust, and smoke swirled in the air. Winslow took a hard look at the mess he’d burst in on. Michael stood with his back glued to the curved tunnel wall, Catherine’s cardboard box at his feet. Brizo’s kit lay in the dust near the box. The lantern, broken, flamed from the far side of the anxious little gathering.

Randolph stood by the abandoned stretcher, yanking Jake backward from the opposite tunnel wall, while Brizo stood behind the sentries with her arms sheltering a small female shape. Keiko! Somewhere along the line, the tiny woman had joined Brizo’s group.

Jamie, Catherine, and Brooke loped up behind Winslow.

“I *told* you not to touch him!” Randolph said to Jake. He pulled Jake toward Brizo. Their feet tangled in the stretcher, but neither man fell. They kicked free of the poles and blankets that lay scattered over the tunnel floor.

“You hurt?” Randolph asked.

Jake shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

With the young sentry and the lieutenant warden out of his way, Winslow could see Vincent, kneeling hunched-over with his bad shoulder against the far wall. He had pulled his left sleeve down over his knuckles, and the claws of his right hand were still caught in the fabric. His mane stood out from his head like he’d been electrocuted and his breath whistled high in his throat. He stared at the people around him as if he’d never seen them before. Vincent looked totally lost.

Winslow took a step forward. Glass crunched under his feet. Looking down, Winslow saw a broken bottle in a patch of dampened dust, and a long thin plastic tube trailing away toward the scraggle of blankets. *Okay,* he thought. *That explains why Keiko’s here. She must’ve brought the IV Brizo wanted.*

Brizo said to him, “I don’t understand what happened. Vincent woke up and went crazy.”

Honey, Winslow thought. *You ain’t seen him crazy. And I promise, you don’t want to see*

him crazy.

Catherine came and stood next to Winslow. She saw the broken IV bottle. “I know what happened,” she said.

Vincent’s head turned toward the sound of Catherine’s voice. His blue eyes locked onto her face like laser sights. He dug the toes of his boots into the dust and shoved off the wall, only to drop back against it, gasping. He was trying to get up, maybe trying to go to her. He didn’t notice that his claws were still caught in his sleeve. Any second, they were going to start ripping the cloth.

But Winslow wasn’t paying much attention to those things. What he saw was the horrible way Vincent *moved*. He seemed punch-drunk; he was slow and he was clumsy. He shook head to foot with heartrending palsied shudders.

The sight made Winslow feel like he’d gotten a bucket of ice poured down his back. He thought, *Abyssal bricks and frost-cracked stones! Vernon!* Vincent’s sickness didn’t pair up exactly with what had happened to the elderly soldier, but Old Vernon’s affliction was the first thing to pop into Winslow’s thunderstruck mind.

Catherine went over to Vincent. Randolph opened his mouth when he saw what Catherine was doing, but Winslow flapped his hand at the man to shut him up. Vincent might be confused about everything else, but he knew *Catherine* was there. The woman got down in the dirt with their wild-eyed friend. She put her arms around his neck.

Vincent stopped trying to move and the horrific shaking eased up. He turned his head and pressed his cheekbone against Catherine’s hair, uttering a small wounded sound. His breathing didn’t slow down, but it got quieter. Catherine spoke soft words meant for Vincent alone.

She soon stopped speaking, and just knelt beneath Vincent’s weight, holding him up. Winslow approached. He crouched down close to them both, but also just to one side of Catherine, so Vincent could watch Winslow’s every move.

“Hey,” Winslow said.

Catherine sat back and took hold of Vincent’s claws. “Here, Vincent. You’re going to tear your shirt.” One by one, she plucked his fingers free.

Vincent looked from Catherine’s hands on his, to Winslow’s eyes, back to Catherine, then back to Winslow. His cut-up mouth and nose had a bluish tinge that scared Winslow a lot.

“Come on,” said Winslow, as gently as he knew how. “Will you let me take you to Father?”

Vincent sort of wilted in Winslow’s direction until his forehead rested upon Winslow’s chest. Putting one arm around his friend, Winslow thought, *Guess that’s a yes. Good Lord. The aliens and toothbrushes, the Shakespeare? That was Vincent hanging on by his fingernails. The man’s got nothing left.*

“Winslow?” Brizo said. She must have dared a couple steps because she sounded closer. “Just a sec. We’ll get the stretcher sorted out.”

“Nuh uh,” Winslow replied. “No more stretchers. We’re almost where we need to be. I’m still the horse for this job.” He glanced over his shoulder at the young medic. She looked ready to cry. A lot of that was going around today.

“You did good, Brizo. You did everything right, okay? Exactly what you were trained to do.”

Inside his own head, Winslow added, *It’s just, no one can TEACH you how to take care of Vincent when he needs taking care of. Those are skills you can’t learn before the fact. Wish I’d remembered that sooner. I’m the one at fault here.*

Winslow pulled at Vincent’s cloak to untangle it from his friend’s arms and legs.

“Catherine? Will you get his hood?” he asked.

Catherine nodded and smoothed the black fabric over the back of Vincent’s head. “It was the needle,” she whispered. “For the IV. And I wasn’t there. Like I promised.”

Winslow could understand why Vincent might be upset by Catherine’s absence, but not the needle thing. Needles creeped Winslow out, but Vincent was Father’s right-hand man. He helped Father teach essential first aid to all the Tunnelfolk. Vincent and Father also worked in tandem to train their two or three mobile medics—like Brizo—for more complicated emergency medicine. Vincent took on nursing duty too, whenever Keiko and Mary were both busy, and when Father got shorthanded. Or whenever Vincent brought home a special stray.

But maybe Catherine knew a thing or two herself by now. If it was stupid to let Brizo whisk Vincent off like that in the first place, it would be stupider to *not* listen to what Catherine had to say about the way Vincent’s mind worked. She had chosen to stand by Winslow’s life-long friend. She deserved Winslow’s trust.

“You’re here now, Catherine,” Winslow said. “That counts for a lot.” He hefted his tawny load once again and groaned his way to his feet, thinking, *This must be Vincent’s payback for the time I gave him the job of trucking the new stove Down to the Kitchen.* Winslow was getting more than his fair share of workouts this week.

“Do you need us to come?” Randolph asked. “Jake and me? Otherwise we’ll stay here and get this cleaned up.”

“We’re good,” Winslow said, hurrying away. “Remind me later to thank you proper, okay?”

The reunited group buzzed and swarmed in the tunnel. Winslow left them behind. “Hell, Vincent. It’s more of a mess getting you home than it was to mobilize two worlds to search for you.”

Vincent didn’t answer. His eyes were open, but he was cold, and quiet, and breathing all wrong. Without the blankets to hide his shape he felt like a bundle of dry twigs. Okay, maybe he was more like a stack of good-sized tree limbs, but still—all skinny lines and bony angles.

“Hang in there, Little V. You just hang on.”

It took Winslow a minute to realize that he and Vincent were not alone. A small person jogged in their wake, the soles of her sheer-stockinged feet pattering against bare cement or stone as they rushed headlong toward the Inner Circle.

She must’ve ditched both the scarf-wraps and the shoes, Winslow thought, *and the Gunga Din gear too, so she can keep her promise this time around.*

Winslow decided then and there that Catherine was worthy of induction into the Troop—with full honors and all attendant privileges thereto.

They hurried past two hidden sentries and crossed over the boundary of the Perimeter. Winslow nodded at each spyhole in turn as he went by. He began to hear the pipes clanging with sentry reports of the rescue party’s progress, and orders from places like the Kitchen and the storerooms, queries from the outposts, and more than a few overanxious and unauthorized conversations. Suddenly, *ALL QUIET* pealed forth, tapped by three different hands on pipe after pipe. General Pascal’s assistants were relaying his direct command, no doubt. This was followed by a message *hammered* out on The Anaconda, the one conduit in the Pipe Chamber that linked into almost everyone’s pipe access within the Perimeter.

ALL QUIET, OR SO HELP ME, I GO ON STRIKE FOR A MONTH!

Winslow huffed a laugh as he strode forward. He knew it was an empty threat. Pascal on strike was as impossible to imagine as Mary dancing the can-can at Winterfest. But the pipe

master's frustrated sentiment had its intended effect. The system went silent.

They began to encounter people now. At first only one or two at a time, then small groups. Then larger groups.

"Outta the way!" Winslow boomed. "Move! Get aside!"

They parted for him, and closed in behind him. He glimpsed Catherine shouldering through the growing crowd. Finally, she dodged around Winslow and jogged out in front. People were beginning to pour in from other tunnels now, some to watch them pass by, and some sad schmucks to step out and gawk, blocking their way. Folks could be such sheep during an emergency!

Winslow didn't know how she found the breath to do it: Catherine put her fingers to her mouth and blew a piercing whistle. "Clear a path right now and *keep it clear*!" Winslow also didn't know how such a dainty woman could shout *so loud*.

He couldn't see her face, but it must have looked like something out of the Book of Revelation because the gathering mass of people melted back. A moment later someone tapped out Catherine's order on the pipes, demanding a clear route to the Hospital Chamber. All Catherine had to do after that was follow the empty tunnels to their destination, bypassing the unempty ones. Helpful bystanders pointed her in the right direction.

Vincent's Catherine, Winslow thought. *Absolutely. No question. And Catherine's Vincent.*

A moment later, Catherine's Vincent seemed to come alive again. Winslow felt a tremor along Vincent's backbone. Vincent turned his head and looked around. He saw faces peering out from tunnels and entryways, saw Catherine running interference ahead of them, saw Winslow gazing somberly down into his upturned face.

"Hey," Winslow said to him again. "Welcome back. Do you know where you are?"

"Home," Vincent croaked. "Put me down."

"Uh, no. Sorry. I don't think that's a good idea."

Vincent coughed. "Want. Be. Upright."

"Tell you what. Give me two more minutes, and we can let Father decide how upright you can be. We're almost there."

Vincent blinked at the onlookers. Then he pulled his head back into his hood like a turtle retreating into its shell and nudged his face against Winslow's neck. It wasn't the safest place for those teeth to end up, but Winslow figured if Vincent was talking again, he had enough self-control to keep his fangs to himself.

Anyway, Winslow knew, *it's the people. Everyone looking at him. Damn it.*

Winslow couldn't really blame the Tunnelfolk. As mythical-minded Vernon might have said, the people were watching their crown prince come home. It had been a dismal week for everybody.

And then, by thunder, they arrived. Winslow followed Catherine into the Hospital Chamber to find Mary waiting for them, looking worried, waving them past her to a screened-off corner at the back of the large room. Winslow passed beyond the curtain frames and leaned over to lay Vincent on the bed those frames enclosed—

Vincent clung to him. He did not accomplish this feat by holding onto anything, but by hooking his claws into Winslow's clothes so that he stuck fast like a two-hundred-give-or-take pound burr.

"Okay. You can stop that now." Winslow tried to let go of him again. Vincent refused to be set down on his back.

"Look. I'm going to *sit* you on the edge. Okay? That work for you?"

It did. Vincent sat quietly on the mattress and let Catherine move his hands away from

Winslow's coat and vest. He was starting to look lost again. He stared off into the middle distance as Catherine pulled the hood of his cloak away, uncovering Vincent's head.

Mary joined them in the little space, carrying a lightweight chair. Then Father walked in. He nodded to Mary and she set the chair on the floor. Turning to his patient, he said, "Vincent. Thank God."

Vincent didn't look at Father. Or any of them.

Winslow crouched, grunting as a knee popped. His knees were getting their own special workout today. "Vincent. Hello! Alien abductee, we're talking to you!"

Nothing.

"Uh, Father?" Winslow asked. This was bizarre. Vincent just sat there, fingers twitching, looking at space. "He was arguing with me a minute ago."

Father bent down and snapped his fingers twice in Vincent's face. Those blue eyes didn't even blink. Father pulled the chair directly in front of Vincent and sat down, relieving his still-mending back and sore leg of the strain of bending low.

"Dear God." The old man put his hands on Vincent's shoulders. "Mary, do me a favor. Note the time to the second. Just write it down on something."

"Yes, Father." Mary pulled out her pocket watch, a small Mouse-repaired clock face with a sweeping second hand, strung onto a burgundy satin ribbon.

Another few seconds went by. Vincent closed his eyes and shook his head—and winced like that had been a bad move.

"Note the time again, please," Father said. He touched Vincent's chin. "Vincent?"

Vincent opened his eyes. This time he *saw* the man in front of him. "*Father*," he whispered. Vincent bowed his head onto Father's shoulder. He sat still, letting Father just hold him.

Winslow stood close enough that he heard Father murmur, "Oh, my son."

Vincent's voice came out muffled as he answered, speaking into Father's soft mantle between shallow breaths:

"*When, like committed linnets, I*
With shriller throat shall sing
The sweetness, mercy, majesty,
And glories of my King;
When I shall voice aloud how good
He is, how great should be,
Enlargèd winds, that curl the flood,
Know no such liberty."

Aaand they were back to poetry.

Winslow thought it possible that things might turn out all right now. He really, really wanted things to turn all right, anyway. He stood up straight. His knees thanked him.

While Vincent recited, Father had begun an up-close examination, touching Vincent's neck and wrists, passing a hand between Vincent's eyes and the little lamp Mary shone over Father's shoulder, and taking a good look at Vincent's mouth and nose. Vincent stopped talking. The Tunnels physician pushed lightly at Vincent's shoulders until Vincent sat up. Father looked into his son's shadowed eyes.

"You are severely dehydrated."

"Mm-hm."

Father turned to Catherine. He spoke her name with solemn gravity. “Thank you,” he said. “Catherine, *thank you*. Please, I need you to answer some questions for me.”

“Anything,” Catherine whispered.

Father took her at her word, aiming a barrage of inquiries about Vincent at her, stopping only to give directions to Mary, or to tell Winslow to bring in more light. Winslow obediently fetched, arranged, and lit more candles, already feeling unsettled inside this chamber. He half imagined glimpses here and there of haunting shades gathered beyond the glow of each candle wick he set aflame.

Mary, on the other hand, appeared to be having serious difficulty keeping up with Father’s commands. He asked her for salve, and she handed him his stethoscope. He muttered something about a basin and IV bottles, and Mary reached past Vincent to turn down the blankets and top sheet of the hospital bed. Father repeated his last request a little louder.

“Oh!” Mary said. “Yes, of course.” She hurried out of the screened place.

Maybe Mary also felt the old ghosts crowding near.

Finally, Father turned to Catherine and thanked her again. “All right, Catherine,” he said. “Could you step beyond the screens? There are things we need to do for him now.”

Catherine nodded. “I’ll be close by,” she said to Vincent.

Vincent watched her go.

Mary bustled back in and set a clean cotton nightshirt on the bed beside Vincent. She had not brought a basin with her, or anything to do with IVs. Father looked from the garment to Mary’s distracted face, and sighed.

“Winslow? Will you help me with this part?” Mary asked, so intent upon her own agenda, she failed to notice Father’s irritation.

“Um,” Winslow said, stalling while he glanced at Father. The doctor stood up stiffly from his chair, frowning. But he nodded at Winslow. “Okay, yeah,” Winslow told Mary.

Father kissed the top of Vincent’s head. “I’ll be right back,” he said. “I must gather some things you need.”

To his credit, Father appeared to be more unhappy about Vincent’s condition than about Mary’s flustered mistakes. Winslow could relate to that. No one had expected Vincent to come home looking like this. Father limped past the screens and Winslow heard him begin to clatter around in one of the medical supply cupboards.

Mary got down on her knees. Winslow took hold of Vincent’s cloak. “Okay,” Winslow said. “Let’s get this off and get you into bed.”

Vincent broke his silence. He said, “No.” He tugged his cloak sleeve out of Winslow’s hand. This made him wince again. That sad left shoulder.

Go slow, Winslow told himself. *He’s been cranky ever since that thing back there with Brizo. Everyone’s got their limits, right?*

“Hey, now,” Winslow said. He tried a legal tactic that usually worked on his friend. “You need help. We’re here to give it. Just take it easy, okay? Let us help you out.”

This time, though, Tunnel principles held no sway. Vincent shakily crossed his arms and snagged his claws into the fabric of his cloak on both sides. He pulled the garment tight around his midriff, not looking at either of his would-be caregivers.

Father returned, carrying a load of sterilized dressings and packaged tubing in a deep basin. “What’s the trouble?” he asked.

“What *isn’t* the trouble?” Winslow grumbled, getting irritated.

Mary touched one of Vincent’s boots. Vincent slid his foot out of her reach.

“Vincent, you need to be undressed so Father can finish examining you.” Mary seemed to

think that if Law didn't work, Reason might. "Do you think you can do it yourself?"

Vincent shook his head.

"Well, then." She reached out again and Vincent tucked both feet half-under the bed frame. "Father?" Mary appealed to the one person Vincent always listened to.

Father set his supplies on a table and came to his son. He sat down beside him on the bed. "Vincent."

"Please," Vincent whispered, but he didn't say what he wanted. Staying upright looked troublesome for him. He was beginning to shake hard again.

Winslow thought, *It'd be a pain, but we could just wait for him to pass out. That would solve the standoff.* Winslow didn't like that kind of solution, but he also didn't know what else to do.

"See here," Father said. "The clothes can wait. He needs fluid *now*. Mary? I want both lines."

Mary looked up. "Winslow, for that we only need to cut open his sleeves." She nodded to blunt-tipped shears set out on the table, along with several other tools from Father's medical bag. It made sense to Winslow.

Father started to say something, but Winslow and Mary were already moving to carry out Mary's plan.

"Okay. Vincent, you just hold out your arms for me." Winslow reached for him.

Vincent flinched.

Mary paused in the act of getting up off the floor. She'd seen Vincent's reaction. Winslow bent down, staring at his seriously messed-up friend. Vincent wasn't cranky. He was *scared*.

"Hey," Winslow said, more quietly. "Hey, it's *us*. What are you afraid of?" Winslow thought about his own question. *Ah, hell.*

"The scissors?" he asked. He'd known for a great many years that Vincent hated scissors as much as Winslow hated needles. It was just really easy to forget about that problem, what with all the other things to worry about. Winslow felt annoyed with himself. He thought, *Son, you MUST get your head on straight about these details if you're gonna be any use in here.*

Vincent wasn't answering him.

"Okay, I get that," Winslow said in the calmest tone of voice he could bring into play. "We'll leave the scissors right where they are. Okay? But it's not a good time to get shy, Vincent. So come on." He touched Vincent's arm.

Vincent didn't pull away this time.

"Okay. That's good. Father, it won't take us but a second to do this right."

Winslow exchanged a relieved look with Mary and they both worked quickly to remove Vincent's boots and mantle. They got past his vest and overshirt, too. Then Mary started untying his white woolen shirt's rawhide laces. All of a sudden, Vincent hung his head and began to weep.

This was a truly wretched thing to behold: the man was so dried out, he had no tears.

Startled, Mary pulled her hands away. Vincent shook with silent sobs, and with whatever had gone wrong with his muscles, and began to slump forward. Father caught hold of him and didn't let go.

"Mary. Please, Mary, the IVs. Bring the warmed solution bottles. He's hypothermic. Do you understand? Good. Winslow. There are two kettles simmering on the brazier out there beside a basket of empty hot water bottles. Be so good as to fill them and wrap each one in a towel."

Winslow knew not to take the dismissal personally. He and Mary glanced at each other and then slipped beyond the screens without saying anything more. They went to attend to their

separate jobs, listening as Father's voice murmured to Vincent behind them.

Winslow took his time with the hot water bottles. Mary hustled back over to Father and Vincent with glass containers in her hands. Winslow was in no hurry to follow. *Last thing in the world I want to see is those two sticking needles into Vincent,* he thought. He listened carefully for the least sound of resistance from his friend, but heard nothing unusual. Well, there *was* a big difference between Father and Brizo. Even with sharps involved.

It took a little while, but Winslow eventually noticed that someone was handing him rubber water bottles, one after the other, and taking full bottles from his hands so he didn't have to set the kettle down to reach for the next empty one. He looked up from his work. The someone was, of course, Catherine.

"You know," Winslow said, "sometimes you're even quieter than Vincent. You're awful good at sneaking up and digging in."

Catherine gave him a tired smile. "It's something new I've learned these last few months. To find some way to be useful."

"Trust me. You're more than useful." He saluted her with the last filled water bottle. "Thank you, Catherine."

She nodded and handed him the stopper. It only took a few more moments to wrap each bottle in a soft towel, with both of them sharing the task. Catherine accompanied him as he carried the basinful of warmth past the screens.

They found Vincent tucked into bed, wearing the clean nightshirt, and attached by long plastic tubes to the sterilized jars hanging from two separate IV stands. An IV needle was stuck into each arm, held in place by gauze bandages and tape. Mary was folding Vincent's clothes into a pile at the foot of the bed. Father sat on the chair by Vincent's side.

As Catherine and Winslow entered the little space, Father took a thermometer from Vincent's mouth to read the mercury level. Winslow thought Father way too trusting, using a glass thermometer like that—but Father was the doctor. And Winslow had to concede that Father's patient did seem calm now, for all that Vincent couldn't seem to catch his breath. Vincent looked at Catherine, first thing. She stood beside Father and reached down to hold Vincent's hand.

"You stayed," Vincent said, faint as a faded echo from a distant cavern.

"So did you," Catherine answered.

Winslow looked away from both of them, feeling like an intruder. "Where do you want this?" he asked Father, shoving the basin in Father's face.

"The table over there. Please cover it with a blanket, to keep in the heat. We're not ready for water bottles, just yet." He looked up at Winslow's perplexed face. "But when we do need them, they'll be ready. Thank you."

"Uh huh." Winslow complied with Father's wishes.

Mary took the pile of clothes with her and left. Winslow heard her voice from across the chamber. He guessed she must be addressing worried Tunnel dwellers from the gathered crowd. He turned out to be half-right: it was a worried Tunnel dweller, but it wasn't one from the crowd.

Mary poked her head back in and said, "Father? Michael's out here with a box that he says Catherine wanted you to have."

"Yes," Catherine looked at Father. "Vincent said you'd need to see some things. To know how to help him."

"Then by all means, bring in the box," Father said.

Mary nodded and withdrew to call Michael over.

Winslow walked around to the other side of the bed. Vincent turned his head to watch

him. Winslow rubbed at the back of his neck. “Just wanted to, well, say I’m sorry. If I was too rough just now. You know me.”

“Mm. I know you. Winslow?”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you. Brought me. Home.”

“Yep. That I did. Now shut up and get some sleep.”

And Vincent actually smiled. In Winslow’s opinion, the expression didn’t sit too well on his friend’s ghostly face, but seeing it repaid him for every single burdened step Winslow had taken down from the Morningside Portcullis.

“Yes, Winslow,” Vincent said.

Winslow folded his arms across his chest. “Good answer.”

II

25 March 1987
Wednesday, Evening

Catherine gratefully sat down on the chair Winslow brought in for her and accepted the cup of herbal tea Mary handed to her upon Mary’s return. The drink was hot, sweet, and floral—heavy on the chamomile, and exactly what Catherine needed.

“I’ve asked Pascal to send word to Maria,” said Mary. “She’ll end the search Above and tell everyone that a Helper has found Vincent...and brought him safely home.”

Catherine looked up at the word “Helper.” Mary sat down on a three-legged stool beside Catherine, holding her own cup of tea. The older woman smiled at her with tears in her eyes.

“That’s good of you, Mary,” Winslow said. “I would’ve remembered that after a while, but it’s best to get everybody calmed down sooner rather than later.” He set down a stool for himself on the other side of Vincent’s bed. The teacup in his hand looked like a fragile seashell in the paw of a large bear.

Father sat on Catherine’s left, quietly doing doctorly things while the rest of them talked. Catherine watched him remove a blood pressure cuff from Vincent’s arm and press the end of a stethoscope to several places on Vincent’s chest. He worked around the two IV lines without needing to look at them. Catherine waited until he leaned away from his son and put his stethoscope back in his leather bag. Then she placed her teacup and saucer beneath her chair and took Vincent’s hand again, holding it tight.

She tried very hard not to stare at Vincent’s bared right arm. The needle on his left side was bandaged to a vein on the back of his hand, and his left sleeve still covered most of that arm. The second IV needle had been placed higher up on Vincent’s right forearm, and so this sleeve was rolled up nearly to his shoulder. Catherine had a disconcerting impression of textured red colors marred by scabrous patches of scraped skin and strips of white medical tape. *I’ve never seen more of him uncovered than his head and his hands,* Catherine thought. *That’s what seems strange to me. Not Vincent himself.*

She could tell herself that, but his long arm (and the thick coppery-gold fur covering it) *was* strange. The sight reminded Catherine of easy judgments based upon external factors. It reminded her of how little she truly knew about Vincent and his life.

Her discomfort also reminded her that both Vincent and Father had tended Catherine

when Vincent first brought her Below. They had washed her clean and stitched her lacerations. They bandaged her wounded arm, face, and ribs, sending her torn clothes away somewhere for repairs. When Catherine first met Mary, she learned that the gentle midwife had helped to dress her in a soft nightgown before she and Vincent tucked their patient into Vincent's own bed.

And then...Vincent had to care for me like that again, just two weeks ago, Catherine thought. She remembered with aching shame that Vincent and Narcissa had both seen her in the scanty red cocktail dress she'd worn to Alexander Ross's final cultic rite. Jack Stilton had bought the dress for her to wear to an Independence Day celebration they attended together. Catherine wished fervently that she'd had the foresight to remove that dress from her closet after she broke up with Jack.

Maybe it wouldn't have mattered, though. Ross had cut the front of Catherine's dress open before Vincent arrived on the scene. The evil *bokor* would have done the same thing to whatever garments she'd put on that night. Catherine had been wearing one of Narcissa's robes when she woke up in the old woman's chamber.

More than a little nervously, Catherine thought, *I don't know how much of my body Vincent has seen*. She felt grateful for her friend's protective decency whenever he addressed her physical needs. Catherine's first small glimpse of *his* body made her keenly aware that Vincent always expressed a reserved modesty about his own appearance. He was completely self-accepting, but he wore his shadowing hooded cloak whenever he felt others might be slow to understand. She had never seen him outside the Inner Circle without that long patched coat in his possession.

Until this morning.

Catherine thought, *I'll be careful with your dignity, Vincent. I promise this too.* She held his hand and she did not stare.

"So," Winslow said to Father from the other side of the bed. "Are the IVs gonna fix his blood? Get him breathing right again?"

"I hope so," Father said, curt. He smoothed Vincent's massacred mane away from Vincent's face.

Winslow stayed quiet for perhaps half a minute. Then he spoke again, just as abruptly. "He's too thin."

"He was already too thin," Mary replied. "He's been too thin for years."

"Yeah, well now it's *worse*. If he didn't drop twenty-five, maybe *thirty* pounds in five days, then I am a little green man from Mars."

"Six days," Father said.

"Come again?"

"Six days," Father repeated. "He stopped eating Thursday night."

"Oh. Yeah. Guess that's so."

Father said, "Under the *best* circumstances, he will begin to starve after a mere three-day fast. And these past months have not provided optimal conditions for him. Vincent doesn't have the reserves to withstand a new misfortune of this magnitude. At this point, he's catabolizing muscle."

As Catherine listened to this exchange, she began to understand that the old man sitting beside her was silently *enraged*. She sat very still in her chair. If he was angry with her, Father might be about to send her away. Catherine intended to fight him if he tried. She'd lose. This was Father's world, not hers.

But she'd try anyway.

Vincent stopped eating Thursday night, she thought. *Because Vincent was not himself.*

After he spoke with me.

Catherine acknowledged her fear and waited for whatever might come next.

"But *still*, Father!"

"I know."

"Some of that loss is water," said Mary. "We're trying to help him with that that now."

"Well, that's good, then." Winslow drank tea from his cup. After a moment's thought, he started up again. "And that staring thing. Father, that was *weird*."

"'That staring thing,'" Father said with acerbic diction, "was a petit mal seizure."

God in heaven, thought Catherine.

Mary put her hand to her mouth. She looked at Vincent and two tears spilled over.

Winslow opened his mouth, glanced at Catherine and Mary, and held in whatever he'd been about to say. The big man's throat worked until he could spit out a question instead of a curse. "Is...is *that* why he was shaking like that? *Seizures*?!"

"I'm not sure about the shaking. Yet." Father directed his fierce glare at Winslow, then at Catherine. "Did anything like what you saw in here occur while you were bringing him Below? The stillness and the staring? Any other episodes?"

Winslow, looking thoughtful, began to nod. "Yeah. Maybe a couple times."

Catherine considered her terrible afternoon. "Yes," she whispered. "Yes, several times. *Many* times. Starting right after I unlocked the door to the—" She caught herself.

"The door to the cage?" Father asked. His eyes were the color of an ocean in the throes of a typhoon.

Brizo's shorthand style must be as effective in her written notes as it is in her spoken words, Catherine thought. "Yes," she said to Father. "The cage."

Mary must also have read Brizo's note. She was not surprised by this mention of Vincent's imprisonment. She pulled an embroidered handkerchief from a pocket and dabbed her eyes with it.

Winslow leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. He looked both angry and tired. "Goddamn it, why did Vincent even *go* Topside that night?"

Catherine's heart began to pound in her ears. *Because I sent for him,* she thought with renewed horror. *Because of what I wrote in my useless little letter to him. I didn't think. My fault!*

But Father simultaneously answered Winslow's question and contradicted Catherine's unspoken distress. "A moment ago, Vincent told me he went Up to see the sky." He looked at Vincent, shaking his head. "I think he expected me to scold him."

Father leaned closer to the bed. He caressed his son's pale forehead. "All he wanted from the world Above was a little starlight, Winslow. And that world gave him...*this*."

Winslow frowned. If Father's eyes contained an oceanic storm, Winslow's eyes glared fire and brimstone at Vincent's softly gasping form. "Those two men who did '*this*.' Where are those bastards now?"

"What does that matter?" Mary asked.

"*I* want to know where to find them," Winslow growled. His baleful eyes turned to Catherine. A moment later, all three of them were looking at her.

Catherine was ready for them. In her steadiest, most professional attorney voice, Catherine said, "There are two men lying dead in a basement room beneath Columbia University's Biological Sciences Department."

Mary closed her eyes. Father looked back to Vincent's sleeping face.

Let anyone make of it what they will, Catherine thought. *I only pray I didn't overlook something vital on my way out of that horrible place.*

After a long silence, Winslow nodded once. “I can live with that,” he said. He got up and walked around them to the tea tray on the table. He refilled his cup, and held out his hand to Mary and Catherine in turn, to refill theirs. “Father?” he asked.

“Yes.” As he took the teacup Winslow held out to him, Father told him, “Thank you.”

Winslow sat down again. Father turned to Catherine. He said, “Catherine, we want the whole story now. Please tell us everything you know.” Catherine saw that Father kept one hand on Vincent’s arm as he spoke to her.

He doesn’t blame me, she thought. *And Father doesn’t blame Vincent, either.* And this was exactly as it should be. Her heartbeat slowly returned to normal. All blame lay cold and pointless with the two secret corpses in that little room beneath the Fairchild Annex.

Catherine tucked her aching feet behind the rung of her chair and did as Father asked, beginning with the conclusion of their conversation beneath her apartment building, and ending with her entrance into the Hospital Chamber. As best as she could, she answered more of Father’s medically specific questions, describing Vincent’s physical and mental state. She showed them the newspaper, and the two tufted darts. She explained about the box of video cassettes and file folders. Father pulled out the professor’s notebooks and what looked like a fat photo album, and held them on his lap.

“I haven’t looked at any of that,” Catherine said at last. “I hope it can help you to help Vincent. If you need...a TV and video player for the tapes...let me know. I can bring those things to you.”

Father looked up from the notebooks. “Again. Thank you, Catherine. I’ll start with these.” He sighed. “Mary? Can you sit with Vincent while I look through this material?”

“Of course, Father.” Mary sounded subdued after Catherine’s account.

“He’s about ready to start on the next two liters.”

“I’ll see to it.”

Catherine glanced up at the IV bottles. Both had almost emptied. Vincent slept, and his breathing was a little slower now, a little deeper. *Two liters of fluids,* Catherine thought. *And ready for two more.* The horrors kept on coming, even here, even now.

Father got stiffly to his feet and tucked the books under one arm. He reached into the box one more time and brought out a Polaroid camera. He handed this across the bed to Winslow.

“Get this thing out of the Tunnels immediately,” Father said. “I don’t care if you destroy the film or break the camera up for parts, but it cannot remain operational.”

“Consider it done,” Winslow told him.

“Good. Now, Mary, I’ll be just around the corner if you need me. *Call me,* if you need me.”

“I will, Father.”

Father bent down and whispered something to his son. Then leaning on his crutch, the Tunnels doctor walked beyond the screens into another part of the chamber.

Mary touched Catherine’s arm. “It sounds like you’ve had...a hideous day,” she said. “Would you like to take a few minutes to freshen up?”

Catherine knew she must look a fright. For once, that didn’t matter to her. “I promised to stay with Vincent.”

“It’s all right to take a moment for yourself. I’m staying with him.”

“Me too,” Winslow rumbled. He held up the camera. “I can work on this job right here.”

Catherine thought about it. Her hands and feet, and her face, did feel grimy. Vincent lay in a hospital bed, with a nurse and a trusted friend at hand. Father was somewhere close. And it *had* been a hideous day.

"Yes," she said. "You're right. Is there someplace I could wash?"

Mary rose from her stool and leaned out past one of the screens. She seemed to have a brief conversation with someone. Mary pulled her head back inside the enclosure and said, "Rebecca is here. She can guide you."

Catherine reached into the cardboard box for her shoes and her purse. She slipped her shoes on her feet and pulled her purse strap over her shoulder. As Father had done, Catherine leaned over Vincent and whispered in his ear. "I'll be back soon. I won't go far."

Vincent continued to sleep.

She walked out of Vincent's screened-in space, observing the cavern around her. Winslow had named it the Hospital Chamber. The room looked nothing like a modern hospital to Catherine, and more like what she imagined a rustic Victorian infirmary might have been.

Pillar candles on tall stands lined the stone walls. A few strategically placed lanterns glowed from the ceiling. Catherine saw cabinets and tables, boxes of rolled gauze and other medical supplies, matching sets of ceramic basins and ewers. Bedside stands stood next to empty cots. More privacy screens separated the chamber into approximate quadrants. The underground hospital space curved around a rock wall toward the curtained chamber entrance. Catherine moved in that direction, and toward Rebecca.

Past the rock bend and a little way across the chamber, she found the quiescent young woman waiting for her. Catherine remembered Rebecca very well from the February evening when she'd finally garnered enough courage to visit Vincent Below. Rebecca had been Vincent's stalwart attendant in his chamber as he lay recovering from the damage the Silks had done to him.

A few years younger than Catherine, Rebecca nevertheless held her own against Catherine's preferences. When Rebecca said visiting hours were over—visiting hours were *over*. Catherine hadn't had such a swift removal from any room since that night back in her college days, when a bouncer escorted her (and the loudly pontificating Simon Lowell) out of a nightclub.

Catherine put a tentative smile on her face. "Hello, Rebecca."

Rebecca smiled back. It wasn't a warm smile, but Catherine did not believe this woman possessed a warm personality. "Catherine. Come with me," Rebecca said.

Catherine followed her to the chamber entrance. They stepped past the curtain to find a good-sized crowd of Tunnel People populating the corridor. The crowd murmured, but Rebecca paid it no mind. Catherine stopped, however, when a hand reached out from the group to take hold of her elbow.

"Catherine!" It was Jamie.

Catherine saw that all four of her new library-raiding friends stood together in a little cluster, looking tired and grim. *The vigil-keepers still standing watch,* she thought. *Where else would they be, after all that's happened this afternoon?*

"I'm happy to see that all of you made it all the way Down," Catherine said, offering them a small smile. She took special notice of Michael. "Thank you for bringing that box in. Father's reading through those documents now."

Michael nodded.

Catherine touched each of them, clasping a hand or a shoulder, and looked into their eyes. "Thank you. All four of you. That's from me and Vincent both."

"How is he?" Stephen asked.

Catherine understood that all the worried people standing at the hospital entry wanted to ask the same thing. She privately observed, *It looks like no one involved has issued a public*

statement regarding the situation. Is it my place to do so?

The faces around her, every one of them looking to *her* for reassurance, averred that it *was* Catherine's place. Perhaps even her duty. Because to the people Below, she was Vincent's Catherine.

So she told them, "Vincent is comfortable now. Sleeping. Father and Mary are doing everything they can to help him."

The crowd around her mumbled and hummed. Some people began to ask her questions. In the midst of the hubbub, Catherine remembered one of her early conversations with Vincent. He had listened to her complain about workplace gossip and the way people at the DA's office—even people she considered friends—constantly speculated about her private life, because she was such a "high-society" lady. On bad days, her most innocuous comments got bandied around the break room like tabloid headlines. There were a lot of bad days for Catherine after she walked away from Elliot Burch.

"Yes. I understand that," Vincent had said.

"You do?"

"Mm-hm. In my world, it's a given that anything spoken aloud is a public declaration. Unless it's established from the beginning that one speaks in confidence. Secrets are respected. Everything else is fair game. Secrets remain private because their keepers bear them in silence."

"And where there is no silence, there are no secrets."

"Yes."

Standing in the very not-silent tunnel, Catherine thought, *Everyone Below knows everything that's happened, from the moment Jamie walked up to us with her lantern, to the moment Winslow followed me into the Hospital Chamber. But NOT everyone knows that two men died today. Or that Vincent almost—* She stopped that line of thought right there.

Catherine waited until the crowd became quieter. She tried to recall the things that Vincent had told her about how his world functioned, seeking some kind of authority she could draw upon. She realized that sitting in the Hospital Chamber a moment ago, she'd been delivering a *deposition* to three Council members: Father, Mary, and Winslow. They received her testimony over tea in a very informal setting, but that made it no less of an official inquiry. Had Vincent been conscious, Catherine's listeners would have comprised a full quorum of the underworld's governing body.

Catherine said to the gathered people, "I'll let the Council decide when it's the right time to answer your questions. Just know that Vincent is safe now. He can use your prayers and good wishes."

Another hand touched her arm. This time it was Rebecca. The young woman nodded to her and pulled her from the crowd. The people milled around the hospital entry. Catherine and Rebecca walked away.

"Well done," Rebecca said, once they were alone in the tunnel.

Catherine swept her hair out of her face. "My day has been full of very careful speeches."

Rebecca smiled and continued down the corridor. They came to another wide entrance. Rebecca stopped. "Here we are," she said. "Have you used this bathing chamber before?"

Catherine shook her head. Last April, while she was the patient Below, Catherine had used a washroom near Vincent's chamber and Father's Study. She'd used that same small room to wash up after the cave-in, too. Catherine had never been to this part of the Tunnels, though.

"Then I'll show you how things work." Rebecca entered the new cavern. Catherine followed.

The stone room was almost as spacious as the Hospital Chamber. Curtains and screens

partitioned the bathing chamber into separate areas. An antique standing mirror reflected candlelight, and the two women, as they entered. Beyond the mirror, Catherine saw that two large, round water tanks constructed from welded metal panels sat on tall plinths at the far end of the room. One tank had been wrapped in layers of quilted padding. Long pipes stretched across the ceiling overhead and ran down along the wall behind the tanks. Catherine assumed the pipes met connection points back there to keep the tanks full.

"The hot water tank is new," Rebecca said, when she saw Catherine examining the setup. "The tank with the wrappings. Winslow, Vincent, and Mouse led the installation teams. They placed the new tank for hot water in here, and another one like it behind the Kitchen. So now there's hot and cold water storage in both chambers. We ran two pipelines of our own between some city steam-mains, and when water flows through our lines, those fixtures heat enough for us to use for washing. We pour in fresh water at the intake two levels up, to keep all the tanks full." Rebecca smiled. "If we want hot showers, it's best to hurry in here right after filling time, morning and evening. William arranged the schedule to make it easier to sanitize dishes and clean up after meals. Even with the insulation, the water cools down in the tanks after a while."

She gestured to the chamber floor. "Once it goes down the drains in here, the gray water gets filtered and disinfected in chambers below us. We use the reclaimed water in the Laundry, and to clean things that the foragers bring Down. Furnishings, fabrics, and scrap, mostly."

"I'm impressed," said Catherine. And she was. The Tunnel People had a lot to be proud of. Their ingenuity, their creative drive to do more than merely survive underground, humbled her. She wondered whether she would be able to live so contented a life underneath her more familiar version of Manhattan. She realized that in order to live Below, she would have to give up most of the modern conveniences she was accustomed to. Like not having to think about where her running water came from, or where her waste water ended up.

Rebecca was watching her. Catherine tried to come up with something to say that would express polite, intelligent interest in her surroundings. "Was there any special reason for constructing the hot water tanks now?" she asked.

Rebecca answered, "A city water-main broke this winter, just after Christmas. There was a flood. We lost access to our usual sources of potable water. We wanted to be sure we had clean water stored in the Hub if that happened again. Enough to meet everyone's needs during an emergency. Mouse and Father calculated that four tanks are what we need. So we made the two new ones. And why not try to heat some of that water in the bargain?"

"A flood?" Catherine asked, thinking of the dangers that uncontrolled water would present to people who lived in underground caves and tunnels. "Was anyone hurt?"

Rebecca's pale eyes became sad. "A man drowned. Anzac. Many friends lost all their belongings. Afterward, some people left the Tunnels and moved Above."

And Catherine had known nothing of it. The flood happened before Vincent had returned to her. "Rebecca, I'm so sorry," she said.

Rebecca nodded.

Catherine looked at the tanks again, and at the many unusual shapes and shadows in the firelit room. She saw a series of shallow pools cut into the rock floor, all dry and empty. The pools each had a faucet at one end, with cleverly arranged pipes leading from the faucets to the water tanks. Some pools had what looked like little sluice gates connecting them to other pools. One very shallow concavity met a wall on one side, where three unmatched shower heads curved above drains in that part of the floor. She saw exactly one actual bathtub in the chamber, a vintage clawfoot. That must have been quite the odyssey to carry Down from the city Above.

Rebecca reintroduced Catherine to Tunnels-style composting toilets and hand-pumped

bidets, located in a separate curtained recess off to the right of the main entryway. She showed Catherine that hand mirrors, oral swabs, dental floss, and homemade toothpowders occupied the drawers of each washbasin stand positioned along the stone walls. Rebecca demonstrated how to draw hot and cold water from taps at the base of each water tank, filling a ceramic pitcher for her guest. She guided Catherine toward one corner of the chamber, to a glazed white basin placed upon a wooden stand, and she brought handmade soap and unevenly cut towels.

Looking her over, Rebecca asked, “Would you like to wear a warmer skirt?” Catherine’s pinstriped skirt was knee-length, and smeared with dust. Her nylons were now destined only for disposal in the trash. “Maybe warmer shoes?”

Catherine thought it over and decided to accept the offer. “Yes. Thank you.” She wanted to stay Below for as long as she could. She’d be better able to sit with Vincent if she dressed for the underground atmosphere.

“I’ll only be a moment,” Rebecca said. She pulled a curtain closed behind her, giving Catherine a private alcove. Catherine heard her walk away. It felt good to have a little quiet time alone.

Catherine took off her jacket, sweater, shoes, and stockings. Finding that she had no emery boards with her, she rubbed the edge of a broken fingernail against the rock wall to smooth it, and she peeled green streaks of candle wax off her hands. She washed away the dust and sweat of the day.

She took the hand mirror out of the washstand drawer and thought, *Jeepers!* at her reflection. She picked bits of packing straw out of her hair and used the comb from her purse to smooth out her tangles. She reapplied what little makeup she had put on that morning. Feeling put-together again, Catherine wound her nylons into a little ball and stuffed them deep inside her purse.

Rebecca called to her from outside the alcove, handing in clean Tunnel People clothes when Catherine lifted the curtain aside. The borrowed skirt was long, a predictably patchworked affair made from strips of worn black denim and gray corduroy. Rebecca also gave her warm knitted socks and a pair of soft-soled boots that reminded Catherine of moccasins.

“These should fit,” Rebecca said. “I brought a belt in case the skirt is too loose for you.” She handed that over too.

Catherine smiled. “The finest hotels Above don’t offer this kind of hospitality,” she said.

Rebecca tucked a strawberry blonde corkscrew curl behind one ear. “I wouldn’t know anything about that.” She seemed unimpressed by the compliment, and also unoffended. She waited patiently to see if Catherine had anything further to say to her.

Catherine reminded herself not to pass judgment on another yet another Tunnel Person. *Cathy, unless she tells you so herself, you can’t know for sure that Rebecca doesn’t like you. Although...if Father is the stormy sea and Winslow is a volcano, this woman is a glacier.* Catherine left her impressions at the elemental level and retreated behind the curtain to dress.

When she emerged from the bathing chamber, Rebecca was waiting in the tunnel to guide her back. She didn’t ask if Catherine intended to return to the Hospital Chamber. She simply assumed this was the case and led the way. “I can bring a supper tray in a little while,” Rebecca commented. “Are you hungry?”

Catherine was famished. “Yes.”

“I’ll bring whatever William is serving tonight, but there’s always a choice of drinks. Would you like anything specific? I think we have lemonade at the moment. Beer, wine, apple juice. All kinds of tea.”

“Lemonade sounds lovely.”

Rebecca smiled. “Then lemonade shall you have.”

Catherine’s curiosity got the better of her. “Do Tunnel People assign such capable hostesses to all their unexpected guests? Or are these special circumstances?”

Rebecca remained immune to the implied compliment, but she stopped walking to say, “Our way is to help each other, Catherine. You know that, don’t you?” She sounded quite serious.

“Yes,” Catherine said, uncertain. “I do know that.”

“To answer your question, we enjoy our guests very much, and these are *extraordinary* circumstances.” Rebecca smiled again, and a little blush colored her peaches-and-cream complexion. “Please don’t be afraid of me. I know we keep meeting during difficult situations, but that’s neither your fault nor mine.”

Father might disagree with you, where I am concerned, Catherine thought, but she began to lower her guard.

Rebecca started walking again. “Our world must seem so strange to you,” she said.

“It does,” Catherine told her. “In a good way, though. I’m still getting used to it. And to all of you.”

“Getting used to life Below takes most people a long time. Everyone agrees that you’re an unusually quick study.”

Catherine didn’t know what to say to that.

“I was that way too,” Rebecca said. “When I came Below.”

“Like what? A quick study?”

Rebecca nodded. “Pascal told me so.” She smiled again. “We have that in common, at the least. You and I.”

There was something in the other woman’s face that Catherine couldn’t sort out. Something complicated. They were approaching the crowd outside the Hospital Chamber now, and Catherine didn’t have time to ask any more questions. Rebecca’s placidity curdled at the sight of the people waiting for them. Her back stiffened as she swept through the group, and past the entry curtain.

Catherine clutched her folded skirt and the heels of her street shoes, moving beyond these obstacles more slowly. Inside the chamber, she almost collided with Winslow. He looked more bearish than ever.

“Hey,” he said. “Rebecca just clued me in about the peanut gallery out there. Excuse me while I go fix all that.” He stepped around her and shoved the curtain aside. The faded scarlet fabric dropped down behind him. Catherine stopped where she was, listening to Winslow disperse the crowd.

“Go get your suppers,” his voice boomed. “You’re only blocking traffic out here. When there’s something to know, the medical folks will let us *all* know. Go on, now. You kids, too. Shoo!”

Catherine shook her head and turned away from the curtain. She saw that Rebecca stood beside her, also listening. The young woman had crossed her arms in what Catherine suspected was an unconscious imitation of the burly man out there in the corridor.

“We all have different ways of helping,” Rebecca whispered to Catherine, as though there had been no interruption to their conversation. “Sometimes I’m a good hostess, I suppose. Winslow, meanwhile, is always good at *not* being a host.”

Catherine’s smile was the real thing this time.

III

25 March 1987
Wednesday Night

Catherine walked past the screens again. Father was standing at Vincent's side. The professor's notebooks occupied the seat of Father's chair and Catherine's teacup was gone from beneath her own. Father placed a wrapped hot water bottle against Vincent's neck and left shoulder while Mary adjusted the blankets around their patient.

Catherine looked at the table behind Father. The tea tray had also gone and the basin of hot water bottles was empty. She set her purse, her folded upperworld skirt, and her shoes beneath her chair.

Winslow leaned into the enclosed space from behind her. "Rebecca and I are gonna fetch supper," he said. "Everyone in here want some?"

"Yes," said Mary. "And maybe some broth for Vincent?"

Winslow ducked back out.

"Only if he wakes," Father said, once the sound of Winslow's footsteps moved past the heavy rustle of the entrance curtain. "What Vincent needs most right now is rest. I don't like the look of that shoulder. It indicates much larger problems."

"He's only bruised it, hasn't he?" Mary asked.

"Bruised and *re*bruised, I think. And he took two darts in that shoulder, on top of everything else. But these are days' old injuries, Mary."

That seemed to mean something to both of them. Mary frowned. "Then why hasn't he healed?"

"I don't think he's been sleeping," Father said. He moved around the head of the bed to do something to the IV lines. "I also think the tranquilizer overwhelmed his system." He looked up and noticed Catherine. He nodded to her.

Her presence accepted once again, Catherine let out her breath. *If he hasn't shuttled me off by now, Father isn't going to,* she hoped. She came closer to the bed. Vincent lay shivering beneath the blankets, still asleep.

"What's happening to him?" Catherine asked.

Father said nothing. Mary told her, "Vincent must be getting warm enough to feel cold. These treatments are helping him to shiver steadily now, to create body heat."

Catherine's sorrow for her friend became further entangled in her anger toward his amoral abductors. *A thin, dirty blanket and a throw pillow for a sick man,* she thought, *in a place that couldn't have been a whit warmer than sixty degrees.* Catherine refused to cry, and she refused to hate the deceased professor. She refused to wonder about the malevolent second man, and she also refused to think any more about the chilly room that had become a make-shift crypt.

"What's wrong with Vincent's shoulder?" she asked instead.

"There was a construction accident. In the Maze, last week." Father's answer came out terse, but he had also used that tone with Mary just now. He moved around the bed to stand beside Catherine. *Okay.* He still wasn't angry with *her*. That was good. She glanced at the stack of documents on Father's chair.

Father does better than I do when it comes to taking action while he's upset, Catherine thought. *Vincent was hurt last week and I didn't even notice anything when we spoke. I was too busy being...confused. I'm so sorry, Vincent.* She took Vincent's hand.

At her touch, Vincent's whole body tensed. He woke, gasping, "Please no door!"

Catherine jumped too, and almost dropped his hand. *That's the fourth time he's done that today,* she thought. She didn't know what Vincent's reflex meant, or why her touch kept startling him so.

Beside her, Father froze.

"What is it, Vincent?" Mary asked from the other side of the bed.

Vincent didn't look at Mary. "No cold," he panted. "No d-door." He blinked aimlessly around him, shuddering. Catherine felt his right hand clench spasmodically in her grasp. "Good...g-good...promise."

"Mary," Father said. "I need a pillow and a blanket from my bed. I need them now, please." Catherine looked at the old man. Eyes wide, Father bent to touch his son's face.

Mary didn't move. "Any particular ones?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter. From my bed. Quickly."

Mary hurried away.

"What is it?" Catherine asked, whispering.

Father didn't answer her. "Vincent. You're safe at home now."

"I...I do not f-feel well. Hurts. C-cold." Vincent's teeth were chattering.

"I know. You'll feel warmer soon."

Vincent lifted his head from his pillow. He looked at Catherine's hand holding his. Then he looked at the plastic tube, and the bandages on his arm. His left hand jerked toward his right side. He moved his arm from the shoulder, Catherine saw, not from the elbow, his hand twisted into a senseless angle at the wrist. Father caught that hand before Vincent could touch any of the tape or bandaging, or the IV connection.

"Leave it alone, Vincent," he said.

"I. D-don't. Want that," Vincent grated through his teeth.

Father leaned even closer. "Vincent, that drip line is saving your life. Don't touch it."

Vincent looked up at Father, pleading silently.

"I know. Hush, I *know*. I promise to remove it the moment you don't need it anymore. All right?"

Vincent turned his face toward the hot water bottle bundle on his other shoulder, shutting his eyes tight. He mumbled into his pillow and the towel. "No use. There's t-too many. Sh-shadows. M-more of the. Latter mule. Stolen blood. B-bars. Bad water b-bad. Meat. *La Bête Noire*. Mercy. S-seasons justice. Pray for mercy. Do p-pray. Have mercy. Scraps."

Oh, my God, Catherine thought.

Father said nothing. He only released Vincent's left hand to brush golden strands of hair away from Vincent's face.

"Father?" Catherine asked him, a little louder.

Father shook his head at her and didn't look around. *Not now,* he was saying.

Catherine took it upon herself to issue her own self-scolding. *Be grateful he's letting you stay at all, Cathy. Back off.* Still holding Vincent's cold right hand, Catherine sat down in her chair.

Father ran his fingers over Vincent's hair. Catherine wished someone would find a brush and try to tame the haggard curls before they became even more tangled than they already were. Father began whispering to his son. Catherine couldn't hear what he said. Vincent's breath came quick and shallow again. He stopped mumbling. Catherine remembered his vacant fright back in the tunnel before Winslow picked him up that last time. She guessed that she and Father used the same method to calm Vincent: quiet assurances of love.

Mary returned. She helped Father cover Vincent's chest and shoulders with the blanket

she brought in. Father didn't bother to pull the blanket down over the rest of his patient, he just tucked one end of it around Vincent's face like a large muffler. He lifted the other blankets to snug the new pillow beneath Vincent's right arm. Catherine saw wrapped water bottles arranged along Vincent's side before Father pulled the covers back into place.

Vincent turned his head toward Father and his breathing slowed down. It amazed Catherine to see how quickly that happened. He continued to shiver, but fear left Vincent's face.

"That's better," Father said. Catherine heard no trace of anger in his voice. "Try to sleep." He took a step away from the bed and stood gazing down at his patient.

Vincent looked at Catherine with dark, unsmiling eyes. Catherine squeezed his hand. "I'm here," she said.

"Yes." He looked dreadfully tired. He closed his eyes. They watched him in silence, until Vincent nuzzled his nose beneath a fold of Father's blanket and lay still. Mary sighed.

"I'd forgotten about that," she said.

Father did not reply. He picked up the stack of books so he could sit in his chair.

Mary came around the bed and patted Father's shoulder. "I'll go set a table for supper," she murmured.

"Thank you, Mary." He touched her hand. They looked into each other's eyes. Mary continued out beyond the screens.

Is there something between Mary and Father? Catherine wondered. *Or is there something to do with Vincent that they don't want to talk about in front of me?* She heard the sounds of Mary's preparations in the chamber, some distance away.

Catherine hadn't spent much time with Vincent in the context of his home and his family. Up to the present moment, she'd been given only a few brief glimpses into his world. She felt very much the stranger here. There were relational undercurrents flowing between everyone that she couldn't quite follow. It also frustrated her to know that her first impressions about individual subterraneans were almost always inaccurate.

In the world Above, Catherine prided herself for her ability to read all kinds of people and situations. Below, she was adrift. It was not unlike visiting a foreign city on short notice. So far, no one seemed too put off by her questions, but for every question she asked, ten more arose in her mind. Catherine wished she'd spent more time over the past few months getting to know Vincent, and less time discussing herself. Here and now, she sat right next to Vincent, yet she missed him terribly. She missed his patient explanations.

Father sat beside her in silence, glaring at the closed notebooks on his lap. Catherine tried to think of a way to ask him questions that he would be willing to answer. *Dad once told me that I'm a fine lawyer,* she thought. *When I put my mind to it. Joe Maxwell and John Moreno think the same thing about me. And Jenny. And Edie, too. Fine lawyers are good at asking the right questions and avoiding the wrong ones. Surely I can talk to Dr. Jacob Wells without getting myself tossed out of the Tunnels on my ear.*

There was only one way to find out. "Are...the notebooks any help to you?" Catherine asked.

"Hmm?" Father looked at her like he'd forgotten she was there. "Oh." He glanced down at the books, frowning. "They are not improving my outlook on the general state of humanity, but I'm grateful you brought them Below with you."

"Do you need to see the videos?"

"*No,*" he said sharply. He softened his voice. "No. I think it's best if those recordings are destroyed as soon as possible. No one needs to see them."

Having awakened her inner attorney, Catherine found it hard to hear him talk about

destroying evidence, sight unseen. What if something on those tapes could be used to help Vincent? She withheld her objections, and her doubts. All the same, Father seemed to understand her difficulty. Perhaps the expression on her face gave her away.

"The written records are sufficient for my purposes, Catherine. Whatever else this Hughes might have been, he was thorough." Father closed his eyes and shook his head. "Dear God, he *was* that."

"How badly have they hurt Vincent?" asked Catherine.

Father opened his eyes and looked at her. "How frightened did you feel in that tunnel, before our group of young scholars arrived?"

Catherine had—summarized that part of the journey Below. Evidently, Father deduced more from her account than Catherine had expected him to. *He may not share Vincent's more extraordinary abilities, but Father has his own means of insight into the human heart,* Catherine thought.

She whispered, "I believed Vincent was dying right in front of me. So did he. I was terrified."

"Then you don't need to ask me about something you've already discerned for yourself," Father said.

Catherine didn't know how he managed to fit an admonishment, his answer to her question, and an affirmation of Catherine's own common sense into the same sentence. *Like father, like son?* she wondered, remembering Vincent's healing words at the secret door beneath Central Park. Father's words to her now didn't feel *healing*, but they did feel true.

He set the notebooks on the table and rubbed his forehead with tented fingers. In the chamber beyond Vincent's screened-in space, Catherine heard voices speaking—Mary's, Winslow's, and Rebecca's.

"It sounds like supper has arrived," Father said, sitting up straight. "Go and have a bite to eat, if you can. Please tell the others I'll be out once you've finished your meal."

Catherine wasn't sure whether "you've" and "your" referred to herself alone, or to herself in the company of the others dining in the Hospital Chamber, but she accepted Father's plan for the evening meal. She rested Vincent's hand upon the contours of Father's blanketed pillow.

"I won't be long," she said to both Father and his sleeping charge.

"I know," Father said. As Catherine turned away, Father picked up one of the notebooks. He opened it to a page some two-thirds through and began to read.

Supper was savory stew and thick slices of brown bread, with halved red grapes and cherries in a spiced yogurt sauce for dessert. The promised lemonade was homemade and a little tart for Catherine's taste, but she found it just as refreshing as the tea had been earlier. The little dinner party didn't talk much as they sat at Mary's elegantly arranged card table. Winslow only spoke once.

"You get roped in here for runner duty?" he asked Rebecca around a wad of bread.

Rebecca filled her cup with lemonade while she answered. "Winslow, I've been working in the Pipe Chamber all week. This is the quietest room in the Inner Circle. I volunteered."

Winslow gave a grim chuckle and that was all the conversation any of them had the heart to undertake. Mary finished eating first and excused herself to bring a thermos to Father—the broth, Catherine assumed. Mary reemerged from Vincent's space and left the Hospital Chamber, taking the empty lemonade carafe with her. Catherine stood up from the table. Winslow began clearing away her dishes.

"Thanks," Catherine said. "And please give my compliments to the chef."

"I'll be sure to pass that along," Winslow said. "William's never met a compliment he

didn't like."

Isn't that the point of compliments? Catherine thought as she returned to Vincent's bedside. *To enjoy being appreciated?* Within the screens, things were as she had left them, except that Father was now writing on an empty page in one of the notebooks, instead of reading.

Catherine returned to her chair, uncomfortable with the quiet. She watched clear liquid transfer itself, drop by drop, from the refilled (or perhaps the replaced) IV bottles into the two small drip chambers. She watched Vincent rest, trembling even in his sleep, hurt and cold and ill. She watched Father's fountain pen mark the page with his swift, antiquated script.

To Catherine, it felt like she sat in the eye of a storm. She thought: *What did you expect, Cathy? That you'd get him home and all would be right with the world? That Father would have some magic potion to make Vincent well again?* That wasn't how things worked in real life.

She wondered if this was how Vincent felt after she was shot, and she wondered how he had coped with this sort of waiting as he watched over her that night. Catherine remembered awakening in her hospital room, groggy and frightened. Somehow, Vincent had come to her even there. He risked a confining room in a public place to be with her, and to stay beside her as she drifted in and out of a heavily medicated sleep.

Vincent's eyes, blue-green under fluorescent lighting, gazed into hers whenever Catherine fought free of her feverish dreams. His presence comforted her. When she woke the next morning, she saw her father sitting beside her. Catherine had been ashamed to feel a moment's sharp dismay—but Daddy brought his own comforts.

If only Vincent could have remained after the dawn, so that Catherine might have *both* of them together, loving her past her pain. Catherine wished that the two men she most cared about could someday be in the same room together. She also wished she felt better about being in the same room with Vincent's father.

Uneasily asleep, Vincent moaned. Catherine reached to hold his hand. *I'll share the comfort you've given me,* she thought. *I'll stay, the way you've stayed with me through everything.*

Father looked up from his writing and cleared his throat. "Before you do that, may I...make a suggestion?"

Catherine paused. Do what? And what suggestion? Father set the notebook aside and stood up. He took hold of the hand that had been reaching for Vincent's. He drew Catherine to her feet.

"Come," Father said, bringing her closer to the bed. He gently pulled his blanket away from Vincent's face, moving Catherine's hand near enough that she could feel Vincent's breath on her skin.

"We have to treat Vincent a little differently when he is ill," Father instructed, very softly. "Illness interferes with Vincent's empathic perceptions, to one degree or another. We have to help him match physical and emotional sensations. When he's awake, you must make sure that he can see or hear your approach. Asleep, you give him this chance to know you're near. Before you touch him."

Father placed Catherine's hand on Vincent's chest and then Catherine understood what he was doing. Vincent didn't wake this time, but sighed beneath her palm, knowing her, trusting her, comforted.

Scent again, Catherine thought, intrigued. *My scent.* A strange question entered her mind: *What do I smell like to him?* She thought about how carefully Father shared this with her. She thought about Mary's errand a little while ago.

"The blanket," she whispered. "The pillow."

“Mm-hm,” Father said. He watched for her reaction. Catherine returned his look with all the unsurprised poise of a well-bred socialite. This earned her a small smile and a nod.

“Thus far, the...connection between the two of you has made this lesson unnecessary. Since the night you first met, Vincent has always been aware of you.” Father sat down again. “Perhaps too aware of you, sometimes. I’ve watched him struggle for balance...between love and fear.”

Catherine didn’t respond to that. She sat down and reached for Vincent’s hand a second time.

“Gently now,” Father warned. “His wrists are bruised.”

Catherine shared a knowing silence with him. Vincent’s wrists had also been bruised after he escaped from the Silks, because they had chained him. Catherine’s heart whispered Vincent’s name, grieving for his pain.

She also thought, *You may not think so, Father, but I do understand the tension that exists between love and fear.*

She held Vincent’s hand and straightened his fingers, feeling the knotted shapes of his knuckles and the sharp points of his claws. “I’ve been very afraid *for* Vincent, but I’m not afraid *of* him, Father.” Catherine raised her chin to look into Father’s eyes. “I’m not afraid of anything about him.”

“Does Vincent know that?” Father asked, his tone steely, yet unaccusing. The question was an honest one, demanding an honest answer.

Vincent knows what I feel, thought Catherine. *Or he did, before that professor’s criminal enterprise interrupted our lives...and Vincent’s health. Of course he knows I don’t fear him. Whatever he is, he’s beautiful. I know him now. I know him!*

Father was still looking at her in that strange way.

“What do you mean, Father?” she asked.

He kept quiet for a while. At last he said, “It’s easy to lie to oneself. It’s almost impossible to lie to my son without him sensing it.”

Catherine kept her face smooth as a porcelain mask. Father, however, seemed all-too-well acquainted with that ploy. She had not impressed or intimidated him.

“I saw him, Catherine. Before Vincent brought you to Narcissa that night. And after he came home.”

His words stabbed Catherine through the heart. She had never imagined that Father might be in any way involved with that debacle. It did not hurt her any less to see that he took no pleasure from reminding her of that night.

“I also saw him after he spoke with you Thursday evening. I was with him when he received your message the following morning. I know my son, Catherine. I know what your fear does to him.”

Catherine opened her mouth.

Father shook his head. “Not here,” he said. “Not to me. When Vincent is better. Talk with him then.” He held her gaze for a moment longer, then he picked up the open notebook and continued writing in it.

Scalded, Catherine thought, *So Father does blame me for this. Maybe. Or some of it? God! I don’t know!* Father made no sense to her. *Or maybe I’m just too tired to sort through all these feelings.*

Catherine looked down at Vincent’s hand. *Stay calm,* she told herself. *It’s enough that Vincent is found, and that Vincent is home. Accept the gift. Be grateful that Father knows what to do for him.*

Mary entered. “Father?” she said. “Your food is getting cold.”

“The least of my worries,” Catherine heard Vincent’s physician mutter. He tore a few pages out of the notebook. “I’m coming now, Mary,” he said.

He gave Mary the papers. “See that these are delivered immediately. It’s getting late. Send messengers in pairs.”

“No children,” Mary said.

“Agreed. Send sentries, if you have to.”

Mary nodded and departed.

Father stood up and rearranged his blanket over Vincent’s arms and shoulders, taking care to leave both IV sites uncovered. “One of our Helpers is an old friend and colleague of mine,” he said, for Catherine’s benefit. “A doctor. I’m hoping he’s available for a consultation tonight. Also, I hope that he can do some swift research for me...about the drugs those men forced upon Vincent. Then maybe we can determine what we’re up against here.”

Even after what he’d said about her fear, Father continued to give no indication that he might be angry with Catherine herself. *Face value, Cathy,* she thought. *Take his words for what they are and leave it there. You’ll feel saner.*

Father took up his crutch and left Catherine alone with Vincent. She leaned over in her chair, resting her cheek upon the back of Vincent’s hand.

“*You* know me,” Catherine whispered. “*You* know that I love you. I have so much I want to tell you. About fear, and healing from fear, and...blessings, too. So much has happened this week. As Father said: when you’re better, we’ll talk...and you’ll be better soon.”

She sat up, and kept watch. She hoped that her touch communicated strength and love, whether Vincent felt her presence or not. Gradually, Vincent’s shivering lessened. His muzzle lost its unhealthy blueness. For the first time since Catherine found him locked up in that cage, Vincent began to breathe quietly and deeply.

“Yes,” she whispered to him. “Breathe. *Be.*”

Father returned from his meal. He took one look at Vincent and reached into his doctor’s bag for the stethoscope. Listening to Vincent’s heart, he seemed vastly relieved. “*There* it is,” Father said.

“What?” Catherine asked.

“Deep sleep. True sleep.” Father moved to the other side of the bed to check Vincent’s blood pressure. “Color is better,” Father murmured. “Pulse is stronger.”

“His hand is still cold,” Catherine said. “Although he stopped shivering a little while ago.”

Father touched Vincent’s throat and chest. “His core temperature is improved too.” He closed his eyes for a second. “He’s emerging from shock. Thank God.” He unfolded the lower edge of his blanket and tugged it down over Vincent’s hands. Catherine reached to help him.

“Mind the IV line on your side,” Father said. “His hands will warm up as the rest of him does.”

Catherine was careful as she folded the blanket over Vincent’s hand and around the bandaged place on his arm. She sat back, rejoicing, her own hand already warmer beneath the worn quilting of Father’s comforter. She heard a sound behind her. Catherine looked over her shoulder and saw Winslow standing there, watching.

“Good news?” he asked. “Please?”

“Good news,” Father said.

Winslow blew out a sigh and went to his seat. He didn’t try to hold Vincent’s hand or talk to him. He only sat watching his friend’s face. “It’s about time we had a little good news,” he

said.

Father smiled, but his eyes were still serious as the stormy sea. He returned his medical instruments to his bag and sat beside Catherine again. The three of them watched, and waited, and Vincent slept.

Some while later, Catherine raised her head. Father stood beside her, one hand on her shoulder. “Catherine?” he asked.

“What is it?” She looked at Vincent. He was asleep in his hospital bed. His hand felt warm in hers.

“It’s a little before midnight now,” said Father. “You’re tired. I think you should go home. Get some rest. Come Down again later.”

Catherine rubbed her eyes. Midnight? She must have nodded off in her chair. Her back ached and her neck felt stiff. She wanted to stay. She also wanted to sleep.

“I’ve already sent Winslow to bed,” Father said. “If that tells you anything.”

Catherine looked to where the big man had been sitting. Rebecca perched there now, looking serene as a Madonna with her white hands folded in her lap. Footsteps sounded on the floor beyond the screens. Father took his hand from Catherine’s shoulder. Mary reappeared.

“Cullen just came in,” Mary said. “He and Marc found him at the hospital.”

“Can he come?” Father asked.

Mary nodded. “Marc will bring him Down after he’s finished with his patient.”

“Good,” Father said. “*Good*.”

This must be the Helper who was a doctor. Catherine thought: *There will be two doctors down here soon, and Mary, and a host of friends, if they are needed*. *Father is right. I should go home. I should sleep.*

She gathered her things from beneath her chair and got to her feet. As it turned out, her whole body was crackly and sore. *I only fought for my life today, and carried things that were too heavy for me over a long distance. I went spelunking too. And then I ran without any shoes on. A year ago, I’d be dead to the world by now.*

“I think I *would* like to go home,” she said. Mary and Father turned to her. “Is there someone who can show me the way to my building?”

“I can,” Rebecca said. The young woman stood up.

Catherine gave her what was probably a very tired-looking smile. “Thank you.”

Catherine leaned down over Vincent’s bed, bringing her lips close to the side of his face. She felt his slow breath warm her skin. “I love you, Vincent,” she whispered. She set her free hand on his chest, above his heart, and Vincent didn’t wake. “I need to go Above for a while. I need to sleep too. But I’ll be back soon. Good night.”

She stood up and walked toward the screens. Mary and Father were waiting for her. They both gave her their immediate attention.

“Good night, Catherine,” Mary said. “Come Down when you’re rested. Signal on the pipes. We’ll send a guide to you.”

At least this Tunnel Person posed no mystery to Catherine. Mary smiled at her affectionately. Catherine thought, *If she knew me better, I think Mary might hug me*.

“Good night,” Catherine replied. She looked into Father’s eyes. He was also tired, but Catherine doubted he’d be sleeping much tonight.

“Catherine,” he said. “Once again, I have no words to thank you. I—” He cleared his throat. “*Thank you.* God bless you for your love, and your...tenacity.”

Catherine stood in front of Father, baffled, until Rebecca took her gently by one elbow and pulled her away. She saw Mary move toward the place Rebecca had vacated. Then Catherine

and Rebecca were out in the Hospital Chamber, and then the empty corridor. They walked slowly through the underworld, side by side.

"I do not understand that man," Catherine said. "One minute I'm convinced he's furious with me, and the next he's blessing me with all the sincerity of a devout priest."

"Would it confuse you even more to know that Father can do both things at the same time?" Rebecca asked.

Catherine laughed. "Confuse me? Yes. Surprise me? No."

Rebecca smiled. "Come," she said. "Your building is this way."

The moccasin-boots were *much* better footwear for the Tunnels terrain than Catherine's gray Donna Karan high heels. She felt grateful that Rebecca had brought the boots to her. Catherine wondered who they belonged to, and who she needed to thank when she returned them, but she didn't ask her companion about it. Rebecca seemed content to match Catherine's pace and walk in silence through tunnel after tunnel. Rebecca's quietness provided a great gift to her. Catherine found herself wanting nothing more than a hot shower and a long sleep.

They arrived at the passage into Catherine's subbasement. Rebecca halted. Catherine thanked her for the escort. "One of these days, I'll figure out your system. Then I won't be such a bother to everyone."

Rebecca pursed her lips, a twinkle in her eye. "The day you figure out the system is the day we elect ourselves a new security warden," she said. "And if you ever refer to yourself as a 'bother' again, I shall personally sit you down and tell you every story I know about a certain young man named Mouse. You'll never apply that moniker to yourself thereafter."

Catherine laughed again. "All right," she said, surrendering. "Point taken."

"Rest well," said Rebecca.

Catherine watched her turn and walk around a corner, vanishing back into the world Below with scarcely a whisper of fabric against brick. *Home,* Catherine thought, remembering the glad warmth of Vincent's hand after she woke in her chair. *Both of us. All of us. And there's no place like it.* She settled the strap of her purse over one shoulder and returned to the world Above for the night.

IV

26 March 1987
Thursday, Very Early Morning

Upon opening his eyes, Vincent first saw Mary. She stood over him with what smelled like a cup of chicken stock in her hand. She looked pleased with him for waking, and made happy sounds when he drank most of the broth. She looked sad when he choked on the rest. Dabbing at his chin with a towel, she told him Catherine had gone home to sleep. She told him Father went to meet Peter, who was coming Below to see Vincent. She asked him if he wanted anything.

"Water," Vincent said.

She brought cool water to him, and he drank it, and he wanted more, so Mary brought him more. He caused the water to spill when he coughed suddenly. Mary took his cup away and patted at Vincent's damp shirt with the towel.

We're going to go through a lot of towels, at this rate, he thought. Towels were fine with

him, though. Towels were better than a stinking beige blanket and a slick metal floor.

"Are you warm enough?" Mary asked. She tucked a quilt around him.

Vincent didn't know. He didn't feel warm. He also didn't feel cold. He felt tired. His bedclothes smelled clean. He wished he did.

When Vincent didn't answer her, Mary sat down on a chair beside the bed. "You'll be all right now," she said. "Just rest. Everything's all right now."

Vincent had trouble believing this because the next time he became aware of her, Mary was standing above him again, this time shining a light in his eyes. If she knew how much this hurt him, Vincent was certain she would stop at once, but he couldn't find the words to tell her. "Do you see, Father?" Mary asked.

"Yes," Father's voice said from somewhere beyond the light. "That's not a postictal condition. It's pharmacological. Peter?"

"Yes. Dilated," Peter Alcott agreed. There was movement nearby, containers being opened and closed. "Susan's friend got back to me with the information I requested. I had to wait for the fax to come through." Papers rustled.

Shapes wandered beyond the light. Vincent didn't like that. It felt—*bad* to see those misshapen Shadows. The space around him smelled like home, but the brightness in his face reminded him of—*No*.

No. No. No. He turned his head, trying to escape the light.

"Is he waking?" Mary asked.

Vincent didn't hear if anyone answered her or not. He shut his eyes against all the unwelcome sights and sounds. He slipped away into quietness.

Then someone was trying to take something from him. Vincent attempted to growl, but only managed a disgruntled groan. He tried to tighten his arms around a lovely thing. *Soft. Safe. Want this,* he thought. He pressed his face into the good smell.

"Mary," Father said. "Leave him be."

"That can't be comfortable, Father," Mary protested.

"If it were *un*comfortable, he would move."

"But how can he breathe like that?"

"Mary, this year alone he's survived fire, flood, a cave-in, a Cadillac, and God knows what else. A pillow isn't going to end him now."

Pillow, Vincent thought. *That's a good name for this thing.* Mary stopped tugging at it.

"Here it is," Peter said, and sheets of paper crackled. "Resedation. It's why Martinez says he stopped using it with his big cats. They simply cannot metabolize this drug. After everything else he tried wore off, *this* stuff stayed reactive. Look at his notes. The timing matches his observations."

"You said the kidneys do remove it from the body," Mary said, moving away from the place where Vincent lay listening.

"With adequate water intake, yes...the kidneys *and* the liver working together. *Slowly*, I might add. But with such large overdoses I think we're dealing with enterohepatic recycling. I also think most of Vincent's digestive system has simply shut down. I'd be surprised if anything has made it to either the intestines or the kidneys for removal."

Father spoke again, sounding worried and tired. "Peter, his blood pressure was next to nothing. He had no water to spare for those processes. Our concern is that his kidneys weren't functioning at all."

"And I share your concern. It's precisely why *these* are so devastating." A finger tapped against the pages of a book. "That energy expenditure pulls more toxins into circulation. His

blood chemistry at this point—" Peter became quiet. Vincent imagined him shaking his head.

"All right, that reminds me," Father said. More paper rustled. "About the synthetic toxins? Hughes seemed more concerned with total chemical concentrations than with the ratios between the separate drugs. But I've gone over these records and, well, look at this. According to the Sunday night blood test, the concentration of that first agent measured much—*much*—higher than any of the others. What if the assistant failed to *mix* the professor's two vials when he prepared that second batch of darts? What if he only used the one compound?"

A chair creaked as the person sitting in it leaned toward Father. "You think they used the anesthetics without the sedative," Peter said.

"It's possible. An inexperienced student, handling someone else's formulation. Hughes checked Vincent's blood, but not the darts. Or if he did check the darts, he didn't write about doing so. But from what I can tell, that would have been unlike the man."

Peter sighed. "It *would* explain the neurological damage we're seeing now. What were those original dosages supposed to be?"

Hands flipped through pages. Vincent tipped his head so that his jaw rested flat upon his pillow. Now he could see what was happening beyond his nest of blankets. He saw his unsleeved arm a few inches from his chin and felt a moment's inner chill. Then he saw a bandage on that arm, but no intravenous needle, and that was very good. He looked past his arm and up into Father's gray-blue eyes.

Father and son gazed at each other until their two companions noticed that Father wasn't talking to either of them anymore. *Father,* Vincent thought, amazed. *Father here. Father with me. Father.*

Vincent's guardian handed a notebook to Peter. He bent forward to touch Vincent's face. Father smelled like Earl Gray tea and leather bookbindings. Vincent leaned his head into the caress. *Soft...safe...*

"Vincent? Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"How do you feel?"

"Thirsty."

Mary got up from her seat and poured water from a pitcher into a cup.

"Peter?" Father said, and both men stood up.

The two doctors helped Vincent turn onto his back.

"Do you feel lightheaded at all?" Peter asked.

Vincent thought about Peter's question and said, "Yes."

"We'll take this slowly then," Father said.

They unwound blankets and stacked pillows into a pile behind him. Then they helped him sit up enough to drink. Vincent regretted losing his close contact with the softest pillow, but he was grateful for the water. He drank without incident this time. Mary took the cup away and Vincent looked at his surroundings, ignoring the ache in his head.

"Hospital Chamber?" he asked.

"Yes," Father said. He sat down on the bed and took Vincent's hand. Observing the contact, Vincent closed his eyes to listen with his heart. He had no perception of Father beyond what his functioning physical senses told him—except for a soul-deep certainty that someone who loved him had come near.

Vincent opened his eyes. "I can...almost feel you, Father," he said softly.

Father considered the statement. "Do you feel this?" he asked, pressing Vincent's fingers a little.

"No."

Father leaned closer and held Vincent's hand over his heart. "This?"

Vincent nodded, knowing what Father meant. "Yes. Your presence."

"Ah-hmm." Father made his thinking-things-through sound and stroked Vincent's head. "And what about this?" he asked.

"The pressure of your hand," Vincent said. "The sound of the friction against my hair."

"May we determine what else you can feel?" Father asked then.

Vincent nodded.

So his healers worked together to conduct a meticulous examination and physical cleansing, unlacing Vincent's nightshirt and moving blankets aside in sections. Peter placed pillows and towels where they needed to be, supporting Vincent's back and limbs whenever they moved their patient in the bed. Mary rubbed sodium bicarbonate and ground oats into Vincent's fur, then brushed the absorbent powders out again. She patted lavender water over his hair and pressed his dampened locks between the folds of a towel to refresh his mane. Father washed those places where Vincent's fur was gone, and then he applied Mary's homemade herbal salve to soothe Vincent's multitude of bruises, his cracked nose and lips, the raw encrusted places where his skin had been scraped away, and his now-sloughing dart wounds.

Father and Peter began to ask many questions. They asked Vincent what kinds of touch he could feel and watched him try to move as they directed him to. They showed him the sensory tools they used before they used them—cotton wisps, safety pins, stoppered ampules they filled with hot or cold water, a pleximeter and pressure hammer to test Vincent's diminished reflexes. Mary tirelessly repositioned the pillows and blankets as they performed each test, and after each test ended she quickly covered whatever part of him had been exposed. None of their actions were unexpected; they had most recently performed these same tests with Father after the cave-in.

Vincent remained gratefully aware that their hands were clean and kind, doing nothing needless. They touched him with patient indifference, with loving efficiency. His healers spoke quietly, and they spoke to Vincent more than they spoke to each other. They listened to his answers. Mary stopped trying to comb his hair when Vincent said it hurt his head. Father swiftly completed his initial investigation of the area when they learned that Vincent's concave abdomen had become very sensitive to pressure.

In many places, Vincent could perceive weight or pressure only. Some parts of him could also feel hurt when touched—his belly, his shoulders, his back, his scalp. With mild provocation, his arms could produce a sensation of tingling pain, but nothing more than that. He was completely and painlessly numb below his knees and elbows. Mary became perturbed when Vincent couldn't move the fingers of his left hand at Peter's request.

"My hand has been reluctant from the moment I knew myself a prisoner," Vincent murmured.

"But now—" Vincent heard anguish in Mary's voice.

"It's all right," Father said. Vincent wasn't sure which one of them the good doctor wished to comfort with his words. "Mary, support his arm and wrist. Vincent, can you try again?"

Mary's steady hands gripped Vincent's forearm. Vincent concentrated. Slowly, his fingers furled and unfurled. This satisfied Mary. Vincent felt tentatively hopeful. They were all enheartened by the fact that Vincent could readily move everything else, although each attempt made him shake like a dead leaf on a winter tree.

They gave him more water to drink and tested his other senses, asking him to look at

things they held before his eyes, and to listen for sounds they manufactured. They used a pipette to place droplets of saline and sucrose solutions on his tongue. They asked him to identify substances by smell.

"Close your eyes, Vincent," Father said. "What is this?"

"Beeswax," Vincent answered.

"And now?"

"Roses." Vincent smiled. "Mary's hand cream."

"And this?"

Then there was movement to either side of him.

"Vincent," Peter said. "Vincent, do you hear me?"

"Hmm? Yes? Black ink." Vincent opened his eyes. "From Father's fountain pen." He saw that Father was holding onto his patient's wrist to measure Vincent's pulse. Father glanced up at Peter and Mary.

"Good, Vincent. Very good," Father said.

They asked him to recall names and dates and other historical facts. They asked him to repeat number sequences, and to recite rhymed couplets. Vincent began to feel very tired.

At last, his caregivers arranged his body into what Mary deemed a comfortable position. She tied the strings of Vincent's shirt and pulled the blankets over him. Peter replaced the nearly empty intravenous solution bottle with a full one. Vincent looked dispassionately at the line still connected to his left hand. Better to see only one IV attached to him than two.

There's no reason to mind the needle, he told himself. *My hand certainly doesn't know it's there.*

But *Vincent* knew it was there, just as he knew that another tube Father had also placed was still there. This knowledge made a difference to him. The intravenous needle made a *big* difference. Thinking of the needlemarks already dotting his skin, Vincent sighed.

"Sleep," Father directed. He unrolled Vincent's right sleeve over the bandage on that arm and pulled the blanket up over Vincent's shoulder.

More sleep sounded like a wonderful idea, but Vincent needed to know something first. "Father? How long has Catherine been away?"

Father smiled at him. "Only a few hours. Fear not. She'll come back Down once she's had some rest. No doubt, the *instant* she's had enough rest."

Vincent missed knowing that *her* warmth was beside him. At the same time, he felt glad that she, too, had gone home. He felt glad she was resting there. She deserved peaceful sleep a thousand times over. Catherine. Dearest Catherine.

"She stayed," Vincent said, humbled by Catherine's myriad gifts to him. "She stayed to find me. She fought...to save *me*."

"Yes," said Father. He was holding Vincent's hand again. "Catherine applied her prodigious deductive acumen to our present need, and she located our wayward needle in this haystack of a city."

Vincent laughed. He loved Father's facility with words. He relished the sound of Father's voice, pleased to hear him complementing Catherine.

Father smiled at his son's soft laughter. Looking into Father's lined face, Vincent compared this present visage with his memories of Father as a younger man. *He wears his years well,* Vincent thought. *Though he too could use some sleep. My father, my father. I believed I would never hear your voice again.*

Father must have seen that pain, and that joy, in Vincent's eyes. "What is it, Vincent?"

There were not enough words in any language, from anywhere in the world, to express

what Vincent felt. And in any case, Vincent was too tired to talk anymore. So he only said, “Father? Will you tell me a story tonight?”

Father raised his eyebrows at the time-honored invocation. “A story?” He looked somewhat amused. “What sort of story?”

Vincent gave the first answer that came into his head. “Nothing dour.”

Father seemed to take that as a challenge. He settled back in his chair. Peter and Mary moved around them, performing tasks that Vincent didn’t bother to identify. After a moment’s silent thought, Father’s eyes lit up.

He set a solemn expression on his face and intoned, “It was the twenty-sixth of May. The moon was round and bright Above. A band of miscreant children wended their way home, unaware of the shadowed figure who followed them across the park. This clever Stranger watched to see where the children went. He waited until the children vanished into a dark tunnel, and when all was quiet, he slipped into the world Below with nary a rustle of the grass beneath his stealthy feet.”

Vincent closed his eyes, seeing the events unfold as though he’d been there himself. He had not been there, of course. On that particular twenty-sixth of May, Vincent had been confined to bed on Father’s orders while the grown people tended to the inflamed wounds a very large dog had bestowed upon him.

“It was not long before the Stranger came to a sentry station,” Father continued. “That night, Ezra stood watch at the gate. He heard the Stranger call aloud, ‘I say, I see you there! You breathe so loudly, I could shoot you in the dark, if I had a mind to. Now listen well! I am owed two boons, for services rendered to two of your own. In repayment for the first, I demand—in the name of Winslow!—to greet your liege lord. Lead me thither or bring him here, but you shall not see my back until I see his face!’”

Vincent thought, *Ah, Vernon.*

Everyone had a tale to tell of how they came to live Below. Father took pride in his ability to adapt these stories to his brilliant style of recounting them. As Father spoke, Vincent’s most unconventional teacher lived again.

It’s Vernon who taught German to all of us. Vernon who gave us the Erlking...along with many other dark and daring tales over the years. Perhaps my message today has recalled him to Father’s mind.

Vincent listened, and began to drowse. Before Father reached the part where Vernon nimbly dodged the efforts of four sentries to remove him from the tunnel, Vincent was asleep.

He woke from a dream he had no desire to remember. *Home,* he thought. *Home. I am home. There are no iron bars here. No straps. No razors. No salty hands. No chains.* He took a slow breath. He felt hollowed-out and his head was still sore.

Carefully, Vincent turned onto his side. He saw Mary sleeping in a high-backed chair beside his hospital bed. She sat wrapped in a shawl with her chin on her chest. Wisps of her long, ash-brown hair had escaped the matronly uptwist she wore, and her careworn face seemed to smile a little as she dozed. Out past the privacy screens enclosing his bed, Vincent heard the low voices of Peter and Father holding an earnest conversation.

“—did not bode well for those two animals,” Peter was saying. “The tremors were worst for the panther, but with aggressive therapy it pulled through. Martinez told me they had to move it from the zoo to a sanctuary. But the tiger?” Peter sighed. “They had to euthanize the tiger.”

“Dear God.”

“There was no controlling the seizures. And apparently it started gnawing its own legs.”

“All right,” Father said, “All right. That’s enough.”

The two doctors became quiet for a moment. Vincent heard more papers rustling. Peter asked, “Jacob? What do you think?”

Father sounded—braced for the worst. “I think you’ve found the best option. We can only trust that he will heal as quickly as he always has...and that he’s willing to accept the interventions.”

“I can send down the supplies as soon as you’re ready for them. Test strips, taurine and B vitamins, first thing. I can get the rest of it, and the ointment, after the pharmacy opens in the morning. Do you need more activated charcoal?”

“In the amounts we’ll need? Yes.”

Activated charcoal, thought Vincent. *Not good.*

“But before we get ahead of ourselves,” Father went on, “we need to explain the treatment to him.”

“Of course. Do you want me to stay for that?”

“Peter, I’d appreciate it if you would do more than *stay* during that conversation.”

Then without warning, Father’s voice spoke very close to Vincent’s ear. “And note the time,” it said.

Vincent recoiled, but Father’s hands held him fast. Vincent saw three faces gazing down at him: they were two doctors and one nurse; two Tunnelfolk and one Helper; two Undercity Council members and one Uppercity adviser; father, godfather, and trustworthy friend; three gifted healers. The mathematics of their skillful love equated intricate beauty. Vincent did not know how they had moved so close to him.

What is this? He struggled to think, to comprehend the changes in his body and his mind. *What is wrong with me now?*

Father spoke his name. Vincent reached for him and Father grasped his shaking hands. “Don’t be frightened. You’re safe,” Father told him.

“No,” said Vincent, “I’m sick.”

Father could not deny this fact.

“What happened?” Vincent asked.

The three faces looked at one another before Father answered him. “Vincent, are you...aware at all...of your seizures?”

Vincent could only stare at him.

“You’ve just experienced a lengthy absence seizure.” Father’s tone was gentle. “You’ve been unaware of us for well over two minutes.”

Stunned, Vincent thought, *Father just said, “seizures.” Plural. This has happened before now.* Vincent closed his eyes. He gathered his wits *(trembling panthers)* and focused his thoughts *(seizing tigers).* Understanding came.

Stars Above, he thought, *the misty times. The blank spaces. This has been happening to me for DAYS.*

Father asked, “What are you feeling, Vincent?”

Everything and nothing, Vincent thought. He was poisoned. Helpless. Humiliated. Harmed—

To answer Father’s question, he said, “My head hurts. I’m thirsty.”

Mary’s light footsteps moved toward the table and, presumably, the water pitcher.

“Are you hungry?” Peter asked.

“I don’t know.” Vincent couldn’t remember the last time he felt hunger. He opened his eyes. Father and Peter were giving each other a Meaningful Look. Peter took off his black-rimmed reading glasses and put them into the pocket of his starched white shirt. Vincent couldn’t

tell what Peter might be thinking. He only knew that all three healers were worried. Peter sat down on a stool to Father's left, smoothing the fabric of his green and blue necktie. He was settling in for a long talk.

Vincent pulled his hands away from Father. "Can you help me?" he asked.

"Yes," Father and Peter said together. Mary brought water in the cup. Vincent watched Father, and drank the water, and lay back upon his pillows.

"Mary, let's try some more broth." Father sat down in a chair.

Mary hastened to the table again. Watching her, Vincent thought, *She does love to feed people*. *She takes good care of us all.*

Mary returned to her chair. Father took the cup of rich broth from her and sat glaring at it. As if the lukewarm liquid posed some dire peril he must handle with utmost care. Vincent waited, letting Father think.

After a moment, Father sighed. "Vincent, I'm not sure how to begin. How to explain."

Vincent knew exactly where to begin. "All of you believe that poison remains inside me," he said.

His healers sat silenced in their seats, looking at him.

"Well, yes," Father finally said, nonplussed.

"There's nothing wrong with my *ears*, Father."

Although Father knew that Vincent could hear people speaking should they stand in the corridor *outside* the Hospital Chamber, the older man looked uncomfortable, and sad. Vincent thought, *He's always tried to spare me from all that is hurtful*. *All three of them have always done this for me.*

Quietly he told them, "You can't protect me from this. It's already happened. I'm harmed. It's done."

Father began brooding over the broth again.

"Tell me what happens now. Please."

Father looked up. "How much do you want to know?" he asked.

This was both a father's question and a doctor's question. It left Vincent a way out if he wasn't ready to explore his own pain. Vincent was not sure he would ever be ready for that, so he said simply, "Tell me everything you can."

This time it was Peter who began to answer him. "Vincent, this is what we know."

Peter spoke with practiced authority, a man accustomed to explaining such things to his patients and their frightened families. He said, "To begin with, the tranquilizer these pseudo-scientists used is a mixture of three separate drugs: two kinds of anesthetic and a sedative. Each of these drugs is supposed to moderate the effects of the other two. Chemically, it's a pretty ingenious blend.

"When used in correct proportions, the three drugs work together to produce a stable dissociative state in a subject. That means reflexes and autonomic functions are preserved, but not conscious control. This condition can be useful in veterinary medicine, and in field research. It seems this Professor Hughes spent several years refining his formulation in a laboratory setting. Personally, I think he became overconfident, using it with you. Careless. He was also...reckless during your anesthesia and your recovery from it."

Father made a small sound of disgust.

Peter ignored the sound. "Hughes obviously didn't expect your system to be so sensitive to these drugs. He also didn't pick up on the fact that you started to metabolize each drug at a different rate—and thus lost the corrective benefits of the complete formula."

A bad man willing to learn only what he expected see, Vincent heard a Shadow whisper

inside him. *And this you name "mercy"? This you deem "courage"?*

Vincent made no answer to that voice. Peter was saying, "Now as far as we can tell, you've received two overdoses of this three-part serum, during two specific incidents."

"Which actually constituted *six* very large doses, altogether," said Father flatly. "These men grossly overestimated your weight."

Peter agreed, nodding his head. "And we strongly suspect that two of those 'very large doses' were...mismanaged during preparation. If so, you've received *far* too much of the drug that is most toxic to your body. The primary anesthetic. You've...noticed certain neurological problems, these past few days—and earlier tonight?"

It seemed Peter was Father's match in matters of understatement. Vincent nodded. Yes, he had noticed.

"Okay. Those problems stem from this primary drug's interference with your particular biochemistry."

Mary looked like she was on the verge of tears. She twisted a handkerchief in her hands.

"Symptoms of severe trauma to your nervous system became apparent on Sunday evening," Peter said, "but Hughes didn't catch on until *after* you were given the last two 'very large doses' of the anesthetics."

Father turned the cup of broth this way and that. He muttered, "It would have been difficult for him *not* to notice. One cannot easily explain away a grand mal seizure."

A leaden sensation began to settle in the pit of Vincent's stomach. *Keep breathing,* he told himself. He asked, "The professor explained away other seizures? Other signs?"

Father's eyes said, *Yes*, emphatically. "Vincent, that night, while you began to wake up, they were measuring your brain waves via an EEG machine. We've seen the graphs, correlated the anecdotal notations. We believe Hughes misinterpreted three separate complex partial seizures as 'dream activity.'"

"Perhaps I *was* dreaming," Vincent said. His visionary visit to Catherine's apartment was still his clearest memory of those first days at Columbia.

Father shrugged. Vincent's dreams had always been scientifically inexplicable to both of them, although Father never gave up trying to help Vincent riddle out how they happened, and what they meant. "Perhaps you were. You were also in seizure."

Vincent looked up at the uneven rock ceiling. He found he almost felt glad to be receiving these explanations. The complete story was horrific, but at least it was *rational*. Father and Peter also seemed to think these problems were treatable. Vincent thought, *This is what hope feels like. I had forgotten.*

When Father and Vincent both remained quiet, Peter began speaking again. Vincent turned his head to look at him. Peter said, "It was after those last two darts that they gave you straight phenobarbital. This was intended to stop the one seizure they did manage to identify correctly."

"Yes. I know about that drug."

None of them asked how Vincent knew. Peter only nodded.

"I assume it didn't kill me," said Vincent dryly.

Father said, "Hughes injected a stimulant immediately, as an emergency stopgap measure. We think—by pure dumb luck—that it kept your heart beating instead of causing cardiac arrest."

"And the anticonvulsant was a relatively low dose," Peter added.

"They *did* administer pure oxygen," Mary murmured. "For several hours."

Vincent shut his eyes. *And so. I have survived,* he thought.

Mary spoke his name. Her hand touched his chest. "Are you tired? We can leave you to

sleep—”

Vincent opened his eyes. “Yes, I’m tired. But I want...I need to know the rest of this.”

Mary patted his shoulder. Vincent could see that she felt sad for him, and that she loved him. She understood his need. Vincent was grateful for Mary’s presence. He was grateful for all three of them. Mary settled back into her chair. She and Father let Peter continue the explanations.

“So now we come to our educated *guesses*, based upon our research tonight,” Peter said. “Vincent, because both of the anesthetics distribute easily to fat cells, we think your body has stored as much of the...overabundance of drugs as possible. Nevertheless, your initial exposure hit you hard. Each successive dose has only compounded the dangers to your system. It’s unfortunate in this case that you have an *underabundance* of fat cells.”

Vincent accepted the truth of Peter’s neologism with a small smile.

“Unknown amounts of all these chemicals have probably become bound to proteins in your blood and muscles. We expect that the drugs or their residues are present in most of your organs, too. Your entire body is saturated with this stuff. The drugs you haven’t stored away continue to circulate. You’ve been trying to process these freely circulating drugs.”

Trying, Vincent thought grimly, *and not succeeding.*

“Now, as you’ve...starved, you’ve catabolized body tissues to stay alive. The chemicals stored in those tissues have been slowly released, in unpredictable amounts, over the past few days. It’s been like a slow seep of drugs, constantly affecting you.”

Father said, “And call all of *that* only the first part of our complex problem.”

Have I ever presented a “simple” problem to my healers? Vincent wondered. “And the next part?” he asked.

“The next part is simply the same difficulty we’ve always faced,” Peter said. “It’s the way your body operates. You’re not handling the drugs very well.”

Peter had entered familiar ground. “Enzymes,” Vincent said. Father and Peter had long ago theorized that Vincent’s body lacked many biological molecules which were common in other people. They also believed Vincent’s organs produced biochemical analogs unique to his system. For this reason, Father’s recorded list of substances that Vincent must avoid at all costs had grown—rather long.

“Liver enzymes,” Peter specified. “The drugs in the first dart alone were as much as your liver could keep up with. All the other injections—” He folded his hands on his knee. Vincent recognized this as Peter’s one indicator of personal distress. Nothing showed on Peter’s long face, or came through in his voice.

“Your liver was working hard, Vincent, but it had only partial success metabolizing everything. The workload placed upon it was too great. We think you’re doing better now...that is, your body is trying to eliminate the toxins again. But it’s going to take a long time. We believe that as your liver tries to break down the chemicals, your upper digestive tract is reabsorbing the resulting metabolites, so your body has to process them all over again. The level of each chemical in your bloodstream fluctuates as drugs and metabolites are released or reprocessed.

“Meanwhile, these chemicals are still *active*. Even the half-digested drugs remain potent enough to contribute to the ongoing damage. What’s left of the sedatives continues to depress your body’s functions. The primary anesthetic is, among other things...disrupting your nerves and signals in your brain. We believe it’s the chief cause of your seizures and your loss of full motor control.”

Mary looked up from her wrinkled handkerchief to ask, “What about his loss of feeling?”

“The drugs have *not* helped that,” Father said. “But I think much of the original injury

was mechanical. They were not gentle with you, Vincent. They did not protect your arms or legs whenever they moved you. And...you were—" Father looked away from Vincent, toward the more neutral shape of a bent pipe attached to the cavern wall.

"Except for a brief trip to an X-ray lab, and some equally brief examinations of your back, you were strapped to a table in the same position for fifty-seven hours," Peter stated. "During this time, you were also subjected to a series of electric shocks. I think nerves must have been stretched and crushed. And by now, one or more of the drugs are probably hindering sensory nerve impulses."

Mary leaned forward and set her hand on Vincent's. Her gesture seemed to say, *It was MY question which elicited this bad news,* and Mary was sorry her friend must receive it. If she could have given him the use of her own nerve signals, her own hardworking hands, her own maternal heart, Vincent knew Mary would do so without a moment's hesitation. He turned his right hand beneath hers so he could close his fingers around Mary's work-roughened palm.

"It seems we are beyond complexity," Vincent said. "Let's call these problems: multifarious. Labyrinthine."

Mary gave him a teary smile.

Peter smiled a little too, and resumed his discourse. "Apart from its influence on your level of consciousness, we're not sure *what* the secondary anesthetic is doing to you. It's a new derivative and there isn't much information out on it yet. But one of its known side effects is probably why your injuries have been so slow to heal, why you're bruising so easily. The chemical itself is acidic. I think it must interfere with the coagulation of your blood after injury. There have been reports of damage to skin and muscle tissues in a minority of test subjects."

Peter shook his head. His craggy, good-natured face still revealed nothing of his deeper feelings, but Vincent could guess some of it. Name a medication's rare effect, or a procedure's small chance of some complication or other, and Vincent could always be counted upon to demonstrate the full extent of the risks involved. Everything, from alcohol to table sugar, affected him powerfully. Some medicines, be they chemical preparations or herbal correctives, could only poison him. Together, Father and Peter had been working their way around these dangers since the day of Vincent's birth.

"Whatever amount of the drugs that *are* fully metabolized have probably been converted into substances that are dangerous to you in and of themselves," Peter said. "Possibly things like formaldehyde. Normal wastes have also built up in your blood and tissues—to poisonous levels. Your body's first recourse for releasing all these toxins got short-circuited by dehydration. These men used an IV line while you were unconscious, but the drip rate they established was too slow to do you much good."

"You're following?" asked Father.

"Yes," Vincent said, imagining several possible outcomes to the bleak picture Peter described. "Go on."

Peter glanced at Father, and turned back to Vincent. "The third part of the problem is your need for food. We're sure that by now you're deficient in many necessary minerals. Your body is requiring a great deal of energy to recover from this past week. And you need nutrients to heal. However, due to all the other issues we're dealing with, it looks like you're burning calories just to take in calories."

Peter brushed one hand over his silvering brown hair. Vincent began to wonder how long his friend had been awake today. He knew that a doctor's workday was measured in more than hours, and Peter dedicated all of his energy to protecting the health of every patient he treated. Such devotion could take its toll.

Nevertheless, here was Peter Alcott, plying his trade with patience and skill in the dead of night. His generosity was legendary in the world Below. Vincent knew Peter offered this gift of service as much for Father's sake as for his own. Refolding his hands, Peter continued.

"So this takes us beyond guesswork and into...oh, medical instinct. Your father and I are working from second-hand accounts here, Vincent, but we don't think your body is going to handle food any better than it's already handling the drugs. Maybe the unfriendly substances in your blood are reacting with proteins or sugars. Maybe you're dealing with completely normal electrolyte deficits after a traumatic fast. Your liver may well be releasing tainted bile into your digestive tract. We can't be sure exactly how it's happening, but we do know that your system is completely unbalanced. *Any* activity weakens you further."

Vincent looked from his Uppercity family practitioner to his Undercity physician and surgeon as Father added, "Right now, *food* seems to be linked with symptoms of sedation. We've come to believe that whenever you exert yourself physically—which includes whenever you eat, or seize—either the stored drugs, or the partially-processed drugs, or both, flood your bloodstream in significant concentrations. They're wreaking havoc all over again."

"I watched you earlier," Mary said, her face pale. "Once you drank the broth I brought for you? After a few minutes, you were shaking and I couldn't wake you. But you weren't sleeping." She looked to Father.

"Catherine mentioned similar incidents: as the two of you moved through the Columbia Tunnels, and when you arrived at the Portcullis, and also after our young scholars gave you food," Father said. "It's difficult, of course, to associate specific symptoms with any one circumstance, but consistently, after receiving food, or after a certain level of seizure activity, you've become completely unresponsive for a time. Anywhere from a few minutes to an hour or more."

Vincent waded through the disjointed images in his mind. He discovered that he could recall little of his journey home after he and Catherine reached the Morningside Portcullis. Vincent remembered the two darts in Catherine's small hand. He remembered drinking Stephen's red juice. Beneath the fragrance of gentle lavender, he could still smell *Eau de Winslow* in his hair. His big friend was strong, but it was a long way Down from that gate. Vincent's weakness placed a great burden upon everyone. How he must have frightened them!

He told Father, "I think I did feel...strange at these times. Addled. I cannot remember very much."

Father nodded. This did not surprise him.

Vincent also remembered Randolph's earnest face. He heard his lieutenant shouting. He heard Brizo's telegraphic curses. Young Jake had screamed. Vincent steeled himself to ask, "Did I hurt anyone?"

Mary immediately said, "No. Your friends are worried about you, but no one's been hurt."

Anger quickly supplanted Vincent's miserable relief. He thought sourly, *For all that I keep trying to choose the bee sting, yet the thrice-damned serpent rears its head at every turn. Is there no end to this madness?*

Peter saw that Vincent was upset now. Slowly he said, "The last part of our problem is...everything else. Vincent, every organ in your body started to shut down."

"I know. I could feel it."

Father and Mary seemed to have nothing further to say. Peter unclasped his hands and sat forward. He touched Vincent's shoulder. "According to his records, this Hughes guessed that you might be developing a stronger sensitivity to his tranquilizer. After the Sunday night disaster, he refused to give you any more of it—which is *good* for us, here and now. However, we don't

think he shared our suspicion about that second set of doses. If this *is* a case of sensitization, smaller amounts would have a greater effect on you as time passed, and as exposure continued.

"On the other hand, your father and I think the drugs have simply influenced you to a greater extent as your overall condition has declined. In either case, the results are the same. Sum it up as 'systemic injuries of extreme stress' compounded by the effects of multiple drugs."

Peter moved back. Vincent looked up at the blank solidity of the Hospital Chamber's low ceiling. He thought, *I was right to ask Catherine to bring that box with us. She's done well to deliver it so faithfully. Thank you, Catherine.*

"Vincent?" Father asked.

Still here, Vincent thought. He returned his attention to his healers. "So. My overall condition. You believe it can be treated?"

This time, all three of them shared the Meaningful Look. "We think so," Mary answered.

"Yes," Father said firmly.

And Peter nodded.

"Your regenerative powers seem to have remained intact," Father said. "In spite of everything you've endured. Even now, you're recovering—swiftly—from acute renal failure, and from shock, and from possible injury to your liver."

Father let this sink in. Then he made more positive pronouncements. "Your hydration is improved. These few hours' rest have already done you remarkable good."

"And yet, now that I've come beyond a need for emergency medicine, you're afraid that...if I eat food, it will continue my poisoning."

"Or if you overextend yourself in any way. Which, I'm sorry to say, won't take much."

Peter held up one hand, qualifying these conclusions. "As I said, that's our best guess as to what's happening now. *If* we're correct, we believe we can help you get better. Simply stated, we want to accelerate the seep. Get the drugs out of your body as quickly as we can. This should restore the circumstances that allow you to heal the way you do."

Vincent eyed the cup of broth Father continued to hold. "Tell me."

What they told him involved a regimen of feeding cycles—force-feeding, if necessary (although Peter kindly called it "enteral nutrition"). They hoped this would induce Vincent's body to process its remaining caches of poison. The things they intended to give him to eat should "jump-start his stalled systems" (Mary's phrasing) and nourish him as that unpleasantness occurred. At the very least, frequent small meals, administered with care, would end the rigors of starvation and give his body half a chance at recovery.

Their plan included regular doses of activated charcoal to keep his body from redigesting toxins, as much as was possible. They would give him vitamin and mineral supplements to replenish his depleted reserves. They would keep him on the intravenous line so those fluids could flush out poisons. They would keep him attached to the catheter Father had insisted upon when Vincent first arrived in the Hospital Chamber, again to help flush out the poisons.

Vincent must stay in hospital for these treatments, near to all the specialized medical supplies they would need. They planned to enlist Olivia's and Dr. Wong's help to select healing foods and herbal remedies. They prescribed strict bed rest for Vincent during treatment.

They expected that one or two days of intensive nursing would see him through the worst of this internal scouring. Father (unsurprisingly) expected Vincent to remain abed for a much longer period of time thereafter. None of them knew how badly the drugs would continue to affect him, or how quickly his injuries would respond to their care. None of them knew how long his full recovery would take. Listening to the spaces between their words, Vincent decided they were unwilling to admit that they didn't know whether Vincent *would* completely heal.

Vincent looked at the ceiling again. He must get used to this view. He tried to breathe slowly.

Everything—*every* single thing—an independent person did for himself would be denied him.

But is such independence not already denied me? Vincent asked himself. *If I tried, right now, could I get up out of this bed and leave the chamber?* He didn't think he could.

"Is there any alternative?" he asked.

Their hypothetical alternative involved less aggressive detoxification. Bed rest and charcoal (no escaping these), special soups and teas, constant medical supervision. No tubes or needles. This sort of recovery would depend upon how well their patient could ingest and digest his medicines, without artificial assistance. Vincent got the impression that Peter believed Vincent was already too weak for this approach to work. Mary thought Option Two was the gentler, but less effective, course. Father didn't think it was a good alternative at all.

"You're not ready to come off the IV," he said bluntly. "And your seizures complicate everything."

All three of them agreed that it would take much longer to clean out the drugs this way. Father confessed his worries about the state of Vincent's nervous system. He was afraid that over time, the continuing sedation, and the seizures, would whittle away Vincent's remaining strength. With Vincent's hydration under control, his seizures now posed the greatest threat to him. Each seizure could be as dangerous as a blow to the head, with similar aftereffects, some even interrupting his ability to breathe properly, and Vincent's many seizures were recurrent.

He knew quite well that in their world, nervous disorders were difficult to treat. No one spoke Vernon's name, but Vincent guessed they were all remembering the horrors of late-stage Parkinson's by now. He also thought of their Helper and friend, Sam Denton—and the hardships that fragile man had suffered ever since his stroke last June. Vincent recalled that a few years ago, a child Father diagnosed with epilepsy had lived Below for a time. Gloria had been one of the few children Father had hurried to place with a good family Above, so she could begin to receive regular doses of the medicines she needed.

Although Peter helped with supplies when he could, most prescription drugs were hard to come by (and in Vincent's present condition, out of the question). Vincent knew Father was right to be worried.

If Hughes and Gould have inflicted permanent nerve injury upon me—

Vincent left that thought unfinished. A thought like that was a pebble which could trigger a landslide inside him. *One thing at a time,* he reminded himself. *We're still trying to get rid of the poisons. Leave tomorrow's trials for tomorrow.*

Now Father was explaining that Dr. Wong might have some herbs to help decrease seizure activity, but Father and Peter would need to consult with Wong in person before they gave anything of that nature to their patient. They did not want to try untested medications while Vincent was so weak, and while so many toxic things were circulating in his blood. His healers all agreed that *time* was going to be Vincent's best medicine.

"Do you believe that the treatment you prefer will give me the time I need to heal?" Vincent asked them.

They did.

"And to be certain of the details for this treatment, you must first see what happens to me when I eat something."

Yes.

Vincent looked at them. It was very late—or very early—and they seemed tired. He

thought, *You have done so much, for my sake, to save me.*

"I accept your help," he said quietly. "I accept your good judgment. And I thank you." Father held the cup to his patient's lips. Vincent drank the broth.

"We expect you're going to feel 'strange' again, in the next little while," Father told him. "You may lose consciousness. I'm going to time how long that takes, and how long it lasts."

Vincent nodded, silent now, and ill at ease. He felt like he was waiting for ether to take effect. Or the blend of Olivia's herbs that helped him relax during those times when sleep persistently evaded him. Or even morphine.

But the ordinary medicines Father gave to him at need never frightened him like this.

My captors have turned my food into a poison, Vincent thought. *They've transformed my most essential freedoms into things that can kill me.* He wondered what his intoxication would be like, now that he expected it. Which caged sensations had been due to his seizures, or his injuries, or his deprivations—and which had been due to the drugs? Was there any point in attempting to separate such effects into categories? Vincent waited, trying not to feel like he'd just swallowed something vile. Father sat beside him, waiting too.

As they waited, Father began to speak encouragingly. He didn't say anything more about Vincent's medical problems. He rested one hand on Vincent's arm and changed the subject entirely.

"Now, then. I...understand your classes have been meeting without you. When you see the children again, Vincent, you must be ready for anything. Your science group has been rehearsing something in secret all week."

"Rehearsing?"

"Yes. In your chamber, no less. They're quite dedicated to their project, whatever it is."

Vincent smiled a little. "I'm glad they've come together, to learn from one another."

Peter and Mary were both up, gathering papers and other objects from the nearby table and clearing them away. Peter returned to the bed with a blood pressure cuff and a stethoscope. He gently pushed up Vincent's left sleeve to apply the cuff. Vincent looked away from the sight of his own elbow—and the band of bruise-mottled skin around that joint, where once his fur had grown uninterrupted from shoulder to claws.

Father saw him do this and asked, "Tell me, Vincent? What *have* you been teaching in your classes? I've felt rather out of step since the cave-in."

Vincent saw the determined hope in Father's eyes and knew he was trying to help Vincent reconnect, and to comfort him. Vincent took a deep breath, accepting this transfusion of Father's courage. He thought warily around those jumbled memories that he dared not examine in detail, until he came to the day he'd worked with Michael's literature group, and from there to the safety of his teaching schedule within the Undercity's matrix of teaching methods.

He told Father that he'd borrowed the large book of painting reproductions from Father's Library so he could teach his Sunday visual arts group about impressionist artists. He planned a treasure hunt for his class. He hoped to lead an expedition through the Tunnels to find as many mineral pigments as they could. Once they returned home again with their raw materials, Vincent intended to help the children create their own pastels so they could try their hand at original impressionistic paintings.

Father said that he liked Vincent's idea.

In writing class, the children were studying Petrarchan sonnets. In Vincent's literature group the children were reading *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, at 'Randa's request, and their weekly discussions had proved insightful. In music theory, they were reviewing Major intervals, to help several children who had recently joined that class—including Ellie, who already listened with

wistful interest whenever Colton played the viola.

In mathematics, the children were exploring circles. In logic: story problems via puzzles Vincent concocted for the children, and puzzles the children created for him in return. In science, the children were learning about insects and Vincent had no idea what they might be rehearsing now. Also, he had been tutoring Michael and Poe in implicit differentiation, and Sovaan in the English language, and Corrie Beth in Latin.

Vincent felt a few others had come to him for help with specific subjects, but he began to have difficulty recalling precisely who wanted to learn what. Was it Brooke who wanted to study gemology, or was that Tomas? Whoever it was had found a bit of tourmaline and come to Vincent to learn the mineral's name.

"A chip...marble. In-inwood."

"Yes," Father said, and waved at Mary to bring another blanket for Vincent's bed.

Vincent muscles spasmed uncontrollably, until he lay shivering without feeling any cold. "Knew the b-brown part of...stone was...a sepat thing." His tongue became a clod of clay behind his teeth. He stopped talking.

Father said, "All right, this seems to be a muscular reaction. It shouldn't last long."

I suppose this answers their question, Vincent thought. *One more of Father's scientific investigations yields valuable information. Their plan...for me. Proceeds from here.* Now the mist was creeping in. The shaking was bad for him. His head felt caught in an invisible vise.

"Vincent?" Father took hold of Vincent's chin and turned Vincent's face toward him. "Let's have the seventh multiplication table."

What? Why? flashed through Vincent's mind, but Father began, "Zero sevens are zero. One seven is seven. Two sevens are fourteen. Come, Vincent."

Sometimes one played chess with Father, and sometimes it was best to humor him. Vincent counted up to six sevens for him, and then numbers became elusive.

"And seven?" Father asked.

Vincent could only come up with, "Four."

"Yes. Forty-nine. And eight sevens?"

There was a five and a six involved, Vincent was sure. He thought carefully about how to merge the two concepts into one. "Elev'n," he said, closing his eyes. He turned his face toward the pillow that smelled like Father.

"I think he's under," Peter said.

And it was so.

Then Vincent thought there was a shadowy man nearby. The man held a bowl in his hands. He waited until Vincent raised his head from the metal floor to look at him. The man's face frowned. Reflections from the man's eyeglasses obscured the man's eyes. The man tipped the bowl and spilled water out onto white tiles. Wherever the water touched the tiles, it gathered into red puddles.

The man set the bowl on a polished silver table. He held a scissors in his hand. He came to the door of the cage and unlocked it with the scissors. He stepped back, pointing at the claret pools.

"Heel," commanded the man. "And you may drink."

The man was tall. The man was *very* tall. Seeing this, Vincent began to feel bad. The man's height was wrong. *Wrong*. Vincent pushed at the floor with his hands, sliding his body deeper into the cage.

"What, you think water falls from the sky?" asked the man.

It does! Vincent wanted to tell him. *It does, and anyone may taste it! Anyone at all!*

The man was uninterested in Vincent's truths. He *tsked!* and grasped a bar of the cage door. He began to swing the door closed.

Vincent heard the sound of a ceramic mug being set onto a wooden tabletop, and woke with a gasp.

"Vincent?" Father peered down at him. "Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

Vincent blinked at his parent's face. He looked around the space delineated by the stretched white curtains in their wood and metal frames. "Where are Peter and Mary?" he asked.

"Peter's gone Above. For supplies. Mary's gone to bed. Are you all right?"

"I...I think I...I'm thirsty. Is there water?"

"Yes. Yes, there is."

Vincent's cautious thankfulness became panicked desperation as Father got up from his chair and walked away from him. Father said there was water. He knew Vincent thirsted for it. Yet Father turned his back.

He walked away.

Vincent couldn't find his voice. His throat felt tight and dry. "Father," he whispered, devastated. "No. Father, please. Water. I beg you. *Please*!"

Father turned toward him, eyes wide. "*Vincent*."

Vincent tried to reach for him.

Father brought a cup and a carafe from the table as he returned to his chair. He let the cup drop onto the bed. He gripped one of Vincent's hands. "Vincent, it's all right. Do you understand me? I stood up to bring this to you."

Vincent looked at the carafe in Father's hand. *I have misjudged him,* Vincent thought. *I have misinterpreted his care.* This frightened him even more. He did not like being unable to trust Father's intentions. He feared his new inability to think, to feel, to understand.

Father righted the cup and poured a stream of clear water into it. He set the carafe on the floor at his feet. Vincent reached for the cup.

"Slowly now," Father warned him. He wrapped his hands around Vincent's to steady them.

Vincent raised his head to drink.

"Slowly! You'll choke."

Vincent tipped the cup at too steep an angle, gulping at the water. And he choked.

Father grabbed Vincent's left shirtsleeve at the shoulder and pulled sharply, rolling Vincent onto his side. Vincent's head hurt, and his bruised places hurt, and the other parts of him that could still *feel*, felt hurt. His shamed heart ached, too. Vincent coughed until he could breathe again. He lay where Father had put him. Quiet. Defeated.

But Father lifted Vincent's head and touched the hard rim of the cup to Vincent's mouth. Vincent tasted cool spring water. He drank as Father poured water into his mouth, a trickle at a time. Father refilled the cup three times before Vincent felt his thirst was sated.

"*Water, is taught by thirst,*" Father murmured. "*Land, by the Oceans passed; / Transport, by throe...*"

"*Peace, by its battles told...*" Vincent said, his soft voice cracking.

Father smiled and bent to set the empty cup on the floor beside the carafe. "*Love, by Memorial Mold...*"

"*Birds, by the Snow.*"

Taking up one tangled length at a time, Father moved locks of hair from Vincent's face and neck. He smoothed each layer of that tortured mane behind Vincent's shoulder. Father's face was full of sorrow and love.

“I’m sorry, Father,” Vincent breathed.

Father smiled again, shaking his head. “Do you need anything else right now? Anything at all. I’ll bring it to you. Or send for it.”

“Is there, perhaps, room in your healing strategy...for the procurement of a toothbrush?” asked Vincent.

Father put his hand to the side of Vincent’s face and regarded him gravely for a moment. Then he leaned down and kissed his son’s brow. “I think I can arrange something,” he said.

Chapter Fifteen: Phantoms

I

26 March 1987
Thursday, Morning

Catherine slept until about seven-thirty and woke up needing to know what was happening Below. She enacted a morning routine perfected by almost nine months of working an assistant district attorney's hours, rushing through half a cup of instant coffee and a few spoonfuls of strawberry yogurt. Then she went down to the laundry room in the basement.

Once she made sure of her solitude, Catherine entered the storage room beyond the line of washers and dryers. The subbasement entrance into the Tunnels opened below her building's storage area. Standing alone in the dark passage, she sent her signal on what she thought of as her messaging pipe. She waited. A few minutes later, not one guide arrived for her, but two. Eric and his friend Kipper darted through the brick entryway, skidding to a stop in front of her.

"Hi!" Eric said.

"Hello, Eric!" Catherine returned, pleased to see him. The boy ran into her open arms. Catherine hugged him tight. "You know, I was thinking about you the other day. How are you?"

"I'm okay. Ellie, too. Look! I got new shoelaces." He stepped back so Catherine could admire the neon green laces strung through the eyelets of his shabby boots. "They're not glow-in-the-dark," Eric said, "but Michael says there's a special kind of light you can shine on them to make them show up after lights-out."

"I see." Catherine turned to the boy's companion. "And hello to you, Kipper."

Kipper gave her a little wave. There wasn't much spark in him today. "Mary says you're coming to see Vincent," he said.

"That's right."

"None of us can see him yet. Father says he's too sick."

Catherine put her hand on Kipper's shoulder. "Vincent will be better soon."

"Yeah," Kipper said, digging at the ground with the heel of his sneaker. "Hope so."

"Would you like me to tell him hi for you?" Catherine asked.

"Yeah."

"Me too," said Eric.

"You too," Catherine agreed.

Her young guides led her Down into the Inner Circle. The few people they met as they walked greeted them with smiles and nods. The Tunnels seemed quiet today—although, Catherine supposed, it was still early in the morning. Aromas of breakfast food (*real* breakfast food) wafted from the end of one tunnel as they passed by. Catherine wondered if it would be impolite to ask if she could sample some of it. That stew last night had been very good.

"Don't forget," Kipper said when they reached the curtained entrance to the Hospital Chamber. "Tell him I hope he gets well fast."

"I will."

Eric opened his mouth.

"Yes. And you, too," Catherine said.

Eric grinned. The two boys ran off in the direction of the breakfast smell.

Catherine found an elderly gentleman waiting inside the chamber, near the entrance. He

sat in a heavy wooden chair, reading a book. Catherine felt this was another person she had met during the cave-in, but she couldn't recall his name. Seeing her enter, the man set down his book and stood up. His brown face crinkled into a smile beneath his cap of snowy white hair.

"Good morning," he said, his voice soft and warm. "I'm Ezra."

Okay. That placed him in Catherine's growing mental diagram of Tunnel People society. Ezra was a councilman, one of Father's oldest friends Below, and one of Vincent's childhood teachers.

During a conversation about Eric and Ellie, Vincent had once mentioned that Ezra served as their world's equivalent to a Minister of Education. He was also the primary teacher for children aged three through seven, working closely with Mary. *The Council seems to be coming out of the woodwork, to see Vincent through all this,* Catherine thought. She didn't know if this was coincidental or not. It made sense to her that Vincent's closest friends should be Council members, since he numbered among them. She wondered suddenly what Vincent's role in that group might be. He had never told her.

Catherine held out her hand. "Good morning, Ezra."

Ezra shook her hand, and held onto it. He led her across the room to the screened space at the back. That space appeared larger this morning. The number of encircling curtains in their frames had multiplied.

"Can we get you anything while you're here?" Ezra asked. "Breakfast is being served right about now. Matthew's bringing some in for Mary and me."

"Something hot would be lovely," Catherine said.

Ezra nodded and left her at the screens.

Mary looked up as Catherine stepped through. The older woman gave her a smile that twinned Ezra's for warmth. She gestured at a chair with one hand. "Catherine," Mary said, and the way she spoke the name conveyed both greeting and invitation.

Catherine moved her chair close to the bed. "How is he?" she asked, looking at Vincent. His situation appeared quite serious to Catherine's non-medical eye.

Mom looked like this, Catherine remembered. *All the tubes. All the sadness.*

Vincent lay on his right side, cushioned by pillows and blankets, and there seemed to be tubes *everywhere*. Tubes trailed out from under the blankets and led to containers beneath the bed frame. The IV line in Vincent's left hand was still there, although the one in his right arm had gone. Clear liquid now dripped into the remaining line from a plastic IV solution bag, rather than from a glass bottle. A coil of another thin tube had been taped to the side of Vincent's face, one end of it running into his nose. An oxygen tank sat near the head of his bed with an attached mask ready for application at a moment's notice.

Catherine thought, *My God. This is subterranean ICU.*

Mary said, "He's resting. His vital signs are strong."

"Your doctor friend came Below last night?" Catherine asked.

"Yes. He brought the extra supplies we needed. And the information Father needed."

Vincent paid no heed to this conversation. Catherine saw with some relief that he breathed naturally, but his stillness frightened her. She perceived no intention in that stillness, no sense that the person she knew and loved was participating in his own context.

Vincent's eyes were open. He seemed to look from one object in his hospital space to the next object, making no internal comment about anything. Catherine leaned close to him. His eyes found her face but did not linger there.

"Good morning, Vincent. I'm back."

After he did not reply, Mary said softly, "We're not sure how aware he is right now. He's

had several more seizures, and then he stopped speaking to us...even when we're certain he's awake."

Catherine nodded, saddened. Remembering Father's words to her, she moved her hand across Vincent's line of sight before she touched his arm. At the contact, Vincent closed his eyes and sighed. *He knows I'm here,* Catherine thought. *If nothing else, at some level, he knows that.*

She slid her hand beneath his long fingers and sat quietly, content to be present with him in this place. Mary stood to pull a blanket up over Vincent's shoulder, then she returned to her chair. She seemed sad and tired.

"Have you had any sleep?" Catherine asked.

Mary chuckled. "A little. And I've dropped off, here and there. Keiko will be in later. Then I'll go back to bed for a while. I sent Father to get some sleep hours ago."

"I'll bet he needed it."

Mary nodded. "Father pushes himself so hard sometimes. I can't blame him, but I wish he wouldn't." She wrapped a shawl around her shoulders. "Well. Vincent is home again. Even with all *this* to manage," she waved her hand at Vincent's intubation, "there's a great weight lifted from Father's mind."

"Yes," Catherine agreed, thinking, *And my mind, as well. And everyone's.*

"I only wish this hadn't happened to Vincent at all. This is...so hard. He's gone through so much over the years. So much in just the past few weeks." Mary gazed at Vincent with quiet affection. "He doesn't deserve this. Whenever we need him, Vincent's always here for us. He's always been here for *me*. And for the children."

Catherine thought about Eric and Kipper, and other young faces she'd seen peering around the legs of adults in the crowd yesterday. "How are the children taking everything?" Catherine asked. "I noticed Kipper acted unhappy this morning."

Mary looked at Catherine, and the sorrow in her tired gray eyes deepened into something close to grief. "Many children have been upset all week. They've been very brave and very worried. Kipper and Ellie are having nightmares. Little Tabitha's been inconsolable ever since she saw Winslow bring Vincent in. I sent her to Ruth and Tavi's chamber. Tabitha is good friends with Tavi's daughters."

"Oh, Mary," Catherine said. "I'm so sorry."

Mary nodded. "This has been a difficult time for all the children." She looked at Vincent. "And for those with childlike hearts."

Mary leaned forward and touched Vincent's forehead, and then his neck, with the back of her hand. She frowned, shaking her head, and folded the blanket down from Vincent's shoulder. Vincent made no response.

"Is he feverish?" Catherine asked.

"No," Mary said. "There's no fever, thank goodness. No infection. But he's having trouble maintaining a steady temperature. And he can't feel when he's getting too warm or too cold. We have to keep a close watch right now."

Catherine feared the fact that Vincent couldn't seem to feel things anymore, at both the physical level, and at the spiritual level of their bond—but there was nothing she could do about it.

Mary pulled her shawl around her shoulders again. As she sat down, she murmured, "You know, Vincent was the first child I met, when I came to live Below. That night, I was the one who was ill."

"Oh?"

"Yes." Mary plucked at the soft webbing of her crocheted shawl, finding a place where

the chocolate-colored yarn had broken and was beginning to unravel. “There’s a process for bringing people down here. Most adults don’t meet Vincent for a long time. My arrival was different.”

“What happened?” Catherine asked.

Mary spoke slowly. “I think I was out looking for food. It was winter. I was...mourning the loss of people I loved, and I was sick. I remember that I couldn’t see very far ahead, because the rain was turning into soggy snow. And because I was crying so hard. I remember feeling very confused. I got lost. One of the Tunnels foraging teams found me, wandering the streets. They decided I needed emergency treatment. They offered to take me to a hospital, but—” Mary looked down at her hands. She stopped picking at her shawl. “I told them the FBI would arrest me if I turned up in the ER.”

“The *FBI*?”

Mary heard the incredulity in Catherine’s voice and smiled. “No, it wasn’t a delusion,” she said. “In college, I was a nursing student who got caught up in matters of social conscience. Civil rights. Vietnam. Democracy. To the government, I was a dangerous dissident. I was in hiding.”

Catherine listened, rapt. She had never heard anything of Mary’s story before today. *No wonder Mary and Father seem close,* Catherine thought. *Their histories give them so much in common!*

“In the end, the foragers brought me Down to the Tunnels. We were moving toward the Inner Circle when we turned a corner...and there stood two hooded figures, one tall and one short. The tall one, he was a young man named Ike. The smaller person was Ike’s friend. A younger boy. The boy had heard us coming. He stood in Ike’s shadow, to hide.”

“Vincent,” Catherine said.

Mary nodded. “My new friends tried to hurry me forward, but I was too tired to keep up. I stumbled. Vincent caught me.” She folded her hands around the ends of her shawl. “When I looked up, I saw the boy’s face. I saw his *eyes*. I thought he was a fever dream. I’d *never* seen eyes like I saw for the first time that night.”

Catherine had looked into Vincent’s astonishing eyes perhaps a hundred times herself, and she wondered what it must have been like to see them in a younger face. Serene, and wise and curious, maybe, even then. Her fingers tightened on Vincent’s hand.

“Vincent set me on my feet and the foragers hurried me away. They brought me to Father. Other new friends gave me hot soup, and medicine, and a bath. They put me to bed in Sara’s chamber. I felt so thankful to find a warm, safe place Below.

“*This* was what I had wanted for my country, and what my country refused to accept for itself. This *place* was...what I had lost, Up on the Surface. It was all that I believed I could never have again. I remember thinking that I *must* be delirious in the cold somewhere, dreaming up this...this beautiful *world*.

“I started to cry again. I couldn’t stop. Sara asked me how she could help, if she could bring me anything.” Mary smiled. “I asked for Little Aslan. Have you read those stories, Catherine?”

Catherine smiled back. “Yes, I have. Many times, when I was little.” And she had privately made a similar comparison herself, months ago, seeing much of that great Narnian Lion in her friend. “Did he come to you?” she asked.

“Oh, yes. Sara sent word of my request. A few minutes later, he walked into Sara’s chamber with a book in his hand. After we were properly introduced, Sara sent for a tea tray. They both sat up with me late into the night. Sara helped me drink my tea and Vincent read *The*

Silver Chair to us.

"I've never forgotten that, Catherine. At fourteen, Vincent was very shy with Strangers...but even so, his first impulse was to comfort a Stranger who needed him."

Mary gazed lovingly at her patient. "Vincent is very special to me," she said.

Catherine nodded.

Mary smoothed a wrinkle in her skirt. "He must have left after I fell asleep; when I woke, Father was sitting in the chair beside the bed. He finished reading the book to me. My fever had broken. I felt stronger."

"Stories are a wonderful kind of medicine in their own right," Catherine said.

"Yes, they are, aren't they? I started to come alive again that night. When the people here invited me to stay, I stayed. I met all the other children. I became the person who looks after the little ones. Now I help our women become mothers. I watch over our orphans. I teach."

"Every child I've met Below speaks very highly of you," Catherine said. "They depend on you."

Mary sat up in her chair. "And I depend on them." She glanced at what appeared to be a jury-rigged pocket watch lying next to a slate on the table. Columns of numbers written in white chalk covered half of the slate. "Excuse me," Mary said. "I need to help Vincent with some things."

Catherine nodded again, thinking, *The activist nursing student has become a wonderful caregiver Below.* She watched Mary pour water into a basin to wash her hands before she prepared various liquid solutions in several cups and pitchers on the table. Mary went to Vincent and spoke to him.

"Vincent? I need to give you medicine."

Vincent opened his eyes but didn't move.

"Ezra?" Mary called.

"Coming." A moment later, the man walked in and bent over Vincent. "Time to do this again," he said.

Catherine released Vincent's hand and moved her chair backwards so Ezra could take Vincent by one arm and lift him in the bed. Vincent roused a little. He helped with this repositioning, slowly moving a shaking arm or leg, and leaning forward when Ezra asked him to. Once Vincent was sitting up, resting against a mound of pillows at his back, Mary stepped in.

She used what looked like a large syringe with no needle on it to measure and inject liquids into the tube she uncoiled from the side of Vincent's face. Vincent looked away from Mary and found Catherine. He smiled at her. Catherine immediately scooted her chair closer and took his hand again.

"Vincent."

"You look as if you've rested," he whispered.

"I have."

"Good."

Mary finished her injections and cleared her materials away. "Now your hand, Vincent," she said. They must have already established a routine.

Vincent looked at Catherine.

"Oh," Catherine said, understanding. She let go of the hand she held. Mary smiled.

"Just for a moment," Mary said.

Mary dabbed rubbing alcohol onto one of Vincent's fingers, then she pricked the spot with a sharp stylus. Catherine looked away in a hurry. She hadn't expected that.

"Are you all right?" Vincent asked her.

"Shouldn't I be asking *you* that question?" she replied.

"I don't feel it. It doesn't pain my hand." But Catherine noticed he wasn't looking at what Mary was doing, either.

"Eric and Kipper both send their love," Catherine told him, to change the subject, and to fulfill her obligation to her two young escorts. "Kipper says he wants you to feel better soon."

Vincent smiled again and closed his eyes. "If you see them, tell them 'thank you' for me."

"I will."

Mary returned Vincent's hand (with a bit of damp plaster covering the fingerstick). She moved to Vincent's left side and used a small syringe (this one *was* equipped with a needle) to inject something into the port at the end of Vincent's IV line. She capped the small needle and continued her checkup, donning a stethoscope and wielding a blood pressure cuff. She inspected the IV's drip chamber.

Catherine remembered that when she was a girl, Dad had taken her out of her mother's hospital room whenever things like this were done to Mom. Catherine had casually observed doctors and nurses bustling around her during her own hospital stays, the way Mary was doing now, but she had never really paid attention this level of care in action before.

She thought, *I feel awkward because I still don't know the proper etiquette for having a conversation during a medical exam. And Vincent just doesn't do small talk.*

"Mary?" Vincent asked, as Mary set the stethoscope on the table. "Water?"

She brought a cup to him and held it while he drank from it. After a few swallows, he coughed. Mary shook her head and pulled the cup back.

Catherine thought Vincent watched the cup with longing as it moved away from him. "More?" he asked.

"Vincent, every time you try to drink, you choke. The last thing you need is to catch pneumonia. I gave you plenty of water, just now, through the tube."

"Please."

"Just a little, then." Mary went to the pitcher on the table and poured perhaps two tablespoons more water into the cup. Vincent accepted this from her and did not ask for more a second time.

"I'll talk to Father about that," Mary said, organizing things on the table. "We'll see if we can find something to keep your mouth from feeling so dry." She set empty containers on a tray.

Catherine understood this problem. After plastic surgery repaired her slashed-up face, Catherine's father spent his first few hospital visits placing chips of ice on her tongue for her, to ease the dry ache in her throat. Catherine wondered if the Tunnel People had a way to freeze ice, and if they didn't, whether she should offer to bring ice down from Above. Then she thought that might not be such a good idea. If Vincent was having difficulty staying warm-enough-but-not-too-warm, ice chips wouldn't help him.

She thought about other things that might comfort a convalescent. She considered Mary's story, and also the way Vincent had read aloud to Catherine, when she was *his* patient. Books did indeed help to pass the time. She knew books abounded Below. It would be no trouble to find one or two good novels and bring them to the Hospital Chamber.

Vincent was blinking up at the ceiling. Catherine had just decided to ask if she could read to him for a while, when Vincent stopped blinking. *Oh, dear,* Catherine thought, watching his eyes. *Oh, no.*

"Mary?" she asked.

Mary looked. She went to check the face of the pocket watch. She wrote numbers on the slate with a nub of chalk. "I do hate these," she said. It was the first time Catherine had heard

Mary admit that she hated something.

After a few seconds, Vincent shut his eyes. Mary wrote more numbers and touched Vincent's shoulder. "Rest, Vincent."

"Mm." He turned his head and was asleep.

Mary sighed. "It wears away at him. There's not much we can do but hope that the seizures will stop on their own."

"There's not a medication that can help him?" Catherine asked.

"I think there's some tea or other that's supposed to help. We might try that when Vincent's stronger. But no, there's no medication for the seizures. Father's afraid of an unexpected drug interaction." Mary rubbed chalk dust off her fingers. "In all honesty, he's right to be afraid of that."

"Interaction," Catherine repeated. "With what you're giving Vincent now?"

"We aren't giving him any drugs at all," Mary answered. "Only food, vitamins, and poison remedies."

"Oh," Catherine said, and *Poison remedies!* clanged like an alarm bell in her mind. "Is that because you don't have what you need? Is there something I could get for you?"

Mary sat down beside Catherine. She became hesitant, as though she didn't want to say too much. "No, Catherine. Thank you ever so much...but no."

Catherine wished Mary had said "yes," even if it was only to ask for some simple thing available at any corner drugstore. Catherine wished she could do *something* more to help. This world had given her more help than she could ever repay. And the man lying in this bed had done more for her than anyone else in Catherine's life. She wished her world had more to offer him. She wished that *she* had more to offer.

Ezra brought in a new tray of pitchers and jars. Mary began to inject more things into what must be Vincent's feeding tube. Ezra offered Catherine refreshments out in the chamber and Catherine accepted, leaving Mary to her work. Hot scones and tea, soft boiled eggs and orange slices waited for her on the card table.

"I confess, I haven't eaten a breakfast like this in many a moon," Catherine told the man as she buttered a steaming scone. "If I had known there's a five star restaurant down here, I'd have come Below for all my meals long before now."

Ezra grinned. "Words like that tend to make their way to the ears of our cook," he said. "By the time the two of you actually meet, William'll be ready to serve a feast in your honor, just to say thanks for the flattery."

"Well, until I do meet him, please give him *my* thanks, for taking good care of me."

"No problem."

Ezra didn't have much else to say to her about William or anyone else, and Catherine traded places with Mary when the nurse emerged to enjoy her own morning meal. "He might shiver," Mary warned. "That will pass."

Catherine found Vincent half-awake. He watched her sit beside him. Catherine took his right hand, and his fingers closed around hers. He didn't shiver, but he did turn onto his side, facing his visitor. His empty hand found the corner of one pillow and held onto it with a death grip.

"Would you like me to read to you?" Catherine asked.

Vincent appeared to think about her question. He started to say something. He stopped. His eyes dimmed, only half-open, and he lay still, breathing slowly. Catherine held tight to his hand, hoping the best for him. Silent minutes passed. He shut his eyes. He seemed to fall asleep again.

Mary returned, saw how things stood, and called Ezra in. She and Ezra both worked to loosen Vincent's claws from his pillow and then to move him upright for another round of medicine. Twice, as they positioned him in his bed, Vincent jerked suddenly, and his muscles were slow to relax. But he didn't wake.

"Is this...the deep sleep Father mentioned to me?" Catherine asked doubtfully.

"No," Mary said, plunging black liquid into the feeding tube with her big syringe. "This is far too many ailments, piling one on top of the other." She sighed. "This is also the tranquilizer still in Vincent's system that isn't being absorbed by the charcoal."

She tapped the syringe with a finger to indicate its contents. "He tried to take his medicines earlier this morning, and some hot food. He was too weak to eat. We had to start feeding him this way. And now he can't stay awake. It doesn't take much, to put him out. He's so ill."

"God," Catherine whispered.

Mary hesitated again, but went on. "We're trying to guide his rate of healing, so that Vincent can have a chance to rest in between treatments. It's a fine line to walk. We want to help his body *work* again, and he needs nutrients to do that. We want him to rest, but he's not really getting very much sleep. We also want to clean out the tranquilizer, and that process alone is very hard on him. The seizures are like an electrical storm in his head. They sap his strength. The tranquilizer keeps him sick."

"And that's why Father's afraid of an *interaction*, if you used other medications?"

Mary began to clean up after her procedure. "There are only a few drugs that we know are safe to use with Vincent," she said. "There aren't many medications he can tolerate."

Thinking it over, Catherine felt this information explained a lot.

She stayed until mid-morning, when Keiko arrived to relieve Mary, and another white-haired man arrived to replace Ezra. Catherine was sure she had met the new man, Old Sam, during the cave-in. She might have seen Keiko there too, but Catherine remembered the small woman better from that fracas in the tunnel yesterday.

"I'm going Above now," Catherine murmured into Vincent's ear. "There are some things I need to do today. Mary has my pager number so she can have Benny call me if you need me here. I promise: I'll come."

She wasn't sure Vincent understood her; he was looking at objects again, rather than Catherine. Mary had also agreed to send word via Benny, their cheerful bike courier Helper, if Vincent's condition got worse.

Don't get worse, Vincent, Catherine prayed. *Get better.*

II

26 March 1987
Thursday

She returned to her apartment and spent the rest of her morning sitting at her dining table, marking phone calls off a checklist. Postponing her moving day was one thing. Canceling it required her to contact a lot more people.

Catherine hung up after her conversation with her building manager and marked a check beside his name on her sheet of paper. She read through the remainder of her list. She'd saved the

most important calls for last.

"Here we go," she said to the empty room. She picked up the receiver again and dialed the number for the New York County District Attorney's Office. She got past the switchboard, listening to clicks and tones as Charlene transferred her call. Her recipient picked up after the sixth ring. *Must be a busy day,* Catherine thought. *As usual.*

"Joe Maxwell," a familiar voice announced from the other end of the line.

"Hi, Joe. It's Cathy."

"Cathy!" There was a crunkling noise as Joe muffled his receiver and spoke to someone else in his office. She heard, "Two o' clock. On my desk. That's when the big hand is on the twelve and the little hand's on the two. Yeah."

Catherine smiled.

Joe was back. "Radcliffe! The place is already falling apart without you. How's Providence?"

"I don't know. I'm not there."

"You're not?"

"No." She thought of Winslow, walking beside her through a long tunnel, trying to ask delicate questions in his very indelicate way. Joe was going to have a lot of the same questions about her. "I changed my mind after all, Joe. I decided to stick around New York."

Silence from Joe's end. Then, "Oh."

Catherine wished she could see the look on his face. She didn't think she'd yet seen Joe at a loss for words. "I'm calling because I have a question to ask you."

"Okay. Shoot."

"I'm wondering, if I asked Moreno for my job back, do you think he'd rehire me?"

Joe spoke like he was trying the idea on for size and finding it a little too small. "You're staying in New York."

"Yeah."

"And you want to come back to this insane asylum. To work."

"That's right."

"You're turning down a senior level position for ADA legwork."

"You're really sharp today, Joe."

Joe's voice got serious. "You're sure this is what you want?"

"Yes. I'm sure. Of course, if *you're* not sure, I could always go for my back-up option. I hear Legal Aid needs investigating attorneys."

"Uh-uh. No way. You are *not* signing on with the public defenders."

"Well, I did say it was my *second* choice."

He was quiet.

"Joe? I'm kidding about Legal Aid."

"Yeah. I know."

Catherine waited.

"Well, okay," Joe said. "Sure. I'll give Moreno a heads-up. You come in tomorrow and I think I can have papers ready for you to sign. Your desk is right where you left it."

"That's good to hear," Catherine said.

"So what made you change your mind?"

It was not quite Winslow's question. Catherine found it a hard one to answer. She hadn't had time to sort out all of her reasons. She gave Joe her best summation. "I guess I took a good look at my life, during these past few days. I decided that this is where I belong."

"You bet," Joe said, and Catherine could hear that he was smiling.

“So, until tomorrow. I’ll come in sometime after lunch?”

“Sounds good. Wow. Next time you need a vacation, Radcliffe, try putting in for an ordinary leave of absence.”

“Joe, this has been anything but a vacation. I still have most of my apartment to unpack.”

“Yeah? That’s what weekends are for, y’know. We’ll shove the paperwork through tomorrow, get you a new ID, and you can start up again on Monday. Just ’cause I like you, don’t think I’m gonna cut you any slack.”

Catherine grinned. “I’d never think that. Never in a million years.”

The next phone call on her list rang the office in Providence, to let them know her new decision, and to tell them she’d mail her letter declining the Domestic Violence Bureau position by the end of the day. After that, Catherine called Edie’s home number and left a message on her friend’s answering machine. She offered Edie first dibs on her set of loveseats, if Edie was interested.

“I’m having a frivolous moment,” she told Edie’s machine. “I’m going shopping for new furniture soon. You’ve seen what I have. It’s still in great condition. Call me back. Let me know what you think. Love you, Edie!”

And: check. The subheading beneath Edie’s name read: HALLOWAY BROS. MOVING CO. That phone call had to wait until Catherine received an answer from her friend. If Edie said yes, she wanted the sofas, Catherine would send them over to Edie’s place via the movers. If Edie said no, Catherine intended to ask the Tunnel People if they wanted the furniture. If *they* didn’t need it, the movers could take the sofas to a consignment shop for her. *At least then they’ll have more to show for doing business with me than my cancellation fees*, Catherine thought.

The last name on her list was her father’s. She called him at his office, not knowing if he would be out for a lunch meeting or not. He was still in.

“You seemed so determined to go,” he said, after listening to her news.

“That’s because I was.”

Dad’s office phone had excellent transmission. Catherine could hear him tapping a pencil on his desk blotter. “Cathy, come over for dinner tonight. Can you do that?”

“Yeah, Dad. I can.”

“Good. I want to spend some time with you. Talk, catch up.”

“I’d like that. I’m sorry I’ve been such a whirlwind lately. This week in particular has been...hectic.”

“I can imagine,” Charles Chandler said.

Catherine smiled, knowing he didn’t—and couldn’t possibly—imagine the inner workings of his daughter’s life, but she loved him for trying.

“Seven o’ clock,” he said.

“I remember.”

She hung up the phone and sat where she was for a while, looking at the space she lived in. “I like it here,” she told the room. Her tables and her chairs, her glass display towers and bookshelves and half-emptied boxes made no reply—but it was a friendly silence. Her ghosts had departed to wherever ghosts went after hauntings became pointless exercises in metaphysical futility.

For lunch, she treated herself to a light meal at an elegant sushi bar, feeling in the mood for something different, something geometric and balanced. After lunch, she mailed her letter to Providence and addressed the matter of the empty cupboards and refrigerator waiting for her at home. She took a little extra time as she shopped to select three kinds of tea for Mrs. Anna Lausch.

Once things settled down, Catherine wanted to pay the old woman a long visit. She would thank Mrs. Lausch again, and listen to more of her stories. Then she would see if she could dissuade Mrs. Lausch from sharing any further spyglass observations with reporters like Byron Trask. Catherine could do nothing about Mrs. Lausch's peculiar hobby, but perhaps she could find some way to protect the secrecy of those who came and went through Central Park and its drainage tunnels.

She returned home, unpacked her groceries, and sat down on a couch with a cup of hot chocolate and a book. She woke up with a start, hours later, when the phone rang. It wasn't the telephone she thought about first, as she rubbed her eyes and squinted at the clock on her writing desk. Her first thought asked, *Has the pager gone off? Did I sleep through my pager going off?*

Her phone was the thing making noise at the moment. She grabbed the receiver. "Hullo?"

"First dibs on your hand-me-downs, huh?" Edie's voice laughed.

Catherine thought that through, then said, "Yup."

"I'll take 'em. Only, how are they getting from your digs to mine?"

"Well, you see, Edie, I hired these nice movers to relocate all my worldly possessions, and then I had to call the whole thing off. I still have their number. I'm sure they'd be willing to move a couple couches to the East Village for me."

Edie whooped. Catherine pulled the phone away from her ear until the sound ended. "So the nasty rumors are *true*! You're not transplanting."

In Catherine's still-drowsy mind, claymation raisins pranced across a stage inside a lunchbox singing, *Oh, I heard it through the grapevine!* Catherine rubbed her head. She'd never liked raisins.

"Those second and third thoughts did me in," Catherine said. "Looks like you're stuck with me."

"*Now* can we go celebrate somewhere *appropriate*?" Edie asked.

Catherine smiled. "Edie, I'd love to."

They made plans for dinner out on Monday night and loveseat relocation tomorrow evening. After Edie hung up, Catherine called the moving company and Edie's restaurant of choice to make reservations for both events. Then she got up and pulled her pager out of her purse. No messages.

"No news is good news," she told herself. She looked at the clock again. Ten minutes to six. She didn't have time for another visit Below. She *did* have time to shower, dress, and drive to her father's brownstone in Gramercy Park.

As she prepared for the evening, she also prepared herself to think one step ahead of her father's inevitable questions. It had been hard to talk with Dad about anything important even before her attackers rearranged her life, a year ago. Now it was harder.

These days, she had promises—and secrets—to keep. And she hated lying to her father, even by omission. She'd never been very good at it.

Brushing out her freshly blow-dried hair, Catherine switched on her stereo system to catch the evening news. She listened to the reports while she got dressed and applied her makeup. She heard nothing about mysterious bodies turning up at Columbia. Also, no police officers had broken down her door. So far.

Again: no news was good.

An image from a bad dream flitted through her mind. For a moment, she saw the bodies of Professor Hughes and his associate dangling from Issac's rafters, bloody and silent. Catherine pulled a long breath in, held it, and let it out again. There had once been a time when she believed such visions must be unwelcome figments from *Vincent's* world—because it was

Vincent who—who—

"Killed the bodies," Catherine said, putting a little steel into her spine.

She was beginning to understand that such enemies plagued *her* world, not his. If bad people ended up dead after encountering Catherine's champion, it was because they persisted in their evil acts even as they looked into the noble face of all that was good and true. She guessed that it must hurt Vincent—deeply, irrevocably—to take a life. She didn't like to talk with him about this side of their relationship. She wasn't sure *how* to talk about death—about killing. Yet she could not regret this departure of harmful men from the world Above.

"I also can't deny the truth of the dream," she said, selecting the emerald earrings Dad had given her for Christmas. "These men are not dead because they crossed paths with Vincent. They're dead because they crossed paths with *me*."

The scientists who kidnapped her friend had been alive and well when she met them (physically, anyway; Catherine couldn't vouch for either man's mental state). The professor had died at the hands of his own accomplice. The accomplice hadn't died until after he tried to kill Catherine, too.

It was their lives or mine, Catherine thought. She turned off the radio. *Their lives or Vincent's. Justifiable homicide. We did what we had to do to come out of that room alive. We have the right to fight back, to keep what others would take from us by force. And my world is a better place, with men like that removed from it.*

She put on her coat and picked up purse and keys. *Thank you, Vincent, for saving us both. Feel better soon. Get well.*

Catherine locked her front door behind her and went down to the parking garage. She turned her thoughts away from Vincent, and from the ugly underbelly of the world Above. It would be good to spend a little time with her father. Provided her pager remained silent, Catherine could leave Vincent to the loving care of those who lived Below. She'd visit him again tomorrow.

III

26 & 27 March 1987
Thursday & Friday

In the world Below, a pocket watch ticked softly to itself, a few feet from Vincent's ear. He didn't mind the rhythmic sound. When he heard it, he knew Mary's timepiece was measuring precious seconds of wakefulness for him. When he did not hear the ticking, it meant he was caught in an inner fog bank, left to wander through the dark alone.

Time had stretched itself into the thinnest of membranes between what was possible and what was not. Balancing at the center of that mystical line, Vincent's world contracted to the size and shape of the body he inhabited. As it did this, Vincent began to understand many new things.

He now truly understood what his friend and teacher Vernon had meant, the night he told Vincent that his old soldier's body had become its own battlefield. Vincent now understood that sustaining one's dignity and remaining alive must sometimes be mutually exclusive acts of will. He understood that the blackness had not left him. He understood that the bars of his cage had only metamorphosed into a more deceptive form. He felt he'd been a fool to ever believe that anything beyond himself could hold him captive. His true prison was his skin. His true cage was

his fear. It had always been this way for him. It would always stay this way, forever.

His people tended him and Vincent submitted to their care. This slow time of giving and receiving taught him another invaluable new lesson. Vincent learned that acts of healing and acts of hurting can be intrinsically intertwined.

He detested senna, and that was the first purgative tea they poured into his nasogastric tube. *At least I don't have to taste it,* he thought. *There is that.* He loathed being almost constantly handled and inspected, and his attendants must do those very things to keep his body functioning. *These are my healers and they love me,* he reiterated, as Old Sam brought in a new tray of jars and bottles. He resented losing large blocks of time to befuddling lapses of consciousness, and that was simply unavoidable. *Ezra is a better storyteller than Father in some ways,* he decided. *He notices when he's lost his audience and he picks up the narrative again right where his listener stopped hearing his words.*

When he could think, Vincent used each thought to stave off the blackness from within.

Often, he caught the better part of himself insisting, *I asked them for their help. They explained everything in advance. I accepted this.*

He tried to entertain himself by hearkening to the voices that spoke around him. It was like reading a badly constructed found poem. Nothing made much sense and sometimes that amused him a little.

Ezra: And then! My good buddy Vernon hauls off and punches the jerk in the nose.

Peter: Stay calm. We're looking at a cluster, Jacob. Not *status*. And "tonic seizure" is the term that's being used now.

Mary: You take the basin, I'll take the bag.

Ezra: Problem was, when *Devin* stood at someone's door and called out "Trick or treat!" he *meant* it.

Father: —exactly the same as when he was small. We've seen both types now, separately and in sequence. Can you come with me this afternoon to consult with Dr. Wong?

Mary: No, Winslow. This time it's your turn to "shoo." Out, out, out.

Winslow: Like hell!

Peter: I'm also sending down some new journal articles when I get the chance. How are you doing on zinc and potassium?

Father: You're safe, Vincent. Be still.

Keiko: Sit up now? Sam, come help—

Peter: I don't know *what* the anesthetics might be interacting with. It could be anything. The drugs could be exciting a hormone or blocking neurotransmitters that we don't even have names for. Your guess is as good as mine.

Mary: Olivia says to try cinnamon. They're working on more ginger.

Ezra: But by the time Sara thought to drop a basket over that little cat of yours, it was too late. There's pancake batter all over the place, little paw prints up and down three tabletops. I thought Julia was going to blow a *gasket*.

Father: If he's awake, he may have one or two pieces. It was good of Laura to cut them into small bits for us. Open your mouth, Vincent.

Father placed a sliver of honey and ginger candy on Vincent's tongue.

Vincent smiled, grateful for the spicy-sweet indulgence. "Don't tell Winslow about this," he said.

"Why not?" Father asked.

"Winslow believes ginger is the Eleventh Plague of Egypt."

Father laughed and Vincent was glad to hear that sound.

As the candy dissolved in his mouth, Vincent watched Mary pour green—glop—into the open barrel of a large syringe, insert the plastic plunger, and slowly empty the syringe into the tube connected to its tip. She disconnected the syringe from the tube and refilled the barrel with milk. It might be nut milk or goat's milk; someone had added cinnamon to it and that was all Vincent could smell. It was not cow's milk, though: Vincent's healers knew better than to give him that. Whatever it was, Mary injected it into the tube. After the milk, she filled the syringe with a thick grayish-purplish substance. It had a gluey consistency.

Mary saw him watching her. "There's blueberries in this," she said. Vincent added her comment to his ongoing found poem. "Laura's been seeking out your favorite things Up Top. I hear she's on the lookout for fresh asparagus now."

Vincent smiled.

His nurse reapplied the syringe, filling Vincent's stomach with viscous blueberry liquid. She completed her ritual by rinsing the syringe over a basin, then she flushed the nasogastric tube with clear water. Finally, she capped the end of the tube and reached toward an empty arm of the intravenous stand. She hung the syringe by the ring on the end of its plunger.

Vincent was familiar with the process by now. He knew this sequence had been preceded by water, and a charcoal solution, and water, and that after another quarter hour, Mary would administer more water, and more charcoal, and more water.

Father had said at some point that Vincent's periods of sedation were much shorter now. Vincent assumed this was a good thing. He let his people worry about his problems on his behalf. Thus unburdened, he held his ground against the black.

Yet as the hours passed, Vincent began nurture a secret dream in his heart. He dreamt that each and every invasive medical artifact was removed from his person and from his presence, and that he lay down upon his own bed in his own chamber and felt warm.

And while I'm dreaming, let Catherine come to me there, Vincent thought. *Let her lie beside me where I can take her into my arms, and hold her, and know for a time that we are both safe and together.* He missed her.

"You are assuming, in this dream of yours, that you are fit company for her," a sly voice mocked him from the end of the bed.

Vincent didn't want to look, but he'd learned long ago that if he ignored the Other's external visitations, he only encouraged his depth to find more creative ways to get his attention. So he looked beyond the blanketed shapes of his own feet. The Other seemed reasonably comfortable, reclining against a stack of pillows that wasn't there, his legs tucked neatly beneath him.

There were people nearby; Vincent said nothing to his inconvenient bunkmate. He refrained from snarling at him.

"You always were an insufferable optimist," the Other told him.

Vincent sighed. He must be feeling better at the moment. The Other Vincent was in a good mood.

"Do you think—" the Other began, but his cockeyed grin suddenly faltered. Vincent turned his head to see what the Other was staring at. *Oh,* he thought.

And, *No. Oh please no.*

The Other crept down off the end of the bed, his eyes huge.

Vincent wondered what it meant when one's own hallucination began hallucinating. Of course, he was sharing this new vision with his darker self, so did that actually mean he was hallucinating that he was hallucinating? What was the proper grammatical construct for this situation? His mind scrambled to think about *anything* besides the new shape he saw standing

with its back to the screens. It was a tall—a *very* tall—black Shadow, and it represented the worst of what the depth of himself feared.

(The box is opened. The urn smashed. The door was left ajar, and oh the price you now shall pay.)

Pandora's box was only a story. A fiction. A legend from a long ago time.

(A fiction about true things.)

This isn't real.

(It's as real as your fear.)

Vincent didn't know whose voices he heard. Even more, currently unnamed, facets of himself, surely. The tall Shadow and the bestial Other were staring at each other without speaking. Vincent believed these deadly opposing forces were perhaps the roots of two long-buried memories brought to life by one fragmenting and exhausted mind. He also understood that he was powerless to stop the vision.

(Hey, it's us. What are you afraid of? The scissors?)

No, my strong friend. It's not the tool, but what I know the tool can do. It can hurt my body, confuse my thinking. It can make the hand of a friend seem like the hand of an enemy. I must always fear the confusion of friend with foe.

Everyone Vincent knew had private foes they were viscerally afraid of. Winslow had intruders dripping with guns and hypodermic needles. Peter Alcott's daughter, Susan, had deep water, and thunderstorms. Laura had a Bogeyman of Wardrobes who used to terrify her when she was small. Several children Below had circumstances or symbols pertaining to mistreatments they had survived Above. Catherine had darkness, many kinds of creeping things, and blood.

Vincent had the Cold, and the Door, the dark Hunter-side of himself—and a shadowy Ogre.

The Ogre was immense. The Ogre was violent. There was no defense against him. He was ephemeral and persistent, wearing any face he chose to wear, brandishing sharp silvery weapons, dogging Vincent's spirit from Vincent's earliest days. When the Ogre caught him, the Ogre was capable of doing unspeakable things to him. Only instant obedience to his commands would placate the Ogre. Vincent hated him. Usually, Vincent defied him, and suffered for it, but won the conflict and then the Ogre left him for a time.

The Other hated the Ogre too. But he also took the path of least resistance with regard to this phantom: the Other Vincent, broken and cowed long ago, worshiped at the Ogre's feet. As Vincent watched, his Shadow-self moved to do just that, growling as he crawled across the floor toward the towering shape.

"Don't do that!" Vincent cried. "Get away from Him!"

Someone called his name, but Vincent was too concerned with the problem at hand to answer.

"You empower Him when you do that!"

"Heel," commanded the Ogre. His unsane voice was deep. It was not like any other voice Vincent knew. The Ogre's demand also conveyed a threat. Refusal would provoke harsh penalties.

Vincent felt the Other's inward cringe. "No!" he shouted. But the Other continued toward their enemy.

I always thought he was the strongest part of me, Vincent thought. *But he's no match for our travails of late.* Vincent tried to sit up. Hands held him down.

Vincent snarled. The hands pulled away and the Other, hearing him, looked up. The Ogre looked at him too.

Vincent endured everyone's staring at him. "Come away," he said, countering the Ogre's imperative. The Other's eyes narrowed to reflective yellow slits. *Your choice,* Vincent thought. *Me, or Him.*

His head felt as heavy as Winslow's lesser anvil, and just as hammerstruck. Someone called his name again. The chamber tilted and started to spin. Vincent held very still.

The Other accepted Vincent's proffered escape. "You call me, oh my Brother? You want me to go to you?" He bared his fangs and turned away from the phantom.

Vincent braced himself. The Other sprang toward him. The Ogre swept down upon them both, rage boiling in his ebony eyes, blackness avalanching after him like a cave collapsing.

Catherine came for me, Vincent thought. *Catherine gave me my life. I can defend her gift to me. I can.*

His two worst enemies fell upon him, one to subsume him and one to punish him.

("My son, why are you hiding your face with such fear?"
"Father, do you not see that the Erlking is near?")

The words were bad. The words were weapons. Lies—

He opened his eyes. His flesh was strengthless. Faces floated above him, talking to him.

No, they are not talking to me. They do not want to see me. They want their pet, the thing they tamed and taught to speak.

He was not tame.

He felt a weight on his chest, pressing his shirt against his blighted pelt as he breathed. Concentrating, he raised his head. The thing on his chest was a clawed hand with a needle stuck into it. A transparent tube snaked away from the needle. He studied the hand. He ordered it to move. It did not move. It was not his.

He thought, *It is some new trick of my new poisoners. Some new way to harm me.* He did not like how carelessly this needled hand rested upon his chest. It was far too familiar, too intimate a touch. He did not like the look of the apparatus inserted into that hand. It was altogether bad.

He willed his attack. He was slow, but the hand had no eyes and seemed itself unattached to anything at all. Easy prey. He caught it between his teeth and bit the hand.

"Vincent!"

It was *His* voice, he was sure. *He* was good at tricks and disguises. And if it was not *Him*, then it was still the voice of the man who could decree his ending at a whim. This terrible mortal man had the power to Silence him. Tie him up. Strap him to a bed. Chain him to a wall. Poison him. Shut him into a small room. Forbid him every happiness. Cast him out into the cold world which hated him. Sometimes *He* whispered whispered whispered such dark not-thoughts about the man, and the foolish rabble the man commanded. This man had many friends, *He* whispered, all of them eager to do the man's hurtful bidding.

Enemies.

"Vincent. Stop that. Let go."

Hands groped at him. They tried to take his prey. He growled. It hurt his jaw and neck to hold his position. His throat burned from the chafing contact of a tube they had thrust inside him. His guts ached with the poisonous slop they had forced down through that tube. *Is it not enough that you have taken from me everything that makes life worth living? You would take more?*

They would. They blathered and pulled at him. He felt tired, and thwarted, and cheated. Never had his accursed head known such pain as now pulsed through it. He knew he was not

strong enough to hold out against his enemies for much longer. There would be needles and he could do nothing about it.

"Vincent. Open your mouth."

He stopped growling. There was a good memory connected with those words. Something that felt aglow with sweetness. Some event that pleased his trampled senses. A sensation that did not hurt.

"Open your mouth. It's all right."

He obeyed. They took the hand away and he waited for candy. His jailers only pressed him back onto the flat block of padding beneath him. The only taste in his mouth was that of blood.

The man with hair the color of rusted steel looked into his eyes. He did not know what the man was feeling. The man must be wanting him to *not be*. All enemies wanted this. The man would give no sweetmeats to him. No comforts. No kindnesses. The people around him brought more evil things near. Chemicals and bitter herbs, sterile cloth strips, the stinging scent of alcohol. They put out their hands. They began to touch him everywhere.

He retreated from them. Had he thought his brighter self ridiculous for his hope, for his optimism? Then what was he, himself, just now?

Ogres, he thought at his tormentors. But he dared not resist them. He hurt too much to resist them.

He made himself very small and took into his claws the single tiny glint of light that was his own: the shadow of *her* name.

She has seen me, and yet she returns to me. I have killed for her, and she is grateful. She has seen me kill for her, and she has never turned away from a death. I have frightened her, and she is brave. Yes, her fury asks me to kill for her. She is proud that I kill for her. She takes revenge upon the evil ones, the hurtful ones who harm me with their hate and hunger. She gives my anger meat and drink. She permits my senses to partake of her power. She feeds me, strengthens me. Sweetens death with her approval. In the dark places beyond the blood. Beyond the black. She dances within the flames of wrath. She dances for me. With me.

He took this beautiful unlight of her love with him and fled.

Vincent breathed, capable of intentional *thought* again.

Lost...lost myself. Heights and depths both hurting. Could have been worse.

Yes, it could have been *much* worse. How many *years* had it been since his last last relapse into the personal hell of rampant unreality? How long had it been since his rage *took* him so completely? How long did he have before his Shadows claimed him again?

No, he thought. *I won't allow that to happen. I. Am. Sane. All of this shall pass.*

Father was still watching, and seemed to see when his son returned to him. "Vincent?" Father asked.

Vincent swallowed—and tasted blood on his teeth. That he knew it was his own gave no help to him. The tube dangling down his gullet felt thick as the beam he had pounded onto the frame, down in the Maze. His throat closed up.

Father saw this, or sensed this. He grabbed Vincent and he grabbed a basin. He brought the two into close proximity to each other, just in time. Vincent gagged and was sick into the metal vessel.

His body quieted. Vincent remained hunched over the basin, panting. He had disgorged the nasogastric tube. Father peeled tape from the side of Vincent's face and took hold of the tube's beslimed end.

"I'm going to remove this," Father said. He didn't wait for Vincent to try to nod, but

pulled the tube from the naris through which it was inserted. As the inner loop of the tube moved through Vincent's mouth and past his throat, Vincent gagged again. Father halted, until Vincent's muscles relaxed, then he pulled the tube the rest of the way.

Vincent sneezed and lay down on his side. He felt faint and soiled. Defiled.

His healers had restored water to his body; of their own accord, tears slipped from the corners of his eyes. *No more,* he thought. *No more. No more.*

Father said something to whomever else was in this place with them. He washed Vincent's face with a wet cloth and gave him water to rinse his mouth. "Now *sip* this," Father said, bringing a new cup to Vincent's lips. The cup contained apple juice laced with ginger.

It's not candy I needed, Vincent tried to tell that savagely riven part of himself. *It's this. Simple medicine. Even medicine can be sweet. Father knew. He did.*

There was no answer from within.

"Father?" Vincent asked, too weak to speak above whisper.

"I'm here," Father said.

"Is there such a thing as a lucid hallucination?"

"There must be. You have them."

"Is there such a thing as me?"

"Yes. There is. Rest now."

Vincent closed his eyes.

And the cunning Ogre was there, waiting for him.

His face had changed into a disturbing union of two faces Vincent had known. Or was it three? A mythic underface never quite defined itself whenever Vincent beheld this phantom. He could only sense a shadow-webbed countenance that he felt he should know, as though a vengeful Titan had stalked him into this world from another life, as though they were immutable adversaries from the chaotic dawn of time.

The Ogre's eyeglasses hid his eyes again. Below the red hair and the spectacles, the Ogre's face was narrow and mustached. He pulled on a white coat and stood beyond the bars. The metal bars burned Vincent with their cold. The pockets of the white coat bristled with scalpels and silvery scissors and small flashlights. The white coat kept the Ogre safe from the subzero temperatures.

The Ogre picked up a crowbar.

He jabbed one end of it through the bars of the cage and he bruised Vincent with ferocious blows. He broke one of Vincent's ribs. He pounded Vincent's shoulder.

Vincent breathed.

The Ogre did not speak to him. He only observed Vincent, for many long hours, sneering at Vincent's unclad body. He wrote upon a slate with a piece of stolen chalk: ARE YOU A FREAK OR ARE YOU A GOD? He crushed the chalk in his hand and dusted the white powder into a cracked cup.

Vincent was silent.

The Ogre filled the cup with water and held it before Vincent's eyes. He poured the whitened liquid down his own throat and belched and smacked his lips. He dropped the cup onto the cement floor. The ceramic broke into a thousand pieces. The shards flaked into driest dust when the Ogre blew upon them.

Vincent looked away.

"*If you prick us, do we not bleed?*" the Ogre asked. He held up a gun. He shot a needle into Vincent's bare chest. Vincent's heart clenched around the hollow tooth of the dart.

But Vincent kept still.

"Recite your lessons," the Ogre commanded at last. There was always a command. Always a choice presented in the end. "Recite!"

"No. You are not real," Vincent told him.

The Ogre smiled. "Am I not?"

He stepped to one side and Vincent saw that the Ogre's solidity had concealed a great crowd of people herded into a small, man-made cave. The crowd pressed in on all sides to look at the creature in the cage. Camera lenses gleamed. Flashbulbs strobed through the surrounding blackness. People shrieked at the sight of him. Or they laughed. Or they wept. Vincent felt their hatred and their fear. He felt their morbid curiosity.

Vincent covered his ears with shaking hands.

"Not real," Vincent gasped.

"Am I not?" asked the Ogre. "Is *she* not?"

He held out one tremendous hand and unfolded his fingers, displaying a slender figure upon his opened palm.

Catherine! Vincent thought. *No!*

She wore a torn and slashed red dress. She was bleeding. Her green eyes were full of tears.

The Ogre placed his horrible scissors on a long metal table. He set glittering scalpels next to the scissors. He took a syringe and a bottle of ichor from one of his coat pockets. He dangled Catherine above these weapons, taunting Vincent with her terrorized pain.

"You shall not harm her!" Vincent cried, reaching for Catherine through the bars. The crowd beat at his arm, trying to force him back into the cage. Vincent slammed his shoulder against the cold, and against the blows of the crowd, reaching, desperate.

"Shall I not?" asked the Ogre. "And shall I not harm you?"

You cannot harm me, Vincent insisted to himself. *You are not real. You are not. None of this is real. Surely, none of this is happening.*

"Let this be your lesson, then. I cannot abide a disobedient son," the Ogre said. He held Catherine in his left fist like a doll. He pinched her jaw between his right thumb and forefinger. He bared his teeth. He snapped her neck.

And then the Ogre ate her.

Vincent screamed. And he screamed. And he screamed.

"Stay *out*!" Father shouted. "No! We're all right!"

It sounded like someone in great pain was gasping for breath. A cold round object touched the shaved skin above Vincent's heart. "Oh, my God," said Father, so quietly that only ears attuned to the tones of his beloved voice could have heard him. Vincent opened his eyes. Father looked at him, listening to Vincent's internal rhythms with his stethoscope.

"Vincent," Father said. He seemed upset. "*Vincent*."

Vincent thought, *Mein Vater, mein Vater, jetzt faßt er mich an—*

Then the explosion of white light tore him apart. *This is the light beyond the blackness, or the darkness disguised as light. This is the Ogre's maw. This is the Inferno. I am eaten!* Vincent thought. And then—there was no more thinking.

The world was a very small place. Only a very few sensations existed within it. Only a very few possible acts. One of them was slow breath. Another—Vincent tried to raise his head. Something prevented his doing so. Vincent's throat made a strangled sound.

"Hush. Listen, Vincent. Listen."

His head was pressed from one side onto a lightly shifting warmth. Someone's hand took

a rigid plastic covering away from his nose and mouth. Vincent breathed in *Father*. He listened. Beneath his right ear, Father's steady heartbeat made a calm and stately rhythm.

"Father," Vincent whispered.

"Yes."

Vincent lay inert at Father's side, his left arm resting across Father's middle, and his head resting upon Father's chest. Father sat with his back against a mass of pillows, his legs stretched out on the bed, holding his son in his arms. A colorful afghan covered both of them. Vincent heard the slide of the reworked yarn as Father pulled the blanket up over Vincent's arm and shoulder. Father's breathing changed as he did this.

"I'm not too heavy, Father?"

"Too heavy? What do you mean?"

"My weight...it doesn't hurt you? Your injuries. From the rocks."

"That was weeks ago now, Vincent."

"You've been healing—"

"I am well again. Hush. Listen."

Vincent heard Father's heart, and the soft sound of Father's hand upon his hair. "I can't feel you," Vincent said. "I can't feel anything. Nor anyone."

Father held him, receiving his words.

"I cannot move."

"You're very weak. It may be that we've eliminated both sedatives, so that you're now fighting the full brunt of the anesthetics. And you've had another seizure. Paresis can occur after these...disastrous nervous events." Father's hand stilled against the back of Vincent's head. "It was another grand mal seizure—although Peter would be pleased to tell you the newest names for it, and many other specific details you did not ask to know."

"The white light?"

"You saw light?"

"Yes. This happened to me in the...in the cage. The light. Once."

"Hmm."

Vincent half-heartedly explored the boundaries of his new world. It did not take him long. There was very little he could feel. Very little he could know. He needed Father's heartbeat. He required Father's warmth against his face.

"Am I crippled, Father?"

The older man was quiet for many heartbeats. He said, "It's too soon to tell."

Father reached to take Vincent's wounded left hand into his own. He moved those senseless claws up from his side to also rest upon his breast. He held Vincent's fingers tightly, stroking the fur with his thumb. Vincent saw clean bandages wrapped around that motionless paw. It had been freed of the IV needle.

"I removed everything," Father explained. "All the lines in and out. Just for a while. Right now you need rest—and peace of mind—more than anything else. We'll...go to work again, later."

Vincent closed his eyes, thankful for this gift. A crucial piece of his dream for healing. "Thank you, Father."

Father held him.

Vincent drifted a little and was afraid to sleep. He opened his eyes. "Father?"

"Yes."

"They took my clothes."

A long silence. Then, "I know."

“And...they cut...in many places— You’ve seen it. They cut away...my...”

“Yes. I saw. I know.”

“Why did they do that?”

Father spoke with quiet precision, the good doctor tending a deep wound. “Those men conducted many tests, and took...many physical samples, as they examined you. They also performed ultrasound scans, to view internal structures. Their equipment required bare skin to produce sonograms.”

Vincent unraveled word roots in his mind. “Sonograms. Sound drawings. Like photographs.”

“Yes.”

More pictures. His captors had uncovered him in every way. To take pictures.

A new thought entered Vincent’s head and it hurt him to think it. *Hughes put everything into his box along with his notebooks. And Catherine brought the box Below, to save my life, because I asked her to.* Vincent thought about the folders. The papers.

The book of photographs.

“You’ve seen the pictures,” Vincent said.

Father answered, “Yes. Peter and I have both seen the pictures. *Only* Peter and I. We have also read the data logs. And the anecdotal journal of Professor Hughes.”

It was hard to breathe. Vincent felt like he had gone back into the Maze, felt like he’d become trapped again by fallen stone, sensing the air go stale with each indrawn breath. In that other dark place, it had been Vincent who held Father. Vincent who warmed and tended Father. Vincent who held Father’s life in his hands, and held him gently.

Strength is a gift we give and take by turns, Vincent thought. He accepted Father’s strength now and used it to lance a festering pain.

“They saw every last part of me, then. Captured me on paper. On film. On glass microscope slides.”

Father stayed silent, but his head nodded. Vincent heard the scratch of his graying hair against the pillows behind them.

“They...touched every part of me.”

“Yes.”

Vincent felt tears burn in his eyes. “I knew what they felt, at first. Everything... twisted...inside out. They were ravenous. Unclean.”

“Inhuman,” Father said.

Or all too human, Vincent thought. It was not a good thought to have. He did not speak it aloud. He decided to tell Father about his other fears instead.

“I wanted to get away from them,” he said. “To come home. I was afraid I would say something to endanger our world. I was afraid they would find a way in.”

Father said, “No. We’ve had no intruders. Our home is safe.”

“No thanks to me,” said Vincent. His tears were dropping onto Father’s vest now.

“Vincent, you cannot blame yourself for this.”

“I was careless.”

“You were taking a quiet stroll through the park.”

Both sides of the truth spoken, Vincent had nothing more to say about the night of his capture.

Father added softly, “And you were in pain.” He sighed. “I knew you were in great pain that day, Vincent. And I thought I knew how to help. I’m afraid I was...preoccupied...with a private struggle...to avoid thinking about Margaret for a few hours...after a night of sorrowful

dreams. I was counseling myself, more than you, with what I said to you. I'm the one who was careless that morning...careless with *your* heart. I'm sorry. Can you forgive me for that?"

Vincent nodded. "Yes, Father. I can. I do."

"I know you are in even deeper pain now."

"Yes." Vincent blinked more tears from his eyes. "My pain will not leave me. It whispers to me, infests my thoughts. It poisons my sight."

Father listened and Vincent took a new risk, a small risk that nonetheless comprised a great leap in the dark for the solitary inhabitant of Vincent's shattered little world. Vincent trusted that Father understood him.

"I saw myself in that cage, Father. My Other self. He came to me there."

"Did he?" Father murmured.

"He cried. I cried."

Father nodded again and seemed to hold Vincent even tighter.

"You were right, Father."

"What was I right about?"

"What you've always told me. About being put behind bars."

Father thought about this for a moment. "How so?" he asked.

"I...wished myself dead."

That is the blackness, Vincent thought as he silently dampened Father's vest with his relinquished shame. *That is the worst weapon there is. The worst poison.*

"Vincent?"

Vincent made some small sound, indicating only that he heard Father speaking.

"The night the gang caught you Above? Those people took much from you, I know. They took your sight, and your hearing, your sense of smell, as well as...any illusions you still held about their world."

Vincent nodded.

"These two men...they've done separate harms. They took what that gang did not. These two men took your tactile senses. They profaned touch itself. Your empathic awareness? They transmuted a priceless gift into a scourge, and then they took even that from you. They demolished your physical strength and your capacity for rational thought. They locked you away from your family and threatened the security of your home. They took from you your will to be alive."

"Yes." He didn't know if Father heard him.

"There is one thing no one can ever take from you, Vincent. One thing you can never lose. You cannot even take it from yourself. This thing is a single, simple fact. Even when you lose sight of it, this fact will wait for you, patiently, to find it again."

Father released Vincent's hand to tip Vincent's head back a little, so he could see his son's eyes. Vincent lay quiet, empty, awaiting Father's truth.

Father said, "You are forever one who has been beloved."

Vincent shut his eyes, seeing the words flame against the blackness. Father had traced them upon the very air with a firebrand. For a while, they were the only words in Vincent's world. He drew close into the circle of warmth they made for him, weeping.

Father held his son for a long time, surrounding him with truth as Vincent cried. When Vincent tired and became quiet again, Father began to speak. He said:

"Though the whole heaven be one-eyed with the moon,
Though the dead landscape seem a thing possessed,

Yet I go singing through that land oppressed
As one that singeth through the flowers of June.

No more, with forest-fingers crawling free
O'er dark flint wall that seems a wall of eyes,
Shall evil break my soul with mysteries
Of some world-poison maddening bush and tree.

No more shall leering ghosts of pimp and king
With bloody secrets veiled before me stand.
Last night I held all evil in my hand
Closed: and behold it was a little thing."

Vincent believed there must be more to the poem, but he did not hear if Father spoke later lines. Whatever remained of him that could still feel things, felt warm. Vincent slept.

He woke upon an examination table.

No. Absolutely not. No!

The table-thing remained. Vincent lay caught upon it.

Vincent's fear and anger experimented with ugly words. Winslowian curses tolled in his mind. Then Vernonian curses. Then some of Molly's theatrical invective. Even phrases from Cullen's repertoire made an appearance. Then Vincent thought, *Enough! No more!*

He turned his head and prepared to break free of his restraints—and saw that nothing held him down. He tried to move, and he could not move. His paralysis was complete.

"Which is worse?" asked Hughes. The little man in the white coat walked to the table, pulling another man after him. "I can give you either state: what you have, or what you've seen."

Hughes dragged the other man into the white light of the laboratory lamp. This man totter-shuffled to Vincent's side, his body stiff and his motions slow. Vincent knew before he saw the second man's face that it was Vernon.

Oh, my friend, Vincent thought. *My dear friend. How dare he bring you here from your bed!*

Vernon's hazel eyes bestowed all the sorrow of Nienna—one of Tolkien's Queens of the Valar, and the figure Vernon revered more than any other from that mythos. He spoke not a word to Vincent. Vernon couldn't speak at all, in the end. Not with voice or sign or even facial expression. All he had at his ending was Vincent's gift for knowing what he was feeling—and Vincent's memory of better times—and the waning spark of *being* that gleamed in the old warrior's eyes.

"How dare you!" Vincent accosted Hughes with his fiercest glare. "How *dare* you!"

"I have so many questions," Hughes explained. He tipped Vernon onto a second table so that Big V and Little V lay side by side in the professor's stark white room. Vernon's weakened body began to jerk and shake.

"Beef or veal?" Hughes asked. "Only remember this. *I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you.*"

Hughes aimed a camera at Vernon's defenseless body.

Vincent could no longer feel what Vernon felt, but he remembered what he had himself endured beneath the professor's artificial eyes. He willed function into his limbs. Vincent willed it.

And he moved.

He sat up on the table. He swung his feet to the floor. He crossed to Hughes and took the camera from his hands. He crushed the case into plastic fragments and let them fall.

Hughes moaned. He flailed at his face with his hands. “Blind! Blind!” he wailed.

Vincent sighed and took the little white-coated man into his arms. “You are dead,” he told the professor. “Rest now. Go to sleep.”

Hughes shut his sightless eyes and let Vincent pick him up and place him upon Vincent’s examination table. He lay quietly. He said, “Forget me.”

“I’m trying to,” was Vincent’s heartfelt reply.

Vincent turned to Vernon, but that table was cleared now. No one lay upon it. Vernon had already, and long ago, found his rest.

Something stabbed Vincent’s left shoulder from behind. Snarling, pained, Vincent whirled. It was not Hughes who sat upon the first table now, smiling a predator’s grin. Hughes was nowhere to be seen. The man who had put an explosive dart into Vincent’s flesh—was Gould.

“I took the choice from you,” Gould said. “I had every reason not to wait. You haven’t washed your hands of me.”

As the poison flooded into him, Vincent began to shake. His muscles shuddered and he felt cold, colder, coldest. *I know what I feel about that kill,* Vincent thought. *It was the first time I have killed a man without some inner sense of his passing. I killed the man who hated me—and I know how I feel about it now.*

He turned from Gould and tried to walk away, to reach the door out of this godforsaken place. His body imitated Vernon’s, imprisoning him within a Rambleful of fractured nerves and wracking tremors. Had he ever believed that he knew what it felt like to be old, or sick? Vincent knew it now. He knew.

He reached the door and poured all that he was into the task of turning the knob. The knob would not turn. The door would not open. Slowly, his heart sinking as he did it, Vincent faced Jonathan Gould.

The man smiled at him. He held up his hand, showing Vincent the keyring that dangled from one of his white fingers. “Not human. Like it or not. You’re not going anywhere.”

And Vincent opened his eyes.

Experimentally, he tried to move his shoulders. He couldn’t tell if his left arm had moved or not, but he knew his right shoulder shrugged. Vincent let out his breath. The ending of the dream had been a lie. It might be only a small action, but it was *his* act. He could move again.

He looked at the blankets that covered him. Someone had arranged him so that he sat upright against the pillows. Vincent could feel tape sticking to his face. All the tubes were back in their former places—except the intravenous line, which was now inserted into a vein at his left inner elbow rather than the back of his injured hand. It seemed his healers had taken advantage of that shaved patch in the placement of their new needle.

Vincent had a bad moment then. It felt like claustrophobia, only the small space that closed in on his soul was not an external location. He clenched his teeth against—not a growl, but—a *roar*.

The guttural cry resounded through the cavern, yet it was not what it might have been. With luck, no one outside the Hospital Chamber would have heard it.

Vincent stared at the stone ceiling, air hissing between his fangs, holding himself very, *very* still. There could be no such thing as stillness for him now, not in any matter involving the conscious control of his limbs. However—he stopped his claws from tearing at these

contrivances of science and of medicine. He stopped his body's desire to leap from the bed, away from the evidence of injury and illness. This signified now, for him, as keeping still.

Of course: voices were speaking, and people were near to him. He believed they were real people this time. Vincent did not know what would happen if anyone touched him. He prayed that no one would try.

A worried female voice spoke Father's name.

"No," Father said. "No. That shaking is not a seizure. Give him a moment."

Thank you, Father. Vincent slowed his breath by counting. First there was one and one, taking air in and pressing it out. Gradually, he could count to three with each rush of air. Then four. And then five. Then he closed his eyes and let his battered autonomic nervous system take over.

"Father," he said—his voice sounding dead to his own ears—to let Father know that Vincent was *safe* again.

Father limped to his side.

"Water."

Vincent listened to Father pour it for him. He opened his eyes to sip some of it, feeling the tug of the nasogastric tube in his throat as he swallowed. Each sequential part of that act felt like a separate endeavor, but Vincent successfully drank water without choking on it. He closed his eyes to tell Father he was done. Father set the cup down.

"Vincent?"

"Truly, Father." It was also difficult to speak. Vincent opened his eyes. He was still shaking, and he was tired of shaking. His right hand twisted about on the blankets without his intending it to. This did not seem a good sign.

"Truly, what?" Father asked.

"It was truly a little thing. All of it. Behold, Father: *a little thing*."

Father embraced him, leaning over Vincent from the side, and this time it was Father who wept, leaving the marks of his tears to dry on Vincent's shirt.

IV

27 March 1987
Friday Night

Catherine had not expected to wait so long for the movers. The Halloway Brothers office called her an hour after their team was supposed to be at Catherine's apartment, to apologize for the delay (something about a mechanical problem) and to assure her that the truck was on its way. Another hour after that call, building security finally sent up two men wearing the correct uniform shirts (Ernst and Ferdinand were the names on their company patches). They spent a good deal of time wandering in and out of Catherine's living room. The two men didn't seem to be on speaking terms with each other, and they practically had to draft a peace treaty by hand signals before they could agree who got to pick up which end of the couch—for *both* loveseats.

Watching them, Catherine was glad she had *not* used this company to move her things to Providence.

Best of luck, Edie, she thought as she closed the door behind the ill-mannered pair. On the other hand, maybe she should wish those two men a little luck. If they behaved like that in *Edie's*

presence, Catherine knew her friend would give them more input than they'd bargained for. Edie was good at input. Her work involved a lot of swift-keyed data entry, after all.

Catherine looked at her living room. The place seemed very empty to her. Well, she was ready to find new art pieces to fill in the spaces at the edges. Also, new furniture to fill in the middle of the floor. It now felt more like moving in, than moving on. This was a good feeling to have.

She yawned and looked at the clock on her desk. A little before eight in the evening. Edie should be home to receive the delivery. All of Catherine's obligations to the world Above were completed for the day.

She made the rounds through her apartment, to switch off lights and lower the thermostat setting. She wasn't sure when she'd get home after visiting the Tunnels. She pulled her leather jacket on over her sweater and picked up her keys. Glancing around, she wished she had some gift close at hand that she could take with her.

I should bring something next time, she thought. *A book. A get-well token. Flowers. Or maybe a literary magazine, something with fresh poems that Vincent's never read before.*

Bringing Down a contemporary magazine hot off the presses was possibly the only way to be sure Vincent *hadn't* already read something. Next time. Catherine hoped he felt better tonight, but it might be best to see how Vincent was, before she brought anything for him. She remembered his weakened condition yesterday morning. He might not be up to reading things yet, or even to having things read to him.

She thought, *I'll know soon enough, so it's no good wondering...or worrying.* Her pager had remained silent all day. That was the important thing.

Catherine left one lamp switched on in her dining room and went to the front door. She stopped there, looking back over her shoulder. Had there been a movement of the light? Something like a flicker behind her?

No. She saw nothing flickering. Catherine shook her head and left her apartment, locking the door and taking the stairs down to the basement. After she passed through the laundry room, she stopped to extract the wrench she kept in her storage closet, then she continued on to the space below her building. As she tapped her signal on the messaging pipe (*CATHERINE REQUESTING GUIDE BELOW*, was what Vincent had told her this pattern meant), that weird flicker happened again.

Catherine waited for someone to come to her. She heard sounds ping on the pipes, but didn't know if they indicated an answer to her call. Catherine knew a tapping pattern that meant Vincent was on his way, because he always sent that message if he was more than a few minutes distant from her when she called. But Vincent wasn't coming to her tonight, and Catherine didn't know any more of Tunnels pipecode than those two or three phrases she used to communicate with him—

And the light wasn't shifting where she could see it happening. It pulsed and shimmered just beyond her range of vision. *What is that sense of flashing?* she thought, rubbing her eyes.

She knew she was tired. She'd been too tired for weeks. Even waking up later than she'd meant to this morning hadn't paid off her sleep debt. The unsteady light in her peripheral vision had a peculiar *weight* to it. It was like—Catherine took her hand away from her eyes. She paid closer attention to the thought, and to the sensation. It was like watching a pale blue flame flicker and die in her hand.

(The dark moment in the tunnel. When that last inch of candle went out.)

Then the sense was gone, as though it had never been there in the first place.

Losing the flicker, she felt like she was watching a man swing a sword to cut through a rope. *Someone is falling,* Catherine thought. She pressed her fingers to her forehead. And she knew.

This time, she *knew*.

Catherine dropped her pipe wrench. She bolted for the entry into the Tunnels. She rushed to the place where she had met Father a few days ago, turning into the tunnel she'd seen him take after he finished speaking with her. *I would know. I'm sure I would know. If he were dead, I would know it,* she thought, clinging to the notion.

She *didn't* know Vincent was dead, but she did know something was wrong. It was like the day of the cave-in. It was like Romeo on the riverside bench. It was like feeling Vincent's strength fade away as they walked together toward the Portcullis Gate.

Catherine reached a fork in her path. She wished she had Vincent's ability to follow his sense of her like a homing beacon, so she could go to him as quickly as he always came to Catherine. *Dammit,* she cursed herself. *I left my wrench back there. Look before you leap, Cathy!* She began to search for a rock that she could use to send another message.

Just then, she heard running footsteps on approach from the left-hand passage. She looked up. A Tunnel boy was hurrying toward her. It was Stephen.

"Catherine!" he called as he caught sight of her. He stopped in front of her. "I was already coming Up when your message came through." He held out a folded slip of paper. "This is from Mary."

The message was five words long:

Catherine: Please come Below. M

Catherine's hands began to shake. "Stephen, I need you to take me to the Hospital Chamber."

He nodded, light brown eyes suddenly worried. "This way, then," he said. He started off at a brisk walk, but Catherine pushed their pace to a steady run before they got to the next turn. She was wearing jeans and Reeboks. Running was not a problem for her tonight.

"Mary said to tell you that she also sent a note to Benny, so he could call your pager. If you get a message, that's what it is." Stephen was a practiced runner. He spoke easily within the rhythm of his breathing.

"Thanks," Catherine answered tersely. She was no less of a practiced runner, but her heart was also jackrabbiting for other reasons.

"This is about Vincent?" Stephen asked.

"I think so. Yes."

All relevant information exchanged, the two of them concentrated on their run.

They entered the Inner Circle, drawing the attention of the people they passed. *Maybe it's not such a great idea to blaze in here like this,* Catherine thought. Yet her racing heart would have it no other way.

In the Hospital Chamber, Catherine was met by a woman she believed to be Sara. "Just a minute," Sara said. "Let me check with—"

Catherine had no patience for guardians of hospital patients today. "Please excuse this," she said, and brushed past the woman.

"Wait! Just a minute—no, Stephen!" Sara might be too slow to catch hold of Catherine, but Stephen did not escape her clutches. Catherine left both guard and escort behind.

The back of the Hospital Chamber was dim and full of shadows. Only a few candles were

lit. As she hurried toward the privacy screens, Catherine heard voices murmuring. She moved past the screens to find Ezra, Mary, and Father clustered around Vincent's bed. Father looked up at her. By the way he set his jaw, Catherine knew she wasn't going to be staying in this space for very long.

Mary turned to see what Father was glaring at. She reached across the bed, touched Father's arm.

"Father, I sent for her," Mary said.

"I was already on my way Below," Catherine put in as fast as she could.

But Father limped toward her. "Catherine—" he began.

She didn't hear what else he said because as Father came closer, Catherine glimpsed Vincent behind him. All else tumbled into the distant background. Catherine invoked Deity in her mind.

Oh. My. God.

Vincent was very pale. He lay shaking, just as he had on the day he collapsed beneath the University—only *this* was ever so much worse. His hair looked damp. The bare skin on his face gleamed with sweat and his chin was wet with saliva. While his right hand twisted into painful-looking positions, the fingers of his left hand imitated a spider in full *rigor mortis*. Catherine saw Vincent's limbs move at disturbing angles to form unnatural shapes beneath his blanket. And as he trembled through these contortions, Vincent also *writhed* in his bed.

Catherine's lips formed the word, but she found she couldn't speak: *Vincent*.

My broken angel, she mourned, unable to think beyond this horrible new vision of him. He wasn't looking at her. She wished she could read the deep emotion in his haunted tourmaline eyes. Father didn't give Catherine time.

The old man took her by one elbow, claiming her attention. "Come away!" Father ordered, not loudly, but with an authority that demanded obedience.

She gasped out, "Father. I'm all right. I'm not afraid. I need—"

Father had already pulled her a step or two past the screens. "This is not about you!"

"Father—"

"*No one* sees him like this!" Father said in a hard whisper. Catherine stopped protesting and looked at his face. Whatever she might want—whatever she might *feel*—Catherine saw that *Father* was afraid.

"He's in trouble. I felt it. I came," Catherine said. "What is it? Is this a seizure?"

"No. It's not." Father stopped. "You...you *felt* it? What did you feel?"

Now it was Catherine's turn to glare at Father. *You would keep me away from Vincent right now,* she thought, *and yet you ask me about the most personal aspect of our relationship?*

Father's gaze didn't falter in the slightest.

Because she hoped it might in some way help Vincent, Catherine told Father, "Agony. Desolation. Darkness. That's what I felt. A whisper of horror and then nothing at all. I came to see him, Father. I'm not leaving."

"I don't want you to leave," Father said. "Catherine, please listen. I'm not asking this for myself. *Vincent* wouldn't want you to see him now. Not like this. Can you understand? Wait. When this passes, perhaps—"

"Is he awake? Can you ask him?"

Father sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "Catherine, he is awake. But this is not the time to ask him anything. Please stay out here in the chamber. For now." His eyes seemed to stake her to the stone floor. He turned back toward the screens.

"Will you at least tell him I'm here?" Catherine asked, not knowing what else to do or

say.

Father gave her a sharp glance. “Yes.” He moved out of sight.

A second later, Catherine heard someone else run into the chamber. Brizo leaped past her like a black-haired kangaroo and halted an inch from the nearest curtain. “Found it, Father!” Brizo called, almost hopping from foot to foot.

Father reappeared for the nanosecond it took to retrieve a large book from Brizo’s arms, then he vanished again behind the screens. *Not much courtesy today,* thought Catherine. *For anyone.*

Brizo nodded at her and retreated across the chamber to where the card table stood, surrounded by assorted chairs and stools. Still not knowing what else to do, Catherine joined the young medic.

“I’m the runner today,” Brizo explained.

“Do you know what’s happening?” Catherine asked, hating to resort to second-hand queries but also hating Father’s refusal to let her in.

Brizo shook her head. “It’s been like this for almost three hours.” Her oval face became sad. “No one but Elders and Keiko have been allowed in there since yesterday afternoon. And only runners and sentries out here in the chamber.”

Subterranean ICU on red alert, Catherine thought, and felt utterly useless.

A fresh commotion at the chamber entrance signaled the end of the sentries-and-runners-only edict. Catherine looked over. Half a dozen community members moved past the drapery and walked around Sara with murmured apologies. Catherine thought, *Maybe someone should have assigned a different door guard. That’s seven or eight of us now, running over the poor woman to get into this room.*

Everyone who entered seemed to accept the region of the card table as their redrawn boundary. These new arrivals gathered behind the sparse furnishings, asking Brizo and Catherine questions. “We don’t know anything,” Brizo said. She was taken at her word. The people became quiet, muttering among themselves and casting worried looks at the bend in the rock wall.

More people trickled in. *I think I might have started this rock slide,* Catherine thought, remembering the looks on people’s faces when she and Stephen dashed past them. She left the swelling crowd and moved to stand alone on the nearer side of the bend. From there, she could hear Father grumbling and pages flipping.

“Mere athetoid movements, my hind foot,” he growled. “Incompetent madmen masquerading as college professors. Juju root-doctor pretenders and delusional sideshow barkers. I swear, if Michael decides to apply for admission at Columbia, I’ll....” Father trailed off and the pages stopped flipping.

Ezra was also murmuring in a low voice, but his litany seemed to serve a different purpose. “You’re doing good, my friend. You just look at me now. Keep me company. You’re okay. You’re in good hands here. Vincent, I promise, you’ve got this beat.”

Catherine listened. If Vincent so much as whispered her name, no power on Earth was going to keep her away from him. But Vincent was silent.

“There. That’s right. That’s better. Father?” It was Mary. “Father, it’s stopping.”

Father sighed loudly. Catherine heard his voice, now much quieter than Ezra’s, and she couldn’t make out Father’s words. She began to pace a little, a few steps one way and a few steps back.

There were no further blue flickerings, no revisitations of Romeo’s ghost, and no sound of her friend from within the screens. *I’m here,* she thought at him. *Vincent, I’m here.* She supposed situations like this were exactly why they had actual waiting rooms in hospitals Above.

“Oh, blast. And damn,” said Ezra. Catherine stopped pacing.

“Just hold him, Ezra,” Father said, sounding bone-tired. “Note it, Mary, please. What’s the count now?”

“Twelve and three.”

Father sighed again. “Here. Yes. Pull that end tighter. That’s a better fit.”

Things became quiet behind the screens.

Catherine looked back at the crowd. It had grown larger, and now included faces she recognized. She walked over and greeted her four library raiders, and a friend of Ellie’s—a girl named Lana. She exchanged nods with one of the men who had come with her and Mouse to drill rock on the day of the cave-in—Kanin was his name. Standing a little apart from the others, Sara looked both annoyed and defiant. Catherine guessed it wasn’t a good idea to try to talk to that woman.

The chamber got louder: Winslow walked in. Pascal the pipe master, along with a dark-eyed boy Catherine had never seen before, followed close behind the blacksmith.

“Now, what’s with the groundling convention?” Winslow demanded.

“We’re here for news,” a man answered. “We care about him, too.”

Winslow swept the crowd with his fire-and-brimstone glower, but simmered down a little when he saw Catherine. “And you’re here too, huh?”

“I’m here too.”

Winslow addressed the crowd again. “If you lot are staying for a while, you just be sure not to block the way to anything. Everyone hearing me?”

The crowd agreed that it heard him—and went completely still as one more person pushed past the drape. Winslow turned to see what everyone was looking at. He took a quick step backward to make way for—Narcissa. Her arrival seemed to be an unprecedented event. A hairpin dropping onto the floor would have been a loud noise in that sudden silence.

The old priestess seemed to float toward them, brightening the dimly lit room with the patterned goldenrod of her blouse and the brick red streak of her sash. Her faded indigo skirt had been fashioned from a heavy cotton fabric that snapped softly around her ankles as she walked. The group parted for her. Her cloudy gaze took note of each person in the crowd and she was smiling.

Sara stepped forward. “Narcissa,” she said. “Narcissa, it’s good to see you.”

People were exchanging startled looks behind Narcissa’s back. Catherine saw the dark-eyed boy slip out into the corridor. She thought, *Let me guess. He’s gone to tell everyone else that Narcissa has arisen from the deeps.*

Narcissa touched people’s hands and patted people’s faces. “Good evening, children,” she said.

A lanky red-headed boy stepped forward. “Narcissa.”

“Luke!” The old woman sounded delighted to see him. She raised her hands and touched his shoulders. “Are you here to keep the good watch tonight?”

Luke shrugged. “I’m here ’cause I’m worried. Are *you* here for...I mean...is Vincent...are you here to...?” He didn’t know how to ask his question.

A young girl stepped out from the crowd to stand beside Luke. “Is Vincent dying?” the girl asked. Her eyes were wet and round.

Narcissa cupped one brown palm around the side of the girl’s pink face. “Child,” she said, “you shall never meet another soul who loves life so fiercely as our Vincent.”

This was not an answer to the girl’s question, but no one said anything.

“I join you here because this is where I’m needed now,” Narcissa said, looking out over

the entire gathering. The group grew larger by the second. More and more people were coming in.

Narcissa turned away from everyone else and glided to Catherine. “You also are needed,” she said more quietly.

“I know,” Catherine replied. It was the first time she had seen Narcissa since the morning she left the woman’s deep chamber, ashamed and aching, but alive—and definable as Catherine Chandler.

I expected I might feel bad, if I ever saw Narcissa again. But...I don’t. I feel relieved that she’s come.

Narcissa reached out her hands. Catherine held them, and Narcissa walked slowly toward the screens, bringing Catherine with her. Approaching, they heard Father’s tense voice ask something of Ezra.

“Yeah. Got it,” Ezra answered.

And then, urgently, Father said, “*Vincent.*”

Vincent spoke. He sounded frail, his muffled words breathed into being with slow effort. “*My father...my...father...*”

“*No*. No you *don’t*!”

Vincent did not speak again.

“Father?” Mary cried.

“Quickly, Mary!”

Mary rushed out from the other side of the screens. She ran to a cabinet and flung open a door. Snatching up a bulging plastic device, she ran back to her patient. She was white as a sheet.

“You’re come this far, child,” Narcissa said to Catherine. “You bring great gifts with you tonight. Give them, when it’s time.”

Still holding Narcissa’s strong brown hands in hers, Catherine asked, “What gifts? And what time?”

“You will see, Catherine.” Narcissa’s Caribbean accent ornamented Catherine’s name into some new title altogether. “You will know.”

Catherine walked into the screened space first. Father looked up. “Catherine! *For God’s sake—*”

Father broke off when he saw Narcissa. He looked into Narcissa’s cataract-glazed eyes and abruptly turned away from both women. He had other matters to attend to. “Ready, Ezra?”

Ezra nodded and reached for the bed. Catherine and Narcissa moved closer to stand behind Mary, who held out a folded towel to Father with hands that trembled. Catherine thought it strange that she didn’t feel afraid anymore, when everyone else seemed to be running scared. *What is all this about?* she wondered.

Looking over Mary’s shoulder, she saw. Vincent lay on his side, eyes shut, and he was not moving now. At all.

Ezra removed an oxygen mask from Vincent’s face so Father could cover Vincent’s soft muzzle with the thing Mary had brought to him from the cabinet: a respiration mask. Ezra held Vincent’s head steady, wrapping his fingers over the edges of the new mask to keep it in place. Father squeezed the large bulb attached to that mask—and with this tool, he breathed for his son.

“Mary. The towel can wait. Set it down. The stethoscope, Mary. Please. His heart.” Father tore his gaze from Vincent’s face to look at his nurse.

Mary set the towel on the blanket covering Vincent’s legs as though the towel were a fragile thing—an intricate paper snowflake, or a sculpted porcelain feather. Mary hid her face behind her hands.

"No," she moaned. "No."

Narcissa stepped forward. Catherine assumed she would move toward Mary. Instead, Narcissa gave the other woman a sorrowful look, but walked around the bed to stand at Ezra's side. Deliberately, she placed her fingers near to his on the mask.

"Take Mary away from here," Narcissa told the man. "This is no path for her to walk."

Ezra glanced up at Mary and stepped back from the bed. Narcissa took his place across from Father, who now looked like a man determined to ignore the general insanity of the universe in order to accomplish exactly one end.

Ezra walked around to Mary's side of the bed. "Come along, Mary," he said, putting his arms around his friend. He pulled her hands down so she could see to walk. "You come outside with me now. That's right."

As he turned Mary toward the opening between the screens, Catherine saw Mary's face. *I've seen victims of aggravated assault look less decimated,* she thought. Mary's tearful eyes seemed dark and dead. Ezra led her away.

Catherine moved to the space beside Vincent's bed where Mary had been standing. She watched the pale face of the one she loved. She felt very calm. Her thoughts came to her in a quiet stream, detached from the perils that beset the people around her.

We've already fought this battle, you and I. In a place darker than this. In a place farther from those who love us. She sat down on the edge of the bed. Catherine was needed, and Narcissa was right. The wise-woman was right about gifts and souls and everything else. Catherine knew the simple thing she must do to call Vincent back to her.

It was no use moving her face where he could see her; Vincent's eyes were closed. It was no good moving her hand where he could smell the scent of her; Vincent's breath was stolen. There was only this: the touch of Catherine's fingers upon his claws, and the connection between them fulfilling itself through that touch, like a circuit closing.

Beneath the mask, Vincent drew a long breath.

"You give me strength," he had confided to her, as he lay in a dark tunnel beside a tiny, vulnerable light. Catherine felt she finally understood why her touch kept taking Vincent by surprise. *He takes nothing for granted,* she thought. *Every gift offered to him will always surprise him, always delight him. It is wonder that defines Vincent's life. It is wonder that has been missing from mine.*

Vincent took another breath.

Father leaned close, observant. When Vincent continued to breathe on his own, Father exchanged the soft mask Narcissa released from Vincent's face for the small, hard mask attached to the oxygen tank.

Vincent kept breathing.

Father looked at Catherine, and at her hand lying upon Vincent's, and at Narcissa's smiling face. "Catherine, please give me the towel. Narcissa, pull that strap around the back of Vincent's head." After both women did as he bade them, Father said, "Thank you."

He tucked the towel beneath his son's damp jaw and smoothed the mess of Vincent's mane. "Just breathe," Father whispered. "That's all I ask of you. Just do that."

Breathing, Vincent also opened his eyes.

Awed now, Catherine thought, *He never gives merely what we ask for. He gives what he is, and all that he is. He gives us what we need.*

Vincent gave Father a look of silent adoration. Then, moving his head the tiniest bit, he turned his face toward Catherine. His clear blue eyes smiled at her, accepting her gift with a depth of trust that Catherine had never seen in the face of any other person she'd ever known.

“Catherine.” So soft a sound, more thought than spoken word.

She gave to him the words they had given each other so many times before, ever since the dark night Vincent first brought her Below: “I’m here,” Catherine said. Her touch related all the rest of what she felt for him. It didn’t matter if his hand could feel hers, or if it could not. His spirit felt hers. They were connected. They were part of each other. Each time they touched, they reaffirmed their bond.

“Stay?” Vincent breathed.

Did he ask for her presence? Or for her permission? It didn’t matter. To either request, Catherine’s answer was the same. “Oh, yes,” she said. She knew that Father was looking at her, one of his wary expressions altering the shape of his face.

Narcissa walked around the head of the bed. She leaned down between Father, as he knelt on the floor, and Catherine, as she remained on the bed holding Vincent’s hand. Vincent looked to Narcissa. She grinned at him, carefree as a butterfly on a warm spring afternoon. Her teeth were very white. “Vincent. There is something you must know.”

He waited. Father and Catherine waited too. Catherine, at least, was curious to hear what Narcissa intended to say.

“Many hands must hold you now. You must let them. So! A blossom anchors you. Deep waters shall cure you. Only a burning heart can warm you. A shaken star must light your way. The beguiled wind must teach you to breathe. Do you hear, Vincent?”

“Hear.”

Narcissa’s smile faded. “Let the shadow go, child. It will depart.” She stood up. “Now. Sleep.” She touched Vincent’s temple with one fingertip. “Be asleep.”

Vincent’s right hand curled into a loose fist around the hem of his blanket. He tried to pull the blanket closer to his body, but its tattered edge slipped from his grasp. He closed his eyes. His breathing immediately deepened and slowed.

Father looked from Vincent to Narcissa, and grabbed the stethoscope off the table. Unconcerned, Narcissa walked to a pile of spare blankets tossed helter skelter upon a chair near the foot of the bed. She picked through the pile until she found one that suited her, pulling it free of the jumble.

Father listened to Vincent’s heart and touched one side of Vincent’s neck. He frowned. “I don’t believe it. He shouldn’t be able to do that.”

“Do what?” Catherine asked.

“Sleep. *Instant* deep sleep. And we haven’t seen this since we began treatment.” He stared at Narcissa. “What did you do?”

“The healing sleep, yes,” the old priestess said with a knowing smile. She took her time, spreading the blanket she had chosen across the bed. Catherine saw that it was the one Mary had brought in from Father’s chamber. “I know a trick or two myself, good Father.” Standing on the opposite side of the bed once again, Narcissa patted the blanket at Vincent’s shoulder.

Father looked at his quilted comforter. “Healing sleep,” he echoed. “Yes.” He pulled the earpieces of the stethoscope down so that the instrument hung from his neck like a strange medallion. “Yes.” He rested his head upon the pillow beside Vincent’s masked face and placed his hand on Vincent’s hair.

The three of them stood, or sat, or knelt like this for a long time, an unparalleled diversity of sentinels holding tight to the same true thing. Looking at each face in turn, Catherine thought, *My life doesn’t need to match Vincent’s, after all. It was...silly to ever have worried about that. No one in his world matches anyone else. And no one cares that they don’t. They’re too busy caring about each other.* Narcissa turned her wise smile to Catherine, and Catherine wondered if

the old woman could sense the tenor of her thoughts.

The moment ended when a quiet step moved past the screens and stopped behind Catherine. She looked over her shoulder. Pascal stood there, nearly as pale as his sleeping friend. He studied the way the three of them were arranged around the bed. Catherine saw that he feared the worst.

Father sat up. “Pascal.”

“Father?” The small man looked at Vincent, questioning.

“He’s sleeping now,” Father said. “We’ve...we’ve had a scare, but he’s quiet now, asleep.” Slowly, Father got up off the floor.

Pascal sighed, relief in every line of his face. “There’s a lot of worried people out there, Father. They’re not very interested in anything Winslow and I have to say.”

Father gave the pipe master a thin smile. “I’ll talk to them soon. But first, would you please find Mary for me? Ezra may be with her. Would you please bring her here? I need her to see that Vincent is all right.”

“Yes. They’re both close by. I’ll be right back.” Pascal glanced at Vincent and walked out.

Father looked around at the scattered furnishings. He took a few halting steps without the aid of his crutch to bring a chair for Catherine from the other side of the table. “Please,” he said, offering it to her. Catherine nodded and moved to it from the bed, keeping hold of Vincent’s hand. She was holding onto his left hand, she realized, and it was wrapped in bandages.

Not wanting to hurt him, Catherine loosened her grip. She looked him over. All of yesterday’s tubes were gone. Now she saw only the clear hose connecting the oxygen mask to the green tank. Most of the pillows were piled onto the table. Only the two blankets remained on Vincent’s bed.

Father and Narcissa moved the bundle of extra blankets, which uncovered the second chair. Narcissa folded quilts and afghans at the foot of the bed while Father placed the chair beside Catherine. Mary re-entered the screened-in space, supported by both Ezra and Pascal. Father guided the underworld’s silent midwife to the empty seat. Mary looked at the floor the whole time, tears dripping one by one from her eyes.

“Mary?” Father asked. “Mary, look at me.”

After a moment, she did.

Father took the stethoscope from around his neck. He bent down to set the two rubber-capped ends in Mary’s ears. Moving slowly, he pushed Vincent’s left shoulder back, placing the chestpiece over Vincent’s heart.

Mary listened. Whatever she heard broke through her thin veneer of composed sorrow. She bowed her head and began to cry in earnest.

Father removed the stethoscope and set it on the table. He wrapped his arms around Mary. “It’s going to be all right. *He’s* going to be all right.”

Ezra, Pascal, and Narcissa clustered around the back of Mary’s chair, each of them touching her shoulder, her back, or her hair. Catherine reached for Mary too. *They’re all so giving,* she thought. *They see pain and they want to share it with the one who is suffering. No one ever needs to grieve alone, down here.* She touched Mary’s arm with her free hand, offering what consolation she could.

Mary’s weeping began to subside. Father stood up, although he kept one hand on Mary’s shoulder. Narcissa went to stand beside him, a string of large wooden beads clicking around the old woman’s wrist as she touched Mary’s white face.

“Come with me,” Narcissa said. She took Mary by one hand. “Come with me. Let him sleep, Mary.”

Mary rose from the chair and followed Narcissa out, staring at the floor again. Narcissa's attention now focused entirely upon Mary. She didn't look back at anyone else. The three men looked at each other, then at the open place between two screens that served as the entrance into Vincent's hospital alcove.

"Will Mary be all right?" Pascal asked Father.

Father stood silent and sad, gazing after the two women.

Ezra answered Pascal. "Narcissa knows how to take care of her. She'll be okay. Now that she knows we're not going to lose anyone tonight. Mostly, she needs sleep. Mary's worn out."

"As are we all," said Father. He picked up his crutch and went toward the screens. "I'd better say a few words. With Mary and Narcissa coming and going like that, everyone will be thinking...well. Things they don't need to be thinking." He limped out into the chamber.

The three people remaining with Vincent heard Father move past the bend in the wall, where he began to explain things in a strong, steady voice. A few of the gathered people asked him questions. The crowd became silent whenever Father answered.

Pascal stepped closer to the bed and asked in his quiet way, "How close was it this time?"

Ezra came up behind him, sighing. "I'm no doctor, Pascal, but honestly? I think *this* was sheer exhaustion. His body knotting up from opposite sides like that...fighting his own muscles just to pull in air. Vincent didn't stop trying to breathe. He just didn't have the strength anymore to breathe deep." He arched an eyebrow at Catherine. "It looks like Vincent's doing better now."

Catherine nodded. Her strange calm began to ebb away. She suspected that one of Narcissa's tricks or two had been the source of her temporary tranquility. Now she felt a little frightened, and sad, and very grateful. The trust Vincent had given her filled her heart. *I'll be your strength tonight*, she thought. *My turn.*

There was no question that he needed her strength. Vincent looked worse than he did when Catherine opened the door of the professor's cage. Vincent's beautiful hair was a greasy riot of tangles. The skin that wasn't covered by fur looked permeable as tracing paper. Was he even thinner now? Catherine couldn't be sure. She hadn't had time to get used to him looking ill. Her memory contended that Vincent's feline countenance should be golden and powerful, his clawed hands agile and strong.

"Pascal?" Ezra asked, and at that moment his was probably the calmest voice in the Hospital Chamber. "Can you spare a minute?"

"Yes," said Pascal.

So Ezra had him stack pillows into a large plastic box, which cleared off the table. Then he sent Pascal to refill a water pitcher while Ezra organized medical objects on the tabletop and placed the box of pillows on the floor. The pillows bin was joining other containers beneath the table: a wicker basket half-full of fabric squares—and a familiar dilapidated cardboard file box. To Catherine, it looked like Father had unceremoniously dumped all the notebooks of the late Edward Hughes back into that box, after he'd finished reading them.

The table became tidier. A glazed clay cup remained, the slate and chalk, the pocket watch, an empty stainless steel basin, things from Father's medical bag, the bag itself, and the big book Brizo had brought in, open to a page in the middle of the tome. Pascal added the pitcher when he returned, and Ezra sent him back out again for fresh towels.

The pipe master didn't seem to mind being conscripted for gofer duty. Yesterday, Rebecca had told Catherine, "Our way is to help each other." Witnessing this generosity each time she came Below renewed Catherine's hope for the human race.

Out in the chamber, Father was instructing the Tunnel People as to how they could make themselves useful in the near future. "Anyone sixteen years or older may volunteer for a shift.

Talk to Winslow. You'll arrange a roster, Winslow?"

The community's blacksmith must have given his assent. Father went on. "We'll put the word out when Vincent is well enough for volunteers to step in. Now, then. I know it's been a long week. I want to thank everyone for all that you've done, and for all that you do. Children? I commend you for your helpfulness, and for taking the initiative in your lessons. Vincent has told me he's pleased to hear that you're helping one another while so many of your regular teachers are otherwise occupied."

Ezra smiled at Father's words. He saw that Catherine was watching him. "You'd be amazed," he murmured. "Have you ever seen one of our class sessions in action?"

"No," Catherine said.

"You're welcome to sit in, anytime. We've got some great kids down here. The older ones have been looking after the little ones these past few days. It's a beautiful thing to see."

Catherine had no doubt of that. Tunnel children—Tunnelkids, as Vincent had called them—were all amazing young people. When she'd first learned that children lived Below, Catherine had been concerned for their welfare. She had wondered what kind of life the underworld could offer them. It didn't take her long to discover that these children were all independent, happy, well-fed, and well-loved. She was slowly discovering how well-educated they were, too. She would love to visit a class in session sometime.

After the present crisis was over.

Pascal returned with the towels and put the stack on the table. He looked at Vincent. "Would he be more comfortable on his back?" he asked.

Ezra shook his head. "He'd drown on his back." He picked up one of the clean towels from Pascal's pile. He swapped out the fresh towel with the one beneath Vincent's face, which was already wet through. Dropping the damp towel into the wicker basket beneath the table, he said, "We've been fighting this all afternoon."

"What *was* this?" Catherine asked. "Father said it wasn't a seizure." Some kind of violent seizure was the only thing Catherine could think of that would look as horrible as what she'd seen.

Ezra sighed again. "It had everything to do with that damned tranquilizer. Father said it means Vincent's burning through the last of Doctor Mengele's downer cocktail. Looks like this also happened while Vincent was at the University. Father read about it in those notebooks." Ezra suddenly gave Pascal a wry half-smile. "Do me another favor. Don't tell Father I just brought up Mengele."

"My lips are sealed," Pascal said.

Ezra nodded. "If we want to know anything else about it, we can always consult the words of wisdom Brizo dug out of that pandemonium Father calls a Library." He leaned over the open book on the table. "Let's see. *Paroxysmal dyskinesia*," he read. Ezra looked up at Catherine and Pascal. "The name doesn't tell people like us very much, does it?" He skimmed through the small print on the pages. "Bare bones definition? Episodic attacks of involuntary movements." He stood up straight. "Sounds about right."

"It sounds like the worst understatement of the year," Catherine retorted.

"Agreed. Reference books can never touch on the emotions involved." Ezra gazed at the book, shaking his head. "Man alive."

Pascal moved closer to his friend. "Are *you* okay, Ezra?"

The older man took a step back from the table, and the book. "Yeah. I think so. It's just...I'm *feeling* it, Pascal. I'm with Mary on this one, you know? We feel the city up there beating down on *all* of us, and old memories are getting drummed up untimely. I've been

wondering how Mary's kept herself running without falling to pieces long before now. She's had that beat-up look in her eyes ever since we pulled Father and Vincent out of the Maze. Mary still can't talk much about her ghosts. "

Ezra crossed his arms over his waist, grasping his elbows with his hands. "Me, before I came Below? I once met a kid whose momma dunked his head in a tubful of insecticide. The woman told me, and the cops, the paramedics—everybody—that she didn't know how else to get rid of the little boy's head lice, so they'd let him go back to school. The medical records, and my own report, didn't do justice to what that child went through." Ezra unfolded his arms. He pointed two broad-nailed fingers at the medical book, like he wanted to shoot it through the heart with a gun.

"The printed word always has its limitations."

His two unsettled listeners said nothing.

Ezra looked up and saw Pascal's and Catherine's faces. "Sorry. You two didn't need to hear all that."

"Better us than Mary," Pascal said.

Ezra nodded slowly. "I guess that's true. Social worker ghost stories. That one's been weighing heavy." He rubbed at his eyes with one hand. "I got reminded of that little boy today. It's been one hell of a ride."

Catherine believed that statement pretty much summed up life in both worlds, ever since the morning Joe handed her the envelope from Rhode Island.

Pascal said, "Can I ask what happened to that boy and his mother?"

"Well, they decided, since she had sense enough to wear rubber gloves herself, she also had the sense not to do that do a kid in the first place. She went to prison. Her son went to a state hospital. About the time I heard he'd finally died there was about the time I came Below."

It's not the worst eyewitness account I've heard from the front lines, Catherine thought, *but it comes close.*

Ezra stood beside Pascal, looking at Vincent with a thoughtful expression on his face. "This here's why I've *stayed* Below. Down here, something bad happens and it's not filed away in some dusty record clerk's office. Down here, when a thing happens to one of us..."

"We *all* feel it," Pascal said, finishing the thought.

Another half-formed smile appeared on Ezra's face. "Yeah."

Pascal looked into Ezra's eyes with determined compassion. "Do you need anything else right now?"

"No. Thanks, my friend."

"Okay. I'm going to help Winslow with that roster. After that, you know where I'll be, if you need me."

Ezra nodded.

Pascal turned to Catherine. "I'm glad you're here," he said.

Catherine smiled at him. Pascal stood still a moment longer, his dark eyes worried as he took one last look at Vincent. He left without saying another word.

Ezra checked a dial on the oxygen tank, then he sat down on the empty chair beside Catherine. "Times like this are always difficult for Pascal's bunch," he said. "There's a group of them. Pascal's the eldest. They all grew up together. A good friend of mine once dubbed them 'the Troop.' They were inseparable, when they were kids. Now there's not many of them left Below."

Catherine looked at Ezra's kind brown face. "Time tends to separate friends."

"Yes, ma'am. That it does."

They sat quietly. Beyond the screens, Father had stopped talking. Catherine heard a low murmur of voices that gradually dwindled away. People must be leaving the chamber.

Tenderly, Catherine touched the unbandaged knuckles of Vincent's contracted left hand, grateful that at least Vincent felt warm to her—warm now, and hopefully not *too* warm. She noticed that the claw on his ring finger was blunted. Clipped. How long had it been that way? She didn't know.

"What happened to Vincent's hand?" she asked. An IV cannula had been taped there when she left him yesterday morning, but these new wrappings looked like they covered something more serious than a needle wound.

Although Ezra's voice stayed calm, he sounded sad. "Vincent got confused. He bit himself."

Such a direct reply. *I don't believe Father would have answered my question,* Catherine thought. Looking at the bandages, she felt tears sting her eyes.

Catherine had no trouble imagining the damage Vincent's teeth could do to his poor hand. Was it the needle? She remembered the way he growled at the darts when she held them out for the Tunnelkids, The People's Exhibit B, presented in the wake of the *Confidential's* monster article as Exhibit A. She thought about the punctured examination table in the professor's lab, and the claw-scored floor tiles. She tried to imagine what Vincent's view must have been from inside a cage less than a third the size of a jail cell in the Tombs.

Catherine closed her eyes and thought, *One hell of a ride*.

"I should have come Below sooner," she said. "Everything I've been doing...business things...all of it could have waited." She felt a tear escape, and she opened her eyes again. She wiped the tear away.

Beside her, Ezra was shaking his head. "'Shouldas' trip us up, when we need to be taking care of the here and now. What counts is that you came. The timing isn't always our own doing, you know."

It felt like a truth, graciously spoken. So Catherine nodded. She heard uneven steps approaching the alcove, and the sound of Father's crutch softly thumping the stone. Father came back in.

Ezra stood. "I got things cleaned up a bit," he informed his friend.

"Thank you," Father said somberly. His voice was no longer that of the self-assured orator Catherine had heard speaking only moments ago. Father looked and sounded gray. He went to the vacated chair and sat down with a little wince, leaning away from his bad hip until he could settle his weight evenly.

"Do you need tea in here, or anything?" Ezra asked.

"Not right now, Ezra. Just the quiet will be good for a while."

Ezra nodded and looked at Catherine, asking her the same question with his eyes.

"I'm fine," she said.

"Then I think I'll go keep Sara and Brizo company for a while. Sara's just about ready to spit nails. I can be her sounding board until she settles some."

Father thanked Ezra a second time.

Ezra nodded to both of them and walked away. Catherine took in the empty opening between the screens, then the profile of the grim physician sitting in the chair beside her. Catherine expected that being left alone with Dr. Jacob Wells was going to be as difficult for her as ever.

At first, Father didn't look at her. He set his crutch upright against the back of his chair. Leaning forward, he examined his son's face. He reached for Vincent's hand and felt for the

pulse at Vincent's wrist. He said nothing about whatever information he received from this contact. Catherine assumed his silence meant that all was as well as it could be. Father let Vincent's wrist go.

"I now have that abominable music in my head," Father said, completely drained.

He didn't say anything else, so Catherine asked, "What music, Father?"

"The one Schubert piece I cannot abide." He glanced at her. "'*Der Erlkönig.*' I could go the rest of my life without hearing it again. Unfortunately, I cannot escape hearing it here." He tapped his forehead with the fingers of one hand.

Hearing the German title, and Schubert's name, the reference suddenly clicked into place in Catherine's mind. She'd heard that music too. Goethe's lyrics, Schubert's *lied*.

"*That* was the message Vincent sent to you. I've been trying to figure out why it rang a bell. The Erlking—"

"Yes," Father said.

Catherine became quiet, thinking about German poetry and Austrian compositions. It had been a long time since she'd heard the piece sung. A college friend, it must have been Eve, had performed it at a piano recital once, but that was years ago.

"How does it start?" she asked. "Something about night and wind?"

Father's eyes became stormy again. "Catherine, if you think I'm going to recite *that* poem over *this* sickbed, you are sorely mistaken." He spoke quietly, but his rebuke stung. Father turned back to Vincent.

I never seem to get past square one with this man, Catherine thought, feeling wholly unwelcome.

She examined Vincent's hand in hers, waiting for her hurt to dissipate. It was far easier to think about Vincent than it was to spar with Vincent's father. Slowly, Catherine straightened Vincent's fingers out of their dead spider mien. His hand looked better after that, more like a hand—or rather, more like *his* hand.

This was the first thing about Vincent that frightened me, Catherine thought, remembering her wounded days Below, when her bandages doubled as a blindfold. *I reached for the gentle hand that fed me soup and I wasn't expecting to touch...claws. Why would anyone ever expect that? There are no precedents for meeting Vincent.*

Catherine tentatively let herself feel the wonder she had kept shut away for so long. She knew that curiosity and delight were the true currency of love. She also knew that she had rejected love's economy, for reasons that seemed ridiculous to her now. She suddenly remembered moment after wonderful moment—all through last year's ten April days Below, and all through this year's January, and February, and March—moments when Vincent's hands had touched her with gentle love, moments when he had held her in his arms with strength and tenderness, when his lips touched her hair, when his quiet voice spoke powerful truths into Catherine's complicated life.

Maybe it wasn't *Vincent* who had created that empty space between them. Maybe it wasn't *his* withdrawal that Catherine had felt during these past few weeks. Perhaps Father was right about Catherine's fear, and her emotional bankruptcy.

I've missed Vincent so much. Catherine was surprised by the thought, and by the one that followed after. *I've missed the touch of his hands.* She allowed herself to look with honest eyes at the hand she held, not staring but *seeing*.

This was a large hand, with a wide, thick-skinned palm. Wiry reddish hair covered its back, while the short fur across the fingers grew satiny-soft, with a golden sheen. The hand's natural position made a flat-fingered fist, which kept Vincent's sharp nails tucked safely against

the calloused skin just below his wrist.

This was a strong hand, capable of undertaking construction projects in the Maze. It was a dexterous hand, able to pen words in a generous, flowing script that was a joy to read. It was a lethal hand, one that dealt death with a single rending slash of claws. It was also a merciful hand, ready at all times to wipe the tears from a frightened child's face. This was Vincent's hand, and it had always been open to Catherine, offering to give her anything and everything good, whenever she dared to ask for his love, and even when she found herself unable to ask.

Catherine thought: *I can't believe I almost walked away from this. My own fear almost robbed me of this.* She didn't blame herself for her old fears, but she wished she could have accepted the grandeur of Vincent's gift much sooner. She wished she hadn't needed yet another catastrophe to set her priorities straight.

Turning away from the pain of regret, Catherine's mind took up the riddle of the poem again. Night and wind. Horses and the Alder King. That was it: a father riding home with his dying child, trying to convince his son that the boy's fears of the Erlking in pursuit were only a child's fevered illusion.

Catherine decided that she'd asked Father a very stupid question just now. Holding Vincent's hand in both of hers, she tried again. "Father, I know you're angry with me, but—"

Father turned to her quickly, looking puzzled. "Catherine? I'm not angry with you."

She thought: ...*What?* Catherine felt like Father had made a sudden movement toward her face. She blinked. *Oh. Okay, then.* Her questions flittered away from her.

Observing Catherine's stupefaction, Father's expression softened. He said, "I suppose...I can understand why you might think I'd be angry. But no. I'm not angry. Not with you, anyway. Not now. February twelfth is behind us."

Catherine just sat there, speechless.

Father sighed. "I've frightened you, haven't I?"

Catherine said nothing.

Father answered his own question. "Yes, I have. And badly, it would seem. Catherine, I admit that I have felt...frustration, even anger...assuredly great fear. It's dangerous, what you do together, for both of you. And I don't know if I'll ever find enough charity in my heart to forgive a world which denies so much of life to my son. *Your* world." His voice became rueful. "But my feelings are not your responsibility. If I've forced you to shoulder a father's fears, Catherine, I am truly sorry."

His unsolicited apology was the last thing Catherine would have expected from him. *I give up!* she thought. *I can't read this man and I can't anticipate his actions. Father is completely beyond my ken.*

She continued to sit in stunned silence at his side, and the storm in Father's eyes dissolved into an enervated repose. "Catherine, you asked me a question once. Do you remember? You asked me if I knew that I could trust you."

When she was sure she could speak intelligibly, Catherine said, "Yes, I remember that." He'd been in jail at the time. It was a painful interview for both of them. But, yes, even then, Father had told her that his trust in *her* was not in question. It was her world's cruelties that Father feared.

"After all you've done for Vincent, for Margaret, for me...for *everyone* Below...how could I *not* trust you?" Father told her now. "But even before all that..." He offered her the faintest of smiles.

"Know that I *do* trust you, Catherine. We won't always agree about what it means to love my son. Know that, too. But I'm not angry with you for loving him. Nor he, you. That was never

the issue."

Somewhere along the line, Catherine had missed the fact that an armistice existed between them. She didn't know when it had happened, or who had initiated it. She watched Father pick up his stethoscope again. He listened to his patient's heartbeat, and then carefully removed the mask from Vincent's face. After half a minute or so, when they saw no adverse effects, Father shut off the flow of oxygen from the tank. He hung the mask by its strap from the head rail of Vincent's bed.

"I'd like you to try to understand," he said, as he reached for other things on the table. "I've been fending off the Erlking for thirty-two years." Father spoke in a cautious way, as though to repel that spectre's attention. "Perhaps I've become accustomed to spearheading these skirmishes alone. At this moment, however, I'd like to think I'm a little wiser than I was even a week ago. Catherine, rest assured that if—God forbid—anything like tonight should ever happen again...I'll send for you myself."

Catherine accepted Father's promise, still half-disbelieving her own ears. "If you do, Father, I'll come. I'll help in any way I can."

Father nodded, giving her another faint smile. He poured some water from the pitcher onto a towel and gently cleaned Vincent's face with it. Vincent didn't wake.

Father worked in silence and without hurry, each touch of his cloth an avowal of intimate familiarity. Witnessing this, Catherine began to understand that the deep devotion her friend expressed toward his adoptive father was more than mutual. Jacob Wells loved his son more than life itself.

When he finished washing Vincent's face, Father replaced the dampened towel from Vincent's pillow, offering no comment about the conditions which required such use of toweling. He wiped dry the surfaces of the plastic mask, then positioned it to loosely cover his son's mouth and nose, restarting the flow of oxygen. "The less he has to work to breathe, the better," he muttered.

Hoping their new rapport would hold, Catherine asked the question she'd started to ask earlier. "Father? What's been happening in here?"

"Since your visit yesterday? Two steps forward and one step back, hour by hour. I think Vincent has battled every last demon in his pantheon during these past days."

"Ezra told me Vincent's still fighting the drug?"

"The last residues of *five* drugs," Father corrected her. "But maybe now...if he can *sleep* again, he can begin to make some headway. Narcissa's name for this stage of sleep is actually quite accurate. Maybe Vincent will sleep through the rest of this tempest."

Five drugs, Catherine thought, remembering the things Mary had told her about what Vincent could and could not tolerate. "The 'tempest' being his...seizures?" she asked.

"The seizures are a symptom. Devastating in their own right, but only one of many other related issues."

"Then what's the true problem?"

Father looked away from her as he answered. "We think Vincent has sustained nerve damage."

Catherine's heart skipped a beat. She had worked with enough victims of assault to know what nerve injuries could do. Her own father had protected her from the permanent effects of such damage when he flew in the best plastic surgeon his wealth could acquire, to fix Catherine's face.

"If not cumulative brain injury," Father added in a dreary monotone.

"You *think,* Father? You're not sure? Could you be wrong?"

Please be wrong! Catherine's heart cried within her. *Brain damage?!*

"A doctor can always be wrong. Although that's a lesson many people never seem to learn. A father can be wrong about these things, too." Father nodded at Vincent's bandaged hand. "But I don't believe I'm wrong about this."

"He still can't feel his hands?"

"Physically, Vincent hasn't felt much of anything for *days*, Catherine. Except for the slow increase of his injuries, and a headache that puts a bilateral migraine to shame."

Father closed his eyes, shutting in his own pain. "But there's more to it than that. He's also been *seizing* for days. Certainly since Sunday evening, and perhaps earlier." Father opened his eyes again. "He's had...severe trouble with his left hand. And he's been unable to move his left side at all since early this morning."

"*Father.*" Fear compressed Catherine's lungs.

"Believe me, I know."

"Can Vincent...*heal* from this?"

Father shoved his fingers through his hair. "He's healed from all manner of debilitation in the past," he said, keeping his voice low, "but he's never experienced such extensive internal trauma." Father met Catherine's eyes.

"His body has been *trying* to heal itself ever since the night he was caught Above. His abductors' neglect and incompetence pushed Vincent beyond the point where he could recover without our help. He *has* begun to heal, but these seizures...they're using up his strength, putting his health at greater risk. They either hinder or undo some of his progress each time they occur. And, my God, tonight—"

"The dyskinesia," Catherine said.

Father made a sound that landed somewhere between a laugh and a sob. "You and Ezra have been at the book. Oh, yes. Paroxysms, three types of seizures, organ failure, dysphagia...the list goes on. It's the worst case of poisoning I've seen in many, many years."

These are very scary things to hear him say, Catherine thought. Father's professional caseload before he came Below included studies of radiation poisoning in Japan and New Mexico.

Father regarded his sleeping son. "My greatest medical fear for Vincent has always been neurological problems. He heals quickly and continuously from everything, yes. This ability has kept him alive more than once. It kept him alive at the University. It's kept him alive since he's come home. And yet, for all that he is, Catherine, for all he can do, Vincent's constitution has never been strong. I know he doesn't look it, but his system is quite delicate. He's always been susceptible to fatigue, and to chemical influence. This is not the first time we've had to deal with seizures. Not the first time he's—" Father's voice broke. He shook his head.

Chemical influence. Catherine recalled the high stakes of one self-absorbed biology professor. She remembered listening to the doomed little man weigh his paltry aspirations against Vincent's torment. *I'm sorry Vincent, but I've decided to hate Professor Hughes after all,* she thought.

Father folded his hands beneath his chin. He might have been holding an old grievance in check, or offering up a silent prayer. He spoke slowly. "When Vincent was a young boy, I almost killed him myself once...with Tylenol, Catherine. *Tylenol*."

Catherine wiped a new tear from her face, thinking, *Well, that explains why Father ejected me from the Tunnels that night in February, after I offered to bring Down anything that might help with Vincent's pain...were it only a bottle of Tylenol. It was the gentlest medication I could think to offer, but it must have been more than Father could bear, to hear me say that.*

Out loud, Catherine said, “But Vincent recovered.”

“Yes.”

“And he recovered from the Silks’ attack last month.”

“Yes. He did.”

“He can recover from this, too.”

Father looked at her. “We’re all praying that he will.”

“What needs to happen so he can? Is there anything I can do to help?”

For the first time since the cave-in, Catherine thought she discerned a true gentling in Father’s manner toward her. “What Vincent needs is to eat as much as he can, and to sleep as much as he can. Once my own pulse slows to a rate that may be measured by double-digit numbers, I’m going to put in a new IV line. Vincent *must* stay hydrated. As for what *you* can do, I would have you remain right where you are, doing just what you’re doing, for as long as you’re willing.”

“Then I’m here for the night,” said Catherine. “At least.”

Father nodded, respecting her decision. “It’s an encouraging sign, you know, that Vincent remains connected to you. That *you* can sense him. That you draw strength from one another. It means he’s still fighting, still reaching out beyond himself, to all of us. And to you.”

“Are you worried that he’ll stop fighting? Stop reaching?”

Father sounded achingly tired now. “Yes. For one reason or another. That possibility worries me very much.”

This was a gift Catherine Chandler could give to Jacob Wells. She returned trust for trust. “Don’t worry about that anymore. I’m not going to worry about that.”

“No?”

Catherine shook her head. “Many hands, Father. Remember? Yours and mine among them.”

Father smiled. “Narcissa and her obscure prophecies.”

“Yes, but I found truth in her words. Vincent doesn’t need to fight anymore, or to reach very far. *We’re* here. For him. For each other.”

Catherine looked into Father’s penetrating gray-blue eyes. “I want to be here for *you* as well, Father. Let me do that, please. Let me give you a little of the help, and the hope, you have given to me.”

Father looked down, and at his son’s face, and back to Catherine. Then he reached for her left hand. Catherine gave it to him, squeezing back when he closed his fingers around hers, accepting her gift.

Accepting Catherine.

And she accepted him.

They sat together at Vincent’s bedside after that, not speaking further. They had no need for words. The shadow of Father’s anger no longer stood between Catherine and Vincent. The shadow of Catherine’s fear no longer came between Vincent and Father. They kept watch together through the creeping hours of the night, and when Vincent’s dreams became unrestful, when his hand trembled or clenched in seizure, when he seemed in danger of waking too soon—they took turns comforting him.

None of us alone can lay our phantasms to rest, Catherine thought, in the long quiet before dawn, which the world Below shared with the world Above. *Narcissa was also right about this. We have to depend on one another to build a time for blossoms and bright hearts, stars, winds, and waters. Springtime things. A time for new beginnings.*

Catherine hoped with all her heart that this season of healing would come quickly to

warm her loved one and to cure cure him of every sorrowful wound. She held this hope aloft for them all.

Part Four: Seasonal Constellations

Chapter Sixteen: Many Hands

I

28 March 1987
Saturday Morning

Winslow watched Father refill Vincent's cup with William's apple-ginger blend, thinking, *Perfectly good apple juice ruined*. Nasty though it be, Vincent couldn't seem to get enough of the stuff. Father was using the drink to practically bribe his patient into taking Lilliputian bites of quinoa porridge.

Winslow shook his head over the listless wreckage of his friend. He wasn't sure if Vincent's being awake was a good thing or not. He supposed it all depended on how you went about weighing "good" and "bad."

It was *good* to see Vincent sitting up, a minor mountain of pillows at his back. The pillow mountain had been covered by an overlapping grid of frayed terrycloth squares, and Winslow recognized a sheepskin and knitted yarn throw from Vincent's chamber that someone had brought in for him. Vincent wore the tacked-together blanket wrapped around his shoulders like a shawl, so he seemed comfortable enough.

On the other hand, Vincent wasn't eating on his own, and that was *not* so good. Father was doing all the work, coaxing breakfast into his son. Also, Vincent's breathing had gone off-kilter again. He looked like what Winslow imagined you'd see if a mean guy with a big fist had blacked both his eyes. And Father didn't look much better.

"I know that you're tired, Vincent," Father said, sounding thoroughly all-in himself. "Shall we say, five more bites?"

"We?" asked Vincent, his voice even weaker than Father's.

Father smiled and held out a spoonful of mush.

Winslow thought, *Father might be putting the medical folks on call now, instead of on watch, but Vincent is still one sick cookie.*

Vincent silently swallowed the food, and more of the juice.

Winslow saw other changes in his friend's condition: a few more points he could score for the "good" side of things. The end of the IV line in Vincent's left arm was covered over with fresh tape, a situation made possible by what seemed to be careful work with a straight razor, leaving a ring of de-furred skin around the middle of Vincent's arm. Clean bandaging stabilized the flexible IV tube above Vincent's elbow and the blankets on his hospital bed had a crisp, freshly laundered attitude. Winslow took a closer look at Vincent's face and bare forearm. He decided the fur was ruffled from very recent washing.

Guess Father got him up this morning. Cleaned him up, remade the bed. It explained the crew of helpful hands he'd seen hauling pails of wash water out of the Hospital Chamber when Winslow arrived. It also explained why Father's sleeves were rolled up past his elbows, the damp fabric there two shades darker than the rest of the old man's blue shirt.

"There. Good," Father said. He stood up from his chair, moving like a man ten years

older than he was. He took the porridge bowl to the table and began loading a tray with cups and dishes.

At the head of Vincent's hospital bed, Rebecca and Pascal stood picking through a box of jars and rough-cut towels. Rebecca wore her workday pinafore, and she'd done something to her hair to keep it piled on top of her head beneath a rose-colored scarf. Winslow wondered what she was up to. Father had called in Winslow and Pascal for an experimental nursemaiding shift. He hadn't mentioned inviting Rebecca.

Not that Winslow planned to ask Rebecca anything. She had that guard dog look on her face. The one that showed up whenever she caught kids playing too rough, or when she heard about some new tragic insanity from the world Above—or when she figured out that someone she cared for was hurting.

Winslow walked over to the bed. He folded his arms over the thick lump of paper which filled an inside pocket of his fringed vest. Ezra had asked him to play postman this morning, but Winslow felt he needed to wait for the right moment to make his delivery. He had a pretty good idea this was *not* that moment.

"Morning," Winslow said to Vincent.

Vincent blinked at him.

At least he's off the O-two now, Winslow thought, glancing at the green tank beside the head rail of Vincent's low bed. *Pascal said that was really hard to look at last night. Even so—*

"I gotta say, you look like your flying saucer crash landed on you before it took off for outer space again."

Vincent didn't smile. "Then I look better than I feel."

"Too much ginger?" quipped Winslow, putting half a smile on his own face.

It was exactly the wrong thing to say. Vincent still didn't smile back. He exhaled and turned away from Winslow, hiding his face within the grubby briar patch that had once been his flowing yellow mane. Father might have washed the rest of him, but the old man hadn't touched Vincent's hair.

Pascal moved to a chair on the far side of the bed and sat down, looking unhappy. Rebecca, though, *she* glared daggers at Winslow over Vincent's head. Her pale eyes could have glaciated the Galápagos. Winslow took his best shot at not shivering.

Father ahemmed. "Winslow? Will you come with me for a moment? I need you carry this tray for me."

"Yeah. Sure." But in his own head Winslow groaned, *Ah, hell. Great way to start off the day, huh? Stuck between the King of Immanent Lectures and the Doberman Duchess of Ice Bergs.* He picked up the tray of dirty dishes. Pascal gave him a commiserating nod as Winslow followed Father out into the corridor.

The blacksmith thought, *Easy for Pascal to make sad faces at me like that. I bet he's put his foot in it maybe once in his life.*

They were almost to the Kitchen when Father pulled Winslow into the tunnel that led to crockery storage. In between meals at this time of day, the storage chamber was a quiet place for a private chat. Winslow made sure to get started first.

"I get it, Father. You need a perfect gentleman on watch in there. I swear, I'll tone it down."

Father didn't smile. Maybe he was just too tired. "If you can't, I want you to call in Marc or Randolph to take your place. It's been a long night, Winslow, and a bad morning."

"Sorry to hear that," Winslow said, knowing he'd tape his own mouth shut before he replaced himself with anyone else.

"Yes. Well, you walked in on Vincent's second attempt at breakfast. In this instance, the ginger is medicinal, to help him keep his meal down. *Eating* is hard work for him right now, Winslow. Do not make it harder for him."

"Okay. Sorry." Winslow scowled at the tray he carried, feeling bad for his friend and mad at himself. *That's why Father's teamed me up with Pascal,* he thought, glum. *Maybe with Rebecca, too. They're good at the touchous stuff.*

Father sighed. "Although I must admit, Vincent's appetite for that drink took me by surprise." He pressed one hand against the small of his back, grimacing. "Deny him nothing within reason today. If he's craving something like that, it's because he needs it."

"Understood."

"You should know that whenever Vincent wakes, the first thing he asks for is water. I recommend that you keep a full cup close at hand. Also, I showed Pascal how to use the oxygen, if it becomes necessary. Don't be conservative with the oxygen. If you think Vincent *might* need it, use it."

Winslow nodded, thinking, *We all knew it was serious last night, but I was hoping it'd be less so this morning.* That hope was turning out to be ill-founded.

"What else?" Father muttered to himself. "Oh. Yes. I've put Olivia in charge of Vincent's meals and herbal medicines. She's in the Kitchen with William today. She'll be sending things in on a schedule, so you won't need to worry about that part. *Your* task is to help Vincent to eat what Olivia sends. If he can't eat, wake me up. If his condition changes at all, come wake me up. Right now, I'm off for a hot meal and a hot shower. Then I'll take a bed in the Hospital Chamber. So I'll be close by."

"Sure you don't want to just call in Keiko to sit with us? Or...even Brizo?" Winslow didn't bring up Mary. That poor woman needed rest even more than Father did. "You look like you're wearing yourself down, Father."

This is what made Father smile. "My own patient has already made the same observation...and the same suggestion. And as I've already told Vincent: yes. I'm sure."

"Uh huh." Leave it to Vincent to try to doctor his doctor. "So how does Rebecca fit into all this?"

"Ah. Rebecca came in to help Catherine this morning. She decided to stay and see what she could do for Vincent's hair."

That made sense. Winslow believed that keeping Rebecca's own curly head of hair in order required skills beyond Winslow's reckoning. The woman also had a steady hand and an open heart—for all that she got up in arms about protecting people when the world kicked them down. If anyone could salvage Vincent's mane, it was Jill-of-all-trades-and-Mistress-of-Many Rebecca.

Winslow nodded, now thinking about the way Rebecca also seemed to have appointed herself to the job of looking after Vincent's Catherine. "And are we expecting Catherine to come back Down today?" he asked.

"Catherine never left," Father said. "I gave her a bed at the west end of the Hospital Chamber. She's resting there now.

Winslow smiled. "Why am I not surprised?"

"I've received strict orders to inform all comers that Catherine must be awakened at once if Vincent asks for her."

Also not surprising. Although Winslow wasn't sure what to do with the note of affection he heard in Father's voice as he related Catherine's wishes. Father hid a yawn behind a fist.

"You get going," Winslow said. "Anything that's slipped your mind, I'll figure it out."

Father nodded. He turned away and limped slowly toward the Kitchen. Winslow followed after him with the tray.

Returning to the Hospital Chamber, Winslow found Rebecca perched on a stool behind the head rail of the hospital bed, dutifully attacking Vincent's mane with her fingers and a pair of scissors. The light level was low; no one had lit the overhead lamp. A minor thing like that wasn't slowing sharp-eyed Rebecca one whit.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I was wrong. There's *four* places that must be cut away. I think I can unravel everything else."

She sifted through the amber frizz. Her voice fell to a soft whisper. "There are also two places where your hair is already cut. May I trim those spots, so they blend in better?"

Vincent might sometimes be hard to read, but a stoic he was not. Winslow could tell that he was totally depressed about Rebecca's recommendations. "Yes," Vincent answered his hairdresser. He memorized the rock ceiling above him while Rebecca began to snip fat, yellowy mats off his head.

Winslow pulled up a chair and sat down, looking across the bed to Pascal's worried eyes. So far, their friend was exhibiting phenomenal grace. *Maybe Vincent's too worn out to do anything about it,* Winslow thought. *Or maybe he's actually okay with those scissors, since it's Rebecca using them. But...I suppose he could've finally outgrown his thing about the hair.*

Winslow took a good look at Vincent's face. Nope. Thing: still present. He glanced at Pascal again.

They both knew that Vincent's preference for long hair went *way* back. As did his horror of scissors. Outside of infancy, Vincent's *only* childhood temper tantrum had been about getting his hair cut. Devin and a pack of Bazooka bubble gum had spelled bad news for the four-year-old kitten-kid that day. It had taken the collective efforts of Father, Winslow and Pascal, both boys' mothers, *and* Pascal's dad to calm Vincent down. In the end, Father and Francine had to talk to Vincent for an hour, and then they had to sit close enough so he could hold onto both of them, before the kid would let anyone near him with Julia's shears.

He's always been skittish about people messing with him like that, Winslow thought. *Some things don't change.*

Rebecca finished snicking away the hopelessly matted bits from Vincent's mane. She set each tuft on a towel spread out across the edge of the table, her movements deliberate and precise. Winslow could have been watching a Buddhist nun prune a rosebush.

"That's done," she said to Vincent.

Vincent didn't say anything back.

Rebecca took the lid off an earthenware jar and scooped out a dab of white paste with her fingers. "On to lesser evils." She rubbed the paste between her hands until it melted into a clear, fragrant oil. It smelled like coconut.

Rebecca pressed a snarled lock of hair between her palms, letting the oil soak in. Pascal held out a wide-toothed wooden comb from Rebecca's box. Taking it from him, the young woman started to pick apart the tangle.

Pascal touched the blanket that covered Vincent's arm, checking on him. "Vincent?"

Vincent only turned his sad eyes to Pascal and kept quiet.

Winslow kept his mouth shut too. *Hold your peace, or find some tape,* he told himself. *This job is for the likes of unflappable Jack and cool-headed Jill. Not me.*

"You know it's us today, right?" Pascal asked. "We're staying in here with you. Father's going to rest."

"That's good news," Vincent said.

Pascal tried on a tiny smile. “Yes. Also? I was keeping a list for a while, but by yesterday afternoon I didn’t need to anymore; every Helper has sent down a note, or a message on the pipes. Blessings and prayers. For you.”

Vincent closed his eyes.

“I thought you should know.”

Vincent opened his mouth, but then he didn’t say anything. He let his breath out in a slow sigh. Well, sometimes, even a bookish man just plain ran out of words. Winslow touched his vest, thinking of the packet he carried. He decided it still wasn’t the right time.

Rebecca worked her way through Vincent’s hair, smoothing long tresses over the Tunnel-style towels spread out beneath Vincent’s head and shoulders. She was very good at this. She was the right woman for the job.

Appreciating Rebecca’s level-headed concentration, Winslow observed, *Our girl cares about all the many things she does. She puts every last bit of herself into finishing whatever she decides to take on.*

Winslow had once spent several minutes watching this woman dip tapers in the Candleworks. She’d been making candles for Winterfest, a project which required three colors of wax and many long hours. Every year, Sara and Rebecca crafted one bright-hued candle for each Tunnel dweller and each Helper, and maybe a hundred extras to keep the Great Hall chandeliers lit during the Tunnelfolk’s January festival.

Rebecca handled each pair of candles with a tenderness most women reserved for sleeping babies. Winslow had tried to compliment her for her patience. The work was so quiet and repetitive, Winslow would’ve wigged out ten candles into the job.

Rebecca ignored Winslow’s praise. She turned to a round rack of finished candles and took one pair of tapers from a wooden drying ring. Gazing up at him, she placed the candles in Winslow’s big hands. Her eyes were the color of the winter sky.

“Why, Winslow! Look!” she said, smiling.

“What am I looking at?” he asked.

“Do you see? You hold the means of light that brings two friends safely through the dark.”

Winslow looked down at the candles. *Which two friends?* he’d wondered. The candles might be destined for any of them. And that had been Rebecca’s point.

Rebecca had taken her hands away from his and gone back to work. “I shall never tire of candle-making,” she said, dipping a new pair of tapers on their shared wick.

As far as Winslow knew, Rebecca never tired of any task she undertook.

When she was able to run her comb through Vincent’s hair without snagging anything, Rebecca closed her jar of coconut oil and set the comb on the table. She took a large plastic spray bottle out of her box. “This is water,” she said, leaning toward Vincent. “And then there will be soap.”

Vincent nodded, not opening his eyes.

Rebecca misted Vincent’s hair in layers until water began to drip onto the towel spread across her lap. She set down her spray bottle and reached into her box again, but Pascal spoke up.

“Wait,” he said quietly. “Vincent needs a moment.” Pascal got up and looked at Mary’s pocket watch on the tabletop. Bending down over Vincent, he cocked his head like he was listening for faint signals on deep pipes.

“What’s up?” Winslow asked. He cautiously touched Vincent’s shoulder. Vincent didn’t notice. “He asleep?”

Pascal shook his head.

"Hell. How'd you know he's spacing out?"

"I was watching his hand," Pascal said.

Winslow looked. Sure enough, Vincent's right arm had turned his hand palm-up and his long fingers twitched a little. It reminded him of the mid-week moment after Winslow set Vincent upon this bed, except that today, Vincent's eyes were already shut.

"Damn," Winslow muttered. "Father tell you to look for that?"

Pascal shook his head again. "I remember from when we were kids. The Tunnel Collapse."

Now *there* was a piece of ancient history. Winslow hadn't thought of that tragedy in years. "What about it?" he asked.

"I helped my mother in here with the sick kids. You know, after the gas leak." Pascal glanced at the pocket watch. "Rennie and Vincent were the sickest."

Vincent's hand became still again. Pascal took another look at the watch and spoke Vincent's name a few times. After maybe the fifth or sixth repetition, Vincent opened his eyes.

"You back with us?" Winslow asked.

Vincent raised his right hand to his head and didn't answer. *He's still shaking when he moves,* Winslow thought. He really hated to see that.

"Vincent?" Pascal called.

"I hear you."

"Okay." Pascal chalked numbers onto the slate lying beside the pocket watch. Winslow knew that slate served as Father's reusable tally sheet in situations like this. He was glad Pascal was taking care of the doctor's procedures. Winslow was busy worrying about Vincent.

How has Father been doing this for two days straight? he wanted to know.

Vincent let his hand drop so it rested upon his chest. Then he slid that hand down to cover his stomach. He closed his eyes again.

"You, uh...do you need a..." Winslow glanced at the supplies set out on the table. "A basin?" he asked.

"No," Vincent said, but he was breathing carefully.

"You gonna say so if you do?" Winslow asked.

"Yes."

All the same, Winslow kept a weather eye on him as Rebecca went back to work. She poured some pale green liquid out of a long-necked glass bottle and reached her cupped hand out toward Vincent's nose. "Is this tolerable?" she asked.

After a few more breaths, Vincent said yes.

Winslow thought, *Rebecca's always respected Vincent's ways. They're still a good team. She's a champion among kid sisters.*

Rebecca poured handfuls of the bottled concoction over Vincent's hair until even Winslow could smell its sweet herbal aroma. Rebecca was massaging that in when Weaver showed up with a tray from the Kitchen. Winslow left his chair and cleared a space on the table. The stodgy seamstress set the tray down, then went right up to Vincent's bed. She waited until Vincent opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Them clothes you brought in, week back? For the children?"

"Yes?" Vincent asked.

"You found something Penny's pleased to wear. Got a shirt took in to fit just right. Pulled apart some corduroys and made a skirt for her, too. Pleased as punch."

Winslow had to smile. Weaver could apply her phrasing to herself as well as to the self-

conscious little girl. Weaver, like William, liked being applauded for her work.

"That's good, Weaver," Vincent said.

Weaver nodded. She eyeballed each of Vincent's attendants. "Take extra care of this one."

Pascal nodded to her on behalf of all three attendants and Weaver departed.

"Is *Weaver* our runner today?" Winslow asked, once the old woman moved out of earshot. He knew she'd put her name on the volunteer list, but Winslow sure hadn't placed her at the top of the hospital service roster. Hell, they weren't even operating under the roster yet.

"She's Olivia's," Pascal said. "Cullen's supposed to be our doorman, and Destiny's supposed to be the errand-girl from this end." He caught Winslow's questioning look. "While you were working on the roster last night, I made a different list for Father. For today."

It wouldn't be the first time Winslow got left out of the loop. He was okay with it, though. Last night had been crazy for everybody. "Well, 'supposed to be' don't make it so, Pascal. Cullen and Destiny weren't out there when I came in." Winslow started to turn toward the screens, but Pascal got up.

"I'll check on them," Pascal said. He glanced at the tray Weaver had brought. *Your job,* his eyes said.

Oh. Right, Winslow thought. He looked at the bed and its disconsolate occupant. *Lucky me.* Winslow sat back down. Pascal walked out of the screened space.

Rebecca took the basin from the table and set it on her lap. "I'll rinse this out," she murmured to Vincent's hair. Removing the top from her spray bottle, she poured water with one hand and held locks of hair under the thin stream with the other. "I won't take long."

True to her word, she'd finished that stage of her work by the time Pascal returned to report that Cullen and Destiny were now where they should be. Rebecca left to take care of the empty plastic bottle and the suds-filled basin. Winslow pulled his chair closer to Vincent's bed and picked up the cup of dark herbal tea from the tray. Olivia had put a note on the tray for him:

> Tea first. Toast 15 min. after. Veg. broth with toast if thirsty.
> —Livvy

"Looks like you have to get through this and some almond butter toast," Winslow said. "Carrot broth optional. You up for it?"

Vincent looked at Winslow like that was a seriously dumb question. Nevertheless, he didn't fight the food, and then he kept all of it down. *Another point for the home team,* Winslow thought. *Call it two points, even. This is no picnic, but maybe today's gonna turn out okay.*

For a while, Okay kept happening. Rebecca came back and rinsed another potion through Vincent's mane. She toweled off his hair and took a brush to it. Pascal kept her workspace clear, sending Destiny off to the Kitchen with Olivia's tray. Father stopped in on the way to his borrowed bed. He looked at the slate and checked Vincent over. Father was relieved to hear that the first delivery from the Kitchen had gone off without a hitch.

Okay was still hanging on when Father left the four of them alone together. Rebecca trimmed those cut-out parts of Vincent's hair, like she said she would. She used the brush some more, then collected all the towels and packed her hair care gear back into the box. Vincent looked *much* better after Rebecca finished with him.

Winslow privately noted, *He knows it, too. For a man who doesn't even own a mirror, Vincent sure likes to keep a handle on how he looks.*

This was especially the case ever since Catherine came into their lives. Winslow felt positive that his friend's new self-awareness wasn't anything like *vanity*. Vincent didn't have a

vain bone in his body. What he *did* have was a ladyfriend to look nice for, and a fastidious nature to begin with, and a face that separated him from every other man of the human race.

I forget that a lot, thought Winslow. *Seeing him coming and going from day to day. Funny how it was on my mind so much when I was living Up Top, but it's just not important Below. So it's easy to forget, sometimes, that Topsiders are too stupid to see a person behind those blue eyes. Mostly, they're too stupid to see "persons" in each other.*

Winslow was still furious that Topsider stupidity had landed Vincent in this hospital bed.

"I think I'll go put these things away," said Rebecca, picking up her box. "If you want, I'd be happy to find something for you to read." She looked at her three listeners. "Any requests?"

Winslow shrugged at Pascal. "You pick. Or Vincent." Winslow wasn't about to damage their present level of Okay with the wrong suggestion.

But his small effort to protect the *status quo* turned out to be completely misplaced. In the space between Rebecca's question and her companions' cue to answer her, Winslow saw Vincent's right hand slowly close into a trembling fist. The sick man's sigh would have been a moan if he'd had enough strength to put his voice behind it. Right about then, as far as Winslow was concerned, Okay died a bad death.

In a way, it turned out scarier than any of the images Winslow had always carried in his head about what full-body seizures were supposed to look like. His afflicted friend didn't thrash or kick, or chomp down on his tongue, or do anything dramatic. Vincent just went stiff as stone and stayed that way. Touching Vincent's arm felt like leaning against a tunnel wall with a subway train rumbling nearby. Winslow could sense the vibration of nervous tension in Vincent's body—and the terrifying strength of Vincent's immobilized muscles.

Feeling all this, Winslow winced. *There's no way in hell that won't hurt, when he comes to. Man, I thought watching Vincent stare off into the aether for a minute or two was a bad deal.* Winslow dropped to his knees beside the bed, feeling just as helpless as he had on that godawful day when he'd found Mama Julia passed out on the Kitchen floor, her hands entwined in the apron straps above her heart.

"Is he breathing?" asked Pascal.

Lord, what a question! Winslow thought.

Rebecca said, "He seems to be...so far," and knelt down next to Winslow. She set her box on the floor, shoving it under the bed where no one could knock into it.

Pascal went to the green tank and twisted the knob, looking at the pressure dial. He put the clear plastic face mask into Winslow's hand. Winslow felt immensely grateful that Pascal was here with them.

Winslow used the time it took to settle the mask over Vincent's nose and mouth to also cover up his own fright. He moved his hands from Vincent's face to the man's rigid arm and made a careful survey of what was happening. "Pascal? He's only cramped up on this one side. What's with that?"

Pascal was checking Mary's clock. "Father didn't tell you?"

"Brother, when we talked this morning, Father was asleep on his feet."

The pipe master looked sadder than ever. "Father told *me* Vincent had a big seizure yesterday. Worse than this. After that, Vincent's whole left side...stopped working."

Winslow's brain wanted to make things better by pointing out signs of an alternate reality wherein none of this could possibly be happening. "But...I figured out that Father got him up this morning. To get Vincent clean this morning. Hell, the washtub in here is clear on the other side of the chamber. So how did—"

Gently, Rebecca touched Winslow's face with her hand, turning his head toward the foot of Vincent's bed. There was an extra stool down there and a glowing brazier to keep the screened space warm. Winslow didn't get what she was doing—until he also saw the Hospital Chamber wheelchair folded up against one of the curtain frames. Rebecca's hand moved away. She didn't even bother to look at him. She knew from the way he clenched his jaw that Winslow saw what she'd meant him to see.

"Oh my *God*," Winslow said. "Seriously?!"

No one gainsaid the seriousness of their friend's predicament.

Beneath Winslow's hands, Vincent's arm jerked and then relaxed. Winslow looked down at him. Vincent was breathing fast, his lackluster gaze resting on Rebecca's headscarf.

"Are you awake?" Rebecca asked him.

Vincent blinked. "No."

"Forty seconds," Pascal muttered, clicking chalk against the slate. And that was Pascal: measuring eternity with a pocket watch.

Winslow hated the way Vincent was breathing. He hated all of this. Vincent shut his eyes and went quiet.

"It's happened again, Pascal," Rebecca said.

Pascal grumbled at the things on the table. He picked up Father's stethoscope and used it to listen to Vincent's heartbeat.

Vincent's right side didn't lock up this time. "Do you know if this is the same fit or a new one?" Winslow asked.

"Father says this sometimes happens in waves," Rebecca said. "Clusters. Vincent?"

Pascal drew back.

Winslow saw that Vincent's eyes had opened again. Vincent looked at Rebecca, then Winslow. He opened his mouth to say something, but no sounds came out.

"Hey, it's okay. We got you," Winslow said, but he believed Okay was *long* gone.

Vincent moved his hand toward his mouth. That hand could have been Old Vernon's, the way it didn't work the way Vincent obviously wanted it to. Those blue eyes were full of feelings Winslow didn't *ever* want to experience for himself. Winslow started to pull that hand back down, before Vincent's claws could catch on something important. Like the oxygen mask, or Vincent's face, maybe.

"No," said Pascal, observant as ever. "Wait a minute, Winslow. He's signing."

"He's *what*?"

"Say that again, Vincent," Rebecca said.

Vincent repeated the gesture, which didn't look like anything meaningful to Winslow. But then, sign language was not Winslow's *forte*. He didn't spend nearly as much time with Laura as Vincent and Rebecca did. Come to think of it, Pascal got to see a lot of Laura, too. That girl loved to hang out in the Pipe Chamber.

Please tell me Vincent's not reduced to Sign, just to talk to us now. Winslow sent this out into the wide black cosmos, not sure Who he was asking for this favor, or Who had the power to grant it. The God Winslow had grown up with felt very distant this morning. Anyhow, God or Whoever didn't gratify Winslow's request right away.

"Water," Rebecca translated, watching Vincent's fingers touch the mask above his chin. "Winslow?"

Winslow gripped the cup that Pascal put into his hand, his own mouth feeling very dry, hearing Kipling's lines jabber brightly in his head:

He was "Din! Din! Din!
You limpin' lump o' brick-dust, Gunga Din!
Hi! slippy hitherao!
Water, get it! Panee lao!
You squidgy-nosed old idol, Gunga Din."

He told himself to make sure not to swamp his friend as he lifted Vincent's damp head off the pillow and held the cup for him. Rebecca pulled the mask down. Vincent was *desperate* to drink.

"*Easy*," Winslow said. "There's more where that came from. There's *plenty* more."

(But when it comes to slaughter
You will do your work on water,
An' you'll lick the bloomin' boots of 'im that's got it.)

Winslow took the cup away from Vincent's mouth in the hope that this might induce his friend take in some *air* for a bit. Vincent stayed quiet, breathing quickly, watching his regimental *bhisti* keep charge of the water cup. Then, with his hand under Vincent's head, Winslow *felt* the moment Vincent zoned out yet again. "Lord," Winslow groaned, fairly drowning in sapphire eyes that didn't see him anymore.

"Don't give him any more to drink until he's really awake," Pascal suggested.

"Thanks. I'd never have worked *that* out on my own," Winslow shot back.

Pascal, bless him, didn't take offense. Winslow made a big mental sidestep and toned it down. "Sorry, Pascal," he said. He rested Vincent's head on the pillows. Rebecca moved the mask back into position.

The pipe master just shrugged, as if to say, *Winslow, I'm used to you by now.* He returned the end of the stethoscope to Vincent's chest, listening for the ticking of a different kind of clock.

They watched over Vincent in silence for a while. Finally, Pascal said, "He's not coming out of it."

Rebecca took the cup from Winslow's hand. "I'm getting Father." She stood up and set the cup on the table, starting for the screens with a whirl of pinafore and a flounce of escaped ringlets. Then she gasped, "Oh!" and stood still.

Winslow looked around to find out what in tarnation had snuck up on *Rebecca*. He saw Catherine standing in the opening between two curtain frames, looking like an unforecasted rain cloud in a hithertofore empty summer sky. She wore a Tunnelwoman's plain gray dress under a long blue vest, with Tavi's style of complicated ribbon-work decorating all the seams. Her green eyes looked at each of them, concerned.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Winslow told her, "You either have really good timing, or really bad timing. Depending on your point of view."

"Pardon," Rebecca whispered. She slipped out to summon Father.

Pascal motioned for Catherine to come in. Winslow grabbed a stool by one of its front legs and scraped it across the floor to the side of Vincent's bed. Catherine accepted Winslow's offering. She sat down, her gaze superglued to Vincent, already reaching for his hand.

Under other circumstances, Winslow wouldn't want to interfere. But under *these* circumstances— "Catherine? I wouldn't do that just yet. He's—"

Movement from the bed got Winslow's attention. Vincent's head turned slowly to the right, taut cords standing out in his neck. His good hand fisted up and bent inward at the wrist. Vincent became bedridden statuary again. "—having a bad morning," Winslow finished.

"Yes," Catherine said, unsurprised and unhappy. She didn't stop reaching. She only changed her aim to grip Vincent's forearm instead of his hand. Holding him like that, Catherine's expression changed.

"God," she breathed, and leaned over to put her other hand on Vincent's shoulder. "He wasn't *shivering*."

"Huh?" Winslow asked.

"In the tunnel, by the gate. That wasn't Vincent shivering, or...he wasn't *only* shivering. It was *this*."

Looking at her, Winslow thought, *"This" being a hot smithereen of hell on earth, right? And you saw him through it alone. You didn't have a timekeeper with the patience of Job on your team. Or a candlemaker with the fearless heart of a tundra wolf to run and fetch Father for you. And God Almighty, even though Vincent has those folks with him now, you're still down here with him. You shed a whole new light on what it means to stick with someone through thick and thin.*

Catherine sat quietly, not exactly holding Vincent tight, or holding him down. She just kept close, her hands resting on Vincent's shirtfront and sleeve, ready for anything.

Winslow looked at Vincent's drawn face and blank eyes. He thought about rainclouds blotting out moonlight, and thickheaded locksmiths, and hollow darts full of deadly drugs. Most of all, and worst of all: the drugs.

Winslow ground his teeth until his jaw ached. He had always hated drugs. *Always*: as in, from birth. Topside poison had ended Winslow's father four months before Winslow was born, when two kids torqued on God-knew-what stampeded into the man's butcher shop one brisk September morning. They murdered the surrendering shopkeeper for the forty-three dollars and eighty-four cents in his cash register. Winslow grew up knowing that a good measure of his mother's anger had been rooted in that bereavement.

He had also seen many other people suffer because some you-name-it drink/pill/shot/powder cruelly took over their lives. Father had once admitted that bitterness and a bottle of booze might have finished *him* off—if someone hadn't brought him down into the Tunnels and given him something to live for. Winslow suspected Kanin nursed some painful memories of his own: the stone cutter never touched a drop of anything that William brewed for the community's adults, not for Saturday suppers, and not for holiday celebrations. Old Dolores still jonesed for heroin; it was the reason she never went Above. Vernon himself had his weaknesses, back when he was warden. And Vernon had been the straightest shooter Winslow had ever known, downright rabid about keeping trash out of the Tunnels. Maybe Vernon's troubles were precisely *why* he'd been so zealous—and maybe those troubles were why Vernon's indomitably loyal apprentice had inherited his mentor's antipathy.

The LAST person I'd EVER have expected to see strung-out like this...is Vincent, Winslow thought, believing his friend the most temperate and forfended man in the Tunnels. The blacksmith discovered that he was looking forward to someone's finding the bodies of those two baseborn, rump-fed University scuts. On some dark night in the future, Winslow wanted to be able to go Up Top and spit on their graves.

Getting mad won't help any more than getting scared, he told himself. *So pull it together, son.* Not an easy job, but Winslow pulled it together. He asked Pascal, "Did Father happen to mention to you how long the drugs would keep doing this to Vincent?"

As Pascal shook his head, Father's voice suddenly provided a more definitive answer.

“Vincent was given enough tranquilizer to poleaxe an elephant. Getting completely clear of the drugs will take however long it takes.” Father limped heavily into the curtained-off space, with Rebecca close behind him. “Unfortunately, the direct effects of the drugs don’t fully account for his present condition. This is what we’re left with after the toxins in Vincent’s system have dropped below life-threatening levels. Damage done.”

Even worse.

Father rushed around the bed to get at Vincent’s yonder side, where no one else was taking up space. His crutch clicked as he moved.

I need to have a look at that for him soon, Winslow thought, grabbing hold of one thing he knew he *could* fix. *Sounds like he’s got a bolt coming loose somewhere. Maybe that ticklish one on the cuff.* If they all got past this present barrel of fun, and Father got the chance to go back to bed, Winslow might just sneak over and take care of that for him while he was sleeping.

“Pascal, hand me the stethoscope, would you?” Father gave his crutch to Rebecca and took the stethoscope from Pascal. He started checking his son over. “Any changes from before?”

“His heartbeat is faster by nine or ten beats a minute,” Pascal answered. “It’s holding that rate now.”

Winslow thought it a sad circumstance that Father had to get up again so soon, but he also felt better, seeing the old man back in the thick of things. Nursemaiding only got a body so far. Heavy stuff like seizures required a doctor’s attention.

“And how long has he been like this?” Father asked.

“This is number four, and it’s...” Pascal consulted the pocket watch. “A minute and a half in.”

“Four of this type?” Father asked, listening to Vincent’s heart.

“Two of each,” Pascal answered.

Yeah, thought Winslow. *Spacing out or locking up. And it drags Vincent down a notch each time either thing happens.*

Catherine whispered Vincent’s name. Winslow looked at the bed. Vincent was beginning to relax again. His breath came easier. He shut his eyes.

“Talk to him,” Father said. Now he was feeling for Vincent’s pulse at the wrist. At least the *doctor* wasn’t flipping out. Vincent had that going for him.

Catherine murmured to their patient. Winslow didn’t catch what she said, but Vincent came awake at the sound of her voice. He squinched up his eyes to look at the faces surrounding him. He brought his good hand to his chin and pawed at the mask. He must not have been signing this time because Rebecca started to say, “No, Vincent—”

Father interrupted. “Take it off for him.”

Winslow double-checked Father’s expression to be sure the old man was for real, then he slowly pulled the oxygen mask away from Vincent’s mouth. Winslow kept his eye on Vincent’s teeth. These were visible because Vincent was working at breathing slowly. The gasping man didn’t look *lost* at the moment, but he sure didn’t look *all there,* either. Then Vincent saw Catherine’s hands on his chest and arm.

His right hand jerked. Catherine still didn’t try to hold Vincent down—and she didn’t let him go. She just moved with him, staying close, leaning forward on the stool.

Winslow couldn’t tell if Vincent knew who she was and that she meant no harm. Winslow wanted to pull Catherine away from Vincent’s claws—but he held onto the oxygen mask and didn’t touch her. He knew this was plain old lizard-brain instinct, his desire to protect friends from real and present dangers. He’d honed these reflexes back when Vincent got sick (and insane) at the tender age of fifteen. Winslow loved this friend like a brother. He also knew

exactly what Vincent could do when he wasn't thinking straight.

But Vincent wasn't a kid anymore. And Winslow guessed that after months of rushing Topside every time Catherine found herself in some dire fix up there, Vincent wasn't going to sit by and let someone grab the woman right in front of him—no matter *how* sick he felt. So Winslow did nothing to provoke a violent outburst, and it became clear that Vincent wasn't going after Catherine, anyway. Winslow saw Vincent catch his nightshirt with his claws and pull, glaring all the while at the stretched swatch of buff-colored fabric, like he couldn't believe he was wearing it.

Winslow thought, *He's scared again. That is so weird.* He still didn't understand what was so frightening about nightshirts, but Winslow *was* sure the others also saw Vincent's fear, and even felt some chilling rendition of it for themselves. *Maybe it's just a Hospital Chamber thing. Scariest damned cave down here. Always has been, always will be.*

Vincent let go of the shirt, grabbed at a blanket, missed his hold, went back to his shirt. Glancing up, he seemed to figure out that the five people surrounding him were looking on in silence. Something dark and painful showed up in Vincent's eyes. Winslow's throat felt pinched from holding in all the badness he was feeling. He didn't know what anyone could do to help.

And that was when Catherine decided to break through the Hospital Chamber's icy crust of collective worry and frightened sorrow. She leaned even closer to the bed.

"Tell me something, Vincent," she said, every poised inch of her the upper crust lady amongst good chums. She could have been sitting with them in the Dining Hall, a cup of breakfast tea in her hand and a fine plate of hot crumpets on the table in front of her. "When you opened up that college course catalog? Which section did you decide to read first?"

Every head in the sickroom turned Catherine's way.

Vincent blinked at her. His hand stopped yanking at his shirt. He thought hard about her question.

"Astronomy," he said. The word came out slushy and Vincent's voice was barely audible, even in this, the quietest chamber of the Inner Circle.

Catherine smiled. "Tell me that's *not* because the subject begins with 'A.'"

Vincent kept staring at Catherine. Winslow could practically *hear* the gears grinding in the man's overabused head. "Rutherford Observatory," Vincent said at last, talking slow, "has always been...one place I cannot visit...at night."

(Tap ta-tap din din. Getting words through in the crazy-strange code.)

Catherine sat back and took hold of Vincent's hand. "Good morning, Vincent." She wasn't a rain cloud anymore. Her smile looked like a beauteous sunrise breaking over the horizon.

Vincent blinked at her some more. He pulled his hand out of Catherine's grasp to reach for Father.

"Vincent?" Father asked.

Vincent didn't say anything, or turn toward anyone else. He only gave the old man an indecipherable look, catching him by one arm and holding on. Father bent down, maybe to listen for more of his son's clumsified speech. Vincent just kept looking at him, talking with his eyes.

"It's all right," Father said after a moment, seeming to decide something, or to understand something. He looked across the bed at Vincent's four friends. "All of you, leave us. I'll call you back in later."

Winslow was the first to accept this, and the first to move. He got up and waited by the screens for the rest of them. Rebecca took her box out from under the bed and stood up, and Catherine sent Father a sad nod and also stood. Pascal was the last to leave Vincent's side.

"We'll be by the entry," Winslow told the two men they were leaving behind.

Father nodded and Winslow led the others out.

As he went, he couldn't help but wonder what all *that* had been about—but he let the question slide as one more thing that was none of his affair. If doctor and patient, or even father and son, had wanted the four Vincent-keepers to know what was going on in Vincent's head, one or both would have said so.

"What if it's not over?" Pascal whispered, looking back. "And they need...us?"

"Then Father will call us back. Just like the man said," Winslow replied.

Pascal plainly didn't like it, but he walked with the rest of them around the curving rock wall.

The four summarily dismissed keepers crossed the chamber and stopped a little distance from Cullen, who sat in front of the chamber entrance, whittling over a bucket to catch the pine shavings. The woodcarver looked up. "Destiny's gone off to get a new tray," he said. "What brings all of you out here?"

None of them said anything in reply. They just looked at each other, not exactly keeping secrets—but honoring implicit confidences. Everyone Below got special treatment over certain things, because everyone Below had their own unbearable sorrows and Achilles' heels. It was up to those in the know (usually relatives, Council members, or groups of close friends) to look out for each another and protect one another's weak spots. Vincent simply had a lot of extra-special circumstances to sort through right now. Thus, he got a wall of screens around his already isolated hospital bed and a watchman at the chamber entrance. And when Vincent and Father shooed away the man's closest friends, those friends did not waste time asking stupid questions like, "Why?"

This wasn't stuff Vincent's friends needed to discuss, any more than they needed to talk about why Mary was out of commission today, or why the Council wasn't sending search parties out after Mouse just yet. They accepted these conditions as ordinary details from the Undercity's innermost circles. Then they kept most of those inside details to themselves.

And what do you know, but it's all Troopers on the very inside today, Winslow realized. *The Elders are handing off most of the damage-done work to the Elderkids.*

Even Olivia was there in spirit, what with her teas, elixirs, and foodstuffs getting ferried in from the Kitchen. *Best place for her to be a help, if she can't be here,* Winslow knew. Tending Vincent was no job for an expectant mother; so their arrangement also protected Olivia. Looking down at the pipe master's bald pate, Winslow thought, *Pascal did good with his list last night.*

When it needed to take care of its own, that was just how the Troop *worked*. Winslow turned his eyes to Catherine, standing rightfully in their midst. She had arrived at the inside too.

Cullen started to look worried that no one was answering him.

"Errands!" Rebecca announced, popping what was becoming another awkward silence. "There are some things I need to take care of before I go help Sara and Michael in the Nursery. Catherine? Do you want to come with me? I can help you find some reading material for the boys before I have to go."

The boys?! Winslow thought, startled.

Rebecca must have snatched his indignation from the air. She tipped her nose up at him with a saucy twinkle in her eye. One trick she must've picked up from Molly.

Catherine gazed back toward the rock bend, unsure.

"He ain't going anywhere," Winslow murmured to her.

Catherine's glance his way came *much* sharper than Rebecca's—very spitfire but not an ounce of sass. Winslow remembered Catherine's description of her confrontation with Hughes.

The fact that the mad little scientist had taken her to Vincent so quickly was a no-brainer for Winslow. The blacksmith would go through a lot himself, to stay clear of Catherine's ire. He'd deserved his fair share of her anger on the day of the cave-in and he never wanted to find himself on Catherine Chandler's hit list again.

It took her a second to decide *not* to pencil Winslow in for either a tongue-lashing or a noontide meeting with the Reaper, but Catherine finally nodded at him. She turned to Rebecca. "Yes. I'll come." The two women walked around Cullen and disappeared past the drapery.

"Are you sure it's a good idea," Cullen asked, watching the drape wag into place behind the departees, "letting the two of them team up together like that?" A sardonic smile appeared on his stubbled face.

"You wanna be the one to get in the way of *either* of them?" Winslow replied.

Cullen just chuckled to himself.

Winslow folded his arms. *I wonder what those two consider good reading material for "the boys."* He shook his head. Well, Catherine wouldn't be gone long. Winslow expected to find out soon enough.

He took his own look over his shoulder at the relatively dark back-end of the chamber. He thought, *Just bring something that gives some Okay back to us, please. Right now, even a little Okay would be a really good thing.*

II

28 March 1987
Saturday, Noon

Rebecca gave good directions. Catherine turned the corner and found herself standing in a tunnel she recognized. It was lit by stone-ensconced lamps and led to a passage that linked the lower section of Father's chamber to Vincent's. Catherine's underworld guide had assured her that everyone was free to peruse Father's book collection, and at all hours. On the slim chance that Catherine couldn't find something suitable in Vincent's room, she should feel welcome to try Father's Study. But the moment Rebecca brought up the option, Catherine knew she wouldn't be comfortable doing that.

It's going to feel awkward enough, looking through Vincent's books without his being there, she thought. *I have no interest in rifling through Father's Library. What did Ezra call it?*

"Pandemonium," Catherine muttered. And she needed no more of that. Today or ever again.

So she walked to the end of the tunnel and turned left, toward Vincent's chamber. But once she stood outside the low, hand-chiseled entryway with its short flight of ancient brick steps, she stopped. She suddenly imagined a familiar cloaked shadow, ducking his head to pass into the cavern within. The vision hurt her, because she did not want to be standing in this place alone. The person she *should* be seeing was not here to select his own books.

(He wasn't only shivering. My hands remember that. My heart remembers.)

Struggling with Vincent's absence, Catherine saw the look on his face as he strained to listen to her, and to understand what she said. She saw his hand (the one that could still do so) pulling at blankets, grasping at his shirt of whip-stitched rags. She tried *not* to see the place on his quiet left arm where the fur had been completely shaved away. Early this morning, when she

had asked Father about that bare place, wondering aloud why they needed to cut away so much hair for such a small IV needle, Father told Catherine that no one Below would have done such a thing to Vincent.

(I've never seen him outside the Inner Circle without his cloak. With one exception.)

Father's own work was difficult to notice; the necessary spaces he'd cleared above Vincent's veins were tiny and precise. That naked place on Vincent's arm seemed extravagant by comparison, revealing skin that had never known the touch of sunlight, greenish-brown bruises where his bones came together, and blue blood vessels for Father's new IV line. Father had been far too tired for anger by then, and his buffeted tone of voice told Catherine that the subject was too painful to discuss further. This meant there must be more to the matter than a shaved elbow. She'd gone to sleep thinking about it.

(He could not reach the water, so he sat down to rest. He held his mantle close like a long-lost friend.)

Now the shadow in the entryway stood clawing his left sleeve down over the back of his hand.

(Not like a gorilla, Hughes said. True fur. All of it.)

As she thought it through, Catherine felt she understood. These were gestures *she* remembered making after she saw what Martin Belmont's men had done to her face. And months later, after she learned what Alexander Ross had done to her mind. These were also motions little Amber Kurdy performed during Catherine's interview with her in front of a video camera, the child tugging at the edges of her pink cashmere sweater, although her mother had already buttoned it up to her chin. The shadow was trying to cover himself too.

(They saw a lab rat. They denied his mortality. They videotaped their work. "Superficial Anatomy.")

"Astronomy," the shadow whispered.

(All he wanted was a little starlight. He went Up to see the sky.)

And in her shadow's defenseless eyes, she saw that shame was killing him.

Catherine spun away from Vincent's doorway. Rebecca had said she would come to find Catherine in one library or the other, after Rebecca finished whatever she was doing on the other side of the Hub. Catherine wasn't ready to be found.

She hurried to the little washroom that stood between Vincent's and Father's chambers, pursued by *(neurological problems, cumulative brain injury)* incontrovertible evidence of Father's greatest medical fears. Catherine rushed inside and dropped onto the solid wooden bench, sobbing. This was not the first time she had cried for Vincent, and for pity, because Fate had dealt such a brutal hand to such a one as he. But this time the carelessness of the evil that had harmed him—the blatant *cluelessness* of Hughes—was just too ugly, and too monstrous.

I want him well, her heart cried. *Please, please, make Vincent well.*

A memory of Narcissa's voice answered her. "Let the shadow go, child. It will depart."

Catherine let go. She cried. And when her tears ended, the shadow had gone.

"He's not absent," Catherine said, sniffling, and out of breath. "He's in the Hospital Chamber...and he needs good friends and good stories today."

Feeling more in control of herself, Catherine stood up. The washroom was shady and cool. Lamplight supplied the only light to see by. The light shone into the chamber from the corridor. Catherine could see the shapes of unlit candles in niches and sconces around the room, but she didn't know where to find matches in here. No matter. She had used this room before. She could wash up now without brighter illumination.

Catherine uncovered the marble cistern, which sat in its heavy iron rack at one end of a

dry hollow in the floor. She unhooked a ladle hanging from that rack and dipped the ladle into the cistern. Bringing the dripping ladle across the room to a wooden stand and its accompanying washbasin, she half-filled the wide ceramic dish with water. Then she washed her face and neck, using a bar of soap from the shelf on one wall, and drying off with a squarish towel from the well-stocked cabinet beneath the shelf.

Opening the drawer in the basin stand, Catherine began to search for a hand mirror, so she could see how best to finger-comb her hair. She found a dozen different combs and brushes, a plethora of ribbons and leather cords in a small cedar box with a hinged lid, a large metal nail file—and no mirror. She looked at the open drawer in the fluid citrine light. She looked up at the walls. No mirrors hanging there either.

It's not just any bathing chamber, Catherine thought, closing her eyes. *This is Vincent's room.*

She remembered the first time she came into this place, leaning on Mary's arm, weak from pain and bed rest. Mary taught her to wash by feel and told her to leave the facial bandages in place for just a little longer. Two days afterward, when Catherine removed those bandages, Mary came for her again, to give her a tour similar to what Rebecca's would be a year later, and to help her dress. After the cave-in, Vincent had brought Catherine in here, heating water for her and then leaving her to her own devices. She'd never thought about who this clean, ordered space belonged to. On each previous occasion, she had been uninterested in mirrors.

Catherine opened her eyes. She completed an adaptation of her morning routine, careful to replace things that she moved. She found a jar on the shelf bearing the image of a single white molar, which must have been painted onto the glass by a child. She opened the jar and dabbed out a little aromatic toothpowder to clean her teeth with her fingers. When she finished, she picked up the basin and emptied it into what Mary called the bathing pool, which had a drain at the lower end. She watched the wash water reflect the low light and vanish into whatever plumbing lay beneath this level of the Tunnels. She rinsed the basin and returned it to its stand.

Catherine latched the cover of the water cistern and thought, *Vincent must fill this by hand, when the water level gets low. Maybe he does this in exchange for the privacy this room affords him, rather than use that big chamber down the hall.* She remembered the cage and the shoddy "amenities" it had contained. She remembered the box of clothes she had pulled out from under the storage room's sink. She left the bathing chamber dry-eyed, full of hate for Professor Hughes and his murderous lackey.

"I'll be angry now," she whispered, walking into Vincent's main room. "Then I'll leave it behind, shake the dust off my feet and move *on*."

The cave she entered was brighter than the narrow bathing chamber had been. No candles were lit, and the Tiffany-glass oil lamps were dark, but blue and apricot light from the luminescent stained glass window revealed evidence of an interrupted life. The bed had a rumpled look, as if its owner had reclined upon it and gotten up without straightening the blankets and Vincent's hoard of cushions and pillows. Cabinet doors stood open, revealing small treasures and stacks of papers. Vincent's winsome bric-a-brac occupied the flat spaces on his small mantlepiece and enormous antique sideboard and hutch. Cut geodes and polished minerals glittered. Bronze or ceramic figurines guarded child-made clay pinch pots, which contained gleaming glass marbles, or dried flower petals, or assorted bottle caps. Miniature stone obelisks cast long shadows over the uneven walls.

And books congregated. The books were *legion*. Shelved, stacked, tucked between candlesticks and dented clocks, forming towers on the octagonal table in the middle of the room: Vincent's library.

Catherine had always thought Vincent a man of excellent (if eclectic) taste in both décor and literature. Yes, compared to most people she knew, he owned very few things. The contents of Vincent's chamber would fit—easily—into Catherine's bedroom, or into just one corner of her father's office. Yet each object Vincent displayed in here felt meaningful. He surrounded himself with color and artistry. His chamber offered a perfect refuge of comfort—for body, intellect, and spirit.

Catherine contemplated the gallery of faces Vincent displayed on one wall. Postcards from around the world, New York Yankees baseball cards, glossy inserts from local theatre programs, full-page images torn from books and magazines, or photographs enlarged into commercial posters that friends had brought Below for him. Two new posters had joined the ranks since the last time Catherine visited this room. Ella Fitzgerald now sang at a microphone between the pictures of Albert Einstein and Martin Luther King, Jr. In the bottom row of the collection, John Muir now leaned on his walking stick in front of a mountain, flanked on the left by Maria Tallchief *en pointe* and on the right by Roberto Clemente in his Pittsburgh Pirates jersey, smiling as he crouched between two small boys dressed to play ball.

All this illustrated one more truth Narcissa knew and declared confidently for the benefit of anyone who forgot, or who wasn't paying attention: Vincent loved life.

Catherine went to his table. Bemused delight began to replace her sick anger. This made a most irregular emotional transition—but then, "irregular" certainly described the selection of books on Vincent's tabletop. Before they parted company, Rebecca had commented, "Anything on the table is something he's reading at the moment." If Rebecca's insight held true, Vincent was currently reading about twenty books at the same time.

Catherine surveyed the assortment. Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* sat unapologetically beside a coverless copy of Thích Nhất Hạnh's *Being Peace*. Dante's *La Divina Commedia* had been stacked on top of *The Large Scale Structure of Space-Time* (Hawking and Ellis), which in turn hid a compact volume entitled, *Poems of Robert Browning*.

Catherine saw a Heinlein science fiction novel, a coffee-table book of Impressionist art, folders of magazine clippings, a *Field Guide of Eastern United States Butterflies and Moths* with a torn cover, and a thin, pink, paper-bound text—*Poetry Magazine*, September 1985. She saw *Le Phare du bout du monde*, by Jules Verne and *Paris: A Poem*, by Hope Mirrlees. Lying beside a mauled edition of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* she found a handmade cardboard portfolio decorated with childish drawings and signatures. A note printed in green pencil lay on top of the portfolio:

> Vincent
>
> These are the New ones. Get well
> soon.
>
> Geoffrey, Samantha, & Miranda too!

The "new ones" the children had left for their friend were *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strips, crookedly cut out from newspaper pages and arranged in a chronological pile. Curious, Catherine opened the portfolio and found an entire collection of newsprint strips. Someone had pasted them onto paper sheets fashioned from brown grocery bags. The borders of these makeshift pages were decorated by more children's art: renderings of characters from Watterson's world, some signed, some accompanied by multicolored graffiti.

Today I got all my maths right so
this is Calvin showing off.

Hobbes likes Tunafishis!

C.B. and me like Susie best—Denise

Catherine smiled and closed the portfolio. She opened another, this one bound in leather. It contained more artwork, but none of *these* drawings had been made by children.

I think I knew he could draw, Catherine thought, slowly looking at one image after another. *He drew a portrait of the man who took Ellie, just from one sighting of him, and used that picture to locate Naj's child-endangering rathole.*

But the drawing of Naj had been little more than a wanted poster's rough sketch. These pieces—

"These are beautiful," Catherine said.

She saw faces, figures, hands, unusual landscapes. People of all ages, some of whom Catherine knew, some she had never met. A little ragamuffin boy presenting a toothless bag lady with a wilted flower. Mary delivering a baby into the arms of a women seated in a rocking chair. Father frowning at a chess board in the middle of a game. A fantasy vista of waterfalls in a great cavern full of light.

All these scenes, and many others, were portrayed on trimmed squares from paper bags, the inside surfaces of cereal box panels, or homemade sanded paperboard, each piece carefully separated from the next by color-dusted scraps of waxed paper. It seemed Vincent saved his best creations for thick, toothsome paper and board. He worked mostly in charcoal and pastel, with a limited palette. Looking at the papers he used, Catherine suspected his color choices were not a strictly voluntary range.

She turned a cardboard section divider. And there was her own face, smiling at her from the smooth front surface of a manila envelope. The portrait was entitled: *Great Expectations*. He had drawn her in graphite pencil. She sat on her terrace, wrapped in Vincent's cloak. A book lay open on her lap, and she was looking up from her reading to smile at her audience. Vincent's grasp of light and shadow was flawless.

Catherine turned more pages. He had dedicated the entire back section of his drawing portfolio to her. All the images came from moments Catherine could identify: nights they had spent talking, feelings she had felt, occasions that formed a shared history. The last drawing in this section, immediately preceding a sparse collection of blank paper, showed a charcoal portrait of Catherine standing outside the grille work of the secret door beneath Central Park, stooping to look through the bars at the viewer.

Catherine realized she had become short of breath. She saw the date beside Vincent's signature—two Fridays ago. She saw watermarks sprinkled across the lower left corner of the piece. He had titled this one, *Angel at the Gate*.

She touched the spattered corner of the page (brown paper bag again). *When he drew this,* Catherine thought, watching her fingers tremble and come away from the paper smudged with black, *he was crying.* She knew she had left her friend with *this* image of her, when Vincent was stolen—kidnapped—from the park.

This sad moment in our history was all he had, in that cage, and in the dark, she thought. *My parting "gift" to him.*

Her delight had gone. Catherine felt horrible.

She looked at the blank pages awaiting further art. She remembered Vincent's paralyzed left hand, resting upon the blankets of his hospital bed. *Will he ever draw another picture?* she asked silently.

"You should see his paintings," a voice said from behind her.

Turning, Catherine saw Rebecca standing in the entryway, a pile of folded clothes in her arms.

"Vincent paints?" Catherine asked, her voice as tremulous as her hands.

"Two murals in the Painted Tunnels are his," said Rebecca. She crossed the room and set the clothing on a small table beside the ladder which led up to Vincent's second-story anteroom. "If you visit people's chambers down here, and the homes of many of our Helpers, you'll see watercolors, and small encaustic paintings he's given away. And scores of the pastels."

Closing Vincent's leather folder, Catherine said, "It seems the more I learn about him, the more there is to know."

Rebecca smiled. "As is the case with most people." She took a handkerchief from one pocket of her patched pinafore. "Here."

Catherine took the soft fabric square, aware that tears were spilling down her face again. "Oh, and I just washed up," she sighed, pressing the cloth to her eyes.

"No one will fault you for having a heart," Rebecca said. Then she stood quietly, waiting for Catherine to regain her composure.

Why do I seem to end up in tears whenever I'm in this room? Catherine wondered.

When she looked up, she offered the handkerchief to its owner.

"Keep it. You might need it again today."

Catherine nodded, unable to disagree. She looked at the long vest she wore, another thing Rebecca had brought to her this morning. The vest had an inside pocket. Catherine put the handkerchief there. Rebecca stood with her hands folded in front of her, a gentle companion with all the time in the world, making no demands upon Catherine.

Chagrined, Catherine thought, *I think I've been mistaking calmness for coldness. Rebecca is at least as self-possessed as my Grandmother Heathcott was—yet far less self-interested. Her generosity is unflagging.*

"Thank you, Rebecca," Catherine said to her. "For everything. And...for the quiet you bring. You have no idea how much that's meant to me."

"Maybe so. And maybe I understand more than you expect me to." The young woman looked at Catherine appraisingly. Was Rebecca calm? Yes. And still just as blunt as a block of ice.

Catherine tried out Rebecca's tactic. She said nothing and waited for the other woman to continue.

Rebecca's eyes sparkled. She knew exactly what Catherine was doing. "This is a quiet world, Catherine, but we're not all listeners down here. Stay long enough and you'll find that the talkative souls start to worry about the quiet ones after a while. Especially when they are presented with a nine-year-old girl who never spoke to *anyone*. Oh, the stories I could tell. Everyone was after me for years, trying to get Silent Rebecca to talk out loud."

Her cool gaze settled on the clean clothes she'd brought in with her. The shape of Vincent's folded cloak topped the pile. "There are only two people who never asked me to speak when I didn't want to. Not once in all the time I've known them. Vincent and Pascal."

Rebecca looked at Catherine. "You don't know Pascal very well, but you do know what it's like to have a conversation with Vincent wherein you do not exchange a single word."

It wasn't a question, but Catherine nodded.

"As Pascal once told me, a time of quiet, a pause between actions, is the necessary punctuation between separate ideas. Silence both links and sunders. It can be a shield, and it can be a weapon. It can also be the deepest healing solace in the world. I grew up in Tunnels with friends—with brothers—who gave me silence, and who let me give that back to them. I know what that kind of quietness can do for people."

Catherine smiled sadly. "That's something I'm starting to learn. I guess we have that in common now. Besides both of us being quick studies."

"So it would seem." The complicated look Catherine had noticed on Wednesday was returning to Rebecca's face. "I think we have something else in common, too. Did you know that we're also both chandlers?"

Catherine was surprised. "I didn't know. Is that...*was* that your name, Above?"

Rebecca's smile was small, though not sad. "No. I don't mean that we share a family name. I mean the chandler *trade*. The work we do."

Catherine thought about this. "Candlemaking?" she asked.

Rebecca nodded and dropped her gaze. She seemed to be untangling a difficult concept. Catherine waited for more.

"We hear about many of your exploits," Rebecca told her. "Ellie and Eric have made you into a *legend* among the children. We follow some of your cases in the papers too, the ones we know about, when Father can be convinced to identify them for us. The children have never been so interested in your world's justice system."

This time Catherine said nothing because she had no idea what to say.

Rebecca went on, "*I* do many different things Below. I make soap and mend clothes, and I help wherever an extra hand is needed. I listen. I keep watch and tend the lights. I make candles. I love my friends. Tell me what *you* do Above, Catherine."

She was asking about more than Catherine's job. Slowly, Catherine said, "Well, I suppose after all is said and done, all the witnesses located and interviewed, all the forms filled out in triplicate, all the briefs typed up and all the paperwork filed, I try to help people. I try to keep people safe. I work to stop those who are only interested in hurting others." She shook her head. "It's not easy. I get confused sometimes. And discouraged."

"Yes. I've noticed." Rebecca stepped closer and touched Catherine's hand. "Maybe sometimes you forget what you can truly do. Catherine, you have the power to make light. You can foster hope." Rebecca smiled again. "You're a chandler for human hearts. It's up to other people to decide what to do with that light once they have it, but it's *your* effort that offers them the means of true sight. And, from what I know about you, I believe it's your *desire* too."

Rebecca moved her hand away from Catherine's. "I think you've needed someone to say this to you."

Catherine glanced down at one of the books on Vincent's table. The Jules Verne novel with the picture of a lighthouse on its cover. "You're not the first person to tell me some of these things," Catherine said. "I've heard a lot about my relationship to my work lately. But I think you *are* the first person to really get the message through." She looked up at Rebecca. "I've been giving it a lot of thought. A few days ago, I was trying to think of things in terms of...lighthouses, but the image wasn't me."

Rebecca's smile widened as she navigated the metaphors of their conversation with exemplary seamanship. "*Father* is a lighthouse. *You* are a much more...portable person. Please don't be afraid to be yourself."

Catherine sighed. "Even when I'm still trying to discover the person I am? The woman

I'm supposed to be?"

"Especially then."

Catherine smiled back.

They both looked down at the Jules Verne book. Rebecca touched the cover and slid the book to one side so she could see the volumes beneath it in the stack. "Vincent must be getting ready to teach someone French. Look."

Underneath Verne lay two copies of *Le Petite Prince*, one printed in its original language and the other an English translation.

"No grammar book?" asked Catherine.

"Oh, he'll hand one over to his student eventually, and he'll send whoever it is into Father's Study for a French-English dictionary when they start reading the Jules Verne adventure." Rebecca tucked a loose curl of her hair behind her ear. "But if you come to Vincent for lessons in another language, the first thing he'll do is put undiluted literature into your hands."

But of course, Catherine thought. To Rebecca she said, "Then his students are very lucky people. *My* French teachers were all sticklers for learning vocabulary by rote."

"Stuffy grammarians tapping the chalkboard with their rulers?" Rebecca asked.

"Goodness," Catherine replied. "You've met them."

Rebecca laughed softly. "Like most children down here, I harbored no regrets about leaving the schools of your world behind."

Catherine picked up *The Little Prince* in English. If anyone had ever written a more beautiful story about the stars, Catherine had never read it. She studied the tabletop and saw a thick book bound in leather. Shakespeare. She took that one as well.

Rebecca reached past the two portfolios and carefully slipped a contemporary hardback from the middle of a book pile. "I'm surprised to see this one here," she said. "Vincent's been loaning it out left and right." She gave the book to Catherine.

Catherine turned it so she could read the title printed in silver foil across the book's black spine. "*A Terrible Strength*. Brigit O'Donnell."

"Have you read it?" Rebecca asked.

"No, but I've heard of the author. The Irish peace activist?"

Rebecca nodded. "I'm not sure whether Pascal has read this or not, but I *know* Winslow hasn't."

"All right." Holding tight to the three books, Catherine said, "I guess this is enough to keep us occupied today."

"And then some. Can you remember the way back, or would you like me to go with you?"

"I think I could find the way, but I wouldn't mind your company."

Rebecca smiled. "Funny, I don't think I'd mind your company either."

As they walked back to the Hospital Chamber together, Rebecca let Catherine take the lead. A comfortable silence stretched between them. Catherine decided that Rebecca was a good teacher too: Catherine took no wrong turns, and never once did she feel uncertain of her way.

III

28 March 1987
Saturday, Early Afternoon

In-between, as he was, he felt no need to sort out the real from the not real, and no strength to do so should the desire awaken in him. Vincent let it all be real, and true. Was someone *really* sending sacred words along the Hospital Chamber pipe? If they were not, it was no concern of his. The words themselves were true.

> *In this matter, O king, the Bhikshu is satisfied with sufficient robes to cherish his body, with sufficient food to keep his stomach going. Whithersoever he may go forth, these he takes with him as he goes—just as a bird with his wings, O king, whithersoever he may fly, carries his wings with him as he flies. Thus is it, O king, that the Bhikshu becomes content.*

He was content. His family had washed him and given him good food and medicine, and he had asked his father's help and Father had taken out the last needle and Vincent was freed in his hospital bed. He rested there, pleased. Gradually, he began to know that a peaceful mind and a preoccupied mind both sat near to him, breathing coolness and heatedness over his soul in turns. He felt them and they both felt loud, just as whispers breaking a long silence are very loud to an ear no longer acclimated to sounds.

Vincent lay where Winslow and Pascal could watch over him. Winslow concentrated upon the Lofstrand crutch in his hands, making a repair with a small wrench, metal clicking brightly against metal. Pascal's fingers tapped quiet words onto the pipe master's knee. Not the ancient phrases Vincent was hearing, but fragments of new code, or perhaps very old code, Pascal's mind eternally turning over many words and seeking out new ways to say them.

While these things were happening, Vincent also walked along the shore of a dark river. The river had no name he knew and the surrounding forest of rock pillars stretched arthritic shadows toward the lantern he carried. He sometimes called this forest his *selva oscura*, and when he needed to go there, that was how he named the place to Father. It was a quiet place, a mourning place, a river of shade and a forest of stone. A deep place. The only bright light that came there was the light Vincent brought to it. But when he dimmed the lantern, bioluminescence glowed from the rocks and waters, revealing the silent, secret life force of his Underground weald.

Simultaneously, Vincent was sitting in the basement of the Chinese herb shop on Mott Street, listening to a wise old man read sections from the Pali *Tipitaka*, rephrasing in English for his audience. Vincent had come there with his friends on an errand, and the group of Tunnel children had stayed because their Helper was feeling a little lonely that day, and of a mind to read to them. Molly sat beside Vincent, and Vincent was young enough that Molly sat taller than he. The spiritual pipecode heard by the half-drowsing Vincent of the present-day became the gentle voice of Wong Hin Yuen. As Vincent listened, Dr. Wong's remembered voice became the inner narrator of an English translation Vincent read for himself, after the inexorable passage of time swept him past his childhood. Memory, text, and dream—it was all the same. Each felt as real as the other.

"*...he looks upon himself as freed from debt, rid of disease, out of jail, a free man, and secure...*"

The fragrances from a thousand dried herbs and fungi and tree barks and roots and powders and clays and resins and lacquered boxes, and the cool cement floor, and a steaming pot of tea filled the air. Winslow's wrench ticked as he finished tightening a bolt on Father's crutch. The dark water flowed softly, softly along its stony channel. Young Molly didn't have much

interest in the discourses of the Buddha, but she cared very much about Dr. Wong. She listened just to listen to *him*. Vincent, in remembering that moment, also remembered the time he went down to his river to mourn Molly's passing, her pain and her shame all too alive in his heart. He had dreamt of her beside the nameless waterway and it took him many long days to ponder the meaning of his dream.

She had come to him there in the shape of an owl, her eyes round and as night-sighted as his own, her flaxen hair drifting over her silent brown wings. Vincent was not surprised that Molly should be his owl-woman, a sister to that fey spirit from the fable he loved, written by an Irish girl no older than himself, who lived in a green land across the sea.

He had asked his departed friend, "Molly? Why did you choose the Split-Rock Chamber?"

Her glassy owl-eyes gleamed at him in the dark. "You know why."

(Molly? Did he just say, "Molly?")

He stayed with the river and the memories of Molly until his supply of food ran out. Then he journeyed home, traveling up out of darkness into the Tunnels once more. This was a three-day road and when he returned, he went first into the Kitchen. He found fresh bread in the Larder, and one of the last jars of Julia's grape jelly.

Winslow smelled strongly of fire, and of engine grease roughly scrubbed from his hands but not yet from the clothes he had put on today. Both Winslow and Pascal had breakfasted well, and Pascal had enjoyed spearmint tea afterward. And child-Vincent's nose detected the presence of fresh jasmine blossoms in Dr. Wong's shop. A drift of warm air swept the scent down the basement stairs from the ground floor above. A friend or a customer must have gifted a sprig of the white blossoms to him—

Chewing a slice of oat bread spread thick with sweetness, hearing water start to simmer in the kettle he'd placed on the hot stove, sixteen-year-old-Vincent began looking in the cupboards for a canister of tea leaves. Anything would do, but he hoped for green tea, maybe even jasmine. From the moment he first smelled the fragrance of that delicate flower as a young boy, he had always loved jasmine.

(Winslow? Do you think we should wake him?)

Heavy footsteps came toward him from behind. Vincent found plain green tea behind a mostly empty tin of cinnamon. He took the small tea canister from its shelf.

(Be my guest. There's plenty more empty beds in here. Want to pick one out for yourself before you mess with him?)

"Good thing we've got new supplies coming in," said a gruff male voice Vincent didn't know.

(I'm not talking about bothering him. I'm talking about helping him to not have a bad dream.)

"That's the last loaf of bread, and I was out of flour." An ironic note colored the words of the unknown man. An abrasive quality defined Vincent's sense of him. The man smelled like a spice cake.

(You can't fix what a person dreams, Pascal. Why are you even worrying about that?)

The man stopped and thumped something down onto the long table.

(You didn't hear him screaming in here yesterday.)

Vincent turned around. The man who had come in behind him had his arms wrapped around a large sack of wheat flour. He perspired from carrying the load. He was very big and very round, red-haired, his jowls covered by the early growth of a new beard. He and Vincent stood at the same height, although by the end of that year Vincent would surpass him in this

regard. Vincent had been away from home for nearly a month. The newcomer must have joined the community while Vincent was gone. Ordinarily he would not be meeting Vincent alone like this, and one of the Elders would have prepared him for the encounter.

(Just let the man rest for now. Besides, I don't think he's really asleep.)

The man's face reddened until it turned maroon. He stared at Vincent, his initial peevish anger fracturing into new emotions. Now he was afraid and surprised. "What the devil are *you* supposed to be?" he demanded in his astonishment. At least he didn't shout, or run away shouting.

Vincent set the tea canister on the scarred wooden table in the middle of the Kitchen. He looked at the round man and felt only patient amusement at the stranger's startlement. "Hungry," Vincent said.

More people came walking along the back passage into the Kitchen. Vincent looked past the man to see Vernon, Rebecca, and Laura round the corner, each of them carrying a box or a basket suitable to their respective strengths. Vernon saw Vincent first, smiled warmly at him, and nodded in greeting. Then Rebecca smiled. She set her basket of fresh vegetables on the table. She helped Laura place a little basket of spice tins beside the produce, then the older girl pointed across the room. Laura turned. Delight brightened her countenance.

The little girl raced across the floor to Vincent's waiting arms. He picked her up and held her balanced lightly against one hip. Vincent felt the child glow with joy in his arms, Laura's love for him pure and adoring. Their burgeoning friendship had become a nexus of healing for both of them. Laura kissed his cheek and grabbed his neck in a friendly stranglehold. She let him go at once in order to wave at Rebecca, poking Vincent's chest with a small finger as Rebecca walked over.

Rebecca made a series of gestures with one hand, which Laura copied with judicious five-year-old dexterity. They had been experimenting with hand signs all summer, but Vincent did not recognize these signals.

«What are you telling me?» Vincent asked Laura in the basic language they had developed together.

She sketched other signs he did not know. Vernon interpreted.

"She's spelling your name," said the warden.

"My name?" Vincent looked at Laura. She was grinning, proud, happy that her friend had come home and that he was holding her, eager to give Vincent the gift of her new words.

"Peter and Willis found us some coherent sign language books," Vernon said. He set down a box of canned goods and moved to stand beside the big red-faced man, who was now staring around at the whole group of them. "Dragging these two girls away from their studies to do chores has been a big chore in and of itself."

Laura fingerspelled Vincent's name again. Her joy became his own, a feeling they built together and nurtured in each other. Vincent looked to Rebecca. She understood what he wanted, and began to spell out a new word in the manual alphabet.

Vincent smiled at the child he held and, imitating Rebecca, spelled, «L-A-U-R-A,» for her. Laura squeaked, strangling him again.

"And while we're naming names..." Vernon said then, setting one hand on the shoulder of the big man at his side. "Vincent, meet William. He says he wants to cook for all of us for a while. William, meet Vincent."

William nodded stiffly, still staring across the Kitchen at the strange golden-haired youth holding the beatific deaf girl, while the mute teenager with hands scarred by lye and hot candle wax began to guide an enthusiastic signed conversation between all three Tunnelkids. Vincent

returned William's nod. He glanced at Vernon over the dark crown of Laura's head.

"Welcome home, my dear boy."

"Thank you, Vernon. It's good to be back."

(Um, okay, Pascal. He's definitely talking to dead folks. Go ahead and wake him up.)

The tea kettle sang. Small hands shaped words in the air. Two friends stood up from their chairs. Two enemies broke a small glass door in a cold little room. Dr. Wong turned a page in his book. The abandoned husk of a childhood companion hung perfectly still from the end of a cable in the Split-Rock Chamber. Molly's owl wings unfolded where her arms had once been as her now-weightless spirit transformed herself for flight. The tome in Vincent's hands inspired him with its wisdom.

Vincent thought: *And so rejoicing all his frame becomes at ease, and being thus at ease he is filled with a sense of peace, and in that peace his heart is stayed.*

The owl-woman swooped toward his chest and plucked out a long shard of glass with her talons. Pascal leaned down over the bed and Winslow braced himself for danger, knowing that *he* was the man everyone had once depended upon to stand between a violent monster and the rest of their community, a strong, brash man who remained tacitly resigned to this expectation. If only Vincent's sorrows were not so easily communicable to all the people who cared for him!

I won't hurt you, Vincent thought, feeling his friend's readiness to battle, and his omnipresent anger, and not a little of Winslow's fear.

Then Pascal touched Vincent's shoulder and the thin membrane between Vincent and not-Vincent was broached. Vincent dropped into an echo chamber of feelings that were not his own—almost dipping into *thoughts* that were not his own—sliding toward a personality both good and kind, wise in an insular way, and quiet in the interstices between the notes of pipesong that pulsed through Pascal's mind. The soul of Pascal was a peaceable place to explore, but Vincent had no right to be there. He fought to keep from moving any deeper, resisted the whirlpool current that drew him away from where he should be residing—

Returning to himself, Vincent half sat up in bed, opened his eyes wide, saw Winslow's face, saw Owl-Molly, saw Jonathan Gould. The enemy jabbed a sharp tool at him. The dead woman tweezed two more glass shards out from Vincent's soul. And as Vincent bolted fully awake, the heel of Winslow's restraining hand *(mad bad you're not going anywhere)* met the soft spot beneath Vincent's breastbone where one of Jonathan Gould's darts had struck him.

Vincent cried out, though not loudly, for the iron impact clouted most of the breath from his lungs. He fell back, hearing Winslow's curses begin to rain down upon the three of them. He could only compare the pain he felt with that of a hard blow to the groin. He struggled to disentangle himself from Winslow's emotions, so that he would not get pulled into Winslow the way he had nearly been caught inside Pascal. Vincent wondered if his internal organs were still inflamed from poison, or if the dart wound itself remained unhealed. His heart limped gamely in his chest, stuttering out the discordant beat he felt in his neck, his stomach, his chest, and the dark, besieged interior behind his eyes. Vincent tried to breathe.

"Vincent, hell, man. I am *sorry*." Winslow started moving toward him again.

"Don't touch me," Vincent gasped.

Winslow pulled away, hurt now, but also afraid of causing his friend even more anguish.

It has returned, Vincent thought. *My feeling what everyone else feels. And I am not prepared.*

Tears of pain ran in wet lines from his eyes, down along his temples, and into his hair. Vincent felt he might vomit at any moment. He did not want that to happen again. Winslow swore mightily. Pascal shushed him, a little impatient with the big man. After they all had a

minute to settle down, the pipe master asked Vincent, “Do you want me to get Father?”

“No,” Vincent answered.

“Do you need some water?”

Vincent thought, *Constantly,* but did not trust his body to cooperate with his need right then. “No,” he said a second time. He looked at his friends. Pascal sat attentively, willing to fulfill any request. Winslow just held his head in his hands, furious with himself, and glared at the space under Vincent’s bed.

While we were boys, my friend, you might have benefited from Dr. Wong’s lessons in breathing mindfulness, Vincent thought, watching him. But Winslow had never given much credence to any practice of meditation, and he was also not easily teachable, as his mother had been fond of pointing out.

More thoughts about more dead folks. Vincent felt nearer to the departed than to the living. At least he did not lose himself in the dead when their memories touched him. The cold sickness at his center widened into a hot ache. Vincent kept inviting air into his body. It came, and with it came a growing sense of light. Vincent knew this lightness and listened for the footsteps that must soon accompany it.

He was not disappointed. He felt Catherine walk into the chamber, sensed her brilliance come toward him. He raised his working hand and wiped the tears from his face. Resettling his hand over his middle, he watched Catherine step past the screens and place a pile of books on his bedside table. Her green eyes adroitly observed the three of them and their varied postures.

“Is everything all right?” she asked.

Not wanting to lie to her, none of them answered.

“That was probably an unfair question,” she murmured, and walked around to the left side of Vincent’s hospital bed. She claimed the empty chair that waited for her there and rested her hand upon Vincent’s. “I’ve brought some books,” she said.

Her touch was not like Winslow’s or Pascal’s. Vincent was not threatened with loss or dissolution. He had never thought of their bond as a boundary, but today—it was. They were connected and they were distinct, one dream yet two dreamers. Touching *her*, he was completely safe and completely himself. He did not need to hold his identity together or to hold himself apart. Catherine’s love held him. That was enough.

His tears began anew.

She spoke his name and took out a handkerchief. Her gentle hand brushed the cloth with delicate tenderness at the corners of his eyes. “It’s all right,” Catherine whispered. “It *is* all right.”

“I believe you,” Vincent said.

And that, too, was enough.

IV

28 March 1987
Saturday Afternoon

“*But if the while I think on thee, dear friend, / All losses are restor’d and sorrows end.*”

Vincent felt he’d never known the *Sonnets* until now. Catherine’s voice brought out nuances of meaning, secret thoughts from gilded words. He watched her hands, the right hand

resting upon his book, lifting to turn a page, or smoothing flat the thin paper. Her left hand guarded his left hand. On another day he might have wished for his hand to feel hers. He'd run out of wishes. For now, he dwelt only in the renewed peace of this present moment.

Catherine dwelt there with him, matching his pace of being, stopping her reading only moments ago when his caregivers saw blankness steal into his eyes. Vincent wondered what that robbery must feel like, what his friends must endure to witness his absence, but he could not ask. Asking would be more-than-enough and he didn't want to go there. When Vincent had returned to her, Catherine finished the poem. The quiet that followed seemed truly hallowed to Vincent's heart.

"This is such a beautiful book," Catherine said at last, closing it. She caressed the leather cover. "I suppose it was a gift?"

Vincent said softly, "Yes. From Father."

She smiled. "Five'll get you ten that you and Father could perform any scene from any play in here...and at a moment's notice."

Winslow rumbled from the other side of the bed. It wasn't quite a laugh. Winslow wasn't up to laughing yet, but the sound was on its way to being a chuckle. Catherine glanced over at him.

"Am I wrong?" she asked.

"No," said Pascal. "They do it all the time. Some of us know how to join in. We see a lot of little shows whenever there's enough people gathered to provide an audience."

"Invite me sometime," Catherine said. "I'd love to see some of those shows."

Pascal smiled.

Pipecode echoed in from the corridor, foragers arranging to meet at one of the entrances. The master pipe into the Hospital Chamber stayed silent. They listened to a distant clatter and roar from the subways. Two men passed the chamber entrance. Voices murmured and someone laughed. It sounded like Tomas and Benjamin. The sounds softened and the room was still once more. Pascal looked at Vincent.

"Do you feel ready to try to eat something now?" he asked.

Vincent eyed the tray Destiny had brought in for him some while ago. "Not yet. But I'll take the tea."

Pascal nodded and lifted an upside-down saucer off the rim of a heavy ceramic mug.

This would be Vincent's third successful dose of the robust brew—if he did not become sick again after drinking it. Dr. Wong's tea did not taste *bad*, but it was, beyond question, *medicinal*. Early this morning, Father had said that while he, together with Dr. Wong and Peter, had determined that Vincent should not be lethally sensitive to any of the herbs, the team of healers remained unsure of whether their patient could actually stomach the mixture. Vincent had replied that he would drink anything they gave him if there was a chance it could improve conditions inside his skull. The two cups he had managed to retain so far had already lessened his headache considerably. Vincent slowly moved to sit up so Pascal could administer this new cup.

But sitting up was difficult for him. Half of his body no longer answered his intent and the other half was too weak to fully compensate. The muscles in his midsection remained convinced that the end of the world had come, preferring apathetic insolence to the pain of physical effort. Vincent was getting out of breath from not thinking too much about these problems when Winslow asked, "Can I help with that?"

Vincent needed his friend's help, and he was afraid of his friend's help. He looked from Winslow to Catherine.

"I'll help too," she said.

Vincent nodded, turning his thoughts away from his fear and frustration. *Please don't let go,* he thought to her.

Catherine made a perfect shield. Their connection became Vincent's refuge while Winslow's smoldering unhappiness rattled like rockfall in Vincent's mind. Winslow rearranged Vincent's weight and shape. Catherine protected the angles of Vincent's unanswering arm. Pascal situated the pillows behind him. When they were done, Vincent could drink his medicine. After he caught his breath again, that was.

Vincent sipped the tea, trying to neither lap up nor slurp the liquid. Winslow sat down in his chair and took a packet of paper from the inner pocket of his vest.

"I've got something for you, Vincent," Winslow said. As Julia might have described her son's attitude, Winslow sounded like he was dusting off his best company manners. Vincent sensed that Winslow felt severely chastised—although the rebuke came from Winslow himself more than anyone else. "Some more things to read," Winslow said.

Vincent waited. Winslow untied the gray ribbon which bound the many pages together. The blacksmith fanned out a colorful array of decorated paper in one big hand. He informed his three companions, "These are from all the kids. Ezra asked me to bring them in here. Do you want to read them later, or take a gander now?"

"You can read them to me," Vincent said.

Winslow handed half the papers to Catherine. The two of them read the messages by turns, leaning close to let Vincent see the pictures the children had drawn for him, and math equations they had solved for him, and acrostic poems they had written for him. The children wanted him to feel better. They wanted him to get well. They were waiting for him to come back and finish reading novels or books of poetry with them. His science group had clearly been excavating insect identification references out of Father's Library. Painstaking arthropod portraits represented insects from almost every order of classification.

"*Why* are they drawing earwigs?" Catherine asked. She gazed in mild horror at one crayon drawing of a fine dermapteran specimen creeping happily beneath an arcing rainbow.

"I don't know," Vincent murmured. "When I left them, we were studying butterflies."

Another colorful picture, prefaced with:

To: Vincent

We miss you! Come play hopscotch with us!

From: Emily Anne & Holly

The girls had drawn a dark brown child, a brilliantly pink child, and a tall, dandelion-headed fellow jumping their way through a chalked grid sketched out on the ground before them. Catherine was amused by the image. Then she glanced at Vincent's left hand and Vincent felt sorrow darken her heart. And something more came through. Was she—ashamed of him? Of his weaknesses? Her feeling shifted as she took the next paper from her stack, and Vincent couldn't track his impressions to their source.

Stay with what is enough, he thought. *I can do no more than that today.*

He had emptied the cup of medicine. Pascal put the cup back on the table. The lukewarm tea felt slippery in Vincent's stomach. Winslow moved the hopscotch drawing to the pile of pages he was making at the foot of Vincent's hospital bed. *Inhale and exhale. Just enough and*

no more, moment by moment.

"Look at this one," said Catherine. She held out a dark blue paper, shaped into a circle and folded down the middle to form a large greeting card—a sure indication that it came from one or more of the children who had lived for a time in the world Above. The front of this card was spangled with five-pointed white, yellow, lavender, and powder-blue stars. The low illumination of his hospital space made it difficult to enjoy these delicate shades, but Vincent didn't want to assail his eyes by asking his friends to light another lamp or candle.

Where did the children get all these colors? he wondered. Had a Helper recently sent Down new boxes of crayons?

Catherine unfolded the blue paper, revealing a stunning constellation map, every inch of empty space covered by stars. The young artists had arranged the miniature pentagrams into springtime formations, and they were colored to portray the relative brightness of each body of light. In scrinched-together letters at the circle's edge: LOVE FROM ELLIE AND ERIC.

Tears came to him so easily now. *This* gift, Vincent reached for, and he took it from Catherine's hand. He looked at the innumerable wax marks, knowing that hours of work had gone into the star map's creation.

I wanted to see the stars...one last time...

His memory showed him mist, and frosted glass, and unbreakable metal rods. He remembered frozen walls and closed doors, imaginary sketches rinsing slowly from cement. He saw Shadows he could name and a darkness he would not. Broken shards littered a gray floor, winking wickedly in the flat electric light. Every crack and protrusion of the Hospital Chamber ceiling above him was burned into Vincent's mind for life. And a round page writ over with the accents of heaven obscured it all.

He was weeping again, quietly, and although this increased the bodily sadness in his head and stomach, it was good for the rest of him to cry.

After perhaps a minute of this, Catherine leaned closer. She rested her head on his shoulder, her hand touching his chest. For the first time in forever, Vincent's bludgeoned joint did not respond with pain. He had no way to judge whether this might be a good sign or a bad one, and he didn't care. He sighed and his new tears passed away like a sweet shower of April rain. Catherine didn't move. She was fragrant with Castile soap, and with powdered myrrh and ginger, and a touch of cloves; she had used Tunnels toothpowder this morning. The fulsome dust of books scented her hands and her hair. Vincent cherished the aromas of his inmost home intermingled with the essence of the woman he loved. This woman who loved him.

He spread the map flat on his blanket and traced the invisible lines between groups of stars with his fingers. The children, and Father, Owl-Molly, Narcissa, Catherine, and all the other friends taking care of him today—their love brought the spheres of great teachers—wise poets and prophets—within reach. Vincent said,

"*Many a star of fire shot forth from the iron, and that burning heart received and drew in; / But in the darkness a hidden thief is laying his finger upon the stars, / Extinguishing the stars one by one, that no lamp may shine from the sky.*"

His friends were listening to him, grieving with him, learning from the grief.

"*No prayer is complete without presence*," Vincent said.

The stillness became so vast, Vincent felt sure they could all hear the minute creak of coals cooling by infinitesimal degrees in the brazier beyond the end of his bed. Even Winslow's hot heart became cooler. The big man sat up straight. "What does that mean?" Winslow asked.

Vincent looked up from his personal expanse of sky. "It means I've been distracted by many things lately. Thank you. All of you. I am doing better now." He rubbed his face with the

side of his hand.

His friends read the remainder of the children's messages aloud. Vincent savored each little slice of life, treasured each bright mind who sent his or her regards with Winslow into this room. They finished reading the last note of good will. Vincent asked for paper and a pencil.

"You mean to write back to them?" Pascal asked.

"Yes."

The pipe master got up and left the alcove to find what Vincent required. Catherine and Winslow gathered up the children's papers and set them on the table. Winslow offered to put the map of stars there, but Vincent covered the card with his hand and Winslow just nodded at him.

Pascal returned, with Weaver, Cullen and Destiny close behind. Pascal held the letter-writing materials. The other three carried trays of food for Vincent's attendants. "Late lunch," Destiny told them. She grinned at Vincent. "And boy are *you* looking better."

Rebecca's doing, I'm sure, Vincent thought. He said only, "Yes."

After the man, the woman, and the girl went back out into the front section of the Hospital Chamber, Catherine offered to help Vincent with the small meal that still waited for him on his own tray. Vincent shook his head. He told her, "You should eat. I want to write this first."

He used the smooth back cover of *A Terrible Strength* as a small writing desk, thinking, *It's fitting, somehow, that the author who also gave me the owl-woman should help me to write this message now.* Strange, that Catherine should bring an O'Donnell book to him. Vincent believed in coincidence insofar as statistics could take him, but he knew that other forces were continually at work in his life as well. Thinking of his waking dream, he believed that his prescient abilities must be returning to him along with his empathic ones.

I am healing, his heart whispered over and over, as though to root this truth so deeply into his soul that no sudden drought in future days could possibly break his hope again. *I am healing.*

His right hand shook around the pencil, but his unfeeling fingers were not as clumsily as he had expected. This was good. Years ago, when Vincent was laboriously learning to write, his young hands seeming more *paws* than *hands* at the time, he'd trained himself to use both left and right. He had developed dominant-hand proficiency in the technique Father imparted to him, and invented a simplified script for his right hand along the way.

This hobby was partly meant to exercise *all* of his fingers with fine, controlled movements (which had always been a struggle for him), and partly to becalm his mind. Vincent liked the process of drawing loops and lines onto a slate or onto paper. He liked linking letters to form words. The discipline soothed him. When one hand became tired of holding the chalk or the pen or the pencil, he switched to the other. He had stopped this sort of ambidextrous calligraphy practice when he began work on a series of essays and themes at the age of eighteen, but his right hand must not have forgotten too much. It was the illness in Vincent's nerves and muscles that made his present attempt so strenuous, the outcome on paper so visually disorganized.

Nevertheless, this was the best work he could offer and he performed it in grateful recognition of the fact that he *could* write, that at least for the time being he could *think* of true words to write. It did not occur to him to wonder whether the children might think badly of the squiggling lines that wandered across the page of paper Pascal had found for him; Vincent thought each one of his students possessed beautiful handwriting. Gradual achievements in spacing, form, and style only added layers of new beauty to their art. Every written word was such a precious thing.

He finished his letter and asked for water to drink. Pascal helped him with the cup and Vincent read through what he had written.

My wonderful friends,

What can I say to express my gratitude for your gifts? Your dreams and memories have gladdened my heart today. I look at your messages and your art, your thoughtful poetry, the colors you selected for me with such care. I admire your learning and feel your love. Thank you. I will see all of you soon.

Vincent

"It's a good letter," Pascal said, looking on.

"Will you see that it's delivered?" Vincent asked.

"Of course." Pascal took letter, pencil, and book.

Vincent smiled his thanks. He was tired now. His body felt as if he'd spent the morning shaping stone with Kanin. But there were yet more things he must do: firstly, he needed to eat. He had promised Father he would eat Olivia's healing foods. In return, Father had promised that if Vincent could do this throughout the remainder of the day, they wouldn't need to employ any more medical tubes during Vincent's recovery.

Catherine stood up from her chair to return her empty plate to a tray on the table. Vincent had not realized he'd taken so long to write his letter. She had already finished her meal. Had it been sandwiches for his friends? Catherine returned to her place carrying a plate of browning pear slices and a small bowl of carrot and parsnip soup, now quite cold, garnished with shreds of grated ginger. She smiled at him as she sat down.

"Do you want me to send this back to the Kitchen to warm it up?" she asked.

Vincent inclined his head toward the foot of his bed. "If we needed to, I think we could make do in here. The brazier is hot enough for that. But I'd rather try the food as it is."

"All right." She paused, setting the plate of fruit on the blanket beside him. She arranged the soup bowl and spoon in her hands. "We've come a long way, haven't we," she asked, "since those ten days you spent holding a spoon for *me*?"

Vincent gazed into her face: a matchless face which bore only one pale scar now. A face which graced him with tenderness every time he looked at her. *Yes*, he thought, and did not need to speak the word. Catherine's heart was already saying *Yes* for both of them.

V

28 March 1987
Saturday Afternoon

"There's *As You Like It*," Pascal said, bending his neck to read the Table of Contents right-side-up.

"I don't know that one very well," Winslow replied.

Pascal nudged the volume and teased, "This is an excellent edition for reading. I think it has all the words in it."

Winslow snorted. "I like *Twelfth Night*."

Pascal read more titles. "*Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The*

Merchant of Venice—"

"Not that one," said Vincent in a hollow whisper.

His two friends glanced at him. Winslow returned to the open book. "How about *Two Gentlemen of Verona*?" he asked.

"That will do."

And that decided them.

Catherine enjoyed watching the three men talking together. Rebecca had introduced the word "brothers" into Catherine's mental diagram of social connections in the underworld—and as unlikely a set as this trio made, the word fit. Hulking Winslow, dark and fiery, his big hands clasped to keep them out of everyone's way; and modest, quick-eyed Pascal, pale, neat, and watchful; and Vincent beside both of them, golden where their scant hair was black or brown, furred where his friends were smooth. Vincent: well-spoken, in need, and at home in his companions' care. The fraternity between them was undeniable.

Pascal began assigning personae: Proteus and Speed to Winslow, Valentine and Pantheno to Vincent, Launce and Lucetta to himself. The pipe master looked at Catherine. "Would you like to read Silvia and Julia?" he asked her.

"I don't think I've ever read this play, but I'll do my best."

Pascal smiled. "We'll work out the rest as we go."

"Sometimes we round-robin the lesser parts," Winslow murmured. "When there's a small bunch of players like this."

Catherine nodded. Pascal placed the book on the bed where they all could see it, then moved his chair closer to Winslow's so they could both make the most efficient use of the candlelight. Vincent didn't need to look at the book. Catherine wasn't surprised by this. She felt privately entertained by the practiced manner of the three Tunnel People as they began reading in concert.

This is a world without television, she thought. *A world without radio and mostly without electronic music players. What they have is books. Vincent has mentioned musicians giving concerts down here, so they must also have live music sometimes. And they have each other.*

Winslow was saying, "*Wilt thou be gone? Sweet Valentine, adieu!*" Catherine smiled at the discrepancy between the words and the personality of the man speaking the words. Vincent listened to Winslow delivering the lines of Proteus and picked up a pear slice from the plate on his lap.

While the proceedings unfolded in Elizabethan English, Catherine admired the drawing of stars lying next to Vincent's plate. *The children did a lovely thing for their friend,* she thought. She wondered what it must be like to be a teacher with so many young ones to look after. She wished she knew more about being part of a large family that included multiple generations, the members of each age group growing up together, or growing old together. Still smiling, Catherine began to understand something new about herself: *I'm becoming part of Vincent's family,* she thought.

"*For I will be thy headsman, Valentine,*" said Winslow, and he stopped reading. He seemed to be waiting for a reply.

Silence answered him.

Catherine turned to look at Vincent. He sat staring in the direction of a curtain frame, half a pear slice resting on the palm of his upturned hand. Catherine decided this was the least distressing sort of seizure for bedside attendants, but she despised what it did to her friend.

Catherine reached across Vincent's body to take the food from his hand. She set the morsel on his plate. Pascal moved the plate onto the table, beside the slate and chalk. The pipe

master added numbers to the tally, dividing his attention between the watch on the table and Vincent's moveless eyes. Winslow sighed hugely. "Has Father got him taking anything?" the blacksmith asked.

"Just the tea," said Pascal.

"Is the tea even helping?"

Vincent turned his head, blinking slowly, and *seeing* Winslow. He also seemed to have heard Winslow's question. "How many...entries...are written on...the slate?" Vincent asked, choosing and pronouncing one word at a time.

Winslow looked surprised by Vincent's uneventful return to consciousness. Pascal referred to the slate and answered, "Five in the 'A' column, three in the 'T' column."

Vincent closed his eyes. "The tea is helping." After a moment, he opened his eyes again, looked at Winslow, and asked, "Is it my line?"

He spoke softly, humbly, his mouth blurring the words ever so slightly. His face had the translucent quality of bone china. Catherine thought, *Vincent is the bravest person I've ever met.*

"Yeah," Winslow said, and this time his voice was a sad, subdued half-whisper. "Your line, V."

Vincent said, "*I have spoke thus much / To mitigate the justice of thy plea, / Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice / Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there*."

They looked at him. Vincent blinked back. Translating their silence, he whispered, "I got it wrong."

Pascal said, "No, I think you got the lines right. But they're from a different play. We're in Verona, not Venice."

Vincent said nothing.

Winslow read Proteus's line a second time, a prompt for Vincent's memory.

Vincent kept silent for some while, thinking. Then he whispered again. "I know this. I do."

Catherine took Vincent's bandaged hand. She didn't believe that he felt her touch; he only saw the movement she made. She thought a shadow began to darken the blue in his eyes, the shadow that wanted to cover himself, to hide his china face, and escape his pain.

"It's okay," Winslow said. "We can quit reading if you want. It's just a way to pass the time—"

"I *know* this," Vincent repeated.

"Well...then, maybe all you need is to jog your recollections a little," Winslow tried. He started to reach toward the bed.

Catherine saw that Winslow's hands were heading for the book of Shakespeare, probably to move it closer, to encourage Vincent to read the words he couldn't quite remember. Vincent did not seem to perceive this intention. He covered the paper circle of stars with his trembling right hand. He said, "No," and now the blue was vanishing from his eyes altogether.

Even the bravest among us can become scared...but why is he afraid of Winslow today? Catherine worried. Maybe there was no reason. After last night—after all that had happened—Vincent had every justification for a fear of life in its entirety. Catherine pinned Winslow with a sharp glance and the blacksmith retreated.

"*And on a love-book pray for my success?*" Catherine read Valentine's question, her own hands enclosing Vincent's silenced left hand, even as her heart hoped to draw Vincent away from confusion and fear.

After a moment, Winslow answered, "*Upon some book I love I'll pray for thee.*"

They waited. Vincent looked at the heavy volume, sighed, and read out, "*That's on some*

shallow story of deep love, / How young Leander cross'd the Hellespont."

Winslow responded with the jesting words of Valentine's friend. Vincent closed his eyes and recited accurately. This small victory comforted him.

They finished Scene One, Scenes Two and Three: the First Act. By the end of that reading, they were all easier together, sometimes smiling at the words and at each other. But even smiling a little, Vincent looked weary, as fragile as a ceramic piece from the collection stored in Catherine's glass displays. He accepted water from Pascal and studied the way Catherine continued to hold his injured hand.

"I'll read something else for a while," Catherine offered.

Vincent nodded.

Catherine pointed at, and Pascal handed to her, *A Terrible Strength*. She opened the book one-handed and read, "*Mùirne found the baby nested betwixt the oak tree's lumping roots in Fraochán Móinéir.*"

Catherine read the first chapter, entranced by O'Donnell's remarkable introduction to a story of romantic high fantasy at its finest. She stopped reading at the chapter's end only because Vincent had dropped off to sleep, his face turned toward hers like a sunflower's to the sun. His chin rested on his shoulder and his right hand still covered the card Ellie and Eric had made for him.

Catherine closed the book. She sat watching him, absorbing the warmth of his hand despite the fragility of his body. At some point between the time Catherine went to sleep and the time she'd awakened late this morning, someone had acted upon their compassion for Vincent's hair. And Father must have removed the IV while Catherine was out collecting books. All in all, Vincent looked a bit more like himself.

Winslow stood up. "I need a break." His words were muttered, and without any further prelude to the act, he turned and left the alcove.

Once he had gone, Catherine quietly said to Pascal, "Dare I ask?"

Pascal's fingers drummed with sprightly energy at his knee. "It's not important. Nothing that hasn't happened before. It's just not helpful that it's happened again today."

"'*It...*'?" Catherine pressed.

"Sometimes Vincent and Winslow get in each other's way. They try not to, but they're both so..." Pascal looked up at the stone surface above them, searching for the right word.

Big? Catherine thought. Out loud she suggested, "Strong?"

"Strong-*willed*," Pascal amended at once. "They have moments when they collide without meaning to and then sparks fly. You can ask either of them about it sometime."

Which means Pascal doesn't want to be the one to come between his friends by disclosing too much of their relationship to me, Catherine thought. And it would be cruel to force the small man into that position with new questions, however much Catherine wanted to know more. She sat still at Vincent's side, listening to the quiet of the underworld.

And, yes, it *was* quiet, she felt now, a Quiet as Rebecca defined it, the city Below characterized not by the hurdy-gurdy bustle of the streets Above—and not by unsullied soundlessness—but by a living, breathing stillness. *Calmness,* Catherine mused. *Earthy sanity delivered by the rocks themselves and welcomed by the people who live down here.*

She straightened a curling edge of the bandage on Vincent's hand. Watching her friend fight for his own mind—to keep what sanity he had left, and to regain what was half-divorced from him—had left her heart feeling bruised. She did not blame Winslow for his withdrawal.

Vincent moved his head, tipping it back onto the pillows. So, he wasn't deeply asleep. Merely resting. Locks of his hair slid along the right side of his face, revealing one ear. Catherine

was staring before she realized what she did. Catching herself, she thought, *I refuse to stare. I will only see, and I will look with love.*

Structurally, this was no more a human ear than his hands were human hands, or his mouth, or his nose, or the preternaturally quiet way he moved (when he was not reeling from enemy assaults). His ear was round, a semicircle of flat skin, lacking the open spiral of Catherine's own ears, and placed high on the side of Vincent's skull. The fur covering this circular shape was textured like crushed velvet, straw-colored, with a deep orange center. The ear had a ragged top edge. Catherine thought first of battlescars, then of a small beaten body *(someone else strung him up)*, hung like a lynching victim in her nightmare of Isaac's loft.

Torn ears. Had Hughes done this to Vincent? The skin didn't look scabbed or excised, but Vincent healed differently than other people; it might have happened at Columbia and the slight injury could have already scarred over. Catherine wanted to touch that nicked place, to test its softness and its wholeness, but she would not demean Vincent by *petting* him in front of one of his friends. She settled for moving a strand of his hair away from his ginger-tipped lashes.

You're so beautiful, she thought. *Our trials can't change that about you, no matter what happens today or tomorrow or the day after that. Every last inch of you will always be beautiful.*

She returned her hand to Vincent's wrist. Across the bed from her, the pipe master turned around in his chair. Catherine realized that the subterranean quiet was being displaced by a hushed commotion out in the greater Hospital Chamber. "What is it?" she asked Pascal.

"I'm not sure." He stood up.

The commotion came closer. She heard hissing demands and louder protests. Squilchy footsteps rushed toward the alcove. Catherine's dozing charge heard the sounds. He did not like the interruption. His bristling brows drew together. He turned his face sharply toward Catherine —and away from the incoming ruckus. Catherine tried not to add her own annoyance to whatever internal clamor Vincent must be experiencing. She refrained from tightening her grip on his wrist. What was the good of doormen and serving women if they couldn't keep a sickbed safe from noisy invaders?

Now a young voice was calling Vincent's name. Catherine heard Winslow command in an exasperated undertone, "Stop that! Get back here!"

Vincent woke. He blinked sleepily at Catherine, and turned to look at the entry space. Catherine frowned. An oozy, dripping figure appeared between the screens. Pascal actually took a step backward before he realized who their mud-soaked visitor must be.

"Vincent!" Mouse cried. "And Catherine too!" Catherine saw wide eyes and an expansive grin. The rest of the young man was a sloggy, sodden quagmire, from his mop of drizzling hair to the goop-caked toes of his wrapped engineer's boots. "Came back up, heard pipes, took the fastest way home. Have to tell Father, big mess by the Mossy Grotto. Need a repair crew. Quicksand!"

Vincent said gently, "But are *you* all right, Mouse?"

Mouse grinned again. "Mouse is good. Better than good! Better than better! Vincent came back!" He squished one step closer and added, "Mouse went looking. All the secret places. No friends there. Where have you been?"

Winslow growled from behind the boy, "I'd be three kinds of joyful to relate the tale to you—*if* you'll get your mucky carcass out of this chamber and into a bathtub in the next ten seconds."

Mouse glanced over his shoulder at the blacksmith. "But Vincent—"

"Is in *hospital*, resting *quiet*-like. C'mere."

"Vincent got hurt?" Mouse's grin went away.

Winslow rolled his eyes and grabbed the young man's shoulder. "You take the bath, *then* I'll tell the story. Got it?"

"Go on, Mouse," Cullen's voice urged. Catherine could see only their doorman's eyes as Cullen reached around Winslow's arm to set his hand on Mouse's other shoulder. "You can visit again when Father says it's okay."

Mouse became one very worried mudpuppy. "Get better quick," he told Vincent. Reluctant, he let Winslow and Cullen tug him back out into the chamber. The three of them walked away, leaving a trail of gook on the floor and Winslow's argumentative words drifting on the air.

"No...you can't just rush into places like that. Sometimes you've got to stop and listen to what folks are telling you! Cullen, we need some mops in here!"

The commotion moved out into the corridor. The Hospital Chamber regained its Quiet. Vincent still faced the space between the privacy screens. "Catherine?" he asked. "Pascal? Did you...see that, too?"

"Yes," said Pascal, and Catherine contributed: "Mouse."

"Ah. Thank you."

Pascal leaned out of the alcove and shook his head at the stone floor. "I think Cullen could use some help cleaning up," he said. He looked at Catherine and Vincent. "Will you be okay for a few minutes?"

"Yes," Catherine said.

"If you need anything, I'm just around the corner."

Catherine nodded. Pascal left swiftly, stepping over the trail of mud and slime to avoid tracking any more of it around. Catherine turned her attention to Vincent. "*Quicksand*?" she asked.

"A constant danger in many of our passages," Vincent said.

"How constant?"

"Our patrols encounter it once or twice a month, sometimes more often than that after heavy rain."

"So even your home Tunnels have their dangers," Catherine said with a little shiver. She added the imagined faces of children sinking into oozing muck to her fears of cave-ins and flooded chambers.

"Every place is dangerous in its own way," Vincent answered.

Catherine shook her head, not refuting Vincent's words, but simply releasing something else she could not protect him from. She ran her thumbs over his bandaged knuckles. "Mouse cares about you very much," she said.

Vincent smiled. "Yes." He watched her straighten his fingers. She rested his hand flat upon the blanket at his side.

Vincent's voice remained calm, but now his smiling ended the way Mouse's had. He gazed steadily at his left hand. "Father tells me that if this condition is an effect of seizure, it may reverse itself at any time."

Carefully, Catherine asked, "And if it isn't? If it doesn't?"

"Then it doesn't." Vincent looked from his hand to Catherine, and then away, toward the brazier.

Catherine's bruised feeling returned. "There's nothing to be ashamed of, Vincent."

Vincent turned back to her quickly, a listening glint in his eyes. This was the most normal expression she'd seen on his face in many days. *He can feel me again,* Catherine realized. *Or, at least, he's beginning to feel me.* Hope and relief offset her nervousness about the silent way

Vincent considered her words.

At last he said, “You think I am ashamed.”

Aren’t you? Catherine thought. *I would be. It was the worst feeling in the world, after my attackers hurt me.* But she kept this to herself. Vincent glanced down at their hands again.

He said, “I’ve recently learned that when my father was a young man, he was attending school in Coventry in 1940. That was the year aerial bombers from Germany began to attack Great Britain. His school was evacuated to another town, but Father stayed behind with the family of a friend. His friend’s mother was a teacher. She was tutoring other young people in their neighborhood and did not mind the addition of one more student to their group. Her husband was a doctor. Young Jacob Wells offered to help him with his work. Even then, Father already knew which profession he wanted to pursue.”

Catherine nodded, wondering where this story was taking them. Vincent returned his clear gaze to Catherine’s face.

“Father was terribly injured by an explosion during the most devastating November raid. He was sixteen years old. Should Father have been ashamed that he could no longer walk or run the way he used to when he was a boy? Should he be ashamed of his crutches and walking sticks now?”

“Of course not,” Catherine said. Vincent’s eyes never left hers. She saw no accusation, no impatience or rage. But neither was resignation present in his comportment. Or shame.

“Mary has told me that Narcissa’s eyesight has been failing her for years. One day, Narcissa will become physically blind. Must *she* be ashamed? This woman who sees so clearly with all of her other senses, and with her intuition, her confident spirit—”

“But surely she feels the *loss*,” Catherine objected. Blindness was one of Catherine’s deepest terrors. “Anyone would feel the pain of such a *tremendous* loss.”

Vincent’s tired eyes hinted at a new smile. “Ask Narcissa about that someday. She’ll tell you what she feels, and then she’ll instruct you as to what *you* are feeling for good measure.” He sighed. “But loss and shame are not the same thing. I’m not ashamed of my impairment.”

Catherine bent closer to say, “So tell me what you *are* feeling.”

Vincent picked up the stars card and took refuge in the patterns he saw there. The children had not labeled or outlined any of the constellations, and Catherine only recognized a few: the Big and Little Dippers, Cassiopeia (her mother’s favorite), Draco the dragon. Vincent placed the card over his heart, covering the paper with his hand.

“I’m thankful to be alive,” he said. “I feel very frightened of what the future may hold for me, angry at men who can no longer respond to my anger.” He closed his eyes. “I don’t like burdening those who must care for me now.”

Catherine reached for his still-functional hand. She clasped it tightly. “You’re not a burden.”

He opened his eyes and looked at her. “Oh, I am. One willingly accepted, perhaps, but a burden nonetheless.” He pressed her fingers. The stars crinkled faintly beneath their joined hands.

“We all take our turns, from the moment we are born. This is my time to be held, Catherine. I do not deny it. I have the right to be cared for, and my family has the right to give me care. I feel the hands that hold me, and the touch of each hand is a gift. Each moment is a new chance for giving. I’m trying to keep this in mind.”

His grasp loosened and the trust in his eyes chased away Catherine’s thought-twisting fears and sorrows. “I want to honor every giver,” Vincent said.

Leaning over him like this was beginning to irritate Catherine’s back. She sat up, taking

her hand from his slowly to show that she was not detaching herself, only realigning her body. Vincent watched her in silence. When Catherine sat still, he asked abruptly, “Do you know that I love you?”

She could see that he sensed the chord of joy gamboling through her spirit. Catherine whispered, “Yes.”

“I meant to tell you, before you went to Rhode Island. I meant to come early Saturday evening, to give you a good memory to take with you.”

Catherine thought, *Of course you did. I’m the one who should be ashamed of myself...for thinking you might ever have intended otherwise.*

But that was only one facet of the convoluted emotions existing between them. Catherine said to him, “We did what we both thought best. But you could have come to visit me sooner. Why didn’t you?”

“I was not ready,” Vincent said. “It takes time...to let someone go.”

“But you didn’t want me to go.”

Boundless compassion softened his face. “I wanted you to be happy.”

Catherine smiled at him. “*I* wanted me to be happy.” She let her smile fade. “But I guess I was also trying to deny the truth about the things in my life that bring me joy.”

Vincent replied, “What you felt *was* true, Catherine. You were unhappy in New York, and the idea of Providence gave you *great* joy. We both know that. Your joy, Catherine...do you know how beautiful it is to me? How precious?”

Catherine was not sure what to say. She was not sure how to differentiate between what she knew about Vincent’s feelings, and what she only thought she knew. She asked, “And you thought my joy could only become complete if I left New York?”

Vincent thought about her question. “Perhaps,” he said. “Or perhaps I sensed something that you were beginning to understand about yourself.”

“Yes,” Catherine sighed. “Part of my heart did want to go somewhere new.” She asked, “What about *your* heart, Vincent?”

He replied, “My heart did not want to you leave, did not ask you to leave, but my heart could also never compel me to prevent you from going. ‘No one will ever force you to stay; no one will ever keep you from leaving.’ That is a law among my people, and it’s a good law.”

Catherine nodded. She remembered listening to Father explain this rule to Eric on the night she brought the boy to safety in the Tunnels. It was, she realized, part of a way of life that made genuine safety possible in Vincent’s world.

Vincent continued, “We must all reach for our potential. And you have come so far, reached out with such courage. I know reaching out makes you happy. Your triumphs and your possibilities have opened the world to me. If you must go away to be happy, Catherine, I would want you to go with my blessing. Your happiness is my happiness.”

His redoubled confirmation of the influence she held over Vincent’s heart frightened her. Catherine watched his face. “Vincent...I did tell you I didn’t want to leave you behind.”

For a moment, some self-reproachful part of her feared he might say, *Yes, but you’ve said that before, and you’ve left me behind before...*

But Vincent only nodded. “Yes. But wherever you are, Catherine, I am with you. That has never changed. You won’t lose me. Wherever you go, you won’t leave me behind...unless it is your wish to do so.”

“This feels so strange,” she murmured.

“Freedom?” Vincent asked.

Catherine nodded slowly. How *terribly* strange that Vincent should have more experience

in living with personal freedom than she! Catherine said, “But...when we spoke at the secret door? Why didn’t you also tell me...some reasons why you did *not* want me to go?”

“What good would that have done?”

She felt her brow furrow. “I don’t understand.”

He answered gently, “You always do what you feel is right, Catherine. You came to me and asked for my help to decide to do something that you already wanted to do. Describing your dilemma, you gave me five reasons for you to go to Providence...and one reason to stay in New York.”

One reason, her mind repeated.

He held her gaze. “We both want you to be strong, Catherine, free to dream your own dreams, able to accomplish great, wondrous things with your talents and skills. So I shared with you the truth about yourself, and I tried to explain what I believe about our love. How our love can flourish, what our love and our freedom mean to me.”

She considered this.

Vincent asked, “Did I help you, Catherine?”

She nodded again. “Yes, you did. I needed...reassurance. You gave me that, and so much more.”

Our love, she thought. *He explained what he believes, with all his heart, about our love.* Which led her to another question.

“And why didn’t you tell me that night...that you love me?”

“You did not know it then?” he asked, his eyes shining with what he felt for her.

Catherine smiled a little. “I knew. But it’s important to hear the words. You didn’t say them then.”

“I didn’t want to hold you back.”

These words sounded so nonsensical to her, Catherine had to stop to think for a few seconds, to be sure she’d heard him right. “Hold me back? How?”

Her emotional bruise transmitted itself from Catherine’s heart to Vincent’s blue eyes. “This is...” he whispered hesitantly. “It’s...after everything that’s happened to us, this is the thing that *does* shame me.”

Catherine saw it clearly now: her shadow—the reflection of *her* shame in this confession of *his*.

“Catherine, you share...you give so much of yourself. You bear the burden of great secrets, and of a bond that I know must be intrusive to you at times. You give friends and strangers alike your help and love. You give me your time, your thoughts and feelings...your trust. And in return—” Vincent swallowed hard, but he did not take his gaze from her.

“I wanted more,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

He never ceased to astonish her. “Vincent,” Catherine breathed.

He kept going, his voice rough, his eyes tearful now. “I rejoiced in your freedom, and I believed I could find my own within it. Yet, at the same time, I wanted our dream—*my* dream, in *my* city—to last...just a little longer. How could I speak more of my heart to you before we parted that night, how could I know for *myself* everything my heart truly contained, when this...this *greed* was consuming my soul? Of *that* I was—and remain—ashamed.” Now he did look down. His weariness slipped into his speech.

“I am only what I am. You had to discover your own destiny. I have no right to interrupt that process.”

Catherine took his nearer hand once more. “And *these* are the words from your heart I needed to hear when I came Down to you that night. Don’t ever be ashamed of your feelings.

God, Vincent, where is it written that you're not allowed to *want* something?"

Vincent looked up. "It's inscribed on the palms of these hands, the planes of my face. I want many things, as do we all, but my desires cannot take precedence over what is right. It is not right to want anything that diminishes another person. This is a belief I live by, and this is the life I live, Catherine. The life providence grants me and the life I have chosen." He sighed again, a sad, tired sound. "You have different choices."

Catherine nodded, and smoothed the fur over his long fingers.

After a moment Vincent asked quietly, almost shyly, "Catherine? Why did you choose to stay?"

He asked a more difficult question than he knew. However, Catherine's first and foremost reason was very simple. "Because I love you too," she said, thinking to herself, *And I should have said it to him that night at the secret door. I should say these words to him every single day, from now on.*

Vincent smiled at her. "Yes...but even love can be a hobble...a crippling force...if we are reckless with it. I don't want that for us."

Catherine took her time putting her thoughts and feelings into some kind of rational order. Her response to this issue required ruthless honesty and Catherine needed it to make sense to herself as much as to Vincent. She heard water splashing a little distance away, and the murmured words of Pascal and Cullen as they decided who should mop which sections of the floor. Somewhere above them, another subway train trundled by, clacking rhythmically. Catherine tapped into underworld sanity and sat a little taller in her chair.

"Vincent, I think—"

She looked at her companion and stopped speaking. She had taken too long to formulate her reply. Vincent was asleep.

"Later then," Catherine whispered. "When we're both feeling stronger. I promise."

She watched him for a little while, privately debating whether she should rescue the stars card or leave it beneath his hand. She decided that Vincent needed the paper circle rumpled over his heart more than he needed it safe on the table, where he couldn't hold it close. Catherine stood up and gently adjusted the folds of the blanket around his shoulders. This was the warm wrap Vincent always put around Catherine whenever she became cold or tired in his world. Catherine felt gratified to see that it had been brought into the Hospital Chamber for him. She also pulled a quilt up from his waist, draping the fabric over his hand and smoothing the patched binding across his chest.

He IS getting better, she thought, walking around to the table and then returning to her chair. *I thank the wide-open skyway Vincent loves for keeping him here with me.*

She sat down with the O'Donnell book. *And for keeping me here with him,* Catherine added. Opening the book to its second chapter, angling the pages toward the light of the candles, she began silently to read.

VI

28 March 1987
Saturday, Late Afternoon

Winslow walked up to the entrance of the Hospital Chamber and regarded the long red

drape with scowling distrust. What came next? He supposed he might drop an oil lamp on the floor and start a fire. He could knock a glass bottle off a shelf and ruin a lot of expensive medicine. An escaped rhinoceros might barge in, plowing past the barrier Winslow made of his own body. Or maybe a well-timed earthquake would come along and dump a hundred tons of bedrock on their heads. At least that one wouldn't be Winslow's fault.

"It'd *feel* like my fault, though," he growled to himself. But when the earth did not open up at his feet and he heard Pascal and Cullen talking quietly, Winslow pushed the re-purposed theatre curtain aside and walked in.

Carpenter and pipe master stood off to the left, wringing out a pair of mops. So engrossed were they in their work, it took them a moment to notice Winslow's arrival. Cullen finally looked up and asked, "You got Mouse to the Bathing Chamber?"

Winslow nodded. "And I also got about five kids working over Mouse's backtrail. If you're done with those," he waved at the mops, "I'd expect they could get put to good use down by the South Well."

"I'll send them over with Destiny once she gets in from the Kitchen," Cullen said.

"Sounds good. It'd be helpful if you'd put the word out to Marc and José to pull a crew together. They can go check out the Grotto."

"As good as done."

"Thanks." Winslow glanced at Pascal. "All quiet on the western front?"

"Yes." The pipe master tilted his head toward the dark end of the chamber. "Catherine was starting to look...crowded. I thought I'd give them both a little space." He propped his mop against a wall. "She hasn't called me back in."

Winslow nodded again. *Crowded*. Pascal always could sum things up with a prime word or two. The smith moved away from his two friends, following the damp track on the floor to the bend in the wall. He had crossed his arms, about to lean a shoulder against the rock and stand watch there, when he caught sight of two little shadows crooking their necks around the curtain frames to peek into Vincent's hospital space.

"What the—?" Winslow muttered. Never mind walking, talking mudballs, earthquakes, zoo exhibits, or butterfingered blacksmiths: the whole point of setting up an isolation ward teetered on the brink of collapse today.

The urchins had heard him and whipped their heads around to look, but someone else must have noticed the girl and the boy lurking outside the screens. Catherine's voice called a gentle, "Ellie, Eric. Come. Sit with us for a minute."

Brother and sister spared Winslow one brief caught-red-handed flash of the eyes and scuttled inside.

"Everyone looked busy," Eric said. Either Catherine or Ellie must have gestured for him to lower his voice. In an exaggerated whisper, the boy explained, "We didn't like to get in the way by saying we were here."

Winslow snorted and walked over to the entry screens. The kids had taken Pascal's and Winslow's seats. Vincent looked sound asleep. Catherine glanced up at Winslow from her end of the sickroom. He nodded to her and stayed put on his side of the curtain frames. He thought, *You're hosting this tea party. I can see that, plain as day. Far be it from me to toss a new monkey wrench into the works.*

Ellie and Eric got quiet for a moment, scrutinizing their teacher and erstwhile playmate with the worldly sobriety of children who knew how easily someone they loved could get snatched away from them.

"Vincent's face is sad," Ellie whispered.

“Mostly, he’s just very tired,” Catherine replied. She smiled at both of them. “Did you get to see Vincent’s letter?”

“Yeah,” Eric said, an apparent expert in public-library-style conversation. “Zach’s passing it around.”

“His writing didn’t look right,” commented Ellie.

“It’s hard for Vincent to write today,” Catherine said.

The girl nodded. Maybe she’d seen the bandaging on Vincent’s left hand and drawn her own conclusions, or maybe she was internalizing a fact made obvious by thinness and pallor and a hospital bed. Her own hands were clasped so tightly in her lap, the knuckles were turning white.

Poor kid, Winslow thought. These two siblings had gotten sucked into the city’s family welfare system in the first place because they had no one else to take care of them when their mother got sick. Ellie, at least, must have been old enough back then to remember hospital situations all too well in the here and now.

Winslow harbored a soft spot for orphans left behind by deceased single mothers.

Eric said, “I just wanted to tell Vincent that our class solved *both* of his puzzles.” His voice took on the confidential tones of one conspirator sharing inside information with another. “Then we made a *chess* puzzle for him. Michael helped *a little*, but Geoffrey and Samantha cooked up this real good idea and the rest of us tested it to make sure it’s *super* hard.”

“I’m sure you’ll get to share your puzzle soon,” Catherine said. A Rebecca-like spark turned up in her eyes, while private delight in youthful malfeasance showed through at one corner of her mouth. “You can send me a note, if you want to, and let me know how long it takes Vincent to discover how to solve your puzzle.”

Eric swung his legs and smiled. “Okay. Sure I will.” He seemed to realize that his feet were making soft bumpity-thump sounds against the chair. The boy settled his heels on the top rung. “Ellie and me, we made a different kind of puzzle, just us two.”

“Constellations aren’t a puzzle, Eric,” said his sister, in a way that suggested she’d already tried to explain this to him more than once.

“They *sort-of* are. Kipper thinks so.”

Ellie shrugged.

“Well, it was a beautiful card,” Catherine affirmed. “I saw it too.”

“Yeah?” Eric asked. “You liked it?”

Catherine nodded. “And Vincent liked it *very* much. When we gave it to him, he wouldn’t give it back.” She gazed at the two children for a moment, then she stood up and leaned over the bed. “Look,” she said to them.

Folding back the top edge of Vincent’s quilt, she showed her guests that Vincent had claimed the starry blue page as a talisman against future misfortune. *Star light, star bright,* Winslow thought, remembering how much Vincent had always loved the nighttime sky.

Winslow couldn’t quite bring himself to imagine what it must mean, deep-down, to get a fresh set of wishes in the mail—perfect, pristine prayers—after all of your own were used up. Sharing in that kind of pain hammered the whole world into new and horrifying configurations—and Vincent’s tears had just about busted Winslow wide open. Knowing that he was himself responsible for too much of the crying going on today made Winslow want to crawl under a rock and die there.

First star I see tonight...

The two kids had quit talking. Eric grinned broadly at Ellie, tickled that their artwork was such a hit. The girl simply watched the slow lift and fall of Vincent’s chest beneath her gift of

stars. She stopped crushing the life out of her fingers, though.

Catherine settled the quilt across Vincent's chest, deftly as any experienced nurse from Below could've done. She walked around the head of the hospital bed and past the table. Smiling, she held out her hands. "Now it's time to let your friend rest. Here, I'll walk with you to the entrance."

The children stood up and Winslow got out of their way. Eric waved at him, confident now that his conversation with Catherine issued ample insurance against any would-be scolds. Catherine gave the blacksmith a look that said, *Stay here with Vincent until I get back.* Winslow nodded to her a second time.

He thought, *You'll get no argument from this quarter, Catherine.*

Just outside the screens, Ellie stalled, looking over her shoulder. Eric had grabbed Catherine's left hand. The woman was still holding out her right expectantly. Ellie put her little pink hand into Catherine's and asked, real quiet, "Did they tie him up?"

Catherine's sparkle dimmed down from gentle mischief to sorrowful sympathy. Winslow guessed she might be thinking of how she and Ellie first met—and about the rope she unknotted to take the girl away from danger. Catherine could also have been thinking about the things she'd seen in the professor's laboratory. Winslow had a *lot* of trouble thinking about that laboratory.

"Yes, Ellie," said Catherine. "They tied him."

Catherine started walking and the kids went with her. "I'm glad we made the card," Ellie said in a low voice. They disappeared around the bend in the wall. "Me too!" said Eric. Then, "Hi, Destiny!"

Winslow headed off their teenage errand-runner, meeting her at the turn. He accepted the fresh tray she carried. "Are we letting in visitors now?" she asked, turning to watch the threesome make their way across the room.

"Not officially," Winslow huffed. "So just...keep out any more wild cards, won't you? I've had enough of the crazy-making for one day."

"Shift ends at suppertime," said the young woman with tenacious optimism.

Winslow grunted and started to take the tray over to Vincent's table. Destiny went back out into the front section of the chamber, where two unmanned mops should be ready for her to relocate them. Winslow thought, *Yeah, this shift will end for one set of Vincent-keepers and their support crew, but it won't be over for the whole boatload of folks worrying about him, and definitely not for the man himself.*

He looked up from the tray and his despondent thoughts, and halted at the sight of yet another interloper, who had been standing silently in the background, watching those final exchanges between Tunnelkids, caretakers, and ladyfriends. Winslow was contemplating the logistics of installing a locking gate at the Hospital Chamber entrance when he saw that the figure in the shadows was only Father.

I did good with that crutch, Winslow grumped, slamming a heavy damper on his temper. *The old man didn't make a sound walking over.*

"I'm receiving the impression that it's been an eventful afternoon," Father said.

"You have no idea," Winslow grumbled.

Father startled Winslow all over again by smiling. His nap must have restored his sense of humor. "Children are children, Winslow. And Vincent isn't under house arrest."

"Yeah. I know."

Father gestured for Winslow to go on in and set the tray on the table. They walked past the screens. Father gave his patient a cursory once-over and checked the notations on the slate. That done, he observed, "I think the chill is creeping up on us in here. Would you see to

refreshing the brazier?"

"Sure," Winslow answered. He didn't move toward the coal pail waiting at the base of the brazier stand. Father raised his eyebrows at him. Winslow took a deep breath.

"I smacked him a good one around noon. Vincent didn't want us to wake you up, and Catherine got things calmed down pretty fast. But you should check to see how bad it really is for him."

Winslow fully expected the storm cloud that skated across Father's face. He felt moderately relieved to hear no crack of thunder in Father's voice. "Where did you hit him?" Father asked.

"Here." Winslow pointed to the analogous spot below his own rib cage.

"Of course," Father sighed. He shook his head. "And other than that...?"

"We did okay."

"Then let's accept it as a triumph and let the rest go, Winslow." He reached into his doctor's bag, and that was that.

Winslow took the pail to the chamber entrance. The kids were still there, Eric regaling Cullen with cheerful tales about the six wooden-handled jump ropes Cullen had made for all the children to share. Catherine stiffened at Winslow's approach. She darted a glance toward the rock wall behind him.

"Father's up," Winslow was quick to explain.

The woman's slender shoulders relaxed and she nodded at him.

Having escaped both frying pan and cook fire, Winslow let himself relax a little. Pascal slipped away from their group just as Cullen figured out what kind of pail Winslow was carrying. Cullen said to Winslow, "Cover my post until I get back, and I'll run that down to the Kitchen for you. Destiny took off with the mops."

"That'd be good," Winslow allowed.

The woodcarver looked down at the kids. "You two, want to come help me?"

"Sure," said Eric. "Getting hot stuff?"

"That's right."

The kids gave Catherine quick parting hugs. Then the new threesome walked off together with the brazier pail, leaving the curtain to ripple and fall into well-established creases behind them.

"Eric and Ellie are happy here," Catherine said softly. "You've given them a welcoming home."

"We try," said Winslow. "Best place I know to live."

Catherine offered him a smile just for him, friendly and inviting all in the same sunbeam. "What are they bringing back from the Kitchen?" she asked.

"Probably hot coals from the big braziers in the Dining Hall. And maybe some more of the briquettes we make and burn for heat. We keep a stockpile in the storage chamber behind the Kitchen." Catherine's smile became an unspoken question so Winslow expounded, "For Vincent's brazier, back there."

"Oh." The woman tipped her head into a charming parody of Vincent's best quizzical attitude. "I've always loved the warmth of fireplaces, but usually I turn a dial to heat a room."

Winslow chuckled. "The Tunnels are a whole 'nother world, right?"

"Yes." She looked across the chamber. The blacksmith knew who she really wanted to be talking to right now. "That reminds me, though." She turned her green eyes his way. "I have some packing boxes full of...extra apartment things. I don't know how much might be useful to all of you, but if I could get some help bringing the boxes Down, you're welcome to it."

“I’ll do you one better,” Winslow countered. “I can send in a transport crew to take care of that for you.” He added quickly, “*Not* that I’m saying you can’t come Down *with* them. Just, if you’ve got stuff to do...” He shrugged. “When would you like the help?”

“Is tomorrow morning too soon?”

Winslow smiled. “Tomorrow morning is no problem.”

“Great.”

“Your apartment house, right?”

“Yes.”

“And how many boxes?”

“One medium-sized, and two smaller ones. Oh, and four paintings on canvas.”

“Do you want our folk to show up Above, or Below?”

Catherine had to think about that for a second, working out the process in her mind. “It’s easier for *me* if one or two of you came to my apartment door. But what’s easier for you?”

Their polite tap-dancing reminded Winslow of a comedic sketch he’d seen once: two men standing at an open doorway saying to each other, *After you. No, After you. No, I insist. You’re too kind, you go ahead.*

He ended the antsy-dance. “I’ll handle all those details. And you’ll have visitors tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” said Catherine. She looked at the rock wall again.

“Go on,” Winslow told her. “I can keep my own company here.”

She smiled, a little sheepish about being so easy to read, but she said only, “I’ll see you when you get in.” She walked back toward Vincent.

The thing about the crazy-strange, Winslow thought, *is that it’s mostly, simply, nuts-and-bolts love.*

Cullen eventually returned alone, conveying the news, as he handed off the steaming pail of cinders and fuel pellets, that Olivia had put the two little sneaks to work in the Kitchen. “Mortar and pestle stuff. That’ll teach them,” he said with a grin.

“I bet you anything the kids think it’s ten shades of fun,” Winslow replied.

Cullen nodded. “And I’ll just bet you’re right.”

Winslow headed over to the bending wall with the pail, meeting Pascal as he came around the corner. The smaller man carried a large flask wrapped in towels. Winslow stood out of the way to let him pass by. On the other side of the wall, Catherine walked up holding a refilled pitcher of water. Together they returned to the screened-in space.

Vincent must’ve waked up, Winslow thought, listening in as they got closer. Father and son were engaged in quiet banter at the back of the cave.

“No,” said Father’s voice, “No, I’m sure *I* made quite the model patient. As I recall, I was inordinately helpful to you and Mary.”

“You’ll notice, Father, that *I* do not throw teacups at my attendants,” Vincent responded.

“You caught that teacup. There was no harm done.”

“Nor do I resort to Homerian insults when I do not get my way.”

“Now...now, I thought we agreed. That was the morphine talking.”

“And was the morphine also singing?”

“Vincent.”

Winslow heard the two men share quiet laughter. He chanced a smile himself. Then the laughs stopped and Father changed his tone. “*Vincent*.”

A cup landed on a metal panel—the tea tray for sure—a little harder than was necessary. Winslow and Catherine glanced at each other and hurried in.

Father was in the middle of strapping the oxygen mask to Vincent's face. His patient lay locked-up in the bed, eyes closed, breath hard to come by. From a yard away, only the tensed imbalance to the right half of Vincent's body gave any visual clue to what was really happening.

It all cranks up so FAST, Winslow thought. His throat started to hurt.

Catherine put her pitcher on the table and went to kneel beside the bed. Winslow's load was more complicated than hers. He tried to be extra careful with the iron coal scoop as he transferred the contents of his pail to the brazier.

"We didn't see this last night," Catherine murmured to Father.

"No."

"What does it mean for Vincent now?"

Father sighed. "The brain remains a largely unexplored phenomenon of biology. All I can tell you is that fewer incidents are occurring today, and that different outcomes might be expected from sleeping versus waking states, especially for Vincent. And heaven only knows what influences Narcissa invoked last night."

Father put his stethoscope to work. The lines around his eyes got tighter as he concentrated on the job of hearing whatever was going on inside Vincent's chest.

Winslow settled the emptied pail and scoop into the nooks designed for them in the brazier base. The only thing he could do after that was to stand at the foot of the bed, waiting for someone to need something he could take care of. Vincent's good hand pinched the kids' starry card at the fold, the paper getting bent here and there. The pitcher Catherine had left on the table sat a tad too close to the table's edge. Winslow could foresee so many potential accidents, rips and potsherds and puddles, but he didn't dare budge from his spot by the brazier.

Me trying to get the drop on the devil's work is only tempting trouble today, he thought, bitter.

The seizure let up. Vincent stretched out beneath his quilts and started breathing like he was meant to. Then he opened his eyes and did not take kindly to Father's medical attention. He twisted his arm around to push away the stethoscope with his wrist, not letting go of the paper he held. He half-grunted, half-snarled something preverbal, coming close to a "No! Don't," and added mush-mouthed, "Good...promise...I'll eat...there was...soup." The hairy back of his hand found the right side of his forehead and came to a shaky rest there. His starful get-well card shimmied like the wings of an impossible moth just out of its cocoon.

It's like watching him get kicked in the head, Winslow thought. *A lot.*

Father leaned down. He waited until Vincent looked him in the eye, then the old man settled Vincent's fluttery hand upon a pillow. He told his son, "Vincent, you've done splendidly today. Don't be frightened. No one is going to do anything to you without your full consent. Do you understand?"

Vincent looked away from Father and found Catherine kneeling at his side. She placed her hands on his bent arm, reassuring him. He blinked up at Father and nodded.

"Very good," said Father. "Would you like water?"

Vincent licked his lips and nodded again.

A person standing behind Father went immediately to the table and got to work with the cup and pitcher. It was Pascal. Winslow didn't know when the pipe master had rejoined them.

Father took off Vincent's oxygen mask. He shut down the airflow from the tank. "I know you don't like the mask on your face," he said. "But you've needed the help it gives you."

Vincent made no reply. He was watching Pascal pour the water for him.

Pascal gave the cup to Father and moved back a step, where the small man wouldn't be in the way—or crowding anybody. Like Catherine, say. Winslow went to stand beside him.

"This one hit him hard," Winslow muttered to his friend.

"They all hit him hard," Pascal said back.

You got that right, Winslow thought.

Done with the cup, Father held up the end of his stethoscope. "I'd like to use this now."

"Yes," said his patient. Vincent had a better handle on talking this time. Thinking, too, maybe. He watched Father press the chestpiece to the front of his nightshirt.

Father listened carefully for a good half minute. As the old man finally stood up from his diagnostic stoop, Vincent asked him, "Father? How long have you been worried about my heart?"

Winslow's stomach flip-flopped inside him.

"Specifically or overall?" Father hedged.

Vincent simply waited for the real answer.

Father folded up the stethoscope and returned it to his bag. "You developed a serious cardiac arrhythmia yesterday morning," he said quietly. "We've been monitoring the situation closely. Your heartbeat is disordered and has neither worsened nor improved today. Does that answer your question?"

Vincent shut his eyes for a second, then looked to Catherine. Winslow couldn't see the woman's face from where he stood, but her fingers dug into Vincent's shirtsleeve. "Yes, Father," Vincent said.

The blacksmith started having his own problem with getting air into his lungs. Childhood biology lessons had given Winslow the general notion that brain problems and heart problems could be equally deadly. That said, memories from early adulthood drove his fear of heart failure to the pinnacle of panic.

He remembered how he had punched a rock wall with his fist, protesting: "It's too soon, Mama. This ain't *right*!"

Julia, lying on a cot in this very chamber after her heart attack, had *told* her son not to get bent out of shape. She'd ended up inheriting her mother's heart, was all. Just like *her* mama had her gramma's heart. Back went their legacy into olden days. One more part of life Above that weaseled on Down with her when she came Below. And did Winslow know if anyone had the sense to pull those bread rolls out of the oven before they burned?

Still, no matter how nicely she'd settled her demise in her own mind, the cook's son was not fooled. He stayed beside her for the whole hellacious show. He saw everything. She was forty-three years old. It *wasn't* right. After they moved her back into her chamber and started a nursing roster for her, it took Mama Julia's stifled heart two-and-a-half agonizing days to die.

Molly's rape, Vincent's madness, Julia's passing. It was a bad time to be Below. Later that year they lost Molly too, three days after Tropical Storm Doria flooded the Tunnels. Molly's death was the only suicide in the history of the community—and *that* finally drove Winslow Topside.

He'd come home in time to catch the Reaper slinking up behind Vernon. Old Vernon's interminable twilight had scared the hell out of Winslow: *no one* deserved to go out that way. And now Vincent—no, *not* Vincent. Not him too. Not for good. No goddamn way.

Winslow had had enough.

"I can't *take* this," he said, choking on the words. "I just...I can't *do* this anymore. I am *not* doing this again."

They all looked at him in the way pedestrians Above scanned the city skyline during a hurricane watch. And he had nothing safe to throw or smash. Nothing he could do to help, nowhere he could go.

"Winslow."

Can't fix the dreams, or the facts, or the future, Winslow thought, feeling caught on one side of a rockslide while his friend lay caught on the other, out of reach and out of time. *Sure as tsunamis, I can't change the past, either. I am well and truly stuck. I've got no place to go but Up Top, and there's nothing for me up there. Nothing. Oh my God.*

"Winslow."

"*What*!"

Then he understood that it was Vincent talking to him.

Winslow hauled his mind kicking and screaming from its infuriated precursors to grief. Vincent held something out to him in his very unsteady claws. Winslow had to unclench his own fingers to take the gift. His scarlet-tinged vision seemed to clear as he looked down at the blue paper circle and the pastel stars decorating it.

"Wait," Winslow got out. "Wait. No. This is—"

"For you," said Vincent.

Winslow opened his mouth to say—he didn't know what. When his eyes met Vincent's he discovered that nothing passed muster. Not, *This is yours, man.* And not, *The kids put this together for YOU.* And not even, *I can't accept this from you. Not your stars, Vincent. Your wishing lights.*

And the thing was already in his hand.

Winslow slumped onto a chair and just sat there, counting crayoned stars, and losing count, and finding his own self waiting for him somewhere beyond the bluey space. This get-well token said it all, everything Vincent was too sick to speak aloud, and everything Winslow was too tired of holding in. Dunderheadedness forgiven. Anger accounted for. Dashed hopes reawakened. Friendship reinforced. Mourning rituals postponed.

How many people moved this piece of paper Down from some Uppercity store to get it here to me? Winslow wondered. It was commercial construction paper. The hands of at least one Helper were involved, along with those of a supplies transport crew. Someone had then put the paper into a Nursery storage cupboard, Mary or one of the kids, helping out. Winslow could picture all the children rummaging through the cupboard, passing paper and crayons around. Eric and Ellie Peterson picking out this particular page, cutting it into a circle, and coloring it. The kids bundling their messages together and tying it up with a bow. Ezra handing over the rainbow stack. Winslow relaying half the messages to Catherine, the good woman delivering the Petersons' card to Vincent, and Vincent making this noble gesture now because Winslow needed a sustaining prayer of his own to stay pulled-together in here.

The blacksmith thought, *I get it, V. Seriously. Thanks.*

His friends had let him be while he traversed the light years between enclaves of five-pointed stars. Father was saying something about sending word to Olivia to hold up further shipments from the Kitchen. He wanted Vincent to sleep for a lengthy block of time. Pascal was moving dishes of food that wouldn't spoil in the interim from the new tray to the tabletop. Father asked Vincent, "Do you think you can finish your medicine?"

"Yes," Vincent answered.

Winslow watched Father serve Vincent the tea. *This is also all wrong,* he thought. He remembered Vincent mumbling to friends long departed, and he offered up: *Lord, don't let him rehash 1971. I don't much care how you do it. Or if that's even on Vincent's mind. It might be. He's the one who brought up Tom Robinson's curtain fall, and he's the one conversing with all our ghosts in here. Just don't let him take Molly's way out.*

He didn't try to touch on the fact that Vincent must also not die like Mama Julia had. If

there *was* a God, he'd already know how Winslow felt about that.

Catherine now sat on the chair next to Winslow, holding tight to Vincent's good hand. Father stepped past her to set the empty teacup on the table. "Winslow?" he asked, cautious but respectful. "Could you help me move the pillows so Vincent can lie down?"

Winslow tucked the slightly crumpled card into his inside vest pocket. "Yeah. I can do that."

The two of them mined the pillow mountain down to a gently sloping hillside. Winslow paid close attention to how he used his hands to grasp Vincent's arm, lifting him forward in the bed to get at an overlooked towel wadded between two pillows. Settling the man onto his side, Winslow caught Vincent's grateful eye and nodded to him. Father smooshed spare pillows into a bin beneath the table.

Winslow sat down again. Vincent turned his face toward his Catherine. Vincent asked her, "Will you go before I wake?"

Catherine shook her head. "No. I'm staying right here. When it's time to go back, I'll say goodbye before I leave...and you'll be awake for that."

Vincent descried her face, being leisurely about it, without smile or frown, just receiving all that Catherine's presence gave to him. He whispered, "You still look like an angel to me."

Father and Pascal were being very, very quiet with the plates and cups.

Catherine accepted Vincent's compliment with a refined smile befitting a lady from New York's upper echelons. "Shall I read?" was all she said.

Vincent requested O'Donnell.

Pascal put the book into Catherine's free hand and she started where she'd left off reading aloud at Chapter Two. Father took a seat on the opposite side of the bed while Pascal took the tea tray out. Vincent made it through most of the fourth chapter before he fell asleep. Catherine finished that section. She closed the book.

"It's a good story so far," Winslow said, keeping his voice quiet. "Brave lady, Mùirne, to take in a war orphan from the other side, raise him up like that to believe in her enemy's religion. So he can claim his own birthright."

"Do you know how the story ends?" Catherine asked.

"Nope. Never read it."

She held out the book to him.

"Is it Vincent's book?" Winslow asked.

"He won't mind if you finish the story on your own."

"I know. I just want to make sure it gets back to the right person when I'm through." He took the book from her. "Thanks."

Her smile was not the one she reserved for Vincent, or for the two Peterson kids. All the same, it contained enough of that sunshiny warmth to make Winslow think she was starting to see him as a friend. He looked down at the black book in his hands, feeling better about things. Not Okay—he assumed *that* would be some while longer in coming—but *better*. Vincent and Catherine hadn't given up. Winslow wouldn't either.

"You and Pascal are free to go, if you'd like to," Father said to him then. "And if you would, please put the nursing roster into effect. I think Vincent's condition is becoming stable enough for that."

This news was grand, sweet music to Winslow's ears. "That's great," he said. He stood up. "Um, sorry about earlier, Father."

"Winslow, you've done more good than you know. Thank you."

The blacksmith pitched a limpid half-smile in Father's general direction and made good

his escape. *Got to leave the broken hearts and scrambled brains for those who can bear up under the weight of it all,* he told himself. His pocketful of stars felt like a mystic life preserver keeping his head above water as he crossed the cavern. He decided he had just the right amount of gumption left to do as Father asked—just enough to keep him from sinking beneath the storm-swirled waves of emotions for which Winslow felt not at all prepared.

He found Pascal at the chamber entrance, chatting with Cullen. They were discussing the finer points of designing light-weight folding seats for the communication outposts. Elderly folks like Old Sam would appreciate sitting down on something that wasn't cold rock or iron whenever they were on duty.

Winslow thought, *Pascal will be just as glad to get back to the Pipe Chamber as I will be to get back to my Forge.* He mentally calculated the progress Kanin should making down in the Inner Maze. He thought about a new load of coffee cans in his workshop waiting to be cut apart and pounded flat. Next, he remembered the two or three hand tools that people had brought in for him to repair. And before he got to any of that, he should go and see for himself what was happening out at the Mossy Grotto. Where there was life, there was always hope—not to mention plenty of work to do.

Winslow tightened his hold on Vincent's book. He came up to the two men standing at the drape. "Hey, Pascal," he said.

Chapter Seventeen: Treasures

I

29 March 1987
Sunday, Very Early Morning

Two hours past midnight. All's Well.

The pipecode had a muted tone, denoting transmission along The Anaconda rather than direct contact with the Hospital Chamber pipe. Vincent also heard the whisper of fabric on skin, and skin on skin, and he sensed movement nearby. He opened one eye, cautiously, lest the ambient light prove too bright for him.

He needn't have worried. His graveyard shift attendants had left only two candles lit, just enough light to converse silently in sign. He turned his head on his pillow, to engage depth perception through the use of two eyes instead of just the one. The dialogue became easier to follow.

«I love the big space, a whole wall to work with!» Laura was saying.

Rebecca smiled at her younger friend. «Not like a little, bitty sheet of paper.»

«And not *flat* like paper. I must work slower than Elizabeth to keep my paint where I want it to stay.» Laura shrugged. «But I'll get used to it.»

Rebecca looked directly at Vincent and asked, «How long did it take *you* to discover the best technique for painting on cement?» Her voice spoke the question while her hands shaped their Tunnels dialect of Signed English. Vincent was sure he'd made no sound, but Rebecca had known at once that he was awake.

She misses nothing, Vincent thought. *And never has.* His own voice creaked out, "I needed a day and a morning to become acquainted with the tunnel wall."

Rebecca translated this for Laura. Vincent rested prone in his hospital bed, arms encircling a puffy pillow. His mouth wouldn't be very visible, speaking as he did over the soft lumps of fabric and felted stuffing. Not that he believed his lips were particularly readable just then, mumbling the way he had. He would make a better effort next time. Laura simply smiled at both of them. Vincent changed position, to get his face clear of the cushioning obstruction.

His gaze lit upon his left hand as he moved—and he found himself watching, enthralled, as his *hand* moved, first sliding off the pillow, then flattening itself on the sheet beneath him. Vincent stopped. Wonderingly, he turned that hand, closed his fingers into a fist, spread them wide, held his bandaged left hand trembling before his eyes.

He thought, not with Hamlet's bitter irony, but in complete, amazed relief, *What a piece of work is man...in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god!*

Vincent looked down at the blankets covering him and slowly straightened his knee. The shape of his left leg changed, unbending, moving as he willed it to. Vincent closed his eyes and sighed.

Rebecca touched his shoulder. Vincent felt the painless warmth of her touch, and her quiet joy. He opened his eyes to look at her.

"I think you've been able to move for at least an hour now," she said, keeping her face turned half-way toward Laura. "That's when I first saw the improvement." Her smile seemed to add a little color to her wintry gray eyes. "You must have wanted to tame your pillow."

Vincent glanced at the squashed shape of the pillow in question and chuckled. “Yes.”

He twisted his body and sat up, testing his strength as he did so. He thought, *I won’t be winning any footraces for a while, but at least I can carry the weight of my own flesh.*

Rebecca placed more pillows behind his back for him to lean against. Laura straightened out Vincent’s blankets and helped him pull rumpled edgings up from his waist. «I’ve never had the chance to tuck you in before,» she said.

«There’s a first time for all things,» Vincent answered. Like Rebecca, he voiced the words and signed them at the same time. It was the way he was used to speaking to Laura. His hands shook as he did this, but Laura understood the gist of his attempt.

He could feel that Laura had been nervous as she watched over his sleep, and that she remained worried about him. But she smiled at him now, and Vincent was able to smile back.

This is good, he thought. *All of this is good.*

Laura sat down in the chair Catherine had occupied earlier tonight. Vincent turned his thoughts skyward for a moment and sensed the peace of slumber through his connection to Catherine. She had remained Below until nearly ten o’clock, when Vincent had awakened briefly to take food and medicine and a bevy of vitamin and mineral tablets. Catherine stayed that late just so she could say good night. Before she went home, Vincent had encouraged her to take time for herself on Sunday. She needed to set her apartment to rights before her workdays devoured all of her spare time.

“Not *all* my time,” she assured him. “This week, I will visit you whenever I can.”

Her words implied an expansion of their friendship, and of their love. Her words also confirmed the new-found freedom Catherine felt to come Below at will. Another priceless moment. One more gift to be thankful for. *Sleep well,* Vincent thought to her now. *Dream restful dreams.*

He looked back to Laura. «You’re enjoying your time with Elizabeth?» he asked her.

«*Very* much.»

«Father is eager to see your work.»

Laura blushed. «I hope he’s not expecting something I can’t deliver.»

Vincent shook his head. «We expect only that you stay true to the vision behind your art. There is no more than that.»

Laura wavered between bashfulness and pleasure. Impulsively, she reached for him. One of her hands enfolded one of his. Strong young fingers met weakened claws. Laura told him, «I missed you.» She had to abbreviate the second word, using only her right hand to speak.

«And I missed you,» Vincent said, also adopting the abbreviation.

Rebecca had filled a cup with water. She returned to her own seat. «Thirsty?» she asked, anticipating Vincent’s need.

«Yes. Thank you.»

He opened his free hand for the cup. Rebecca gave it to him, and supported his wrist as he drank the water. This, too, was wonderful: his returning ability, the miracle of clean water, the gifts of friendship.

Rebecca set the emptied cup on the table. «How are you feeling?»

«Hopeful,» Vincent replied.

«Father wanted me to ask if you’re in any pain.»

Vincent thought about this, and about the things he was—and was not—feeling. «Not much pain,» he said, continuing to use single-handed signs. «The headache remains, but it’s much easier to live with now. I am...stiff.» He flexed the fingers of his left hand against Laura’s palm. Movement, but no sensation yet. Other parts of him also remained numb. Vincent

wondered what he would do if feeling and coordination did not return.

What can I do but adapt to it? he thought. It was a difficult idea. He didn't like the possibility. Vincent decided to talk to Father about that some other time.

«Do you feel able to take some tea?» Rebecca asked next.

Vincent tilted his head at her. «What kind of tea?»

«The one Dr. Wong prescribed for you.»

Vincent sighed. He appealed to Laura. «Do you see how it is? I'm awake for five minutes and she pounces upon me.»

Laura imitated his head-tilt, adding a smug little smile to her mimicry. She released his hand so she could say emphatically, «Don't look at me like that. I'm on *her* side.»

«A conspiracy!» Vincent accused. Laura's heart sparked alight with silent laughter. Pleased with Laura's wit (and with his own), Vincent said to Rebecca, «Be that as it may, I will drink my medicine.»

Rebecca nodded. «I'll go let the Kitchen know.» She stood up and left his bedside. The candle flames flickered in the draft of her passage. Vincent saw a drop of wax splatter onto the tabletop beside *The Little Prince*. One of Rebecca's ubiquitous hair ribbons marked the half-way point of the story.

«We were reading that earlier,» Laura commented. «I've always loved that one.»

«Me too.» Thoughtful, Vincent added, «It was the first novel I read, when I began to read books by myself.»

Laura gazed up at the space above his head, considering. «I think the first long story I read alone was *Heidi*.» She smiled. «I wanted a pet goat for such a long time after that.»

«I remember,» said Vincent. He paused. «Do you still?»

Laura looked at him with tolerant condescension. «I forgive you for that remark only because you are not well.»

Vincent smiled again. The rhythm of his heart might be faltering, but his inmost self felt bright. His soul might be struggling, but he felt loved. He thought, *To be alive is to be a perpetual navigator of paradox.* To Laura he said, «I'm always grateful for forgiveness.»

Rebecca came back in suddenly, wearing an expression of utmost seriousness on her face. She stopped just inside the privacy screens. «Vincent? Do you feel up to receiving some visitors?»

«Visitors?» Vincent repeated.

«If you don't, I intend to send the little padfoots off to bed. All fifteen of them.»

«I have fifteen visitors. At two in the morning.»

Rebecca pursed her lips and nodded. The woman was enjoying this situation immensely.

Which means that those who have come to see me tonight are undoubtedly children, Vincent thought.

«I'll see them, Rebecca,» he said.

She nodded and walked back toward the chamber entrance. She wasn't gone long. Vincent heard Rebecca take a minute to stand out in the corridor with the Tunnelkids, establishing a few rules of etiquette, and then she shepherded the flock of incorrigible young people through the room and into Vincent's hospital space. His many guests filed in, stationing themselves around his bed without speaking, all of them looking him over as though to assure themselves that every constituent part of their friend was present and accounted for, nothing lost, nothing missing.

Vincent glanced at Rebecca, then at Laura. As ever, Rebecca understood. She nodded. «I'll interpret,» she signed.

Vincent returned her nod and rested his hands on his topmost blanket. The children maintained their solemn silence. As often happened with a large group of people, their feelings collected together in the small space, flowing over him like intermeshing strands of wind-sculpted clouds. Vincent had long ago learned to accept the moods of a collective cloudiness rather than try to mediate each person's presence in his mind. The end result lessened the strain upon him. Vincent smiled at the children. Zach and 'Randa audibly released held breaths. The others crowded closer.

"I've missed seeing my friends," Vincent said.

"How are you, Vincent?" Geoffrey asked with well-mannered, and self-conscious, decorum.

"I just woke up. I'm feeling better. Why are all of you awake?" At this hour of the night, it was rare to see so many children up at the same time.

Geoffrey directed a Meaningful Look at Zach and the older boy answered for all of them. "We wanted to show you something," Zach said.

Vincent asked, "What is it?"

"Well, we had science class without you again today. We finished learning a big list. I think we've finally got it right now." Zach glanced around at everyone. Vincent realized that every member of his science group had come to the Hospital Chamber. "Okay," said Zach.

Holly stood up tall. "*Archaeognatha*," she said. "Jumping bristletails."

Samantha spoke up next. "*Blattodea*. Cockroaches."

Nicholas gave them, "*Coleoptera*. Beetles." He nudged Dustin.

"I *know*," Dustin whispered. Facing Vincent the boy recited, "*Dermaptera*. Earwigs."

The alphabetical listing continued, each child naming insect orders in turn, each of them taking more than one turn to speak. Vincent smiled inwardly as he listened, thinking, *Teach them to trust themselves, and children can accomplish anything at all.*

Tunnelkids. The children of the Undercity. *His* children.

They had stopped speaking. They were waiting for his response.

"You are excellent scholars and teachers," Vincent said. "You've taught this to yourselves, *for* yourselves. What can you tell me about each order?"

Vincent knew this would be a conversationally dangerous question, and so he was not disappointed by their answers. His students freely dispensed their knowledge. Their voices chattered facts at him. *Coleoptera*, beetles, had the hardest exoskeletons. *Isoptera*, termites, munched on wood and made old houses fall over. *Siphonaptera*, awful fleas, were *paralytic*, drinking up the blood of a host animal and making itchy bites. Fleas were way worse than mosquitoes (*Diptera*) because it was hard to *see* the ugly suckers to smash them, and if you did catch them in the act, fleas could jump out of the way really fast.

"I think you meant to say, 'parasitic,'" Vincent murmured.

"Yeah," said Eric. "'Cause they're *parapsychs*."

Ellie rolled her eyes. Vincent only nodded. The boy had the right idea, anyway.

"You've studied very hard," Vincent said to his class. "It took me a long time to learn to say all these names correctly. How did you go about remembering?" He felt truly curious to know. If their technique was something he could replicate, the children would enjoy using it again for other lessons in the future, because *they* had first put this tactic to work for their own benefit.

Geoffrey and Zach glanced at each other a second time. They were eager to share what they knew, but it was a communal project. Everyone wanted to be involved in the explanation.

Zach said, "We started out by making the classification into something we could sing."

"Show me," Vincent said, intrigued.

"Ready?" Geoffrey asked everyone.

The children all nodded. Geoffrey turned to Samantha and the girl sang out in a strong, clear voice, "*Thysanura*!" The others quickly joined in, singing in unison. "*Collembola*! *Eph-em-er-op-tera*!"

Insecta Classis, to the tune of Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus."

No words could form adequate praise for their achievement. Vincent glanced at Rebecca and Laura, who looked just as surprised as he felt, and Vincent grinned, and he began to laugh. He held his stomach until his mirth released him from his somewhat uncomfortable laughter and he sat smiling through the rest of the musical arrangement. Luke and Simon came to the alcove from the chamber entrance and stood watching the performance from the space between the screens. The final note of childsong rang through the Hospital Chamber. The music's ending infused the chamber with renewed quietness.

Vincent held out his arms to his amateur musicians and entomologists. "*Bravi*!" he said.

The children poured into his embrace. Six of the closest little ones leaned against him so he could set his arms around their shoulders. The others climbed onto the bed, flocked to stand on either side of him, and scrambled congenially over one another, jockeying for the best positions.

Samantha said, "Zach did just as good as Father, leading *every* practice! We had to stay *so* quiet to keep it a surprise. Father should let Zach direct the children's choir sometime!"

And Lewis was saying, "Look-look! I got a loose tooth!"

And Colton said, "Yeah, huh? Vincent, see? I *lost* my tooth." He pointed inside his mouth. " 'Ight 'ere."

And Tabitha said, "When are you going to be better?"

And 'Randa said, "Can you come back to the Hub by Concert Day? Me and Colton, we're going to play a duet!"

Dustin bounced at the end of the bed, announcing, "And, and, and, *before* the concert, we're having a marbles tournament. Can you play?"

"But *first* we want you to come play hide and seek with *us*," Nicholas said, pointing to himself and to Kipper beside him. "We found this great new spot!"

"*Not* in the Maze," Kipper put in as fast as he could.

Lana asked, "When we're done with the tree in Brooklyn story? What are we going to read next?"

"*Children*." Rebecca called them all to order with a voice that brought to mind the scouring winds of Antarctica.

Fifteen heads performed a duck and cover maneuver.

In the sudden quiet, Vincent sighed. "My friends, I cannot answer your questions, all at once. But I want you to know that I'm very proud of everyone. I'm happy you came to see me. Now, one at a time, I'd like to hear what each of you has to say."

He thought it was Geoffrey who started saying something to him, but Father's voice overrode the boy's words, sounding strangely hollow, as though Father were speaking at the other end of a long pipe. "That's right. He's coming back to us now."

Back? Vincent thought. *Who went missing? Where did he go?* He was still in his bed. He was alone in his bed. A yard beyond the foot rail, the children stood massed around the brazier stand, silent. Vincent saw that Tabitha was sucking her thumb.

"No, Vincent. Don't try to move yet." To someone standing behind the table, Father asked: "The time, Rebecca?" His voice was just starting to sound ordinary to Vincent's ears.

“Just shy of nine minutes,” Rebecca calmly answered.

Vincent could feel that Father was debating some course of action inside his own mind. Vincent felt very thirsty. The beautiful cloud of children pulsed with fright and intense interest. Their emotions came at him hot and sharp, like a swarm of tiny knife points grazing his awareness. Which kind of seizure had they seen? *Nine* minutes?

Ellie was one of the tallest in the group. Vincent focused on the girl’s face. He thought through what he wanted to say, so he could speak the words in clear, clean syllables.

“I liked your song,” he said slowly. “You have...every reason to be...proud of yourselves. Thank you...for sharing your work with me.”

“Sure, Vincent,” Zach replied for all of them. His voice sounded gentle, his manner deliberately nonchalant. “Anytime.”

After a moment, Father said in his brisk way, “All right. You’ve seen that Vincent is awake again. He needs to rest now. Off you go.”

The children filed out more slowly than they’d filed in. At the last moment Tabitha broke away from the others. She clambered onto the edge of Vincent’s bed and flung her arms around his neck. She was the most frightened of all the children.

This little one has lost far too many people, in her short life, Vincent thought, sorry that his illness had scared her, yet deeply honored by her trust and by her affection for him. He gave her a brief hug. “I’ll see you again soon, Tabitha,” he whispered to the girl.

“Okay,” Tabitha said. She let him go and allowed Father to help her climb down off the mattress. She followed her friends out of the sickroom.

Vincent looked up at Father.

“An absence seizure,” Father said. “I had to explain what was happening. I thought they might feel more reassured if they saw your recovery for themselves.”

Vincent nodded. His head felt like someone had stuffed it full of cotton batting, and the ache behind his eyes had increased again. “I need water,” he said. He felt dizzy. He closed his eyes, heard someone pour liquid into a cup for him.

He became aware that he was no longer sitting up. A dry wash of compressed air bathed his mouth and nose. He could *hear* his own heartbeat. It sounded like a drummer just learning to keep time. His languid body tingled unpleasantly in many places.

Vincent lay looking into Laura’s dark brown eyes. By candlelight, her smooth, narrow face had the appearance of an alabaster sculpture. Vincent moved his hands to sign to her, but his arms were too weak to lift his words up above the fabric of his blankets.

Laura shook her head. «Don’t try to talk. Rest.» She put her hands on his wrist to reinforce her command. So Vincent bent the second and third fingers of his right hand inward toward his palm. This was the full extent of movement he felt able to perform for her at that moment. Laura saw the gesture and smiled at him with tears in her eyes. She was unhappy, yet she endured her unhappiness with great courage. Her own right hand repeated the sign Vincent had made.

«Yes. And I love you.»

“Is he awake?” Father asked from Vincent’s left side. Laura saw him ask the question. She nodded.

Vincent turned his head to look. Father set a half-empty teacup on the table. “It never rains but it pours,” he muttered. “Rebecca?”

Rebecca put the stethoscope into Father’s outstretched hand. He held it up where Vincent could see it, questioning his son with his grim silence.

Vincent whispered, “It’s all right. Not afraid of that now.” The oxygen mask muffled his

speech, but Father understood.

"Water next," Vincent added as Father leaned over him.

"Yes."

Their repeated acquiescence to each request for water kept Vincent from the edge of panic every time his throat felt dry. His inability to procure water for himself had become a dreary terror in the back of his mind. His fear worsened each time he woke up like this. He thought of Ellie and Tabitha. He thought of Catherine, and said to himself, *Where my own wounded trust falters, I can remember their trust in me, and draw strength from their example.*

Such memories had been sustaining him all through this long day and night.

"I think there is actually improvement," Father said. He sounded surprised and tentatively pleased. Vincent looked at him. His sense of Father shone with new hope. "I'm hearing a transition from sustained abnormality toward the occasional premature heartbeat."

"To my everlasting sorrow, Father, I've read very little in the field of cardiology," said Vincent.

Father regarded him stonily, then took the earpieces from his ears and removed the mask from Vincent's face. "Tell me if you feel any shortness of breath," he directed his son, "but I'm of the opinion that you can do without this now."

Rebecca's hand turned the knob on the oxygen tank. She delivered a cup of water to Laura. Father hung the strap of the mask over the head rail of Vincent's bed. "What I wouldn't give for an ECG device," Father sighed. He turned to Vincent.

"By auscultation, I can listen for skipped beats, which are most likely *irregular* beats of your heart that are too quiet to hear, because the muscle isn't contracting in a way that produces audible sounds. Your heart is having difficulty pumping blood effectively. Conflicting electrical signals have altered both the pacing of one heartbeat after the other, and the coordination of movement within the heart that produces a complete beat. As of right now, the pacing is more regular than it was yesterday, and the 'skips' between ordinary beats are fewer. Your heart rate itself is also much closer to normal. These are positive signs."

"Does this mean I can return to my chamber soon?" Vincent asked.

Father's expression shifted into a sympathetic smile. He touched Vincent's face. "Soon," he agreed. But Vincent knew "soon" was not "yes."

His attendants helped him sit up. Even the gentle light of the two candles felt bright to him and Vincent held a hand to his forehead as he moved, shading his eyes. Laura gave him the water to drink.

"When you're ready, there's the cup of medicine, too," Rebecca said from her place beside the table.

Vincent drank his water *slowly*, delaying the inevitable for a few minutes longer. He asked Father, "This time, how long...was I...?"

"This seizure lasted about two minutes," Father informed him. "Then you slept for perhaps twenty minutes afterward."

"I could do with some more sleep," said Vincent. His tingling sensation was almost itchy. He wouldn't mind escaping that for a while.

Father only nodded.

After the cup of water, Vincent was a cooperative patient who drank his tea, and then he ate his chicken soup (made from the last of William's fresh stock) as well as a slice of toast spread sparingly with mixed berry jam. Laura read out the middle chapters of *The Little Prince* in Signed English and Vincent felt safe in the care of his father and his friends until he fell asleep again.

Father later gave his patient two further pieces of his complete prognosis. The tingling Vincent felt indicated a pins-and-needles return of sensory nerve function, and, insofar as Father could tell, the two-minute episode after the children's visit had been Vincent's final seizure of any type. "The storm is passing," Father told him. Their long siege had ended.

II

29 March 1987
Sunday Morning

Catherine inhaled steam from her cup, falling in love all over again with her personal blend of Mocha Java. She was enjoying the luxury, on this quiet Sunday morning, of drinking medium roasted, freshly ground, French pressed, ritualistically prepared, honest-to-God *coffee*. Truth be told, Catherine had become a more devoted connoisseur of coffees than of wines, her kitchen counter occupied by three different coffee creators: the French press (for slow-down-and-smell-the-roses moments like this one), the automated drip-brew coffeemaker (for weekday mornings on the run), and the electric grinder (to provide her with the best chance for a perfect cup at home). She kept an entire kitchen cupboard reserved for coffee beans, each variety sealed in its own glass container and organized on its shelf with the label facing out. Her box of gourmet coffees had been the first moving carton she unpacked in the kitchen.

Everyone needs a hobby, Catherine thought to her steaming drink as she took it with her to the dining table.

In this case, though, coffees seemed more than a hobby. Catherine felt that coffee-making constituted her one embarkation into the culinary arts. Working for the DA had limited Catherine's time and energy for composing moments like this one for herself. It made her all the more appreciative of a decent cup of joe, let alone a priceless feast for the senses. On some days, she believed she could *kill* for the kind of coffee she now held cupped between her hands.

She sat at her table, gazing out her terrace doors at the spring greenery beneath her windows, sipping heaven from a china cup. She remembered the list of comforts that she had made with Jenny and Nancy over the phone. She thought, *That's another thing I should change about my life. After I go back to work tomorrow, I shouldn't let busyness keep me away from the things—and the people—I really enjoy.*

Catherine heard a knock at her front door. She glanced at her watch. Two minutes past nine. She got up to greet the expected visitors.

She decided right away that her three underworld guests looked very out of place in the carpeted, straight-angled hallway outside her door. Globed light from incandescent bulbs brought reinvented clothing into sharp relief against the smooth ecru surfaces of the walls. Kipper and Lana resembled stock characters from a Charles Dickens novel. The dark-haired boy and the tow-headed girl both smiled at Catherine when she opened the door. Standing behind the two children, Jamie only looked like a modern-day street kid getting her first starry-eyed exposure to fairyland.

"Hi, Catherine," Jamie said.

"Good morning. Please, come in."

Catherine ushered the Tunnelkids into her apartment. They stood looking at her living room, curious and impressed. Catherine had unboxed perhaps eighty percent of her belongings—

minus the now-absent couches and her intended donations. The room was spacious, daylit, and immaculately clean. She hoped to complete the rest of the unpacking from her rescinded move later today.

"Wow," said Lana. "You have a pretty home."

"Thank you," Catherine said, smiling in spite of a renewed sense of awkwardness in their presence. She thought of Jenny again, and of the night a frustrated ADA told Jen Aronson that Cathy Chandler felt no guilt over her good fortune in life. Technically speaking, she did not feel guilty at this *present* stage of her life. But as she caught sight of the wonder in the children's eyes, Catherine became poignantly aware that her world would call these kids "homeless," and "delinquent," and that her three young friends had probably never set foot in a room like this one before.

No, Catherine wasn't feeling *guilty*, but she *did* want Jamie and Kipper and Lana to feel at home, to be themselves in her company—and she also did not want them to judge her for the differences between their lifestyles. She suddenly wished she could be sure that they would not secretly resent her for bringing them to her apartment so they could cart away her hand-me-downs.

"I...was just having some coffee. Can I get something for any of you?" she said.

"Like what?" Kipper asked, turning from his keen inspection of a bookshelf to look expectantly at his hostess.

Offer what a child might find appealing, Catherine reminded herself. She answered the boy with: "Well, I have milk. Or I could make some hot chocolate—"

"Do you have marshmallows?" Kipper asked hopefully.

"*Kipper*," Lana reprimanded him in a soft voice, poking the toe of her soft-soled boot at his ankle.

"I *like* cocoa with marshmallows."

Catherine interceded on the boy's behalf. "That's good, because I think I have plenty of marshmallows today. Lana, would you like some cocoa, too?"

Lana considered the question, then nodded.

Catherine looked to Jamie.

"I like coffee," Jamie said.

"What kind?" asked Catherine.

Jamie hesitated. "There's...different kinds?"

Catherine nodded. "*Oh*, yes. And you've come to the right place for a crash course. Two cocoas—*with* marshmallows—and one to-be-determined coffee, on the house," Catherine told them. "Come, sit over here."

She led them to her dining table, apologizing automatically, because she felt self-conscious. She explained that she had given away her central living room seating without acquiring replacements. The kids sat at her glass-topped dining table, looking like they weren't sure what to do with their hands. Catherine started to go into the kitchen and noticed that the kids were also starting to crane their necks, so they could see what she was going to do in there.

This is silly, she thought. *These are my friends, and they don't expect me to wait on them like dignitaries from some foreign nation.* She smiled at her guests (and at her social fumbling) from the kitchen doorway. "Or, if you'd like, you can come help me in here," Catherine offered.

They needed no second invitation.

Lana and Kipper took turns stirring milk in the saucepan, adding spoonfuls of cocoa powder and sugar until they both agreed the concoction tasted right. Catherine poured the hot chocolate into mugs for them and gave them free reign with her bag of miniature marshmallows.

The two children carefully counted out allotments of marshmallows that matched their span of years: nine for Lana and ten for Kipper. “And one to grow on!” Jamie teased, popping a sweet gelatin puff into each of their mouths, which made her younger friends giggle.

All three Tunnelkids were fascinated by the electric coffee grinder. “Loud!” Kipper called over the rattling, crunching sounds.

“Some models are louder,” Catherine said. Jamie had selected Costa Rican Monte Crisol by smell, and Catherine enjoyed both the aroma of the ground beans and the girl’s interest in the brewing process. Jamie eagerly obeyed Catherine’s instructions for handling the freshly washed French press.

By the time the four of them sat down again at the dining table, their hesitancy with one another had departed. Catherine’s friends asked about her collection of glass eggs, and exclaimed over her view of Central Park. Lana paged through a book of poetry lying open on the table—Wordsworth—and found a poem that sounded good to her mental ear. She read “Such Age, How Beautiful!” aloud, confidently sounding out the hard words and lingering over imagery in accordance with the punctuation.

> *“...Thee with the welcome Snowdrop I compare;*
> *That child of winter, prompting thoughts that climb*
> *From desolation toward the genial prime;*
> *Or with the Moon conquering earth’s misty air,*
> *And filling more and more with crystal light*
> *As pensive Evening deepens into night.”*

The child finished the poem and pushed the book back to where she had found it on the table.

“I like that part about the moon,” Jamie said. “It’s so sad, but so peaceful. *Conquering earth’s misty air, / And filling more and more with crystal light...”*

“Yes,” Catherine murmured. “It’s beautiful.”

“What’s a snowdrop?” Kipper asked.

Catherine answered, “It’s a white flower that blooms before spring, or in very early spring. Sometimes you can see snowdrops while there’s still snow on the ground.”

Beside the Wordsworth collection sat a floriography that her mother had given to her when Catherine was a little girl. A detailed illustration of the corresponding plant accompanied each entry, and Catherine had been reading about snowdrops and other blossoms earlier that morning. Snowdrops symbolized hope and consolation.

“Isn’t snow kind of cold for a flower?” said Kipper.

“That’s why a snowdrop is a ‘child of winter,’” Lana said. “It knows deep inside that after winter comes the spring. The snow won’t last forever. The snowdrop hopes for warm days ahead. Like the Lady, in her winter, entering her new season.”

“Whatever season it is that comes after death,” Jamie mused. “Like the moon getting brighter as the night gets darker.”

Kipper nodded, slowly. “Yeah. Okay, that makes sense now.”

Enchanted by their fearless engagement with the literature, Catherine thought, *No one who spent an hour talking with these kids could ever call them “delinquents,” no matter how strictly a person defines “formal schooling.”*

Lana and Kipper became occupied with the serious business of slurping melted marshmallows from the bottoms of their mugs. Jamie took a folded paper from a pocket of her

jacket. “Vincent wanted me to give you this,” she said.

Catherine quickly took the note and, unfolding it, read the somewhat spindly line:

Left-handed, I wish you a bright morning.
—V

She smiled. Her poetic friend could say so much, using so few words. She glanced up at Jamie. “He’s doing better.”

Jamie smiled back. “Uh huh. Father says he’s probably going to sleep a lot today, but Vincent was writing notes to people and trading Shakespeare quotations with Poe when I stopped by the Hospital Chamber after breakfast.”

Catherine didn’t know who Poe might be, but Jamie’s news cheered her. *Left-handed,* Catherine thought, a dark cloud lifting away from her heart. *And Shakespeare, too.*

Sometimes, Vincent was simply adorable.

“When you get back to the Tunnels, would you tell Vincent I’ll come see him again tomorrow night?” Catherine asked.

“Sure,” Jamie said.

“I guess I’ll need a guide. I’m not sure how late I’ll be.”

“I’m available all night.”

They shared fresh smiles. “I appreciate it,” Catherine said.

Their drinks finished, the children were eager to be on their way. “We’re making a surprise for Mary,” Lana told Catherine as she picked up Catherine’s smallest donation box. “We should get back and help the others with it.”

“I’ll bet you’re very good at surprises for your friends,” Catherine said.

Kipper grinned at her. “We sure are! You shoulda seen everybody last night in the Hospital Chamber.”

“You made a surprise for Vincent?” Catherine asked.

Kipper and Lana nodded, then laughed together, two friends remembering a moment of shared delight. They hurried out the front door with their loads. Jamie shrugged and picked up the two largest canvases. “Little show-offs,” was all she said as she followed after them.

Catherine shook her head and went into her bedroom. She retrieved the skirt, socks, belt, and moccasin-boots she had borrowed via Rebecca last Wednesday. The clothes were washed and folded, and Catherine had pinned a note of thanks to the skirt. She piled the Tunnel People clothing into the remaining packing box, which she handed to Jamie when the transport crew of three returned for their second trip Down.

“Thank you for your help,” Catherine said.

“Thank *you* for the stuff,” Lana replied.

“And the cocoa!” Kipper put in.

“And the Costa Rica coffee,” Jamie added. “It was really good!”

Smiling, Catherine said, “You’re welcome.”

“See you tomorrow,” Jamie said. The Tunnelkids slipped past the door to the stairwell, Jamie with the box and Kipper and Lana each carrying a painting. The stairway door swung shut behind them.

Maybe they’re not so out of place up here, after all, Catherine thought. She closed her front door and went to take the four mugs from her dining table into the kitchen. *They were perfectly comfortable with me, once they got used to my rooms. And the poem served as common ground between all of us. Lana certainly has an excellent eye for the best poems. I’m not sure I*

could read aloud half so well when I was her age.

She rinsed the mugs and the saucepan and placed everything in her dishwasher. She washed her French press and left it to air dry. Then she returned to the dining table. She opened her language-of-flowers dictionary. Catherine was using a handwritten note as her bookmark. By the time she closed the book again, she had added two more flower names to the list. She took the paper with her down the steps into her living room, setting the list beside her address book while she looked up the number for her favorite florist.

Catherine's hand rested on the receiver, ready to pick it up and make the call. The telephone rang. She snatched her hand away, startled. "Jeepers creepers, Cathy," she muttered. She picked up.

"Hello?"

"*What* is going *on* over there?!" Jenny's voice demanded. "I get a message from you, saying you're moving away. Then I get a message from Nancy, asking if I want to get in on finding a new housewarming present for you. *Then* you leave another message saying you're *not* moving. Which is it?"

"Okay. For starters, I'm not moving—"

"*That's* a relief."

"Next: it's very sweet of you both to think of buying me a gift."

"I *wasn't* thinking about it yet, because I was still working through my utter *shock*, Cath."

"And Jen, why on earth don't you check your answering machine more often?"

"Horrible, distracting thing," Jenny said. "I've been doing hand-holding duty for Alain Viso. You know, my eager adventurer writing his book on Petra's ancient statues and monuments? A word to the wise, my dear. Never get entangled in the affairs of an archaeologist who suddenly develops the delusion that he's an art critic."

Catherine laughed. "If I ever find myself in that situation, I'll be sure to remember your sage advice."

"Wonderful. Now fill me in."

Catherine started to sit down on a sofa and realized she didn't have even *one* sofa to sit on anymore. She rolled her eyes at her own impulsivity and hoped Edie was enjoying the heck out of her new furniture. *Next weekend,* Catherine promised herself, *I am going shopping.*

To her friend on the phone she said, "Jen, do you remember how I was really needing a change?"

Jenny said she did.

"Well I got one. A *big* change. Or, maybe it was more like a big wake-up call. It's been a very peculiar week."

She ended up sitting on one of her parlor chairs, tracing abstract designs over the side of her TV cabinet with her fingertips while the edited version of her tale poured out. Deciding on the fly what was safe to say and what was not, Catherine also went back to thinking through the *Why* of her ongoing residence in New York. She looked over at her list of flowers. She looked at her address book. *All in good time,* she thought. *Just as long as I have the bouquet in hand before tomorrow night.* She closed her eyes and listened to Jenny say, "All of *your* adventures are so much more interesting than mine."

"Want to trade?" Catherine asked.

"Not on your life."

And Catherine smiled.

III

29 March 1987
Sunday Night

Winslow walked out of the Nursery, leaving behind him the snuffly voices of five little boys trying to explain their quarrel to Ezra. The blacksmith thought their problem was mostly a matter of the kids not knowing they were half past tired, going on cranky. Ezra, for his part, was planning to stay in there and hear them all out. Winslow supposed the Elder teacher and counselor might get them to *talk* themselves to sleep. That would solve fifty percent of the conflagration right there. The other fifty percent was going to take some one-on-one time with Dustin.

Winslow thought, *There's a boy who's had to do without for so long, he's ended up accepting some pretty screwed up ideas about how to go about being prosperous among friends*.

As far as Winslow could tell, this was the sort of misconception that took root in everyone who lived Topside for any amount of time (including, at one point in his life, Winslow himself): the need to stockpile deadbolt installations, and keys to all the locks, cans of food, rent money or drug money, breakups with girlfriends and fallings-out with bad neighbors, an extra bottle or two in an inconspicuous drawer, or maybe a boxful of sweet-stuffs, all to keep a body's fear at bay. That need and that terror seeded the mind like weeds delving into cracked concrete, and the eventual failure to keep your treasure safe—safe from others, safe from yourself—could kill a grown man, let alone a little kid like Dustin. *It takes a place like the Tunnels to teach folks that it's yourself you ought to be trying to save,* Winslow thought. He turned a corner and started down the passage that would bring him to the Hospital Chamber.

When he got there, the red drape still looked pretty intimidating to him, but he lifted it aside and went in. All was quiet. At the back of the cavern, Winslow found Father and Vincent waiting.

Father was setting a folded blanket on top of others stacked at the end of Vincent's stripped-down hospital bed. Vincent sat in the Hospital Chamber wheelchair, silent and sphinx-like, wearing clean sleeping clothes. Compared to what Winslow had seen of him yesterday, Vincent seemed the picture of health. Both men looked up at Winslow's arrival, surprised to see him.

"I am substitute-Ezra," Winslow told them, trying to unstick his mind from the sight of the wheelchair. "Since you told him you don't have an emergency in here, Ezra asked me to stand in for him. He's got a...thing going down in the Nursery."

"What sort of 'thing' ?" Father asked.

Winslow crossed his arms. "Turns out that Dustin's been keeping a mother lode stash of candy under his bed. Other kids found out after he broke his bedstead a while back. They kept asking about it, he wouldn't share...you can guess the rest. Though what set them off tonight was the fact that Dustin wouldn't let them use his candy as pirate booty for some game they were playing together. They were all stoked for battle. Ever notice how sugar does that to kids?"

"Not only children," Vincent commented from the chair.

"Then maybe kids just get away with it more."

Vincent waved his hand in an as-you-say gesture. Winslow did a double take. Left hand, no bandage, no mobility hindrances. Good news all around. Vincent must be moving *much* closer to Okay again.

"So, um, what did you two need help with?" Winslow asked.

Father thought over this change in available assistants, then stated, “Vincent is returning to his chamber tonight. Could you help him with the wheelchair?”

“Still can’t walk?” Winslow said, and wished the moment the words were out that he’d kept his big mouth shut. “Hell. Sorry. I mean—”

“I can walk,” Vincent said.

“It’s too far to try,” Father returned at once.

Vincent folded his hands and resumed his impersonation of Egyptian limestone.

This little bout of crazy-strange had to be the remnant of an argument between father and son that Winslow was happy he hadn’t been around to witness. Father picked up the box that Catherine had brought Down from the University and waited for Winslow to fall into line.

Lord, how I hate getting landed in the middle of this stuff, Winslow thought. Vincent glanced at him. Winslow honored his end of their friendship, catching onto the lifeline of their Troopers’ code that reached back through the years into their own childhoods.

“You cool with this?” he asked, pointing at the wheelchair and not looking in Father’s direction. If Vincent was not, Winslow would take sides. Father wasn’t going to like it.

But Vincent knew what was being asked of everyone in here, and, as was his way, he made no fuss that might end in needless division. His eyes slanted at the corners as he smiled. “All I want is to sleep in my own bed tonight. Perhaps you can help.”

“Damn straight I can help.” Winslow took position behind the chair.

Father looked more than a touch annoyed with both Winslow and his adopted son, but he tucked the box under one arm and started off across the chamber, moving fast for an old man with a bum leg.

“Are things okay between you two?” Winslow asked Vincent in a whisper. He began rolling the wheelchair after Father.

Vincent said, “Father has a discomfiting chore ahead of him. We’ll both feel more like ourselves in the morning.”

Winslow (along with the rest of the old-timer Tunnelfolk population) knew Vincent and Father were capable of incisive and combustible arguments. When they really disagreed over something, they could make whatever chamber they were occupying totally uninhabitable for everyone else. Still, the fact that they could come out of a fight mostly courteous and respectful toward each other said a lot about the validity of their cherished Tunnel principles, by which both men lived, and for which both of them would sacrifice a great deal.

“And how are *you* doing?” Winslow asked his friend. He nodded at Father, who stood beside the chamber entrance holding the drape out of their way. Winslow pushed the wheelchair out into the corridor. Father followed after him.

Vincent began quoting what had to be Father’s most recent diagnoses. “‘Normal pupillary reactions. No neurological incidents for twenty hours. Erratic heartbeat resolved this afternoon. Abundant ill-humored social discourse. Vincent will be well again very soon.’”

From behind them, Father cleared his throat. “*Vincent’s* irritability notwithstanding, ‘immanent recovery’ does *not* mean ‘fully recovered.’ Overexerting yourself at this stage will do more harm than you seem willing to admit.”

Winslow waited for more, but they both dropped the subject after that. He wondered who had nettled whose dignity first, then let it go. Not his business.

They took the more circuitous way through the Long Gallery, where the floor stayed flattest, passing tunnel entrances, openings into smaller caverns, and the Hub’s large Bathing Chamber. Inside the Long Gallery they could see that the children had gotten hold of a fresh supply of chalk. The little guys had decorated most of the floor with open circles, hopscotch

grids, and cheerful sidewalk art. Vincent turned his head. Winslow noticed he was smiling at both the chalkwork and the sight of his colored glass window in the tunnel wall on their right.

This is Vincent's real homecoming, thought Winslow.

A right turn into a new passage. A brief jaunt past the row of flaming lamps ensconced along that wall. They came to the steps leading up into Vincent's entryway. Winslow halted the wheelchair. He leaned down, setting the wheel brakes on each side. Father stood beside them.

The old man started dishing out instructions. "I think the best way to do this is to help Vincent up the steps, then come back down for the chair and—"

"Father," Vincent said. "Let's leave the wheelchair here."

"Vincent."

"I can walk eighteen feet, if you'll only allow me the chance."

Winslow looked from Vincent to the steps. He didn't think Vincent was really mad at anyone. It was harder to tell with Father. Beneath their separate brands of irritation, Father seemed a little scared and Vincent was starting to look tired. Winslow remembered that the last time he'd been standing where he was standing—behind the hand-grips of this wheelchair while a doctor and a patient squabbled—it had been Vernon sitting in the chair. *Do either of them remember that moment?* he wondered. Those weren't good memories to be fueling their conflict, if that was the case.

Father said nothing further and Vincent put his slipper-clad feet on the ground. He grabbed the nearest edge of rock at the entrance opening. Winslow watched his friend's shoulders tense up beneath his shirt as Vincent slowly got out of the chair.

Despite his adamant declaration of independence, Vincent did not *walk* forward. Nope, he Frankensteined his way along, lifting his feet like they were too heavy for him, taking one brick step at a time, and pausing for a long moment once he got inside the entry passage archway. Vincent's hands stayed pressed against the walls to either side of him. He began to shuffle down the eighteen-foot causeway into his room. It was by no means a glorious return, but Winslow could tell it meant a lot to him.

Winslow released the brakes on the wheelchair. He pulled it away from the steps so he and Father could follow after Vincent. Father held back, giving Vincent space, maybe giving *himself* some space, too. That was fine. No one was in a hurry tonight. Maybe a minute passed. At last Father looked up at Winslow's purposefully not-questioning-anything face. He told the blacksmith, "I suppose there are many different kinds of healing." Then he sighed. "Go on ahead of me, Winslow."

Winslow did so, catching up to Vincent easily. The convalescent had made it two-thirds down the passage and was now running out of steam. From the way he was breathing, Vincent might have been climbing a steep slope. He slid one shaking hand along the wall, braced it, dragged the opposite foot forward. He sensed Winslow come up behind him. He stopped.

"Winslow," he whispered, "Father is about to win a moral victory." He bowed his head.

Winslow took in the beaten way Vincent was standing and thought, *Like hell*. This passage was too narrow for them to stand two abreast, so Winslow stepped up behind him and got one arm around Vincent's back, taking hold of Vincent's right elbow with his empty hand. Vincent's muscles felt trembly, forcing his body into a hunched and drooping shape. He seemed as weak as a—well, yeah, Winslow might as well use the old adage—weak as a newborn kitten.

"Okay, V. You say you can walk. I got your weight now, so move your feet."

Vincent stayed where he was for a couple more deep breaths, then he accepted Winslow's support and started forward again. Winslow had to admire the man's grit. Vincent never took the easy way out and he also never got offended by offered help. They walked together the rest of

the way and for the first time since the night Vincent vanished from the Tunnels, Winslow thought his friend was really going to be all right.

They reached Vincent's chamber. Vincent gently pulled his elbow out of Winslow's grasp and straightened his back to step away from the blacksmith's muscular arms. He entered his chamber like a sojourner who has crossed the burning wasteland to enter Paradise. Winslow saw this in the way that Vincent *looked* at things. Vincent set his clawed hands on the back of one of his chairs and took a breather there, gazing around at his furniture in enigmatic silence.

Winslow stepped out of the passage into the chamber, feeling his throat want to tighten up on him again. Father came in, one hand manipulating his crutch, the other hand still grasping a bottom edge of the University box. He set the box on the seat of Vincent's second chair and stayed just as quiet as Winslow.

They observed Vincent's movements as their patient crossed the footworn carpet to get to his bed. There, Vincent stepped out of the slippers and lay down, sort of nestling in amongst his blankets and scattered pillows. The lamplight shining through the window from the Long Gallery cast blocks of blue and apricot over Vincent's white knitted shirt and wash-faded gray pants.

Father walked to the foot of the bed and switched on Vincent's battery-powered floor lamp. More colors from the glass lamp shade beautified the chamber. Father disentangled a blanket near Vincent's feet. He covered his son with it.

"Winslow," he asked, "would you wait for me in my Study? There's one more thing I'll need your help with tonight."

"Sure," Winslow said. He looked into Vincent's worn-out blue eyes. "Vincent?"

"Yes?"

"Good night."

Vincent smiled.

Winslow detoured through the Tunnels to return the wheelchair to the Hospital Chamber. He met only Luke along the way. The young man waved to the smith as he headed out for Perimeter patrol. Randolph must be doing a good job keeping everyone on task with their security duties.

And then there was nothing to do but hang out in Father's Study. Winslow went in and took a seat at the big table in the middle of the chamber, glancing over the headlines of a newspaper Father had left there. Soviet spies were said to be manipulating guards at the American Embassy in Moscow. President Reagan had vetoed STURAA, and this was playing merry hob with Federal highway and mass transit projects in New York. In other news, a lot of people were hacked off about epidemic airline flight delays. Winslow rolled his eyes and pushed the newspaper away. Same old, same old.

The sound of approaching voices made the blacksmith look over at the west entrance to the gallery circling Father's chamber. He heard a child's chatter punctuated here and there by an older man's encouraging commentary. Holly walked into the room, followed by Peter Alcott, who carried a white paperboard box. Winslow stood up.

"Thank you, Holly," Peter said to the girl. "And tell Samantha I'd be happy to read her story the next time I come Below."

Holly hugged him, accepting the doctor's affectionate pat on her back. Peter came down the iron steps into the Study. Holly disappeared back the way she'd come.

"Good evening," Peter greeted Winslow.

"You must've lost *evening* on the way Down," Winslow replied. "This here is a quarter past midnight."

Peter chuckled and crossed the chamber to Father's grotesque Victorian sideboard. He set

down the white box and turned to Winslow, holding out a hand. Winslow shook Peter's hand, then pulled the Uppercity doctor into a hearty hug. Stepping back, Winslow asked, "So how go things Above?"

"Things go very much as they always do," Peter answered.

"How's Susan these days? Got the museum up and running yet?"

Peter wasn't one for big emotional displays, but he puffed up a little, just like any proud father would do at the mention of his daughter's successes. "She's calling it a gallery and cultural center," Peter corrected, "and I think she's happy as a lark—or whatever bird it is that sings for joy in Santa Fe."

Winslow smiled. "That's great to hear." Susan Alcott was another young lady of Catherine's caliber who deserved all the happiness Topside life could give her.

"The next time she sends a letter, I'll make sure her news comes Down to all of you," Peter said. He looked around Father's Study. "Is Jacob with Vincent?"

Winslow was still getting used to the oldest old-timers openly using Father's given name like that. Father had kept any least detail of his identity to himself for so long, only a few Tunnelfolk, and even fewer Helpers, knew to call him anything besides "Doc" or "Father." That was changing now. The death of Margaret Chase had changed a lot of of things.

"Yeah. They're both in Vincent's chamber, getting Vincent settled back in," Winslow said.

Peter smiled, happy to hear Winslow's news. "Then that's where I need to be right now," he said. He touched the top of the white box. "This contains medical supplies...pills and other things that need to be put away soon. Can you keep it safe from inquisitive little hands?"

Winslow nodded.

The doctor clapped Winslow on the shoulder. "It's good to see you again." The blacksmith returned his sentiment. Peter went to the iron steps and climbed into the passage that fed Vincent's entrance tunnel.

Alone again, Winslow opened the box out of curiosity. Peter had packed it with glass and plastic jars, and four small bottles of injectable substances. Winslow saw dietary supplements—tablets for adults, chewables for kids. There was also a small bottle of antibiotics, a smaller supply of morphine pills, a tube of some kind of skin cream, and Winslow didn't bother looking at the rubber-topped bottles of clear fluids. A flat carton of new syringes completed Peter's donation.

With everything else he brought down just to help Vincent, this is a really big gift, Winslow thought. But then, Peter had always been the kindest of doctors and the truest of friends. Winslow closed the box and, hearing movement down the tunnel, turned to see who was coming into Father's Study now.

It was Father, still lugging the Columbia documents. Seeing Winslow waiting for him, Father said, "Peter is going to stay with Vincent for a while. Is the fireplace in your workshop available?"

Winslow glanced at the file box. He believed he could guess what fate Father had in mind for it. "Yes."

Father set the battered box on his desk and joined Winslow at the sideboard. "I'll only be a moment putting these away," he said, and opened the white box.

Some of Peter's fresh supplies went into the sideboard's upper cabinet. The rest Father tucked inside his medical bag, after ensuring that all container lids were tightly closed. Both cabinet and medical kit were off-limits to almost everyone else in the Tunnels. Finally, the old man crossed to his desk and stood staring at the Columbia box like it might be something that

could bite him.

"Planning to incinerate the professor's records?" Winslow asked quietly.

"Yes."

"Can I carry it to my shop for you?"

"If you would. Thank you."

A discomfiting chore, Winslow thought. *Vincent got that right.*

Winslow carried the box. He followed Father out of the Study, through the late-night serenity of the Hub, out past what was universally recognized as the limits of the Inner Circle, and down a brick-walled tunnel into Winslow's workspace.

Father glanced around. The old man didn't get out to this chamber very often. Winslow had been cleaning up a project when Ezra's summons had reached him. A shop broom leaned by its duct-taped handle against Winslow's heavy wooden workbench. Candles were lit throughout the room. Winking red light glowed from live embers in the hearth of the coal forge. Winslow set the box next to his smaller propane forge and turned up the wick on the overhead oil lamp.

"Let me stir the hearth," Winslow murmured. He livened up the coals using bellows and tongs. The firepot wouldn't be hot enough to work metal, but it should serve for what Father had in mind. Winslow imagined stacks of paper crisping into fluffy white ash, and the crusty residue the videotapes would leave behind. Well, it was about time to give the big forge a thorough cleaning-out.

Father started things off by handing over file folders full of paper. Winslow crumpled up loose sheets of numbers and what looked like computer-printed nonsense. The paper lit up nicely. Once they had flames flaring, Winslow added thin stacks of pages.

They moved on to notebooks. Winslow tore off the cardboard covers to burn those separately from the paper signatures. Then they came to the video tapes. The rectangular paperboard sleeves posed no problem. Winslow tossed those to the flames right off. Father held the first black cassette in his hand, eyeballing it dubiously.

"Do you think this will burn completely enough to make it unusable?" he asked.

Winslow reached over and took the cassette from him. "It's not so much about making the *cassette* unusable, as getting rid of the film inside it." He popped off the flip-up flap that protected the actual videotape, then selected a small Phillips head screwdriver from a drawer in his workbench. He removed the five tiny screws from the cassette's black casing, using a utility knife to slit the yellow label down the side seam between the casing sections. Turning the cassette reels-side-down, Winslow lifted the top half of the case away. Father examined the uncovered spools of tape with clinical disapproval.

"This is what's gotta burn," Winslow told Father, prodding the leftmost reel with one finger. "I've heard stories from Up Top about how sometimes folks torch cassettes, but the cops can get to the inside part like this and salvage footage. They've got these big photo labs for that kind of work."

Father nodded, frowning.

"Uh, do you care if I keep the screws from these?" Winslow asked.

"Do what you like, as long as the...footage...is destroyed."

All told, Winslow dismantled fourteen VHS cassettes, dropping screws into an empty baby food jar, and feeding magnetic tape to the fire in his forge. He figured when they were done in here, he'd go toss the black casing parts into the wide throat of the Abyss. Maybe the ash from the firepot too. The Tunnelfolk did not use that bottomless pit as a common dumping ground. They had funerals there sometimes, and community ceremonies of release and renewal. It was also simply a dangerous place to be. However, consigning the mad professor's leavings to the

darkness eternal seemed like a fitting thing to do.

A related thought spoke up in the smith's mind then: *Unless*... Winslow looked up from the smoking remains of the fourteenth video and asked, "So now that we're halfway through the whole job...did Vincent need to see any of this? I mean, to make some kind of peace with...everything?"

Father had picked a big, fat book out of the box and held it tightly in both hands. "No," he said. "I asked him again, before Peter came in to sit with him. Vincent wants to put Columbia behind us. I believe his exact words were: 'Sometimes justice demands destruction.' We're to burn it all."

Justice, thought Winslow as Father handed him the big book. *Street justice maybe. But nothing anyone from the Topsiders' world can ever learn something from.*

Father was saying, "Now I don't want you to bother opening that one. Maybe...you could pile some coals around it, if you can, and—"

The book was heavier than Winslow had expected. He snapped out of his private musings as the thick block of paper slipped out of his hand and broke open on the floor, spilling little shiny squares all over the place. Winslow quickly identified the squares as Polaroid snapshots. Most had landed with their dark backsides facing up, but some of the pictures showed up as smears of color on the stone floor of his workshop. The big book had been a photo album.

"Damn," Winslow grunted, crouching down to sweep up the scatter with his hands. But once he got a closer look, he stopped. "What...the *hell*...?" he got out.

The four closest face-up photos didn't make sense at first. Gradually Winslow got the impression that every one of the pictures had something to do with Vincent. In the first photograph, someone held a right-angle ruler in front of a yellowy-gold background, framing—what was that? Vincent's *ear*?

Okay, ear, jawline, tawny mane. Vincent's hair was festooned with red and white wires and a metallic *something* had been inserted into the skin above his fuzzy ear. A tack? A *needle*? One of those skinny white wires sniggled away from the needling metal electrode. *ALL of those wires?* Winslow thought, chilled. *And a needle at the end of every ONE of them?!* The skin at the back of Winslow's neck lumped up into gooseflesh.

Another photo showed a steel cage on wheels shadowing a gleaming white floor. A rabbity man wearing a white coat reached his hand into the cage to—Winslow's mouth dropped open—to pet Vincent on the head. Vincent reclined on the floor of the cage, which was narrow enough that it made its occupant look cramped in the little space, yet at the same time the bars of the cage were tall enough that they made Vincent seem miniaturized behind them. Vincent lay facing the camera, left knee cocked, shoulders settled against the barred corner at his back. He had no clothes on. Not a stitch. And—

"Dastard lunatic plague-lopped *ghouls*!"

It was bad enough to see his friend *caged*. It was even worse to see a Stranger—and this had to be the Columbia professor—drumming up the derring-do to pat his captive on the head. The mustached man in the white coat resembled some brave little boy at a petting zoo, touching for the first time what he took to be a non-domesticated animal.

But even more than *that* was what they'd done *before* this picture got taken. The two researchers had cut off big strips of hair from all over Vincent's body. The job looked random, though it probably served some purpose or other for Vincent's captors. Winslow remembered his confused friend flinching away from the mention of scissors. He surveyed those body parts in the photo (including Vincent's sad left shoulder and elbow) laid bare by close work with a razor. Where Winslow could see cleared skin, Vincent had gone black and blue. The expression on his

unnaturally pale face—

It defied all description.

It's not Vincent in the raw keeling me over here, Winslow knew, revolted rather by the photographed surroundings of his imprisoned friend. No Elderkid could grow up in Tunnels without seeing every last one of his friends buck naked somewhere along the line. They went swimming together in the Chamber of the Falls, invaded the Bathing Chamber together, swapped clothes, slept in shared bedchambers or in the Orphans' Dormitory, and none of it was a big deal. They were a large family in close quarters, and the community had made only slow advances toward providing the means for physical privacy along with improvements to their living spaces.

Also, those among the Tunnelfolk who had lived for any length of time Up in the city streets were always extra glad for the chance to take off their clothes in a place where they wouldn't be arrested—or worse—for doing so. That glad gratitude rubbed off on everyone else who lived Below. Their home had never been, and would never be, the kind of Topsider-contrived slaughterhouse of a "shelter" or filthy municipal flop house that would curse you with lice or bedbugs or ringworm, or rob you of your possessions (including your clothes) if you weren't careful, or send you running back out to the relative safety of the streets nursing bleeding orifices. Everyone admitted into Winslow's community by birth or by adoption had a lot to be thankful for, and they *were* thankful.

Their thankfulness kept everybody well-aware of how *special* was their safe place in the Tunnels. Everyone trusted each other to respect and keep safe their bodies, in all their many shapes and sizes. The Tunnelfolk especially honored and loved Vincent's body. He was the strongest of them, and yet the most vulnerable. It took the heart of an outcast Insider to recognize the inherent beauty and dignity of Vincent's lonely dimensions. Very thankfully, only Insiders lived Below.

So Winslow's chance viewing tonight was not the really bad part. The *bad* part was Winslow's knowing how much it bugged Vincent to be stared at. Even when the attention had nothing to do with how he looked, Vincent liked to keep a low profile.

He was a modest man. A very quiet, very humble man. But also something *more* than a man, and not quite a tame one, at that. An otherworldly prince who wasn't at all adverse to discussing tough issues one-on-one with anyone and everyone. A confident public speaker and a popular teacher. Renowned for his practical wisdom and his gently affectionate nature, his playful kindness, his impeccable sportsmanship, his protective instincts and keen sense of justice. A powerful and calculating defender who would take on any opponent at a moment's notice to keep his people safe. A Tunnels resident who loved his creature comforts as much as anyone, and who wore his hair long for the aesthetic pleasure of it. As far as Winslow knew, he was not at all embarrassed by who and what he was. It's just that Vincent had also always been, well—cautious about his differences, even apologetic sometimes. Aware. Sensitive. Who could blame him for that? And this *degradation* in a University lab—in a *cage*—stripped down in front of fiendish Strangers—and there were all those places where Vincent's coat of fur had been carved up—all those places where they had obviously hurt him *bad*—

What was it Vernon had said that one time? About the difference between the ancients and modern people? Yeah. They'd been talking about warriors, Germanic Barbarians and Picts and the like. Vernon had said that the vast majority of people were simply not psychologically equipped to fight nude. It was one of the hardest things you could ask a civil, sane, twentieth-century soul to do. And these pictures scattered across Winslow's floor showed nothing that remotely resembled *asking*.

Winslow thought: *Those two men died way too fast.*

The next photo also showed Vincent in the cage, this time kneeling on the floor, drinking something from a white bowl. A second bowl full of Winslow didn't know what (and it didn't look good—maybe cold cuts, maybe dog food) sat on the floor panel beside Vincent's right knee. The angle of the photo captured a full frontal shot of the cage and its contents. Nothing was hidden and nothing was concealable. Vincent looked sick and pained. His hands held the bowl like he was afraid he was going to drop it before he could finish his drink.

The photo after that showed Vincent outside of the cage, lying on the lab's white floor beneath a sand-colored blanket. His bare hands and feet stuck out from under the fabric, and institutional padded leather cuffs were buckled tightly around his wrists and his ankles. Winslow could see part of another cuff attached to Vincent's right forearm. Broken white straps spider-webbed out from the cuffs in all directions. A weird-shaped plastic mask had been strapped to his face and Vincent was out cold. At least in *this* picture, his captors had thought to cover him up.

Winslow shut his eyes and turned his face away before his mind could get accosted by anything more. Without a doubt, there was way too much *more*. He said, "Father? I am sorry as hell I saw that."

Father's voice dripped with acid. "As am I. But now that you *have* seen it, would you help me pick up the mess?"

Winslow helped the old man, trying not to look at anything. Snippets got through anyway. Legs, claws, straps. Wires, teeth, genitals, rawhide shirtlaces. Solid metal bars, white space. Knotted snarls of yellow hair. A redheaded nerdy type bending over Vincent's prostrate body with a silver medical instrument in his hand.

Alien abduction, Winslow started thinking. *Alien abduction. UFOs. The Alder King. Lord, that stuff was no joke at all.*

They got the loose photos into the fire, where the slick little squares bubbled and smoked, melting into clumps on top of the coals and ashes. Then Winslow picked up the album. He looked at Father.

"Everything else in this book...it's just more of that shit?"

Father's jaw had now clenched so tight the muscles were jumping beneath his skin. He nodded.

Winslow set the album on his workbench and ripped away the thick front cover, and then the back cover, in two smooth pulls. He tossed the covers at the fire, let them get a good start at burning up, and added the photo pages in sections, watching the flames instead of the pictures. When he turned to Father again, the Undercity doctor was staring dully at the last composition notebook—an ANECDOTAL LOG, according to the title penned across the cover. Father looked like he was thinking hard about something.

At last, the old man opened the book and took two more snapshots out from under the front cover. He gave them silently to Winslow.

Winslow did his best to prep his brain for more badness. In the new photos, the cage had been relocated to someplace outside the gleamy white laboratory. It could have been a warehouse or an industrial garage. Catherine had told them it was a basement storeroom of the Fairchild Annex.

One photo showed Vincent tucked into a corner of the cage, eschewing a dowdy pillow and mussed blanket. He was resting his forehead upon the arms he had folded across his bent knees. The other photo showed him stretched out across the blanket, his limp claws ignoring the boundaries of his prison by hanging over the edge of the floor panel. Vincent's face was mostly hidden from the camera. Winslow could count all of his friend's ribs. Vincent seemed totally torn down. It might be that a gigantic foot had smashed him flat.

Black-inked phrases labeled both photos. They were dated, 4–24–87, taken several hours apart, and marked with the word STORAGE. *Like Vincent was just a hock of meat stashed away for later,* Winslow thought. A ball of fire raged inside his chest.

Father coughed and said, “These were the last two pictures. Hughes didn’t take any more before Catherine went to Columbia the next morning.”

“She didn’t mention that she found Vincent like this,” Winslow said.

“Catherine didn’t. Vincent talked Hughes into allowing him to put on some clothes that night.”

Winslow dropped both photos into the fire. “That’s a mercy. So...Vincent told you that? I mean...he’s able to talk about...stuff?”

Father took a flattened plastic bag out of the box. “No. Hughes wrote about their conversation. Vincent has said very little to me.”

Father also brought out a long folder of flimsy plastic sheets. They might be some type of film negatives, or possibly X-rays. He said, “Perhaps *you* can make something good come of...our accident with the photographs. You’re a friend rather than a father. Someone closer to Vincent’s own age.”

“Maybe,” Winslow muttered. He took the bag and the folder and they let both things burn. Winslow had an excellent flue for his forge, but the smells were adding up. Burnt hair *(God almighty, they KEPT the fur?!)* and fumes from scorched polymers mingled searingly in his nostrils. Father gave over the Anecdotal Log. They watched the record book crisp and crumble into ash.

“Father, I want to know how they were able to bruise him up so bad. Or did they do that after they knocked him out?”

Father took the last item out of the box, a hinged wooden cube held shut by a snap latch. “Vincent’s bruising was from the darts.”

Winslow just looked at him, incredulous.

Father explained, “The ballistic charge in each dart was strong enough to break bone. Vincent was lucky to have come away with *only* the bruises.” Father turned the cube in a half-circle on Winslow’s workbench. “And the chemicals from the darts interfered with his blood’s clotting factor. He’s also lucky such pervasive injuries did not produce more severe internal hemorrhaging. Vincent is mildly anemic now.”

Winslow decided that *spitting* on two Topside graves wasn’t going to be good enough.

“And I made it worse, didn’t I?” he asked. “When I hit him yesterday.”

“Yes and no,” Father said. He put a kindly hand on Winslow’s arm. “The worst was over by then. As you could see for yourself tonight, you haven’t slowed our patient’s recovery by any significant measure.”

Winslow nodded, accepting this cold comfort as a way to get past his guilt over the incident. “Okay.”

Father held the little cube while Winslow tore the file box into small sections and consigned the cardboard to its pyre. They watched the flames licking the fresh fuel. And that was the end of the chore. Winslow deposited the clattering remains of the video cassettes into an empty crate and set the container in an out-of-the-way corner to await future disposal. He looked at the little latched case Father was holding.

“I’ll see to this one myself,” Father said.

Winslow settled a heavy wire screen in front of his fireplace and then accompanied the Tunnels physician back to Father’s chamber. He caught himself thinking about the only other friend he’d ever seen stripped and battered. Winslow wished he’d never seen high-spirited Molly

in that condition, just as much as he wished he wasn't going to be haunted for many long weeks to come by the snapshots he'd seen tonight.

He touched one of his back pockets but didn't take out the folded get-well card he carried there. He thought, *Keep your mind's eye on the kids' crayonwork instead, son. Just keep those constellations right at the front of your thinking.*

It was a good idea, but it did nothing to curb Winslow's deep-seated wrath.

Father was definitely aware of Winslow's state of mind. "Will you be all right?" the old man asked as they walked.

"Yeah. Probably. I've just...Father, it's been a long time since I have felt this *mad*. And there's nothing I can do about it but choke it down and hold it in."

They went a little way farther down the passage. Then Father said something Winslow never forgot.

"Winslow, you don't know anger until you've heard your son *beg* you for water, because Strangers have convinced him that no one cares if he's thirsty."

Father stopped walking. He held up the little box.

"This is a case of microscope slides. It contains stolen bits and pieces of my child." Father shut his eyes and took a breath. He looked up at Winslow again to say, "But it's not *Vincent*. It's not worth one more tick of the clock spent being angry about it. If I allow this box, or the one we destroyed tonight, to represent a focus for my anger, I know I will start to look at Vincent and see the boxes instead of my son. His captors' cage instead of himself. If that happens, my anger will complete the murder his tormentors attempted."

"But what do you *do* with the anger?" Winslow asked.

"Feel it," Father said. "Feel it completely and know that you have every right to it. Then decide what else you want to feel besides. I look at Vincent and I want to feel anger *and* hope, anger *and* affection, anger *and* sorrow for his pain. Think of it as...oh, smelting an alloy of emotions. Does that make sense to you?"

It did make sense. It made very good sense. Winslow nodded. They started walking again.

"Then you must shape that emotional alloy into something good," Father murmured. "Something worth creating and living with thereafter. You pour all that energy into loving your friends and letting them love you. It's taken me many years to *begin* to learn how to do this. And I am not always successful when I try to feel beyond such sickness of the soul. It's human nature to dwell upon the things that have hurt us, just as it's our nature to overlook many outlets that would otherwise give us the most relief from our suffering. If you can dream up a different way to get through the rage, please let me in on the secret."

Winslow laughed in spite of himself. "If that secret ever gives itself up to me, you'll be the first to know it."

They went into Father's chamber and found Peter waiting there, reading the newspaper that Winslow had pushed aside. Peter folded the paper and dropped it back onto the table. Father went down the iron steps.

Peter informed them, "Vincent's sleeping now. I think hourly checks should be sufficient tonight and tomorrow."

"Yes," said Father. He turned briefly toward Winslow. "Thank you for your help," he said.

"Sure. Thank you for yours."

Father smiled and Winslow's work was done for the night. The son of a previous Tunnels cook took the gallery passage toward the Kitchen. He felt this situation called for a little midnight sustenance. The voices of Father and Peter spoke quietly behind him.

“He asked me some very pertinent questions tonight, Jacob.”

“That’s to be expected.”

“I answered him as well as I could. Did you really tell him you expect him to stay in bed for a *week*?”

“Well, I do. For at *least* a week.”

“Do you also know that’s never going to happen?”

Father sighed.

Winslow snorted and kept walking. *Anger AND stubbornness,* he thought, as the doctors’ voices became a mere echo in the tunnel. But Father’s helpful words had stuck with him, in the same way that stars do not leave the sky after sunrise, but burn, invisible to the unassisted eye, until the fall of night reveals their presence once more.

Winslow thought, *It’s been too long since I’ve seen sky. Maybe I’m starting to get barricaded inside my own head.* Sometimes a little change in perspective helped a lot with that sort of thing. After completing tonight’s round of chores, Winslow felt he could use any improvement in perspective he could get.

IV

30 March 1987
Monday, Early Afternoon

Vincent positioned his stockinged feet on the stone floor and prepared to stand upright for the second time that day.

“I hope this goes better now than it did earlier this morning,” he muttered to himself. The prickly itching deep in his muscles had mutated into a persistent fizziness. Vincent was trying to ignore the feeling. He had other things on his mind, pleasant things he wanted to accomplish this afternoon.

He wanted to exchange his nightclothes for ordinary attire. He wanted to be fully dressed by the time one friend or another brought the next tea tray into his chamber. Then he wanted to sit quietly in his reading chair, the one with narrow arms and rose-colored upholstery. He would drink his medicine and look at the beautiful images in Father’s big book of impressionist art. That was a good dream to pursue for an hour or two. His dream pleased him. He looked forward to its realization.

But before any of that could happen, Vincent must first get out of his bed and stand up on his own.

He pulled air into his lungs and released it again, as though preparing to dive into deep water. He reached out for the back of the chair nearest to his bed: the carved, square chair that Old Sam had found Above in pieces two years ago. The Tunnels Elder had repaired it, and given it to Vincent as a Winterfest gift. Vincent held onto the chair and got to his feet.

Good, he thought. *This is good.*

He felt rickety. He moved carefully along the length of his bed to the tall wardrobe, which stood beside Lady Justice against the chamber wall. Vincent opened one door, then the other, and stood still, examining what he saw within.

Folded blankets, his stored chess board, and his boxed set of pewter chessmen occupied the topmost shelf. On lower shelves: folded shirts, tunics, sweaters, vests, breeches, trousers.

Paired socks and gauntlets and gloves. Wraps, spare laces, and cording. Square handkerchiefs and coiled belts. Leather footwear stood lined up in a casual row at the bottom of the wardrobe: one calf-high pair of hard-soled boots alongside a pair of handmade, soft-soled shoes. On the ground between his wardrobe and the base of the electric floor lamp, Vincent saw his other pair of boots, ankle-high, insulated with a soft liner of fur and suede scraps, brushed clean of soil and humus. These were the boots he had been wearing during his most recent visit to the park.

He turned his face up toward the open clothing cabinet. A dominant aroma of cedar-chip sachets greeted him. The sight of book spines standing in little groups between garment piles made him smile at himself. Vincent's wardrobe contained approximately one week's worth of both clean garb and reading material. The amount of clothing he owned was not unusual; the Tunnelfolk's tailors and seamstresses saw to it that everyone could get through at least seven days and one formal occasion before an hour spent scrubbing garments in a laundry washtub became necessary. The books, though—well, better an infestation of literature than of moths.

As Vincent stood considering his choices, he noticed that something was missing from his wardrobe's inventory. More than *one* thing, really, for a full set of everyday wear was not present within the stacks. Moreover, the article he *most* cared about was absent from its occasional home on the middle shelf. He turned to look around the chamber. His cloak was not flung across either one of his chairs or his small récamier (which were the places he usually left his cloak when he wasn't wearing it). A quick visual search of his chamber found the garment waiting for him on the table beneath his upper antechamber, rolled into a bulky rectangle on top of other folded fabrics.

Of course, he thought. *These were the things I was wearing...when I came home.*

He ought to put them away.

Vincent took another deep breath and crossed the room, depending upon chair backs and the front of his sideboard for their support as he went. He picked up the entire clothing pile and slowly made his way back to the wardrobe. The weighty collection challenged his arms. His knees began to feel watery. Muscles to either side of his spine started to shiver a little. He kept his dream foremost in his thoughts: the clothes, the chair, the tea, the book.

Items returned to their places on the shelves. His blue overshirt reclaimed its wooden hanger in the wardrobe's narrow side compartment. The pile had included everything, all of Vincent's clothing cleaned, mended. Even his belt had been scrubbed and polished. A small paper sack held the objects he had carried in his pockets on the night he'd been—

No.

Vincent set the paper bag on the round end table beneath the balanced scales of Justice.

There. Done, he thought. Satisfied, Vincent resumed the implementation of his good and worthy plan.

And that was when he discovered that he could not decide what he should wear today. He became distracted by the numbers, the arithmetic, running through a swift accounting of his possessions. Vincent abruptly understood himself to be a wealthy man.

I have three extra sweaters, he thought. *Two extra vests and a new tunic...the one I made for myself last month while my leg was healing. I own two pairs of matching boots besides my shoes and my slippers.*

He had liked having all these things. They fit him well. His riches astonished him. Why had he not realized that he possessed a surplus of goods? His mind began sifting through the names and known possessions of his friends. Did anyone near to his own size need something warm?

Uneasy, he glanced around his chamber again. Color bewildered him. He saw too many

smooth, sculpted lines. And books. His gaze retreated instantly from the shape of his brass microscope. Candles, lamps and lanterns filled the cavern with golden light. Pillows, cushions, bolsters—they littered his abandoned bed. Warm, soft blankets offered a return to childhood's illusion of safety from all that lay outside the magical shield of his bedclothes. Vincent had *(meager, bad-smelling bedding)* so *much*. He was responsible for *(wounded, unclad flesh, shaved skin)* more than he needed. His choices *(how best to lie down upon a small metal floor panel)* seemed innumerable.

Vincent peered into his wardrobe, his eyes dry and stinging. The cedar smell was very strong. His breath came faster than it should. His claws caught up his cloak from its shelf. He held the fabric to his nose, inhaling the comforting scents of soap, and the cloak's many combined materials, and his friend Rebecca, not quite knowing what he should do. One put on everything else before donning one's outer coat, but the long cloak was the only thing Vincent knew he wanted—no, *needed*—

(They took my clothes.)

He backed away from the wardrobe, turning in a slow circle. He saw the full water pitcher and the empty drinking cup on his table. Candlesticks reared up like waxed spikes among towers of tomes. Dazed, Vincent let his cloak fall onto the seat of his reading chair. He braced his hands on the book-covered tabletop, locking his elbows to keep his arms straight. Two dozen books, close to hand, and he had no interest in reading any of them.

(They touched every part of me.)

He read the title of the book he was staring at. The *Divine Comedy,* exalting common words through proximity to Dante's lofty subject matter. Vincent might have been looking into a mirror. The allegory offended him.

Shaking now, he beheld the book and hated it. His hatred tasted like iron filings at the back of his throat. *Dante*, and his neatly executed dissection of Hell, dividing pain from pain, penalty from penalty; his arrogant arrangement of Heaven into telescoping spheres of virtue, his segregation of loves into greater and lesser forms; Purgatory spanning the gap between Light and Dark through modes of purification that seemed to Vincent suddenly and spitefully meaningless. The poet's exhibition of what was in reality *Chaos*—his redefining it as poetic *Order*—this crushed Vincent's heart, sickened his thinking. His jaws wanted to snap at the words, bite them from the crisp pages and spit them out on the floor.

Part of him felt puzzled and frightened by this imagined course of action. It was a completely irrational thing to do. Another part of him watched impassively as claws which *must* belong to someone else's hand caught hold of the book and hurled it out of his chamber through the gaping entryway. The book twirled in the air, splitting open into two wings. The pages rustled, featherly, as the volume concluded its maiden flight. Vincent heard the thing land upon flat stone somewhere near the steps outside his entry passage.

"Your theology...be *damned*," he cursed the book in a gasping growl. "For...it is...*false*."

His entire community had come into being in the first place because it was not the *doers* of evil who would ever suffer most from the horrors they enacted. No, the greatest suffering fell to the people unto whom the evil *was done*. Vincent served as living proof of this.

His chest hurt. He clapped a hand over his heart. His fury performed an about-face and marched inward.

Yes? his anger coldly demanded. *You believe your "proof" to be true? Fool!*

The words slipped through into the shadowed places of his soul, awakening darker voices. *Do you believe YOU have earned no penalty for the acts committed by your own hands? The lapses and omissions of your own heart? Is your soul THAT blameless?*

“I...don’t know. I—”

He had foolishly cast his cloak aside. His heart, his lungs, were freezing beneath a heavy sheet of ice. Vincent clenched his teeth, exposing his fangs. The pain bowed him forward. He staggered away from the table and grabbed at the square wooden chair. He stared at his worn carpet.

Shall we count again the faces of our kills? a not-voice whispered.

Vincent shook his head vigorously, in the unformed hope of dislodging all voices from his imagination. He panted, “There is...but one...justification...for violence. One. And I have...always abided...by that. Always.”

And I have always become stronger through your violence, the whisperer replied. *Learning. Growing, despite your principles. Or perhaps because of them. Improving the effects of our hands in battle. What does THAT deserve, Brother?*

Vincent had no answer.

“He’s a killing machine,” Jonathan Gould had argued. But did that machine *deserve* darts, and prisons, and poisons? Was Vincent’s total humiliation a fitting penance for prior acts performed in the defense of allies and noncombatants? The faces of the violent dead arose from the Shadows of his memory. So *many* faces. His existence had ended nineteen lives during the past three months alone. Did these deaths make a valid exchange for other lives? Had not these nineteen lives ended so that blameless others might be saved? And yet—who was *he* to stand as judge and executioner, guided only by his personal inklings of love to make split-second life and death decisions?

Who was he? No. That was the wrong question to ask. What did *Who* matter? The real world as Vincent understood it did not operate according to such self-oriented quandaries. Justice must look beyond all misplaced doubts and self-recriminations. After all, was justice not the quintessential work of weighing wrongs and striking balances? Didn’t his entire community rely upon Vincent to weigh and strike and balance for the good of all?

Be that as it may, the weight of a most recent wrong dragged at his soul. How could Vincent ever hope to balance the deathbed contrition of one attacker against the remorseless lust of the other? Was it even possible to regain his footing as Vincent tottered at the fulcrum between his immediate future and his immediate past?

“And...beyond all of...these questions...what justice...can ever account for...*internal electrodes*?” he said aloud with great effort.

Vincent felt *this* was the grief truly unbalancing him at the moment.

In the earliest hour of the morning, Peter had described the procedure to him. He was a good doctor and a good friend, explaining gently and concisely. Yet even a devoted godfather’s love could not right *this* wrong.

Hughes and Gould had occasioned by force that which Vincent believed should *only* ever happen in the course of genuine passion, within the intimate shelter of love and the most tender touching of all. They had stolen from their victim a first occurrence (and Peter had confirmed two more thefts after that)—for the complete expression of his sex was something that had not happened to Vincent before. His captors had thus polluted his natural curiosity about stories he had read, encroached upon those amorous experiences of friends that Vincent had sensed in passing, or heard recounted to him during private conversations.

They had pillaged his virginity.

A rejected advance and its horrific consequences had taught him at the age of fifteen that he must never expect to participate in this relational aspect of adulthood—and of manhood. In the years following his revelation, Vincent learned that the most sensual tempos of his body ran

slower and deeper than those of ordinary people. His hungers were Vincent's own to bear alone. He never thought of his celibate solitude in terms of chastity or restraint, for where there was no choice, there was no sacrifice. And yet, where there was no hope, there was also no reason *not* to dream, and, however much it sometimes hurt him to do so, nothing to stop him from wishing on stars. Secretly, patiently.

Passionately.

But *now*—what was Vincent left with now? A memory of vials and Petri dishes dropped into a black garbage bag, the contents suddenly disposable, ultimately inconsequential. Residual sensations of cruel invasion, which he could not wash away. The inescapable knowledge that a cherished erotic ideal had been reduced to a reflex provoked by electrical impulses—and badly done, at that. Certain symptoms Vincent related to his healers during their Wednesday night examination indicated that the professor's overheated device had burned him.

Peter had explained that, too.

The ice encasing Vincent's chest drove him to his knees. He trembled on the floor, one hand clutching at the front of his shirt, the other grasping an arm of his chair until the wood creaked. He felt tears, or rivulets of cold sweat, or both, begin to slide down his face.

(They threw you in the trash, get it?)

He rasped to the Shadows, "The truth...is...that...there was...no justice...in any of this. No *sense*. There can be. No meaning. *Oh*."

It must be his heart—his wounded, wrung-out, poisoned, terrified, breaking heart. Cardiac arrest in the flesh, no metaphors in action, and no way home. Alone, he could not now get up off the floor, could not reach the pipe running along the upper wall into his antechamber, could not even cry out.

(Limited life spans, Professor.)

Vincent thought, *They've killed me after all. All of me. Inside and out.*

"You haven't washed your hands of me," said Jonathan Gould.

Vincent didn't want to die like this.

Through the renewed blackness of his icy doom, he heard someone walking toward him. Step, step, and tap. A three-part stride.

Vincent looked up. Father appeared in the entryway. He held Vincent's copy of *La Divina Commedia* in his hand, intent on seeking out the person he knew must be occupying the chamber.

"Vincent? I found this on the floor just outside. Did you—?" Father glanced down and saw his son fighting for breath beside the chair. He stopped talking mid-sentence.

"*Father.*" Vincent knew his mouth forced out the shape of the word, but he couldn't make it *sound* like a word. His voice had gone.

Father dropped the book.

The world grayed over for a few seconds. Vincent knew Father knelt in front of him, talking, his hands gripping Vincent's arms. Then Father was calling Vincent's name, ordering him to pay attention. The physician's fingers touched Vincent's neck, feeling for what must be a failing pulse. And then Vincent was struggling against Father's hands, bracing himself against Father's body to get his feet flat on the floor, working to stand.

"Vincent! I don't want you to—"

"Not this again," Vincent gasped. "My heart—" He coughed. "Not. This way. I won't die. On the floor."

Father stood up with him, supporting him. Both men walked with unsteady legs, for Father had also dropped his crutch. Vincent took the three steps from his chair to his bed and collapsed upon the mattresses. His head pounded. His chest heaved.

Father bent over him, setting his ear against Vincent's sternum and listening closely. Vincent felt eviscerated, shorn, his only emotion fear, his only expectation death. He knew that the men he killed felt things like this, in their final moments of conscious life—

Except for Gould. The passing of Jonathan Gould felt like a toxic black hole in Vincent's mind, devouring all the light and leaving behind only questions that had no answers. Vincent's hands tingled with the power of death.

Father had slipped into his attitude of efficient medical concentration, setting aside his own fears in order to do a healer's necessary work. He stood up straight and felt the pulse in Vincent's right wrist, then Vincent's left, comparing the two assessments. Finally he pulled a clean handkerchief from a pocket of his long coat and dabbed moisture from his son's clammy face.

The older man spoke evenly. "Vincent. I know you are terribly afraid. Listen to me. Your heart is *not* going to stop because of this. I do not believe the arrhythmia has returned. You're safe. You must trust that all the air you need is here for you, as I am."

The part of Vincent who did not throw books agreed at once. This man was an excellent doctor. A wise, kind guardian. He was Vincent's *father*. He spoke the truth to his son. Surely, all of this pain in his patient's body revealed nothing more than Vincent's unbridled fear.

Vincent groaned through his gritted teeth. Even so, his fear was *(caged! defiled!)* very great. He groped for Father with one hand.

Father caught the questing hand and held it pressed to his own heart. His empty hand came to rest upon Vincent's abdomen with the lightest of touches, to avoid fomenting rebellion amongst half-healed puncture wounds. "You must free the muscles *here* to do all the work of breathing. You're attempting to move air with your chest. That won't work, *isn't* working. Stop *trying* to breathe."

Vincent looked into Father's eyes and obeyed him. Those first shuddering moments of submission were an agony, his body not knowing what he did to it, nor what it must do for itself to reestablish its own automatic checks and balances. Vincent thought he would black out.

But he did not faint. He gazed past Father's face, relaxing the contracted muscles beneath Father's right hand. He trusted Father's courage and medical skill. Vincent felt Father's lifelong faith in him, and, deeply: Father's unstinting love.

At length the oppressive fear lifted. The air came. Vincent breathed.

When he could think again, he thought, *And so, behold: a little thing resumes its correct proportions.*

Father reached around behind him to pull the heavy wooden chair closer to Vincent's bedside. Before he sat down he asked, "Are you cold?"

Vincent let himself feel the full range of sensations present in his body. He nodded. Father retrieved a blanket from the end of Vincent's bed and covered his son with it, tucking the tattered quilt beneath Vincent's chin and taking a moment to test the temperature of Vincent's forehead with the back of his hand. Vincent bent his knees and crossed his arms over his middle. He *was* cold, and shaken, and shaking. Father sat beside him for what seemed a long while, a rock, an anchor, a fount of strength, Vincent's rootedness in the real world.

This is my father, Vincent thought, and he felt proud of the fact.

Looking into Father's face, and into his heart, Vincent said, "No one could hope to have a better doctor than you."

Father replied, "I'm very glad you think so."

Vincent moved one hand out from under his quilt. Father accepted it, holding tightly to Vincent's fingers. "Are you feeling better now?" Father asked.

Vincent nodded.

"Vincent, what happened?"

"I—" Vincent sighed. "I was trying to dress. I became frightened."

"What frightened you?"

Vincent looked to his open wardrobe. "My choices. Those I had...and those I did not."

Father felt sad for him, and also angry about all of their sorrows. Vincent sensed the older man dismiss this anger as something not useful to either of them in the present moment. Father's strong spirit brightened with healing emotions and he deliberately shared that warmth through the physical contact of his hand holding Vincent's, using that touch to thaw the frozen places in his patient's weary soul. Much about Vincent's empathic gift remained a mystery to them, but it was also a consistent mystery, subject to a predictable and inherent order of operations.

Father murmured, "You know, even when you were a small boy, you were always trying to do too much, too soon."

Vincent offered a weak smile. "I wonder who I learned that from."

Father chuckled, but Vincent sensed that his mood was becoming acutely analytical. "Vincent, earlier I heard you say, 'Not this again.' What did you mean by that?" Father immediately rephrased his statement into a more specific query. "Have you experienced this sort of episode before?"

Vincent hesitated, deciding how to answer. "Yes," he said. "More than once. But never so strong—so overwhelming—as today."

Father considered Vincent's response. "Hmm. Shall I hazard a guess as to when these attacks began?"

Vincent waited.

"Was it after the twelfth of February?"

Vincent looked at Father's hand holding onto his and nodded.

Father sighed, "And again, I learn that you didn't come to me."

I was still trying to understand my fears, and my judgments, of the gang, and of myself, Vincent thought. Out loud he said, "My waking fears were no worse than my nightmares at the time—"

Father interrupted sternly, "Although the influences of those dreams were *substantial,* as I recall."

"They always are," Vincent answered. "Father, about this problem...I *would* have come to you, when I was ready, but that was when Margaret needed you. Afterward you were grieving, and you needed *me*, and you also needed time alone. And later...the cave-in happened. I came to believe that I must begin to heal in my own way."

He grew quiet. That healing time was another thing his imprisonment had taken from him. But no one could have foreseen Catherine's job offer from Providence, or the opportunistic professor from Columbia University.

Softly Father said, "There's always something to protect someone else from, isn't there?"

"For both of us," said Vincent.

They listened to the hour, followed by Pascal's *ALL'S WELL*, ringing down the pipes. Father muttered an ironic counterpoint as this ordinary message punctuated extraordinary events. Vincent simply drew upon an alternative to Dante in his memory and recited to himself: *It is sooth that sin is cause of all this pain; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.*

All evil remained a little thing in his closed left hand.

“Chesterton and the gentle Dame Julian,” Vincent whispered.

“Oh? What about them?”

Vincent pushed fabric down from his chin. With one claw he traced a triangle of antique lace in the patchwork of his quilt. “The poem about the ‘little thing,’ Father? I’d like to read that.”

“All right,” Father said. “I’ll see if I can find the book for you.” He let go of Vincent’s hand and sat back in the chair. Father sounded cautious as he said next, “Speaking of books...I want you to know: I burned that box of notebooks and...things...from the University.”

Vincent waited to see if the coldness would return. It didn’t. “Thank you, Father,” he said.

“Winslow...ehem...helped.”

Vincent smiled. “My condolences to Winslow.”

This remark surprised Father into laughter. Vincent listened to his music of relief and release, and thought, *Ah, Winslow.* The box-burning must have been a full-fledged adventure in its own right.

Father finally wound down, saying, “Yes. Condolences.” His smile softened. “It’s almost time for your next dose of medicine.”

“I know.”

The older man got up from Vincent’s chair. His movements were slow and wooden. “I’ll go remove potential stumbling blocks from the path of our teapot deliverer.”

Vincent watched Father pick up his crutch from the floor, then collect the much-maligned work of a great Italian poet from the place where it had fallen. Father grunted in moderate pain as he stood up, leaning quickly against the bare wall beside the entryway to keep his balance.

Vincent narrowed his eyes. “You told me you were well again.”

Father looked across the room at him. “I am.”

“I’m not unaware of your discomfort, Father.”

Father cleared his throat. “The discomfort I feel is no worse than it’s been lately.”

“But is it better?”

Father raised his eyebrows.

“Father: influences.”

The good doctor sighed. “*You’re* obviously doing better.” He shook his head. “I’ll take my own tea later. I’ll even go so far as to *rest* this evening...if you’ll do the same.”

Vincent gazed upon him and loved him. “It seems we are negotiating mutual obstinacy,” he said.

Now Father’s smile became a rueful one.

“I will rest,” Vincent promised.

“Good—on two fronts.” Father crossed the room to Vincent’s wardrobe. “Did you want something out of here?”

A new beginning, Vincent thought. “Would you bring me an overshirt?” he asked.

Father took the top shirt from one pile and closed the wardrobe doors. Then he placed the garment on the bed within Vincent’s reach and returned to the chair. He lifted the book he still held. “A call for help, by the way?” he asked. “Or a medically unauthorized head start on spring cleaning?”

Vincent studied the book’s newly scuffed cover. “Neither. The preface to an exorcism, perhaps.”

Father’s voice lost its gently teasing tone. “And Dante was a hindrance to...such a task?”

“No, not a hindrance. I think it was closer to...a catalyst. Function served, no longer needed.” Vincent blinked at the valiant little volume. “Though I assure you, I was not thinking in

such a rational way at that moment."

Father nodded, resting Vincent's book on one knee.

"I had intended to give the book to Michael to read," Vincent commented. "To accompany an upcoming passage in Dostoevsky. But perhaps his class has moved past that part of the text by now."

"Well, he may still want to read it. I've never known Michael to turn down a literary challenge."

Vincent smiled again at the truth of Father's words.

"I'll see that he gets the book," Father said.

Their talk turned to other matters while they waited for Vincent's tea to arrive. Father described the status of the Maze Barricades Project, and plans for the evening concert to be given in late April. Eric wanted to start taking lessons in chess, which pleased Father to no end, as he always enjoyed introducing new students to the game. Mary had come back from her visit to Narcissa's chamber. Her return during today's noontime meal created quite a stir in the Dining Hall. One of their Helpers, Austin, had announced his engagement to a charming woman named Sherrie. The couple planned to move from New York to Chicago after the wedding. Although everyone would be sorry to see their friend go, the community was very happy for Austin's sake. Vincent wished the middle-aged mechanic all the joy in the world.

Half-listening as Father went on imparting Undercity news, Vincent thought: *This is why no Darkness can last. This is what Catherine and Father and my whole family have been teaching me anew. Love cannot help but prevail. Only the tiniest spark is required to break through the shell of night. Many sparks together will always dissolve the blackness. Always. Evil can change the course of history, but it cannot abide the presence of Light. Knowing this, we can endure what harms are done.*

These thoughts, too, could not correct or justify the wounds slowly closing inside him. Nevertheless, Vincent saw once more an open space beckoning from beyond the gathered Shadows. He accepted his own power to choose to travel toward the dawn.

And maybe tomorrow, he thought, *I'll regain the freedom to choose for myself which shirt to wear.*

Maybe tomorrow.

V

30 March 1987
Monday Night

Jamie left Catherine at one of the entrances to Father's chamber. "Vincent's going to love it," said the girl, admiring the Lalique crystal vase in Catherine's hands. The vase contained a profusion of flowers, all nodding to the rhythm of Catherine's steps, as though the blossoms agreed with Jamie's expert opinion. Catherine smiled at her new friend. Jamie smiled back and walked into another tunnel, her escort duty concluded.

Catherine thought: *Jamie's right. I have no reason to feel nervous about this gift.*

She felt nervous anyway. The Tunnelkids may have accepted $6,500 worth of artwork and sundries without knowing what they had carried Below, but Vincent was an astute observer of his city. Catherine wasn't sure he knew how to price *objets d'art* at a glance, the way she often

could. However, Vincent *would* be able to recognize the rarity of the vase, the quality of the flowers. The bouquet had seemed like a wonderful idea while Catherine sat comfortably in her apartment. She had been perfectly satisfied with the flower arrangement when she picked up the delivery from her building concierge after dinner out with Edie. Then, bringing the bouquet Below, she saw dainty flower petals bobbing beneath rusted pipes, stained concrete reflected in transparent crystal.

She thought, *My problem really has nothing to do with what I'm feeling right now. This is my get-well gift for a special friend. That's all. But what if Vincent finds the gesture excessive? What if I...embarrass him?*

Well, she was here now. She had brought a present for Vincent, mistake or no. She bowed her head to inhale the sweet fragrance of the twiggy cherry blossoms artistically threaded in amongst the other blooms. She believed Vincent would know most, if not all, of the flower meanings. Catherine had once shown him her mother's gift, watching his fingers turn the pages with reverence as he admired the watercolor illustrations. He had been able to compare the text of each entry with his memories of a Victorian floriography he had seen Below.

The white and pink cherry flowers smelled good. Catherine felt she had done well to order them for the arrangement. They filled out this tangible prelude to the things she needed to tell her kindest friend.

But, she wondered, *what will he think of me after he hears what I have to say? No bouquet in the world could ever make up the difference if I lose Vincent's respect.*

Catherine raised her chin. That thought was unworthy of her—and of him. Vincent loved her as only Vincent had ever loved her. She must trust that love. She must never again give in to her old fears.

With a practiced shrug of her right shoulder, Catherine repositioned her purse strap to keep it from slipping down her arm as she walked. She gripped the vase and stepped into Father's chamber. The old man waited inside, seated at the central table.

At first glance, Catherine thought Father was playing a game of chess against himself. A board had been set up on the tabletop and he moved a black piece, then a white piece, as Catherine walked over to him. He looked up at her. Catherine saw that he held a book in one hand. He must be referring to its pages of graphs and diagrams in order to re-enact a game.

Father stood up. "Catherine," he greeted her.

"Hello, Father."

She stopped in front of him while he removed his reading glasses and studied the vase and flowers. Then he smiled. "Vincent is in his chamber now. It is my fervent hope that you will find him *resting* there."

Vincent's chamber. Not the Hospital Chamber. Catherine's spirits grew lighter. "Then he's recovered?"

Father folded his glasses and set them on the table beside the chessboard. "Not completely."

He must have seen some of the resurgent worry, or the nervousness, in Catherine's bearing.

"Rest assured, Vincent is out of danger now. The seizures have stopped and his heart has resumed a healthy rhythm. He's been able to walk a little. The children played chess with him after supper tonight. But it will be some days, perhaps weeks, before his full strength returns to him. At times, his thinking still becomes disorganized. I believe brief, *quiet* visits from his friends will help him there."

Father was making no attempt to be subtle. Catherine nodded, accepting his hints. "I

won't stay long tonight, Father. I know he needs his sleep."

"Just as much as you need yours," Father replied. "Has your return to work gone smoothly for you?"

Catherine smiled. Arriving at the office this morning, she found a twelve-inch stack of file folders occupying her in-basket, half a dozen TO DO – ASAP notes from multiple bureaus littering her desk like confetti—and a WELCOME BACK! greeting card signed by Joe and several of her co-workers.

"Yes," she said. "I felt appreciated today."

"Good. Good."

"Father?" She had one more question she needed to ask him. "The...brain injury you suspected? Will that continue to affect Vincent, long term...or is he healing from that, as well?"

Father answered, "Vincent's ability to heal is...astonishing. I'm thankful he received the treatments he needed, just in time. His injuries were severe, but I now believe the damage is not as permanent as I originally feared. We must wait and see how far the healing can go. He's doing very well as of tonight, all things considered."

Ask a medical question of a doctor, get a doctor's two-edged prognosis, Catherine thought. "Thank you for telling me," she said.

Father nodded. "Go now. I don't want to keep you. I can see you're here on an important errand."

Catherine grinned at her flowers and crossed the room to the iron steps. Behind her a chessman clicked against the board as Father moved another piece to a new position.

Outside Father's Study, glowing candles lined the passage walls. Catherine followed the lights down the corridor and past the entrance to the little washroom. At that point, a new sound began to supplant the dominance of pipecode in the medley of Tunnels Quiet around her. It was instrumental music, a little tinny, playing bright strains of recorded fancy.

Catherine listened to it and thought, *Is that...Gershwin?*

Horns and strings gave way to piano in an exuberant crescendo. Not only was this Gershwin, but *Rhapsody in Blue*. Catherine went up the steps into Vincent's entry passage and moved quietly toward the music. As she came closer, she heard two male voices conversing within the chamber.

"—says that you can't live in New York if you don't own a recording of this song. He's convinced there ought to be law or something."

Vincent laughed. "The friend who gave me the jukebox held a similar opinion."

"Do I know this friend?"

"No. She died before you came Below."

Vincent turned toward her as Catherine entered the room. He had sensed her arrival, was smiling at the sight of her. His gaze dropped to the bouquet she carried.

"I come in peace, bearing gifts," Catherine told him. Turning to Vincent's companion she said, "Hello, Michael."

Michael returned her greeting. The three of them became quiet, listening to the last bars of music soar into the high shadows of Vincent's chamber. Then it was over. The jukebox emitted mechanical clicks and whirs as the music player reset itself.

Michael stood up from the large wooden chair where he sat. He gathered up a stack of pages and notebooks, reaching to take the hand-bound sheaf of papers Vincent held out for him. "I'll tell Mandy and Tomas you liked their essay. Don't be surprised if they show up here wanting to know all the gory details of your analysis."

Vincent replied, “I’d expect no less from those two. Good night, Michael.”

Michael nodded. “Catherine,” he said. “Good to see you.”

Catherine smiled at the boy. Michael walked around her and departed swiftly for other environs.

“I didn’t mean to chase him away,” she said, walking to Vincent’s table. The table’s surface had been cleared of all but a few books. A cup and pitcher sat between the single book pile and an antique candelabra. Catherine set the vase on the table so she could take off her purse and scarf.

Vincent said, “Don’t worry. Michael was already on his way out. He needed to return to his chamber to study for an examination he’s going to take soon. He’s preparing to apply for admission to college.”

Catherine looked at Vincent’s face. Satisfied affection shone from his features as he gazed at the empty entryway. Vincent reclined comfortably at the end of his bed, cushions and pillows forming a bulwark around him. Tunnels loungewear seemed to consist of a regular set of white shirts that Catherine had seen him wearing at other times, yarn-mended sweatpants, and long knitted socks. The window behind Vincent glowed with amber light, making his hair look like golden curls of smoke against the glass.

This was the first time she had seen him taking his ease like this. Vincent was a man completely at home. The vision warmed Catherine’s heart.

She picked up the vase and brought it to him. Vincent turned from his chamber entrance to view the flowers, his body’s residual trembling barely noticeable, but still a clear reminder of his convalescence. He touched the graceful curve of an iris petal with the claws of his left hand.

“This is...a complicated bouquet,” he said.

Catherine smiled. “Father tells me you’re better.”

“Yes. Getting better. Catherine, what is this flower? A type of daisy?”

“Yes. Helenium.”

Vincent repeated the name to himself. “Hmm. I’ve seen this bloom in other colors, in pictures.” He glanced up. “I remember. Helen of Troy. The flowers that grew where her tears fell upon the grass.”

“When Paris kidnapped her. Yes.”

Vincent looked into her eyes, into her soul, then back at the cherry blossoms, and the cloves flowering like tiny clusters of nighttime fireworks, the fragile snowdrops, the sunny elfwort and elegant iris stems.

“That is one way the ancient story can be told,” he said.

Catherine watched him trace a line along the surface of the crystalline vase, until his fingers came to rest upon Catherine’s, where the beveled design etched into the glass met her skin.

“*Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes.* I see iris beside the helenium in this lovely vessel. You bring a message, Catherine. Should I be afraid?”

He knows I am afraid, Catherine thought. She found courage for herself in Vincent’s fearless blue eyes.

She said, “I don’t want you to be afraid. This is no trick, no Trojan horse, but you’ll have to decide for yourself what you should feel. I do have something I need to tell you.”

Vincent slowly pulled his hand from hers and leaned against his pillows, arranging himself to listen. Catherine brought the vase back to the table. She opened her purse and took out the book she’d brought with her. She sat down on the upholstered seat of Vincent’s salvaged and restored sitting room chair.

“A couple days ago, you asked me why I chose to stay in New York,” Catherine said. She hesitated, recalling how tired and ill he had been. “Do you remember that?”

“I remember.”

“I want to give you my answer to that question, but first I need to tell you some things about my life...my life before I met you. And my life afterward.”

Vincent waited for her.

Catherine sighed, running her fingertips along the edges of the book’s spine. It was time. This needed to be said.

“I can’t deny that I’ve led a privileged life, Vincent. My father and I...we’ve known our times of sorrow. When my mother died it seemed like the whole world became a different place to live in. For a while it was a much scarier place. But we found many things to do together, ways to build new sources of light for the years to come. We had each other, and Mom’s legacy, and Daddy’s firm. I had my friends and school. Goals for my education and career. I’m not sure I should call them dreams. They were mostly just...hopes, ideas about the future.”

She glanced at him. Vincent’s demeanor seemed calm, kind, gently curious.

“Then I started making some mistakes.”

Catherine placed the book flat on her lap and clasped her hands over the front cover.

(Don’t be afraid.)

“Remembering how things happened for me...still makes me feel disgusted with myself sometimes. At other times, I’m simply sad for the girl I used to be. I didn’t *throw* myself at boys...or later, at the men in my life. I was just looking for...well, for something none of them could give me. I thought I’d found what I was looking for every time I fell in love. Then...things would just...crumble in my hands.

“There were times when I ended up feeling like all I had to give was whatever my money could buy to accessorize my life, so that intimacy with me could decorate someone else’s life. I think with some of those relationships, I felt so...grateful that someone would even want to be with me, because I wasn’t anything special—oh, I don’t know. I enjoyed being around the people from my parents’ world. There’s just...not a lot of deeper meaning in that world. I was the pretty girl who could give clever speeches in forensics club. Later, I was the fashionable attorney who could set her own schedule. I wanted to be more, to *do* more with what I had. Nothing lasted. I was lost, alone. I was so afraid of being alone that I couldn’t even admit that I was scared.”

Catherine took a deep breath. “In the months before my accident, I could feel everything start to slide. My career...looking back, it was a joke. A disaster. I was good at what I did, but I never felt like working. I think I felt guilty for not having earned my position at the firm. I got engaged to a man my father liked. Dad once told me that I could do a lot worse than Tom Gunther. We all knew this was true...because I *have* done a lot worse. For myself, and for the men I once loved. Or thought I loved. I couldn’t imagine what might be better.

“And Tom was...oh, Tom loved me politely for the most part. I was an asset to his plans. He gave me some stability. Maybe I should say, ‘rigidity.’ Tom’s world was very small and I felt it closing in on top of me. The way my father’s world had already shuttered me into some very small circles. I was drinking too much, too often.” Catherine shook her head. “I was shopping too much. Wasting time, avoiding home, avoiding Dad’s office, some nights avoiding Tom’s bed or my own bed, always avoiding anything that made me the least bit uncomfortable...which turned out to be almost *everything* in my life. I understand now that this was my way of living on the run from my fear.”

Catherine looked into Vincent’s eyes. Sadness emanated from her listener. “Vincent, when you saved my life, you saved every part of my life, every broken piece of me. You put me

together again. You gave me...myself. And you gave me *your*self. Everything you are. I know I've given you so much pain back. Of all the wonderful people in my new life, you're the one I've hurt the most, and the most often."

Vincent started to sit up. "No, Catherine—"

"Yes. Please, stay where you are."

Vincent subsided.

"So you see, these were the kinds of thoughts weighing down my spirit when Joe told me about Providence. And to crown that whole mess inside my heart, I couldn't stop thinking about how Alexander Ross made me hurt you." Catherine paused.

Be honest, Cathy, she thought, and began again with: "No, there was more to it than that. Alexander wasn't the one who said the things I said to you, the night you took me to Narcissa. That was *me*. That was...the Catherine no one else has ever seen before."

"Please," said Vincent, his voice wrung with compassion. "You were sick, poisoned—"

"Vincent, I know I was sick. I know a deceitful criminal *caused* me to be sick. But that's not what matters to me now. What happened between us that night—those were the most hateful things I've ever done in my life. I'm not sure I can ever truly know what it cost you to stay near to me during my...sickness."

"I could never leave you alone in such darkness," Vincent said.

"I know that, too. And I also know that I left you alone in yours."

"Catherine."

She spoke softly but resolutely. "Vincent, I *know*. After you came home again last week, I heard you repeat something that I said to you earlier in the month. A name I inflicted upon you because I confused you with my own demons. *La Bête Noire*. I heard you say it. You *teach* French, Vincent. Haitian Creole isn't great a leap for you. I'm sure you've spoken with Narcissa about Vodou *loa*. You understand exactly what "The Black Beast" meant to me in that darkness. I *know* my ugliness injured your spirit."

Vincent closed his eyes.

"I also know you don't want me to carry that burden...that kind of guilt. God, Vincent, *you* faced *my* fear and showed me you were not afraid."

He opened his eyes again.

"You forgave me all the hurt I was responsible for, and you saved me from everything else I couldn't control. The goodness, the strength you've brought into my life...through these gifts, you've taught me what it really *means* to give. Two weeks ago, I wasn't sure what *good* I could give to you"—Catherine waved one hand toward the vase—"that wasn't simply a trinket from my world. There are so many valuable things I could bring you, Vincent, and still...they're only *things*. I'm learning that *things* tend to come with strings attached. With chains."

Catherine looked down at the book she held. Her volume of Wordsworth poems. "When Providence became an option, you didn't want to hold me back, and I didn't want to chain you to a woman who wasn't sure who she was, or what she was worth. I think I was happy that my boss had handed me an easy out. Because this time I was running away from *you*, Vincent. I was running away from *us*. I know that now. I'm sorry I ever thought that running could solve any of my problems."

Now she faced Vincent squarely, and Catherine found that she had entered a place of inner calm. She felt grateful they were able to share their deepest thoughts and feelings with each other. She told Vincent, "I'm not going to run anymore."

What Catherine felt now—this was confidence. It was trust. And it was peace.

"Our city is my home. On the other side of all the dark times in my life, New York has

been the one place that brings me true happiness. I've made so many memories, walked down so many streets with so many friends. This place gave me my childhood, and my professional skills...and it's full of life and art and music. It has plenty of its own problems that need to be solved. This town *teems* with things calling out to be done.

"I'm ready to give back to the world that has supported me throughout all my years of confusion and loneliness. And I want to change the world that wounded me...the world that wounded you. I'm not going to be frightened anymore. I want to help others know that they don't need to be afraid, either. Someone is there for them. I can be there for them, walking beside them."

Vincent's face had become unreadable. His eyes shone bright, intent. He sat silently, listening with all of his great self and being. Catherine thought, *I should never have believed that you would judge me for my past, or for the hard times we've survived together. That isn't who you are, nor how you love.*

She said to him, "Vincent...you are part of our city. You are the most treasured part of my life...and of me. I stayed because my love for you *required* me to stay. I could do nothing else without becoming someone else...someone I don't want to be. When I learned that you were missing, I knew that the center of who I am had become lost as well. I had almost left *both* of us behind in my rush to get away from my pain and uncertainty. Searching for you, Vincent, I found Catherine Chandler."

She thought she could feel him then. Feel the eternal power of him, and his endless devotion to the woman he loved. His devotion to her. A tendril of sensation caressed her spirit through the amazing bond they shared. It felt wonderful, plentiful. It felt right.

"I will try not to be foolhardy with our love," Catherine said. "I understand that I have to learn to accept what exists between us. What we have together is meant to give us life abundant."

She stopped talking. They sat without speaking, each watching the other's face. At last, Vincent whispered, "Then...welcome home, Catherine."

She smiled at him. He was beautiful. Always gentle. Always loving. She opened the book and held it so the candlelight could illuminate its pages. She found the poem she wanted to share with Vincent and began to read aloud.

"*Surprised by joy—impatient as the wind*
I turned to share the transport—Oh! with whom
But Thee, deep buried in the silent tomb,
That spot which no vicissitude can find?
Love, faithful love, recalled thee to my mind—
But how could I forget thee? Through what power,
Even for the least division of an hour,
Have I been so beguiled as to be blind
To my most grievous loss?—That thought's return
Was the worst pang that sorrow ever bore,
Save one, one only, when I stood forlorn,
Knowing my heart's best treasure was no more;
That neither present time, nor years unborn
Could to my sight that heavenly face restore."

She looked up from the printed words, looked up into that heavenly face, looked, and looked with love, and in return was seen.

Catherine closed the book and set it beside the vase on the table. She stood up, draped her scarf around her neck, held her purse in her hand. She went to Vincent. She leaned down and touched her cheek to his. She hugged him, indulging her need to brush her fingers over back of his head as she breathed in the earthy solidity of the one she loved. She was home. The man she loved was home. And her friends knew where to find her. She knew where to find herself.

"Good night," she whispered, then left the chamber.

Chapter Eighteen: Angels Above

I

31 March 1987
Tuesday, Very Early Morning

No rest for the wicked, Winslow thought, putting one foot in front of the other. Well, it served him right. Bedtime stories had always had the wrong effect on him. They never put him to sleep. Instead, they tended to keep him awake for hours after he snuffed the candle, while his brain worked over whatever matters of plot and circumstance the story gave to him. And the O'Donnell story was so *excellent*. Really hard to put down. He walked along the tunnel, just strolling, thinking over epic battles and noble sacrifices.

The underworld around him had burrowed into quietness, the early hour silencing Inner Circle conversations on the pipes. Topside traffic noises had died down too. It all felt kind of peaceful. Winslow believed this kind of peace Below was shamefully overdue.

He turned a sharp corner and came to a stop. Ahead of him, another tall form also pulled up short, halting its own progress in rounding the bend at the junction between two connecting passages. Winslow and Vincent stared at each other, both of them startled.

It was Winslow who pointed out, "You must've been deeper-in-thought than I was, if I've gone and snuck up on you like this."

He thought he detected a whiff of mischief in Vincent's reply. "I was concentrating upon my journey."

Vincent stood with one hand seeking support from the tunnel wall and the other hand grasping the knob at the top of one of Father's walking sticks. He was dressed in sleeping clothes and cloak, boots on his feet, a slight stoop in his walk. He'd come a good way out from his chamber.

"Uh huh," Winslow said. "Does Father know you're running loose?"

Vincent wobbled the end of the walking stick against the stone floor and looked up at Winslow. "When I borrowed this, Father was fast asleep. And I'm not running anywhere." Now the mischief showed through in his smile. "But I am walking."

Winslow smiled back, shaking his head. He heard that touch of pride in Vincent's voice.

"Why are you awake?" Vincent asked him.

"Gotta be the same reason as you. I couldn't sleep."

Vincent nodded and started forward again. Winslow fell into step beside him, backtracking along the corridor he had just exited. They took the southern turn toward the Perimeter instead of the western turn that would point them in the direction of Winslow's chamber. Neither man rushed onward, which seemed fine with both of them. Vincent was still in no shape to hurry anywhere. He moved at quarter-speed, his breathing steady but his trembliness readily apparent.

After traveling together like that for a minute or so, Winslow simply put himself between Vincent and the left-hand wall, letting the convalescent grip Winslow's supporting left arm while Winslow settled his right across Vincent's shoulders. This stabilized forward momentum. Soon Vincent was able to stand taller, not stooping over the cane anymore. Winslow's strength sufficed to keep them walking side by side along the downward sloping passage.

"We going anywhere special tonight?" Winslow asked, wanting to know just how far

Vincent thought this jaunt was going to take him.

"The Mirror Pool," Vincent replied.

Not the destination Winslow had anticipated—though truth to tell, he sure as hell hadn't expected to come across Vincent out here in the first place. A little distance farther along didn't add any greater surprise to the discovery that Father's patient had gotten up on his own initiative. Pondering their situation, Winslow started to grin.

"You know, the last time we took a walk like this, you were the one holding me up," he said.

Vincent glanced at him. "Yes. You were rather the worse for wear that night."

"Vincent, I was drunk as a lord."

Vincent laughed. "But, otherwise, you had a good naming day?"

"You know I did." It felt *so* good to hear Vincent's husky chuckle again. "One of these days, you're gonna have to tell me how you got your hands on my mother's recipe for that cake."

"At no time did I 'get my hands on it,'" Vincent answered. "Julia never wrote that one down."

"I *know* she never wrote it down. It bugged me for years. But how did you know how to bake it?"

They took the circular Sun Stair slowly, descending the equivalent of a single flight of steps into the Solar Passage. When daylight hit the surface of the Mirror Pool, this tunnel lit up with sunshine. Right now, however, the mica flecks in the walls only struck tiny sparks of torchlight.

"The cake was a team effort," Vincent said. "Rebecca remembered all the ingredients. I remembered the measurements. Pascal remembered the baking time and oven temperature. William was nearly wringing his hands, watching us."

That got Winslow laughing. "You three always were a force to be reckoned with."

"So I am told."

At the bottom of the Stair, Vincent stopped to rest, leaning on the passage wall.

"You okay?" Winslow asked, concerned.

Vincent nodded. "I'm tiring. To be sure, I'll be ready to sleep when I return to my chamber."

"Want to head back now?"

"No."

Winslow waited for his friend, beginning to worry whether the help he gave Vincent tonight was a service or a disservice. But a moment later, Vincent stood up straight and got moving again. So Winslow went with him.

They followed the passage into the great cavern which sheltered a calm and secret waterway. Winslow released his friend. They walked onto the stone walk bridging the narrowest section of the Mirror Pool.

Vincent just stared at the Pool for a long while. Then he knelt down and set Father's walking stick on the flat stone beside him. He reached for the star-flecked surface of the water. Vincent dipped his hands in, and—he washed them.

Winslow crouched next to him, looking on. It felt wrong to try to say something, maybe to ask what was the matter with the wash water stored in Vincent's chambers. So Winslow held his peace. Vincent moved with with an air of methodical ritual.

Seeming satisfied at last with the result of these libations, Vincent shook his hands over the water and held still. Winslow kept on saying nothing. Vincent noticed his companion's careful silence. He murmured simply, "This is something I do."

Winslow thought about hows and whys. What need drove a man still recovering from deathly illness to come all the way out here, just so he could bathe his hands in starlight? In his mind's eye, the Tunnelfolk's chief smith and mechanic began to see two Topside plots of ground awaiting coffins that had yet to claim their appointed occupants. He didn't know whether that image showed him the obvious answer, or whether he was getting his own dose of crazy-strange tonight.

Either way, doesn't matter, Winslow thought. *It's the comprehension that counts.*

He asked, "Was it Vernon who taught you to do this something?"

Vincent continued to watch ripples widen in shimmering rings over the surface of the black water. "Yes."

That was all Winslow needed—or wanted—to know.

The Pool became a mirror again. Vincent twisted out of his kneeling position to sit sidelong to the waterline. Winslow also sat down, resting his arm across a bent knee. Vincent got very quiet, looking at the reflected stars, and maybe at his own reflection.

Winslow tried out the contemplative attitude for himself. It didn't suit him very well. *No surprise there,* he thought. But those embers of light gleaming at him from far across the galaxy *were* kind of pretty. This was a nice spot. As good a place as any to say a thing that Winslow needed to get off his chest.

"There's something I have to tell you," he said.

Vincent turned from the water to look at him.

"I helped Father get rid of that box from the University lab."

"I know."

Winslow sighed. "Yeah, well. Maybe what you *don't* know is that I saw stuff Father didn't start out meaning for me to see. A few of the...uh, Polaroids. Snapshots, you know. I did my clutz act again. Got an eyeful."

Vincent looked down at the walking stick on the ground between them.

"Just want you to know, I'm sorry that happened. That I saw what I saw. Hell, I'm sorry *everything* happened."

"Everything," Vincent whispered. "Yes." He went back to scoping out the water, although this time Winslow was sure his friend scrutinized his own reflection.

Quiet settled down and dug in afresh. Winslow was starting to get a little creeped out by the stillness when Vincent said, "I don't like being photographed."

Winslow decided to perform his best imitation of Pascal. He shut his mouth tight and strained his ears for more soft words to come. He didn't have to wait very long.

"Winslow, when you look at me, what do you see?"

God almighty, thought Winslow. *How am I supposed to answer that one?* But if this was the price for dropping the professor's ghoulish photo album, Winslow must pay up. He cleared his throat. Vincent faced him again.

Winslow made an effort to stay afloat in the depths of keenly intelligent blue eyes. He said, "What I see is my friend. You're a kid I grew up with. A smart boy who's turned out to be a fine man. A good man. Someone I am proud to know."

Vincent stayed silent, but it felt like an open silence, and one that included Winslow within its spacious, starlit vista.

"It still kills me, Vincent. You know it does. But what those people did can't change who you really are. It can't."

Vincent lowered his gaze. "Some changes we can resist, while other changes..." He sighed. "A cage forces unwelcome changes upon a captive, Winslow. I tried to show this truth to

Hughes, but the professor would not admit what he and Gould were making of me...or what their cage made of me. You've seen. In the photographs...you've seen what was most important to them."

Gooseflesh broke out over Winslow's arms and neck. *What was most important to them.* Even after the thing with the Polaroids, he hadn't thought of the whole University mess in quite that light. To Winslow those pictures revealed nothing less than a couple sadists playing with their newest—toy. He tried to imagine the kind of mind that let a man look into someone else's eyes and not only fail to see a person, but fail to see even an animal.

How do you touch another living thing...even if you don't know what it is...and decide it's some kind of a toy for your private playroom? Winslow thought. He couldn't grasp how anyone could sink that low. He never wanted to be able to grasp a thing like that.

"Both of them were...uh...*bad* men," Winslow said. "The professor, though—man! What Catherine told us, what those pictures showed? He was the worst. He *knew* better."

Vincent replied, "He wanted what I could not give." It was not agreement and it was not argument.

"Meaning what?" Winslow asked. "What did he want?"

"His dignity. His freedom."

Winslow took his best shot at understanding. "That guy, Hughes, didn't have enough of those things already? Topside professor like him?"

"No. Hughes had nothing. I'm sure of it. He took all he could from me in order to...clothe himself in what he lacked. And then...I had nothing worthy left to offer him. Nothing to give, or even to barter."

Sad, Vincent shook his head, and turned back toward the Pool. "Hughes was a broken man. Regretful, but not remorseful. Not until the end. Perhaps all he knew how to do was what others had done to him at some dark moment in his past: to break, to harm. Stand him beside another man, one who took dark delight in doing...that...and Hughes let himself believe it his duty to gratify old desires." Vincent paused.

"Winslow, their onslaught, their robberies...it hurt. More than I imagined was possible. I find that I *am*...changed. Things are different now. For me. And...it hurts."

Helpless rage struck hard, like lightning or a meteor. Winslow began to rub at his neck, scrubbing his fingers across his throat and Adam's apple. He felt as if something had choked him, a real damn *big* something, ghostly and unmentionable. Vincent looked away from the water and watched the restless movements of Winslow's hand.

Softly, Vincent said, "Winslow, I'm not Molly."

Winslow osmosed the statement of this warden and teacher who had the ability to look inside a person's heart and see every last facet of a secret fear. He lowered his hand.

"You've been thinking about her too."

"Quite a bit," said Vincent.

"Thought so."

"Yes?"

"Uh huh." Winslow clenched a fist, unclenched it, flexed his hot fingers. "You were talking to her just the other day, you know. In the Hospital Chamber."

"Hmm."

"Tell me you won't *ever* follow her example, Vincent."

Winslow's companion thought about this and said, "Molly's way is not my way."

Not complete reassurance, but enough to put Winslow's mind at ease. For the time being.

"Winslow, I accept Molly as my guide back into the land of the living. To me, she is like

the wise spirit from Brigit O'Donnell's fable about the owl-woman. Do you remember? She teaches us what is worth living for. Her lessons in the art of dying are meant to draw us toward love."

Winslow did remember that children's story, and how much it meant to Vincent and Pascal after Molly's death. His memory even conjured up one of the storybook's plate illustrations, the one that showed the owl-woman sheltering an injured child within the feathered circle of her wings. *Damn,* he thought, also recalling how the kid in the story had gotten hurt. *Bloody hell.*

Aloud he said, "They broke you, didn't they. That's what you're telling me tonight. That's what you were asking Molly about." The words came out a little rougher than Winslow had intended.

Quieter than Quiet, Vincent answered, "Yes. They broke me."

Winslow swore, voicing a stream of dire oaths until he caught sight of the sudden amused twinkle in Vincent's eyes. "This ain't meant to be funny," Winslow growled.

"And yet..." Vincent murmured. "And yet..."

"Yet nothing. No one else has *ever* messed you up so bad. Toting you all over the Tunnels is like carrying feathers compared to what I'm dragging around now. It weighs me down right here." Winslow stuck out a thumb and tapped it against his chest.

Winslow's furious glower did not scare Vincent off. "I *am* healing, Winslow. You don't need to carry my hurts for me."

Winslow lowered his voice. "I'd carry you and your hurts to Hades and back, if it meant knowing nothing like this would ever happen again." He leaned closer to his friend. "If I thought it would make things easier on you, I'd fetch the moon Down from the sky and wrap it up in a bow for Winterfest."

Vincent cocked his head. His mouth turned up gently at the corners. "I like the moon where it is, Winslow. But I thank you for the offer."

Winslow reached over and grasped Vincent by one arm. Vincent responded in kind and they sat together like that, two true brothers, just holding on.

"Brokenness is not always the end," Vincent finally said. "Sometimes we must break through the edge of the darkness to reach for the light."

"Yeah?" Winslow asked.

Vincent nodded. He released Winslow's forearm. The blacksmith let go too. Vincent looked out at the starry water. "It's in a book Father gave me today. The second half of a poem by Chesterton. Listen:

"*I broke the infernal gates and looked on him*
Who fronts the strong creation with a curse;
Even the god of a lost universe,
Smiling above his hideous cherubim.

And pierced far down in his soul's crypt unriven
The last black crooked sympathy and shame,
And hailed him with that ringing rainbow name
Erased upon the oldest book in heaven.

Like emptied idiot masks, sin's loves and wars
Stare at me now: for in the night I broke

The bubble of a great world's jest, and woke
Laughing with laughter such as shakes the stars."

Poems, Winslow thought. *Always poems.* And poems were totally Okay. Poetry was Vincent's native tongue.

Vincent's voice gave life to the words, made the poem's costly triumph a new reality between the two of them. Vincent bent over the Pool, dipping his hands again. He wasn't cleaning off remembered violence now, only lifting water to his mouth to drink. This took some patience on Vincent's part; his hands were still far from steady. But he eventually got the job done.

His thirst slaked, Vincent reached into his overshirt's front pocket and pulled out a leather marbles pouch. Winslow heard the contents of the bag click and grind together as Vincent's shaky fingers unknotted the drawstring closure. He held the open bag out toward Winslow. The smith moved to receive whatever gift Vincent intended to give him. Vincent shook a few flat pebbles out of the bag onto Winslow's waiting palm.

"My recent conversations with the children gave me this idea," Vincent said. He reached into the pouch and pulled out a broken ceramic tile. Identical tiles littered the city's subway tunnels, fragments of decorative constructions dislodged from the walls. Vincent sat up straight and flicked his wrist at the Mirror Pool. The tile shot from his damp hand, touched the reflecting surface, skipped once over the water and vanished into the black.

"Skipping stones," said Winslow. "You're losing your touch."

Vincent eyeballed him askance. "Come with me to this place next month, and we'll see if your assessment holds water then."

Winslow laughed. "You're on, V. Bring the kids with you. We'll need some contest judges."

Smiling, Vincent took a stone from the bag. He meditated upon it while Winslow made an experimental toss of his own. Three skips. Not bad.

"Earlier this month, Catherine was living under a Vodou curse," said Vincent. Winslow looked over at him. He'd heard the rumors. None of that news had been good.

Vincent explained further, "She was given a token of evil magic...a seashell. It held for her all the power of her fear, and it magnified the horrors her enemies wanted her to see. She began to believe in a power the shell did not truly contain. It captured her."

Vincent closed his fist around the pale gray stone. "One dark night, after I had brought Catherine Below to try to help her, Narcissa gave Catherine instructions to reverse the magic. I don't know what those instructions were. Neither of them shared the ceremony with me, and I don't know if Catherine ever performed it. But later, I went Above, to see Catherine at her home. I found her with the shell in her hands, and her wounded heart..." Vincent shut his eyes against the memory. "She sat alone in torment. She was so weary."

Opening hand and eyes, Vincent continued, "I reached for her. She let me take the shell. I crushed it in my hand and cast the fragments away. Catherine told me later that watching the shell break and fall was a moment of deep healing for her. Surely one of many on her journey."

Vincent held his stone between his fingers, preparing a throw. "Catherine has given me the other half of my idea for tonight."

He stared at the stone he held. He said to it, "The first dart...an ambush in the dark." His wrist snapped the stone at the Pool. The pebble skipped twice and the black water gulped it down.

Vincent picked out another stone. “Second ambush in the Ramble...second dart.” One skip, a watery plunk, and more ripples.

Vincent kept going, naming a total of six darts and an examination table and the cage. Winslow selected one of his own skipping stones. “Wires in my friend’s hair,” he got out. His healthy workman’s hand made the stone skip five times.

“Electrode needles at the ends of the wires.”

“That ass in the white coat petting your head.”

The stones and tiles flew. They spoke phrases as abbreviations, a new kind of pipecode beaten upon receptive water instead of sound-conducting metals. Their slow message decoded nothing less than a nightmare of epic proportions. But together, they let the nightmare go, dismantling it, scattering it, casting its influence away.

Tears crept into Vincent’s voice before they were done, and the furnace inside Winslow’s chest smoked and roared when he heard the little nicknames those pribbling, beef-witted science bandits had heaped upon Vincent’s gentle soul. Vincent must have felt Winslow’s internal blaze; he even drew nearer to it, allowing Winslow to grasp one of his shoulders during several more stone’s throws.

Winslow felt the way his friend’s muscles were starting to pull their act together again, and the restored heat of Vincent’s only-one-of-its-kind body. He felt his own anger-*and*-gratitude—an expansive thankfulness springing out from Winslow’s newfound knowledge that Vincent trusted him this much.

Winslow removed his encouraging hand as Vincent held up a final tile. “All that remains unnamed,” Vincent concluded. He launched the tile. It skimmed out. The tile skipped once, twice, three times, and sank.

Vincent sighed again. He looked deflated, the dark circles beneath his eyes aging his face.

“How are you feeling?” Winslow asked.

“Like myself now.”

Winslow smiled. “That’s good, but I think I was asking in a more medical way.”

Offering a little smile of his own, Vincent said, “I will need to sleep soon. Can you help me go back?”

Winslow briefly considered a fresh batch of witty idioms he could use to answer that request. In the end, however, he thought, *Hell with it*, and just said, “Yep.”

He helped Vincent get to his feet and picked up Father’s walking stick for him. Vincent stood where he was for a moment longer, watching the Pool. He bounced the leather bag in his hand. Small skipping stones clacked inside it.

“How many of those have you got left?” Winslow asked.

Vincent upended the bag into Winslow’s open hand. He returned the empty pouch to his shirt pocket. “Two.”

Winslow said, “Well, then let’s make them count.”

II

31 March 1987
Tuesday, Noon

Catherine checked her watch. She listened to the voice finish speaking on the other end of

the line.

"Well, it's a quarter past noon now," she said into the phone receiver. "I guess I'm due for a lunch break. I could meet you at Collect Pond."

"See you in a few," Isaac said.

Catherine hung up the phone and reached for her purse. Isaac rarely if ever called her at work. She slipped into her coat and pulled her purse strap over her shoulder. Whatever her friend needed to tell her must be too sensitive to tackle over the phone.

Meaning Isaac's news has got him worried about me, Catherine thought.

She left the building, curious and wary. She wasn't sure of the details, or how Isaac had come by them, but Catherine felt she could guess the nature of the word-on-the-street that Isaac meant to share with her.

He was waiting for her on the Centre Street side of the park when she arrived. Catherine bought them hot dogs and cans of generic cola from the roach coach peddling lunch hour wares outside the Civil Court building (her treat, she insisted). They walked down to the grungy little Collect Pond plaza and sat down together on a low concrete retaining wall. Young elm and linden leaves shaded their seat. Bright yellow daffodils spangled the trash-littered dirt patch behind the wall. Catherine and Isaac opened their sodas and divided a handful of flimsy paper napkins between them.

After they'd both gotten a good start on their last-minute picnic, Catherine asked, "So. What's this about?"

Slowly he answered, "Well...you know you asked me to keep an ear open."

Catherine nodded.

"A neighbor of mine, Peg. She's a custodian over at Columbia University."

Catherine kept her face calm, but felt a line of tension creep down her back.

Isaac looked up at the shadowing trees. "Peg had a very *strange* Monday," he said.

Catherine glanced at the cement space between them. She set down her half-eaten hot dog in its paper tray.

"One of the professors, man by the name of Clark, asked for her help moving some of his supplies out of storage in one of her buildings," said Isaac. "Basement room. Not a lot of traffic down there. Peg says, when he got to the door, he expected it to be locked, and it wasn't. He didn't like that. He liked it even *less* when they walked into the storage room and found two dead men inside. They both looked murdered."

Furniture, Catherine thought, and shivered.

"Strangest thing about it though? There were two bodies, and Professor Clark's crates of stuff...and this empty monkey cage." Now Isaac turned his eyes from the trees to assess Catherine's expression. "The cage wasn't Clark's. He got...upset."

"Well, *sure*," Catherine said.

Isaac shook his head. "Peg said he freaked out about the deaths, but he got *mad* because now he can't get his equipment out of a crime scene. Guess he's been burned by something like that before. That fact being why he borrowed the storage room from some colleagues in the first place." Isaac paused to drink some cola. "One of the...uh...deceased was the man who lent Clark the room. Another professor. The second body used to be one of the dead professor's grad students."

Catherine said nothing. As she listened, she fitted Isaac's information into what she already knew about Hughes and Gould.

Still watching her, Isaac said, "I can see this isn't news to you."

She took a deep breath and looked into his eyes. "Some of it is news...and some of it

isn't."

Cautiously: "You're already on this case for the DA?"

With equal care Catherine answered, "No. And if this case ever happens to get shoveled in my direction, I'm going to do my best to pass it on to someone else."

Isaac chewed a bite of his food, looking thoughtful. Catherine sat with the toes of her shoes touching the cracked pavement. Her heart pattered too quickly inside her chest. The bodies had been found. The room was being processed. She had been too busy reinstating herself at work to spend time at home watching for news reports on television, or listening to the radio. Catherine supposed it must be a good thing that yesterday had been completely uneventful for her, legally.

"Peg says another strange thing happened after the cops had her open the office of the dead professor, so they could look around. There was a horrible smell. At first she was afraid someone else had died, but they found out it was just food rotting inside a briefcase behind the professor's desk." Isaac reached into a jacket pocket and pulled out a small sheet of lined paper. "You gotta see this."

Catherine read the list Isaac had spelled out in capital letters with a blue felt pen. APPLES – FOUR TYPES. CAN OF TUNA. CAN OF SARDINES. PKG RIPE SMOKED SALMON. PKG SPOILED COD. BRICK OF SHARP CHEDDAR CHEESE.

She stared at the paper, trying to imagine Hughes buying all of this at his local market, then trucking them into his office inside his briefcase. Why? Perhaps—for Vincent?

(Hughes offered cold meat.)

Her eye went back to SHARP CHEDDAR CHEESE and she felt on the verge of dissolving into peals of helpless laughter. Catherine looked away from the list. Hughes suddenly seemed *beyond* pathetic. And there was nothing else she could imagine to say about him now.

Isaac returned the paper to his pocket. "Are you okay, Cathy?" he asked.

"Yeah, Isaac. I'm fine."

He hesitated, then said, "And how is Vincent?"

Catherine thought about this question. Isaac wasn't asking about February twelfth now. This was a new situation, another one Catherine had pulled Isaac into—or, at least, she had pulled him to the periphery. She owed him as much truth as she could give him without breaking her promises of secrecy to Vincent and his people.

She met Isaac's wise brown eyes. "They almost destroyed him, Isaac."

"He...got caught again."

Catherine nodded.

"You have anything to do with it this time?"

Catherine sighed, "In a second-hand way, I guess."

Her picnic partner considered the last few bites of his hot dog.

"He's safe now. Recovering," she said.

Isaac looked at her. "Peg said they were science department people."

"Yes."

"How long did they have him?"

"Five days."

Now Isaac surveyed the other people lunching in the plaza. "A lot can happen in five days," he said.

Catherine thought, *A lot did happen. A lot is still happening.*

With quiet sincerity Isaac offered, "I'm sorry trouble found your friend again."

“Thanks, Isaac.”

“If there’s anything I can do...”

Smiling, Catherine touched his arm. “You’ve already helped me a lot. Thanks for passing along what Peg found out.”

“Not a problem.”

They regarded each other. Catherine wondered again what Isaac’s life must be like, and what had instilled in him his great respect for—not just privacy, but—secrets. Maybe someday, she’d find the courage to ask him. Today she said only, “Do you have time to squeeze me in for some training on Friday morning?”

He grinned. “Could be. How early?”

“How’s five-thirty sound?”

“Absolutely do-able.”

“Great,” Catherine said, and thought, *Assuming I haven’t been arrested in the meantime.*

But there was nothing to be done about that except to wait. And hope. And keep on with keeping on.

Isaac nodded and stood. Catherine picked up her hot dog.

“Can I walk you back?” Isaac asked.

“Thanks, no. I’d like to sit here and finish lunch.”

“Okay. Take care of yourself. If I hear anything more, I’ll give you a call.”

She smiled at him. Isaac walked away, casually pitching his empty can and crumpled hot dog tray into a garbage receptacle as he left the park. Catherine finished her meal and then sat still in the dappled sunlight, letting her mind drift and her stomach settle. Nothing—nothing at all about her life was simple anymore.

Will I ever get used to this new fact about myself? she wondered.

Catherine suspected that only time would tell.

III

31 March 1987
Tuesday, Early Afternoon

Cassie pointed to an orange ribbon stretched across an upper corner of Mary’s new memory board. “I did that one,” said the girl. “That was my hair ribbon, but I think it looks good with all these other colors.”

Vincent privately mused that the children seemed to be in a general mood for rainbows lately. Their collection of colorful ribbons criss-crossed a background patchwork of faded gray and blue fabrics. Mary touched the decorated board with one hand. “It’s beautiful!” she said. “Now I’ll have a place to show off my special mementos.”

She held up the gift, which the children had just presented to her. All the adults seated around Father’s table made appreciative sounds of approval. The group of young artisans clustered behind Mary’s chair, projecting immense self-satisfaction. Vincent leaned back in his own chair with his fingers interlaced in front of him. He considered the assembled feelings of those companions who had enjoyed their midday meal in the Library.

Olivia and Kanin sat close together, holding hands, husband and wife both aglow after Father’s renewed reassurances of Olivia’s good health. The luncheon conversation had produced

many suggested names for their baby.

Ezra sat between Kanin and William, nodding his head as he listened to Eric describe the boy's current art project. Eric liked using his new Hot Wheels as a model for his work. Did Ezra think Mary might want a car-picture for her memory board? Ezra replied that she certainly would.

Meanwhile, William continued to grin over the compliment Vincent had given him almost an hour ago; William's lightly oiled asparagus made a perfect accompaniment to the mushrooms and rice he had prepared for the little party. Vincent's praise had even inspired Mouse to try some of the dish Vincent considered a delicacy. Mouse had never been especially fond of seeing green things on his plate, but he said Vincent made the vegetable *sound* like something good to eat. The young man's eventual pronouncement that eating asparagus was, "okay good, okay fine," inspired a round of congratulatory toasts in William's honor. Smiling at William's pleasure, Mouse served himself a second helping.

Vincent enjoyed watching his loved ones celebrate a time of welcome news for all. He also quietly reveled in the novelty of his returning health. Today he felt content of stomach and deliciously warm. Waking from dreamless sleep at mid-morning, he discovered that his body could move smoothly, easily, if still a little slower than it had before his illness. Nothing hurt. He rested now, in good company, and in high spirits. The loving security of *family* perfumed the chamber. Vincent closed his eyes, breathing their scents, hearing their voices, feeling their happiness at being part of each other.

This is serenity, he thought. *This is true life.*

He sensed Father lean close to him. "Do you need to retire?" Father murmured. "You've been up for almost five hours now."

Not opening his eyes, Vincent answered, "This chair is very comfortable."

He knew Father smiled. The older man touched Vincent's wrist. His emotions offered themselves to Vincent's mind. Attentive love. Relief. Amusement. Father moved his hand away. Colton was asking Father a question about *The Iliad*. Their conversation flowed into the general hum.

It was like floating calmly in the bubbling inlet above the Chamber of the Falls.

Vincent listened to these voices of the present moment, and he also listened for voices from the past. Their community spanned decades, lifetimes. Words bathed him in light.

A memory of Ike told him, "I guess what I said was pretty stupid, Vincent. I'm sorry. Old Pascal says I gotta learn to listen better. Maybe you can help me do that."

Of course, old friend, Vincent thought. *And in time I did learn to speak more clearly, even as you renewed your patience to receive my brittled speech.*

Lisa ran up to him, light and lithe, calling Vincent to come, to come with her and watch her practice at the barre Old Sam had installed for her cadre of young ballet enthusiasts in the Dormitory vestibule. Vincent followed his friend, admiring her grace and sharing her youthful joy.

Now Ezra's voice recited lines from a work of Alexander Pope:

"Meantime to beauteous Helen, from the skies
The various goddess of the rainbow flies:
(Like fair Laodice in form and face,
The loveliest nymph of Priam's royal race:)
Her in the palace, at her loom she found;
The golden web her own sad story crown'd,

The Trojan wars she weaved (herself the prize)
And the dire triumphs of her fatal eyes."

"Yes," said Father to the children. "And all the ancient world leaned close, holding its breath, awaiting triumph for the victor. Who would prevail?"

"Don't get into a fight at all, if you can help it," Vernon advised out of the past. "If Outsiders can't find you, they can't threaten your peace. Yes? So show me where you would place the hidden door in this tunnel. Upon what frame of shadowed space does our safety hinge?" Teacher and pupil leaned over the map. Young Vincent pointed to the best wall for the new door.

And Devin smiled down at him, holding Vincent's gift of a wooden toy. Vincent had decorated his gift with four bands of color. Elizabeth's paint cans supplied each hue. "Hey, Vincent, this is nice!" Devin told him. The older boy turned to show the conical top to Winslow. Vincent's heart brimmed with pleasure. His friends liked the present he had made! "So give it a spin," Winslow told Devin. The three children crouched down on the floor of the Long Gallery to send the top through its whirling paces.

Then Francine's quiet voice spoke, praising the work of her two young helpers. Vincent and Rebecca held up the shirts they had mended. Pascal's mother nodded. "Good as new," she declared. Boy and girl folded the shirts and reached into Francine's basket for two more garments in need of repair.

"What are coursers?" Mouse asked Father.

Each voice lifted and lulled. Here surged a current, now swept a wave, voice after voice saying, *You belong to us. We belong to you.* Vincent loved being home.

He tarried in the chair until he decided that five and a half hours of public wakefulness constituted a respectable achievement for the day. He opened his eyes. Olivia and Ezra maneuvered through the group, removing dishes from the table and stacking them onto trays. The others talked quietly in the background, and Father recounted the duel between Paris and Menelaus for his eager listeners.

Father paused as Vincent stood up from his chair. Vincent touched Father's shoulder, then Mouse's, smiled at the children, and left the Library. His own chamber seemed a bastion of silence after the chatter of his friends. But his sense of floating upon peaceful waters remained with him, an almost d*zogchen* awareness of himself and his people. This attunement seemed the very source of his hope and his salvation: an enlivening state of blessedness and wholeness that centered his mind and heart upon all the goodness existing in all the worlds.

Vincent sat down at his table. His soul reached outward, reached upward, and brushed Catherine's presence Above. She must be working. She had focused her attention despite a distraction which caused her some anxiety earlier in the day. Her present attitude felt similar to the concentration Tunnelkids experienced when they were solving one of Vincent's logic puzzles, or working together to interpret a poem.

Vincent returned his awareness to his immediate environment. Resting his hands upon the cover of the poetry book Catherine had left for him, he admired her lavish gift of rare blooms in their exquisite crystal vase. She had called her material wealth a chain. She would know better than he whether this were truly so. She had also called her bountiful vase a trinket. Yet its barter value in food and medicine must be very great. Vincent suspected its worth on the street exceeded that of the elegant vase of roses Elliot Burch had given to Catherine, in the days before she withdrew from that relationship. But perhaps the real difference between the two bouquets lay in the intentions of differing gift-givers.

Vincent recalled: *You give but little when you give of your possessions. / It is when you give of yourself that you truly give. / For what are your possessions but things you keep and guard for fear you may need them tomorrow?*

She had given of herself, her thoughts and her values, her deepest intentions. Catherine's bouquet explained everything. Cloves, for dignity. Spiritual cherry blooms, for beauty. The grieving helenium and revelatory irises. The consoling hope of snowdrops. Clear water to refresh rootless flowers. The purity of sculpted crystal, one whole vase, crafted into a modern design, with no chips or cracks. No broken places. Only complete prismatic glamor. Rainbows winked along the faceted lines in the glass. *Have I ever received a present so infused with meaning?* Vincent wondered.

This object and its yet-living contents, suitable for display in even Catherine's luxurious home, represented far more than a trinket to him. It was a generous gesture, and one which communicated her esteem for him. It was the sort of gift one lover offered to another.

Is not dread of thirst when your well is full, thirst that is unquenchable?

He looked away from the vase. His random glance found his journal, lying atop the single stack of books on his table. Yes. He was ready. Vincent reached for the book, then for his fountain pen. Opening the volume and uncapping the pen, he began to write.

His thoughts poured out into a secret letter to his dearest one. He had been writing similar missives in his journal for nearly a year, although he had never sent any of them to her. It was enough, to spell Catherine's name, and to imagine her listening presence, as he transformed memories into written words. The scents of the flowing ink and the blooming flowers transported him so deeply into this task, Vincent did not at first notice the arrival of a visitor.

Her friendly voice spoke to him from the entryway. "Hi, Vincent."

He looked up from his writing. "Come in, Ellie," he said. She had left her companions in the Study to join him here.

The child crossed the floor and stopped beside his chair. Vincent capped his pen. Ellie stood close, not speaking. She studied his open journal with interest.

"Mary will enjoy the gift all of you made for her," Vincent commented.

Ellie nodded, a little smile dimpling her face. "She lets us take care of her." She reached out her hand to touch one of the journal pages. "Are you writing a letter?"

"In a way, yes." Vincent set his pen on the table and folded his hands.

"I could deliver it for you, when you finish."

Vincent smiled. "Thank you, Ellie. But if I decide to have this letter delivered, I'd want to be the messenger."

"So it's special."

"I'm writing it to Catherine."

Ellie cast a backward glance at the nearby empty seat, then sat down in Vincent's square-backed chair, facing him. Her feet barely touched the floor. "Do you think it would be okay if I wrote to Catherine?" she asked.

"Of course," Vincent said. "You may write to anyone you wish."

The girl ran her fingers across the carved wooden armrests of the chair. "There's some things I want to tell her. Things about me and my brother."

"Perhaps Eric might also want to send a letter."

Ellie shrugged. "He's never been good at writing."

"Eric is learning quickly. And he's good at drawing," Vincent observed.

Ellie smiled again. "Yeah. He always used to win coloring contests at the grocery store."

"I believe it." Vincent knew that Eric excelled in art class. More than that, even after so

brief a time spent Below, Eric was becoming good friends with Mouse. The two boys had taken to drafting detailed plans for gizmos and construction projects, spending many an afternoon together. Mouse enjoyed the undisguised admiration of a younger friend.

"Vincent? You know how Lana and Kipper and Zach like to do messenger duty in the city? Up Above?"

"Yes."

Ellie's hands became still on the arms of the chair. "Eric and me...we've been down here a long time."

Ah, thought Vincent. "Almost three months," he said aloud.

Ellie poked at a sanded knot in the wood of the chair arm. Vincent waited for the girl to collect her thoughts. Looking up at him she said, "When you were gone...I made a wish every time I went to bed, so that you would come back to us. I only had my plastic star, but I thought...because you gave it to me...maybe it might be good for wishing, if I concentrated really hard. And if all my wishes were for you." She fell silent, gazing at his face.

There were no words to say. Vincent reached out his left hand to touch Ellie's. She did not recoil; she did not move. Her courage, her hope, brought the warmth of tears to Vincent's eyes. Ellie loved him. Her love throve within her, pure and uncomplicated. The shadows of fear in her heart were not directed toward himself. She accepted him completely. He, Vincent, her bringer of starlight.

He found his voice at last. "Ellie, your wishing brought me home. I'm sure of it."

Bold in her innocence, she placed her other hand on top of his. Vincent watched her stroke the reddish fur there. She drew a deliberate half-circle around the dry bits of skin now peeling away from the raw pink scars Vincent's teeth had left behind.

He felt the placid movements of Ellie's fingers and wondered at her curiosity and her pleasure. He knew that he presented the best of both worlds to many children: a safe man and a safe animal in the same person. Some preferred one aspect of his Being over the other. Samantha, for example, loved best his intellectual civility; Tabitha loved him for his Otherness. But Ellie was not thinking of him as either a speaking animal or a bestial human, Vincent was certain. To Ellie Peterson, Vincent embodied something irrevocably in between—he was simply himself, her friend, her guardian Below.

And to Vincent, Ellie was a miracle.

He listened for the unspoken whispers echoing inside this beautiful child. He asked, "Ellie, do you want to go Up to see the real stars again? Do you feel ready?"

Still holding his hand, Ellie nodded.

Vincent shifted his gaze to his journal, glimpsing his half-finished letter to Catherine. He sensed Ellie's courage awakening his own. Her desire for healing beneath the nighttime sky mirrored his heart's deepest longing. He smiled inwardly. *Father will have...objections,* he thought.

But Ellie had prayed for him. She and Eric had sent a handful of stars into the Hospital Chamber when he most needed to see those constellations. And Vincent loved Ellie. This sister and brother were the greatest gifts Catherine had ever brought to him from the world Above. Ellie had become his sudden daughter.

No objections would hold them back. That was not the way of their community. In the end, Father and everyone else Below had always honored Vincent's freedom. That gift and that privilege were things Vincent could share with two children who craved breathing space as much as he did.

"Ellie," he asked, "when was the last time you visited Central Park?"

IV

31 March 1987
Tuesday, Very Late Night

The door to the Junction Chamber rumbled open along its groove. Rebecca stepped away from the switch. She stood in typical silence before the barred gate, observing the bare cement structures around her.

All was dark and quiet. Lamplight from the bridge above filtered down into the chamber, providing diffuse illumination. Vincent stood beside his friend, feeling—everything. Rebecca's calm complicity, his own trepidation, and most of all the redoubled caution humming deep inside himself. Every move he made recalled the threats which shadowed his time Above. Each misstep, each misfortune, every potential misadventure. His body seemed to broadcast its own weakness near and far: his mortal vulnerability. This outermost border of Tunnelfolk territory felt utterly strange and terribly familiar at the same time.

Vincent felt physically too large for the dimensions of the underground passage. His senses expanded his boundaries of Self in all directions. His ears heard nothing anomalous in this level of the Tunnels. His nose and tongue perceived nothing out of place from the air currents flowing through the drainage pipes. He intuited no danger nearby. Yet his heart beat a swift tattoo and he had to stifle a tigerish urge to pace across the enclosed space, to measure distances with his stride and make sure the walls did not slink inward when he wasn't watching. The gate was troublesome. He did not like the iron bars.

Rebecca turned and looked at him. Vincent dropped his gaze from the menacing gate to the toes of his boots, but Rebecca's speculative curiosity about the chamber beyond the Junction Door had already morphed into compassion for her companion. *She knows me all too well,* thought Vincent.

"Shall I open the gate?" Rebecca asked.

"Please."

She went to the metal barrier, hesitated for the space of a single heartbeat, and pushed it forward. The gate swung open with a slow creak. She murmured, "I suppose that improves the view."

"Thank you, Rebecca. It does."

She posed no questions and offered no further commentary. They waited together in the dark place, listening to the hollow noises of distant traffic outside, and to the reassurance of one another's breathing. Vincent considered asking Rebecca whether she wanted to come Up into the park herself, but decided not to. Rebecca had not left the Tunnels for many years, not since the season she had first accepted the work of crafting the Tunnelfolk's Winterfest candles instead of delivering them. Vincent sensed that she had no desire to change her habits tonight.

It is I who am seeking change, he thought. *Movement beyond a fear that paralyzes. Advances toward new hope.*

He gripped the book he carried, observing its shape with his hands, deriving instinctive comfort from its flat surfaces and right angles. A container for human thought, this book held many noble notions suspended in its lines of printed text. Vincent thought of Catherine reading Wordsworth to him. He thought of how she had read O'Donnell's heroic fantasy to him in the Hospital Chamber. He remembered as if from a dream the prophecy of his own underworld priestess.

Narcissa's words sang in his ears, nearly fulfilled now. Wind awaited him Above. *She*

awaited. The one who gave him new strength to breathe, and think, and dream.

Distant footfalls entered his range of hearing.

Rebecca saw Vincent turn his head. “The children?” she asked.

Vincent nodded.

Rebecca said, “And you are strong enough for this.”

“I believe I am.”

Rebecca nodded, smiling. “I hope you enjoy your walk in the park. I’ll be here, if you need me.” Her eyes sparkled. “And I’ll keep an ear to the pipes. How long do you think it will take Father to realize that you’ve gone Above?”

“Oh, not long. I left a note for him in my chamber.”

“I doubt he’ll be pleased with our nocturnal conspiracy.”

Vincent responded with a voiceless laugh. “Not at all pleased. I’m sorry to put him through so much worry. But this is something I must do. I will explain it later, and listen to what he has to say in return.”

Imagining that conversation, Vincent saw himself enter Father’s Study to find the good doctor standing beside his octagonal table, waiting for him. Vincent thought: *It will be very early in the morning. Long after midnight and before the dawn. I will greet him with, “Father,” and then he will pinch a lock of his hair between his fingers and lift it up from his head. He’ll say to me, “Do you see this, Vincent? Gray hair! Gray! Hair!”*

Vincent had to smile, for his memories of Father’s embrace gave him warmth, and the excitement of two incoming youngsters preceded them down the tunnel like an aroma of kitchen wizardry before a feast. *Joy is contagious,* he thought. *When it is time, I will share this night’s celebration with my father.*

He trusted that Father would understand, and imbibe. They both knew the heights and the depths of the dangers now. Knew them as historical, embodied facts, and not merely as untested hypotheses. They also knew beyond all doubt that no matter how long or short a time each person spent Below, the moment always came when it was right to go Above once again. They had learned this lesson from each other when Vincent was four years old, after he made his first breathless return to the Surface world with Devin, beneath June’s full moon in 1959. They had learned the lesson afresh, day by day, night by night, during the following years of life together among their people: the underworld’s cautious procession, the work of lifetimes, adventuring with hope toward healing.

So although Father might shake his distinguished gray head at these goings-on, although his dedication to Tunnels custom and the safety of his people would prickle his words into sharp protestations, his paternal heart would also rejoice in his children’s freedom, as it had always done. Vincent knew he carried Father’s love with him tonight. He carried all the dreams of his community.

Eric and Ellie rushed around a corner into the Park Entrance tunnel. They saw Rebecca and Vincent waiting for them. The children slowed to a walk, Eric grinning, Ellie bright of eye and rosy of cheek.

“We brought our letters!” Eric announced, holding out two envelopes.

“And you brought yourselves,” Rebecca said.

“Are you coming?” Ellie asked Rebecca.

“No. I’ll wait here and walk home with you two when you get back.”

Vincent took the children’s letters from Eric and slipped them inside the back cover of his book. He tucked the book inside his vest, securing it beneath the encircling stricture of his belt. Rebecca was telling the children to have fun. Vincent looked up at his friends.

Rebecca said, “Don’t you forget to have fun too, Vincent.”

Fun. A single syllable of modern English. Fun. The most elementary expression of freedom and joy Vincent knew. He smiled at his dear friend. “I won’t forget,” he said.

Vincent held out his hands to the children. Eric took his left, Ellie his right, and they walked together past the gate, down the leftmost tunnel, toward the gentle gusting of cool night air. As they walked, Vincent stooped to avoid cracking his forehead on the upper curvature of the cement pipe.

Brother and sister held tight to his hands. They came to the outer threshold. The three Tunnel dwellers stepped out onto the edge of the drainage field. There they paused.

The world Above was dark, and alive, and bountiful.

Everything vibrated. Everything danced, colluded, recreated. *This city teems with things calling out to be done,* Catherine had said. Vincent felt the teeming engulf him. It was like the first time he had come Above as a young boy, holding fast to the protective hand of his elder brother, lost at once within the intoxicating swirl of being Outside, where the vast, impossible, immeasurable dome of the sky levitated beyond all city lights. Vincent felt younger than the Tunnelkids beside him.

This city teems...

Teeming, the proliferate springtime flora graced the night with greenness and raw fertility. Teeming, the hush-whush of automobile tires rolled over asphalt in a tidal river of nighttime motion. Teeming, electric light streamed out from millions of separate windows to form a great gossamer globe, enclosing these three children of New York within its sphere of peopled space.

I stand now at the heart of my city, thought Vincent. His whirling senses stretched toward Catherine once more, finding her wakeful awareness not far, not far away. *Our city,* Vincent silently amended. *Our home.*

He centered himself, his thoughts, his intentions. He looked out into the dark. Part of his mind estimated distances, consulted bleary memories. He gazed at the place where he believed he had fallen *(my father, my father, he’s seizing your son!)* prey to deadly hunters. He kept his awareness open to whatever emotion might come. Terror? Anger? Regret?

His psyche settled into nothing so easily definable. Instead, it only vibrated, generating a fitful hum within him. All of his senses strained to perceive any danger nearby. He detected nothing remotely suspicious. Still, the vibration continued. Vincent realized his body trembled.

Don’t frighten the children, he instructed himself. He breathed the green air and let his gaze trace the crisp outlines of foliage and other landmarks visible to his dark-adapted eyes. No mist tonight. Flat, patchy clouds floated across the firmament above them. Only welcome shadows awaited them out there in the park. Vincent permitted hope to cloak him in night-colored courage.

He listened for the emotions of the children standing to either side of him. Eric’s patience with their delay was ebbing. Ellie seemed caught up in the enchantment of their adventure, already pleased and expectantly awaiting more. Vincent looked down at them. Both children gazed back.

“Vincent?” asked Eric. “Are you scared?”

Honest, Vincent replied, “Yes. A little. When the dangers are real, it’s wise to be afraid.” He turned toward Ellie. She was listening too.

Vincent said, “But we must never allow our fears to make our choices for us.”

Ellie nodded. Eric smiled.

“Are we ready?” Vincent asked them.

“Yeah!” answered Eric.

Ellie squeezed Vincent’s hand.

The three walked together into Central Park.

They left the lamplight behind, and the tunnel. Vincent guided them past the muddiest patches of the field. “Tell me what you can see,” Vincent said, wanting to know how well they were adjusting to outdoor darkness.

“Bushes,” Eric said dismissively.

“Trees,” said Ellie. She pointed. “And a light, over there.”

To Vincent’s ears, it sounded like a group of young men had gathered in the one of the least patrolled sections of the park for furtive purposes unknown. He hoped it had nothing to do with drugs, but that pervasive misery was always possible. Whatever they were doing, they must not yet be very practiced at it. They had not realized that if they wished to keep their doings secret from the park’s various nightwalkers, they ought to switch off the flashlight one of them kept swinging around.

“I want to keep away from that light,” Vincent told the children. “We’ll go to some trees I know. It will be dark while we travel through the undergrowth. But the grove is a good place to visit.”

“I like the dark,” Eric said.

Vincent replied, “So do I.”

He led them through the shadows. They walked light-footed, wide-eyed, unhurried. Among the bushes, Vincent silently marveled at the sheltered openness of the landscape. Leaves were *real*. Earth, *actual*. The physical world smelled so good. His healing body felt so strange. And even vulnerable, he simultaneously knew himself so—capable.

They arrived in the grove at the perfect moment. An opening between drifts of clouds in the sky revealed the waxing crescent moon. It gleamed like a holiday ornament, spilling silver light into their private place. Tiny new leaves and fat tree trunks screened them into a sylvan world they could make their own.

“What do you think?” Vincent asked the children.

Eric released his hand and walked to the center of the grove, looking around. Ellie stood quietly beside Vincent. She pointed to a wide bank of leafy plants curving around the south side of the clearing, an earthbound twin to the crescent moon. “Is that a garden?” she asked.

Vincent smiled. “Perhaps a very casually tended one. Come and see.”

They went to the edge of the grove. Vincent knelt in the litter of old leaves and new grass. “These are late crocuses,” he said, touching a long, blade-like leaf. “The flowers are closed for the night, but they’ll open again, come morning. And these are violets.”

Ellie got down on her knees beside him. Eric came to stand behind them both, watching.

“What’s that stuff?” Eric asked. “Poking up under those sticks?”

“Japanese knotweed. We should remind the foragers to come Up and harvest some while the shoots are young. William will cook the shoots for the community. It’s good.”

The boy bent down to get a closer look at the pale knobs protruding from the damp earth like a skeleton’s fingertips. “We eat weeds?” he asked.

Vincent answered. “We do. Many kinds. Although we have to be careful not to harvest plants that are poisonous, or treated with toxic chemicals.” Vincent pointed to the stringy remains of a long-dead plant standing a foot away from the cluster of knotweed. “This is shepherd’s purse. And this,” he gestured to another plant, grown barely large enough for him to identify, “is chicory.”

Ellie commented, “The violets are prettier. They even have nicer leaves.”

“We eat violets, too,” said Vincent. He reached down and plucked three young leaves from three different violet plants. He held out the leaves on his hand.

“These...aren’t, you know, sprayed with bad stuff?” Ellie asked doubtfully.

“No. I never encounter pesticides or herbicides here,” Vincent told her. “These are safe.”

Brother and sister each accepted a leaf and they all chewed the food slowly. Vincent enjoyed this special flavor of the season, a delicacy like asparagus that made him feel clean for eating it.

Eric said, “It doesn’t taste purple.”

Ellie looked at her brother from the corners of her eyes. “Did you expect it to?”

“Well, it’s a *violet*, right?”

Vincent wondered what purple was supposed to taste like.

Ellie began gathering tiny violet blossoms. “I think it tastes like lettuce,” she said.

Eric wandered over to a forsythia shrub in full bloom. “Look at this.”

Ellie glanced up.

Eric tugged at a trailing branch of golden flowers, the blooms moonlight-faded to the most delicate pastel yellow. “Fourthia!” he said.

Ellie smiled. “That’s what you called it when you were four.”

“It made Mom laugh,” Eric said. “Then she made forsythia crowns for us.”

“You remember that?” Ellie asked.

“Yes.” Eric toyed with the slender end of the branch.

“I’ll make a crown for you now, if you want,” Ellie offered.

A smile of his own appeared on the boy’s face. He glanced at Vincent, then twisted off three boughs, bending and wringing the thin green wood until each strand broke free. Vincent silently thanked the shrub for its sacrificial patience, and he thanked the spirit of the park for the allowances it granted children who wished to perform small feats of springtime magic.

“Make us all a crown,” Eric said, holding out the waving stems to his sister.

“Okay,” Ellie agreed. She turned to Vincent. “Can you hold these so they don’t get lost in the grass?”

Vincent held out his hands. Ellie entrusted him with her violets. He watched her clever fingers transform Eric’s stems into three flowery circlets. Eric’s amiable voice spoke quietly while his sister worked, sharing other moments he remembered from their life Above. He spoke of the good times for their little family. Holidays. An Easter egg hunt. Ellie’s performance in a school play the year before Eric began kindergarten. Finally, taking one flower at a time from Vincent’s hands, Ellie wove violets into the twisting circumference of each crown.

She held up a finished wreath to Eric. “Come here. I’ll crown you,” she said.

Eric knelt before his sister. She placed the first crown on his head. “Prince Eric!” she declared.

The boy laughed, and kept smiling.

Ellie turned to Vincent. He had to bend lower so she could reach him. The forsythia wreath came to rest lightly on his hair. “And Prince Vincent,” Ellie said.

“My Lady,” Vincent murmured in courtly reply. He watched her, wondering whether she would crown herself, or—

Ellie held out her crown to him. “Will you?” she asked.

“It is my privilege.” Vincent crowned her. “Princess Ellie,” he named her.

The midnight princess smiled. She turned toward her brother. *They are so beautiful,* Vincent thought.

“We’ll need thrones,” Eric said.

The two children looked around the grove, searching.

"Come," said Vincent. "I know the perfect place."

"Is it far?" asked Ellie.

Vincent pointed to a knotted oak tree at the edge of the clearing. "It's just there."

"Okay," Ellie agreed.

They stood up. The three of them walked to the tree. Vincent led his companions to the lowest branch, which grew above a convenient line of knobs bulging from the trunk. He told them, "When I was a boy, we called this the Stargazing Branch."

"Cool," Eric commented, and climbed up without further ado.

Ellie followed more slowly, gripping her gathered skirts in one hand. Vincent went up last. He hearkened to his muscles as his body reached and stretched. His hands clutched tree bark. His arms and legs pushed and pulled his weight upward against gravity. Capable. He sat nearest the trunk of the tree, next to Ellie. Capable. Healing. Strong. Ellie's smile welcomed him to their shared seat.

If I can climb a tree, I can climb the side of Catherine's apartment building, Vincent resolved.

He loved his body for being able to climb tonight.

Royal, the three friends surveyed their kingdom. The breeze felt mild on their faces. The clear space in the sky above the grove widened as the clouds shifted. Stars became visible. Ellie tipped her head back, careful not to send her crown tumbling to the ground. She smiled at the sky.

A soft disturbance in the air caught their notice. Faint wing beats pulsed near their oak as a flying shape ascended out of a hackberry tree to their right. The night bird lifted higher and higher across the open space before them, until it sailed above the treetops.

"What's that?" Eric whispered.

"I think it's an owl that roosts in the park," Vincent answered.

Between the two princes, Ellie said quietly, "No. Not an owl."

Vincent looked at her. She witnessed the owl's flight with round eyes. Vincent sensed recognition in her, and something powerful, some departure of fear from her heart. Ellie fairly glowed with hope.

"Someone better," she said.

Vincent considered the owl-blessed sky. He thought of Molly and Winslow. He thought of his father's latest victory over the Erlking. He remembered helenium blooming in a crystal vase.

I am Achilles, he mused. *And I am Hector. I am Paris in love with Helen. I am Helen herself, caught at the heart of a war she did not invite, nor intend. And I am Odysseus, too. I am also the Celtic Mùirne, wise mother and true friend. I am her adopted Áinle, foundling peacebringer. Being each of these, and more, I soar into the night sky with my owl-sister. Enthroned upon an oaken branch, I stargaze beside my children. We are all wondrous heroes. And I am...me.*

"Prince Vincent?" Ellie asked. "Do you know a good star story?"

A voice within him whispered, *Are we not each the hero or the heroine—the Princess or Prince, Warrior, Healer, Lover, Woodcutter, Lost Child, Winged Spirit—each unto our own tales?*

Vincent answered, "Yes." And to Ellie he said, "I know a good star story."

"Tell it," said Eric. He glanced at his sister and added a polite, "Please, Vincent?"

They sat in the tree, legs dangling six feet above the loam, heads crowned by the floral offspring of sunshine, all three robed in regal moonlight.

"Gladly," Vincent told the boy.

Ellie kept watching the sky.

"*Once, in a far off land, there grew a silver tree*," Vincent began. "*Every night, at moonrise, the tree opened its magical blossoms. At the heart of each blossom burned a dazzling spark of light. Night after night, the tree's spark-laden branches gleamed at the top of a hill 'gainst the empty blue-black sky. All the kingdom 'round about loved the night-fire tree and its gift of light, for in those days, the round moon shone alone in the heavens. No stars had yet arrived in the sky to befriend the lonely orb. But the silver tree made a beacon of light that rose up from the horizon in the west, ever summoning the roving moon to the earth.*"

It was an O'Donnell fable from the book Vincent carried snug inside his vest. Not the tale of the owl-woman, but another, equally lovely in its way. The children listened while Vincent spoke. The story drew them together, worded their feelings, lauded their freedoms. United, three child-hearted dreamers reigned in peace beneath their moon.

V

1 April 1987
Wednesday, Very Early Morning

"*I saw you last night and got that old feeling*
When you came in sight, I got that old feeling
The moment that you danced by, I felt a thrill
And when you caught my eye, my heart stood still..."

The Boston fern was not cooperating. "I should think you'd be happy to go back out to your home in the borderland," Catherine told the stubborn plant. "Spring has sprung. We're staying in New York. And I want my table space back."

The fern refused to accommodate the hanging planter's new weather-resistant chains. Catherine did not want to damage the foliage, if she could help it. Two other ferns that had overwintered inside her apartment had also put up a fight tonight as she repotted the Japanese painted fern and trimmed shriveled fronds from the Sensitive fern. Both had ended up looking the part of battle-worn veterans recently returned from the front lines of a gardening war.

Catherine felt sorry for all of her potted plants. She had always forbidden the cleaning staff to interfere with her ongoing cultivation efforts. But during the past year, the cultivars' solitary caretaker had abandoned her previous tendency to coddle and pamper her leafy companions into attractive photosynthetic displays. Catherine had now become (at best) a nocturnal botanist, shoehorning basic container gardening tasks into her schedule after she finished her take-home legal paperwork each night. Usually, even this kind of horticulture-as-afterthought helped her to relax and unwind. That was exactly what she had wanted from her plants tonight, on the eve of Robert Ehringer's trial. But damn these rebellious ferns!

Over her stereo speakers and through her open terrace doors, she heard Ella Fitzgerald finish affirming that old feeling in her heart, and move on to the tranquil sweetness of "Rain." Joe Pass strummed his guitar. "*Ah va da ba dya da da doo dee...*" flowed the song.

"You tell them, Ella," Catherine muttered.

She teased a frond around the third chain and draped the frilly green tip over the rim of the planter. The frond bristled at a ridiculous angle. Sighing, Catherine hoped that exposure to

morning daylight would eventually train the greenery in the direction it ought to grow. She turned the planter on the iron table. Yes, that position should work. Now came the grand finale.

She gripped the planter and stepped up onto the towel-covered seat of a patio chair. Balancing self and fern beneath the hook attached to the underside of the penthouse balcony above her, Catherine lifted the chains into position. The scar in her back twinged. She needed to finish this task quickly. She tried to snag the planter's connecting ring onto the fixture.

Some overtired part of her mind must have believed that the ring slipped into place. She started to lower her supporting left hand. The planter immediately overbalanced, not connected after all to the terrace ceiling. By instinct, Catherine grabbed for it, but she knew the fern was lost. A white-hot jolt of self-preserving fear kept her from leaning out over the eighteen-story drop in some useless attempt catch the planter at its center of gravity. She felt terrified that the thing might smash down on top of some unsuspecting passerby below.

"No!" she gasped.

The planter tipped off her palm and fell—

Straight into the sudden outstretched grasp of two large, clawed hands.

"*Rain...da da da...*"

Hopping down off the chair, Catherine gaped.

"Are you all right?" Vincent's voice asked her.

She nodded automatically while her thoughts spun through a series of inarticulate questions and impossible explanations. She looked up from the rock-steady hands holding her white ceramic planter, looked up past the dark, patched cloak and the curls of night-muted gold. Vincent's blue eyes gleamed at her by the light of her terrace wall lamp. Even in the filtered light, Catherine thought his skin was still too pallid, his face still a little too thin and shadowed.

"How did—how did you get up here?!" she demanded.

Soft, simple: "I climbed."

Imagining the fall of the fern, Catherine could not help but imagine the fall of her beloved friend. He often climbed down to her balcony from the roof access to her building's elevator shaft, but he had once told her that he sometimes climbed up from the ground, if the night was dark and the weather amenable. Whether he scaled the wall from the top or from the bottom, it was still a long way down to earth. Her imagination showed her a dark figure clinging to the brickwork with his claws, creeping foot by foot toward dizzying heights. And then seizing there—

No, she told herself. *Father said the seizures have stopped.*

Still, Vincent's illness had deprived him of too much of his former strength. Or so Catherine had believed. Father had told her as much on Monday.

Four days ago, you couldn't hold onto your own spoon! she thought hard at her visitor.

Yet Vincent had come.

Catherine groped for something, anything, to say to him. She arrived at, "*What* are you doing here?"

"Saving your fern from oblivion, it seems," came Vincent's wry reply.

Catherine stared at him. "Does Father know where you are?"

A smile warmed the edges of his face. "If he does not, I'm sure his ignorance will be short lived."

He sounded absurdly calm!

"Vincent, I...I thought you were...resting...Below. Surely it's too soon for you to come Above! God, Vincent, if you fell—if you got hurt trying to visit me—I'd never be able to live with myself!" Catherine's frightened mind pounced upon a stray possibility. "Vincent, if this is

some kind of April Fool's prank, it's not funny!"

She stopped talking. Vincent had borne out this tirade in silence, staring right back at her, a distinctly deer-in-the-headlights expression conquering his face. His beautiful, wonderful face. After the word, "prank," she saw the sparkle leave his gentle eyes. Standing motionless before her, he looked just as shocked as Catherine felt, his shoulders drawn, his posture beginning to project dismay. He now seemed uncertain of his welcome.

And he must never, never feel uncertain of his welcome.

Catherine took the planter from Vincent's hands. She set it on the table. "Forgive me," she said. She stepped close, stretching her arms up to embrace him. "Forget I said any of that. Forget it all, please. I'm so glad you came!"

And then his arms were holding her. He was strong and good. A tall, solid arrival of warmly dressed flesh and blood. Perfect, present, real. Vincent: in her arms, Vincent: beneath her hands, his long mane and broad cowl, his fringed mantle and his soft-furred cheeks. Vincent: held close, body to body, spirit to spirit, heart to heart.

Catherine's fear surrendered to joy.

Ella Fitzgerald's voice began singing, "I Didn't Know About You."

Keep telling it true, Ella, Catherine thought. *Sing it like it is for us.*

She took a step back and looked into Vincent's forgiving eyes. "Thank you for rescuing my fern," she told him with a little smile.

She felt grateful that he smiled back. "Would you like me to hang it for you?" was all he said.

Catherine glanced at the ceiling hook. "Please?"

He did so, quickly and easily. Catherine watched him perform her little chore, feeling wonder warm her heart once again. His enviable ability to heal from everything life threw at him amazed her.

"Is this good?" he asked, lowering his hands from the now-hanging planter.

"It's perfect." Rubbing her fingers, Catherine realized that her hands were grubby with potting soil. It would be nice to wash up a bit for her unexpected guest.

"Well," she murmured, "I was going to celebrate the revival of my garden with a little wine before bed. Can I get you anything?"

He did not often accept her offers of refreshment when he visited her home, but—newborn April Fool's Day or not—tonight must be something of a special occasion for him.

"Perhaps...a glass of water?" he asked.

Catherine nodded. She gathered up the towel from the seat of the patio chair and brought it with her across the terrace and into her apartment. At the kitchen sink, she gave her hands a swift scrubbing, then poured her glass of Chardonnay, and Vincent's glass of water.

It's strange, she thought, *how excited I feel to be preparing even so plain a drink for him.* Catherine loved sharing ordinary details of her life Above with Vincent. In fact, she suddenly realized that it was—fun—for her to extend her hospitality to him.

She returned to the balcony and found her friend standing at the outer wall, gazing at the city lights. Sensing her arrival, he turned toward her and took the water glass she held out to him. Catherine made a simple, heartfelt toast.

"To your health, Vincent," she said.

He smiled, a little sadly she thought. Rim clinked upon rim and they drank from their glasses. Vincent looked down into the clear liquid his glass contained, cupping the beverage in both hands as though he held a costly treasure.

"I have a friend Below. His name is Sovaan. He came to us from Cambodia, and he has

known terrible hunger and thirst in his young life." Vincent drew in a slow breath. "Sovaan tells me that this fear I feel will fade, with time. This fear of...unquenchable thirst."

Catherine touched his hand. "You were given every reason to feel afraid, Vincent."

"I know."

She had to wonder how much courage it must have taken him to have come Above at all tonight.

She admitted, "I have such easy, everyday access to running water. Most of the time I take it for granted. Have as much as you want."

He bowed his head. "This is plenty. Thank you." He smiled again. "One of my teachers used to say, 'Our fears repay us in kind for our fears.' It took me a long time to understand what he meant by that."

Catherine heard the devotion in Vincent's voice as he recalled his teacher's wisdom. "Was this Ezra?" she asked.

"No. This was Ezra's closest friend. A beloved councilman named Vernon. He was the chief Tunnels warden before me. An elite soldier during the Second World War, before he came Below. He taught me everything he could about preventative security, and about protecting people."

"Tunnels warden," Catherine repeated. "That's your role in the Council?"

He looked at her curiously. "Yes. I am our security advisor. I train and organize all our wardens, sentries, and lamplighters."

Catherine laughed.

Vincent cocked his head at her.

"No, it's nothing," she assured him. "Something Rebecca said to me makes a little more sense now. And it's funny."

"Ah."

"Here," she invited, still smiling at him. "Sit with me."

As they sat down on the terrace floor, leaning their backs against the low wall, Catherine noticed a thin book lying on one corner of her patio table. It had not been there when she went into the kitchen. "What's this?" she asked.

"Gifts," Vincent said. "For you, from your admirers."

Catherine grinned and opened the book. "*Fables and Fantasies*," she read from the title page. "By Brigit O'Donnell." She flipped through the pages, finding a collection of short stories and color illustrations within. "A children's book?" she asked.

"Yes. A book for children of all ages. These stories carried me through my youth on the wings of hope and love. O'Donnell's imagination is extraordinary."

"I did enjoy what I read of *A Terrible Strength*," Catherine said.

"I think you'll like this, too," Vincent replied. Catherine glanced up at him. The sparkle of lively pleasure that she adored had returned to his eyes. "This book was published when she was fifteen. I was the same age when Father first read it to me."

"Isn't that a little old for fairy tales?" Catherine teased.

Vincent chuckled. "Or not old enough." He touched Catherine's hand as it rested upon an open page. "One of the stories is about a princess who lives in a castle of pearls beneath the sea." His voice became softer, gently affectionate.

"She reminds me of you," he said.

Catherine held his sapphire gaze, intrigued by Vincent's mood. "Then I'll look forward to reading about her," she replied. "Maybe meeting this princess will let me see myself through your eyes."

Vincent's smile only widened. Catherine's curiosity surged to wakefulness in her heart. But she decided to save that literary encounter for another night. This night belonged to an upperworld princess and her underworld prince in the flesh.

When I was fifteen, she thought, *I think I was mostly reading fashion magazines and romance novels. And my father had long since stopped reading bedtime stories to me. One more difference between life Above and life Below, I suppose. Or perhaps between a life lived imaginatively, and a life all too devoid of dreams.*

Catherine sipped her wine and leaned her head on Vincent's shoulder. Something cool and delicate crumpled beneath her cheek. Catherine sat up. She brushed her fingertips over Vincent's long hair and retrieved a small trumpet-shaped blossom from his tresses. The yellow petals belled out into the points of a star. Forsythia. She looked up at Vincent again, giving his features a more critical examination. She saw another blossom riding the abundant fringe of gold above his forehead. Catherine plucked the second flower free. A violet. She raised one eyebrow at her post-midnight companion.

The brightness in his eyes became playful. "I took Ellie and Eric to the park tonight," Vincent explained. "They made springtide wreaths for us to wear."

"Oh. And so it is that you've come to me with flowers in your hair," Catherine said.

"It's been a night filled with seasonal flora," Vincent murmured.

"Mm."

Catherine twisted around so she could see him better, balancing the book of fables on her lap. She reached up and slid her fingers over Vincent's hair again, marveling at its fineness. Vincent sat quietly, just watching her, letting her do as she pleased. Catherine's hand acted upon a sudden impulse before she had the chance to think about what she did. Carefully, she smoothed Vincent's hair away from his face and behind his shoulder, exposing his right ear. He made no objection, so Catherine lightly ran her index finger around the furred circumference. Vincent blinked but held still.

The fur there was very soft, and his ear was thicker than she had expected. Something between a lion's and a bear's, she believed, but angled so that it lay naturally flat against the side of his head. She decided that the two notches that split the upper curve were not new injuries, after all. The fur that grew along the tattered edges shone pale in the low light, almost white.

"I noticed this the other day," Catherine whispered, "while you were asleep in the Hospital Chamber. What happened?"

"It's been that way since I was a baby," Vincent answered. "I must have been cut by something sharp before friends brought me to Father."

"An animal?" Catherine asked, thinking of many possible unsavory inhabitants of Manhattan's back alleys.

"Perhaps. Or a blade someone carelessly cast aside, or broken glass, or a piece of twisted metal. People throw away many dangerous objects."

Catherine nudged his chin, turning his face so she could get a look at his other ear. *In for a penny, in for a pound*, she thought, smiling at herself. His left ear was whole, although a single silver stripe marked the lower arc of the velvety circle, extending outward like a spoke. She traced the line with her fingernail, detecting tiny ripples in his skin, where the silver fur hid a wound long healed. "And this?" she asked.

Vincent finally looked down, shaking his head as he remembered. "Mouse did that."

Catherine sat back against the wall, surprised. "Mouse?"

Vincent drank some water as he reflected upon his memories. Then he said, "There was a time when I wore an earring."

Catherine's mouth fell open. She quickly closed it. "An...earring?"

Vincent seemed amused by her reaction. "Yes. A gold hoop. Rebecca found it and gave it to me. One of our Elders, Elizabeth, helped me pierce my ear and put in the ring."

Catherine tried to imagine the sight—and failed. She didn't know who Elizabeth might be. "What did Father say?" she asked.

Vincent smiled. "Father said it made me look like a pirate." His eyes danced. "Which is not something you should tell your seventeen-year-old son when you *don't* want him to wear an earring."

Catherine had to laugh. "Oh, Vincent."

He laughed too. "It simply became a part of me for several years. One day, I must have been...twenty-four, I was staying with a child in our Seclusion Chamber. A feral little boy I had caught skulking around the Tunnels."

"Mouse."

"That was the name he chose for himself after he learned to speak. But speaking came later. That day, I had just finished bathing him, and the boy wanted nothing more to do with me. In his struggles, he caught the hoop in my ear and pulled it free."

Catherine winced in sympathy. "That must have hurt."

Vincent nodded. "It did. Father put in five stitches that night."

"Ouch."

He shook his head. "But I don't regret the pain. Because that was also the moment Mouse connected with me. He saw that he had hurt me. And for the first time, he understood that I was a person, like himself. Someone who could bleed and cry. I became *real* to him. After that, we could begin to become friends."

"So it was worth it."

"Oh, yes. Mouse's friendship is beyond price. But my days of piracy had ended."

Catherine grinned again. *At least it wasn't Hughes or Gould who scarred him,* she thought, satisfied with her discoveries. She resettled herself against Vincent's shoulder, and she felt him rest his cheekbone upon the top of her head. They were quiet together for a little while. Vincent's body felt warm at her side, his breathing calm and calming. Idly Catherine turned the final pages of the book. Behind the creamy endpaper, she found some large folded sheets of handmade stationary.

"More gifts?" she asked.

"Mm-hm."

She unfolded the sheets of paper. They were letters. A quick glanced showed her that Eric, Ellie, and Vincent had each written a message to her.

Vincent murmured into her hair. "Read mine later. Please."

"All right," Catherine agreed. She tucked Vincent's letter inside the cover and returned the book to the table. "Do you want to see what the children wrote to me?"

"Only if you wish to share."

She guessed he had closed his eyes. He was speaking very quietly now.

"Are you falling asleep?" she asked him.

"I'm enjoying the music. And you."

On Catherine's stereo, Ella and Joe were now performing Duke Ellington's "All Too Soon."

"She's not Mozart," Catherine said.

"She doesn't need to be Mozart to share with the world her mastery of song," Vincent replied. "She's still magic."

And this reminded Catherine of the new poster on his wall.

You're magic, she thought to him. She sighed in contentment, appreciated the satiny finish of her Chardonnay, and began reading the letter Eric had written to her. It was printed in pencil, with many erasures pinking the recycled page here and there. In the salutation, he had rewritten both "dear" and "Catherine," changing his original spelling from "D-e-e-r" and "K-a-t-h-r-i-n." As she went through the child's missive, Catherine thought, *He must have asked someone for help with spelling the hardest words.* She read:

> Dear Catherine,
>
> How are yoou? I am doing fin. Ellie is riting a leter to. We want to say thank yoou for geting us owt of the bad homes. I like wher I am now. Ther is gud stuf to eet and I am hafing lots of fun. I got cloes I like and a cool Hot Wheels car. It is a Sol-Aire CX-4! I thot scool was boring befor but I like it heer. Lerning stuf down heer is fun. I like logic clas the best. We are going to mak up the best puzzel ever. I like siense secund best. We are lerning abowt bugs now, but next munth we wil lern abowt metallurgy. Zach ses that we get to vizit Winslow's werkshop a lot. I haf tuns of frends now. I haf Ellie to. Thanks for finding her and taking us to the gud home.
>
> Yor frend,
>
> Eric

Beneath his name, he had drawn and colored a detailed portrait of a silver sports car with painted flames streaking upward from the hood. Eric's "cool Hot Wheels," Catherine assumed. One of those popular miniature toy cars. At the bottom of the page, he had added:

> P.S. The chess puzzel tuk for minits and ten secunds but Kipper sed Vincent waz beeing nise.

Catherine chuckled to herself. Chess puzzle challenges. Someday, she really would like to visit some class sessions in the Tunnels. She found herself wishing that her childhood schooling had been half as interesting as the Tunnelkids' education seemed to be. The boy's thank you cheered her heart.

"Eric is a gifted young artist," she commented aloud.

"Yes, he is," Vincent said.

She held up Eric's letter. "Look at this."

Vincent raised his head and nodded gravely at the illustration of the car. "He has a good eye for proportions and perspective," he said.

"His spelling could use a little work," Catherine observed.

"Spelling improves with practice, and with wide reading, and gentle encouragement. Eric had too few opportunities for such things before you brought him to us. But see..." Vincent pointed to examples in the body of the text. "His spelling patterns are consistent. And he is experimenting with the shapes of words on the page, writing out how they sound to him. And he

takes care to learn how to correctly spell the words that are most important to him. ‘Home’ and ‘thank,’ and the name of his toy car, ‘metallurgy,’ ‘chess’ and ‘logic,’ the names of his friends..."

“I think Eric’s teacher also has a good eye for proportions and perspective,” Catherine said, admiring Vincent’s expertise. “Especially when it comes to understanding his student’s work.”

“Hmm.” Vincent stretched his arm around Catherine’s shoulders and held her close. Catherine refolded Eric’s letter and began reading Ellie’s. The girl had written in a delicate—even a timid—cursive, the penciled letters carefully formed and the sentences ruler-straight across the page. It looked like what Catherine’s instructors would have called Ellie’s “best handwriting.”

> Dear Catherine,
>
> I wanted to write you a letter for a long time but every time I got started, there was too much to say. Father told me once that there is almost always too much to say, but we should try to say it anyway. So I’m trying that now.
>
> I want you to know that before my Mom died, she promised she would look down at us from the stars and send an angel to take care of me and Eric. She said we might not ever see our angel, but our angel could see us. I used to watch the sky for angels, but I never saw any.
>
> Me and my brother stayed at lots of foster places after my Mom was gone. At one place a woman told me there was no such thing as angels. They’re just made up like Santa. After me and Eric went to live at Ridley, I guessed she was right. Then things got lots, lots worse and Naj took me away. I hated my Mom for lying to me.
>
> Vincent says it’s o.k. to be mad like that. It just feels really awful. He says you will understand. He told me your Mom is gone too. I’m so sorry you lost your Mother.
>
> When I tried to get away from Naj he hit me. He yelled at me and tied me to a chair. I didn’t know what to do but you came in out of nowhere. I want you to know that I think my Mom sent you to me. I never told that to anyone before. Thank you for keeping my brother safe. Thank you for getting me out. Thank you for our new home.
>
> I’m sorry I ran away from you so much in Ridley. I didn’t know who you were yet. I was scared. I’m learning how not to be scared anymore. It isn’t easy. When Vincent got taken away from us, I was very scared, but I wished for an angel to go find him. He’s my teacher and my friend and I wanted him back. My wish came true. So I want to thank you for that too.

Vincent says he's going to take my letter to you tonight. And Eric's letter, if my brother can stop playing skateboard tag long enough to write one. Vincent says we can go up with him to the park tonight too. I've never been in a park at night. He says if it's not too cloudy, we can see some of the stars. My friend Lana says Vincent knows lots of stories about the stars.

When you read my letter, I guess I'll be in bed because it will be very late. So I want to tell you about something I'm going to do before I come back from the park to sleep. I want you to know I'm going to thank the stars for you tonight. I'm going to thank my Mom.

This is the longest letter I ever wrote. I'm glad you are my friend. Please come see me again soon.

Love,

Ellie

Catherine held her hand pressed to her heart. If she did nothing else for the rest of her life, solved no further crimes, battled no other criminals, she could go to her everlasting rest knowing that she had given these two precious children a real home—and their best chance at living a happy life. Ellie's love for her, Ellie's gratitude, her trust, the things she believed about Catherine—

Vincent's hand gently squeezed her shoulder. "Ellie's message must be potent," he whispered.

Wordlessly Catherine held the letter out to him. Vincent checked Catherine's expression for her implicit permission, then read the page, front and back. Catherine saw tears glinting in his eyes by the time he finished.

"I didn't know," he said. "She has shared so few of her thoughts with anyone Below."

"Did she get to see the stars in the park tonight?" Catherine asked.

"Yes." He looked at her. "I think she even saw an angel."

"An angel?"

Vincent nodded slowly, awed. "A protective spirit of the night. A daughter of the stars." He gave the letter back to her. "Ellie's courage is remarkable."

"The courage to keep looking for angels?" Catherine asked.

"And the courage to see them when they do appear."

Catherine folded the page. "Ellie's heart is beautiful."

Vincent watched her place the children's letters on top of the book and weight them down against the rising breeze with her wine glass. He said nothing. Ellie's beauty spoke for itself. And Catherine believed all beautiful things spoke deeply and silently to the beauty that thrived within Vincent's heart.

Catherine noticed the music now floating out to them from her living room. "Listen, Vincent," she whispered. "I love this song."

They listened.

“There was a boy
A very strange enchanted boy
They say he wandered very far
Very far
Over land and sea

“A little shy and sad of eye
But very wise was he

“And then one day
One magic day he passed my way
And while we spoke of many things
Fools and kings
This he said to me

“The greatest thing you’ll ever learn
Is just to love and be loved in return”

Catherine smiled at Vincent, repeating, “*A little shy and sad of eye / But very wise was he.*”

Vincent tipped his head a little, gazing back at her. “Catherine? I don’t think of myself as shy.”

She laughed, lighthearted. “Nor should you,” she said.

Her stereo moved on to the next track of the CD. Catherine stifled a yawn. Vincent eased his arm away from her shoulders.

“It’s late,” he said. “I should go. Let you sleep.”

She wished he could stay longer, but it was going to be a big day for her, and she could tell they were both tired.

They stood up. Vincent moved his glass from the floor to the table. Catherine finished her wine.

Looking up again, she saw that Vincent now stood close beside her, the deep blue of his eyes ripe with mystery. She hugged him. His powerful arms hugged her back.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better,” she said.

“It’s more than a feeling.”

She stepped back from him, letting her hands linger upon his chest. Something in Vincent’s voice shimmered like an echo of ancient music in Catherine’s spirit. She found herself wishing she had the power to tap into Vincent’s emotional landscape at will. Her heartbeat quickened.

Vincent said, “*The greatest thing you’ll ever learn / Is just to love and be loved in return.*”

His eyes, Catherine thought, breathless. *The love in his eyes. His love...for me. And to think: all along, this is what has been waiting patiently for me to emerge from my sad little cage. My cocoon. Vincent’s love.*

He had fallen silent and was standing completely still.

“What is it?” she asked.

Vincent leaned toward her. His gaze was magnetic. Tidal. He said softly, “I want something.”

She knew, and she knew she wanted what he wanted, and she knew he knew it. She turned her face upward and forgot how to breathe. Catherine closed her eyes.

He kissed her lips. His mouth was kind. The shape of his flesh touching hers felt soft and strange, flattened yet pliant. The strength of concealed bones and teeth underlay his tenderness. His touch was feather-light and fire-bright, the contact unbelievably chaste and undeniably passionate in the same splendid blaze. Catherine reached up, felt textures like velour and silk between her palms as her hands found the planes of his face and steadied him, held him, welcomed him.

He retreated gently. Catherine opened her eyes again. His eyes were moonlit oceans, boundless and eternal. Catherine's entire body wanted to melt into him, to sink into the salty mirror of his spirit and feel the cleansing currents of his purest love immerse her forever.

Surely feeling this desire within her, Vincent smiled. His right hand caressed her cheek and temple, followed the scarred line of her jaw down to her chin, then slipped along her throat to the back of her neck. Two fingers of his left hand traced a path across her lips, where his kiss still burned like a morning star. He gazed into her soul, as though he could see clear through her whole being and out into the unexplored mists of aeons to come.

Velvet-on-granite, his voice spoke slow words into existence, the weight of his gaze engraving the lines upon the inmost surfaces of Catherine's heart for all time.

"*Stone walls do not a prison make,*
Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for an hermitage;
If I have freedom in my love
And in my soul am free,
Angels alone, that soar above,
Enjoy such liberty."

The breeze played through the fronds of the hanging ferns, and through the lovers' hair. Whispers of city life wafted up to them. Catherine bowed her head, amazed by all these gifts of the night. Vincent's hands pulled her closer and he held her, cherishing her entirely. She listened to his heartbeat, slow and strong. For a moment, she thought the rhythm of their hearts merged and became one.

His hands relaxed, then released her. Catherine watched the one she loved glide backward, his face the picture of perfect peace. Then he turned and vanished over the balustrade, giving his attention to the process of making his way safely home.

Catherine stood where she was until the music playing on her stereo had ended. The quiet felt pristine. Poignant. She looked down at her table. Two empty glasses, and a book of hopes and dreams. She moved her wine glass and picked up the book, careful not to let the children's letters blow away. She removed Vincent's letter from the book and smoothed his pages flat across the front cover, holding them down at the margins so they would not flutter as she read. Vincent had used a fountain pen to write his message to her on clean commercial paper cut from a notebook. His handwriting alone was a work of art.

Dearest Catherine,

Those words you read to me echo in my mind. "*When I stood,*

forlorn, / Knowing my heart's best treasure was no more. / That neither present time nor years unborn / Could, to my sight, that heavenly face restore."

I thought I would never see you again. I thought I had lost you.

Catherine, I knew there would come a time when your path would lead you away from me. But what I never could imagine was the pain I felt when that day came. You must do everything you were meant to do—for me, for both of us. To try to stop you would be to mock everything we believe in. And yet, to live by what is right can sometimes be so difficult.

You have wondered what good you could hope to give to me. Know this, Catherine: our bond has given me a freedom I've never known before. Through you, I have seen a world I had only dreamed of. The freedom to share your dreams with you, to discover your world and all its wonders, is in itself a gift of such magnificence as I have never known. When that world of possibilities seemed to end, I could not think. I could not breathe. I lost myself, and in that moment of vulnerability I fell prey to those that would do me harm.

When I awoke, I was in a cage. I knew imprisonment in truth. Trapped—my strength, my will, my hope left me. I could no longer fight. What was there to fight for? I could feel myself slipping away.

Freedom, for me, has always been circumscribed by who I am—by what I am. I have never accepted those limits. From the time I was very young I promised myself never to become a prisoner of my fate. I took the risk. I went Above. Father always protested, but these risks brought me great solace. The alleys and shadows, the rooftops were mine. They belonged to me. When I traveled them, my freedom was limitless—but I traveled them alone. Until the night I found you. Then we traveled them together.

When fate called you down another path, I felt all was lost, that I'd been forgotten. I had lost my freedom. I had lost my faith. And in that cage, I was dying. As darkness clouded my sight, I looked up—and saw you.

I thought it was a vision. I could not believe you had come for me. In that cage I had lost my belief in everything, but you were there to remind me that there is a power greater than evil, greater than disillusionment, greater than fear.

You were there because, discovering I was lost, you stayed—to find me. You chose a path you could share with me. I know you traveled a long, dark road to bring me home.

A cage of shadows awaited me Below, its bars forged from memories and grievous wounds. My people, my family, did all they could to release me from my illness and my fear. I fought, with what hope was given me, to breathe again. But I was unable to break the final chain of my captivity.

I lost the courage to believe that I could heal. I felt—how can I explain it? I felt defeated. My pain was poisoning the people I love. I saw this in their eyes, heard it in their voices. I thought the only gift I could give to those who love me was to say farewell, and go quietly. This was all I could hope to do for myself.

Then, as you had sought me out Above, so you came to me Below, and not to say goodbye. Beyond all hope and all despair, you were there, Catherine. You gave yourself freely, generously, to me and to my healers. You took each of us by the hand to draw us toward your light. And you gave me possibility. “Love, faithful love, recalled thee to my mind—”

I remembered. I remembered everything we have fought for and everything we have dared to dream. My heart knew that you believed in our love and the silent tomb lost all its power over me. You were there to remind me. In every way, you have given me new life. You set me free.

For that—for everything—there are no words except—

Thank you.

Sleep well, my dearest Catherine, sleep well.

—Vincent

Before Catherine refolded Vincent’s letter, she kissed his signature. She held the three handwritten messages and the book of Irish fables in her hands, held them tight. She turned her gaze out toward the merciful night beyond her balcony. From the heights above the tree line of Central Park, her city glittered its reply to the springtime stars, and all the possibilities they represented.

THE END

Author's Note About the *Beauty and the Beast* Timeline:

As Ron Koslow and Wendy Pini mentioned in the Afterwords of Pini's *Beauty and the Beast* graphic novels, and as novelist Barbara Hambly has commented in one of her own novelizations of *Beauty and the Beast* episodes: transmuting a story from one medium to another is a challenging process. My own present attempt takes cues directly from Hambly's strategy of performing major chronological shifts, in the hope of developing common themes by intertwining the stories of all fifty-five original episodes into a cohesive narrative, rather than adhering strictly to the teleplay-generated format and arrangement of the television series.

Thus, I have placed *Nor Iron Bars A Cage* midway through Season One, immediately following “Dark Spirit” and immediately previous to “Temptation,” and I made this decision for one primary reason of character logic. The character who most influenced this decision is Catherine Chandler. After she's searched for Vincent for days, found him half-dead in a cage, and witnessed the deaths of his two abductors, I cannot imagine that she would willingly leave Vincent until she felt certain that he was out of danger. This required her to escort him home, and stay there for several hours, and so interact with his Tunnelfolk community.

Therefore, my rendering of “Nor Iron Bars a Cage” needed to occur after “Shades of Gray,” where the Tunnelfolk met “Vincent's Catherine” for the first time during the cave-in emergency. Respecting Hambly's placement of “Shades of Gray” immediately before “Song of Orpheus,” my *NIBAC* also must occur after “Song of Orpheus” and everything previous to it in the Production Order of episodes, with the obvious exception of “Masques.” I moved “Masques,” “An Impossible Silence,” “China Moon,” and “The Alchemist” to chronological positions after “Temptation” in order to create a more realistic calendar history for the characters. For further insight into my arrangement of episode storylines, please visit my Story Chronology page on *Piece of Eternity* (http://www.batbland.com/pieceofeternity).

—Z.W.

Acknowledgements

I could not possibly have completed this novelization project without the steadfast encouragement, loving support, and critical wisdom of my beloved husband, my inspiring sisters, and my generous online friends Sobi, Rosaura Wells, and Angie Burns. Dear ones: there are no words except—thank you.

Many, many powerful thanks are also due to the dedicated fans who craft the impressive online repository of historical and artistic information at the *Beauty and the Beast Scripts and Transcriptions Project* (www.batbforever.com). I also extend my lasting gratitude to the curator of the *Beauty and the Beast Treasure Chambers* website (www.treasurechambers.com) and the Beauty and the Beast Museum Project's *Treasure Chambers Online Museum.* These invaluable reference websites make possible the weaving of all my *Beauty and the Beast* story tapestries.

To series creator Ron Koslow and the original script writers, producers, cast, and crew, I offer my most heartfelt thanks for creating this stunning fantasy in the first place. The dream you dreamed is amazing. Your ongoing legacy is beautiful. It is still completely relevant to twenty-first century generations. We need works of love and beauty in our world more than ever.

And to Ron Perlman, who brought the Beast to life on the screen:

Sir,

As I understand things, “Nor Iron Bars a Cage” was very much your story, about your character, and I (truly, truly) hope you don’t mind too much that a mythically minded thirty-something upstart has had the audacity to meddle with the tale.

I have casually followed your work for several years. The first film I saw in which you appeared was *Enemy at the Gates*. I was immediately impressed by how that magnetic actor playing Koulikov characterized the veteran Soviet sniper, within such a brief amount of screen time. At a later date, I came across *La cité des enfants perdus*, which I found captivating, although I admit that a shortage of sleep may have increased my initial fascination with that film. What can I say? I'm the sort of adventurous insomniac who indulges in surreal French films at two-thirty in the morning. Regardless, I watched a carnival strongman and a young street waif rescue children from their creepy enemies, and I loved every moment of the show. I kept looking at the leading man, thinking: *Who is this guy? He's amazing!*

So I looked up your filmography, enjoyed many other movies and TV episodes, laughed at the funky ones, pondered the dramas, marveled at *Quest for Fire*, and got so intrigued by *The Name of the Rose* that I visited the public library to read Eco's book. I do this with many artists, authors, actors, directors, musicians, historians, philosophers, scientists--anyone who stands out from the crowd because their work is excellent. You always bring characters to life with honesty and authenticity. This makes any project in which you are involved something I want to experience. I love audiobooks, and so I was thrilled to find the novels you have narrated. I also eavesdropped on the computer games my husband likes to play. In my leisure hours I perused Ron Perlman listings in my Netflix queue. And that is how I came across *Beauty and the Beast*.

Being seven years old at the time this show first aired on television, *Beauty and the Beast* was never really on my radar. I came to the series after Netflix added it to the online streaming section of their video catalog. At the time, I was trying to figure out how to write good fiction by analyzing the scene structure of various well-written television episodes. Here was this Ron Perlman show I'd never seen before, I liked the writers who were involved in script production, it

was conveniently online, I had always enjoyed that fairy tale.... Click: I tuned in and started watching.

And this was a story that changed my life.

I found therein: hope, at a time in my life when I most needed it. And unstinting examples of courageous love, which have rarely been presented to me with such clarity. And a promise that the delicate dance between dreams and madness can and will lead us through the darkness, so long as we keep moving our feet to the music.

Beauty and the Beast addressed so many of the issues I am trying to explore in my own writing. So I studied the art of this show's storytelling in order to learn more about the craft. I've tinkered with this self-directed sort of curriculum in the past, but this was the first time I ever really tried my hand at that nebulous genre of ill repute: fanfiction. I also decided to go ahead and do an especially crazy thing: sit down and learn how to write a novel by novelizing an already existing story. I decided to use a *Beauty and the Beast* episode as a springboard, transmuting that episode into narrative prose and adding original material as a kind of half-and-half creation. I also decided to explore how characters might respond to the plot. Many things happened in this series that surely required a significant amount of recovery in between episodes.

I took a close look at my options. I wanted the challenge of an emotionally "difficult" episode from the first season, one that left a lot of questions unanswered in the script, and one that also presented a strong story for me to work with. "Nor Iron Bars a Cage" fit these criteria. Additionally attractive to me, this was also an episode that hearkened back powerfully to the original fairy tale: Beauty leaves the Beast behind because she wants to return to her father's world...she almost stays away too long...the Beast begins to die of grief and his now seemingly unbreakable enchantment...Beauty returns just in time to save the Beast with her ardent confession of true love, and her compassionate ministrations of healing water. It's a beautiful plot. The teleplay carries that once-upon-a-time moment into the twentieth century, and beyond. And your performance in this episode, by the way, was *tremendous*.

My novelization took me four years to write. Real life happened in between writing sessions, of course, and other projects required attention along the way, but the dream remained compelling. I've learned far more than I imagined I could. The task has given me a new momentum, a confidence in the way I research a scene or orchestrate a motif, outline a chapter or let go of my outline and respect the characters' freedom to decide how they want to react to one another in the story. Vincent the character, and Ron Perlman the actor were equally inspirational to me during this learning process. It's been a precious time in my life. I want to thank you for your extraordinary artistic example, on- and off-screen.

From this experience I have learned that creating art is both an act of faith and an act of will. Picking up a pencil, or walking onto a stage, or standing in front of a camera to portray the truth about what it means to be human—these acts attest profoundly to the power and beauty of the human heart. I believe those who give such creative statements, as well as those who receive them, are mutually improved by the undertaking. Our spirits are nourished. Thank you—*thank you*—dear sir, for so faithfully gifting us all with your talent and your integrity. Your work, your art, has made a difference to many people. It has made a great difference to me.

I wish you and yours joy and abundant love on your birthday, and every day to come.

With gratitude and admiration,

Zara Wilder

Works Referenced

Note: Titles listed in brackets are mentioned in the novel's text, but not quoted.

Chapter One: Gifts of the Night

I

Un bel dì vedremo...
Giacomo Puccini, music; Giuseppe Giacosa & Luigi Illica, libretto. *Madama Butterfly*, Act II. 1904.

The Curfeu tolls the Knell of parting Day...
Thomas Gray. *An Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard*. 1751.

II

[William Wyler, director; Dalton Trumbo, Ian McLellan Hunter, & John Dighton, screenwriters. *Roman Holiday.* 1953.]

IV

[William Wyler, director; Dalton Trumbo, Ian McLellan Hunter, & John Dighton, screenwriters. *Roman Holiday.* 1953.]

Chapter Two: Choices

I

[Fyodor Dostoyevsky. *The Brothers Karamazov*. 1880. Constance Garnett, translator, 1912.]

[Carl Sandburg. *Remembrance Rock*. 1948.]

V

A bove majori discit arare minor...
Latin Proverb. "From the older ox, the younger learns to plow."

Chapter Three: Hand of Providence

I

He hath disgrac'd me and hind'red me half a million...
William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene i. 1600.

V
...beggar'd all description...
William Shakespeare. *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act II, Scene ii. 1623.

[Mark Twain. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* 1885.]

Chapter Four: Dreams Denied, Dreams Attained

I

[H. A. Rey & Margaret Rey. *Curious George.* 1941.]

[Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. *The Lost World.* 1912.]

III

For any one to love a man, he must be hidden...
Fyodor Dostoyevsky. *The Brothers Karamazov*. 1880. Constance Garnett, translator, 1912.

[Victor Hugo. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame.* 1831.]

Ever the Love which quieteth this heaven...
Dante Alighieri. *Paradiso:* "Canto XXX." *Divine Comedy.* 1320. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, translator. 1867.

[Dante Alighieri. *Inferno. Divina Commedia.* 1320.]

I love you! Your beauty provokes me, your all...
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. "Der Erlkönig." *Die Fischerin*. 1782. Zara Wilder, translator. 2013.

Chapter Five: Revelations

I

Traditional English Nursery Rhyme, parody. “Wee Willie Winkie.” 1844.

IV

Fè le majik Papa Hougan...
Vodou chants developed by Zara Wilder from the *Beauty and the Beast* teleplay “Dark Spirit,” written by Robin Bernheim. Season One, Episode 9. Originally aired November 27, 1987.

Hector Ocala’s Defensive Chant:

Fè le majik Papa Hougan.	*Make the magic, Papa Hougan.*
Fè majik la, Grand Chemin.	*Be magic, Great Chemin.*
Mwen ka wè,	*What I can see,*
Mwen pa ka pale.	*I cannot describe.*
Tout se pa bon.	*Everything is not good.*
Revoker la majik.	*Revoke the magic.*

Alexander Ross’s Aggressive Chant:

Nou se zetwal yo tou.	*We are stars.*
Nou travay nan mitan lannwit,	*We work at night,*
Men nou toupatou.	*But we are everywhere.*
Jou a se lannwit.	*Day is night.*
Fen an se nan konmansman.	*The end is at the beginning.*
Fè la majik.	*Make the magic.*

They that have power to hurt, and will do none...
William Shakespeare. “Sonnet XCIV.” *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare.* 1609.

With love’s light wings...
William Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene ii. 1590s.

Chapter Six: Second Thoughts

I

Drunk all...Poison...Thus with a kiss I die...
William Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*, Act V, Scene iii. 1590s.

Chapter Seven: Serpent and Bee

I

[William Shakespeare. *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare.* 1609.]

III

A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch...
Robert Browning. “Meeting at Night.” *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*. 1845, 1849.

[William Shakespeare. *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare.* 1609.]

[William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice.* 1600.]

The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars...
William Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene ii. 1590s.

Camille Saint-Saëns. *Danse macabre*, Op. 40. 1874.

Anger in its time and place...
Charles Lamb (1775-1834) & Mary Lamb (1764-1847). “Anger.”

[Robert Louis Stevenson. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.* 1886.]

Chapter Eight: No Such Liberty

I

Rest Master, for we be a-weary, weary...
Ezra Pound (1885-1972). “The Eyes.”

III

[Thornton Wilder. *The Ides of March.* 1948.]

IV

[Richard Adams. *The Plague Dogs*. 1977.]

She is like one who, in the storm of dust and sleet...
Plato, paraphrase. *The Republic*. c. 380 B.C.E.

Stone walls do not a prison make...
Richard Lovelace. “To Althea, From Prison.” 1642.

Chapter Nine: Scientific Progress

II

[Aristotle (384 – 322 B.C.E.). *Politics.*]

III

Thou call’dst me dog before thou hadst a cause...
William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene ii. 1600.

Chapter Ten: Conclusive Evidence

II

If an insolent man thrusts a sword of speech against you...
Abul ʿAla Al-Maʿarri (973–1058). “Calmness, II: Refrain from Speech.”

[Hesiod. *Works and Days*. c. 700 B.C.E.]

Tired with all these, for restful death I cry...
William Shakespeare. “Sonnet LXVI.” *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare.* 1609.

III

[Margaret Mitchell. *Gone with the Wind.* 1936.]

IV

Woe unto him that giveth his neighbour drink...
Habakkuk 2:15-16. *The Holy Bible.* King James Version. 1611-1769.

...I am...fed with the same food...
William Shakespeare, paraphrase. *The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene i. 1600.

And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?
William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene i. 1600.

Chapter Eleven: Leave to Go from Hence

I

Save that, to die, I leave my love...
William Shakespeare, paraphrase. "Sonnet LXVI." *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare.* 1609.

Here lies the water—good...
William Shakespeare. *Hamlet*, Act V, Scene i. 1599-1602.

...O, here / Will I set up my everlasting rest...
William Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*, Act V, Scene iii. 1590s.

The skies are painted with unnumber'd sparks...
William Shakespeare. *Julius Caesar*, Act I, Scene ii. 1599.

For let the gods so speed me as I love...
William Shakespeare. *Julius Caesar*, Act III, Scene i. 1599.

[Harper Lee. *To Kill a Mockingbird.* 1960.]

Let those who are in favour with their stars...
William Shakespeare. "Sonnet XXV." *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare.* 1609.

...a necessary end...will come when it will come...
William Shakespeare. *Julius Caesar*, Act II, Scene ii. 1599.

...to sleep! perchance to dream...
William Shakespeare. *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene i. 1599-1602.

Suns of the world may stain when...
William Shakespeare, fragments. "Sonnet XXXIII." *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare.* 1609.

...since I am a dog, beware my fangs...
William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene iii. 1600.

II

You take my house when you do take the prop...
William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene i. 1600.

IV

[Julian of Norwich. *Revelations of Divine Love.* 1395.]

Man and beast Thou preservest, O Lord...
Jewish Publication Society. Psalm 36:6b-7a, *The Hebrew Bible.* 1917 Edition.

V

The villainy you teach me, I will execute...
William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene i. 1600.

The quality of mercy is not strained...
William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene i. 1600.

Chapter Twelve: Unconfinèd Wings

I

When Love with unconfinèd wings...
Richard Lovelace. "To Althea, From Prison." 1642.

III

...No such liberty...My Althea...
Richard Lovelace, fragments. *"To Althea, From Prison."* 1642.

IV

...Love with unconfinèd wings...
Richard Lovelace. "To Althea, From Prison." 1642.

Chapter Thirteen: Tunnelkids

I

When flowing cups run swiftly round...
Richard Lovelace. “To Althea, From Prison.” 1642.

No such liberty...
Richard Lovelace. “To Althea, From Prison.” 1642.

My father, my father, and do you not hear...
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. “Der Erlkönig.” *Die Fischerin*. 1782. Zara Wilder, translator. 2013.

It is something to have wept as we have wept...
G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936). “The Great Minimum.”

II

Fee-fi-fo-fum...
Traditional English Rhyme. Used by Joseph Jacob in *Jack and the Beanstalk*. 1890.

III

[Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. “Der Erlkönig.” *Die Fischerin*. 1782.]

[Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. “Paul Revere's Ride.” 1861.]

[Washington Irving. “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* 1820.]

[T. H. White. *The Sword in the Stone.* 1938.]

[Harper Lee. *To Kill a Mockingbird.* 1960.]

Perilous ancient passions...
G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), fragments. “The Great Minimum.”

Motheragod, the halls of hell!
Patrick Dennis. *Auntie Mame: An Irreverent Escapade.* 1955.

Hate me when thou wilt...
William Shakespeare, fragments. “Sonnet XC.” *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare.* 1609.

Thou know'st thy estimate...
William Shakespeare, fragments. "Sonnet LXXXVII." *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare.* 1609.

Love is strengthen'd...
William Shakespeare, fragments. "Sonnet CII." *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare.* 1609.

I must ne'er love him whom thou dost hate...
William Shakespeare, fragments. "Sonnet LXXXIX." *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare.* 1609.

Chapter Fourteen: Crash Landing

I

[Rudyard Kipling. "Gunga Din." 1892.]

When, like committed linnets, I...
Richard Lovelace. "To Althea, From Prison." 1642.

IV

[Betty Smith. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. 1943.]

Water, is taught by thirst...
Emily Dickinson (1830-1886). "*Water, is taught by thirst."*

Chapter Fifteen: Phantoms

I

[C.S. Lewis. *The Silver Chair.* 1953.]

III

[Hesiod. *Works and Days*. c. 700 B.C.E.]

"*My son, why are you hiding your face with such fear?"*
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. "Der Erlkönig." *Die Fischerin*. 1782. Zara Wilder, translator. 2013.

If you prick us, do we not bleed?
William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene i. 1600.

Mein Vater, mein Vater, jetzt faßt er mich an...
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. “Der Erlkönig.” *Die Fischerin*. 1782.

[Dante Alighieri. *Inferno. Divina Commedia.* 1320.]

Though the whole heaven be one-eyed with the moon...
G. K. Chesterton. “The End of Fear.” *The Wild Knight and Other Poems*. 1900.

[J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Silmarillion*. Christopher Tolkien, editor. 1977.]

I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following...
William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene i. 1600.

Behold, Father: a little thing...
G. K. Chesterton, paraphrased. “The End of Fear.” *The Wild Knight and Other Poems*. 1900.

IV

My father, my father...
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. “Der Erlkönig.” *Die Fischerin*. 1782. Zara Wilder, translator. 2013.

Franz Schubert, Lied; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, lyrics. *Erlkönig.* Opus 1 (D. 328). 1821.

Chapter Sixteen: Many Hands

I

[Johnathan Swift. *Gulliver’s Travels*. 1726.]

He was “Din! Din! Din!
Rudyard Kipling. “Gunga Din.” 1892.

II

[Fyodor Dostoyevsky. *The Brothers Karamazov*. 1880. Constance Garnett, translator, 1912.]

[Thích Nhất Hạnh. *Being Peace.* 1987.]

[Dante Alighieri. *Divina Commedia.* 1320.]

[Stephen Hawking & George Ellis. *The Large Scale Structure of Space-Time.* 1973.]

[Robert Browning (1812-1889). *Poems of Robert Browning*.]

[Jules Verne. *Le Phare du bout du monde.* 1905.]

[Hope Mirrlees. *Paris: A Poem.* 1919.]

[*Poetry Magazine.* September 1985.]

[Betty Smith. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. 1943.]

[Bill Watterson. *Calvin and Hobbes.* Collected comic strips. 1985-1987.]

[Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. *Le Petite Prince.* 1943.]

[Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. *The Little Prince.* Katherine Woods, translator. 1943.]

[William Shakespeare (1564-1616). *The Collected Works of William Shakespeare.*]

III

In this matter, O king, the Bhikshu is satisfied...
Sâmañña-phala Sutta. The Sîla Vagga. Dialogues of the Buddha, 66. T. W. Rhys Davids, translator. 1889.

...he looks upon himself as freed from debt, rid of disease, out of jail, a free man, and secure..
Sâmañña-phala Sutta. The Sîla Vagga. Dialogues of the Buddha, 74. T. W. Rhys Davids, translator. 1889.

And so rejoicing all his frame becomes at ease...
Sâmañña-phala Sutta. The Sîla Vagga. Dialogues of the Buddha, 75. T. W. Rhys Davids, translator. 1889.

IV

But if the while I think on thee, dear friend...
William Shakespeare. “Sonnet XXX.” *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare.* 1609.

Many a star of fire shot forth from the iron...
Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī. *Masnavi*. 1258-1273. *The Mathnawí of Jalálu'ddín Rúmí*. Reynold A. Nicholson, translator. 1925-1940.

V

[William Shakespeare. *As You Like It*. 1599-1600.]

[William Shakespeare. *Twelfth Night, or What You Will.* 1600-1601.]

[William Shakespeare. *The Taming of the Shrew*. 1590s.]

[William Shakespeare. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. 1590s.]

[William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*. 1600.]

Wilt thou be gone? Sweet Valentine, adieu!
William Shakespeare. *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Act I, Scene i. 1589-1592.

I have spoke thus much...
William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene i. 1600.

VI

[Erich Maria Remarque. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. 1929.]

Star light, star bright...
Traditional American Nursery Rhyme. "Star Light, Star Bright." Late 1800s.

[Harper Lee. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. 1960.]

Chapter Seventeen: Treasures

I

What a piece of work is man...
William Shakespeare. *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene ii. 1599-1602.

[Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. *The Little Prince.* Katherine Woods, translator. 1943.]

[Johanna Spyri. *Heidi*. 1880.]

Georg Friedrich Händel, composer. "Hallelujah Chorus," *Messiah.* 1741.

[Betty Smith. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. 1943.]

II

Such Age, How Beautiful!
William Wordsworth. “To ------, in Her Seventieth Year.” 1827. *The Complete Poetical Works*. 1888.

IV

[Dante Alighieri. *Divina Commedia.* 1320.]

... behold: a little thing...
G. K. Chesterton, paraphrase. “The End of Fear.” *The Wild Knight and Other Poems.* 1900.

It is sooth that sin is cause of all this pain...
Julian of Norwich. “Chapter XXVII.” *Revelations of Divine Love.* 1395.

[Fyodor Dostoyevsky. *The Brothers Karamazov*. 1880. Constance Garnett, translator, 1912.]

V

George Gershwin, composer. *Rhapsody in Blue.* 1924.

[Homer. *The Illiad.* 760-710 B.C.E.]

Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes...
Virgil. *Aeneid*, Book II. 29-19 B.C.E. “I fear the Greeks, even when they bring gifts.”

Surprised by joy—impatient as the wind...
William Wordsworth (1770-1850). “Surprised by Joy—Impatient as the Wind.”

Chapter Eighteen: Angels Above

I

No rest for the wicked...
English proverb, based upon Isaiah 48:22; 57:20-21.

I broke the infernal gates and looked on him...
G. K. Chesterton. “The End of Fear.” *The Wild Knight and Other Poems.* 1900.

III

[Homer. The Illiad. 760-710 B.C.E.]

Meantime to beauteous Helen, from the skies...
Homer. *The Illiad.* 760-710 B.C.E. *The Illiad of Homer.* Alexander Pope, translator. 1899.

You give but little when you give of your possessions...
Kahlil Gibran. “On Giving.” *The Prophet.* 1923.

IV

…my father, my father, he’s seizing your son!
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. “Der Erlkönig.” *Die Fischerin*. 1782. Zara Wilder, translator. 2013.

[Homer. The Illiad. 760-710 B.C.E.]

V

I saw you last night and got that old feeling...
Lew Brown, music; Sammy Fain, lyrics. Ella Fitzgerald & Joe Pass, performers. “That Old Feeling.” *Fitzgerald and Pass...Again.* 1976.

Rain...Ah va da ba dya da da doo dee...
Eugene Ford. Ella Fitzgerald & Joe Pass, performers. “Rain.” *Fitzgerald and Pass...Again.* 1976.

[Duke Ellington, music; Bob Russell, lyrics. Ella Fitzgerald & Joe Pass, performers. “I Didn’t Know About You.” *Fitzgerald and Pass...Again.* 1976.]

[Duke Ellington, music; Carl Sigman, lyrics. Ella Fitzgerald & Joe Pass, performers. “All Too Soon.” *Fitzgerald and Pass...Again.* 1976.]

There was a boy...
eden ahbez. Ella Fitzgerald & Joe Pass, performers. “Nature Boy.” *Fitzgerald and Pass...Again.* 1976.

Stone walls do not a prison make...
Richard Lovelace. “To Althea, From Prison.” 1642.

When I stood, forlorn...
William Wordsworth (1770-1850). “Surprised by Joy—Impatient as the Wind.”

Final Note: Brigit O’Donnell is a fictional character from the *Beauty and the Beast* canon. The equally fictitious titles of O’Donnell’s books, along with her archetypal presentation of the owl-woman, are gleaned from George R. R. Martin’s episode, “Masques” (Season One, Episode 5, originally aired October 30, 1987), its auxiliary materials (scripts, transcripts, and production data), the 1993 *Innovation Comics* rendering of the original script, and Ru Emerson’s 1990 novelization, *Masques*. The specific texts and story elements from O’Donnell’s works (in particular, *A Terrible Strength* and *Fables and Fantasies*), which are woven into this novelization of “Nor Iron Bars a Cage,” are purely the invention of Zara Wilder.