

A Perfect Anniversary

by Zara Wilder

Each gazed into the other's eyes.

At last he said, "Every moment since that night, I'm reminded of what a gift life is."

She stepped forward into his embrace. He held her as she slipped her arms around his waist. They stood quiet on her balcony amid the dozens of candles she had set alight. The April breeze flickered the candle flames, and the nighttime shadows quivered all around them. She believed this was going to be a perfect anniversary night. Their perfect first anniversary of the dark night they had met. As perfect as his words.

"A gift," she murmured. "Dancing light. You find perfect phrases to describe things."

"Hmm."

She turned her face upward. He looked magnificent. She saw he had brushed most of the curls from his mane for the evening. His fine golden hair flowed in waves past his shoulders. Indulging herself, she reached up and smoothed his tresses, then outlined the strong angles of his jaw, elated by the textures she felt.

He stood enraptured by her greeting, entranced by the sparkle in her exultant green eyes. Her affection delighted him. Her desire beguiled him. He felt through his empathic attunement to her emotions the pleasure she received from touching him. He felt her trust, and her admiration for him, even as he admired her familiar features and reveled in his own feelings for her. She fairly glowed in his arms. And now she smiled at him.

"Kiss me?" she asked. Irresistible.

He bent down, gentled his mouth upon her lips. Her hands drew him closer still. She felt his left hand glide upward along the silky lace of her gown to sweetly cradle the back of her head. This was the second kiss of their peculiar romance. Neither ever wanted it to end.

Nonetheless, breathing remained essential. They retreated, smiled at their mutual breathlessness, recovered, advanced again, amplified their sharing. She stood up on her toes, raising her hands to twine her fingers through that glorious hair. He wrapped his arms entirely around her, his heart blazing with wonder, with passion, with joy.

Her perfume intoxicated him. Amber, vanilla, bergamot, and rose. Her beloved underscent, the unique fragrance of her, herself, inscribed its signature upon his dazzled

senses. Her heartbeat pulsed in his ears. Her hunger for him hummed through his bones. The roughness of his tongue surprised her, lightly abrading her lower lip. The shape of his mouth was strange, mysterious. He yielded to her investigation. The fur on his face felt like velvet to her, his skin exquisitely warm. He tasted of honey and cloves and cinnamon. She sensed his clawtips press against her scalp, sharp points delicately restrained. How could a body so masterful as his yet offer her such softness, such receptivity?

He withdrew first, resting his brow upon hers, still holding her tightly to himself. She lowered her heels to stand flat upon her terrace floor once more. He pulled back enough to look adoringly into her eyes.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered.

Her smile radiated happiness. "Come inside," she invited. "I have more beautiful things to add to our celebration."

He cocked his head a little. Considering her invitation, perhaps. His blue eyes returned her smile: measure for measure, brightness for brightness.

"We'll leave the balcony door open," she added, knowing he did not like to be shut up inside closed rooms Above.

In answer, he relaxed his hold on her. She took his hand and led him through the open French door, and past the sheer curtains, into her bedroom. It was only the third time he had entered her apartment.

She quickly switched off the electric lamp in her room. Dozens more candles welcomed them with warming light. They stepped down together onto her carpet. He went with her cautiously. The candlelight was kind to him, but her home remained a foreign domain. He could never belong here.

She paused, stood on tiptoe again, and kissed his cheek. Now his eyes crinkled with amusement. These warmhearted liberties she was deciding to take with him tonight—it was new.

"May I take your coat?" she asked her guest.

He considered again, then slipped out of his mantle and handed it to her. She draped it across the bench at the end of her bed. Turning, she brought him through the louvered bedroom doors into her living room. Candles glimmered there, too. She went up the low steps into her small dining area, where she switched off another electric lamp. He saw that her glass-topped pedestal table had been set for two. A clear crystal bowl, containing water and a floating candle, made a lovely centerpiece. Light reflected off the glass and chrome furnishings around the room, and from mirrors on the walls. Standing now beside her antique side table, she touched the neck of a bottle she had prepared. The bottle lay upon a bed of ice chips inside a small, silver-plated pail.

“Would you like champagne?” she asked.

He stepped up into the dinette, joining her. He glanced at the champagne bottle, then shook his head. “Thank you, no.”

He felt her disappointment like an ice shard, puncturing his breast. Minute, swiftly dissolved—but cold with sadness, all the same. He tried to further moderate his refusal.

“When I go Above,” he explained. “I do not drink alcohol. It isn’t safe. For me.”

She looked down at the bottle, chagrined. She supposed his custom made sense, considering the dangers he faced in her world. Still, she had not expected it. She liked social drinking. It relaxed her, and she especially associated champagne with parties, special occasions—and romantic interludes. She could scarcely imagine attending a celebration of any consequence without sipping the delicious effervescence during the festivities. She smiled regretfully as she met his gaze.

“I’ve been offered beer and wine when I’ve visited the Tunnels. So I know you’re not teetotalers down there.”

“No. We’re not teetotalers.” Privately, though, he realized he might be becoming one. From childhood, from his friends and mentors, and through personal experience, he had learned never to needlessly risk the health and well-being of himself and his community through intemperance of any kind. His habit kept him careful with when and how he imbibed distilled or fermented drinks.

Now, however, he was unsure how to explain to anyone that since his terrifying tribulation with the street gang in February, he could not abide the smell—let alone the taste—of beer. And since last month’s narrow escapes from two separate drug-saturated plots of deranged Columbia University professors, he had avoided every possible intoxicant. Even William’s excellent wines and mead and cider.

Strong drinks did not feel safe anymore. These days, he found he craved safety more than ever before. He could not predict how long he might need to continue applying his lifelong rule for his forays Above to his everyday life Below.

“Do you drink alcohol when you’re at home?” she asked, curious.

“Sometimes,” he replied, which was accurate enough. “Usually on holidays.”

“You can’t make an exception for our holiday?”

He had never tasted champagne. He knew letting her provide his first experience with carbonated wine would please her. But he shook his head a second time. “You may still enjoy some champagne yourself,” he suggested.

She nodded, wondering what else to offer him to drink. “Would you like mineral water instead?”

“I will try it.”

“Just a moment.” She took one of the coupés from the table and hurried into the kitchen. She filled his glass, trying not to marvel at his implication that he had never tried sparkling water before. Sometimes, it seemed far too easy to forget how different his world actually was from hers. Easy to forget the strangeness of his world when he visited her own world, anyway. She always found herself markedly aware of the differences whenever she ventured Down into his subterranean realm.

She returned to the dining room and saw that he had spent his time alone filling her glass for her. He replaced the champagne bottle in the ice pail. She grinned at him. They traded glasses.

“To hope,” she said.

“To hope,” he agreed.

They raised their glasses in salute and sipped. The water tingled on his tongue. Mild, tasteless carbonation: a novelty. He knew he must drink it slowly though, mindful of his stomach. She watched her companion handle his unfamiliar beverage in its unfamiliar vessel with admirable aplomb. His large hand miniaturized the coupé. While they drank, he smelled the aroma of her champagne as it melded with her perfume. He found this a heady combination. Pleasance from her glass refreshed her. She had been looking forward to this all day.

“Sit with me,” she said then. They moved toward the dining chairs. He set down his glass to seat her, then seated himself beside her at the table. He felt like a large bird perching upon a narrow twig — an unusually plush twig, at that. The metal chair felt small beneath him, and it was cushioned with plump padding. He surveyed the refreshments she offered. Berries mounded in a small crystal bowl, stuffed mushrooms arranged on a glass plate, around tiny rounds of pale cheese. Cubes of pink cake occupied another plate, set near a dish of chocolates: white, brown, and black. Bite-sized appetizers, all.

He wondered whether the berries had been treated with pesticides. Maybe he could risk tasting one of the dark chocolates; he could usually discern by taste if candies contained harmful industrial sweeteners. His nose detected onion in the mushrooms, which rendered them inedible to him. And he couldn’t eat cattle cheeses or conventional cakes.

She noticed him hesitating.

“Don’t tell me you don’t eat, either, when you go Above,” she said.

“Some things I can eat,” he said slowly. “Other things, I can’t.”

She cultivated calmness, so she wouldn’t blush. It had never occurred to her that he might not be able to share the same party tidbits that she liked. “Oh, dear,” she murmured, even more disappointed than she had felt over her mistake with the

champagne. "I'm sorry. I should have asked."

"You wanted to surprise me."

She nodded. "Is there anything here that—?" Her hand hovered uncertainly over the food.

"Maybe you could tell me more about the ingredients," he answered.

As it happened, she did not know whether or not the fruit was pesticide-free. Or what sweetener the chocolatier had used, or if the dark chocolate contained any dairy. She suspected that, yes, the cake was artificially colored, and she was certain milk and butter had gone into its batter. And then it shocked her to learn what horrible maladies alliums inflicted upon her companion's body.

"I've served you a table full of poisons!"

He touched her hand. "You didn't know."

"I really should have asked," she repeated.

"You'll remember to ask next time."

She winced. "You trust me enough to let there be a next time?"

Chuckling, he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "This is not the worst crisis we have faced," he told her. "And I will gladly accept any 'next time' you choose to offer me."

"I still feel foolish."

"I know," he said. "I feel it. But I don't think you are foolish. Your heart intended only the best for our evening."

She sighed at his generosity, and drank from her glass. "So, now I'm dying to know," she said. "What can you eat?"

He folded his hands on the table. "I can eat most of the foods that other people eat," he said. "But it must be real food, and it must not contain chemical additives or processed fillers."

"Not junk food," she summarized.

He nodded. He briefly explained that he had trouble with most starchy plants, with unsprouted legumes, and with tropical fruits. Other food types were outright dangerous to him: cow dairy, alliums, nightshades, avocados, macadamia nuts and citrus fruits. He also had to be sparing with chocolate, coffee, tea, salt, sugar, and alcohol. She already knew from conversations with his father that most drugs and various chemicals were toxic to his system. As they talked, she began to understand that she had never given much thought to how adulterated her world's food supply had become in the modern era. With her own food choices, she worried most about the

number of calories and grams of fat she consumed.

“How exactly does your community get ahold of — real food?” she asked.

“Our Helpers know what kinds of edibles we need,” he replied. “And we know which shops and markets sell the best natural foods — and which days they dispose of their unsold produce. We are good at foraging in the city. We also grow a few small-scale crops of our own in the Tunnels. Maybe someday we can learn how to grow more. Nutrition is important in our world. Many of us have suffered hunger and malnourishment in the world Above. We are careful about the quality of our meals Below.”

She listened, fascinated, becoming aware that she, like many of her Topside peers, harbored some rather high-handed assumptions about the food that poor or homeless people would — or should — be willing to eat. She felt a little ashamed of several donations she knew the director of her mother’s charitable foundation had recently arranged for some of the city’s homeless shelters and food banks.

“And I am not the only one Below who must avoid certain foods,” he concluded. “We keep a list of people’s allergies and dietary needs posted in the Kitchen, and we store our supplies with care, to avoid contaminating anything with ingredients that someone might be sensitive to.”

“That sounds like a lot of work,” she said.

“It’s life-saving work.”

She nodded again and admitted, “I’ve just never known anyone who has this kind of problem.”

“Oh, it’s likely you’ve known people,” he replied. “But they may not have shared their needs with you.”

He was most likely right.

She entertained the possibility that it might be a good idea to start paying more attention to where her food came from, and how it was made. In fact, she must pay closer attention, if she ever wanted to offer any hospitality to her beloved friend that would not injure him. All the more so because she had never been much of a cook, and she felt no special inclination to improve her skills in the culinary arts.

“Are there foods you don’t like to eat?” he asked her, ending her ruminations.

“Let’s see,” she replied. She reoriented her thoughts to answer his question. “I don’t like maraschino cherries at all. Fruitcakes and mincemeat fall into the same boat, there. And I don’t like slimy vegetables. Okra, boiled cabbage, stewed tomatoes, canned spinach, things like that. I hate charred meats. Oh, and also pickled meats. Most snack foods don’t appeal to me — it’s the grease.” She reviewed memories in her mind,

looking for any more unpleasant meals or tastes. “Cheap beers or wines or liquors, too,” she added after a moment. “I like good brews and vintages too much to settle for poor imitations.”

He wondered how she would judge the products of William’s work Below.

“You like good beers and wines,” he said. “What are your other favorite things?”

She smiled. “I enjoy pretty much everything else. I’ve never been a picky eater. Hmm—I do especially love good coffee. Ice cream is my favorite treat. Although crème brûlée is my favorite dessert. I think sushi is delicious. I adore just about every kind of berry. And fillet mignon, cooked medium-rare, never fails to cheer me up.”

He nodded, pleased with this insight into her tastes. He would remember them in the future.

The thought of fillet mignon gave her an idea. Brightening, she asked, “If I served a steak dinner next time, would you enjoy that?”

“I—don’t know. Probably.”

Many dampening emotions flitted through her mind. She couldn’t settle on just one to feel. Astonishment led the charge. “You’ve never eaten steak?”

He shook his head, no.

Their worlds were incredibly estranged.

“Next time, then,” she promised him. “Steak for two.”

He chuckled again. He appreciated her zeal. “Next time,” he agreed.

“Well,” she said. “For the time being, I guess you’ll just have to come with me.”

“Where are we going?” he asked.

She stood up from her chair. “The kitchen. I am determined to find something I can safely serve to you tonight.”

Bemused, he also stood. She took her glass with her into the kitchen, so he brought his glass as well. After all they had survived together during the past few months, he recognized by the set of her shoulders that she had taken a new mission upon herself. She would not feel satisfied until she had met this challenge squarely, and done her utmost to conquer it.

She began with her refrigerator, opening the door wide, and urging him to peer inside. He obliged her. “This looks promising,” he said, pointing to a pale melon on the bottom shelf.

“The honeydew?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not worried about pesticides on the melon?” she asked.

“Less worried about pesticides on melons than about pesticides on berries,” he replied.

“How do you know what to worry about and what to worry less about?”

“Research,” he said, then added, “When Mary first joined our community, she taught us what she knew about the poisons the world Above puts into the food it produces. She and Father studied how the poisons can harm the humans and animals who eat these foods, and how the poisons also harm the Earth. Our community decided to make better choices for our world—a decision that we hope, in its own small way, helps your world, as well.”

“Mary,” she said, mulling over the few facts she knew about the Tunnelwoman. “She was part of the counterculture in the ‘60s.”

“Yes.”

She shrugged. Her family and friends had always been dismissive of the environmentalists and flower children and civil rights activists. Mary, now the Tunnels nurse and midwife, was the first friend she’d ever known who had genuinely lived that life, twenty years ago. “Well then,” she said, “I suppose Mary would know a lot about the subject, and I suppose natural foods might be important to her.”

He said, “And now, it is important to all of us.”

She extracted the melon and closed the refrigerator door.

“I always wait until my other fruit is gone before I slice a melon,” she confessed.

“They’re just big and bulky to cut. And the seeds are slimy. But my mother always said melon is good for me.”

He set his glass on a counter. “Can I help?” he asked.

A half-smile tickled at the edge of her mouth. “Are you volunteering?”

“Yes.”

“All right.” She set down the melon to locate a cutting board, a large knife, and a spoon. He went to the sink and quickly washed his hands, scrubbing them damp-dry on a fresh towel.

She raised one eyebrow at him as he joined her in front of the cutting board. “So hygienic,” she commented.

“I am my father’s son,” he replied dryly.

She laughed, and watched his strong left hand clasp the knife handle. He made swift and efficient work of the melon. After halving it, he scooped out the seed beds with the spoon, and sliced the fruit into long, narrow wedges. She stared at his hands as he worked, surprised by his skill. One by one, he picked up each wedge and cut away its rind in a single, smooth arc, arranging the finished morsels in a neat row on the board.

"I'm impressed," she told him with total honesty. Not a scrap of melon flesh went to waste.

He said nothing, but he did not think he had done anything impressive. He cut the wedges into smaller crosswise portions, then set down the knife. He picked up a piece of the fruit. Catching her eye, he silently held the bit of melon near her lips.

She smiled, opening her mouth. He fed her a bite. It was out of season, straight out of the refrigerator, the flavor somewhat wan—yet juicy and sweet enough nonetheless. He put the remaining bite into his own mouth, and his eyes smiled.

They shared half the melon in this way, standing together in the kitchen, feeding fruit to each other, in between sips of her champagne and his mineral water.

"This is not what I had in mind when I imagined our evening," she said.

"No," he concurred with a smile.

"I like this better," she said.

"Good. I like it very much, myself."

He watched her scrape the seeds and rinds into a garbage bin beneath her sink, reflecting upon the uses the Tunnelfolk found for such perfectly edible ingredients, but he made no remark about her action. They both rinsed melon juice from their hands. She placed the remainder of the sliced melon in a bowl and set the bowl inside her refrigerator. He washed the knife, spoon, and board, and dried them while she refilled his glass with more mineral water. They went back out into the dinette, where she refilled her glass with champagne.

"You're quite handy in the kitchen," she commented.

"Why wouldn't I be?" he asked.

She couldn't think of any particular reason. "Well, I thought William was your chef Below."

"William prepares scheduled community meals, and keeps the Kitchen and Pantry organized," he said. "We are all taught how to cook for ourselves, though. It's part of a Tunnels education. Anyone can use the Kitchen anytime they want to. And everyone takes turns completing cooking and cleaning tasks, under William's guidance."

"I stand instructed," she said, and raised her glass to his superior culinary experience.

"William must be a good teacher."

He smiled again, shaking his head. "William did not teach me."

She lowered her glass. "Oh."

"I learned to cook from Julia, Winslow's mother. William joined us Below when I was sixteen."

She wondered if she would ever manage to connect all the details of his life together into one understandable whole. “Your community is so full of life,” she said. “Always changing, adapting.”

“It’s a world,” he said. “A secret miracle, ever evolving.”

“You’re finding perfect phrases again.”

He bowed in answer to her praise, happy that she loved his family’s world, too.

“Did you have someone special who taught you kitchen skills?” he asked her.

She thought about it. “Not really. I ‘helped’ our cook, Pamela, sometimes, when I was little. Mostly with breads and desserts, because those recipes were the most fun for me to knead or stir. My mother and grandmother taught me how to entertain, how to evaluate tastes and plan menus, how to supervise household staff. I didn’t do much of my own cooking until after I left home to go to college. And even then—” She shook her head. “Pre-packaged foods and take-out were always my easy go-to solutions. On my own I can fend off starvation, but I have no gift for meal-making. I’m best at — at salads.”

“I like salads,” he said.

She laughed to hear his earnest tone of voice. “Don’t make fun!”

“I’m not. In my world fresh greens are a delicacy.”

She shook her head again, marveling again. “Since you’re trusting me with a next time, maybe next time I’ll also make us a salad to share.”

“I’d like that very much,” he said.

“One without any onions in it.”

“Wonderful.”

“Steaks and salads. It’s a plan.”

They smiled at one another. She stepped close to him and took him by the arm. Still smiling, she led him down the steps from her dinette into her living room.

“I have more to share with you tonight,” she said, turning on her stereo. “Would you like some music now?”

“Certainly,” he answered.

She pressed the “play” button and looked up at him, eager to see his reaction. Piano notes flitted through the air from her stereo speakers. A half dozen notes, and he sighed, already transported.

“Rachmaninoff.”

“I knew you would love it!” she exulted. “His piano concertos.”

He did love the music. But even more did he love the stunning woman at his side. He loved the treasured moments she was sharing with him: her home, her food, her music, herself. Tenderly, he put one arm around her and pulled her closer. "You're the one I love," he murmured.

She drained her glass and set it on her square coffee table. She also relieved him of his glass and then hugged him tight. Orchestral instruments joined the piano as the music expanded. Their spirits soared with the melody, each rejoicing in the nearness of the other.

"I never knew how lonely I was," she breathed, "until you came into my life and gave me your love."

He whispered her name. And he whispered her name.

"You are my secret miracle," she told him.

She felt him kiss the crown of her head.

They did not quite dance. It was not dancing music, nor was her recently redecorated living room furnished to accommodate dancers. But they swayed slowly in the candlelight, secure within one another's arms, during the languid flow of sound between the energetic flourishes. Their sway-dancing moved them gradually across the room from her stereo system. Whenever they moved together, he felt the new, faint tug of the precious amulet she had made for him as it hung from the leather strand around his neck. She felt the shape of the crystal pendant he had given her after he arrived tonight, warmed now by her body heat, through the lace of her gown.

They had so much to feel. So much to dream. So much to discover, and give, and cherish.

They had never known such warmth, such happiness.

"Would you like more water?" she asked him.

"No."

"I'd like more champagne." She gently disengaged herself. "You can sit down if you'd like."

He did not move from his place in front of her fireplace. He did not want to sit. He knew he was too tall for her furniture, knew he was ultimately too alien to fit into her luxurious world. She wore her wealth and power as easily and unconsciously as she wore any of her graceful evening gowns. He could not do the same. He knew she longed for him to feel comfortable in her world, in her home. But he could not feign an ease he did not feel. Their worlds were not the same, and neither of them, each a native resident of their own domain, would ever find lasting comfort in the other's abode. For his part, he found his greatest upperworld comfort in simply being near to

her.

She took her glass across the room to the dinette's side table again, availing herself of the chilled bottle in her pail. He admired the elegance of her form as she moved. She savored the fruity nose and creamy palate of her champagne. He was still standing where she had left him. She returned to his side. He considered his sense of her for a moment.

"Take care," he gently warned her. "You're becoming a little giddy."

How could he tell? His formally attired presence in her candlelit apartment inspired giddiness aplenty. But she had spent her past months learning to trust his insights.

"You can feel this affecting me?" she asked, raising her glass a little.

"Oh, yes."

"Do you always?"

"Feel the influences that affect you?"

She nodded.

"Yes. Every time."

She looked down into the pale gold drink she held. "Does feeling my — influences — affect you?"

"Mm-hm. Not to the same degree, nor in the same ways you feel them. But I am affected, yes."

She remembered her many outings and celebrations during the past year. She remembered being exorbitantly wined and dined by Elliot Burch. She remembered her humiliating ordeal under the influence of the unlikely Vodou bokor, Dr. Alexander Ross. She suppressed a shiver.

"I think you are now remembering — unpleasant things," he said softly.

"I'm remembering the Vodou cult," she specified.

He took her empty hand. She squeezed his fingers gratefully.

"Alexander drugged my champagne," she said, "and he urged me to drink as much of it as he could get away with, without rousing my suspicion. Then he drugged my morning tea. We both know how that influenced me." She looked into his eyes. "What did it do to you?"

He regarded their joined hands. "That night — I felt your fear begin to grow, to intensify. First in your dreams, then after your waking. Your fright unsettled me, but that first night you faced your fear. You did something concrete about the things that frightened you."

"Yes. I killed two whole tarantulas," she replied, grimacing. "I imagined that I saw more."

A lot more.” Her shiver became a shudder, unsuppressible. “Ugh — all over my bed. In my bed! I only found the two. I spent the whole night searching for the rest. But they weren’t physically real enough to be found.”

“Nevertheless, you were brave to hunt for them.”

Until then, they had not spoken so openly about the events of that time, nor about the dreadful details.

“But the day after,” she murmured. “The day after — I was not brave at all.” She gazed up into his face. He met her eyes. She saw no judgment there.

“When you began hallucinating,” he told her, “I was talking with Father in the Library. I felt sudden, terrible pain. Here.” He touched his temple. “And then also here.” He lowered his hand to cover his heart. “At first, Father feared I was suffering a heart attack.”

“My God,” she breathed.

He said, “I did not share your visions, but I shared your agony. Your vertigo, your panic. Burning, like fever. Fracturing and lacerating like broken glass. You wandered the city alone. The visions hammered at both of us.”

“You didn’t know they were—visions.”

“No. Not then. Narcissa helped me to understand what was happening to you, and to my own mind and heart. But that was after—after I spoke with you on your balcony, after nightfall. After I saw with my eyes, and heard with my ears, the danger you were in.”

She felt this was a very generous way of describing that conversation.

“And when I am not in such great danger? If I am at a party, or just having a drink with a friend?”

“Then my mood often begins to answer your mood, much more insistently than at other times. Your emotions — thicken, somehow. They simplify. I might feel lightheaded—or lighthearted — in answer to your body’s signals. When doctors have given you medicine for pain, I felt a kind of dullness or sleepiness in the background of my sensing.”

“Our bond is so strange,” she mused. “So subtle, yet so powerful.”

“There have been times when, through our bond, you have also sensed me,” he said.

“True.” She recalled those rare moments. All of them thus far were life-threatening occasions. She sipped from her glass to ease the dryness in her mouth. “I felt your fear and your pain after the cave-in. The rockfall hurt your head, I think. And bruised your back and shoulders.”

He blinked, intrigued. He had never told her that. “Yes.”

“When the stones fell, you were stunned for a little while. You felt the weight crushing your chest as you came to.”

“Yes,” he said again. “After my wits returned to me, it took some time to free myself, and Father, from the rock piles. It took even more time to regain my bearings.”

“I think something happens whenever your consciousness is altered,” she said, trying out the idea for herself as she spoke. “It’s not something that happens inside me, in these moments. I’m just up here, going about my daily life.” She gestured with her coupé at the apartment around them, and at the city beyond, surrounding her apartment.

“But you—” she went on. “I think you unknowingly broadcast your distress. And perhaps you only do this ‘broadcasting’ when your mind is tuned out of your everyday frequencies.”

“Tuned out,” he repeated, thoughtful.

“The cave-in was the first time I remember feeling that kind of distress call from you. I might have sensed your broadcasting on the night the Silks attacked us—but I was so overwhelmed by my own fear for you, and my own guilt, that I doubt I’d have noticed anything I could be sure came from you.”

He sighed. Both the night of the Vodou ritual and the night of the gang’s onslaught had been two of the worst nights of his life. “I would not have wanted you to come to me after I woke in the gang’s stronghold,” he said. “When I did wake, I was terrified that they had caught you as well. I felt — indescribable relief to sense that you were elsewhere, blocks away from me. And away from my attackers.”

“Your tormentors,” she whispered.

He looked away and made no reply to that.

“Do you think, if you do not want me near when you are in danger, that something in you refuses to reach out for me through our bond?” she asked.

“It is possible.”

“I wonder if I could learn to do that. Intentionally.”

He tilted his head to one side. “I already feel when you want or need me to come to you during moments of danger, and when you do not.”

She knew this was so. He excelled at reading the nuances of her needs. She also knew how useful it might be, ultimately to both of them, if she developed the skill to turn off her end of the psychic homing beacon.

“Would you want our bond to become silent only during certain times of danger?” he asked. “Or—or is, perhaps, ordinary privacy something you desire, as well?”

Although she had known of their bond for a mere three months, the connection had

actually existed between them for a whole year now. She had not gotten around to thinking about their bond in terms of privacy. She tried to imagine what it must feel like to possess a constant awareness of someone else's emotional life. The experience she imagined did not appeal to her.

She told him, "There is nothing ordinary about our bond. I'm learning to trust your tact with regards to my privacy. Never once this year have you abused or broken my trust."

"Your trust is sacred to me," he said, his eyes shadowed by the gravity of truth.

"I know it is," she said. "In any case, most of the time I am simply in awe of the power of our intimate sharing. Remember the night we reunited Eric and Ellie."

He did remember the euphoria of her triumph. He remembered, too, her joy and wonder as she began to understand that he could feel with her, and within her, the intricate bliss that words alone could never communicate. For her part, she savored the remembered expression on his face: the rapture, the peace she saw there that night. The ecstasy that found a new incarnation in the moment they were creating together now, for themselves, for their anniversary.

"I suppose the bond itself is a complete mystery anyway," she said. "Maybe it doesn't have rules or reasons. Maybe it can't be — activated or deactivated from either end. It just works."

He suspected that their bond did have some kind of internal structure, and that it had a purpose beyond their present understanding. His personal empathic ability had definite patterns to its functioning, patterns that only emerged over time, through careful observation and reflection. His bond with the woman he loved must employ similar tendencies and patterns. They had yet to discover and interpret them all.

He said, "I think you may be right, though, about the way I seem to 'broadcast' when I know I am in peril, but am not fully aware of myself."

"I'd like to say I'd be interested to test our theory in the future," she said. "But I do not like the circumstances that provoke your broadcasts."

He smiled ruefully. "Nor I."

She emptied her glass. And now she did feel it for herself: the fizzing luminance of a fine vintage, warming and expanding her from the inside out. The music filling the air sounded smoother too, the Andante cantabile more tranquil and fluid than the first movement had been.

"How is your sense of me affecting you now, tonight?" she asked him.

In truth, he realized that he felt increasingly less cautious than he usually did inside an upperworld room. Lightsome. Full. She had so thoroughly welcomed him, he felt himself enchanted.

“Tonight you have kindled dancing light within me,” he said. “How shall I determine which gleaming comes from you, and which from me, when we both stand bravely here together, our hearts aflame?”

She set her glass down upon the table. She reached for both his hands. Strong, gentle, kind hands. She called him by his dear and noble name. “Keep romancing me,” she commanded him. “For my heart is burning with my love for you.”

She believed that the trials they had endured together only sweetened the essence of the fire they shared.

“Do you feel it?” she asked, but did not let him answer. She kissed the corner of his mouth. He bowed his head and her lips found ways to speak to him that required no words at all.

He let her steal his breath away.

Long minutes later, wordless, she pulled his hands toward herself once more. In answer he stepped even nearer. She moved backward, drawing him with her. He had forgone the sofas and chairs in her living room. Perhaps he would find the furnishings in the room behind her more appealing.

He halted them beside her bed. He looked deep into her eyes, and into her heart, testing what he saw therein, challenging dreams in conflict with realities. “What do you wish of me?” he whispered.

“Celebrate me,” she said. “Celebrate us. We are neither of us in peril tonight. Celebrate our hope with me.”

“And our love,” he breathed.

“Yes. Our love above all. Here. Tonight. Even if only for tonight. This is our night.”

With great care, he pulled his hands from her grasp. Slow, deliberate, he bent toward her slender figure. He took her into his arms, lifting her off her feet. He laid her upon the bed. She slipped her feet out of her shoes. He moved her shoes to the bench, beside his cloak, and reached down to loosen the laces of his boots. Stepping out of them, he settled onto the bed himself and stretched out beside her.

Melodic chords streamed in from the living room. The night breeze billowed the bedroom curtain inward from the balcony. Candlelight shimmered in the lovers’ eyes.

He had dreamed of this. He had dreamed and dreamed alone for so long. Her small hand touched his face. Her heart did not cringe away from his heart, his face, her touching. The old yearning awoke within him—the hunger he must watch and and bridle, even as he warily opened channels within himself, to allow that hunger to surge cleanly through his soul at last; to surge and brim and to reach for the satisfaction of its desire. And, with faith in love’s providence, to seek to satisfy his beloved’s hungers in

the undertaking.

He turned his head and kissed her palm. She smiled up at him. She caressed his cheek in passing as she moved to curl her hand around the back of his neck, pulling him down to her. His velvety muzzle found the sensitive skin above the collar of her gown. He began his requested celebration there.

His hands explored the length of her, memorizing spans, curves, proportions. Her hands measured the breadth of him, pressing at the fabric of his shirt beneath his vest to feel the slide of whip-stitched cloth over hidden fur, and to map the contours of muscle, the inner framing of bone. She enjoyed his creativity; he was playful in his passion. He embraced and nuzzled with impunity, easily lifting her into new positions, cushioning her limbs with his own body while his wide, heated hands sought out the parts of her he'd never dared to touch before. But for his quickened breath, he loved her silently.

She took advantage of an enthusiastic roll that pinned one of his arms beneath her to untie the knot of his cravat. She unwound the handstitched fabric, and let it drift where it would from her grasp. Her fingertips traced swirling lines upon his long neck. She mouthed the bared skin along his throat, down to his collarbones. He shivered in her arms, uttering a voiceless moan she had heard many times before in other settings: the strange, gentle man who loved her, receiving the affectionate touch of his goddess.

Gratified by his pleasure, she pushed lightly at his shoulder. He responded at once, rolling onto his back and steadying her ascent with hands that encircled her waist. Her airy skirt floated down across his legs. She leaned over him, emanating fervor. The necklace he had given her winked and glinted as it hung suspended between them. Her precious, priceless keepsake from the underworld's deepest chamber. She shifted her weight. Her fingers came to rest upon one of the burnished metal plates of his belt. She leaned closer, bringing calculated pressure to bear upon him in a poised and practiced movement that she had always loved to perform.

And she stopped short.

He watched her eyes cloud with puzzlement, felt incredulity jolt her out of her evocative humor. He froze in place beneath her beautiful, startled body. How had he offended her?

She lowered her hand from his belt to confirm the fact which her poised and practiced maneuver had already revealed to her. Where she had expected to find ample evidence of her partner's ardor, she found nothing to speak of happening instead.

She looked into his questioning face. She abruptly saw that he had stopped breathing. His eyes were darkening with unanticipated anxiety. She withdrew her hand—but too quickly. His quiet gasp told her that her gesture came across as a recoil, an abandonment. Bewilderment, even fear, slunk into her thoughts for the first time that

night. Her kneeling and leaning felt awkward now, her right thigh held in pause between his thighs, the arm supporting her upper bodyweight beginning to ache with the tension of arrested motion.

She straightened her back and retreated from him, feeling lost. His breathing, at least, had resumed. He sat up. It shamed her to see alarm in his expression.

“Have I hurt you?” he asked.

She shook her head firmly. “No. No. Never.”

His left hand reached for her, but hesitated. He did not touch her. He asked, “What is wrong?”

“You—ah—you’re not—you don’t seem—invested.” She fumbled and blurted the words, feeling about half her age. He stared at her as if she’d gone utterly insane.

“Invested?” he repeated, blankly.

“You’re not aroused,” she tried again. “I—I expected—you to be otherwise—at this point.”

His heart pounded. His blood steamed. His whole body vibrated with vim and vigor. The most beautiful woman in the world had been making bountiful love to him all evening, and then she had encouraged him to love her—quite bodily—in her bed. He had never felt so aroused in his entire life.

Third time’s the charm? she wondered silently, a little desperately. Aloud she said to him, “I expect a man’s body to respond to me. To meet me—in—in readiness.”

Tentative, she touched the canvas pant leg closest to her, resting her hand near his hip.

He closed his eyes, understanding. He exhaled. “Oh.”

She felt herself blush in sheer relief. She removed her hand.

He murmured her name and opened his eyes. “This body responds—differently—to you. To everything. This body is—something Other than a man’s.”

She knew that. She did. But now she was staring at him, confronted anew by the truth that his differences from her, and from everyone else, were not—and never had been—the superficial differences she often wished they were. All the same, she hated hearing him talk this way. Her first impulse always led her to deny, or to correct, his beliefs about himself. Her own beliefs about him throbbed rigorously in her mind.

“Of course your body is a man’s!” she hurried to reassure him—and her unnerved self, as well.

“My body is what it is,” he said stolidly. He sat taller on the bed. “And I think the responses — the rhythms — of my body do not naturally share your chosen tempo.”

“We can share anything we choose to share,” she rebutted. “Perhaps you only need a

little, well, assistance.” She knew next to nothing about male difficulties of this nature. She refused to recall the contemptuous jokes and jibes lurking in the back corners of her social repertoire, which now threatened to flood her mind at the worst possible moment. She tried to think of basic therapies instead. “There are—techniques—” she got out. “Medications—stimulants—”

His gaze was cooling as she spoke. The fuzzy luminescence in her head was not helping her make her case. She knew she wasn’t making sense. She wasn’t sure how to make herself make sense. She felt woefully flustered and disoriented! The differences between them were suddenly too different. She had never encountered this situation before.

Her hasty words sent a chill down his spine. Had she forgotten so soon what two abductors’ upperworld “techniques,” “medications,” and “stimulants” had done to him only weeks ago? He instantly submerged the rising memories of his captivity back down into the realm of his most hideous nightmares.

“The rhythms of my body are different, not diseased,” he insisted.

She did not want to refute this point. She did not want him to be diseased or disordered. She did not want to insult his dignity.

“I’m sorry,” she said, chastened. “I don’t want to judge you, or to compare you with—um—I guess—I just don’t know what to do, if—when—” She shook her head, frustrated. “I’ve always assumed that the mechanics of intimacy are—consistent. Predictable.”

“You value predictability,” he said.

“I do.”

“Me too,” he said softly.

They both looked away from each other.

“Maybe—I’m still too attached to my favorite routines. Romantically speaking,” she said.

“Is a man’s erection so important to you?” he asked. “To your routines?”

She looked swiftly at his face, surprised by his frankness. He was gazing, with some longing, she thought, at the hands she held folded in her lap as she sat on the edge of her bed.

“It’s what I’m used to,” she told him with equal frankness.

He looked up into her eyes. “I cannot give you what you’re used to.”

His statement was so true, it hurt them both.

“I think I learn that lesson all over again every time we meet,” she said, thwarted. “I

wish I were a better student.”

Sorrow dimmed his countenance. “I don’t want to be your teacher,” he said.

Of course he didn’t. She pressed her hands to her cheeks, hoping to quell the flush that must still be blooming there. She thanked God for the generosity of the candlelight.

“It’s just that I like to determine a partner’s sexual sincerity, his passion, by the way he —participates—in my—routines,” she explained. “It’s how I gauge the status of a relationship.”

And also, she thought to herself, but could not quite bring herself to speak aloud, it was how she’d learned to quash her doubts about the quality of her own attractiveness.

For if a man’s body proclaimed her inherent desirability, even if sometimes against his conscious will, then his words or actions could matter less to her, in the end. Such proof of her physical beauty reassured her of her value to others — or her power over them —in at least this one arena. And so her inevitable disappointment in the failure of a relationship might just hurt a little less.

He was astonished by the inherent absurdity, and the naiveté, of her habitual discernment method. “Do you measure the sincerity and passion of your partner’s intentions by this standard? Do you measure the quality of your partner’s affections this way?” he asked.

“Historically, yes,” she replied, nonplussed.

She could tell by the look on his face that the next question he was not asking her went something like: And how has that worked out for you thus far?

Self-disgust began to burrow its way into her awareness. No, he wasn’t judging her. She was judging herself. Again. Besides, she knew, it was not as if she had been doubting his sincerity, or his passion, or his affection for her—up until the precipitous rupture of her great and grandiose expectations.

He watched her try to collect her thoughts, while her churning emotions tackled this newest challenge to her worldview. In the meantime, he worked to process his own shock at the cessation of their frolic. She had freely touched him wherever and however it had pleased her to touch him, and her touch seared like a blessed flame that burned him without wounding. His flesh now ached acutely — hungrily — everywhere — with the loss of her kisses and caresses. Breathing sensibility into that absence, he turned his attention to the impressions that were forming in the wake of her retreat and revelations. Sumptuousness. Safety. Sensuality. He also pondered her word: Sexual. She had accepted him totally, if only for a moment. One perfect, poignant moment. She had gladly received the love which his soul and his body offered to her. His psyche — and his skin, his mouth, his hands — the very marrow of his bones — would cherish that acceptance, and their felicity, forever.

But for now? For the remainder of this night? He sighed to himself. She was not quite sober. And he was disconcerted by the resurgence of fear between them. He regretted that what he was and what he was able to give her could not satiate her appetites as she desired.

Their anniversary celebrated the mutual end of their aloneness, and the dawning of new hopes and dreams. It was enough. It was abundant. He drew in another deep breath and felt thankfulness overflow from his heart. Even in her confusion, she still looked like an angel to him.

She cleared her throat. "The things I'm used to — my private expectations — they keep getting us into trouble, don't they?"

"Sometimes," he said. "Other times, they get us out of trouble." He twisted around on the bed and set his feet on the floor.

"Have I spoiled our celebration?" she asked his back.

"No," he answered, and the warmth in his voice offered her comfort she wasn't sure how to receive. "But we're not ready for this."

Bleak, she told him, "I wanted us to be ready."

"So did I. But we're not. So—let this remain a dream we share."

Her vision blurred with tears. Dreaming was hard for her. But, "A dream," she conceded. "For now."

"May I use your bathroom?" he asked bluntly.

"Of course." She wiped at her eyes.

He stood up. She called after him. He stopped.

"Tell me what you're used to." she said.

His shoulders sagged. How could he explain?

For he was used to bearing and forbearing many things to which he could never become fully accustomed. He sustained the brutal knowledge that his infant self had inspired someone to immediately discard him after his birth. All his life, he brooked unthinking dismissal from the society of his friends, as he watched each of them dream engrossing dreams that of necessity excluded him from the dreaming. As a child, he had also braved his older brother's tumultuous fellowship and adventuresome ambitions, grieving both Devin's bullying and his eventual desertion. And he mourned always the damning remembrance of feeling his own ravenous adolescent claws exert bloody, wrongful force to pillage one he had claimed to love.

He was all too used to battling annual bouts of crushing aloneness, or befuddling madness, or mute despair. He tolerated the condescension of those smug acquaintances at the periphery of his life who adjudged his faculties deficient in

comparison to their own, because they could not imagine his contentment with his personhood. Time and again, he bore the weight of experiencing too many people—including the beloved occupant of this apartment—scream and sob at their first sight of his face. Or their second sight, or even their third. He had also — somehow — survived sensing from afar those occasions when this woman he loved forever made passionate love to another man, Up in the world she shared with her suitors.

He coped with battle, generally, and with his memories of battle. He had long endured the virulent mockery of small-hearted men. He had suffered the petty cruelties the Silks women had inflicted two months ago, alongside senseless torture at the hands of their strutting male associates. His entire being still fought to surpass the violations of two feckless scientists who had recently caught and caged him, and, but for the intercession of his beloved friend, would have killed him. He strove daily to come to terms with his beloved's oft-strained efforts to piece together some way of relating to him that would not altogether devastate one or both of them.

He sighed again. Over his shoulder, he told her, "I am used to horror."

Dismayed, she watched him stride away into the next room. The electric light stayed off. He did not close the door. She didn't think he liked doors. She heard water running from the sink's faucet. She got up and crossed the room to stand at the threshold, looking in at him.

He bent over the vanity countertop, dashing handfuls of cold water over his face. As she watched, he reached for the spigot and shut off the flow. Still hunched over the sink, he braced his hands on the countertop surface and blew out a long breath. She saw that the ruffled cuffs of his sleeves jittered around his wrists.

"You're trembling," she observed.

"I'm — deescalating," he replied.

"I think I'm deescalating, too," she said.

"I know."

She took a hand towel from her wall cabinet and gave it to him. He pressed the towel to his face, then dried his hands. The washing seemed to restabilize him. He placed the towel on the countertop between them.

"You're disappointed," she murmured.

He turned his head and looked at her. In the dim room, his eyes glinted gold behind swaying locks of his hair. His rich voice came to her, calm and clear. "You are the disappointed one."

She waved a hand at the doorway, at the fluttering curtain and flickering candles beyond the doorway, at the rumpled bed, and the dining table out there, laden with

uneaten dainties, and at the now-silent living room. Her music CD must have ended some while ago. "I just—I wanted to include you—in my world, in my life. Tonight, more than ever before. The way you've included me in your world, and in your living, your loving. I hoped you could sample—" She found herself near tears again. She lowered her hand to her side.

He stood upright. She could really only see his shadow, and his vague image in the bathroom mirror. She wondered if he had even glanced at his reflection. She wondered what he thought of his own reflection. She couldn't bring herself to ask. Now he came to her, steady and unhurried.

"You hoped we could share beauties after horrors," he said.

"Yes." She sniffled and looked down.

His long fingers touched her chin, pressing lightly upward, prompting her to lift up her head. Their eyes met. He spoke her name like a blessing.

"Don't lose heart. You've succeeded. Your hope for us is fulfilled. And very beautifully." The perpetual outpouring of grace from his spirit never ceased to amaze her.

He said, "I believe it's necessary for people to risk testing the known limits of our lives. Sometimes we must scale the walls enclosing our worlds and dare to peer over the parapets. The risk must be taken, and the work must be done, to honor hope and unveil new possibilities. It is necessary. It is the only way to truly learn and grow. I will never forget your courage in taking this risk with me, tonight and always. I'll never forget your hospitality. I treasure every single moment I share with you, come what may."

His hand cupped the scarred side of her face. He touched his lips to her lips. His touch was so fine and so deft, it felt like a kiss from a butterfly, or a rose: a wisp of eternity unfurling fragile petals, or fanning gossamer wings.

"I am not disappointed," he whispered to her.

She clasped his hand, leaning into the strength of his convictions. His words assuaged her blazing, blasted fears. Her uncertainties remained, but they quieted down. She pulled his hand from her cheek and led him back out into the bedroom. She glanced at the bed and realized that her residual curiosity about his differences embarrassed her now. She wondered if he felt any curiosity about what she had in desperation termed her "routines." What a ridiculous word she had chosen.

She seemed stymied. Yes, she was calming, but her feelings still whirled through his sense of her. One feeling hurt her most of all. It grieved him to feel her in pain.

In the spirit of risk-taking, he decided to ask her a question. She tended to become upset with him whenever he tried to talk with her about fear. He did not know how she would respond to an attempt to talk about the swollen emotion he sensed glowering at

the forefront of her thoughts. If he did not ask, he would never know. This night might afford his only opportunity to broach the subject.

He flexed his fingers within her grasp. She looked away from her bed, over at the candles glowing upon her nearest bedside table.

"I feel that you are ashamed," he said.

"That's unfortunate," she replied.

He touched her shoulder with his free hand. "I often feel the shame you feel—about your love life. I've sometimes heard shame in your voice, when you've spoken of your romances."

She looked up at him, troubled.

"Why do you feel ashamed?"

She took a deep breath, held it, let it go. "Looking back, I'm not sure my love life has ever had very much to do with love," she said.

"If not love, then what?" he asked.

His eyes were full of interested compassion. He truly wanted to know. She tried to find words.

"Infatuation?" she suggested. "Greed, sometimes. Or obsession. Loneliness. Habit." She sighed. "Expectations. My own, yes, but also the expectations of others. My parents' especially. My father most especially. He expected me to marry soon after my debut. That was twelve years ago. He still wants me to marry. He's put up with years and years of my—disconnected adventures. He even had to rescue me from a couple catastrophes. He wants grandchildren—honorably, legitimately begotten grandchildren. I think his disappointment looms constantly over my own. In my heart of hearts — I just don't know. I've never felt ready for any of that. A marriage, a household, a family. Someday — yes. And some days I do dream of a husband and children more wistfully than other days. But not just now. Not just yet." She gazed at the wonderful, inhuman hand she held.

"So, there must also be a lot of rebellion in my — flings and flirtations," she said. "My rebellious little routines. It always feels like love at the time. It always feels like heaven to fall in love with the ideal of an attractive man, and then to share some intimate moments with him. But the man himself can never live up to my dream of him. No one ever understands who I am. Me, least of all. No one stays. I think most of the time, my love life has been about two people using each other to feel a little better about themselves, for a little while. It doesn't last, though. We can never connect to each other, in the end. Surely, these are things I ought to feel ashamed of."

She looked up. In his mind, her sorrow souged a pained lament. The pattern she

described revealed a lack of self-respect. This trustful gift of her confidence in him was tremendous.

He told her, “There’s nothing wrong with being with someone you care about. There’s nothing shameful about finding pleasure in a willing lover’s company. Troth protects emotive and sexual integrity, true. But not all commitments, and not all dreams, last forever. Not all are meant to. Things change between people, as people themselves change and grow over time. Everyone moves through seasons and cycles of life, each in their own way. I don’t believe sex provides a — a shortcut — to intimacy. Neither is it ever a substitute for commitment or love. And yet, love does not always need to thrill at romantic pinnacles to still be love. Isn’t companionship a blessing too? Isn’t play?”

She stood still, thinking his perspective through. The mercy he extended was unprecedented in her life. “I’ve never thought about love—or sex—that way,” she admitted. “I always assumed love must be — monolithic. All-or-nothing. Ultimately out of my reach, even if I could never stop myself from reaching. I thought lovemaking was supposed to happen in certain ways, too, for it to — well, count. For it to be in any way connected to love.”

“Many forms of love exist,” he said. “And there are many, many, myriad ways of expressing each one.”

She managed a feeble smile. “Erotic love must be the most dangerous love to attempt.”

“Eros is the highest, brightest form of love,” he replied. “It is infinitely compelling.”

She felt her smile begin to thaw, like the passing of winter into springtime. Sometimes, he seemed an utter innocent. Other times— “I didn’t expect you to hold such opinions,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Well, as you said. You are your father’s son.”

He blinked. “This opinion is one Father imparted to me from my youth. It’s an opinion he maintains to this day, and I agree with it.”

“And wholeheartedly, too,” she said, enjoying everything that made him the man she loved.

“Yes,” he answered. He thought for a moment. “You don’t judge only your relationships, or your partner’s devotion, by your ability to—arouse your lover. You judge yourself, too.”

“True,” she said sadly.

“Do you know that I find no fault with your allure?” he asked.

She consulted her memory and intuition regarding her companion. “Yes,” she said, and hoped with all her might that she would never forget the truths his heartfelt words and

actions were solidifying for her now. She only wished she had not so blunderingly found fault with his appreciation of her charms.

Freed of her shame, she engaged her curiosity. She said, "There's something—very personal—I would like to ask you now."

"You can ask me anything," he told her sincerely, as he had told her more than once before.

She glanced around the room and found the low steps in front of her balcony doors. "Come over here," she directed. "Sit down."

They sat side by side on the edge of the top step. The curtain wafted behind them, revealing a brief glimpse of the city lights outside. The light from the candles continued to flicker and dance.

He was watching her, waiting for her question.

"What I want to ask is twofold," she began. Plunging in, she asked, "Is tonight the first time you've ever—made love with someone?"

Silent, he nodded.

She had long suspected as much, and she found his sure-handedness, even boldness, all the more enviable in light of his confirmation.

"You say you are—simply different," she said. "I accept that. But — how do you know — for sure — that — everything—?" She left her sentence dangling in midair.

"That everything works properly?" he asked.

It was her turn to reply with a silent nod, relieved of the burden of articulating her thought.

He went quiet for a while, thinking how to answer. He felt her thoughts and feelings hesitatingly graze various possibilities, unwilling to land upon any one explanation without further facts from him. He felt grateful for her efforts to suspend her disbelief. She was both a skeptical attorney and a survivor of numerous crimes, and he knew trust and patience were difficult for her.

"I've always been drawn to beauty," he said at length. "I trust and relish my thirst for beautiful things, and places, and ideas, and persons most of all. But this love of beauty is a very different feeling from the pull — and the hunger — that the entirety of myself feels for you. The pull is like a magnetic force. Bare physics. Or perhaps — biology." He exhaled a ragged sigh.

"The pull is not our bond. It is entirely of myself. Yet it does seem — informed by our bond. Or perhaps — oriented toward our bonding. The pull I feel is very strong, and it is strongest, and bears the most potential, whenever my senses bring your cycles to my awareness."

“My cycles?”

He nodded, saying, “The cycle of your moods, which encourage or discourage amorous approaches—” And then, spoken much softer— “And the cycle of your fertility.”

She gaped at him for a second, before she was able to master her surprise—and her face. “You can sense my monthly cycle,” she finally said.

“Yes.” He risked explicit terms. “I know when you menstruate. I know when you ovulate. I know all the fluctuations in between. It is deep knowing, beyond thought. My body knows. My body answers, and echoes you.”

He waited again, listening at all levels of their love for her reaction.

At last she came up with: “That’s amazing to me.” And she meant it.

He relaxed into her renewed acceptance. “My body is a conservative system. The way I exist in the world is — delicate — demanding — expensive — efficient — all at the same time. I think — I think the response you were looking for tonight would be available to you during a different phase of your cycle. And it is possible it might also only be available during certain seasons of the year.” His voice fell to a low murmur. “I know my overall energy reserves wax during spring and fall, and wane in summer and winter. My body’s sexual energy may well follow suit.”

He finished speaking. She thought he looked extremely vulnerable.

“Then,” she said very gently, “we’re fortunate that right now it’s spring.”

His still-adoring blue eyes smiled at her, turning upward at the corners. The look was endearing, both masculine and feline. Unique to himself.

“And the mechanical — or the arousal — component?” she persisted.

The smiling faded from his demeanor. “I am capable,” he said. “I — I have not myself explored the boundaries of my capability, but — recently — last month, I — I did learn —” He struggled, and she witnessed the struggle. Its intensity frightened her a little. She perceived sudden dire woundedness in his voice, his posture — in the depths of his eyes.

A woundedness she recognized from the day she unlocked the door of a mad scientist’s cage.

She told herself that “Oh, my God,” would be the absolute wrong reply to this moment and successfully kept her mouth shut.

She took his hands instead. She spurned nascent pity and focused on condolence. He would sense the choosing. She wanted him to feel from her the most loving emotion she could muster.

“Last month?” she prompted, hoping to clear the way for him. “The professor and his student?”

He had fixed his gaze upon his hands held in her hands. He breathed slowly around the raw scars within his mind and soul, refusing to see any other view than this. “They experimented,” he said.

She’d half-known it. She hadn’t demanded details from the man she loved, nor from the family and friends who had cared for him after his rescue. She did not want to know the details. The horror was too much for her.

She loathed dwelling upon past horrors, and spared no effort to banish her remembrance of them, as quickly and thoroughly as possible. This was how she had mobilized her courage and learned to be strong during the past year. It was how she had rebuilt her sense of self after her previous April’s life-altering assault. But if she found last month’s outrage against the one she loved unthinkable, unendurable—what must it be like for him?

She wondered what their adventure — or misadventure — in her bed had cost him tonight.

She wondered what she owed.

Her eyes filled with tears — yet again — as she understood that she had — yet again — broken a secret vow she kept trying to make to herself. She had taken him, and his love, and his body, and her expectations, for granted. She knew him well enough to believe that he would not mind being thought of as so ordinary and familiar to her, that he could be taken for granted. Still, she berated herself for her appalling forgetfulness. She didn’t know what her distractibility meant. She didn’t understand why she could not more consistently appreciate his presence in her life. She also didn’t know why she couldn’t notice the sacrifices he made to be with her. She didn’t know how to repay him for his life-saving love.

His hands left her hands. She felt the thick pads of his thumbs smooth away her tears as they fell. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to grieve you.”

Now she laughed softly, and shook her head. “Your heart is still perfectly beautiful, even after horrors,” she told him. “Perfectly gallant. Let me grieve with you, if I may.” Grieving would ease her furtive sense of indebtedness. But she wouldn’t tell him that.

This was a subject she disliked bringing up in conversation with him. She knew she owed him her life, a dozen times over now. She owed him everything. He always tried to convince her that the debt did not exist. He also always resisted her every attempt to convince him that it did. She believed that only through great effort and persistence would she ever convert him to her way of thinking. It was easier to simply give things to him without disclosing the reasons why she needed to give them. He might be able to feel her feelings, but he could not read her thoughts. His Tunnels culture of share-and-share-alike predisposed him to humbly receive her giftings and sharings without

question.

Her tactic worked on him tonight. She gave him her tears. She took for herself the meager consolation of claiming a portion of his confided suffering for her own purposes.

He embraced her, cleansing his heart's haunted pain with his faith in her kindness.

"Grief and joy," he mused into her hair.

"Two recurring themes of our eros," she replied, nestling.

"Perhaps that is what makes it ours," he said.

"Doubtless."

After a moment he reiterated, "The point is: I am different, but I am functional. We must journey into our future with great care. But—"

"But at least impotence is not the problem I feared it was," she finished for him.

"Yes."

"Thank you for explaining. I know — that wasn't easy for you."

His quietest wry chuckle rumbled in her ear. "Nor for you."

He had explained the unfathomable pull he felt of body to body. It was good she knew about it now. He was also thankful she did not ask him about his hunger. If she asked, he would answer. But he would rather not have to describe his hungers to her—not at the present time. He did not want to cause her any further hurt, or fright, or perplexity tonight. And, deep down in the riven shadows of his heart, a forlorn voice reasoned that if even garment-shielded contact with this one intimate part of his body had so astounded and upset her, had so shattered her expectations of who and what a rightful lover ought to be for her—then he dreaded enduring her reactions to this one most intimate part of his soul.

Body and soul, he felt himself more alien than ever in her world. He wearied of surprising her. And he felt far more than tired of horror. Safe in his arms, she tucked her newfound knowledge of him into the storehouse of her mind. She let the upheaval of the last half hour melt away from her thoughts. He seemed content to simply hold her for a quiet while. So she let him.

It was peaceful to rest her cheek against his chest and listen to the slow, steadfast beating of his mighty heart. Comforting. They had done this before. He had comforted her this way before. She broke their silence to share a memory.

"We sat just like this, right here, after I came home from the hospital in February," she said.

"Yes."

"That was the first time you came inside with me."

"Yes. It was cold that night. Too cold for you to stay outdoors for long. Your wounds were aching."

He meant the gunshot wound the mob enforcer, Mitch Denton, put into her back after she had escaped from his car, and the lingering headache from the concussion she had sustained when his shot felled her.

"You held me and held me. I listened to your heartbeat, and the quiet. It was so good to be home. I felt safe. Protected."

"Mmm." Noncommittal punctuation.

"Then my back needed me to stop sitting on the steps, and you brought in a chair from the living room for me. I sat in the chair and you sat on the steps and we talked long into the night. About all kinds of things. But only a little about Denton and the Flynn case."

"I remember." It hurt to remember. The night Mitch shot the woman he loved was another night he numbered among the worst of his life. The evening she finally came home, alive and healing, and had let him hold her and hold her, he'd felt dizzy with relief and gratitude.

"It still strains my imagination to think that Denton grew up with you in the Tunnels," she said.

He wished this truth could strain his own imagination. But his memory recorded all the particulars of a long and troubled history with the boyhood friend who had grown into a bitter, resentful enemy.

He had not known Mitch was the violent criminal his beloved was hunting during her investigation of the longshoreman's murder. Not until he'd arrived in that dark alley near the docks, too late to protect the one he loved from harm. Not until he'd seen the face of the man who gunned her down.

Since then, she made sure to mention to him the names of the suspects and perpetrators in her most dangerous cases. Just on the off chance that he might have heard of them before, or that he might catch a useful rumor from the streets, and could provide her a little forfending information.

He said, "We offered Mitch a chance for a better life. He did not accept it. He betrayed us all."

She had never heard his voice sound so cold. She wondered why her poet-warrior had let the man live, if he hated him so much. He had located Denton's hideout and slaughtered three flunkies. There would have been four if she had not herself shot Rado, Denton's right-hand man, with Denton's own gun during her escape attempt. The

authorities never found Rado's body. Either he'd survived and slithered off into the urban wasteland, or mobsters had stopped by the alleyway and cleaned up the mess before the police got there.

But her special friend had let Denton off.

She had speculated upon several possible motives during the past two months, ranging from morbid nostalgia to misguided compassion to miserable cowardice, and none of her suspicions either made much sense or made her feel very good about herself.

Violence was another subject she did not like to discuss with her protector. The few times she had tested the waters in that direction, she had discovered the vast variance between their two separate perspectives on crime and punishment. She also discovered that their two worlds fostered two utterly different worldviews. Granted, her secret savior and his people did readily cooperate with her, even alerting her at times to street-level word of problems that needed to be solved in the world Above. But she and he had—not fought, no, but—argued more than once about what crime was, what it meant, who was responsible for preventing it or for stopping a crime in progress, and how best to respond during and after each crisis. Criminal litigation was still very new to her. Underworld mores were even more uncharted.

She did not know what to do with the fact that Denton was still alive. She didn't want him to be.

"The last I heard of him, they had settled him into his long-term accommodations in Lewisburg," she said. "That's a federal penitentiary in Pennsylvania. I had expected him to have a much longer stay locally, in the MCC, for his trial, but he stunned me and everyone else in law enforcement, by pleading guilty to all charges as soon as the marshals arrested him. He made no defense or protest at all."

He knew the sequence of events, although the location of Mitch's prison was news to him. He said nothing in response to her reflections. She stirred in his arms. He released her. She sat up, searching his face for he knew not what.

"Did you have something to do with Denton's—attitude adjustment?" she asked.

A vision of Mitch the last time he'd seen him flashed before his inner eye. "You know that after I brought you to the hospital, I confronted Mitch," he said. "Anything he chose to do after that confrontation was his own decision."

"You took a great risk, then, letting him go free," she said. "Maybe too great a risk, considering Denton's history."

His gaze sharpened. "Do you believe I risked your life?" he asked.

Now that he put it that way, she knew it was exactly what she believed. And this belief had been nagging at her from the back of her mind for months. She nodded. "My life, yes, and the lives of those I had placed in witness protection. I put them in witness

protection because Denton wanted to kill them—my witness and his wife and children. Denton came after me to get to them.”

He had never heard her voice sound so cold. It numbed his heart. The three dead faces of Mitch’s pawns rose up in his remembrance, joining the image of Mitch’s livid, anguished face. He looked at them, noted them, honored what he could honor, rejected what he must refuse. He let them sink back down into his inner morass.

“I confronted Mitch to protect your life,” he said. “I confronted him to protect many lives, and to avenge many losses. I disarmed him and forced him to look into the mirror of my face. What he saw there ended him. I saw it happen, I felt it. I witnessed his ending. There was nothing left of him. I walked away. I went to you. Mercy let us both go free from that place.”

“Mercy let us?” she asked, her brow furrowing. “Us being you and me?”

His voice intoned in its deepest register, “Me and him.”

She did not like hearing him put himself on par with a monster like Denton. “You have nothing in common with him. He’s a relentless murderer and racketeer. ”

The numbness was spreading from his heart to his ribs and shoulder blades. “Yes. He was that. He may still be. Or maybe he’s becoming something else now.”

“Sure. A convicted relentless murderer and racketeer, rotting in prison. I don’t share your outlook about this. Just because you risked showing him mercy doesn’t mean I have to.”

Mildly he replied, “Yes. That is true.”

“I don’t think Mitch Denton deserved mercy,” she said, speaking a thought she had long wanted to say out loud.

He nodded slowly in reply, acknowledging her words and emotions, she understood, but this was not his nod of agreement or affirmation. She knew he was softhearted. She also knew how few of their opponents walked—or ran—away from a fight with him and lived. His skill with a kitchen knife was nothing compared with his prowess in hand-to-hand combat.

“Did you judge you owed him leniency?” she asked. “Clemency? Because of your friendship in the past?”

“No,” he said. It was a very firm and decisive no. “I owed him nothing.”

“Then why mercy for him, after everything he’d done?” she asked.

He pondered her question. He pondered the definition of mercy she seemed to espouse. He pondered her doubt in his powers of judgment.

“Because I believed mercy would accomplish the most good and redeem the most evil,” he said.

“Don’t you think your belief was colored by the history you shared with him?”

“Of course history colors all my beliefs,” he answered. “I do not claim impartiality. Can anyone?”

She just looked at him askance.

It was important for every person to doubt those beliefs that conflicted with the ethics of their own conscience. This was simply good sense and strong self-protection. It was equally important that a request to take foreign beliefs into consideration be accompanied by cogent reasons for entertaining those beliefs. He plumbed their shared past for an instance of mercy toward a criminal that her conscience had deemed acceptable.

“You believed Jason Walker deserved mercy,” he reminded her softly.

“That was different,” she said. The so-called Subway Slasher had been a vigilante, not a parasite. “Jace was different.”

“You wanted Jason to show mercy to muggers,” he said. “So the muggers must have deserved mercy they were not receiving from him.”

“They were stealing. He was killing. His crusade had gotten out of hand. He should have just let the police do their job. He should have trusted the legal system.”

He left the prickly subject of the police alone. “Yet you wanted your system to be merciful to Jason when it caught him,” he said.

“Of course! What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying Jason did many merciless things, yet you wanted mercy for Jason because you admired him. You got to know him as a person, as the friend of a friend, before you uncovered his secret. He was courteous to you. Even charming.”

She did not like where she felt he was going with this line of reasoning.

“You hated Mitch,” he continued. “He had no secrets from you. Everything you needed to know about his character was written down for you in his case files. In his criminal record. You didn’t know he was the one-time friend of a friend. He was crude and savage.” He paused. “Each had his own motivation for his actions, yes, but you also formed impressions of each according to your personal affinities and preferences. This is only natural. But didn’t your own outlook color your judgment of what each man deserved?”

“Denton kidnapped me to preserve his criminal enterprise!” she cried.

“So did Jason Walker.”

She almost retorted that Denton had murdered her colleague in a car bombing, and that he’d intended to kill her like he’d killed many other people, that he had yanked her hair with one cruel fist while he ordered her to tell him exactly what he wanted to know

before he killed her—whether quick and easy, or slow and ugly, he said he'd leave up to her. But then she remembered Jace holding his Tekko-Kagi to her skin, threatening to slash her throat if she didn't tell him exactly what he wanted to know, while his female minion, Suki, twisted her arm and his male accomplice, Red, breathed rancid garlic fumes down the back of her neck.

Jace had attacked a subway policeman prior to sending Suki and Red to abduct her, and although he had not killed him, he'd sent the officer to the ICU, and the man had later been forced into early retirement, due to disability. And then Jace had come after her, to get to the Beast the street people and IRT engineers talked about: the terrible, fierce Creature who haunted the city's dark places, a Thing with the face of a demon and the soul of an angel. She abandoned this example.

"Why are you defending Mitch?" she demanded instead.

"I'm not. I'm defending mercy."

She glared at him.

He enunciated his words carefully to get them past the numbing coldness that was creeping now from his chest and shoulders to his neck and skull, down his arms, and along his spine. "Mercy is what it is because it is not necessarily deserved," he said. "Therein lies its virtue. Its grace. It is the offspring of wisdom and humility. It honors the inherent value of every life. It hopes the best for every outcome, presumes the best it can of every soul. It hearkens to possibility and mystery, even in the face of great evil. Mercy upholds the dignity of both the judge and the judged."

She had somehow forgotten that among many other things, her companion was a philosopher.

"The concept of just deserts is central to my moral code," she told him. "You must know that by now. I have to reserve the most mercy for people who register closest to the law-abiding end of the behavioral scale. The more depraved the crime, the less mercy I can allow."

"Even when an outlaw might need more mercy than a paragon?" he asked.

She felt a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. The person she was talking to right now was both an outlaw and a paragon. One to whom her world granted no mercy whatsoever. She rubbed her forehead in concentration, but could think of no adequate reply.

"Did I deserve Jason's mercy?" he asked then.

She inhaled slowly. "Yes. You did."

"Jason Walker stood over me on a high, derelict bridge, just as I later stood over Mitch Denton." His words husked as quietly as a mild April wind through distant leaves. "To

strike the killing blow against someone who cringes defeated at your feet, who begs you with words or with eyes not to die by your hand—" He closed his eyes. She suddenly realized that he was in terrible pain.

He suddenly realized she truly did not know what she kept requiring of him, time and time again.

"—Or to refrain from dispensing just deserts—" he rasped. "If just they be. The choice must be made."

His face had gone ashen gray, she saw with growing unease.

He had just implied that whatever had happened between him and Denton, it had involved the threat—or temptation—of killing blows, and had resulted in cringing defeat and terrorized pleas. She decided that, philosophy aside, this had to be good enough for her. He'd obviously scared the bejeezus out of his quarry, and now the mob had one less enforcer to do its dirty work out on the waterfront. She didn't want to see him empathizing with Mitch Denton this way. Nor did he need to suffer the memory of whatever had happened between himself and the Subway Slasher.

She reached for him. He gasped at her touch and looked at her a little dazedly. His eyes seemed dark again, and not remotely tame.

She told him, "When I deplored Jason's lack of mercy, you in your mercy told me he'd found it again, in the end. You told me this to comfort me, after his end—after his fall from the bridge—this passionate, frustrated killer I admired. As you said, he was the friend of my friend, and a man who could have become my friend too, maybe, under other circumstances." She shook her head. "I never knew mercy could be so complicated."

"Justice and mercy both are complicated," he said hoarsely.

She thought hard for a moment, still gripping his forearms. "I suppose," she said, trying not to sound grudging or harsh, "that your mercy is what made my world's justice possible in the Flynn case. Mitch Denton submitted to prosecution. He was convicted and sentenced and now he's out of everyone's way. Surely he wouldn't have submitted to us without his—confrontation with you."

"No," he said, certain.

"So I get to be right, after all. You had more than merely 'something' to do with Denton's change of heart."

She had hoped to equalize the heavy atmosphere with a little understated victory for herself and a lot of understated credit for him. Her victory rang hollow. It was clear he didn't want the credit. And now he was projecting that deer-in-the-headlights attitude

she recognized from his earliest visits to her balcony.

This was why she hated talking with him about several specific things.

He was studying her beautiful face and remembering how she had looked under fluorescent lights in her hospital room. How pale and small she had appeared, weak and sedated after surgery. He had wept over her as she slept and as he prayed. She broke his heart with her smile whenever she surfaced out of her murmuring dreams. A smiling that was all and only for him. For him.

"All I wanted that night was to be with you," he remembered. "To stay beside you. Always."

"You are with me, in spirit, forever," she declared.

"I came so close to losing you," he said.

"But you didn't lose me. You saved me." She ran her fingers down his sleeves to find his hands.

"That almost happened again," he said. "Four days ago."

"No," she said, frowning, and she had to work to keep up with the leap in their timeline he had made. It felt like a leap of illogic to her. She deliberately relaxed the irked frown from her face. "No, it didn't. You were there for me when I needed you. You're always there for me. I wasn't hurt. We protected another witness on Wednesday, you and I. Together. You protected me. You saved me. And this witness's testimony saved my friend at work: Joe."

"I nearly came too late," he said. The coldness had devoured the rest of him. It was all he could feel. The hit man in the narrow stairwell was pointing a gun at his beloved's head, ready to fire.

Deer-in-the-headlights was transforming into something else. Something she had never seen before. He wasn't seeing her in front of him anymore, for one thing. She spoke his name, concerned, trying to call him back to her.

He was losing himself in his race to reach her, in his fury to end the new menace to her life. Race to reach her, end the menace. Race, end. He squinted at the room beyond the steps where they sat. It was a riot of squared corners and shifting shadows, folding doors and abstract paintings. A Topsider's lair.

That thought was not good at all. Not right. He could not breathe.

She called him by name again. He turned back to her. She looked worried. She was fearing for him. Not fearing him — yet — but —

"You're shaking now," she said.

And that remark got through. He understood what was happening, and what he needed to do. Understanding snapped his self-control back into place. He straightened himself,

pulled his shoulders back, raised his breastbone, gave his diaphragm space to expand. His lungs filled with air. And the air, too, was its own riot, full of foods he could not eat, and intoxicating perfumes, hair spray, detergents, candle smoke, nail polish and acetone, champagne, melon, wood varnish, wood polish, glass cleaner, tile cleaner, carbon paper, leather, books old and books new, dry cleaning chemicals, live electronic circuit boards, commercial toothpaste, sweat, tears, soap and shampoo, evaporating tap water, dust, aged paint and fresher paint, lotions, lipsticks, face creams, cosmetic powders, carpet powder, ghosts of coffee vapors, hot paraffin wax, her body, his body, the musk of their aborted lovemaking —

“I must go out,” he grated and half-sprang, half-stumbled out the balcony door and onto the terrace.

“My God,” she whispered to the empty room.

On the balcony, he planted his feet and absorbed the cityscape. His eyes beheld the skyline, glinting beneath the nearly full moon. His hands clutched the solid masonry of her outer balcony wall. His nose and tongue scented the wind, which tonight brought him more sensory intelligence from the Hudson River than from Central Park. His ears heard all the open, active clamor of Manhattan at night. Turning inward, he felt his body eagerly accept this impersonal spaciousness. His muscles loosened. His inmost regions recentered, reestablishing his balance and spatial awareness. He stopped trembling. His senses reconnected him to the here and now he was supposed to be residing in.

In the bedroom, she arose from the steps and crept to the French door. She saw him standing perfectly still at the farthest border of her terrace, gazing out at the night. He had moved like lightning to get there. His speed had astonished her: as swift as a cobra’s strike or a tiger’s lunge. His speed always astonished her. It was a quality of his wildness that he usually kept well-concealed beneath his chivalrous civility. She looked back at the room he had vacated. After an exit like that, she didn’t think he’d be coming back in. She turned and walked toward her bed.

On the balcony, he began a breathing meditation he had learned in his youth from one of his oldest friends, Dr. Wong. It was good discipline. It helped him reset his mental space, like rearranging chessmen after a game, returning each playing piece to its original square on the board. Flesh and airflow, numbering breaths. Narrowing attention. Knowing himself as himself. Recovering his mindfulness.

In the bedroom, she scanned the floor around her bed for his cravat. She found the Tunnels-style necktie lying crumpled between her bedside table and her closet door. She retrieved it, gathered up his long, hooded cloak from the bench, and picked up his boots. Quietly, she made her way out onto the balcony and placed his clothes on one of the outdoor chairs. She picked up her lighting taper from the table and relit the seven

candles that had blown out. He was a golden shadow, a silent sentinel, standing at attention among her potted plants. The silence did not feel hostile. It felt pregnant. She did not know what might be born between them when he acknowledged her presence at last.

The numbness in his body and in his thinking had defrosted and was departing. He concluded his full attentiveness to breath, letting the common miracle of respiration recede from his immediate focus. Now he anchored his emotional sanity as his godfather, Peter, had not long ago suggested he try to do more frequently: by revisiting a memory of great beauty. He relived his expedition to the wondrous Crystal Cavern. His heart steadied and began to smile again. It was well. She was safe. They were together. All was very well. She was very beautiful. Her beauty glorified the beauty of the necklace he had brought to her. The quartz crystal he had journeyed far to find, and the gold setting and chain he and his friend had wrought and assembled after he returned home. A tangible image of everlasting devotion. His token of his love for her. She watched him bow his head a bit, relinquishing his tin soldier stance. One clawed hand found the leather pouch that hung hidden among the ruffles of his shirt, and reverently clasped it. The pouch she had sewn to contain the ivory rose she had treasured from her childhood. The most potent talisman of goodwill and lovingkindness she possessed, now his to carry with him. Her token of her love for him.

She approached him. He angled his shadowed face half-toward her, letting her know he knew she was there. She touched his shoulder. He released his talisman and took her hand.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Yes.” He sounded like himself again. As he turned to face her squarely she saw that he looked like himself again too.

“What happened?” she asked him.

“A moment of — disorienting anxiety. I’m sorry you had to see it.”

“Oh, no. Don’t be sorry. Just—” She gazed up at his becalmed and becalming features.

“I’ve never seen you—lose track of me before.”

“I — lost track of myself for a moment,” he said.

Hesitant, she asked, “Does this—happen often?”

Define “often,” he thought, but did not say. He settled for murmuring, “More often than it used to.”

“You were imagining what didn’t happen on Wednesday,” she suggested.

“No. I was remembering what did happen. And remembering how I felt that night, in concert with how I’ve felt in the past.”

"But it was a victory!" she protested. "That night, I felt grateful to you and proud of us both."

He sighed her name. "We were lucky. I was already Above that evening, and already in Midtown, visiting a Helper at her shop on Eighth Avenue."

This had been his friend, Maria. He went Above to meet with her, and to thank her for the immense help and support she had provided during the Tunnelfolk's citywide search for him in March, and to bring the gifts he had prepared for her. He had harvested many pretty stones, gems, and crystals from the Crystal Cavern for his loved ones. He had already made special deliveries Below, to Mouse and Rebecca and Mary. He had presented Peter with two small amethyst clusters, one to keep for himself and one to pass along to his daughter, Susan. On Wednesday, Maria received a hand-polished lace agate from him, along with the encaustic painting he had just finished, which depicted her mother's violin as she had once described it to him. And then the woman he loved had urgently needed him in the Fifth Avenue high-rise.

She agreed, "Yes, it was lucky you were so close by." She didn't know what else to add. "It was thin luck," he said gravely. "As I raced toward you, I discovered that—that I cannot run as fast as I did before."

She tightened her hold on his hand. "Before what?"

"Before the cage. Before my illness," he said.

Abashed, she computed dates. Yes, as of Wednesday he had only been well enough to leave his sickbed for a grand total of nine days. Twelve nights prior to this, their anniversary night, she had rebuked him for showing up on her balcony so stunningly soon after his near-death experience. How long did it take her to recover from her own injuries and illnesses? Her stomach clenched with what seemed like her own bout of disorienting anxiety. In the midst of cementing the Taylor case and rescuing her ensnared friend, Joe Maxwell, from his whirlwind-romance-gone-very-wrong, her beloved's process of recovery had completely slipped her mind.

"I'm sure your strength will return soon," she told him. The words felt inadequate, but it was the best she could do. She didn't think he would want to hear her assessment of his swiftness when it came to scrambling out her bedroom door.

He looked upon his fierce, exotic ladylove with tenderness and pity and trepidation.

"My greatest fear is—"

"No!" She snatched her hand free and pressed her fingers to his lips. She paused to douse the ire in her voice. Then she quietly decreed, "Don't say it. No more fear or talk of fear tonight."

He obeyed her, but he turned his face away from her silencing hand.

As ever, her conduct proved that she despised fear—both in herself and in others. Thoughts upon thoughts dashed through his mind. He studied the nearest revived candle. Smooth white wax housed the wick that tethered its tiny tongue of fire. His sense of her flamed too. He felt as though her hand had scorched his mouth, as though her touch had incinerated the words she had ordered him not to say.

Yet the truth spoke for itself. He still reminded her of what she was most afraid of. She was doggedly attempting to love him despite all their fears. But she had not yet found her balance. Could he say that he'd found his? And regardless of whether either or both of them could claim balance or imbalance, her rejection of fear's stark realities did not bode well for the future of their love.

He did not know any other person, Above or Below, who hated fear like this. Her smoldering antipathy had baffled him for months. He was beginning to accept the possibility that this inclination of hers might be a deeply rooted attribute of her identity. An attribute he did not understand. He wanted to be there for her always, to learn to understand her better, so that he could love her better, and so he could hearten her for living the life she was born to live. Their relationship endangered many beliefs and values he lived by. He asked himself: how did such endangerment impact her?

He had worked hard to adapt himself to her priorities as much as he was able to. In her turn, she expended great effort to accommodate him. At the same time, she did not appreciate nor reciprocate all of his priorities. And his fears invariably scandalized her. The powerful part of him that befriended the frightful darkneses of life and contended with the inscrutable shadows of death violated her idea of who he ought to be. It was the part of him she did not understand. The part of him she might never accept.

He did not blame her for rejecting him, whether in part or in whole. He knew what he was. He knew well the emotions he activated in people from the world Above. Her world. Her world that was built on fear. Worldly fear was fundamentally all she knew, all she had ever known. Fear itself was everything she did not want to know. It was everything she did not want to feel, but could not stop herself from feeling. He suspected that were it within her power, she would stop everyone, everywhere, from feeling fear—or at the least from collaborating with its exhortations.

Yet to revile fear was also to repudiate fear's gifts of discretion, aegis, and vigilance. Ignoring fear substantially diminished one's own ability to keep oneself alive. Repudiating fear in others meant isolating oneself from many tasks and trials that forged alliances and wove communities. Defying every fear, just as much as surrendering to every fear, limited one's opportunities for freedom, peace, and happiness. Confronting the causes of fear whilst eschewing fear's prudence actively courted destruction.

He could not live this way.

But she was trying to.

And tonight, she was teaching him to believe that she relied upon him to keep her alive while she tried. Her lesson did not sit well. He wondered if they neared a stalemate. He wanted to address fear in the manner the Tunnelfolk did. She wanted to defeat fear by any means she could apply. In this disconnection between them, he felt he was becoming habituated to subordinating his desires to hers. And she had never yet compromised. Her fears always took precedence over his. He did not know what to do with this disturbing trend. He must soon give the matter some careful attention.

She lowered her hand, watching him think. He had not physically fled from her this time, but he had withdrawn himself, and turned his focus inward again, traveling to regions of the spirit where she could not follow. She believed she had seen hurt in his eyes. Hurt bestowed by words? By her touch? She wasn't sure. She hadn't meant to hurt him, or to disappoint him. The wind teased invisible fingers through her hair. She looked down at her candles. Several guttered for a moment, but they all stayed lit. The gust passed.

She wondered all over again if she had indeed disappointed her beloved friend. She wished she knew how to reach across the gulf of all that separated them, to reach him and keep him close to her forever. In a way, she knew they would always be closer to each other than breath itself. In another way—oh, the gaping chasm was sometimes more than she felt she could bear! It hurt her to peer into that dark abyss for any length of time. It frightened her.

Mostly, she tried not to think about it. She guessed he thought about it often, though. How could he not? What must it do to someone, to ponder such things so deeply as he did? Pondering was another activity that was still very new to her. She looked up at his face. Pondering is a strenuous exercise, she thought, startled by the insight. Thinking and feeling, being real, excavating truth. It was damned hard and heavy labor.

He was thinking that all he could say for certain in the present moment was that her fear of fear continually divided them. Perhaps moreso than did the unalterable disparity between species. And he did not know how to bridge the divide. Likely it was impossible for him, alone, to do so. She must keep constructing from her own side as well, and someday meet him somewhere in the middle of the gap. They must each reach out toward unknown possibilities. They must both share all the necessary risks of reaching. And all the fears. He longed to talk things through with her. He wished it were not so difficult for both of them to examine their feelings and formulate their thoughts about their separation and their bridge-building.

She began to believe that she was going to have to be the one to break this silence. He wasn't going to start talking again of his own accord. But then, she supposed that would be only fair. After all, she was the one who had told him just now to stop talking.

She thought again of unmapped territories, of yawning pits, canyons, ravines. Never before had she needed to develop such specialized skills to converse with so quiet a person!

He accepted and reaffirmed the nature of their difficulties almost before he finished wishing for their dissipation. The problem was real. It wasn't going away. No, he could not, and would not, force her to talk about something she refused to discuss. But events kept bringing the issue to the foreground of their relationship. Avoiding the issues of risk and fear wasn't going to help them. But she didn't seem sensible of this fact. Even when she brought it up herself in conversation, she would not hear him out beyond those few words she wanted to hear him say: words pertaining to his regard for her courage, or his answer to a direct query. She preferred him to not ever question her motives or strategies, nor to bid her reconsider any decision she made, and to never, never counsel her to heed people's fears, to learn what truths they might impart. At these times, she desired his silence more than his speaking. Even tonight.

Even tonight.

This was the shadow-side of their love. A whispering from her heart that she chose to neglect. A feature of his existence that he could not verbally describe. The source of a recurring quarrel they had yet to resolve. He only hoped she might one day be willing to truly listen to the things her heart tried to tell her about this subject, and to things he needed to say, and to the questions they both needed to ask. He would have to try again, later, some other time. His glance fell upon the clothes she had brought outside for him. He swallowed hard. His throat felt parched.

She noted his discomfort. "Can I get you something to drink?" she asked. "More water, maybe?"

He nodded. "Ordinary water, yes, please."

She went inside to get some for him.

He watched her go. "'Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart,'" he recited to himself, voicing luminous words from the book Father had sent with him on his journey to the Crystal Cavern, "'and...try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.'"¹

She stopped in at her living room on her way to the kitchen. She switched off her stereo system and collected the two champagne glasses from the coffee table. As she went up the steps into the dinette, she eyed the champagne bottle, but passed it by. Her

¹Rilke, Rainer Maria. "Letter Four: Worpswede, near Bremen, July 16th, 1903." *Letters to a Young Poet*. Revised Edition. Trans. M. D. Herter Norton. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1954. 35.

vintage-induced glow had worn off somewhere between her withdrawal on the bed and his evacuation from the bedroom. It was just as well. She felt things had gotten too serious for champagne anyway.

She set the coupés beside the kitchen sink. “How do we even begin to celebrate what we are and what we do?” she muttered to her cabinet door. She opened the door and took out two water glasses. “There are no appropriate rituals for us to fall back on. We have to invent everything as we go along.”

They also had to negotiate and renegotiate every one of their innovations, every single step of the way. Spinning straw into gold. And half the time working with broken or nonexistent spindles.

She took the full water glasses outside.

She found him still standing amid her container greenery, serenely retying his cravat. He did it by feel, not needing a partner or a mirror. He had already reclaimed his boots.

“I’ve had a thought,” she told him.

“Just the one?” he asked, looking at her from the corner of his sparkling eye.

Caught off guard, she laughed.

He reached for the nearest of the glasses and she handed it over before she spilled it.

“What am I going to do with you?” she asked, shaking her head.

He grinned wide enough to reveal his sharp eyeteeth. “Something lovely, I hope.”

She placed her glass on the patio table. She liked it when he smiled that way. He did not often do so. He drank cool water, delighted by the sound of her laughter. It was balm after heartache.

“I was just wondering if I could tell you about something I’ve learned since I began working at the DA’s Office,” she said.

“Please, do share.”

Carefully she began, “Well, in my world, psychiatrists have been making inroads toward treating the kind of disorientation I think you’re experiencing. There’s a condition that’s being recognized now. It’s called PTSD. That stands for Posttraumatic—”

“—Stress Disorder,” he said, his voice overlapping hers.

“Oh. You’ve heard of it?” she asked, deflating.

His bristling eyebrows lifted. “Alternatively known as Battle Exhaustion or Fatigue, Gross Stress Reaction, Shell Shock, Soldier’s Heart, Battered Woman Syndrome, Adjustment Disorder—”

“Let me guess,” she interrupted. “You’re still your father’s son.”

He drank more water and looked out over the park. “That, and more than that. Most of

the people I've known have struggled to overcome terrible hardships and traumas." He turned to her. He knew her own struggle manifested itself in a much different form. The way she spoke of PTSD confirmed that she considered it extrinsic to her own experiences.

She asked, "So — this condition — this struggle — is common in the Tunnels?"

"It's common everywhere," he answered her, taken aback by her unawareness. "It is more ancient than Epizelos the Athenian, and as current as the child who shrinks from affection because she cannot forget affliction."

She was shaking her head now, not in negation, but wonderingly. Their worlds — their worlds!

"Tell me, sweet lord, what is't that takes from thee

Thy stomach, pleasure and thy golden sleep?

Why dost thou bend thine eyes upon the earth,

And start so often when thou sit'st alone?

Why hast thou lost the fresh blood in thy cheeks;

And given my treasures and my rights of thee

To thick-eyed musing and cursed melancholy?

In thy faint slumbers I by thee have watch'd,

And heard thee murmur tales of iron wars..."²

His profound acquaintance with the passage was unmistakable.

"Shakespeare did know everything," she said softly. "He described every human struggle."

He inclined his head. "Some would say that is the purpose of poetry. But your world chooses to call this struggle a disorder, or a syndrome, or an ailment. The uncommon disturbance of an unhinged soul. An unnatural dysfunction—or a crime. In the past it was called cowardice, or mental frailty, or character deficiency. It was believed only those few ignorant or dishonest fools with 'inferior moral fiber' were susceptible. They were humiliated and persecuted. Even killed."

She could not deny it. Her world was too often stingy with its charity toward the sick or the wounded. She winced at the word "cowardice," though, abruptly recollecting—and ruing—the times she privately labeled him "frangible," "shy," "inept," or even "craven." Which, she perceived in light of his patient elucidation, tended to happen whenever he followed his heart toward some course of action that she disagreed with, or did not understand. She used such words to rationalize to herself why he might decide to do or

²Shakespeare, William. *Henry IV, Part 1* (2.3.899–907). 1597. *Open Source Shakespeare*. Eric M. Johnson. George Mason University. 2003-2018. opensourceshakespeare.org/. Accessed 8 May 2018.

say those things she disagreed with—or did not understand. — Or else she flat out let her assumptions and expectations lead her into some ghastly new misjudgment of her friend. She'd been wrong about him more often than she cared to account for. Hindsight kept showing her how woefully her labels distorted her view of him—not to mention her view of his folk Below. He had just designated similar labels as belonging to the sphere of unjust Topsider prejudices. He had just assigned her layman's diagnosis of PTSD to that category, as well.

Now almost growling he said, "People deemed 'guilty' of these 'weaknesses' continue to be marginalized, demonized. Disbelieved. Condemned and disgraced. Feared. Shamed. Cast aside."

She was mentally shaken, but hoped he wouldn't take notice. "Your world takes our outcasts in."

"Some of them. The ones who need us most, and who find no place for themselves in the world Above. The ones willing and able to abide by our laws and customs." The city lights attracted his gaze once more. "There are so many wanderers," he said, sorrowful. "Lost. Abandoned. Alone."

She had met more of these during the past year than she had in all her previous years of life. "What do you call the struggle in your world?" she asked.

"We call it many things: The Will to Survive. The Dark Night of the Soul. Delving Nobility. Grief. Recapitulation. A Time to Heal. Mending Brokenheartedness. Summoning Strength. Hopefulness. The Vale of Soul-Making. Journeying Toward Love. Natural Sanity."

"Sanity? I don't mean to be — insensitive, but how do detrimental symptoms reflect sanity?"

He contemplated the sky, the glass he held, the candles on the table—and, last of all, her sympathetic self.

He said, "It bespeaks pure sanity of body, mind, or soul to acknowledge and seek to escape violent madness. It is sane to be hurt when injured or wronged. It is sane to feel everything horrible, and to trust the feelings; to accept that evil is real, and try to reject evil's imperatives. It takes great courage to learn to live sanely after surviving great harm, however long it may take to learn such living. It is the warrior's greatest sanity and solace to lay down his arms after war."

His words rang in her heart, resounding because his descriptions were personal to both of them.

"Some 'symptoms' are actually stepping-stones back to wholeness," he explained further. "Others offer signs and signals that warn a traveler away from danger, or point the way forward, towards home. That's how I think of it: as homecoming. My people

know many methods for following these signs, and traveling these paths. We've shared and developed many practices throughout many lifetimes. I've used five of these practices tonight, just now on your balcony."

She thought: And here I'd believed you were at a disadvantage, for having never eaten steak. His world held untold stores of riches. Her Social Services fact sheet data seemed paltry by comparison.

But no wonder he maintained such consummate command of himself whenever he took action! No wonder he recuperated so quickly after surviving hate and harm. And no wonder his world felt so fabulously quiet and peaceable to her, that her best nocturnal dreams were of visiting his Undercity community.

"That's how you knew what to say to me last year, to encourage me and restore my hope," she said, awakening to the idea. "That's how you and your family knew how to care for me so well."

"Yes." He set his empty glass beside her glass on the table. "The lore that nurtures everyone's well-being Below taught us how to care for a Stranger who needed sanctuary among us."

She picked up her glass, toyed with the facets in its base. "At the time I assumed it was just — you. Your majesty. Your magic."

"I am no king, no magician," he said. "I am only what I am. But the magic is simply everywhere, waiting to be found by those who seek it."

She smiled once again at his phrasing, and at his humble benevolence. "Oh, how I enjoy you."

She heard the soft rush of breath that told her he was smiling too. He sensed the warmth she harbored for him well up in her heart, flowing lavishly from thence into his soul.

"And don't worry," he assured her. "My world does well enough without psychiatrists."

She felt her smile go a little crooked as she commented, "Your people are definitely doing better than my world in many ways. Okay — in most ways, really."

"Will you remember that sentiment, the next time our worlds collide?" His voice sounded appraising.

She sighed. "Probably not in the heat of the moment. I like to win too much."

"You fight to win at all costs."

"That's me, isn't it? The queen of convoluted contests."

"I could be your court jester," he proposed.

No doubt he could cut a most entertaining caper, if he chose to. She imagined him

tipping his head to one side as he liked to do, smirking that point-toothed grin while wearing a three-cornered cap that jingled with silver bells. She covered her eyes and giggled helplessly.

He rescued her water glass.

After she recovered her composure, she moved his cloak from the seat of her patio chair to the chair's arm, and sat down. She gestured for him to take the chair beside her. He sized up the petite chair for a second, but he complied, returning her glass. She drank from it and lowered it to her lap, clutching the glass tight between her palms, for something neutral to hold. When she felt able to look at him without hearing bells, she gazed into his courtly eyes.

He thought her the most marvelous and bewitching creature he had ever seen.

She said to him, "You once told me that we must do the only thing we can do: endure the pain, and savor every moment of the joy."

"Yes?" he asked softly.

"I just want you to know — I believe the joy is worth every moment of the pain."

Tears misted those blue eyes. And yet the smile in them deepened too. Her eyes looked like stars to him. Unspoken promises to wish upon.

He said, "Tell me more about the things that give you joy. Tell me about the ordinary things in your life. Things that let you walk in daylight, unencumbered by pain."

"Things that aren't so ordinary for you?" she asked.

He canted his head sideways, in his substitute for a shrug.

She sat back in her chair. It was plenty fine with her if he wanted to shift the subject toward lighter fare. But where to begin?

"All right. Then I'll tell you about some of my earliest joys," she said, "and we'll see where we go from there."

He leaned forward, attentive.

"Just to warn you, though. I've told you I've lived in luxury most people could never imagine."

He listened.

"What has been ordinary for me is often extraordinary for a lot of other people."

He nodded. "Most of what I know about your world, I know from books. But I do understand that, in its way, your mode of life seems as spectacular to others as mine does."

She sipped her water. Their worlds represented opposite poles of life and livelihood. Her world was polarized by its material wealth and spiritual poverty; his world, by

material poverty and spiritual wealth. The one basic condition that both worlds held in common was the fact that each world remained populated by fellow human beings. She believed human sympathy was the greatest, surest portal between all worlds. She also believed that the empathic—man—listening to her now was the most human being she had ever known.

And he did look curious to hear what she might say.

And she had become fond of his style of curious courtesy.

So, smiling, she told him first about how she used to sit between her parents when she was a little girl, all three of them snuggled onto a sofa with a huge storybook spread open across their laps, how her love of reading blossomed during those family storytimes together. She told him about shining Christmases in Manhattan and Zürich and San Juan, the magic of Christmas trees and beribboned packages, with snowscapes or ocean vistas decorating her horizons. She told him about the laughter she loved to share with her nanny and with her parents, and later, with her father and their friends, at holiday parties.

She spoke of her family's magical keys to the Gramercy Park gates, how it was her job to turn the key in the lock when they went in, and how she had delighted in the formal green spaces and immaculate pathways inside, the statues and tidy borders. Exclusive access gave it the aura of a secret garden, especially after her mother's death. Not until her law school days did self-consciousness creep into her relationship with the park, as her estimations of wealth and scarcity began to change. She visited rarely now, but her memories remained joyful and comforting.

She told him about her childhood toys and treasures, especially her dear Charlotte doll-companion. She told of her imaginary sister and the year she required other people to make way for a second daughter in the house. She recalled how when she was very small, her mother would sometimes slip into her room while she was playing, and join in her game or her make-believe, whatever it happened to be at the time, with tender mirth and imagination. Daddy never quite learned the knack for child's play, but it was her one of her mother's superpowers.

He drank it all in. Every word and phrase. Every gesture of her hand and expression of her face. Every story, every image. He rejoiced in the joys she had known.

She spoke to him of her family's vacation homes. Both sets of grandparents owned getaway properties scattered across New England. Until the passing of her elders, weekends spent at any of them were common. She tried not to dwell upon her ambivalent relationships with her extended relatives. Still, those little pockets of familiar elsewheres were dear to her child's heart. She always looked forward to those journeys.

She described vacations to amusement parks and resorts around the world, how excited she felt to step into each curated fantasy land, to discover her favorite rides and treats, to look and wander, shop and applaud. Later in life, she carried that sense of carnival magic within her during her many travels to cities, beaches, forests; to deserts and mountains; to islands in both hemispheres; to renowned landmarks and museums. It all swirled together in her mind, forming her personal sense of adventure. Of magic.

She was proud that she could usually find magic where she looked for it. When she remembered to look for it. But magic had come in short supply during the past half-decade of her life. Her girlhood love of enchantments had been replaced by a jaded suspicion of the world's cons and cheats. She did often find magic in the Tunnels now, although it was a darker and more mysterious variety than could be purchased in any theme park or tourist destination of the sunlit world.

He seemed unsurprised by her comparisons and conclusions. But, of course, she thought he must experience magic as a kind of clean, pure oxygen: always present in the general atmosphere, albeit more concentrated in some places than in others. She believed him rarely, if ever, incognizant of magical possibilities. He was a die-hard romantic in that regard.

This notion brought her favorite great romances to mind. Romeo and Juliet. Arthurian legends. Orpheus and Eurydice. She paused there, remembering.

"You're feeling sad now," he remarked. "Why?"

She raised her head. "I was just thinking of my father, after Mom passed away. When I look back at that time, Daddy reminds me of Orpheus—the way he was, for a while. Then I got to thinking about your father. About Jacob. And Margaret."

"Yes," he murmured. "There is much of Orpheus in Father."

"How is he doing now?" she asked.

He looked up at the sky above the city. The night was clear. He could see stars twinkling in the firmament. "It's been little more than a month," he said. "And so much has happened since she died. He is doing as well as he can, I think. We play many more silent games of chess than we used to. He takes more walks alone through the Tunnels. But he also laughs more often with his friends. Something has loosened inside him. He's been telling me stories of his life Before. He's begun visiting our Helpers, Above."

"Oh! Oh, that's wonderful!" She could scarcely imagine Father making social calls around the city. "I'm so glad."

He read her underlying surprise, of course. And it made him smile. "Things change. Sometimes people's habits change, too, with their changing circumstances."

"Yes. Sometimes they do," she agreed. She returned her glass to the table beside her. The wind had picked up again. She rubbed her arms.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

"A little," she said. "It's getting late."

"You have work tomorrow," he said.

"And Monday work at that."

They glanced around at the balcony. The candles had burned low. The smaller ones had gone dark.

"It's been—quite a night," he said.

"It's been quite a year," she replied.

He basked—for just a few precious moments more—in her beauty. "The most miraculous year of my life," he said.

She sighed. "Even miraculous years must end."

"So that a new year can begin."

At this, she smiled and stood up. He stood too. Each gazed into the other's eyes.

"What can I say to you?" she asked. "How do we part now?"

"With the promise of shared hope burning bright in our hearts, like candles or stars."

"Guiding lights in the dark before dawn."

"Yes. Always."

He offered his hand. She placed her hand in his broad palm. He bent gracefully. His lips brushed her skin.

"Will you give me an anniversary poem, before you have to go?" she asked.

He straightened. He looked long into her eyes and into his store of memorized literature, searching for suitable words. At last he enfolded her in a warm embrace. He recited radiant lines for her. Tennyson. She closed her eyes, steeping herself in his resonant voice, his protective arms, his ardent love.

It was she who released him, looked once into his beautiful face, then turned to view the city skyline, resting her hands on the balcony wall. She did not want to see his departure. He would go as swiftly and softly as he had come.

He etched her silhouette into his mind. He put on his cloak. He breathed a parting word of blessing. On silent feet, he moved to the end of the terrace. He swung one leg, then the other, over the parapet, and began his homeward climb.

She stood where he left her for a further half hour. It took time—gentle, moveless time—to settle certain things into their rightful places within the human heart. Their night of celebration was one such certain thing. Then she returned to herself, shivering a little. It was chilly now, and time to sleep. She reached for the pendant of her necklace,

just as he had reached for his rose, earlier, his strong hand cherishing her promise of connection. She looked down at her new treasure.

Her underworld crystal gleamed in her hand. The last of the evening's firelight awakened a secret sunrise within the stone. Her very own piece of eternity. His promise of many more celebrations to come.

END