

# Beyond Words, Beyond Silence.

by Nan Dibble

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This cannot continue.

Walking through the tunnels to meet Catherine, Vincent shook his head: frowning, dissatisfied. Too raw and blunt, he thought. There must be some more graceful way of phrasing....

We cannot go on as we have. As we are.

He shook his head again: that was no better. It evaded the point, which was not what they were but what they were becoming. To which Catherine seemed altogether oblivious. As was natural. She had no experience of violence, except through him. Except for the first time, of course – the brutal attack that had brought her within his limits...and the compass of the protection he could not help but offer, want to offer, because nothing was more important than that Catherine be safe from all threats, all fear....

Just as, except through Catherine, through the unimaginable, shining fact of her caring, he had no experience of love. Except for Lisa. Which had ended so badly, so truly, so nearly in death; and must therefore never be repeated? Never risk fully waking what slept so uneasily within him; what ever since he'd kept controlled with such grim and continual vigilance.

“What have you told her?” Father had asked, when they'd talked – carefully indirect, even between themselves, even though alone in Vincent's chamber – of that vigilance, become so much more difficult with Catherine's closeness, when she'd come Below to mourn her father's death.

“Nothing,” Vincent had replied grimly, hopelessly. “What could I say that wouldn't frighten her?”

The red-shifted times when the Other stirred within him were beyond words or beneath them. There were no words to convey what he felt at such times. He called it “losing himself,” but that was an evasion. For it gave no sense of what, in such moments, he found.

Some things, Vincent had found it impossible to put into words. Even for Father; even for himself. Impossible to speak of such things to Catherine. Yet somehow he must.

In the time since he'd slaughtered the two young men – boys, almost – who'd been foolish enough to consider the dark – his dark – a pleasant place to play their

murderous games, Vincent had been rehearsing what he'd say to Catherine. For he must say something.

We must not ever hunt together again. That must never again be what we are to one another.

That, he'd discarded immediately, for it opened the raw and never-spoken question of what they were, or could be, to one another. That, too, was beyond words and best left in silence. Without words, they'd agreed to that, he and Catherine. From the beginning, and still.

You must not go into danger any more. You must not need me that way. There is that within me which savors too much what is required... permitted... in rescuing you. It lives for violence. Through violence. It feeds there. It is becoming strong and reckless. It is not safe for you to allow it its food. I am not safe. For myself... or for you.

But he couldn't say that either. Catherine, like Father, consented to see only what he himself wished them to see. What was fit for their approval, their love. His lapses into darkness, they rationalized, justified, or simply ignored in their kindness. They had faith in him. And he needed that faith to continue to be what they could approve of. To control what slept within him, so lightly now, so easily stirred, so close to full waking.

And Catherine's life was her own. To spend as she chose. However she chose. Even, to choose another, although Vincent had stopped encouraging her to do so. Concentrating on finding all the joy possible within the limits that bounded him, that bounded them both, Vincent still believed a parting between them was inevitable. But he hadn't the strength to urge it anymore. Or to contemplate it long, even within himself. Sometime, surely. But not yet, not now! his heart cried; and he let its voice override all doubts, all prudent concerns.

Yet to arrogate to himself, even in imagination, the right to dictate what Catherine might and might not do in her work, or her life, or her love was unthinkable. He must make no claims, demand nothing she might not wish to give, force no choices upon her. Never. All the choices must be hers. In all things.

Nevertheless in the past weeks it'd muttered continually in his mind, hummed in his heart: This cannot go on. We cannot continue like this. For your life's sake. For my sanity. For our love.

And therefore he must find a way of telling her, revealing the dark undertow and dreadful feral joy the rescues were becoming to him...in truth, to them both.

But perhaps that final revelation, obvious to him within the bond and therefore not even an insight but a plain fact... perhaps that need not be spoken. The fault was in him. Her only complicity was calling it forth. Loving him. There could be no blame in that. The fault was in him. Him alone. And he must finally say it.

*Truth cannot be told so as to be understood and not be believed.*

Vincent hoped the poet Blake was right in that pronouncement. Because for these last weeks when he'd refused to go to her balcony, that private place that was theirs alone, he'd been weighed down and all but paralyzed by the conviction that he must speak the truth and hope, and dread, he'd at last be believed... even if it meant Catherine would turn from him in revulsion. Even if that disclosure at last convinced her of the

ineradicable ugliness within him, beyond ignoring, beyond redeeming or denying, beyond the reach of the innocently blind, loving faith that could see his monstrous hands – furred, clawed, powerful – as beautiful, as hers. Or himself – unhuman, powerful – as beautiful and hers. Even then. Somehow tonight he must tell her and make her believe....

Through the bond that sang of her, within him – quiet in repose, strengthening and then subsiding with the shift of her moods – he'd been aware, since setting out from Father's study, that Catherine was approaching him as he was approaching her, both converging toward the agreed meeting at the park threshold.

She'd been thoughtful, unhappy at the separation but had respected his need for it, even though she didn't know the reason. By her happiness, he'd known when she'd opened his note, delivered to her at work today. Now he felt her anticipation and her liking for the quiet, moonlit park. Suddenly his awareness of her flared into startled uneasiness that, the next moment, blazed into dread... and expectation. Catherine was afraid... and wanted him.

Without hesitation, without thought, all uncertainties swept instantly aside, Vincent ran.

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The two helmeted bikers, having knocked Catherine to the ground, seemed to be waiting. As, half blinded by the headlights, Catherine got her knees under her, preparing to bolt among the trees, puzzlement cut into her fear. What were they waiting for? Straddling the cycles, the two men bracketed her, gunning their engines, filling the night with the rhythmic roar. But the bikes didn't move. The men didn't move.

Then a different roar broke through. Catherine greeted the sound with a burst of irrational happiness – strong and profoundly sweet. No one could hurt her now. Vincent had come.

It was quick, as it always was. Cloak sweeping wide, like wings, Vincent bowled over the first biker. The settling wings mantled and hid what happened then. The other man revved his bike into escape. As the wheels spewed dirt, Vincent lifted his head, rose, and turned – fast, massively graceful – and plucked him off his moving machine. Shoving him against a tree, Vincent disposed of him with two terse swats, left hand and right, and let him drop.

Quick, and now over. The sound of the overturned bikes became a steady purring, like a mechanical satisfaction.

It didn't make sense.

Quick, gliding, Vincent left the fallen men without another glance and came to her, his gesture urging her toward the culvert.

Scanning for further danger, he said, "Come."

Quick still, he pulled the lever that slid the sheet steel door shut behind them.

Then it came – the reaction she'd been expecting. He turned to slump heavily against the wall, the wild energy almost visibly fading. It wasn't fair; she thought and felt that he

should have to pay such a price for his courage and championship of her: such a high and radiant gift of protection that always stirred and exalted her in ways she had no words for.

Though the violence was shocking, a brutal eruption alien to his gentle nature, it wasn't fair that he suffer shame for releasing such feral splendor for her sake. Though he always blamed himself, the violence wasn't his fault, but that of the attackers who'd provoked it, leaving Vincent no other recourse. There was nothing to be ashamed of in that.

Fierce with her love for him, Catherine caught up his left hand in both hers, gripping tight when she felt him start to pull away. His hand was cold. Wet. Faint tremors ran through it. In the dark of the tunnels she stood looking steadily up at him, throwing her gratitude and her trust against the backlash of self-loathing she knew always claimed him at such times. She felt him turn his head away. But that strong hand that had saved her yet again, that could have easily broken her grip, remained passive within hers, accepting her choice to clasp it, claim it.

"Catherine." His voice was lower, rougher than usual – as though it were an effort to form words and give voice to them. "They were policemen, Catherine."

She heard in that comment a distress beyond the predictable sadness. Something very like despair.

He knew as well as she did how forces were mobilized whenever a cop was killed. Thinking he was concerned about the tunnels' security, given the concerted hunt that was sure to follow this night's events, Catherine shook her head sharply.

"There have been other deaths in the park, Vincent. No investigation has ever had any reason to look down here. Nobody will now, either."

Vincent said nothing. They began walking slowly down the tunnel together. She slipped her elbow under his, still holding his hand.

Frowning, Catherine added, "They came after me, Vincent. Knocked me down, and then... waited."

"But...policemen, Catherine!"

She realized then that she'd misjudged what was upsetting him. A line had been crossed. His own personal line, which separated killing from murder.

Anybody was entitled to defend themselves or those they cared about. But it would be another matter to kill, on whatever provocation, a pair of policemen. To attack the law itself....

She stopped, they stopped, and Catherine released his hand to put her arms around as much of him as she could hold: as fiercely protective of him, in her way, as he was of her, in his.

"They weren't," she declared, suddenly certain of it. "Police don't ride down lone women peaceably walking in the park. I don't believe it. Whatever they were, they weren't cops, Vincent. They can't have been!"

He sighed, and she felt his arms come around her with a tentative clasp. "You know no reason you should have been attacked in that way."

“You mean, have I robbed a bank or snatched a purse lately?”

Another sigh. Maybe a smile it was too dark for her to be sure of.

“They did threaten you.... You’re injured, Catherine. Bleeding. I should--”

“It’s nothing. Really. Tore my slacks and ruined a new pair of pantyhose, scraped both hands a little --”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize. Should we ask Father--?”

The last thing Catherine wanted to do was involve Father. That would mean explanations, justifications, likely contending with Father’s doubts and disapproval.

“A basin of water is all I need. Really, Vincent, don’t worry, I’m all right--”

Arriving at his chamber, Vincent shed his cloak and lit extra candles. Pouring water from a pitcher into a basin, he silently washed the blood from his hands. Though he made no attempt to hide what he was doing, Catherine knew it was a private moment: he’d be uncomfortable with comment. She turned a chair and sat, trying neither to intrude nor withdraw. Neither look at him too hard nor look away. Letting him be merely a large shape in her mind – comfortable in his company.

Having dried his hands, Vincent filled a small silver dish and, with the gentle solemnity she loved, set about carefully patting a damp cloth over the stinging cuts on her hands, cleaning out the dirt as she tried not to wince too obviously.

Distracting herself with her continuing puzzlement, she stated, “They weren’t policemen. They couldn’t have been.”

Vincent seemed to have accepted her certainty, commenting quietly, “Do you have any idea who might have sent them?”

That was a new, and unpleasant, idea to her. “Do you really think they were sent by someone?”

“Catherine, what happened in the park...hardly seems--”

“--random,” she finished for him, grimly.

He nodded, and their eyes met, sharing the contemplation of that unsettling possibility. Reluctantly, she nodded in turn, admitting it was a possible explanation for an attack otherwise so bizarre and unlikely.

Attending again to her slightly scraped hands, Vincent mused, “Who could have done such a thing? And why?”

Again their eyes met, sharing uneasiness and uncertainty.

“This attack failed. But whoever planned it.... Your knees?” Vincent asked, abruptly changing the subject.

The notion of undertaking the unlovely logistics of getting pantyhose down and pantlegs up under Vincent’s embarrassed inspection wrenched a wry smile from her. “They’ll keep until I get home. Really. I’m not even lame.”

Vincent put the cloth in the dish, and then set the dish aside on his table. He began spreading on her palms clear ointment from a tube he’d taken from a cabinet.

Catherine shut her eyes, caught by a memory of that gentle, soothing touch and all it meant to her. That touch, and the wonderful comfort of his voice, was her first and strongest impressions of him. She'd been blinded by bandages, terrified, in pain. And yet the magic of that voice declaring she was safe and no one would hurt her had commanded her wounded belief. Restored her trust: the deepest of her injuries.

And there could be nothing, she thought, more healing than the touch of his beautiful hands – large, delicate, and sure. Against the brutal and horrifying memories and recurring nightmares of men's hands striking at her, of utter helplessness and terror, she could set her awareness of Vincent's touch. All that strength, all that gentleness. Then, as now. It was almost worth having been hurt to be tended so, to receive the gift of such unconditional reassurance, such absolute safety....

She thought she'd begun to love him from that first moment.

She blinked, adding to her memories the strong planes of his face – so familiar now, so loved in their alien, leonine symmetry – and tried to remember how she ever could have found them frightening. She knew she had. But she could no longer remember why.

Finished, he was holding both her hands in a light clasp, studying them.

"It's disproportionate," he murmured.

"What is?" When he made no response, rising to put the first-aid materials away, Catherine said, "Are you feeling...better now? About what happened...in the theater?"

It was a carefully oblique reference to their final confrontation with the two rich thrill-killers they'd stopped from preying on any more helpless prostitutes.

"I was glad to get your note."

"I know."

"I've missed you," Catherine offered, wanting to draw him out. Not for the first time, she wished that she could know his feelings as directly as he did hers. Wished she had something more to go on than guesswork and the different flavors of his silences.

But he didn't come through the conversational door she'd opened.

"Have you been aware, lately, of being followed, Catherine? Have you had any suspicion of...a watch being kept on you?"

"If I had," Catherine replied, as soberly, "I would never have come through the park. I would never willingly jeopardize our secret, Vincent. Or your world."

"Of course. I only wonder...why now? Why this night? How could they know you would be in a lonely place and unprotected?"

She touched his wrist, bringing his eyes again to her. "I'm never unprotected."

She meant it gladly, warmly; but his gaze dropped and he turned away.

"Vincent, what is it? Your note said there was something you wanted us to talk about...."

He rose to return the tube to the cabinet and slowly shut and latched the doors.

His broad back to her, he said, "Nothing...of importance, Catherine. When we are apart too long, I sometimes...forget what it's like, being with you. I have thoughts then that...are of no importance, after all, when you are with me. And safe. And we are together."

When he turned, his slanted, deep-set eyes were calm and very blue. But his tone of voice was the same as when he'd first mentioned the policemen: horrified, frightened, and obscurely defeated.

Whatever it was, he didn't mean to talk about it. And Catherine knew better than to try to force one of his silences: in the face of pressure, he merely withdrew. And there were distances within him where she'd never gone, where he'd never invited her. He respected the privacy of her apartment; she accepted his deep solitudes born, she thought, of his lifelong awareness of how different he was. How fundamentally alone.

They tacitly ceded to each other the necessary spaces in what was, she'd come to think, a kind of reciprocal courtesy. Never forcing or even acknowledging the agreed limits, never invading each other's privacies, in a delicacy and consideration almost ritualized through custom and time – like the motions of a dance. Formal. Ceremonious. Profoundly civilized.

Loving Vincent, she'd learned, was much like holding his hand in the tunnel: she could hold on only as long as he was willing to be held.

When he was ready, when it was time, the words would come.

Catherine was used to waiting.

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Bernie Spirko pitched his cigarette, royally pissed off at himself. Something really major and really weird had gone down here, and he'd missed it. Even tipped off in advance, he hadn't bothered to bring his camera; he'd been so sure it was just another dingbat call, another scam. Of course he'd come – skeptical or not, he always went – but he'd missed it: two cops down, hog jockeys: practically ripped apart, blood splashed across the freshly greening grass, two in the goddam AM, and nobody had a clue. News with a capital NEWS, and he'd missed it all.

He prowled the floodlit hillside, among the milling cops, looking for a chance to latch onto Shivarelli from Forensics, maybe get a good quote, an attributable speculation. Sandy-headed, sharp-faced boyish, and slight, notepad open in one hand, micro cassette recorder holstered in the pocket of his flapping trench coat, pausing, bowed, a second to shield the flame held to a fresh cigarette and then pacing on, Spirko restlessly patrolled his rightful range: inside the yellow tape of the police crime-scene barrier but on the fringes of the action, never making quite enough nuisance of himself to get ejected back among the civilians.

Cops tolerated reporters because they were all after the same thing: they wanted the truth.

Spotting a flashing different from that of the rotating bubblegum machines of the squad cars, Spirko gravitated in that direction. Martinez, the crime-scene photographer, doing his thing. Spirko hung around casually through that cigarette. As he started to light another, Martinez finished doing all the angles on the second victim.

To open conversation, Spirko remarked, "Nasty stuff."

Martinez didn't look pleased to see him. "How'd you beat the meat wagon, Spirko?"

"Lucky guess."

"Yeah," Martinez responded sourly--not really skeptical, because after awhile, cops didn't believe much of anything anybody said. Cynicism. Occupational hazard.

Turning, Spirko fell into step with the larger, older man. "So. What's my story?"

"You tell me."

"A bear from the Bronx Zoo who's got a thing against cops," Spirko suggested.

"Hey, not bad. Only these guys weren't cops."

Startled, Spirko put a hand out, stopping the man. "What? Talk to me, Jesse." Raising a pointing finger, another kind of hold, Spirko demanded, "What happened here?"

Martinez shrugged. "How should I know? And even if I knew, I wouldn't tell you."

Spirko let the crack pass, casual again. Patient. "Listen. Jesse. My Instamatic busted. I could use a good negative for tomorrow."

"You know I can't do that," responded Martinez primly.

"Who's gonna miss one lousy snapshot?"

"Come on, Spirko!" Indignant as a cheerleader the first time somebody asked her price. The usual scamming. It made Spirko tired.

Pointing again, Spirko said, "I got tickets. For the Knicks game. Night after tomorrow. Tenth row, on the floor."

Martinez smirked. "I don't follow basketball."

"You will in these seats," Spirko promised.

Playing the injured virgin scenario all the way out, Martinez started walking away. "Can't do it, Spirko."

"Why not?" asked Spirko reasonably. "It didn't stop you the last time."

Martinez turned. His lined face tightened. "That was different."

Spirko shrugged broadly. "Not to the captain, it wouldn't be." Pulling out the tickets, Spirko strolled closer. "Why don't you just...take the tickets and make it easier on both of us?"

Not even bothering to scowl, Martinez took the tickets, conceding the game. Spirko clapped him on the shoulder, turning as the morgue ambulance pulled in -- no siren, no flashers revolving. There was no rush. They'd all missed it, whatever it'd been.

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The city desk editor, yawning, had promised Spirko that if he was fast, he could have a good chunk of the front page to himself, above the fold -- especially if he could come up with a scenic picture.

There'd be a picture, Spirko promised. And he could be fast.

Most of the morning edition had been locked in and put to bed. In the nearly deserted newsroom, Spirko jerked his tie loose, settled at one of the unoccupied terminals, and started chain-smoking and keyboarding his taped preliminary notes into the traditional pyramid arrangement, from most to least important, so the city desk editor, with his electronic scissors, would have something to cut out and feel useful.

One call came, announcing a courier's delivery of an envelope. Spirko said, "Yeah, shoot it to Rourke," and hung up, knowing that would be Martinez's promised negative. He didn't need to look to know it would be what Rourke, the photo editor, called "scenic," with a good view of the vics and the wounds. Martinez might be a jerk, but he was a reliable jerk. Like a good politician, when he was bought, he delivered and stayed bought. No double-crossing.

Checking his watch, Spirko broke off then to phone a contact he'd cultivated in the precinct house. Bingo. Fingerprints had given them a make on the two vics: one was Frank Summers (two Ms), 28; the other was Claude Oakes (with an E), 31. Both had rap sheets. Local strong-arm stuff, no known mob connections: your basic rent-a-beating for loan sharks and bookies that handled the rougher trade. Not cops, but hardly civilians, either. Your garden variety muscle, low-level street soldiers who'd never come up with a scam like prowling the streets in cop gear, on expensive choppers, on their own hook. They'd been weapons: bought, paid for, and aimed. But at what? And why? And precisely what goddam buzz saw had they run into in the middle of Central goddam Park?

Stripped of the technical language, Summers' throat had been torn out. Oakes had died of massive blood loss from "wounds of an unknown nature."

Spirko inserted the new information at the head of his story, right after the lead, and then went on keyboarding as his recorded voice mused, As though an animal did it. What do you know about animals, Spirko? He stopped, thoughtfully squinting at the smoke drifting into his eyes, as the recording went on, I know what I see. Look at the faces on these people! No one knows what the hell is going on here.

He didn't know either. But he was damn well going to find out.

He was just putting the final tweaks and tucks on his story when the switchboard, having figured where he was, routed another call to him. Eyes on the screen, scowling, he tucked the phone against his shoulder.

"Spirko."

"I'm prepared," a man's voice began, and Spirko juggled the receiver to get his recorder close enough to the mouthpiece to pick up, "to give you a second chance, Mr. Spirko."

"Okay, you got my attention, Mister...?"

"Names aren't important," said the voice tonight's events had elevated from the status of loony tipster to serious Source. A rough voice, Spirko thought: like an educated dockworker making nice for the cameras. He'd heard that voice before, somewhere, somewhere....

Meanwhile the source was continuing, "I'm willing to meet with you. Tonight."

"Right." Spirko checked his watch. "How about five?"

“You take me too literally. This night’s play is over.”

“How about noon? We could do lunch. My treat.”

Laughter that sounded like a cough. “I don’t think so. Tonight. As I said.”

If the guy was scamming, it was a bigger scam than Spirko was used to running into. Highly unsmart, he thought, to try to finagle the little stuff, the small details. That would just annoy the guy, convince him Spirko was small potatoes, not up to being given a view of the Big Picture; the source might (God forbid) go someplace else, and there went Spirko’s dreamed-of Pulitzer, right along with him.

Besides, Spirko wanted to know.

“You got it,” Spirko replied in his best no-nonsense, businesslike tone. “Name the place and time.”

“Sutton Place, 666. The penthouse. You’ll be expected. Nine o’ clock.”

As Spirko was saying, “Right,” the line went dead. Not much into politeness, was Mr. F. X. Source.

A penthouse on Sutton, that was beyond high rent; and that voice was used to being listened to, like when he said jump, he knew everybody in range was going to hop without even asking how high?

And Spirko knew that voice. A news voice. Something political, maybe. Or maybe even mob, though the vics’ rap sheets hadn’t shown any linkup. Money, Spirko thought, and power. And maybe muscle. Which adds up to what? Which adds up to being very, very polite. And very, very careful.

Five minutes later, he transmitted his story to the editor’s desk for review. Forty minutes later, in the grey dawn, the first papers hit the street with the sixty-point front page screamer WHAT DID THIS? over Bernie Spirko’s byline.

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Catherine rose early to have time to buy a paper. Counting out the change for the news dealer took effort, thought. No more than a glance at the headline and the dark rectangle that would surely be a graphic picture was enough to make her instinctively fold the paper double and clutch it tightly. Enough to make her feel tense and exposed. But not enough to dim her determination to find out, both for herself and for Vincent, how much of last night’s ugly mystery had been unraveled. She had to know.

Glancing around, Catherine spotted a coffee shop. Taking a booth, she ordered coffee she didn’t want because that would be safe, unremarkable, normal. People went to coffee shops in the morning and read newspapers there. Whereas a well-dressed woman intently yanking her way through a tabloid, frozen on a street corner and oblivious to passers-by, would have been conspicuous. Different. Dangerous.

The idea of the paper offended her. As a socialite, she’d been enough in the public eye and in the news – even the tabloids – to know how to maintain a seamless, impenetrable public front. She also knew how precious privacy was and how difficult to

safeguard. One of the worst horrors of the original attack had been the voracious media attention afterward. “Feeding frenzy,” her father had called it wryly, trying to make a joke of it, trying to protect her from as much of it as he could. But there was a limit to how long one could hide. Like anything painful, the best thing to do was face it immediately and get it over with. Face the press, scars and all, and tell them bland generalities; but never, never, expose your inner life, your true fears and hopes. Because you’d be vivisected. Flayed alive. In public. For people ghoulishly eager to batten on the most intimate details. Whether their response was pity, disgust, or cruel glee at the misfortunes of the social elite, it was equally scathing.

She’d had nightmares about it for months afterward – like the most intense, hellish version of the common dream of finding yourself out in public, stark naked, with people pointing at you, laughing at you. Being absolutely and helplessly vulnerable.

In her work with the DA’s office, she used publicity when she had to. But she loathed and feared it. Stories about her or clips from TV exposure--they didn’t call it exposure for nothing--always left her feeling obscurely guilty of having been seen. Delicate private matters automatically became grotesque when thrown into the glare of public scrutiny. Like being put on display in a freak show. Intolerable. People didn’t understand.

Keeping the secret of the tunnel community’s existence had been for her both supremely difficult and the easiest thing imaginable. Withholding so much of herself from her father, from close friends like Jenny, Nancy, Joe, had been painful, a kind of lying by omission about what had become the most important part of her life. The silence had put an irrevocable distance between her and them. The secret had isolated her. But for the rest, she’d merely added it to all the other precious, private things she concealed with the sort of practiced bland ferocity characteristic of royalty. She concealed Vincent as she concealed herself...because the alternative was death.

Nevertheless she’d bought a paper. And intended to study it down to the last smeared syllable, the smallest photographed detail. She had to know.

She’d just opened the paper to confront the garish headline, WHAT DID THIS? when a familiar voice said warmly, casually, “Hi, Cath.”

Somehow she didn’t flinch or jump, looking up calmly. Leaning against the booth’s coat-rack post was a handsome, bearded man with shrewd laughter-wrinkled pale blue eyes, dark hair slightly longer and wilder than was modish, above a crisp collar and an impeccably tailored grey business suit. His bodyguards stood sentry back by the door, like a couple of fullbacks trying to be inconspicuous.

“Elliot,” she greeted her onetime fiancé, present suitor, and most dangerous topside friend.

Unlike Joe Maxwell, her boss, Elliot now knew the tunnels existed: some weeks ago, she’d led him through the outer passages to save both their lives. Unlike Joe, Elliot had heard and wondered at certain...sounds: Vincent preventing the Gorrionista death squad from pursuing them down through the manhole. Unlike Joe, Elliot knew there was someone supremely important, supremely loved, in her life. Someone whose existence meant Catherine Chandler could offer him nothing but wary, half-grudged friendship.

Amoral urban pirate Elliot, whom she trusted and didn't trust at all, whom she felt safe with and who therefore put her rigidly on her guard, whose kiss had not been altogether unwelcome, as they both knew....

Confident of his welcome, he slid into the booth opposite, smiling.

Smiling back, tense, Catherine remarked, "This is the last place in the world I'd expect to find you."

His smile broadened, self-mocking, showing lots of even, square, capped teeth: the best that cosmetic dentistry could provide.

His voice adopting a rough dem, dese, and dose street accent, he responded, "What d'you mean? I'm an old aficionado of greasy spoons."

Not magnate/developer Elliot Burch of the calculated press conferences, the fabricated public persona; it was Stosh Kazmarek, the garbageman's son – the vulnerable private persona known only to her – which that voice offered. Not slumming, any more than she was, it implied. Just a couple of old pals accidentally running into each other in a third-rate diner.

Sure, Elliot: we'll just ignore the bodyguards, Catherine thought sardonically – tolerantly amused, in spite of herself, by his easy, self-deprecating pretense. Elliot was a four-star shark. And her friend. She shook her head ruefully.

"Really," she said dryly. Sobering, she asked, "Why are you here?"

"I just wanted to see you, Cath."

His sincerity, behind the entire pretense, made her uncomfortable. He loved her. He did love her. And they both knew it. Her eyes turned aside. "Elliot--"

"I just want you to know I'm here for you. Waiting."

She shook her head. "I don't want you to wait for me."

Earnest, endearingly awkward, Elliot responded, "Cathy, I don't want to wait either. But the way things seem to be, I don't have much choice. I mean, you said to me there's somebody else in your life. I can't do anything about that."

Almost, it was a question. And it waited a breath for answers, explanations, that didn't come. He added, "And I can't change how I feel about you."

Another waiting pause followed. Catherine felt the weight of sadness, from that ungiving silence, growing in her face. And surely Elliot saw it. His face closed, unreadable. Without another word or glance he rose and left, his exit flanked by his bodyguards with almost military precision.

Catherine sighed, reflecting that Elliot was a master. He'd succeeded in making her feel guilty, if not precisely sorry, for not confiding in him. Not loving him. Using his own real pain as a weapon to jab at her, unerringly finding her vulnerabilities and rousing her compassion. Dangerous.

Steeling herself to open the paper again, she froze, realizing the true incongruity of their meeting in such a place. She'd come here in impulse, to hide. And within five minutes, Elliot had shown up with the plain intention of renewing his suit, under guise of concern. Impossible that it should be a coincidence.

He's having me watched! And he doesn't care if I know it. Maybe wants me to know! A warning? Or a threat? And why now: because of what he found in the paper this morning? Because he knows about the park threshold? Because he suspects there's a connection? Or because he knows there is? Whatever Elliot is, he's no fool.

What have I done? I knew it was a risk to lead him through the tunnels, but I saw no choice. Did I risk too much? Have I put everything – Vincent – in danger? Does Elliot think that if his rival were removed, I'd love him then? Oh, Elliot, what terrible game do you think we're playing here? How could imagine anyone would win?

Gripping the paper, she stared at it unseeingly. I've been careless with the trust I've been given. I have to tell Vincent. Warn Vincent. Tell Vincent -- She scanned the lead paragraphs. – that I was right: they weren't policemen. And that he was right: someone must have sent them. Oh, what I have I done?

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Penthouse, in the house on Sutton, only meant the fourth floor. But stratospheric floor numbers weren't as impressive as the setup Spirko found himself walking into. Nobody at the front door barred with a decorative grill, but unlocked. Doors in the large foyer but not doorbells, all locked except for the middle door that proved to be a brass-sheathed elevator with only one button you could push.

Leaving his rippled, golden reflections, Spirko wandered uneasily down a hallway with a carpet you could lose your feet in to the ankles. What he assumed was antique furniture, scattered around as though it was common as dirt. Sculpture. Carved stuff. Along the white walls, lifesize oil paintings of women with powdered hair and snide, constipated expressions; at the foot of a short mahogany stair he descended, a bigger portrait of a snarky looking guy with a pointed grey beard and a ruff.

In spite of himself, Spirko felt definitely out of his league: knowing it was all scam, head games to intimidate him, but uneasy because it was working. This junk was genuine. People actually lived like this. He didn't like the set-up.

Reflexively, he fished for a cigarette.

In front of him, a pair of etched glass doors stood slightly ajar. Through them he could see a large, dark room and the silhouette of a man seated behind a large desk before a window with lots of small panes. Some street light penetrated the sheer curtains. Off to one side was a lamp, too dim and too far to do any good. The man remained a black outline.

Edging nervously inside, Spirko turned and gestured at the door, feeling forced to make excuses for his intrusion.

"The door was open...."

The man's voice – a flat, unfriendly monotone: deliberate, controlled – responded, "Sit down. You're late."

As Spirko approached and took the fancy interviewee's chair in front of the desk, the man added, "Your cigarette, please. The smoke bothers me."

Not a request: an order.

Glancing around for an ashtray, Spirko found none and obediently stubbed the cigarette against the sole of his shoe, thinking resentfully, more damn head games. But he kept the anger off his face. He'd put up with worse, to cultivate a source.

"You were also late, last night." The man wasn't exactly accusing: more stating a fact, like maybe, after that lapse, he'd decide not to hire Spirko after all.

Spirko wasn't hunting a job, didn't have to make nice to this bozo, past a certain point. Past a certain point, he didn't crawl or back off for anybody. But he kept his tone pleasant, placating.

"Hey, I got there as soon as I could. Not every guy that calls me is on the level."

The man leaned forward the folded his hands, showing the cuff of a suit jacket, a little sleeve. But Spirko still couldn't see anything of his features.

The man said neutrally, "And you're convinced at this point that I'm on the level."

Spirko made a face and a dismissive Who: me? gesture. "Sure."

"Had you arrived at the park...sooner, you would have seen something extraordinary."

"Like what?"

"Patience, Mr. Spirko. You're only at the very beginning."

There was a silence Spirko broke, asking, "Do I get to see you? Or are we just gonna sit here in the dark?"

"My one and only condition is that I remain anonymous."

"And if I refuse?"

"You're a fool."

Spirko smiled. "My editor won't print the story without a verifiable source."

"Which is why I won't be your source. I'll give you the information. But you'll have to discover the truth yourself."

Finger pointed for emphasis, Spirko pushed out of the chair. "Either you show your face, or I'm walking." He could play head games too.

He'd gone about two steps toward the doors when the man snapped, "Spirko."

He stopped. Looked slowly around.

The man said, "You were chosen with great care... for your tenacity. For your singular character. I don't think you could walk away from this story if you wanted to. Now, sit down."

Everybody was a scammer. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. His bluff called, Spirko returned to the chair.

"Take out your notebook," the man directed. Spirko produced his pocket recorder with something of a flourish, displaying it as he clicked it on.

Settling to talk, the man said, "The pattern of killings began about two years ago. It's a gruesome pattern of evisceration, throat puncture wounds, and deep slashings. The victims are generally left to bleed to death."

Spirko put in intently, "Then last night... wasn't the first time?"

"Nor will it be the last."

Spirko smiled: finally, they were getting to something interesting. "You're saying...you know the killer?"

"Not... exactly. But I know why he kills."

"Why?"

Pause. "To protect someone."

Another pause. It was as if the guy expected Spirko to extract the details one by one with tweezers, like shrapnel. Or to pay to see each card, like stud poker. A worse tease than a stripper.

Playing the game, Spirko prompted obligingly, "Who?"

"A beautiful woman. A very beautiful woman." For a second, there was feeling in that voice. Lingered over those words.

Factual again, the voice continued, "She's the key. You find her; she'll lead you to the killer."

"What's her name?"

Still playing games, making Spirko push for every fragmentary glimpse, the man said, "She's...an assistant district attorney." Finally, the source decided to say something straight out: "Her name is Catherine Chandler."

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The spring was not yet far enough advanced to retard the twilight, that still came early even to the tallest buildings.

Having waited for some time in the broken brick passage below Catherine's building, Vincent climbed to her balcony even though it was not yet fully dark and though he knew she had not yet returned home. Sometimes, as today, it was an agony not to be able to go to her, not to feel her close. Sometimes he hated the daylight that kept him from her.

He paced restlessly, for once insensitive to the thousand diamond lights coming on in the high buildings across the park, trying to concentrate on Catherine nearing and not knowing how much was his true sense of her and how much, wishful thinking. Agitated himself, he found it difficult to distinguish her troubled emotions from his own.

Through the glass of her French doors, he heard the slight sounds of her key in the lock, the hall door opening. He turned, backed a step, to be out of view if anyone had accompanied her; but no lights came on, inside.

A moment later the French doors were flung wide and Catherine threw herself into his arms, exclaiming, "Vincent. I hoped so much you'd be here!"

Abruptly stiffening, she swung away, continuing distractedly, "We can't stay here, someone might be watching--"

Vincent let himself be towed a step before realizing she meant to pull him inside. Beyond the doors. Into her apartment. He stood fast, and Catherine spun around at the end of her extended arm.

“Vincent--it’s not safe!” she protested.

He knew far better than she where the danger lay. There could be no compromise. Still holding her hand, he settled cross-legged on the tile flooring, where the balcony’s outer parapet would be concealment. After a moment, Catherine knelt down beside him, even though still in her working clothes, high heels, garnet-red skirt settling in lovely soft folds around her....

For several minutes they sat silently, all other concerns shed in the many-layered communion of being together. The bond made and kept him continually aware of her from minute to minute. Always his sense of her underlaid every waking moment and slid, below consciousness, into his dreams, as well. But being with her, touching her, brought an intensity of awareness that the bond alone could not grant him.

Feeling her immediately begin to relax, sensing her happiness and knowing he was the cause, knowing each word and each touch would bring a response from her, always filled Vincent with thankfulness, humility, and a deep, peaceful joy. Her presence was his greatest delight and his heart’s home.

There were no other places. There was only here, and away from her. There was no other comfort except to hold her and feel her breathing and alive and happy within his embrace.

“All day,” he said at last, “I have felt your disquiet, Catherine.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I make it hard for you sometimes, don’t I?” Not waiting for an answer, Catherine went on, “But I was right, Vincent: they weren’t policemen. Two hired thugs.”

“I know.” Explaining, Vincent said, “A helper sends down newspapers. For Father. And Father, in turn...called my attention to the item.”

As Catherine looked him steadily in the eyes, almost certainly visualizing that conversation, Vincent felt obliged to defend Father: “He is naturally concerned, Catherine. For me. For us. The park is so close for such an... incident. He fears anything that might call attention to our world.”

“Naturally,” Catherine said in a neutral voice, trying to mute her answering resentment of Father’s anxious concerns.

Vincent gathered her closer and was glad when she settled more comfortably, peaceable against his chest.

“But your unrest has only deepened,” he commented. “What else have you learned?”

She brushed back the veil of her honey-colored hair, still winter-dark, lacking the sunstreaks with which summer would gild it. What a wonderful thing, he thought irrelevantly, to have in his mind all the seasons of her hair. To have had the gift of so much time....

“Nothing,” Catherine declared, constraint renewing. “I thought.... I had a suspicion this morning. But it’s nothing, Vincent. There can’t be anything to it. Because....” She bit her lip, choosing words carefully. “Because I was hurt last night.” She displayed her reddened palms, whose scrapes and scabs were still visible.

“Not severely. But hurt. And the person I suspected... would never do that. I know that. Once I’d thought it out, I knew I’d been wrong. But it’s possible... someone might be watching,” she finished in an unhappy, worried voice. As though it might be her fault, her doing.

Vincent held her silently for a few moments. Glad merely for that. Letting the peace again enfold them both.

Presently, quietly, he observed, “You’ve seen Elliot.”

She flushed. “How did you know?”

“I know your feelings toward him. I... noticed.” He didn’t say the obvious, that it’d been Elliot whom she’d suspected. He felt there was no need. Nor did he ask what Elliot had said to her, wanted of her. That was Catherine’s private affair. Unless, of course, she chose to volunteer it, share it...

“I think,” Catherine said slowly, “he knows just enough to make him... uneasy for me. I think he came... to offer his concern, more or less. Maybe even his help, if I was willing to ask for it. Which I wasn’t. He knows I have secrets, but he’s never pressed me about them. He’s respected my privacy.”

“Which our bond leaves you little enough of,” Vincent commented, without emphasis.

“Vincent--”

“I know it’s hard for you sometimes,” Vincent went on, knowing the instant she realized he’d repeated virtually her own words of a moment ago. Feeling her smile, seeing her sharp, mock-accusing glance.

Then she sobered, meeting his eyes with that direct grey-green gaze that always stole his breath and made him feel, for an instant, as though his heart had stopped.

And she said, “Sometimes it’s awkward. I never want to hurt you. Sometimes I forget how much...how much you’re with me. Always. But there’s nothing about me I’m truly afraid for you to know, Vincent.”

Leaning back against the parapet, Vincent looked upward; but it was still too early for stars to pierce the city’s half-light haze. Or perhaps tonight there would be no stars: he could smell rain on the wind.

“One cannot foresee everything,” he commented quietly. “And plans go awry. Certainly those men, last night, never expected to encounter... me. That surely was not part of the plan, at least as they knew it. Is it possible, Catherine, that the plan might have gone awry in another way, as well? Might it be that their instructions were to overtake and frighten you and that... they exceeded their instructions? In the heat of the pursuit? That they were told to stop you and were not overcareful how they did so? Might the intent have been more in the nature of a warning... than a true attack? For the outcome was... disproportionate, Catherine. They had guns. They had not even drawn them. I have thought about that today. Whether my reaction was... disproportionate.”

As Catherine turned within his arms, to see his face more clearly in what, to her, would be dimness, Vincent explained, “Father pointed out to me...how many such...incidents there have been, of late. How strong my...fear for you has become, and how often it has proved justified. How closely I attend to what I feel of you, within, so that I am often

inattentive to what is about me, what I'm doing. The children have remarked on it, Catherine. They find it amusing, when they must repeat a question three or four times before I can notice and respond. Father finds it...less than amusing. I am in a constant state...of expectation, Catherine. Anxiety. And therefore perhaps I magnify, exaggerate, any sense of threat I feel. Perhaps...what I do...has become disproportionate. I cannot judge. I'm too close to it.

When I feel your fear, it's as if...I cannot think, I cannot choose. Your fear, my fear, fills me and leaves room for nothing else. And I simply strike out. They were not police, Catherine. But I didn't know they were not. I didn't care. In that moment, it didn't matter to me who they were. I simply struck them down. I've thought about that today, as well. Father...is concerned for me. And I have no answer for him."

Catherine settled back, thinking, cheek against his chest. And after a time she said, "Those men meant me harm, Vincent. They didn't just knock me down. They knocked me down...and then waited. I don't understand it, but I'm certain. We were right to be afraid. It wasn't...disproportionate."

Vincent sighed. He'd almost found a way of saying it – what must be said. And yet hadn't said it. Catherine had found no revulsion in his almost-confession. He breathed the sweet scent of her hair.

"Please, Catherine. Be very careful. I cannot always come to you. You could be hurt...so quickly. Or in daylight. Where I could not reach you. The fear of that haunts me. Please."

For answer, Catherine lifted one of his hands. As he watched, suspended, she pressed a kiss against it – affirmation, a pledge. Affirmation of what, a pledge of what, his whirling senses couldn't interpret. It was a moment before he realized the shock of cold against his hot face was thin, chill rain, drifting down.

Awkwardly abrupt, trying to rise and at the same time help Catherine in rising, he said, "I should leave--"

"No, Vincent. Stay. But we can't stay here. Come in. Please."

Vincent was astonished, shaken.

Except for once, carelessly, when he'd visited her balcony injured, long ago, Catherine had seriously asked him in only once. Months ago: the second anniversary of their meeting. A ceremonious occasion, for which she'd prepared a special meal, a fire, and decorations. Difficult to refuse. Or to want to refuse. And he'd almost gone, would have gone in spite of his misgivings, had not the phone interrupted them. And he'd backed away with a sense of reprieve, that that perilous boundary remained uncrossed. And he'd felt the same relief in her. And so had been unsurprised that in the time since, she'd never renewed the request, the invitation. For beyond that boundary, everything between them would become profoundly unsafe.

Though he'd told her nothing, or next to nothing, of his fears and his desires, nothing of the heated dreams that came more frequently now, she knew. Knew enough to have tacitly cooperated in maintaining the safe, accustomed distances, not risking the precious much they had for the cloudy more neither of them could be certain of – the

distances, and the cautions, that were hers as much as his. Never spoken, so never acknowledged. But always there.

It frightened him now, how much he wanted to go in. It was as if his thinking blurred, or became something other than thinking. The lingering scent of her hair, the light contact of her fingers upon his wrist, the memory of her lips pressed against his hand, filled all his awareness so that no room remained for any other consciousness. For a moment all the care and careful distances became senseless to him and Catherine became everything: beckoning, warm, accepting.

Softly, prosaically, she said, "It's raining, Vincent."

And suddenly the rain shocked him again, as though he'd been elsewhere or asleep and had just reawakened to the fact of it, the bodily experience of it. Catherine will be cold, he thought. And still didn't move, looking past her at the French doors, still standing ajar. And at the shadowy private space beyond those doors.

The apartment seemed suddenly like a cave filled with dangerous, alluring possibilities. It became like looking down from some roof at the street far below and wondering for an instant how it would feel to fall – imagining the rush of air, the terror, the wondrous sensation of flying....

It felt as though they were an immense distance apart and rushing together at great speed. He could feel it in her too, the beat of her blood. Falling into one another and trying to believe the flying could go on forever, yet both dreading and desiring the shattering collision.

Catherine's eyes were caves, too – dark, enormous, with depths in which he'd be utterly lost and it would all feel like flying. There was rain on her lifted face. On her lips. In the hollow of her throat a wet shadow gathered.

He wanted to taste that wet darkness. Drink of it. Head tilting, he drew her nearer, bending. And felt, against his back, the edge of the parapet. And remembered suddenly where he was...and who he was.

The hunger, denied, had grown explosive. Monstrous. Dangerous. Full of hardened layers of rage. A lifetime's starvation demanding to be fed, caring nothing about how it fed or what became of its prey in the feeding. Something that knew only violence, did only violence. An ugly, animal hunger that was the abysmal opposite of love. Which any woman would reject in horror. And which must therefore never be allowed to touch Catherine.

It had no place here.

This was the balcony. Their place, his and Catherine's. And nobody's place, neither truly his nor hers. A place between, a ceremonious and enchanted bridge between worlds, where brutal hunger could find no foothold. Where irrevocable things could not happen. Where there could be no falling.

Drawing back, he said, "I think...we should not, Catherine. I--" Finding no way to finish, he shook his head.

And again, he felt Catherine's relief as what she'd braced herself against, or for, turned aside and needed no bracing, after all. Relief... and yet sadness, disappointment. Something that felt, to him, like resignation.

Folding her arms, head bent against the mist that had already jeweled and darkened her hair, Catherine promised, "I'll be careful, Vincent."

As though there'd been no interruption in their conversation, no interval of inchoate wildness sparked by their fear for one another, the impulse to protect and comfort, and to seek protection and comfort. The outer pressure whose effect was to force them inexorably closer.

Catherine said steadily, "We can still choose."

And Vincent thought that perhaps there'd been no interruption. Perhaps, silently or aloud, they'd been contemplating the same awareness all the while. Her danger, however arising; his reaction...that was the same reaction, whatever its intent.

"Yes," Vincent said, shaken with gratitude for her forbearance, her patient steadfastness, her courage. On some level, somehow, she knew.

He didn't trust himself to embrace her. But his look was an embrace, perhaps conveying something of the wildness and the wanting still.

"Yes," he said again. "Take great care, Catherine. For us both."

"I will."

## 2

Arming himself with facts and solid conjectures took Spirko most of two days.

To start the research, he flipped microfiche until he thought he'd go blind, checking Sentinel back issues, tagging dates, incidents, pulling hard copy on the most likely prospects. Then he logged onto the link with the city's immense database and did a full-scale computer search. He knew enough by that time to set the parameters: almost three years back up to the present; New York area; unexplained, odd deaths. The keywords he used to narrow the focus were death, slash, cut, and myster-. The number of items that popped up, fitting that profile, surprised even him: the city was in even worse shape than he'd thought.

Then he did a second search using the keywords Chandler and monster. That turned up a couple of fresh items. Then just monster, which predictably popped up a couple of hundred possibles: everybody saw monsters nowadays. Scanning the summaries let him discard all but about a dozen. He got hard copy on those, too. Then he laid everything out in chronological order on the ping-pong table downstairs and tried to figure what the hell it added up to.

He'd realized at once that the main things to know about Catherine Chandler were that she was rich and that she'd been mugged and slashed, apparently by mistake, one April night. Missing for ten days, she'd resurfaced under her own power, with no good account of where she'd been.

About eight months later, after extensive facial plastic surgery, Chandler had left her father's posh law firm to join the DA's office – to get even? And a month or so after that, the first killings. Related to the initial attack on Chandler through the intended victim, one Carol Stabler, a hooker, killed in police custody when she'd offered to give evidence

on her bosses. Story described the three vics as “mauled.” More, about a month later. Vigilante stuff, on the subways. Prime suspect that grandstanding media-hound Jason Walker, who’d abruptly dropped from sight. Spirko, who’d covered that story, remembered it well.

Immediately, Walker became Spirko’s prime candidate. The pieces fit in nicely; and an interracial romance between ex-victim and professed Protector, with a little killing thrown in, was hot enough stuff that Chandler would go to considerable lengths to keep it quiet, keep Walker’s whereabouts under wraps.

Not counting the fake bikers, the last incident in the series was barely six weeks old: two rich kids Chandler had tried to nail for a string of hooker killings – slasher murders: interesting – had turned up very dead in a boarded-up old downtown theater. One had a broken neck, nothing special; the other had been ripped apart. Like a mauling, an animal attack. Bing, bing, bing. Once you started looking, the pattern was there. And those were just the ones that had made the papers: Spirko bet there were a lot more, that hadn’t.

Spirko spent the rest of that day sorting and cross-connecting the accounts, making notes and a tentative chronology. The next morning he did legwork.

Lt. Herman had retired but was more than willing to describe to Spirko what he’d found in that brownstone where Carol Stabler had been parked in supposed safety. The investigation had gone noplacé. No evidence Chandler had even been there when the vics had been taken down. But the MO was the same and the connection to Chandler, though nothing you could take to court, was still there.

Next was what at first seemed a dead end: Anna Lausch, who claimed to have seen a “monster” captured in the park, had since died. But Byron Trask, who’d written the story, defended the non-existent honor of the rag he worked for, the Confidential, and its sources. Trask claimed the old biddy had been pretty reliable for a dingbat: she’d surely seen something through her snooping telescope, even if it hadn’t been space aliens. And Trask let drop that Chandler had cross-examined him about that same story and then interviewed the Lausch woman. So though the story stopped there, the connection with Chandler still existed; and parts of what old Lausch had said fit eyewitnesses’ descriptions of the so-called Subway Slasher.

Jason Walker stayed top candidate. Hitting the street again, Spirko shook his head in cynical wonder at what a certified Park Avenue Princess would see in somebody like that. Well, with all his martial arts, Walker certainly was the physical type. Kept himself in shape. Some women apparently went for that.

Spirko crumpled and pitched a dead pack of cigarettes and opened a fresh one.

A phone call to the DA’s office established that Chandler had spent the morning in court. There was time to grab a stand-up lunch. Afterward, Spirko circled back to the Sentinel offices to collect a folder of the most likely bits and as many scenic photos, from those past cases, as he’d been able to get good blow-ups of. Fully-armed and confident, he went to confront the lady herself and see what he could shake loose.

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Approaching her desk, Catherine found a sandy-haired, boyish-looking stranger leaning against it, plainly waiting for her. In his hands was a newspaper she recognized at once. Smiling, the man asked pleasantly, "How did the trial go?"

There were, in the question, an unearned familiarity and an edge of inquisitiveness Catherine didn't like.

She said dismissively, "Fine," though in fact it hadn't.

Holding out a hand to be shaken, the man said, "I'm Bernie Spirko, New York Sentinel. Can I talk to you for a minute?"

A reporter. Probably meant nothing. Catherine tried to suppress her immediate sense of unease. She was due for a meeting in Joe's office in five minutes; but that was nobody's business.

She said flatly, "Actually, now is not a very good time." In other circumstances, she would have told him to go; had him ejected, if necessary. But the paper held her suspended.

"I'd appreciate it," Spirko said humbly. "It's important." As Catherine moved past him to set her briefcase on her desktop, Spirko opened the paper wide, displaying the hateful headline. "What do you know about this?" He set it on the desk before her.

She pretended to scan the story she'd all but memorized. Looking up, she responded carelessly, "About what?"

"Remember?" Spirko prodded.

"Remember what?" she rejoined calmly, trying to sound as though she hadn't the least idea what he was getting at and wasn't particularly interested in finding out. Ice massed in the pit of her stomach.

"I think you do," Spirko declared. "I've been in this long enough to know when someone's lying."

They exchanged hostile glances. "I'm not a liar, Mr. Spirko." She thrust the paper into his hands and stalked past.

"Everyone's a liar," said Spirko in a bored voice. As Catherine moved away, Spirko dumped the paper, caught up a thin attaché case, and tagged along, complaining, "Hey, I'm just trying to find out what happened that night. It's my job."

Catherine gave him a guarded glance. "What makes you think I know anything?"

Having reached the outer corridor, they'd stopped.

"Come on," invited Spirko, and pushed open the door of a conference room, poking his head in to check that it was empty. "I'll show you. How's this?"

Braced, rigid, trying to appear only mildly annoyed, mildly curious, Catherine went in and Spirko shut the door. Shaking a cigarette out of a pack, Spirko asked, pro forma, "You mind if I smoke?"

Letting her distaste show, Catherine said, "Actually, yes."

Spirko responded with a tight smile. Putting the unlit cigarette in his mouth, he began spreading out papers and photos he took from his attaché case. The top photo showed her scarred face.

Tapping it, Spirko commented, "This, you remember, right?" When Catherine didn't dignify that with an answer, Spirko smiled again, dropping onto the photo a plastic-bound book of typescript.

As Catherine looked at it, Spirko provided running commentary: "The police report on Carol Stabler – the woman who was set to testify against those men who attacked you."

Catherine found herself nodding, mesmerized by the document she stared down at without touching. So much pain, fear, and tragedy, all set down in neat, impersonal paragraphs.

"The safe house was...compromised. She was murdered before she could testify."

"That's right," said Spirko, like a teacher encouraging a backward child. He gestured with the cigarette. "And that same night, someone killed those men who attacked her."

He pulled out a few photos, dumped them on the report. No sympathy in his manner. He was almost savoring the details. "Literally...tore them apart..." His sharp, inquisitive eyes watched for her reaction. "Not very pretty, huh?"

In spite of herself, Catherine took up one of the hideous pictures. Glossy. Black and white. Full of graphic details. Finally she could force her eyes away.

"No," she said flatly, sincerely. "It isn't." Regathering her determination, she set down the photo. "What does this have to do with me?"

"Well, there are other, similar...incidents. Connected to you."

Spirko began rummaging through the folio, producing more documents, photos, spreading them out like evidence. "October 9, 1987. You investigated a complaint filed by some elderly people. Claimed they were being harassed by a developer. The investigation resulted in the termination of a prospective project...as well as the lives of four of the developer's leg men. Elliot Burch. I think you know the name?"

The ice had moved into Catherine's face and tone. "You are speculating."

"There is more," said Spirko, with a ghastly pretense of being helpful. "If you want, I'd be happy to review it all for you."

Catherine wasn't sure she could get through such a recital. And it must have showed: fishing in a pocket, Spirko pulled out a lighter and brazenly lit his cigarette, confident she wouldn't protest.

Insolently breathing smoke at her, he grinned without apology, then said, "I'm a reporter, Miss Chandler. I find things out. I dig up secrets. That's what I do."

They faced each other watchfully, as the open adversaries they were. Catherine rejoined, "And what do you think you're going to find?"

Pulling a big, insincere smile, Spirko shook his head. "I don't know yet. But you do." When Catherine made no response, Spirko burst out, "Come on: what is the big secret? Why not just tell me?" He waited again. Then his eyes turned as cold as hers felt. "Because with or without you, I'll find out. Believe me."

When that threat got no response either, Spirko made a spread-hand shrug, collected his evidence, and left. The room still stank of cigarette smoke.

Not sure her legs would support her; Catherine leaned heavily against the table, full of shock and dread. Which Vincent would be feeling. And worrying about.

There was no choice: she'd have to tell him. Tell him that their greatest fear had at last come upon them – a nightmare from which there might be no waking.

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The note she wrote summoned, not Vincent, but Father to the threshold below her building that evening. She couldn't have said if she'd meant to shield Vincent's sensitivities, or her own. She only felt that Father would hear her news pragmatically, not personally – as he'd listen to a recitation of the symptoms of a disease. He'd consider it unsentimentally as a problem to be solved or at least faced. He would offer no sympathy. And so she could bear to face Father with...her confession. For it felt that way, to her.

When she'd described Spirko's try at interrogation, Father was silent for several minutes. A greying man, stocky in layered, patchwork tunnel clothing, leaning on a heavy, hand-carved cane.

Finally he observed, "You're hesitant about telling Vincent."

"The memory of those moments is...painful to him," responded Catherine uncomfortably.

"He should be told," Father said bluntly.

Catherine nodded. She knew that. Her nod hoped Father would take the burden of that unendurable duty from her.

Father said, "Every time you meet, every moment you spend together now...increases the risk."

"I know," Catherine agreed miserably.

Surprisingly, Father came nearer, declaring, "You mustn't blame yourself. This was inevitable. I knew it from the moment he first brought you to us."

"I do blame myself, Father."

"Well, don't."

I told you so was scant comfort. Yet Father's unexpectedly absolving her of responsibility somehow obliged Catherine to voice her own misgivings: "It's me he protects. What he does, he does in my name!"

"He protects all of us," Father said firmly. "He protects the people he loves."

Vincent was continually talking about love – in the abstract. As a force or an ideal. Never personally, directly. Never had Vincent said, in so many words, that he loved her. Once, recently, she'd been daring enough to say those words to him; but distracted by shame, remorse, and a gunshot wound in his shoulder, he'd retreated to one of his brooding, unreachable inner distances. There'd been no reaction: she didn't think he'd heard.

It didn't matter, she supposed. What she felt, all she felt, he knew. So she'd argued to herself that words weren't necessary to formalize what was so directly evident to him...and to her, in the moments that slid out of normal time, when they were united in his reenactment of her rescue – to her, there seemed only one, endlessly renewed: when, fear banished, she was clasped in the embrace of such solidity that stood forever between her and all harm. If that wasn't love, she didn't know what would be. But they'd never spoken of it: it was one of their agreed silences.

Yet, Father's acknowledging Vincent's love for her as a fact, even if a regrettable one, further disrupted Catherine's attempt to keep control of her emotions. She could feel her professional mask further slipping to reveal open distress.

"It's a feeling of shame, Father. I have...watched. I have seen him when he...loses himself."

"Yes, I know. It's terrifying. Anyone would feel the same--"

"No-- No!" Making incomplete, helpless gestures, Catherine backed against the rough brick wall, retreating before an appalling suspicion. "Part of me shares that with him! In some deep way, I wonder – have I been reckless? Have I put myself in danger, knowing that he would...come to me?"

Father's expression was troubled, guarded. But he did nothing, said nothing, either to confirm or dismiss her speculation.

"Am I the one," Catherine went on, "whose actions have become...disproportionate?" She scraped back her hair with both spread hands, full of fear at possibilities from which no one could defend her.

"What have we been doing? To each other? But I didn't know, never thought...didn't choose--"

Father said again, gruffly, "He must be told of this fresh danger. Would you prefer it if I...? Then I'll see to it, Catherine. And Catherine," he said as she turned and started to leave. "You must no longer use the park threshold. Or come Below again without the greatest circumspection."

Biting her lip, Catherine nodded weakly, relieved: she'd half expected Father to impose a harsher penalty, a stricter penance. She'd thought he might forbid her to come Below at all. Had he done so, she would have accepted the exile as no more than just.

Then, meeting Father's steady eyes, Catherine realized, if he'd considered that, he'd discarded it as futile. For that would only mean Vincent would come Above, to her balcony. Which would only magnify the danger. Things had gone too far for any prohibition Father might make to hold against the force drawing her and Vincent together; and Father was a realist.

Father's eyes were not, after all, without sympathy.

"You must not blame yourself, Catherine. We are all powerless against what, it seems, was destined to be. I only pray it may not end...badly. But it is no one's choice. And therefore no one's blame."

Catherine nodded, unconvinced. Spirko was certainly to blame: digging up things she'd thought safely dead and forgotten. And the shadowy someone beyond Spirko: whoever had sent those bikers.

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"I didn't expect to see you so soon," said the dark shape standing before the windows. He didn't sound pleased.

"I'm nowhere on this story," Spirko complained – scamming a little. He hoped that if he dragged his feet, maybe it would prompt Mr. X to give a push, supply some fresh information. Maybe be willing to say something on the record.

"Would you care to speculate?" suggested Mr. X.

"On what?" Spirko came back, sounding annoyed. "I got half a dozen police photographs, all telling me the same thing – only I can't figure out what. I've got a grandstanding martial arts freak that none of his own people have heard from in over two years. If you can believe them. Not even an anonymous letter, bragging about how he's ridding the streets of crime, which is even harder to believe. And--"

"You're speaking...of Jason Walker." The voice sounded surprised. Even angry.

"Sure, who else? What other boyfriend--"

"You can dismiss Walker. He's dead."

"Says who? He fits the profile, he's--"

"Forget Walker." That was an order.

Spirko hadn't thought Mr. X would like that suggestion and had brought it out on purpose to nudge him into spilling something. Mr. X had his own agenda, his own hot buttons: everybody did. Besides, with the tipoff link to Chandler, Spirko had been reviewing the recordings of his informant's voice, comparing them to videotapes of certain press conferences. He was pretty sure in his gut that he had a make on this bozo. And Mr. Megabucks Elliot goddam Burch wouldn't be eager to have his once and maybe future fiancée tainted with exposure over a relationship with somebody like Walker. He was into removing the competition, not throwing dirt at Chandler that would stick for a lifetime. Not to mention possible criminal knowledge or accessory raps, at least, to multiple and very messy homicides....

Or could Burch want to bring Chandler down for giving him the push? Spirko was startled by the thought. Though as far as Spirko could tell, chivalry was long since dead and buried, and though Burch's reputation wouldn't get him nominated for sainthood anytime soon, spite on that scale was a little hard for even Spirko to credit. Out of proportion. Or did Burch only want to shaft her homicidal boyfriend, whoever the hell he was?

But if the boyfriend wasn't Walker, that whole line of inquiry was down the tubes and Spirko had spent most of the day dashing full speed up a blind alley. Was Burch scamming him or was this righteous info?

Mr. Media-management Burch wasn't happy. Well, neither was Spirko, who'd follow the story, and print it, no matter where it led. Whether Burch liked it or not. But without Burch's cooperation and tips, without a quotable source, maybe there'd be no story. If Walker was a no-show, Spirko had no other candidates....

Leaving that tangled problem for the moment, Spirko said, "All right, scratch Walker. So then, what have we got? Your Assistant DA who's--"

"You saw Catherine." Burch looked around sharply: more displeasure. This interview wasn't going even as well as the first one.

"What of it? You gave me her name," Spirko responded, irritated. What did this clown expect?

After a small, stiff silence, Burch reflected, "You're thinking too literally. It's my fault."

"Then talk to me!" Spirko tried to sound hopeful, desperate.

Coming to stand behind the desk, Burch said, "Mr. Spirko, this is not some crazed vigilante fixated on Catherine Chandler. This is something entirely different. This is something that has never been."

Spirko made a disgusted face. "You keep saying cryptic stuff like that."

Softly, raptly, Burch murmured, "You should hear the sounds."

Spirko blinked, baffled. "Sounds?"

More cryptic garbage.

"Of his killings. Sounds you will never forget."

This was getting real weird, real fast. Maybe it wasn't Burch. Maybe the guy was a loony, after all. But he'd known about the park. In advance. And Spirko's hints had certainly spooked Chandler, this afternoon. Couldn't miss it. Something was damn well going on, and this source had so far been pure gold, all the way.

Yet, sick of the man's dodging and insinuations, Spirko went for it, demanding "Who is he?"

"As I told you before, Mr. Spirko – you'll have to discover that for yourself." Calm, factual. Reminding Spirko of the rules. Seating himself behind the desk, like this was a normal conversation.

Spirko exclaimed, "I'm at a dead end here!"

Gently, patiently, as though he felt a little sorry for Spirko, or thought Spirko was too dumb to notice when he was being patronized, maybe-Burch advised, "Open your mind, Mr. Spirko. Imagine. Jason Walker's petty dream of vigilante justice is not what holds Catherine Chandler fascinated. Other, larger dreams are involved here. And other lovers. For instance: have you yet come across the name of a man named Steven Bass? Once, he and Cathy were engaged to be married. He's been institutionalized. But don't let that prejudice you. I think you'd find much of interest in his story...."

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Vincent's response to the threat was absolutely typical: when Catherine rose the following morning, she found a note had been slipped under her door. Vincent's large, confident handwriting invited her to a concert tonight. An act of affirmation, she assumed, before Father and the whole community.

Thinking about it helped her get through what, under normal circumstances, would have been only a normally frustrating day. But the circumstances weren't normal. Twice, she almost burst into tears; at least three or four times, she nearly bit Joe's head off, so that he finally asked solicitously what the problem was. She said something vague about the time of the month – enough to embarrass him into dropping the subject.

She wasn't proud of manipulating Joe that way. Not only her boss but her friend, he deserved better from her. But right now she had no concentration to come up with any more innocuous excuse. And if her own nerves were raw, what must the bond be doing to Vincent?

But feeling guilty, then feeling guilty about feeling guilty, was a vicious downward spiral she couldn't afford to tolerate...for either of them. She took herself firmly in hand and thought, whenever she could, about music, and candles, and the serious faces of the recitalists, tunnel children or visiting helpers, and Vincent's eyes when the music captured all his attention....

Somehow, she got through the day and reached home only half an hour late.

Pocketing her keys and changing only her shoes, she gulped most of container of yogurt – less because she had any appetite than to keep embarrassing tummy-rumbles at bay. She took the elevator down to three, then took the stairs the rest of the way to avoid the lobby and be aware of any possible observer, trying to be extra-cautious.

But once Below, she learned it wasn't a tunnel concert after all, but one Above, in the park. This news was conveyed by bespectacled little Eric, whom she found waiting to guide her: the approaches had been changed again. That happened periodically, a routine security measure. But it still struck her as disquieting: she no longer knew her way.

And she'd been set for a Chamber Society recital. The change threw her off merely because it wasn't what she'd expected. Vincent had been distracted, too, not to have made it clearer in his note. Not to have met her at the threshold....

Eric tactfully left her at the last junction, assuring her that Vincent was waiting for her. Catherine went on alone. She could already hear the music echoing faintly down the tunnel: something lugubrious, that sounded like a train slowly chugging into motion. Beethoven at his most ponderous and Teutonic. Just what they needed.

It should have been funny: she tried to form her stiff face into a smile.

Vincent turned, saying her name, as she entered the final passage. Emerging into the taller junction under the grate, Catherine greeted him in return.

Before she could say any more, before any constraint could arise between them, Vincent said, "The reporter. Father has already told me."

Vincent looked calm. But she knew he wasn't.

"I'm sorry." It seemed such an inadequate thing to say.

“No need to apologize. We will not let this defeat us.”

Determinedly normal when nothing was normal, he gestured at the pillows piled in the usual way against the tunnel wall. “Come,” he said, taking her hand. “They’ve only just started.”

A kind, small fib, since this was the adagio. Or maybe Vincent hadn’t been paying much attention to the opening movement.

They settled on the pillows and against each other, almost reclining. Vincent’s arm came around her back; she curled closer, her cheek finding its home against his broad chest. Feeling his breath against her hair, she shut her eyes, trying to give no sign of how conscious she was of the lift of his chest, his breath, his warmth – everything about him. Trying to be normal. Trying not to reveal how strong her impulse had become to cling to him, be surrounded by him and at the same time surround him, protect him. Which would destroy his brave pretense of normality....

She felt him shift, leaning back against the tunnel wall. She doubted he was listening to the music. Either.

“Vincent,” she said abruptly. Hardly more than a murmur, but she knew he’d hear. “You’re not responsible. It’s me. And the world Above. My world’s ruthless pursuit of facts, as though that were the same as truth.... The truth is now. Here. What we are now. This is all that matters.”

A deep breath. Taken in, held aching long. Then released.

“The circumstances are forced upon us. But the choices are still ours, Catherine.”

“Are they?” She found herself thinking back to her conversation with Father. “Did we choose to be hunted into lies and corners? Don’t you ever wish you’d never found a selfish, shallow, self-pitying woman half-dead in the park and never--”

Her voice was muffled, silenced, as he put both arms around her and held her tightly against him, murmuring, “Hush. No. Never. Never imagine it, Catherine. Never any regret, except that I am not, I cannot be – except what I am. That you deserve more, so much--”

Suddenly, her daylong brittle control broke and she was sobbing, fingers clutched into his vest, his hair. Holding to him, the one solid, trusted thing in a sickening whirl of suspicions, danger, and deceit loud as the music reverberating all about them.

His large hands, trying to soothe and comfort her, patted her shoulders, stroked her back. One settled at the nape of her neck, cupping her head, fingers spread wide within her hair. Arm and elbow braced against her spine, unmoving, immovable.

She tried to move and couldn’t, locked rigidly against him, powerless against his strength. That spoke to something deep within her. And yet it was intolerable, wrong. Frightening. It woke her horror of being overpowered, forced – never absent since the trauma of the first attack. The scars on her face could be cosmetically removed; those on her heart remained.

She tried to turn her head, couldn’t, and moved her swimming eyes. She pushed at him – tentatively, then harder. He moved then, pressing her more strongly down against the pillows, adjusting. In the dim light, his face was remote, his eyes at once distant and

absorbed as they sometimes became when the music took him away, when he lost himself....

She expected him to feel her discomfort and release her. He didn't. She remembered his agonized confession about Lisa, about being unable to let go.... The pressure, the loss of control, were upsetting; all of it being done to her, not with her. Not allowing her to respond, initiate, enter into a dialogue of touch. As though each of them were alone. As though he was losing himself...and losing her in the process. Losing their love, their connection.

She began to feel frantic, panicky: this wasn't what they were to each other. Their passion was higher, deeper, springing from the soul. It shouldn't be like this, a rough transaction so different from the exalted moments of rescue, renewal, safety – the profound moments of peril and sacrifice when she felt closest to him, almost fused with him. It shouldn't be like this, coerced, in a dark section of sewer pipe....

It shouldn't be like this, never like this, Catherine thought, felt. And found her voice. And said, in a choked, quiet tone, "Vincent."

He reacted as if she'd slapped him. Instantly yanking away, turning away, breathing harshly in great gasps. Almost as quickly, Catherine rolled and lunged after him, throwing both arms around him from behind, holding on, anchoring him in place: to move, he'd have to drag her.

Slowly, he bent until his forehead rested on his raised knees. Saying nothing, Catherine held on, twisting her legs under to sit solidly. He wasn't crying. Neither, any more, was she. This was beyond tears.

She felt it when the immense tension of his arms and shoulders eased slightly. Before he could say anything, she whispered by his ear, "It was the time. And the stress. And being so close that it's hard, sometimes, not to be closer. Not to reach out or want...more. It's all right."

"It's not. All right. It's all wrong, Catherine. Any man would have respected your weariness. Been worthy of your trust.. Any man--"

"Hush," she directed, against his back. "Hush. You're not anybody. And neither am I. Anybody would have run away, screaming, from just half of the things we've been through. And we're still here. I'm still here. But we're not going to let them do this to us. Make our choices for us. Or take our choices away from us. We're not going to allow that."

She found, for no reason she knew, utter calm welling up within her. Compassion. Love. She felt as though she were somewhere distant – above the grate, perhaps – looking down at them both with such tenderness it almost started her snuffling again. But there'd been enough of that. Never letting go, she wiped her eyes on the back of his quilted vest: one side, then the other. And found herself smiling.

The music had moved into a crescendo.

"I thought it was going to be a Chamber Society concert," she mentioned inconsequentially.

"Better...if it had been. Catherine--"

“No words,” she commanded, at least releasing him. She clambered back across the pillows and found a comfortable position there. When he remained where he was, shoulders slumped, back still toward her, she said, “Please, Vincent. I need you close.”

When his head finally turned, looking around uncertainly, she patted her knees. “A lap. For lying in.” Skewing a tag of bawdy banter from Hamlet, she added, “And I’m not speaking of country matters.”

And the wonder of it was, he came. And settled slowly, almost by inches, lying back on the pillows, leaning with immense care until his head barely touched her thighs. Probably the bravest thing she’d ever known him to do.

She brushed aside his bangs to softly kiss his brow, and then remarked, “I have it on excellent authority it’s a fair thought, to lay between a maid’s legs. If you can find a maid, that is. Good domestic help is so hard to find nowadays....”

His wide eyes looked searchingly up into hers. The full weight of his head descended the final inch. His whole body settled. He sighed.

As, after a hesitation, the music flowed into a new movement, Catherine began combing fingers through his dense, resilient hair – weaving strands around her fingers, beginning a loose, soft braid one impatient headshake would undo.

“You don’t know,” she confided, “how long I’ve wanted to do this.”

His eyes dropped shut. “Hush,” he said. “Listen to the music.”

Obediently silent, speaking her love, ease, and trust with other voices, Catherine stroked fingertips down his cheek, then again touched her lips to his forehead, the lightest contact.

She was glad it hadn’t been a chamber recital, after all.

### 3

Even from across the large patients’ lounge, even in a wheelchair, even wearing a plaid robe like L. L. Bean seconds, Steven Bass looked like a preppie. Like old money, with the mixed fanaticism and complete indifference about what you wore, what other people thought of you. You cared a whole lot what some people thought, because rank in the social pecking order was everything. And you also cared nothing at all, because ordinary people didn’t matter and you didn’t give a damn if they thought you looked sloppy or great.

Spirko had seen the same mix in Chandler: dressed to the nines and wearing a young fortune one day, practically looking like a Goodwill refugee the next. Just as confident, arrogant, either way.

Really rich people, born to it, were like that. Burch, thought Spirko idly as he started weaving through the checker players and knitters, always dressed too well: he’d never get it right.

The lounge TV was turned to a morning game show, and a blankly staring crowd of about a dozen was gathered on that side of the room; but Bass was alone, his chair

facing the big windows. Rain, sheeting across, blurred the view of the facility's manicured grounds. Spirko wondered what Bass was looking at, if anything; what the man saw, besides the inside of his own psychotic head. Maybe there'd be something useful to get here, though Spirko doubted it.

Spirko didn't like this place or the setup. He didn't like interviewing certified loonies: the ordinary street varieties were bad enough. The whole story seemed to be shifting inexorably onto loony tunes ground – Byron Trask's beat, not Spirko's. To follow up the leads, he had to go there. He didn't like that. High weirdness offended him. It violated his sense of what was right and possible – as though the world were a wet monochrome smear, like what was visible through the window, instead of the hard-edged, factual place Spirko knew and needed it to be.

While Spirko introduced himself, Bass continued to look indifferently out the window, making Spirko wonder nervously how out of it the guy was. But when Spirko mentioned the magic words "Catherine Chandler," life and animation suddenly surfaced in that blank, junior stockbroker face.

As Spirko set a foot on a chair and hastily clicked on his recorder, Bass announced, "Cathy still loves me. I know she does. I'd do anything for her. I told her that. I promised her." With a challenging stare, Bass demanded, "Do you believe me?" as though he was used to making that speech, used to not being believed.

Putting on his best soothing manner, Spirko responded, "Sure, I believe you. I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

Bass' eyes lost focus and returned to the rain. With the air of lofting a remark like a paper plane across some huge distance, he announced, "She ran away...."

Okay, Spirko thought, we'll play it your way. He prompted, "Why did she run?" No reaction. "You can tell me, Steven. Why did she run?"

Bass thought about it. Or something. "Because she knew he would come."

Spirko checked that his recorder was rolling. "Who? Who did she know would come?"

Suddenly angry, Bass gestured at his pajama'd legs. "He ruined my legs!"

"I'm sorry. I really am," Spirko assured at once, thinking that loony or not, people were pretty much the same, after all: find somebody with a grudge and they'd knock you down in their eagerness to tell you all the reasons why they were right and had been wronged. All you had to do was wait, assure them you were both on the same side, trying to get at the truth, and it would all come boiling out.

"And I want you to know that I'm trying to help you." He sat down to show he was listening.

"He ought to be punished," Bass commented in a curiously flat, judicious voice. "Not for me. I don't care about me. But for Cathy."

"I can't do anything about that – we can't --" Spirko dragged his chair closer. "--until you tell me what happened."

Bass gave him another look, disquietingly sharp and skeptical. Then it faded.

"I tried to make everything nice for her. I did. Like it was before. Why couldn't it be like it was before?" There was a long, abstracted silence. Then Bass burst out, focused again, "She called him 'Vincent.'"

"Vincent."

"That's his name," Bass responded, intent on making contact, conveying this revelation. Carefully, Spirko prompted, "What does Vincent look like? Tell me anything you can about him."

Another long pause, as though Bass had gone off to retrieve that information. There was still a tension about him that kept Spirko waiting, confident the man hadn't simply drifted back into the vagues.

Bass said at last, "They have...a sick relationship. He's not a man. I mean, he is not human."

Bass glanced over at Spirko, then started jerking at the robe and then the buttons of his pajama top until he could yank it to bare his chest and abdomen, displaying a set of ugly, ridged scars. Long, parallel lines, thick as rope that flexed with Bass' agitated breathing.

Bass commented calmly, "You see now?"

Spirko not only saw: he stared. With a kind of exultancy and yet a kind of despair: it was evidence, proof...and yet proof that his story had definitely moved across the border into the Twilight Zone.

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Maybe two hours later, Spirko paced and smoked while Edwards, the city desk editor, scanned the photos of Steven Bass' scars.

Edwards remarked finally, "How far back we go, Spirko?"

"I don't know – what: nine years?"

"Ten. You'd think you'd learn something in that time." Edwards was wearing his displeased professor look.

"Bill, gimme a break," Spirko protested, annoyed.

Setting aside the photos, Edwards took off his glasses, which generally meant he was no longer listening. "You got some incredible stuff here, don't get me wrong. But none of it fits together right. You're missing pieces."

Spirko's arms lifted in a frustrated flap. "You heard the tape."

"Yeah – of a certified psychotic. I could go over to Bellevue and come back with a much better story than this." Glasses back on: discussion over.

Spirko held still, staring, until Edwards looked up. Then Spirko stated, "I have another source. A good one."

"Who's that?"

Spirko took a breath, then showed his hole card. "Elliot Burch."

“You’re kidding me.”

“Names, places, dates, you name it.”

“Burch?”

Spirko held up a hand that pledged truth. “On my mother’s grave. He’s had a thing going with Chandler, on and off, for almost two years now. I don’t know what their story is, but he’s got her number down.”

Edwards considered for a minute, halfway between taking off the glasses and leaving them on. Then: “You think he’d go public?”

Spirko jerked an incredulous smile. “What do you think? And I’m not gonna push it, either.”

Glasses came decisively off. “Well, maybe you better start, because that’s your story. Until he speaks up, I can’t print a word.”

“Even though I’m telling you it’s clean...?”

Edwards grimaced, leaning back in his chair. “What d’you want me to say? Go sell it to the Enquiring Star if you’re so damn anxious. They pay better.”

And published junk factoids, as they both knew. And Spirko’s pride was in pursuing the truth.

Spirko balanced a minute, then scooped up his recorder. Leaving, he glanced back over his shoulder, silently promising Edwards that this wasn’t the end of it. The story was there, and righteous: if Spirko couldn’t get at it one way, he’d get at it another.

Passing through the newsroom, Spirko checked his watch: if he hustled, he maybe could catch Chandler leaving the Justice Building for the midday recess. When all else failed, shake the tree some more, see what might drop.

The rain had passed. The day was crisp and clear. Having paid off the cab, Spirko posted himself at the base of the broad stairs and still almost missed Chandler in the noontime hustle. He sprinted and fell into step.

As she did an alarmed double-take, recognizing him, and took longer strides, Spirko said agreeably, “Hi. How about some lunch?”

Chandler frowned, incredulous. “Are you crazy?”

“Maybe.” Fishing in a pocket for his recorder, Spirko added, still conversational, “I just spoke to an old boyfriend of yours. He told me this very interesting story.” Holding the recorder in front of her, Spirko popped the button.

Bass’ voice said, “They have a sick relationship. He’s not...a man. I mean, he is not human!” Smiling, waiting, Spirko clicked the recorder off as Chandler whirled, hair blowing around her face.

Pushing the strands back, she stood pressing her forehead in a pose of horrified shock. “How could you do this to Steven?”

Spirko regarded her placidly. “I told you: I’m just after the truth.”

Furious, contemptuous, Chandler shot back, “Steven doesn’t know the truth!”

Spirko cocked his head, not arguing, asking instead, "What about those scars Vincent left him with?" He pronounced the name carefully and was gratified when Chandler's immediate pallor confirmed that he'd made a hit. Spirko added blandly, "I've got pictures, if you're interested...."

Chandler snapped, "This is harassment, Mr. Spirko. And if you continue, I will have you arrested!"

Empty bluff, and they both knew it. Chandler spun and lunged away across an intersection. Holding at the curb, Spirko called after her, "Steven Bass and I are not the only ones who know about Vincent: there's someone who knows a hell of a lot more than either of us!"

She kept going, vanishing into a scramble of pedestrians trying to beat the light. But Spirko was satisfied he'd hit solidly, thrown her into the cold sweats. Scared, people got reckless. Careless. If he just followed along patiently, keeping up the pressure, maybe something would shake loose and drop into his lap.

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Catherine wasn't in immediate physical danger. Vincent knew that. But her terror yanked him around and sent him two long paces back along the tunnel before he remembered it was daylight Above: he couldn't go to her. Couldn't comfort her swirling dread. Couldn't make it stop. It only grew stronger and stronger, surging and spreading like a sickness. And there was nothing he could do. No way either to escape or confront it.

The pressure and the helplessness were becoming unendurable. Tension built and built, demanding the release of action. Any action.

Thought was overwhelmed by feeling: as he leaned against the tunnel wall, he was conscious only of the hammering of his blood and of fevered images of striking out. Faces - screaming, contorted - swam wraithlike before his inner vision, reenacting the moment of mortal contact, the moment of death. The violence, released and absolute, springing from and affirming his deepest self. And under it all was Catherine's hot joy, and his own--satisfaction that infused all such moments: perilously sweet, intoxicating, and addictive. The moments when there were no limits, no thought, no caution. When all things seemed possible. Even inevitable.

This was monstrous. This must never again touch Catherine as it'd touched her last night, during the concert.

All night and all morning, his mind had been suffused by the two images: his absolute absorption and desire; his recoiling, appalled shame. And then the shaken awareness of the reconciliation afterward: so strong, so luminous. Such an intimacy, to have lain so, with his head in her lap, feeling her loving touch. Such soul-deep relief to know Catherine would forgive and accept him even after so blatant and ungentle a lapse - relief that tempted him to believe that the limits need not be so rigid after all: that he might safely reach out to her and feel her precious warmth through all his length....

Which was madness: there was no safety beyond the limits. Beyond the limits was only the monstrous, the face of what he kept hidden, and controlled only with ceaseless and unrelenting vigilance. The brutish face of the deep and unthinking bodily passions made manifest and released to satisfy its hungers upon its victims.

Catherine's fear eased to anger, purposefulness: she'd found some way to act upon her emotions, not merely suffer them. Relief of a sort. With only his own turmoil to contend with, Vincent set his forehead against the cool rock. After a time, a measure of control returned. Pushing away from the wall, he wearily resumed his slow and abstracted journey.

He reached his chamber to find the children's reading group impatient to resume their excited study of *Wuthering Heights*: a novel concerning a woman in love with a man normal in appearance but with a monstrous nature; a couple whose passionate inability either to come together or stay apart tormented and finally destroyed them both. Vincent had trouble attending or connecting with either the words or the children's comments and questions. Somehow he lasted out the time without any major lapses. When the children dispersed to their afternoon chores, he continued to sit on the edge of his bed, head in his hands.

"Vincent?"

Looking up sharply, Vincent found Father waiting in the entry shaft for permission to come in. Normally Vincent would have been aware of any approach. Normally. But that normality, like all others, now seemed to him like a vaguely remembered and unattainable dream of peace....

Father asked, "Am I disturbing you?"

Vincent dutifully made an abstracted wave of invitation, "No. Please...."

Seating himself on the bed, Father displayed the book he'd brought with him, remarking, "I found an old favorite poem I'd long since forgotten."

Ignoring, with resolute cheerfulness, Vincent's reflexive, half-formed protest, Father opened the book and found his place, suggesting briskly, "Let me just read this to you."

It had always been their custom and their pleasure to share such things. Insights, thoughts, feelings.... Vincent found the prospect unendurable.

"No poetry," he requested hoarsely.

*Wuthering Heights* had been bad enough. The deeper and more concentrated emotions that poetry both embodied and evoked would be beyond bearing.

"Just listen to the first few lines," Father insisted, poised to read.

Before Father could begin, Vincent reached across and carefully forced the book closed. Abruptly rising, he paced to the center of the chamber, then halted, trying to find calm. After a moment, he looked around to face Father's puzzled, concerned expression.

"If I asked you...would you tell me the truth, Father?"

"Of course," Father responded at once, without hesitation. As was Father's custom – a matter of principle that stretched back as far as Vincent could remember. Father believed in always telling the truth. Except when he didn't. Except when he kept silent.

As he'd been silent about his past life until it had come to claim him in the form of a newspaper advertisement that spoke of the wreck of memories; a trusted friend, murdered; a onetime wife, dying; a name – Jacob Wells – that had stood, a secret and unspoken shadow, behind the man Vincent had known only as “Father”.... As Father had enforced more than 30 years' silence concerning the man John Pater, who preferred to be called “Paracelsus,” after the medieval alchemist and sorcerer: co-founder of the tunnel community and Father's defeated rival--expelled, malicious, devious, ruthless; another and darker shadow--of whom Vincent had known nothing because Father had preferred to shroud that truth, too, in silence. As Father had shrouded and withheld the truth that Devin was his own natural son. A more natural son, certainly, than Vincent, who'd always been acknowledged by that name and believed it. Because he had to. Because, without Father, there would be no one....

Vincent regarded Father with a kind of uncertain, helpless trust because Father's truth was the only truth he could hope for; and the never-spoken question was, at last, very simple: “Am I a man?”

Father's eyes jerked aside to focus on vacancy, with wincing concentration. Then they slowly returned to meet Vincent's. With an immense and careful precision, Father said, “Part of you is.”

“And the part that is not?” When Father said nothing, Vincent's agitation again forced him into motion, pacing the confined space. “The part that... takes over... that the man in me cannot forget... cannot close his eyes in peace--?”

Father bit his lip. “I don't know the answer to that, Vincent.” Grasping his cane, Father stood, as though he felt it were a duty to confront such things standing – as one might want to confront death. “I honestly...don't know.”

Sadly, gently, regarding this man, his father, Vincent reflected, “You have educated the man. You have nurtured the man. Read him poetry. Taught him... to love. But the Other... you don't understand.” Again, Father was silent. Vincent said, “You don't understand its power.”

“Vincent--”

As Father came nearer, visibly distressed, Vincent confessed brokenly, “Father, I can't control my thoughts. Father... I am afraid.”

Father clasped him close and hard as though, in that embrace, he offered all the answer he had, all the answer possible.

Which wasn't enough. Not anymore.

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Having scanned through two years of Sentinel headlines and bylines on a microfiche reader, Catherine burst past the receptionist into Elliot's office with the utter fury of desperation.

As Elliot rose, caught off guard – in shirtsleeves, tie undone and hanging – Catherine blurted out the results of her research: “You set Spirko on this witch hunt and it's got to

stop! Call him off. Right now! You said you came to me out of concern, but the whole time, you've been undermining everything that meant anything to me!"

She felt hot, hurt, betrayed – by herself as well as Elliot: how could she have ever trusted this man? How could she have been so foolish as to entrust even the edge of her secret to someone so plainly without a conscience, without a heart?

"Cathy, calm down," Elliot directed, coming toward her. Trying to defuse her rage, he tried to make a joke of it: "Would you mind telling me what I'm supposed to be doing?"

"You know damn well!"

Still sounding no more than exasperated, Elliot responded, "Why don't you believe me? The only time that I've seen Bernie Spirko's name is on a byline for the New York Sentinel!"

"You leaked the Corrales story to him last year. And for all I know, he is still on your payroll!"

"I never gave Spirko a penny," declared Elliot primly.

Evading the issue: Catherine knew how often people were bought with other coin-- favors, tips, preferential treatment.

She glared at him. "How can you deny it?"

"Listen to yourself! You're supposed to be an attorney. Whatever happened to innocent till proven guilty?"

"This isn't a court of law," Cathy flashed in response.

"Cath!" Nearly a shout. Then Elliot caught himself up short, making the effort to speak softly, reasonably--another insult, if he thought she was the kind who could be bought off or deflected by charm. He made soothing, patting gestures in the air.

"Okay – Cath. I know you got secrets in your life. Okay, I know that what's happening now is real and it's causing you a lot of pain. But you can't--" Elliot tried to grasp, hold her. She ducked free, evading him.

Whirling toward the door, Catherine commanded, "Stop it, Elliot! Just stop it!"

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After the door slammed, Elliot slowly went back to his desk chair, his face without expression. Picking up the phone, he told his receptionist flatly, "Get me Manning."

\*\*\*\*\*

Catherine flagged a cab with no thought except reaching the nearest threshold. Reaching Vincent. Not until she'd come through the culvert to face the barred gate did it occur to her that she might have been watched, followed.

She'd come straight to the park threshold – in broad daylight. In spite of Father's warning. Perfectly, unarguably reckless.

She froze, looking back, checking for any sound behind her. Then, suddenly awkward with haste, she let herself in and switched the steel door shut behind her. She went on down the tunnel with short, choppy strides, breathless. Encountering Vincent at the next junction, she nearly careened directly into him, then whirled around, distracted.

“What is it, Catherine?” Vincent asked, reacting to the same agitation that had undoubtedly summoned him to meet her.

“It’s Elliot Burch,” Catherine stated with a leaden sense of despair. “Elliot is the one who’s been feeding information to the reporter.”

“Elliot?” Vincent looked stunned.

“They know your name, Vincent!”

Catherine was near tears at having to admit how appallingly close the hunters had already come. At being obliged to reveal they’d already captured something so secret, so personal. Her sense of threat was acute, yet obscure--as if, by possessing his name, an enemy might somehow compel or harm him through some occult rite.

In a dull, hopeless voice, she added the final fact: “Somehow...they got to Steven Bass.”

Whom she’d prevented Vincent from killing. Already feeling guilty toward Steven because of their breakup, Catherine hadn’t been able to face being responsible for his death, as well as his unhappiness. And she hadn’t wanted the slaughter of a former lover as an unfading shadow between herself and Vincent, either. All sorts of reasons that’d felt compelling and right at the time....

Certain the memory of Steven’s demented abduction of her, and its violent outcome, was no less vivid in Vincent’s memory than in hers, Catherine let the statement stand as self-explanatory, thinking, No good deed goes unpunished.

The impact on Vincent was visible: he rocked back, then turned away and wandered a few steps deeper into the tunnel – as though his first impulse was to escape. He halted, steadying himself against the tunnel wall.

Catherine went on miserably, “Father’s right. The risk has become too great. We can’t see each other again until this is over.”

Still trying to take in the enormity of the threat, Vincent said softly, “But I thought Elliot understood.”

“No!” It was beyond irony, beyond cruelty, that Vincent should try to defend his good opinion of Elliot.

“But Elliot’s a man...who could understand,” Vincent protested.

Catherine commented bitterly, “I thought so too, once. But he’s shown himself: he’s out to condemn us – destroy us.”

“Condemn us...?”

Catherine paced, whirled. “He knows that we are...different--that we’re beyond his experience. And that must threaten him.”

As though explaining it with layman’s psychobabble could lessen the danger, the betrayal.

Vincent shifted his weight, adjusting as though to find fresh balance. “I am the one who is different.”

Seeing him so devastated, so ready to assume all blame, Catherine found herself steadying.

Compassionate, resolute, she responded, “No, Vincent. It’s us. I’ve learned that. We share the responsibility for what we are...together.”

As she quieted, Vincent seemed forced into motion – pacing; hands alternately in tight fists and flung into sudden gestures.

“My mind...is filled with thoughts...beyond imagining.”

Tremulously, Catherine said, “If they ever found you--”

“They would never find me. I would vanish. Bury myself deep inside the earth--”

“Then you would be lost to me,” Catherine pointed out, realized.

He turned, standing before her, regarding her with fathomless eyes. “Without you...I would be lost to myself.”

He fell silent; Catherine thought he was searching for the least painful form of goodbye. But she’d underestimated his courage...and his courtesy.

“Catherine,” he said gravely, “you should not return through the park.”

“No.” She flushed at the oblique acknowledgement of her carelessness.

“Might... I escort you home?”

Though she’d already missed a case review with Moreno, Catherine adopted a like formality, inclining her head graciously.

“Thank you, Vincent.”

As her heart sang, Not goodbye. Not yet! She slipped her arm through his and they strolled on together. For that moment, she would have been glad to have the walk go on forever.

\*\*\*\*\*

Spirko stood in the middle of the penthouse study, glancing nervously around, uneasy to find it empty.

“Well?”

The voice, someplace between neutral and hostile – challenging – came from above him. Looking up, Spirko saw a man’s outline standing at the rail of a small balcony filled with bookshelves.

“His name,” announced Spirko, stubbornly showing off that he didn’t shy away from major weird, “is Vincent. His features... are deformed in some way. Grotesque. And so are his hands.”

“Tell me about his hands.”

Spirko's shrug disavowed responsibility for his facts. If Burch didn't like them, the hell with him. Facts needed no defending.

"They're incredibly strong. He uses them to kill. And this may sound strange... but I think they're more like claws." He stared up, braced for ridicule.

"Is he human, Mr. Spirko?" It sounded like a test question: as if, if Spirko answered right, he might be awarded a gold star.

Spirko shrugged, annoyed. "What else could he be?"

"I'm asking you."

"He walks, he talks. He loves...."

"Catherine Chandler..." Again, the rapt, reverent voice. Brusquely, the man inquired, "Have you seen her?"

Spirko nodded warily, expecting more disapproval. "This morning. She was pretty shaken up by what I knew."

"Would... a picture be useful to you, Mr. Spirko?" The question sounded rhetorical; Spirko waited, attentive, without answering. The man went on meditatively, "You've done a very good job. I think you've earned the privilege. I think it's time I arranged a little introduction."

Relieved to have been taken seriously and pleased at the praise in spite of himself, Spirko had a cigarette in his hand, then in his mouth, before he knew it. Just short of lighting up, he recollected and felt the dark presence above him. The shadowy attention weighed on him. With a self-conscious and apologetic grin, Spirko put the cigarette away.

#### 4

The World, Spirko sometimes felt, had been built for bigger men: like a child, he could ease through spaces that would have stopped somebody else, grab the story, then skinny out through another crack, quick and clean.

Painting the littered sub-basement floor with the flashlight beam, he didn't consider the ceiling and thumped his head on a low-slung pipe.

"Ow! Sunnava --"

Belatedly ducking, rubbing the bruise, Spirko nervously swept the beam around in all directions, revealing heaps of broken bricks, decrepit walls, section of pipe, and corners whose sides disappeared into the featureless dark. It reminded him of Geraldo Rivera and the fiasco over Al Capone's supposed vault, that was just spiderwebs and dusty old beer bottles. At least Spirko had the comfort of not having invited six camera crews, so the whole TV-viewing public could watch him make a damn fool of himself, if this turned out to be some damn scam after all ...

Protecting his camera bag against his chest, he went cautiously on, muttering, "Helluva way to make a living, Spirko."

Around a corner, he found a space about the size of a closet, enclosed on three sides. Made him think about how PI's hated doing divorce work, trying to catch the wrong people in bed together ....

Good enough. He uncased his camera, carefully screwed on the night lens, and made sure the film had been advanced to the first frame. Finally, before switching off the flashlight, he checked his watch: still an hour early. This time he damn well wouldn't be late.

He found a crate to sit on and settled to wait. Everything silent, except for occasional noises from the pipes. A lot of dark, mildew-smelling nothing.

Although he badly wanted a cigarette, he didn't light one. The flame or the lit end could give him away; or somebody might smell the smoke. That happened all the time in war movies, and stakeout cops confirmed it. So he was pretty sure it was true.

Maybe he was an ever bigger jerk than Rivera, but he was going to play this out to the end – everything right, everything by the numbers, so whatever story he got, even Edwards would have to accept as righteous, solid. Spirko didn't know what the hell he was waiting for. But this time, whatever went down, he wasn't going to miss it.

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Bare toes curled on the edge of the coffee table, Catherine sat in a small tight lump on her couch, trying to pretend to read. Classical music played softly on the stereo.

Almost deliberately, she'd put on her oldest pajamas and a warm, ugly robe. No diaphanous negligee, no lace: Vincent wouldn't be coming tonight. And she couldn't, mustn't, go Below.

Seen as a prison, her apartment offended her. Tidy small couches even Joe dismissed contemptuously; a dull dinette set; her matched pair of glass and chrome étagères, with her collection of oddments and crystal eggs; sparse art here and there. A cold, clean fireplace without even ash to be a memory of warmth and flickering brightness. Everything beige, subtly sterile, characterless. So unlike the vivid untidiness of any chamber Below. Vincent's chamber in particular. Where she wished she was.

As she looked around, it struck her for the first time what an empty, uncommunicative setting she'd made for herself. Like a picture in a magazine, or a display in a store window. Except for a few transcriptions in books, a pressed rose, a special note or two, her crystal – all carefully hidden away and intrinsically unrevealing anyway – there was nothing here that spoke of Vincent. Nothing true. Nothing welcoming.

*No wonder he won't come in*, she thought, suddenly angry, guilty, depressed. Nothing here would invite him. Nothin' large, sturdy, comfortable. Only brittle, decorative furniture; alien modernity; shallow, reflective surfaces. Beige.

She wondered, *When he looks in, what does he see?*

Setting aside the book, Catherine unfolded and scuffed barefoot to the balcony. Looking in, she found her worse suspicions confirmed. Seen from the balcony, her apartment was smug, self-sufficient, vacuous. All it had to offer was light, and only a harsh, electric

glare. Not like the comforting half-light of candles, that softened edges and left peaceable shadows. And the music, she supposed he'd find that appealing – but even that was denatured, humming through speakers, mummified. Not alive, performed, the way it was Below. And trivialized, domesticated: cheap, common, and adulterated as water from a tap. Unworthy of the reverence with which music was properly to be regarded. As he regarded it.

*No wonder*, she thought sadly, facing out into the dark, that wasn't even honest dark, but city dark, stained by neon and streetlights and tiny rectangular windows that tried to claim there was not such thing as night. Not like the dark Below, that was true and uncompromising, that accepted spots of flame and brightness, but folded seamless and undiminished the instant they were extinguished. She'd come to respect the dark and to feel that, like music, it wasn't something to be trivialized or tamed. In Vincent's company, she didn't even fear it. *There is no darkness, when you're with me ...*

As desperately as she wanted to go to him, she could almost imagine she was feeling how desperately he wanted to come to her. A current of longing stretched between them like wire, vibrating with tension. And it might be days, weeks, before they could safely meet. How would she bear it?

I'll redecorate, she thought suddenly, and it was a wonderful prospect. She started imagining getting rid of everything and choosing fresh: big overstuffed chairs that would make her apartment seem small, cramped, but she didn't care; plaid, maybe, or a country pattern. Friendly, large. New, but not *too* new. Timeless things. A big sturdy table for putting elbows on, maybe a pedestal, no corners to bang into, knee room, wood, of course; and strong chairs to match, that he wouldn't be wary of, fearing to break them. A multicolored shag rug that wouldn't show or hold the print of boots ...

As she turned, visualizing, a man in workman's coveralls stepped through the French doors. At once she struck at him, drawing on the reflexes Isaac Stubbs had patiently drilled into her; but there were two of them, one smacking her across the face, the other reaching to slap a broad piece of tape across her mouth. They were too strong, too fast. Ignoring her struggles, as they'd brushed off her attempts at defense, they manhandled her through the apartment and then, flight by inexorable flight, down the stairs.

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Hearing scuffling sounds in the passage, Spirko got up, readying his camera. Two guys in coveralls passed, dragging between them a struggling woman in a bathrobe.

Reaching an open stretch, one guy remarked, "We'll do it here. This is where he said." His bored tone made it a routine chore, something to get done so they could go get a beer.

Then a wall burst open and Spirko nearly dropped his camera as something came through with a crash of shattering cinderblock and the most godawful roar Spirko would never want to hear again. By the tumbling beam of a dropped, rolling flashlight, something big and dark burst into the passage, moving fast through the dust, filling the passage with snarls and suddenness.

*Click whizz; click whizz.* The woman yanking off the tape and cowering back. *Click whizz; click whizz.* The two guys whirling, a silenced gun going phutt and the bullet doing a pinball caroms off about 16 angles. *Click whizz; click whizz.* The big dark something rising up tall as a rearing horse, slamming one of the guys back and forth between the walls, then lifting him even higher, one-armed, then roaring again, striking out; a flash of incredulous, terrified face. *Click whizz; click whizz* and an explosion of blood. The something going around – fast! Inhumanly fast – sapping the other guy's gun arm against a wall with bone-breaking force *click whizz; click whizz.* A cry, suddenly cut off as the guy tumbled into a heap *click whizz.*

Spirko was so intent on catching the action that it was a second before he realized the something had turned and was coming at him, one deliberate gliding step at a time. The woman – Chandler – moving alongside the advancing thing, not making a peep of protest as Spirko backed and scrambled into his dead end closet, knowing this was it, he was going to die, be pulled apart –

“No, please,” Spirko found himself babbling. “I didn't have anything to do with this.” Holding the precious camera like a shield, a bribe, and offering to the deadly unknown, he blurted, “Here, come on, take it, take it, come on, please – !”

Ducking the pipes, then straightening from the crouch, looking about 20 feet high, the thing – Spirko got a glimpse of a snarling muzzle that bared big, animal teeth – hauled up a spread, taloned hand. Reflexively, Spirko winced and cried out, knowing he was gone –

And the thing held there, like stop motion. Like a broken fright house dummy. Something went out of it, something of the impossible quickness: it staggered slightly, losing the forward momentum of attack. Spirko halfway expected it to drop down on all fours. But it didn't. It stood. For an instant they regarded each other. Then the thing turned and was gone through a gap in the bricks.

Spirko pulled a shaking hand across his mouth.

Having turned to watch the thing go, leaning in the gap as though she meant to go after it, Chandler turned back – pale; her eyes huge and staring.

“All right,” Spirko said, his voice still choked up by the ashes of panic., “I'm outta here.” He started collecting his gear, each gesture methodical, by the numbers.

Chandler accused, “You set up this whole thing!”

Spirko stared at her, Hed just come within a second of having his head torn off by some goddam *thing*, and somehow, by her, *he* was to blame. It was crazy. Sickening. Face twisting, Spirko declared, “I didn't set up anything.”

“Those men are dead because of you.”

Wearily, Spirko responded, “I was just following a lead.”

Elliot Burch,” Chandler accused

As if he'd reveal a source. “Come on, Miss Chandler,” Spirko rejoined disgustedly, shakily slinging his camera bag over his shoulder. Catching her eyes on the bag, he straightened indignantly, daring her to try for it when he'd caught it all, the whole show, dead to rights, righteous, solid, unarguable face, truth ... Her eyes fell.

Attack having failed she fell back on whining: "You can't do this."

"Why not?"

"Because you don't know..."

Suddenly, Spirko's temper broke. "Hey! Lady! Don't *tell* me what I know." Clamping down on himself, he added, "I earned every word of this story."

"You have no idea what this story is about!"

Spirko gave her a look. "I think I've seen enough, don't you?"

Again she couldn't meet his eyes. He collected his recorder from a ledge, switched it off, put it away.

Chandler spread her hands in appeal, "If you print this, you'll destroy Vincent ... myself ... Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Almost calm, Spirko zipped the camera bag shut. "It's not a personal thing, Miss Chandler." They looked at each other for a second. "It's news."

He walked past her warily: for all he knew, the thing was still around. But there was no sound, no motion in the darkness, as he found his way to the ladder. He was dying for a cigarette.

\*\*\*\*\*

Catherine thought she'd find Vincent – if she found him at all, if he hadn't bolted – wrenched with despair because this was a disaster. Surely, the end of all their dreams, as soon as Spirko printed his story ...

Yet when she distinguished him among the shadows only a little further along the passage, he showed no sign of distress, except that his face was expressionless, empty; his eyes were calm, steady, sad. His pose suggested resignation. And maybe he was right, she thought: maybe it was all hopeless, with no way to fight their way free ...

He and Catherine regarded each other, silent with a strange constraint. Like not wanting to break the news of a death, Catherine thought: except that Spirko was very much alive.

She commented, realized, "I'm shaking." and that was enough to pull Vincent to her, enclosing her within his embrace. She leaned against him and held him tightly.

Quietly, as though a soft voice could gentle the words for her, Vincent told her, "What you said was true, Catherine. It must end now. We must end."

As she stood away to meet his eyes, she found Vincent's quiet and full of compassion, as though her pain were his only concern.

He added, "They know everything."

"No --"

Still softly, explaining without anger or bitterness, Vincent said, "This man will never stop. Elliot ... will never stop. They will hunt me until they find me .. or until I am dead."

Catherine took a ragged breath. "Then I'll come with you."

"It's no life for you," Vincent argued reasonably, sternly.

“Or for you!”

“It *is* my life.”

Already there was something remote about him. Some distance, a calm Catherine struggled to understand and find within herself, without success. She turned away. Trying to fight back useless tears, still seeking some way to evade the disaster or fight back. It felt like slamming headlong into shut and immovable doors. There was no stopping Spirko now. It was too late.

She jerked up her hands and let them fall, then whirled back to face him, bursting out in frustration, “I don’t know what to do.”

We must face what we both feared might come to pass from the beginning.”

“Vincent --”

“It is all we can do.” His voice then was thick with tears; she could see them glinting in his eyes as he took one first retreating step. “Remember our love. Let it guide you. Give you courage. Know that what we had ... can never be taken away from us.”

There was a finality to his words, his manner, that frightened her worse than any of this night’s other events. Her voice a sob, she exclaimed. “Vincent, *don’t* --!”

His composure was breaking up; his pain, becoming visible. “Catherine go. Quickly. Please --”

As he turned to leave, she lurched forward and extended trembling arms. “Hold me. Just hold me one last time ...”

It was surrender: hers, to the fact of their ending; his, to her need for him, overwhelming all prudences of leavetaking. It was a shared helplessness. Catherine couldn’t not reach out to him; Vincent was incapable of refusing her.

They clung together in torment, love and despair. She felt his head rock back with the impact, felt the charge move through him like live current, so that he was rigid with it, then trembling uncontrollably, as she was. Choking on tears, as she was. She believed she would have died rather than let him go. Or perhaps this was true death – the death of dreams, the death of hope: mere bodily death, after this, would be an anticlimax.

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Spirko’s source regarded his visitor with disfavor.

Leaning aggressively on the desk, Spirko stated, “I know who you are.”

“Do you,” rejoined the source, with a private amusement.

“Yeah: Elliot Burch.”

“Mr Spirko, you surprise me,” commented the source dryly, not at all perturbed.

“I was there. I got the pictures. Now I want the rest.”

“The rest?”

“Everything you know: where he lives, who he is, What he is.” Spirko scowled. It made him look younger than ever. Yet this night had marked him: the aftermath of terror was still in his eyes. “You have a lot to answer for, Burch.”

Lazily, not letting his amusement show, the source prompted, "Such as?"

"Those bikers in the park. Those two guys tonight. You sent them to their deaths."

The charade, the source considered, was wearing thin. Opening a box on the desk, he removed a cigarette, remarking, "It would have been far better for you, Mr Spirko, if you hadn't figured that out."

"Don't threaten me. My editor knows I'm with you."

*So self-righteous, the young: in their fixation on facts, so hopelessly ignorant. One could almost pity them,* reflected the source as he triggered the lighter and drew in a deep, satisfying breath of smoke. Theatre. It was all theatre.

Predictably startled, Spirko blurted. "You're smoking."

Letting his voice fall back into its normal cadence and tone, the source replied, "It's Elliot Burch who doesn't smoke."

Turning on the desk lamp, the source straightened, letting Spirko realize a man past middle age, with weary, puffed eyes, a thickening waistline, and thinning grey hair. Sardonicly, the source added, "Sadly, I've become addicted."

Undisguised, he was still masked: a half-mask of thin, hammered gold, encased the left side of his face and extended across the bridge of his nose. Not because he was ashamed of his scars, but because such stigmata were not for the view of common, ignorant eyes.

The name he claimed was "Paracelsus", after the alchemist who had sought to transform base matter into imperishable gold. Appropriate, inasmuch as his own life's work was to effect a similar transformation.

Stubbing out the cigarette, he strolled away from the staring Spirko. Answering Spirko's predictable confusion, Paracelsus remarked carelessly. "Oh, the voice? A trick of the throat. Something I learned as a child. Most useful."

"Who are you?"

*The realization of ignorance is the beginning of wisdom,* reflected Paracelsus. *He now knows he has been ignorant; a pity he will have so little time to be wise.*

Aloud, he said, "That is of no consequence. Remember what you saw tonight, Mr Spirko. The glory of it!"

Paracelsus glanced around as if in hope that Spirko might actually respond with the appropriate awe. But of course, that was impossible: the man's limitations had been obvious from the first. Which was, in part, why he had been chosen.

Paracelsus continued meditatively, "Now you can print your photographs and your hypotheses. Or you can print the truth. Always a much ... larger story."

Unfastening the ties of his mask, Paracelsus remarked, "Let me show you something in the light." Removing the mask, he laid it delicately on the desk, then stooped by the lamp and turned his head to grant Spirko a good view of the bubbled, scarred horror of his countenance. It was not an honor he granted to many.

"Come," he invited. "Look."

Spirko balanced for an instant between revulsion and curiosity. Curiosity won.

Chatty, confiding, Paracelsus explained. "*He* did this."

"Vincent."

"He left me to burn in the fire."

Paracelsus chuckled and Spirko grinned tightly in response, probably believing he now understood. Not realizing he had only progressed to another level of ignorance, to assume that Paracelsus acted from common motives, from petty spite.

Spirko remarked knowingly, "And now you want me to crucify him."

It was wearisome, such incomprehension. But Paracelsus was accustomed to it. Moreover, it was often convenient. Not commenting on Spirko's conjecture, Paracelsus directed, "Turn your tape machine on, Mr Spirko."

Producing the object, Spirko staged smugly, "It's already on."

Such comfort they took in their modern gadgets. Merely holding the recorder eliminated all Spirko's disquiet: allowed him to believe himself only an observer and recast the moment as an interview, a source making a statement.

Strolling a few casual paces, Paracelsus began enacting that expectation in a clear, lecture-hall voice: "I asked you before if he was a man. Well, now you've seen for yourself: He's beyond 'man'. On his own right, he's a god. A warrior. But you see, he ... he tries to *be* a man ... and in that, denies his own greatness. He is a source of primal rage and secret urging. Instinct. He's a killer. That is his greatness. That is his nature."

The recorder clicked. A distraction. Any would have done. Or none at all. There was no evading one's destined and appropriate end. As Spirko turned to replace the spent tape, Paracelsus triggered the soundless release of his wrist-sword. The blade locked, an extension of his arm.

Swiftly advancing on the man, without pausing in his lecture or altering his tone, Paracelsus went on, "But if he had killed you tonight, Mr Spirko, as I hoped ..."

Spirko just had time to turn and take the blade from the front. The sword sliced upward until it was held by the meeting of the ribs. Astonished as Caesar in the Forum, Spirko was impaled like an insect upon a pin.

Holding him close as a lover, Paracelsus crooned confidingly against his ear, "... if he'd killed an innocent man, I believe he would have finally understood. And shed the false skin of his humanity. He would have become what I've always dreamed for him: he would have become my son!"

Wrenching the blade free, Paracelsus let the dead meat drop into a heap on the floor. Although such things were probably regrettable, they were necessary when they served a higher purpose. And what could be more noble than to wake and free a god?

Yet he did regard Spirko's corpse with a certain regret. After such planning and preparation, to have been obliged to kill the man himself, for merely prudent concerns was a waste of the potential mythic resonances. Common slaughter, not sacrifice: Vincent had somehow restrained himself. Denied himself. This time ...

A useful thing, time. Paracelsus would see that Spirko's death wasn't discovered too soon. He intended to use time, and the accumulating pressure of despair, isolation and uncertainty. For his plan had more than one layer, more than one prospective sacrifice.

Suitably innocent – at least in this context. And suitably prepared for his role in the destined drama.

There remained Elliot Burch ...

## 5

Elliot started flipping through the stack of papers. "This all of it?" he demanded curtly, glancing up at Manning.

"Yes, Mr. Burch."

"I mean *all* of it? Day logs, weekly reports, expense reports, phone logs, letters home to grandma? Everything?"

"Everything. The rest," said Manning, tapping his forehead, "is in here. And except between you and me, that's already gone. That's what you pay me for."

Under the deference, there was a cool skepticism, almost an insolence, about the detective. Manning wasn't in awe of money ... or of Elliot Burch. He just did the job. That attitude had made Elliot decide to entrust to Manning the sensitive stuff he required be kept 100% off the record. Anybody's record,

Manning added, "Except whatever is in the park ..."

If that was a question, Elliot didn't intend to answer. He'd see to that himself.

"I have another matter for you. Related. A reporter named Bernie Spirko's been annoying a friend of mine. I want to know why. Who's pulling his strings. Without anyone knowing it's me who wants to know. Not anybody."

Manning steepled his fingers judiciously. "This friend ... You want to tell me, or you want me to guess?" Meeting Elliot's expressionless stare, Manning suggested, "Catherine Chandler." Reading the answer in Elliot's silence, Manning nodded. "Yeah. All right – you want it fast, or you want it quiet? Can't have both."

"Quiet," Elliot decided. "But use whoever you have to. Ten thousand bonus, goes down a thousand every day that passes."

"Fast, or quiet," commented Manning steadily.

"All right. Quiet. The bonus when you have the information, provided it's within a week."

"Consider it done."

Scanning through the surveillance file, Elliot didn't bother to watch Manning leave. But he tucked the phone next to his ear and hit the button for lobby security.

"Burch. Manning is on his way down."

After all, it was past midnight. Except for his bodyguards and a skeleton security staff, the building was empty. Somebody who could pick a lock and knew his way around alarm systems could go poking into any office he pleased. Not that Elliot mistrusted Manning – only that there was nobody Elliot wholly trusted. Except Cathy. Except Cathy

...

The guard on duty responded, "Right, Mr. Bur -" as the receiver hit the cradle.

Unlocking a heavy security file cabinet, Elliot pulled out a folder. Most of the contents duplicated the the reports Manning had delivered to him, as ordered. Gathering the whole pile into his arms, Elliot went down the hall to the duplicating room and began systematically feeding them all into the shredder. Destroying all record of the watch he'd kept, for almost three months – since the business with the Gorrionistas – on and over Catherine Chandler.

Where she'd gone. Who she'd talked to. How she spent her lunch hours. What cases she;d been involved with and evaluations of the potential risks to her in each. One of Manning's operatives had been close behind her when she'd gone into that dilapidated theatre. Hearing gunshots, the op had gone back to the street to phone for backup. Manning had offered to fire him; instead, Elliot had bought him a condo in São Paulo, where nobody would be very interested in what he claimed he thought he'd seen or heard ...

Elliot had pulled back the close watch after that and confined it to daytime. It was plain Cathy was protected at night. Safe, in darkness. Never mind why or how. The fact was all that mattered.

He hadn't tapped her phone: he hadn't needed to. Instead, he had Manning put a guy in her apartment all day, as soon as she left for work. Turned up the answering machine, took notes on all incoming calls. Watched game shows. Cleaned up spotlessly after himself and left when the signal came she'd hit the street again. Worth every penny, because that assured Elliot no nasty packages and no unexpected visitors would be waiting for her when she got back.

That was how the Gorrionistas had snatched the foreman's wife ... before they skinned her.

With Cathy's permission, or without it, Elliot had been determined that nothing like that was going to happen to Cathy. His Cathy. Somebody's Cathy ...

Meeting her at the diner had been a calculated risk – an oblique way of warning her that if he could keep tabs on her, somebody else could too. Anyway, any excuse for a meeting was a good excuse and a risk worth taking.

When she'd blown into his office yesterday, he'd at first been certain that his having her watched was the cause of her indignation. Instead, it had been Spirko ...

Feeding more papers into the slot to be chattered into spaghetti, Elliot grinned, reflecting on the irony that the one intrusion Cathy had accused him of, was practically the only one he hadn't committed: siccing a reporter on her.

God, it'd been so good to see her, Even like that. Even blazing mad at him, her eyes practically shooting sparks. Beautiful. Even like that. Any way at all.

He hadn't seen her that upset since she burst into his Long Island place, years ago now, frantically looking for tools, drill bits, plastique ... and he'd tried to kid her about taking up hard rock mining. Only recently, had he realized what a dumb joke it'd been. And how near the truth. Somebody trapped, hurt, he figured now. Somebody unreachable behind a few thousand tons of bedrock ...

The same bedrock his great dream of a building would have exposed to unprecedented depths. When Cathy consented to marry him ... provided he'd stop the project. But she

hadn't been mad then: more sad, resigned. Both in promising to marry him ... and then in withdrawing her consent when he'd been unable to surrender the larger dream. And then lost it anyway. Too.

And then there was how his father had been removed from a 12<sup>th</sup> floor hospital bed, in spite of FBI agents in the corridor. And the sounds he'd heard afterward, from whoever had ended the pursuit of the Gorrionista death squad by taking apart its members, one by one ...

Cathy had ordered Elliot to forget it. He hadn't, of course. Though he'd never spoken about it to anyone. He'd kept faith with Cathy and with her secret. And they'd kept faith with him, trying to get his father out of danger. You couldn't forget a thing like that. Think about it a little, put the pieces together, and they pretty well told him all he needed to know.

Scooping up the metal wastebasket the shredder fed into, he toted it back to the cement stairwell, away from the smoke detectors. Putting a match to the mound of paper spaghetti, he stood around patiently coughing and waving at the smoke until nothing was left but ash. He tapped the basket with a foot, but found it still too hot to pick up. No matter. He'd have one of the secretaries collect it in the morning.

Returning to his private suite, he phoned his driver to get the car ready, five minutes. Then he changed into a fresh shirt, from those in his bedroom closet.

He'd shut up his Long Island estate when he'd taken on the construction project in Santa Ysabel, and hadn't bothered to have it reopened since returning. There seemed no point. And the commute only wasted time that could be better spent planning, negotiating, checking. Doing deals on Tokyo time. London time. Most days, he had meals sent in and didn't leave the office at all.

Knotting his tie, he grabbed his jacket and headed for the parking garage, where Kenner, his driver, had the limo waiting. Waving his bodyguards back to their endless pinochle, Elliot dropped into the back seat. When the doors shut, he hit the intercom button and commented casually, "It's a nice night. Central Park."

Elliot often unwound by taking impulsive trips during the dark, empty hours. Sometimes cruising across to Jersey or down into the disappearing undeveloped acreage on Staten Island. Once he'd ordered his jet and flown to Jamaica for breakfast and the spectacular tropical sunrise. If his staff considered the habit eccentric, nobody questioned it: he paid them not to. Anyway, it was good policy never to be too predictable. So this trip tonight would seem no more remarkable than any other.

Once in the park, he left the car a reasonable distance away and strolled without apparent purpose until he was sure he was beyond the driver's view. It was part of keeping faith with Cathy. The one restriction he'd put on Manning, from the start, was that nobody was to follow Cathy into the park. Which was why those bikers had been able to get to her, or at least try ... But the story, the next morning, had proved to Elliot he'd been right to impose the restriction: Cathy was safe in the park, don't ask how, don't ask why ...

Staying to the shadows, pausing every few steps to listen and watch, Elliot approached the culvert. He knew about the gate and the door: Cathy had used them in his presence. Standing before them, Elliot reached high and removed, from the top of the circuit box,

the small plastic rectangle, like a domino, that was the last thing in self-contained sound activated recorders.

Pocketing it, he waited a minute, listening, staring into the dark, then hit the door lever and went inside, into the dark tunnel. He knew if he went more than a few paces, he'd be hopelessly lost. But there was no need to go that far. About 20 feet in, two passages met in a broad crossroads. A natural place to stand and talk if on eof you couldn't stay long, was due in court, maybe a snatched meeting ...

Without lighting a match, he knelt down and patted the smooth, curved cement at about ankle level, until he hit the bump of tape attaching the second recorder. Collecting that too, Elliot straightened with the impulse to chalk some greeting on the tunnel wall. Or maybe just a kilroy, nose peeking over fence, to prove he'd been here. That he'd known, and still done nothing. He wanted some exchange or salute between himself and Cathy's secret, that kept her safe, never ask who or how, never ask to see the mystery face to face. But that would be dumb and taken as a threat. And anyway, he didn't have any chalk.

He left the way he'd come.

He didn't go back to the office – certified bug-free, on a weekly basis, although it was. Chanced he'd take for himself, he wouldn't risk for Cathy or her secret. Instead, he had the driver take him to South Ferry. After a short wait, the ferry pulled in and the limo bumped slowly across the boarding ramp onto the cleated metal surface of the lower deck. A few minutes later, the subtle sag and lift announced that the ferry had pulled away from the dock.

Leaving the car, Elliot went upstairs, bought a soft pretzel at the concession, and took it out to the broad open curve of the bow deck. There were few passengers this late, and the chill salt breeze had kept all of them inside. He was alone with the distant lights of Staten Island and the soft, wet slap of the waves.

He rewound and tried the gate recorder first, inserting the earphone jack and then cupping a hand over that ear to block the wind noise. For several minutes he heard only the metallic opening and closing of the gate, the thud of the inner door sliding into place, each sound followed by beep-code of the date/time stamp that he could have deciphered if he'd wanted to. A lot of traffic through that gate in three months: more than he would have guessed or anybody would suspect.

Then, suddenly, Cathy's voice complaining that two suspects had been released. Commenting bitterly that they'd made a game of killing those girls, "flaunting their privileges."

The prostitute murders, that would have been. The two rich lads, Benson and Mercer. Elliot had been worried about that one too. Cathy had been certain enough to have them arrested and go into court with evidence that wasn't worth warm spit. Anything to get them off the streets. She'd been *too* certain for that evidence to be all she was going on, all she had ... that she could afford to admit.

Then there was the indistinct sound of a reply. A man's voice – too low and distant for the mike to catch the words. The hair rose on the back of Elliot's neck. Electrified, intent, he cupped both ears, head hunched against his shoulder.

Cathy, then, worrying about burnout, about seeing so much outrage that you'd start to shut it out, forget.

And the man's voice – clearer, maybe closer – replying. “Compassion is something that cannot be forgotten. It's got a life of its own.”

Cathy's discouraged voice responding, “But it can die, Vincent.”

“Once you have it, it lives in you ... To live by it requires all your strength.”

Cathy, fondly: “And someone to remind you.” A sigh. Then the admission. “I am tired.”

A second of silence followed by the gate and the door shutting sounds. Then the beep of the date/time stamp. Elliot tried not to think about that silence. Or the lack of goodbyes.

Another day ... or night. Door opening first, then gate: he'd come out to meet her. Another conversation – and argument. Fast, muttered, heated. Single words surfacing, like “unjust” and “can't”. Cathy insisting her companion leave the matter alone, not risk himself, let “her world” deal with it. Rumbles of reply that, from Cathy's undiminished insistence, weren't agreement. Another protest from Cathy. Then, clear and distinct, challenging, the man's voice: They come into my world, They come into the back streets and the alleys. Thinking to play in the darkness. I know the darkness – I am its friend. And I will be waiting for them. When they come looking for darkness ... they will find *me*.”

A second of silence. And end-beep. Then a few more door openings and shuttings, some children's voices, followed by silence of blank tape. Elliot took out the earphone and put the recorder away very carefully because his hands were shaking.

So. That was the voice of the mystery. Whose name was Vincent. Who Cathy called Vincent. And who called her, with such formality, “Catherine.” Not yet a face, but a voice. Elliot tried to sort out his impressions.

Not a New York voice or a street voice – not nasal enough, not enough whine. Low; a little hoarse, whispery – soft even in anger; deliberate, with cadences more like poetry than like speech. Indefinably, an educated voice – not because the words were flowery or multisyllabic but because they were chosen, weighed, precise. A voice that didn't fool around with words, wasn't careless or sloppy with them. No nervous *and-uhs* or *y'knows* to fill up pauses. A voice to be believed: what it promised, it would do. Therefore the voice of a good ally to have; or of an enemy you'd hesitate to wish on your worst competition.

A voice he'd heard thickened to a wordless, feral snarling and raised into a roar out of nightmare. But this was how he talked, when he talked. And this was what he talked about: compassion, and the strength to live by it; darkness, that he respected and claimed; what he would and wouldn't allow; how he'd meet those who crossed the line.

A moral voice, that made judgements. And then acted on them: Elliot had read the report on what had been left of Benson and Mercer in that theater. And, a few nights ago, Summers and Oakes in the park.

Who'd come after Cathy. And been stopped. Because Cathy was safe in the darkness, any darkness, that Vincent's voice claimed as his own. Elliot didn't know what he felt

toward that voice. He didn't even know if he wanted to know. He didn't feel like finishing the pretzel after all, and pitched it over the railing. Make some seagull happy....

When he started reviewing the other tape, the first thing he heard was his own name: Catherine, almost certainly yesterday afternoon, fresh from confronting him, reporting what she took to be his involvement with Spirko. Exclaiming, despairingly, "They know your *name*, Vincent!" Then saying father had been right: it was too dangerous for them to meet while

Spirko's investigation continued. Elliot shook his head, not following that, since Cathy's father had died last year. So he almost missed, and hastily rewound to catch, the troubled reply: "But I thought Elliot understood." After Cathy's bitter *No!* Vincent's quiet, puzzled voice protested, "But Elliot's a man...who could understand."

Elliot abruptly clicked off the tape. For a moment his eyes squeezed tight in pain he'd been unprepared for and unguarded against. It hurt to know he'd been trusted. Thought well of. That didn't happen much anymore.

He didn't want it to happen. He bought the respect he needed. But it still hurt, to have had it and lost it.

Somebody was going to be extremely sorry they'd brought Elliot into this.

Opening his eyes, he stonily regarded the approaching piers and lighted ferry landing on the St. George side. Maybe he'd review the rest of the tape on the return trip. Maybe he wouldn't. What had seemed to him normal reconnaissance and covert intelligence-gathering about his legitimate interests – protecting his investment in Cathy – now struck him as something more personal, less defensible: eavesdropping. And he found he didn't want to hear details of Cathy's disillusionment. He'd heard enough. He'd pull the tapes from the housings and burn the mylar strips as soon as he got back to the office.

He wondered how Spirko would take to acquiring a condo in São Paulo or Lisbon...

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Sitting, late in the morning, in Father's study, Vincent was trying and failing to attend to the discussion of the endless conflict between expediency and security.

A particular passage had become much traveled since a helper, a Vietnamese grocer, had relocated his shop nearby. The passage had become a convenient route for transporting supplies – safe even for the youngest children. Yet that passage was among those designated, in the rotation, for sealing. Mouse and Cullen advocated retaining the present, more direct route; Father and William thought it more important to hold to the established schedule. Mary knitted.

Vincent was thinking, *If I had killed Steven Bass, all would be well now.* He shook his head and tried to pay attention to Cullen's point about ground water.

Probably it wasn't true anyway: one always imagined present troubles could easily have been turned aside by some different action in the past. That was a delusion, implying choice and control that, lacking foreknowledge, one had failed to exercise. It made one feel less trapped. But it would have taken so little, he thought, his claws grating on the

chair's arms. One more slash, at the throat, and the course of events would have been diverted. There would then have been no one who could have revealed Vincent's name to the reporter.

Vincent couldn't now remember what had held him back. His memory of such times was blurred and fragmentary at best. He had a vague recollection of Catherine clinging to him and shouting that it was over....

Perhaps that had been why. Perhaps, despite what Bass had done to her and tried to do, Catherine hadn't wanted the man dead, considering what they'd once been to one another. Intimate. Lovers.

Vincent bared his teeth and growled softly, quite unaware of doing it.

A sleepless peace had held him suspended last night after he'd parted from Catherine. He'd remained achingly aware of her all night and had found a kind of comfort in that. As though in some sense he stood sentry over her dreams; as though she could know it and find in the awareness some mitigation for the separation, her grief.

And this morning he'd watched, quite calm and resigned, as Father methodically worked his way through the two morning editions and found nothing of note, nothing worth remarking on except an article on a new building project that would require closing a threshold near Washington Square before construction commenced.

Vincent hadn't realized he'd been braced until the bracing collapsed. He hadn't known how precarious his resignation had been, until his worst expectations had unaccountably failed to materialize. Until he was tempted by hope. Until he felt Catherine's rush of relief that told him she'd found nothing more noteworthy in the morning's newspapers than had Father. Until her terror and suspense flooded back because the threat was unchanged. Merely somehow postponed, delayed....

It would have taken so little. The reporter backing away, face contorted with dread. A slight, small man, with no means of defending himself. Catherine equally at risk, beside him, intent, making no protest as he closed on the man. It would have been easy. And then there would have been no danger. He and Catherine could have been together.

Instead, he'd stopped. Turned away. He still didn't understand how.

His mind judged killing an unarmed man as immoral, shameful. But his mind also shied away at the thought of killing policemen, and that hadn't stopped him. There was little morality, and even less thinking, at such times. No control. No choice. He simply reacted to danger and kept on until the danger was removed.

But as he'd faced Spirko, clearly knowing the threat the man and his knowledge represented, something had gone out of him. The unthinking ferocity had lost interest, focus. Again slept, within him. And despite the certainty of disaster, the certainty of ending and of endless sorrow, he'd no longer been driven. There had been a choice. And he'd chosen to withdraw: deeply troubled but somehow at peace with himself. Sparing the man had felt simple, necessary, right.

Now, nothing was simple.

And he found those two moments replaying endlessly in his mind, skewing inexorably toward a different outcome as he wondered if, after all, he'd been wrong, had failed to protect Catherine. If she was disappointed with him, since he could no longer protect her. If she'd turn instead to Elliot, who could. Elliot. Who'd dispatched the reporter and

could undoubtedly muzzle him, if he chose. If Catherine begged him to do so. If Catherine were willing to sacrifice herself for Vincent's safety. as she'd once nearly done before, if that were the price Elliot required-- Catherine's love. If Catherine might be considering Elliot right now, weighing her durable affection for him against her present anger and sense of betrayal. Weighing the threat he presented and might withdraw, if he chose.

Vincent couldn't tell. Since last night's clarity, a sort of permanent confusion seemed to have descended on him, composed of his own agitation and Catherine's, which he could no longer clearly distinguish or separate. Missing her, being cut off from her, was a kind of blankness – a panicky, smothered sensation. Thoughts and emotions turned in on themselves, circling among the same ideas, the same fears, without resolution or hope of escape. Lacking her, nothing else seemed entirely real or solid. His sense of her came and faded, lost in the surges of his own unease. She could have already gone to Elliot, be with him now, and Vincent wouldn't know.

If Elliot were gone, there would be no threat. It could be so simple....

“Vincent?” Father was looking inquiringly across the table, having plainly said something Vincent had failed to catch.

“I'm sorry, Father. My thoughts were elsewhere. What did you say?”

Father tapped the top map with his glasses. “That if a shaft were put through, here, a stair, the upper way could be closed off and yet still permit reasonably direct access to that part of the city. But we no longer have Kanin's gifts, or Winslow's, to call upon. Much of the heavier work would therefore fall upon you. Do you think it's feasible?”

“Whatever you wish, Father. If you decide to adopt that course, I'll try.”

Vincent found himself incapable of thinking so far into the future. It was all he could do to visualize another night...and then another morning. Which would bring newspapers and Father patiently licking his thumb, turning pages, sipping tea....

The prospect was unendurable. Something, somehow, must be done.

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*There could be no harm, Vincent thought, in looking.* Hooking an arm around the cable of the ascending freight elevator, he remembered the children's story and thought, *A cat may look upon a king.* For all practical purposes and in all but name, Elliot was a king in the world Above.

He dropped flat as air compression warned him he was nearing the top of the shaft. But when the elevator stopped, there was still adequate headroom. Straightening, he found the outline of the expected service hatchway above him and leaped to the nearest cleats to reach it.

In another moment, he was on the roof.

He'd watched this building many times, from various vantage points, some of them blocks distant. All tall buildings intrigued him. And this building's principal occupant had intrigued him. So although he'd never actually ventured onto this particular roof before, he knew what floors, and what windows, remained lighted when the rest of the building

had gone dark and the rest of the city stirred only as one turning in restless sleep. He was several floors above that level now. But threaded through the core of this building, occupying the windowless interior space nobody wanted (Catherine had once explained that common attitude to him), was a garage and its tight spiral of ramps: he'd seen its exit from the street. Lots of cars to duck behind; lots of echoing space to warn his sensitive hearing of any approach. And access to every floor.

As long as he avoided the sweep of security cameras and made no sound, he should be able to take advantage of the smooth descending promenade with which the building's planners had so thoughtfully provided him.

But he hadn't considered the effect of nightfall and the end of the business day. He found the garage ramps all but empty: most of the parking slots were vacant. He was more exposed than he'd expected. He kept to the inner curve, where the light was the dimmest, vaulting from one level to the next whenever he reached a particularly bare stretch that offered little concealment. The angle of the security cameras seemed most interested in the parking area along the outside walls, which was probably natural. Out in the open, he was paradoxically better hidden. He wondered if Elliot was aware of this structural weakness in the building's security....

With no sign of danger, there was nothing to occupy his mind. So he tried to discipline himself to calm in hopes of reaching out to Catherine. And then wished he hadn't. For she was deeply unhappy. At home, he thought – not near, at least. Certainly not here, in this building.

Suddenly, powerfully, he wanted to be with her. Embrace and comfort her.

Being Above had cracked some necessary resignation he'd been able to maintain, Below. And something within him roused – intent, focused.

Something that cared nothing for the danger of discovery, the danger to Catherine; that took no account of reasons, but simply and strongly *wanted*. A purposeful hunger that turned him and made senseless any motion that didn't take him to Catherine. A compass that knew and sought only the one direction.

When he came to himself, he was on the roof again. Head back, hair blowing; furiously yanking at a locked door. He stepped back, shaken and disoriented, stupidly regarding his hands as though expecting to find in them an explanation of the lapse. He thought, *I must not go to Catherine. Or reach out to her, even within. Must not want her... which was impossible.*

He'd come to see for himself what manner of man Elliot was. He tried to concentrate on that. And presently was able to again find the proper door near the helipad and begin his descent again, less quickly and confidently than before. Sometimes he fell into long abstractions – blank times he discovered only upon realizing that he'd stopped, leaning against a wall or a pillar. Laboriously recollected his errand, his purpose. And pushed himself slowly on.

Though he did not regard the fact, it was three days since he'd slept. So perhaps he slept in those lost times, those unthinking abstractions. He didn't wonder about such things.

On some higher level, a motor started up. The vehicle's tires squealed as it negotiated the tight turns. Flattened against a pillar, Vincent watched it pass: a long car, shining

and black, with side and rear windows he couldn't see into. But other senses told him only one man, the driver, was inside. The car passed slowly, at less than a walking pace. Farther down the ramp, its tail lights flashed a deeper red, and wheels and brakes protested, as it carefully eased into the next turn.

Vincent followed.

Two levels down, he saw the car stopped in the middle of the ramp, front and rear doors open, motor idling: plainly waiting for the arrival of a passenger. Voices reached him: the driver, uniformed, stood in conversation with two large men in suits, near a door that led into the building. They spoke of baseball. Something about how the large men stood, something about the balance of their shoulders or the way their unbuttoned jackets hung, suggested that the men were armed.

*Good*, Vincent thought, but didn't examine that thought, sliding behind a delivery van parked in the hammock of dimness between two of the widely-spaced overhead lights. Perhaps ten yards distant from the car: quite close enough to hear and to look. Which was what he'd come for.

A fourth man came through the door, moving briskly, decisively. Bearded, with a broad forehead, wide shoulders. Vincent knew him at once. There had been photographs in the newspapers. And he'd once seen the man in conversation with Catherine in another garage.

A man who, in hiring men to attack Catherine, had at the same time cynically offered up unknowing victims for Vincent's slaughter. Both intolerable. The man who'd broken their dream, his and Catherine's, yet hoped to profit by their despair. The man who threatened everything Vincent cared for and had sworn to protect – his love and his world.

Reflecting on this, Vincent expected rage that would sweep him into motion, beyond choice. And was bewildered, then angry, when it did not come. The Other, within him, cared nothing for abstract threats, past deeds, or possible consequences. There was no danger now: the Other slept. Deliberately, Vincent stepped away from the van, into the open.

"Elliot Burch."

As Vincent spoke Elliot's name, fast actions happened simultaneously.

The two large men spun, one leaning to block Vincent's view of Elliot.

Guns appeared in their hands. The driver ducked behind the car's open door.

And Elliot shouted, "No! Into the car. Now!"

It seemed to be something they'd practiced. The driver dove inside, behind the wheel, and one of the large men after him. The other large man pushed Elliot through the car's rear door and followed. All the doors slammed as the car lurched forward.

Vincent was left standing in the stink of exhaust, listing to the car's diminishing squeals.

The potential for suddenness went out of him. He could feel dawn approaching: time to return Below. He had no further business here. He'd seen Elliot. Which was, he supposed, what he'd come for. He didn't understand the shame and sense of failure that settled heavily over him, weighting and slowing his motions.

Nothing made sense anymore.

Somehow the weekend had passed. Monday dawned – a bright, breezy spring morning. Catherine exhaustedly forced herself out of bed. Pulling on a light robe, she wandered to the outer door to collect the newspaper that lay folded on the hall runner. When she opened the paper she was confronted by a photo of her face and a snarling drawing of Vincent under the headline:

### **DA's Demon Lover in Murder Spree**

#### **Police Promise Full Investigation**

She couldn't do anything but stare. Then motion drew her eye: Amy, a preschooler, had come out of the opposite apartment and was staring at her with the solemn curiosity roused by cripples and deformed sideshow exhibits. Amy's mother appeared and protectively herded her daughter back inside, with a hostile, suspicious glance at Catherine that accused her of nameless depravities. In a horrified daze, Catherine groped her way back inside.

Somehow she made her way to the office, where the true sideshow awaited her. A shouting horde of reporters ambushed her – cameras leveled, microphones thrust out like the weapons they were.

Shouting voices, male and female, bludgeoned her: "What about the Sentinel story?" "What does your father think of it?" "Moreno's asked for your resignation." "--thousand dollars for your exclusive story--" "How many men has he killed for you? How many men has he killed for you?"

Bursting through to Joe's office, Catherine shut the door against the clamor and stood pressing her hands against the glass as though to keep the mob from breaking into this last sanctuary.

Joe was at his desk, a paper unfolded before him. Catherine had never seen his face so grim and unfriendly. He asked, "Just how far were you going to take these lies, Chandler?"

Barely able to get the words out, Catherine said, "Joe, you have to help me."

"It's a little late for that, don't you think?" Rising, holding the paper, he accused, "I trusted you." Coming around the desk, he thrust the paper before her. "Look at these pictures. Look at 'em! Didn't this ever make you sick?" His face twisted with disgusted indignation. "These are human beings, damn it!" As Catherine attempted to push the paper away, Joe flung it to the floor. "Which is more than I can say for your 'boyfriend'!"

The distaste in his voice, his face, made the word something ugly. Grotesque.

"Don't, Joe. You don't understand. Vincent isn't like--"

"Vincent," Joe broke in roughly, "is a monster."

"No!"

"He is an animal!" Joe grabbed her elbows and began shaking her, shouting. "And what oes that make you? Hah? What does that make you? What does that make you?"

With a cry of terror, Catherine lurched upright in bed. Before her open French doors, the sheer curtains blew in a spring breeze. Heart hammering, Catherine swallowed hard and slowly pushed her hair back from her face with both hands, trying to separate dream from reality. It had been a nightmare. And she was still living it.

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Sitting, staring, in his lightless chamber, Vincent felt the dream begin. As sometimes happened when strong feelings arose, the bond opened to grant him flares of vision when emotion peaked. He saw Catherine stoop and unfold the newspaper. Saw, with her, the headline. The pictures.

The shock was like a blow, a mortal wound. Dull, at first; then the pain, and one's life bleeding away.

With the intensity of dream, he felt Catherine recoil from the child's curiosity. He felt the second shock as the mother hastily removed her treasure from contamination from the outcast Catherine Chandler had become. Through her connection with another outcast – himself.

It was a dream. And yet it wasn't. The feelings were true. The fear was true. He'd known that reaction all his life. Even Catherine, at first sight, had flung an object at him in terror. He knew what it was to be hated and feared. Now Catherine did, as well. It was a terrible thing to know. That knowledge was his gift to her. A sharp, bright, hard thing with a stabbing point. And the shame that flowed afterward was like a shadow, like blood from an unhealing wound.

As the impact of the dream pierced deeper, it came to him that all he finally had to share was his differentness; his aloneness.

The mother had known: it was contagious.

Catherine feared infection. That was true. No matter how enshrouded in dream.

Vincent experienced Catherine's flight to Joe – at once her friend and a decent, moral man. A judge she trusted to be biased in her favor. Like a brother or a father she hoped would understand and declare her not guilty. Uninfected. Begging for Joe's help, but really for his vindication. As though the mere fact of their uniqueness, hers and Vincent's, should entitle them to special consideration, an exemption from the world's values and the world's condemnation.

Vincent felt with her the horror and hopelessness as her normal, moral man refused to grant such a singular exemption and spoke the world's verdict. She was guilty. They were guilty. And her lover, their love, was condemned as monstrous. Inhuman. Animal. She had tried to raise him to her own level. Instead, he'd dragged her down to his. Monstrousness was contagious. And Catherine had been infected.

There could be no appeal from that verdict, enacted within Catherine's sleeping imagination and pronounced within her heart.

And in his own, he could find no refutation. It was true.

Suddenly unfolding, Vincent strode out of his chamber along the dark, empty corridors: the community was not yet stirring. He wanted no company: he felt charged, as though by static electricity that would arc at any touch, however gentle, however innocent. He was filled with a rage that had no object and no outlet.

He went to the Mirror Pool.

From its dark surface, the evidence, his reflection, gazed back at him: a large, hulking shape; fanged, maned, furred, and clawed; with an animal muzzle and pale, staring eyes. Proof. From which there could be no appeal and no hope of pardon.

Sinking to a balanced crouch, he regarded the monster that he was. The monster that had dared taint Catherine with its love which, however chaste, however selfless, was anything but innocent: its nature was guilt, shame, secrecy. And its face and its hidden heart were monstrous. It was delusion to imagine otherwise. The proof was before him.

Another vision. And a true one.

He hated himself. For what he'd done. And what he was. It felt like dying. Or like preparing to explode.

After a long, unregarded while he felt someone approaching. Without thought, he knew it to be Father. He didn't move.

Father cleared his throat. When that brought no response, Father said cautiously, "Vincent. You weren't in your chamber. I was worried.... Have you been here all night?"

Curtly, tonelessly, Vincent said, "Catherine dreamt: a nightmare."

A silence. Then Father commented, "Dawn."

Vincent then noticed that the pool's surface was barred with long pink clouds. His image had become a dark stain upon brightness.

"No," he replied, in the same abrupt, flat voice that offered no confidences and asked none. "Only its reflection."

More silence. Then: "Vincent. It's been four days. Long enough to hope. Perhaps this reporter has reached into his heart and realized the harm his story would do. Reconsidered."

Father had of course noticed Vincent's deepening depression and restless suspense. And yesterday Father had finally felt compelled into blunt, direct questions. So Vincent had been obliged to tell him – the crude facts of the situation, if not the details. Silence was permissible between them; lying was not. What Father would prefer not to know, he didn't ask about. It had always been that way.

And Vincent had almost always found solace in Father's hardy optimism, that hoped for the best in people and situations until the matter was beyond doubt. Now, that optimism seemed to Vincent empty and hypocritical.

"Perhaps," he echoed dully. But then found himself incapable of exchanging polite conversational noises. "But as long as I go Above – as long as Catherine is in my life – there'll always be another man, waiting. With a camera. Or a notepad. Or a gun. And one day, one of them will not.... reconsider."

The open bitterness of the word produced another silence. Eventually Father said, with iron tact, "It's been a wonderful...dream, Vincent. But this is your home."

Rising with startling suddenness, so that Father reflexively leaned away, Vincent snapped, "No, Father: this is my tomb."

Vincent whirled and left.

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Attempting to seem casual, Catherine leaned in at Joe's door, commenting, "Rita said you wanted to see me...?"

Joe looked up from his desk. Before him was a newspaper. He asked grimly, "Have you seen this morning's Sentinel?"

Catherine was stuck by a dreadful, sinking sense of unreality as it seemed her nightmare was about to be reenacted. She responded carefully, "No.... What does it say?"

"You'd better sit down."

Bracing, Catherine snapped, "Just let me see it," and snatched the paper off Joe's desk. Instead of the expected pictures and exposure, the headline read, Missing Reporter Found Murdered. For a moment she couldn't take it in. Couldn't do anything but stare.

The thought popped into her mind: Vincent. Finally. After all.

Rising, watching her, Joe strolled off toward the window. Hands in pockets, he inquired, "What's going on, Radcliffe?"

Bewildered, still staring at the paper, Catherine responded slowly, "I don't know."

"How come I don't believe you?" Joe asked rhetorically.

Her angry eyes rose and locked on him. Her voice uncompromising, icy, she said, "I can't help what you believe."

"Hey." Joe lifted both hands, showing a small, uncomfortable grin as a peace offering. "Time out! I'm on your side, remember?"

Then she did remember. This wasn't the dream. She bit her lip, confused. But the paper continued to say that Spirko had been found dead. The threat was lifted! Yet unease battled the jubilant relief that flooded through her. Could Vincent have interpreted her desire that Spirko be stopped, silenced, as a sanction for attack? Catherine found the idea upsetting.

Joe continued, "Now, I don't know what's going on here. But if you need a lawyer or a friend, I'm here. And I got to tell you – if you got any idea why Spirko was knifed, I think you should tell the police--"

Catherine blurted, "Knifed?"

The sharp question took Joe by surprise. He settled a hip on the corner of his desk. "Well, yeah. The autopsy said--" As Catherine attempted to scan the article, she found

the paper removed from her hands. Leaning away, Joe said firmly, "Cathy, I don't think you need to see this." He set the paper aside.

"Go on, Joe!"

"Well, the coroner said he was...uh, killed with a double-edged blade. Razor sharp. Like some kind of surgical tool. Entry wound was in the lower abdomen, but he was cut--" Starting to demonstrate on himself with a graphic gesture, Joe stopped, staring at her in sober concern. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Catherine nodded numbly, realizing Vincent hadn't been involved at all. "Yeah...."

The threat was lifted. But the manner of it made no sense.... Abruptly she decided it didn't matter: whatever had happened wasn't their fault, and they were free! She had to tell Vincent. If he'd learned of Spirko's death, he surely would already have sent a note. This news couldn't wait. She couldn't wait.

Abruptly contradicting herself, she said, "No. Actually, I'm not feeling very well. I thought I could make it through the day, but--"

"You weren't looking too hot Friday, either. And you should see yourself: you're practically green. And it isn't even St. Patrick's Day. The truth is, you been looking pretty dragged out.... Look, Radcliffe. The last time you had off was for your father's funeral, and all that. And the Van Dyne case goes to trial tomorrow: you're going to need to be up for that. Why don't you skip the afternoon, it's just depositions – I'll get Phillips to take 'em. Let him get whistled at, over at the Tombs, for a change. As a matter of fact, why don't you go now? Get some air. Take a walk in the park." Joe's expression was encouraging, innocent.

Feeling mildly guilty at her duplicity, Catherine bit her lip and nodded jerkily, attempting a wan smile. "Thanks, Joe. I may do that."

"Great. I'll tell Phillips. Go on." Joe made shooing motions at her.

Catherine stopped by her desk to stuff her notes on the Van Dyne prosecution into her briefcase. Collecting her jacket and purse, she dodged through the busy office, gaining momentum. The elevator seemed to take forever, descending. By the time she reached the street, she was practically running.

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Shirt half out, tie hanging loose, Elliot angrily paced his private office, circling Manning, seated almost primly in a chromed steel chair. "I hired you to get some answers out of Bernie Spirko for me. Now would you mind telling me why I had to buy a newspaper to find he'd been fished out of the East River?" He pitched the folded paper into Manning's lap.

"Floaters are tough to find, Mr. Burch," Manning responded, plainly trying to sit out the storm. "And even tougher to question."

Rounding the desk, Elliot demanded, "What about the story he was working on? Somebody was feeding Spirko information on Catherine Chandler, and I want to know who!"

Manning lowered his eyes like an accountant who didn't want to point out a glaring mistake you'd made in addition. "Problem is, Mr. Burch, Spirko told his editor you were his source."

Elliot frowned. It'd be one thing to run a scam like that on Cathy; another to claim it to his editor. Could Spirko have believed it? Elliot dismissed the idea, commenting flatly, "That's absurd."

"Well, I figured that much out for myself."

Circling the desk, Elliot leveled a finger in Manning's face. "Listen, I want to know everything Spirko did last week. I want you to find out where he went and who he talked to, who he telephoned. I want you to find out what he had for dinner, what he paid for it, and whether he liked it or not!"

Cool, reserved, Manning mentioned, "I'll need a lot more men."

"Put your whole agency on it. You just do it!"

Manning nodded deliberately. "Done."

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Father and Mouse had been worrying about Vincent, but their discussion had resulted only in an unspecific plan from Mouse to somehow "bring down the sky." Father thought it better not to speculate on what the actual outcome might be. At the least, Vincent would know Mouse had meant well, and that alone might....

Sighing, Father put on his glasses and opened a book as Mouse left, encountering Jamie on the stairs. Then Jamie bounced down the last two steps, announcing, "Father, this came for you."

Father looked up, expecting and dreading the daily delivery of morning newspapers; but what Jamie handed him was a large manila envelope. Puzzled, he slit it. Inside, he found a sheaf of photographs. After one appalled glance he stuffed them back into the envelope and set it aside with what casualness he could muster.

Jamie had paused and was studying him curiously. "Father, are you all right? What is it?"

"Merely some news. Nothing to concern you. Thank you, Jamie."

Understanding it as a dismissal, Jamie left after a final, concerned glance. As soon as he was alone in his study, Father immediately took up the envelope.

The top picture--clear, sharp, and glossy--showed Vincent in the act of striking at the throat of a terrified man. The next one was Vincent alone--full face, snarling. Large canines plainly exposed. Father couldn't bring himself to look at the others.

Checking the envelope, he found a note in familiar, precise printing. It read, *666 SUTTON. COME ALONE OR SEE THESE PUBLISHED.*

There was no signature. He needed none. The printing was that of John Pater--Paracelsus. Once a friend -- now an implacable and most dangerous enemy.

And the rock that friendship had broken upon and foundered, over thirty years ago, was Vincent. Father would not let Paracelsus have him. Then or now.

Deliberately, Father held the corner of the top photograph over the flame of his candle. When he could no longer hold the picture, he dropped it into a bowl to be consumed. Then he methodically did the same with all the others.

Telling no one of his plans, Father unearthed from his wardrobe a grey suit. Outdated, of course, but in good condition: it would pass muster, Above. Having changed, Father made one further preparation. From a desk drawer, he collected a pistol Catherine had brought Below at his request some six months ago, when the tunnels had been invaded by a group of murderous hooligans. It had confirmed his mistrust of firearms that the gun's principal effect had been to wound Vincent.... Nevertheless, he checked that the gun was loaded and appeared in working condition. The gun was a heavy lump in his pocket, and a heavy weight on his mind, as he slowly made his limping way, by little-traveled passages, to the threshold he'd chosen.

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Catherine all but flew through the park, breathless, feeling almost weightless, joyously dizzy. People smiled and turned to watch her pass. It didn't matter: she was free! They were free! And if total strangers were affected by her exuberance, surely Vincent would feel it too and, even without knowing what had ended their nightmare, feel that the weight of threat had miraculously lifted.

Before she came to the culvert she forced herself to a less conspicuous stroll and her face into an unexpressive city mask. People no longer turned. She didn't have to idle too long before ducking into the concealment of the freshly-leafed bushes and making her way to the culvert.

Vincent wasn't waiting for her. But maybe he was being extra cautious because it was daylight. And because he didn't know yet. Letting herself in, Catherine walked to the junction where they sometimes met. He wasn't there either.

Leaning against the tunnel wall, she removed her shoe and tapped a brief message with the heel. Although she hadn't mastered much pipe code, she could manage her name and his--all she'd ever had need of. The fact of the message, those linked names, was message enough. Still he didn't come. Catherine resumed her shoe and started walking, keeping to the lighted ways, since she hadn't brought a flashlight and was still far from the candle-lit Hub.

Wherever passages met, she paused and called loudly, "Hello? Hello?" And presently, from nowhere, a young voice asked if something was the matter.

She'd known she'd pass one of the hidden sentry posts sooner or later. "Is that Zach?" When the boy's voice confirmed her guess, she located it: a grate low in the opposite wall. "No, nothing's wrong. Quite the opposite! But I'm looking for Vincent. He's not expecting me. Can you tell him I'm here and ask him to come?"

"I already heard it on the pipes," Zach replied. "Vincent hasn't acknowledged. Maybe he's below the pipes. Visiting Narcissa or something. He's been wandering around a lot lately. I'll ask Pascal to send somebody to look."

As she stood waiting, her feet told her that running through the park, then striding a mile on tunnel concrete and sand, all in high heels, weren't at all to their liking. And her stomach realized the length of time--days--since it had been interested in anything resembling a complete meal. She imagined Vincent hadn't had much appetite either...and probably hadn't slept any better than she, to boot.

Deciding, she asked Zach to relay to Vincent an invitation to a picnic lunch, in an hour's time, at the outlook overlooking the Great Falls. Then she began retracing her steps to the threshold.

It took her a little over an hour, but not much. She bought the picnic ready-made, hamper and all, with the cab waiting. Returning to her apartment, she quickly changed to bluejeans and a sweater, then hauled the hamper to the basement, figuring it would pass as baggage to be stored there. As she was descending the final ladder, encumbered, the hamper was lifted from her. She dropped the final few feet and turned into Vincent's expected embrace.

He'd always been a careful hugger. But this was ridiculous: barely a hug at all. Then she reminded herself that he didn't know. He'd still be braced, mistrustful of gauging his strength--not cracking her ribs, for instance.

"It's all right," Catherine declared. "There won't be any story. Any pictures. Spirko, the reporter...was found. Last night. In the harbor."

She felt awkward about saying, baldly, that Spirko was dead – providentially murdered. Although she was glad of the result, she never would have wished him dead. She was ashamed to have thought, even for a moment, that Vincent might have been involved.

"I'm sorry," Vincent said, "that your message was so long in reaching me. I had gone into the deep places. To consider. Think. It's peaceful there."

"Did you hear what I said? It's all right, Vincent! It's going to be all right now. We can be together. Have a picnic, even." She patted the hamper and smiled up at him, hopeful of getting a smile in return.

"Yes," Vincent said vaguely. "Your message mentioned the outlook."

Carrying the hamper, he started walking – slowly enough that, for once, Catherine had no trouble keeping up with his longer strides. Studying him worriedly, Catherine decided he was undoubtedly exhausted – as she had been, until she'd learned the news from Joe. Probably Vincent was just too tired to take it in. And she'd called him back from God-knew-where already, and tacked a fairish hike on top of it.

Contritely, she said, "It doesn't have to be the outlook. That was only an idea, because it's so beautiful there, and the sunlight slants down.... Really, anywhere will do, Vincent. The Mirror Pool?"

"No." The refusal was immediate, forceful, and unexplained. A long silence followed as they continued along the dark passage.

"I'm sorry, Catherine," he said finally. "For being poor company. For not fulfilling...your expectations. Your hopes. These last days...have been difficult...."

*Tell me about it*, she thought, and then reflected more soberly, *On the other hand, no: don't let's talk about it*. Because she realized that her relief, their freedom, hadn't touched him at all. He was going through the requested motions like an automaton...but he wasn't really here. She didn't remember ever seeing him so withdrawn except after he'd disposed of the gang of ragged urban savages who'd taken up residence in the tunnels. When, bitter and ashamed, he'd refused all her attempts at reassurance and comfort. When he'd sent her away....

She looked at him keenly, anxiously, but didn't say anything.

The freedom was a fact. It didn't really need discussing or explaining: it was. The important thing was that they'd lasted through the time, endured it all. Everything else was just detail, footnotes. Suddenly, she felt that the real danger wasn't what she'd thought it'd been, and wasn't over. That instead of a joyous reunion, their relationship was more precarious than it had ever been and might well be balanced on the knife-edge of a word said or unsaid, a decision made or suspended....

Likewise, walking along the passage together was also a fact. It was. They were.

Hold to that, she thought. This is what matters.

The outlook was as beautiful as she remembered: shafts of sunlight slanting down, the distant roar and sparkle of the water of the falls, the broad ledge, a sense of air, light, and space available nowhere else Below. Vincent put down the hamper and Catherine unpacked it, all in silence that wasn't tense because she didn't allow it to be.

Sometimes the truth had to be confronted. But there were other times, she'd learned, when it must simply be lived. Enacted. Made actual in motions like opening a thermos of hot, strong coffee and pouring out the cups, handing Vincent's to him high enough that he couldn't be unaware of the aroma, as well as the warmth. Things like carefully peeling and sectioning a large, perfect orange, removing all the webby strings, passing the segments to him one at a time, so he'd notice the previous one forgotten in his hand and absently eat it to accept the new one. Another scent, bright lucent color, sweetness.

Rainbows continually came and went here as the spray drifted above the bowl of the falls. Spooning lumpy blackberry jam onto a cracker, Catherine watched until a rainbow formed, then touched Vincent's arm and nodded to call his attention to it. She looked at it with him, trying to be fully aware of it and of nothing else, past or possible or to come – just the fragile, fleeting conjunction of spray and sunlight, the shimmering, delicate hues encompassing all the colors there were or ever could be, and the two of them, together, watching it.

When the rainbow faded she handed Vincent the jam-domed cracker and fixed another for herself.

She glanced up to find him looking at the cracker as though he didn't know what it was, how he'd come to be holding it, or what to do with it. So she demonstrated, maneuvering her entire cracker into her mouth and then biting down--an indelicate, crunchy mouthful. A different sweetness, a different texture.

Still holding his cracker, he suddenly announced, "I didn't kill Elliot. Either."

Catherine didn't know what sort of answer that bizarre declaration expected. She couldn't even tell if it expressed satisfaction or an obscure apology. In any case, she couldn't have said anything. Not with a mouth full of half-chewed cracker. So perhaps silence would be the best answer, after all. Or as much silence as the cracker would allow her. She rummaged through the hamper's remaining contents for some less noisy food.

She knew Vincent was intermittently uncomfortable about eating in company. Sometimes even with her. That was among the reasons she'd chosen foods that could be eaten in a single bite, needing no display of teeth. Perhaps the crackers had been a poor choice, though, even so: too loud. Too conspicuous. Calling too much attention to what you were doing.

She found cheese – a round of smoked Gouda – and a small silver knife. That, she thought, should be better. Quieter. But she had trouble cutting away the outer casing of wax: in the tunnels' cool, it was both rubbery and tough. Then Vincent's open palm moved into her field of vision: offering to take over the chore. Surrendering cheese and knife, she watched his hands as he removed the rest of the casing. She'd always been impressed by how good he was with objects, tools – how strong and patient he was, using only the amount of force necessary, so that every motion looked effortless, sure.

She admired that sureness, knowing herself to be one continually at war with objects, that she'd halfway convinced herself broke or malfunctioned out of deliberate personal spite. But she no longer envied or resented his habitual competence because those hands were hers – claimed and granted. Between herself and him, averaged out, she supposed there would be the equivalent of one normally proficient person. And probably several very astute lawyers....

She watched him cut a notch, then extract a thin wedge of cheese he offered her on the flat of the blade. The knife looked very small in his hand. A tool, Catherine thought: not a weapon. Never a weapon. The weapon was the hand itself....

A double-edged blade, razor sharp....

She didn't know why Spirko had died. But she'd seen such a blade used and knew whose preferred weapon it was. She was glad to discern even the beginnings of a shape, an explanation: since the bikers, she'd become suspicious of things too convenient to be random or accidental....

Thinking, I owe Elliot an apology, she picked the slice of cheese off the blade. The flavor was dry and placid, as though the Gouda had spent its time in the smoke thinking.

The cheese was quiet food: there was no problem. They shared it companionably.

"You should find someone else," Vincent remarked, with the same unsettling suddenness as before. "There can be no happiness for you...as we are. With me."

"I'm happy now," Catherine responded composedly.

"Yes..." he said, as though he couldn't dispute that fact and yet was puzzled by it. "But you deserve more, Catherine. Than I am. Or ever can be."

"I'm happy now," she said again, offering present truth against whatever dark doubts had so plainly captured him.

He tipped his head back against the rock, eyes shut. Eventually he said, "Catherine. We cannot continue. As we are. The killing. We cannot. I cannot. Cannot any longer...protect you. Keep you safe. Be safe. Cannot be what you want. What you need. Can never be...except what I am. Which to your world is intolerable. Monstrous. And were our secret known, you too would be condemned.... In these last days, I have thought, Catherine. That it would be simpler, safer...merely to end. Perhaps there is...a providence that the choice still remains to us. Before it is forced on us. Again. I don't believe...I could bear the prospect a third time."

Her reply was to kneel and then lean in against him, tucked comfortably against his side. Brushing back her hair, she laid her cheek against his shoulder. There were things she could have said – arguments; reassurances – but she didn't. This wasn't a time for talking...still less, a time for deciding. This was a time to consider only simple things, or simple parts of large things. Things you could take in at a single glance, grasp with one hand, eat in one bite.

Catherine hummed softly to herself, to him if he chose to notice, and rocked her head back far enough to watch for rainbows.

Being happy with him was the only answer she had, and she gave it to him in a steady riverine flow. Presently his head tilted onto hers and she guessed, from his quiet breathing, he was asleep. She loved him unutterably.

## 7

Leaving the brass-sheathed elevator, Father made his way down the stairs. Though blades of brilliant afternoon light pierced gaps where the drapes didn't quite meet, the large room beyond the leaded doors was dark. Advancing a few limping paces into the obscurity, Father warily looked around.

"John?"

"I'm here, Jacob." The measured, sardonic voice issued from the far right-hand corner in the gloom between windows. Father could see nothing. "I've been waiting for you. I trust you...enjoyed the photographs?"

"I burned them," Father replied curtly.

"Pity. I thought they showed the boy in a...an interesting light. But your appetite for truth was always...rather limited, as I recall."

Once that voice had meant wit and banter, the invigorating clash of ideas honed against one another. Once it had been the voice of a friend and confidante unique among all others Below. Father's face grew grim to now hear that voice reduced to cutting sarcasm and insults no less petty for being oblique.

He stated, "There was nothing of truth in those photographs."

"The camera does not lie, Jacob. But we're not all strong enough to look upon the face of Medusa, are we?"

Impatient with the pointless fencing, Father advanced another pace, into the middle of the room.

“You wanted me. Well, I’m here. What is this all about?”

“What it’s always been about: you, me, the child.” The familiar voice lost all its pretended jocularity. Grim and cold, it resumed the dialogue of hatred last broken off at Winterfest two years ago, with Paracelsus’ blade at Father’s throat.

Father declared bluntly, “I will not allow you to publish those photographs.”

“Ah – and how do you propose to stop me...old friend?”

Changing hands on his stick, Father produced the pistol and resolutely aimed at the figure become visible in the act of rising. As Father’s eyes caught the momentary flash of a metal mask, he had the odd thought that it was flesh the would-be alchemist was attempting to turn into gold – beginning with himself.

Paracelsus accused, “So this is what it’s come to in the end, eh? All your fine talk of love and turning the other cheek.”

Father’s answer was to cock the pistol.

The stooped silhouette shrugged elaborately. “Kill me, then: you’ll find me quite unarmed.”

Turning to a window, Paracelsus yanked the drapes apart. Light blazed in: Father winced, momentarily blinded.

Paracelsus commented solicitously, “Does the light offend your eyes? Forgive me. You’ve spent too long in the dark, Jacob. Perhaps we all have.”

Father could see his adversary now. Paracelsus stood behind the desk chair, empty hands resting on its back. But of course he was armed. And of course the photographs were nothing more or less than a weapon – threatening to expose Vincent to the condemning eyes of the world Above, in images that would confirm their innate prejudices, their worst fears. Seeing that snarling face, men would see nothing else – nothing of the scholar and teacher, nothing of the wise and gentle man who was Father’s son. Nothing of the truth.

Father knew the threat, knew the outcome as clearly as though it had all already happened. Knew that Paracelsus would unhesitatingly carry out his threat, regardless of his purported love for Vincent: there was no one John Pater would not sacrifice to serve his purposes...whatever they might be.

And knowing all that, Father still could not bring himself to fire. His doctor’s mind was invaded by images of what a bullet did – the impact and the shattering bone, the ragged horror of the exit wound, the torn organs, the blood. All his life had been devoted to healing and attempting to repair such violation of the body’s integrity. He unequivocally hated any recourse to violence. Not morality but simple, unconquerable revulsion made his finger refuse to tighten on the trigger. He couldn’t do it. The physician in him was stronger than the father; and he couldn’t do it.

Breathing roughly, defeated and obscurely ashamed, he carefully let down the hammer and put the pistol away. It was knowing capitulation to open evil. But he could not do otherwise. Perhaps it was cowardice. He couldn’t judge.

He asked, “What do you want of me, John?”

Paracelsus' hands lifted from the chair back in a broad, dismissive gesture. "A small thing, really." He strolled diagonally across the room toward a shut walnut secretary.

"For God's sake--tell me!"

Opening the deskfront, Paracelsus removed some small object that remained hidden in his lifted hand. "It's time for the boy to claim his birthright." From his hand, a gold locket fell and dangled from its chain like a hypnotist's bauble.

Frowning, Father stared at it.

Casually, watching the locket spin, Paracelsus continued, "I see now that half measures and proxies will not suffice. In these degenerate times, if one wants a thing done properly, one must attend to it oneself. There is, after all, only one primal sacrifice sufficient to wake what is in the blood. A firstborn son, perhaps? As with Abraham and Isaac? But your firstborn has wisely removed himself from our inevitable drama. And Vincent is none of your blood or begetting. Tell me, Jacob – what is that foundling to you? What would you pay for his freedom? Evidently you will not kill for him – would you die for him?"

"If that's your price to leave him in peace, take it."

"What has Vincent to do with peace?" rejoined Paracelsus angrily. "How blind you are, Jacob. How carefully you have caged and bound and disguised the beast and yet refrained from ever looking into its face or admitting what you were doing. Even to yourself. Well, there shall at least be an end of disguises. He shall be presented with a mirror and at last look upon the face of truth."

"What truth?" Father demanded skeptically, thinking again of the horrid photographs. "Yours?"

"Neither yours nor mine. His own. That is the only truth which, as the proverb has it, can set one free...." Paracelsus touched the locket so that it spun, flashing. Light glinted off his mask as he again glanced around. "And then he will look into your face, Jacob, and know it for the countenance of his greatest enemy, whose gift to him has been shackles, blindness, and falsehood. You will free him, Jacob. That is my price."

Paracelsus held out the locket. His other hand rested on a bronze bust of Athena on a small table. "Come, old friend," he said. "Take the token which signifies that the endgame has begun."

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When Catherine left the tunnels it had still been early. So she'd treated herself to a long overdue and much promised dinner date with her friend Jenny as a further celebration of her freedom. When she returned home and stepped from the elevator, the last thing she expected to see was Father in topsider clothes, sitting in the hall chair by her apartment door like a rumpled and disconsolate messenger. In his lap was a manila envelope.

Hurrying to him, kneeling by the chair, she asked anxiously, "Father, is something wrong?"

He looked at her slowly, wearily, and patted her hand. "Yes. I'm...afraid so."

Straightening, she began groping in her purse for her keys. "Come in, I'll make some tea--"

His hand on her arm stopped her fumbling. "Catherine, I fear this won't wait. I have a most unpleasant...duty to perform. Below. Involving Vincent. I had hoped.... I thought...it might somehow be better, less of a shock, if you were there." Father sounded completely despondent.

"Of course, but what--"

"It's rather...complicated." Having put on his hat, Father pushed out of the chair, leaning heavily on his cane.

As they turned back toward the elevator, he went on, "I've just seen...John. Paracelsus. He exacted a certain...promise from me in exchange for the negatives of...certain photographs?"

Father's sharp glance and his gesture with the envelope asked whether he needed to explain further.

And in Catherine's mind immediately came images of her basement accompanied by the ratcheting whirr of Spirko's camera firing and the film advancing, counterpoint to shouts and roars. A double-edged blade, razor sharp.... A guess was replaced by a certainty: she knew who'd set Spirko on the hunt and then been his executioner.

She bobbed her head awkwardly, blurting, "I understand."

"Do you? I'm glad someone does," Father commented, with a ghastly attempt at a smile, as the elevator arrived.

Father plainly was desperately tired – his limp more pronounced than usual – and preoccupied with his errand. Moving the concealing cartons and then helping him descend the ladder, Catherine felt guilty about having made him wait, even though she couldn't have known – Father rarely came Above, and never before to her apartment. That alone was enough to tell her the matter, whatever it was, must be grave. And knowing Paracelsus was involved and had coerced Father into something he regarded with such obvious distaste and worry made her that much more uneasy.

Once Below, Father seemed unsure of the way at several points – not paying attention to the route and probably confronting the new walls and detours directly for the first time, since he so seldom left the Hub.

When he hesitated, Catherine was glad she could guide him, having now traveled the new route several times.

"Thank you, Catherine," he said as she kept him from turning into a passage that had become a dead end, steering him instead into the other fork that would take them across the bridge of the Whispering Gallery.

"Please forgive me if I seem a bit...distracted. This whole business has been...most wearing. For all of us."

With an uneasy sense of her own responsibility for what she realized must have been an ordeal for everyone Below, Catherine said again, "I understand."

Shortly after they passed into the lighted precincts of the Hub, Father paused, cocking his head, listening to a message on the pipes. Nodding, he limped on, commenting, "William is in search of me. And the evening check on my patients remains undone. Well, that will simply have to wait... There's no reason for you to be tied to my halting pace," he added abruptly.

"Go ahead, Catherine, and see if Vincent's in his chamber. Tell him, or have word sent, that I should like to see you both in my study."

"Are you sure you'll be all right?"

He showed her another forced, unconvincing smile. "With only thirty-some years of rerouting and remapping jostling in my memory? Why do you ask?" He shooed at her with the hand holding the envelope. "Go, go."

Still uncertain, she turned and hurried ahead, almost running from one candle niche to the next. After a few minutes, down a long, straight stretch of passage, she saw a familiar figure striding toward her. She wasn't surprised, except that her unease hadn't brought Vincent to her sooner.

As they met and stood together in the passage, Vincent regarded her soberly, asking, "Catherine. What's wrong?"

"Father's been Above. And seen Paracelsus. Something about Spirko's pictures." She glanced over her shoulder. "But I think he wants to tell you himself. In his study. He was waiting for me when I got home."

"Paracelsus," Vincent repeated softly, frowning.

As they turned and went on, Catherine looked up into his face, trying to assess his mood. The rest, she thought, had done him good. And maybe even the picnic. Or perhaps simply the time for the knowledge to sink in that the greatest threat had been lifted. At least the exhausted abstraction of this afternoon seemed to have become something like calm, the steady composure she was most accustomed to.

"I enjoyed my supper," she commented and waited until he looked around at her to explain, "Jenny."

"Yes." He smiled, the whole complex of supper-with-Jenny conveyed to him by the single word, as Catherine had hoped it would be. She enjoyed having such compressed codes with him, secret and gladly private – like their own kind of pipecode. And she could tell he enjoyed them too – maybe only because she did.

Catherine knew that he was not only aware of her moods but that they affected him, probably resonating in ways even he wasn't completely conscious of. So it was all the more important that she be steady now, she thought – to help him face whatever Father had to say. That was, she assumed, why Father had wanted her here – to be an emotional anchor, a quiet onlooker.

After a deliberate pause, she added, "But not as much as I enjoyed my lunch."

Although she'd hoped it wouldn't, his smile faded. "I fear I was poor company."

"After what we've been through, just company is wonderful, Vincent. I don't require entertaining. Or even conversation. Happy or sad, awake or asleep, I want to share it all."

His answering look was pensive, uncertain.

She mentioned, "After all, you did fall asleep on my shoulder."

"Yes," he said, like a sigh, and she was pleased when he didn't apologize. He was definitely better.

Their eyes met and that was conversation enough. She put her arm through his and only released it when they reached the stair of Father's study, which required that they descend single file.

Alien in his topside suit, Father stood by the brazier shaking a roll of film from its container. As Catherine and Vincent stood watching, Father dropped the coil; it flared and was almost instantly gone, leaving an acrid smell. Tossing the empty container onto his desk, Father removed several large photographs from the envelope he'd carried and pitched them onto the coals as well, glaring at them until they were consumed. Then he dusted his hands together in a gesture of finality and looked around.

"Ah. Vincent. One part of the bargain has now been kept. I must now keep the rest, I suppose."

Reaching into a pocket, Father removed what Catherine at first to be an old-fashioned gold-cased watch. But when he held it up by its chain, she recognized it as a large locket. Opening it, Father commented with stern restraint, "I gave my word to deliver this to you. And to give you its history."

Because Father was so plainly reluctant to give the locket, Vincent was reluctant to take it. As slowly, dubiously, he extended his hand; Father laid the locket in his broad, bare palm.

Catherine leaned to look.

Inside was a photograph – the unlined face of a woman in three-quarter view. Curly dark hair done up in a 50's fashion; high cheekbones and a determined-looking chin; alert, intelligent eyes gazing into the distance, not at the viewer. Not quite smiling, but pleasant. Like the face of an aunt one might see once a year, who'd have a reputation as a formidable cook.

But that wasn't right either, Catherine thought. Hairstyles in such photos made people look older than they were: probably the woman had been about her own age. But it was a decisive face – that of a woman who knew her own mind and was comfortable in the knowledge.

Father's voice interrupted Catherine's reverie, commenting grimly, "On the way down, I thought it might be better to drop it into the Abyss. As if it had never been."

Looking up from the photo, Vincent rejoined, "Why would you even consider such a thing?"

"To protect you." Father put his hand in a pocket, then removed it, visibly uncomfortable in the strange clothes. Lifting a short, uneasy glance, he added with an air of resigned confession, "Vincent....no one ever wanted to lie to you. It's just...that there were some things I thought you had no need to hear."

Puzzled – as much by Father's vaguely guilty manner as by the circumstances, Catherine thought – but still steady, Vincent asked, "Who was she, Father?"

Father's tone turned unconvincingly offhand, casual: "Her name was Anna. She was one of us. A good woman. She liked to go Above. She loved to walk the streets, meet the people.... One night -- it was the coldest night of the year--"

Even Catherine recognized the ritual wording: the story of how newborn Vincent had been discovered in a trash heap behind St. Vincent's hospital, one freezing January.

Recognizing it too, Vincent deduced, "Anna was the one who found me."

Father shot another of those uncomfortable, evasive glances. "Ah -- no. That was a story. You were never...found. Anna was your mother."

The steadiness collapsed. Vincent's shoulders contracted like those of someone trying to protect himself against cold. He sagged back a pace, his eyes locked on the picture Father's words had instantly and utterly transformed.

He breathed, "My--?" but couldn't get the second word out. As Catherine stood aside, watching him anxiously, trying not to react herself but merely be a steadying witness to this most personal of disclosures, she saw him collect himself, brace against the knowledge.

Looking up at last, he asked quietly, "What happened to her?"

"She died," Father said brusquely. "It was...an accident. We buried her down in the catacombs." Although he was trying to be unemotional, factual, Father's tension was plain the instant Vincent's attention again returned to the locket. "Vincent.... Vincent, please." Taking a step nearer, Father solicitously grasped Vincent's arm. "Let it go."

"No." Abruptly, startling them both, Vincent yanked his arm away with such force that Father's hand was thrown aside. "How can you even ask that?" Vincent demanded--angry, incredulous. Whirling, he was already stalking away, taking the stairs in long, quick strides.

Throwing a dismayed glance at Father, standing so forlornly, Catherine hurried after.

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In Elliot's office, reserved Cleon Manning was practically beaming with a hunter's satisfaction. "We got lucky," he reported, tossing his trenchcoat carelessly across a chair, then leaning with unconscious familiarity on the edge of Elliot's desk.

"It seems Spirko didn't believe the No Parking signs applied to him. Last month he was cited four times in the same two-block area. I put 20 legmen out on the street flashing his picture. He made regular visits to a penthouse...on Sutton." Manning delivered that bottom-line statement like the punchline of a good joke he'd barely been able to keep to himself long enough to get here.

Leaning back in his chair, in his usual after-hours rumped, shirtsleeve state, Elliot tolerated the familiarity, reviewing the implications of the report. "Whose penthouse?"

Manning's bland expression said this was a funnier joke yet, and better to come, not yet disclosed. "Good question! Place was leased a month ago. No name on file for the tenant."

Elliot eyed him, then asked in a prim growl, "Isn't that...a little irregular?"

"Yeah.... But when you pay a year's rent in advance at double the normal rate – in gold – you're allowed to be a little irregular." The twinkle in Manning's eye invited Elliot to contemplate with him the shocking way the rich were allowed to bend the rules.

It was crazy. Gold was just an asset – not even legal tender anymore: it would be like trying to pay a cabbie in bauxite or soybean futures. Willing to play straight man, Elliot responded incredulously, "He paid in gold?"

"Mmm-hmm."

All playfulness discarded, Elliot considered a moment, then rattled off rapid-fire instructions: "I want full surveillance on the building. I want a 24 hour stakeout. I want cameras, audio, phone taps – the works."

Arms folded, Manning nodded composedly--one professional to another. "You got it." Reaching to collect his trench coat, Manning asked soberly, "Think I should call in the police on this?"

It took Elliot a second to recall it was, after all, a murder case they were talking about. "No." Then again, decisively, "No. We keep it under wraps for now."

Manning plainly wasn't as comfortable about that....but the rich could get away with being slightly irregular from time to time. "Okay."

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Vincent was walking so fast Catherine could barely keep him in sight for more than a few minutes at a time. A cross-passage would open or a stair descend and she'd have to guess and choose, all in an instant, trying to catch the almost soundless fall of leather bootsoles on stone. Soon she'd gone beyond the lighted perimeter into the dark, blindly following, completely, carelessly lost, liable at any moment to stumble off a cliff or over the edge of an unseen stair.

She'd always feared the dark. And the dark Below was like no other – except the glutinous blackness of nightmares, that clutched at your feet and kept you from escaping whatever horrible, formless terror was chasing you. The dark was heavy; almost tangible; thick; inert. She felt she forced each step against something solid and indifferently menacing to which she was nothing. Anonymous. Unimportant.

Here, she was not the Catherine Chandler; not even an assistant district attorney. She was only a smallish, nervous woman, lost and alone in darkness that had no favorites and didn't care whether or not she was beautiful.

She paced her steps to the mutter of, "I'm nobody – who are you? Don't tell me you're nobody, too?" "I'm nobody – who are you? Don't tell me--"

As she bumped into a corner and felt her way around it, she discovered a point of light ahead and gasped with relief. A candle, lit and set upright on the tunnel floor. Beyond it, against the wall, Vincent sat hugging his knees, head bent, as though he were trying to make himself as small as possible.

She'd learned, over the years, this was what he did when strong feelings claimed him, feelings he couldn't completely control: he fled people – as far and as fast as he could. Alone – sometimes for days at a time. Catherine approached slowly and cautiously as though he were a frightened stray she might inadvertently startle into renewed flight. Vincent didn't move or look up as she chose a place to sit – near, but not too near.

The silence was absolute as it could only be Below. The sound of her own breathing was loud to her, and the slight rustlings of fabric as she tried to find a more comfortable position. She tried to hold still, be still, in the tiny light that was his acknowledgment of her presence and concern. Her need for light, where he needed none; her need to be with him when she was sure he'd have preferred to fling himself at some black wall and escape into motion, pure mindless act, unconstrained by anyone's inspection.

But that he'd waited gave her permission to be here. So she said at last, very softly, "Please tell me what you're feeling."

He lifted his head then, bending back against the rock. She thought, but wasn't sure, that there were tear-streaks down the sharp planes of his cheeks. "I don't know if I can tell you. Or if you can imagine."

"I'll try."

Instead of answering, he whispered her truncated verse: "I'm nobody – who are you?" Then he was silent again for a few moments, rocking slightly forward and back with each soundless breath.

"I have never known what I am. I learned to live with that. There was no choice. When we were children, Devin had at least secondhand memories, stories. A name for his loss. But I--" Another long silence. "And yet now...I am somehow a mother's son. Beyond all my memories there now is someone. A name – Anna. A face..." His hand opened on a glint Catherine knew must be the locket. "I am...connected. To...a good woman. With a name. Who was...my mother. Who did not abandon me but only died."

So it was joy that he was clenched around so tightly. That he feared would be incommunicable – that nobody else could understand.

"I know what it was to lose a mother," Catherine offered. "What is it like to find one?"

He reached out then and Catherine at once went into his arms, holding and being held as he wept with no sound or sign but the almost imperceptible rocking.

"It feels...like being found." He turned his head against her then: hard, as he'd thrown it back against the wall. She shifted to hold him that way, to be a wall for him; steady against the torrent of emotions she knew must be sweeping through him.

"And it feels," he said presently, "like being lost, as well."

"Why, Vincent: because Father kept it from you?"

"Sometimes I think I will never come to the end of his secrets. When I was a child, I once attempted to read every book in his study. I thought then I would know everything that he knew."

"What shelf did you give up on?" Catherine asked knowingly and laughed with his gasping chuckle.

"I no longer remember. Far from the top. I couldn't reach that high and Father strictly forbade me to climb the shelves. He coined a word for the death he feared I'd suffer: biblioavalanche."

She repeated the word, carefully separating the syllables, and they laughed over that.

"There are walls in him, Catherine. And locked places. And each time one is forced open, I feel...that I have never known him at all. Until...such a little time ago...I did not even know his name."

Catherine felt the defeated sadness and poignancy of that. "Sometimes I felt like that toward my father, too. We all have walls. And locked places. All parents, all children. Sometimes we're all strangers to one another. What matters is that the walls keep coming down. We keep trying to reach out.... He loves you, Vincent."

He straightened, his expression strained, hurt, angry. "And yet he kept from me the knowledge I was once a mother's child. When that would have meant so much...." He looked around at her, one of his shy, sidewise looks. "A mother's child...may have dreams, Catherine. Dreams which Father's son...."

He didn't finish that but she understood. She prompted gently, solemnly, "Her name was Anna."

"Yes."

"And Father kept it from you."

"Yes." He shook his head – almost a shudder. "Yes: it is both, or neither. And I cannot reconcile it. If I am Anna's child, I am no longer Father's son. Not as before. But Father... is all I have. So again...I am no one." Abruptly both hands were fists held rigidly before him – at once a gesture of holding on and of holding something off, forcing it away.

"What is it?"

"I cannot reconcile it. And I cannot bear these squinting, one-eyed, grudged disclosures. It must be all. If Father kept it from me...there was a reason, Catherine. And I fear that reason. But I must know now. Knowing part, I must know all. Which Father...sought to protect me from. And I am afraid of that. For whatever I am, I am not...only Anna's child. But there is no choice. There can be nothing worse than this ignorant, unbalanced half-knowledge. I must know it all now."

Sudden as a released spring, he was on his feet and bending to break the candle from its footing of wax. Offering a hand, he immediately drew her into motion, heading back along the dark tunnel, commenting, "It's late. I'll show you the way home."

Something about the suddenness made Catherine uneasy.

Passing the Mirror Pool, back in the familiar, lighted spaces, Catherine found herself several paces ahead before she noticed and turned. He'd stopped, somberly considering the water as though he suspected it of hiding some unpleasant secret.

"Vincent?" She hadn't liked the suddenness; but the stillness was worse. The jumps from extreme to extreme were becoming disquieting.

In a rushed mutter, he responded, "Catherine, I must go."

“To her tomb,” Catherine realized. Vincent didn’t answer. Carefully she suggested, “Maybe you should give yourself some more time.”

“Too much time has passed already.”

As he turned away, Catherine took a tentative following step, offering, “Then I’ll go with you.”

“No.” The response was immediate and didn’t seem inclined to discussion.

“Why?” Again, silence and a remote stare. Catherine made a vague gesture of frustrated concern. “Don’t you see what you’re doing, Vincent? You’re throwing up walls. Isolating yourself from the people who love you.”

“This is something I must face alone.”

He swung, ducked into the passage, and disappeared; and Catherine let him go, knowing this time there’d be no candle, no compromise with the urgencies that drove him now. Slowly and with regret, she continued alone along the passages that would lead her home.

## 8

What had felt, before, like spinning seemed now to Vincent a continual inner vibration. It became different motions, intensifying every emotion into lurching, uncontrolled pendulum swings. The one constant was that it was never still.

Sometimes it felt like terror, or like rage. At times it was a shivering, incredulous hope.

The spiral, like his course through the tunnels, was inexorably down.

I am a mother’s child. A lifting, joyous thought.

Father kept it from me and would not speak of it except by coercion. A sinking thought compounded of formless, intolerable angers and dreads.

The pendulum swung.

Momentarily unsure of his footing and his balance, he turned aside at the head of a stair, leaning against the rock face. After a time, he went on — down, and again down.

Eventually, after hours of journey, he came to the depths no light had ever reached — where even his eyes could discern only vague shapes and angles in gradations of grey. Enough to find his way but not enough to make out fine detail — an inscription, for instance. He collected a torch from a wall sconce, although its light obliterated distances into utter black and its flickering shadows seemed a counterpart to the shaking, the outer corresponding with the inner — as though he himself were becoming flame...or darkness. As though his choice now was only between irreconcilable absolutes.

The catacombs predated the present tunnel community by centuries — perhaps by millennia. The barely perceptible odor was a winter smell, dry and dusty and utterly without warmth. Reaching the bottom of a rough stair, Vincent unconsciously drew his cloak closer about him. He stood shivering in the central space, holding up the torch to scan the high walls pockmarked with holes like innumerable eyes or open, silent mouths. Choosing one at random, he edged inside, staring at the cloth-wrapped corpse

so intently that he was startled, jarred, by a voice from behind commenting playfully, “Let him sleep, Vincent. It’s not good to wake the dead.”

For an instant, shock had stolen his breath, his voice. Recovering, he greeted the blind old woman: “Narcissa.”

Head wrapped in a colorful scarf, clinking like a gypsy with innumerable bangles, necklaces, and amulets, the tunnels’ seeress regarded him with amused eyes whited over with cataracts, just as though her vision were unimpaired.

“So far from home, Vincent,” she chided in her richly Jamaican-accented voice. “There is nothing for you down here.” When Vincent made no response, Narcissa’s expression grew sober, concerned. “What is it you seek?”

“Anna,” said Vincent; and Narcissa turned away, visibly dismayed. Vincent went on, “You know these catacombs — show me the way, Narcissa.”

“Her bones,” replied Narcissa solemnly, “have no answers. Go back, Vincent.”

Curtly polite, Vincent responded, “It’s too late for that now.”

For a moment, they considered each other sadly in their destined roles of seeker and guide, helpless not to enact them. Vincent couldn’t not ask; once asked, Narcissa couldn’t refuse to conduct him into her chosen realm of forces, voices, and spirits. His need had somehow summoned her; for in Narcissa’s world, there were no coincidences.

She turned silently, going surely without groping or hesitation, physical blindness untroubled by physical dark. Narcissa knew her way by other means. Father always spoke of Narcissa’s visionary notions of reality with affectionate but plain contempt, as befitted a doctor’s rationalism; but Vincent knew — in his heart, in his blood — the truth of many things likewise beyond Father’s ken. He followed her.

Deeper. Spiraling down to a level thick with unmoving chill fog, where drab mosses overgrew damp walls. Reaching to place the torch in a sconce, Vincent advanced into the open space. The stink of death was strong here — unmistakable, unavoidable, pulled in with every breath. Barely aware of Narcissa halting behind him, Vincent went forward to inspect the inscription that had caught his eye:

**ANNA**

**BELOVED**

The rest was obscured by moss.

Coming a few tremulous steps nearer, Narcissa declared, “There is nothing here but cold stone. Death. Her spirit is gone, child.”

Turning, Vincent challenged, “Once you told me you could summon spirits.”

“Some who walk in death are fearful. Cold. Bitter as the wind that roars up from the Abyss. Evil.”

Vincent protested, “But Anna was a good woman.”

“In life,” Narcissa conceded. “But death can twist a heart. Poison it.” As Vincent turned again to the inscription, believing her because he knew — intimately, keenly — that life

could also twist goodness, love, into myriad forms of cruelty, Narcissa added uneasily, "And Anna's death was terrible!"

"How did she die, Narcissa?" When she didn't answer, Vincent again looked around and found her face stony with horror and reluctance.

"Ask...the Father," was all she'd say.

Some truths were too awful for even Narcissa to voice. It all returned to Father. Everything circled that hub. There was a sense of inevitability about that.

As unaware of Narcissa's retreat as he'd been of her arrival, Vincent steeled himself, then knelt down by the stone and began brushing away the moss. Revealed, the inscription read:

**ANNA PATER  
BELOVED WIFE TO  
JOHN**

"John Pater: Paracelsus!"

Vincent backed away convulsively, feeling as though he'd been shoved. His heart hammered in his ears and the sense of spinning intensified into a sickening whirl. Panting in open-mouthed growls, he clapped his hands over his ears; but that couldn't silence the remembered voices:

Father's ceremonious, unvarying account of Vincent's beginnings: And then he was brought to me. And he was wrapped in rags—

Paracelsus' sardonic question at their first meeting, interrupting, reechoing in Vincent's mind: Or are you content to accept Father's story?— content to accept Father's story?

And then, on another occasion, that same voice harsh with pain, accusation, appeal: Don't you see, Vincent? He wouldn't let me take you. When I was exiled, he made me leave you behind.

Father, explaining ritually to the newest generation of children, Nobody wanted him, calmly declaring the old verdict of abandonment, rejection, an unloved bit of unhuman flesh tossed out with the trash.

Contradicted by Paracelsus' fervent declaration, I loved you! You were mine!

Nobody wanted him.

I loved you! You were mine!

The contradictions whipped Vincent around, blurred his sight, choked off his breath. Everything was whirling. Reality had come off its hub and careened toward a crash.

Or are you content to accept Father's story?

Father, declaring shamefacedly only hours ago, Vincent, no one ever wanted to lie to you.

But he had! Silence as much a lie as speech, to protect Vincent from the terrible knowledge—

Paracelsus' voice, pitying, condescending: Have you really believed that, all these years?...all these years?...believed that...believed that—?

And he had. He'd believed it, had faith that there was a truth beyond knowledge or that beyond knowledge would be a truth he could bear.

Roaring his agony as though to drown out the clashing inward voices, Vincent flung himself at the tomb's closure: tearing at it as if he imagined certainty might be wrenched from an opened tomb, his beginnings dragged out into the light and confronted, made to answer. But the stone's weight and fitting were too much for even his reckless strength. Finally he was merely holding to it because it was solid and cool against his hot forehead. It alone did not spin and he had to hold to something.

Gasping, shuddering uncontrollably, eyes blank and mind empty and adrift, Vincent collapsed against the stone.

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It was a stormy council session convened in Father's study, far later than was customary. Balding, jug-eared Pascal, pipemaster and administrator of the tunnels' communication system, didn't like any part of it. It was strange, uncomfortable, to be discussing tunnel security without Vincent present.

Concluding his summary of recent events, Father said, "I fear this assault on Vincent and Catherine may be just the beginning. But how or where the real attack may come...."

"Only one man," shock-headed Mouse pointed out brashly. "Mouse isn't scared."

Pascal commented dryly, "Maybe Mouse should be."

Stout William, ex-Army cook, remarked, "Paracelsus has always had his followers down below us."

"Yes. And now he has dangerous new allies in the world Above," Father confirmed.

Pascal decided, "We'll just have to change all the entrances to the tunnels." To Pascal, tunnel-born, security lay in secrecy, separateness. Avoiding conflict. Escaping notice.

But that was effective only against threats from Above, as Father pointed out, declaring, "John Pater discovered half of these tunnels. A few false walls won't fool him."

Mouse enthusiastically volunteered, "Mouse can build new traps! Ropes, chutes. One wrong move and—" He mimed a violent ascent. "—up he goes!"

Father made a dismissive gesture. "He'd just cut through your ropes."

Thoughtfully, not looking at anybody, William proposed, "How about deadfalls...pits?"

Probably concerned about the children, Mary frowned over her knitting. "Someone might get hurt."

William responded truculently, "We're talking about Paracelsus here: he murdered Lou."

"Killed Winslow, too," Mouse put in grimly.

"I still got the scar from where he cut me," William went on. "You worried he might get hurt?" Finding Mary resolutely concentrating on her knitting, William was emboldened to add, "I say we should arm the sentries."

That drastic step had been taken only a few times in the tunnels' history — most recently, when the tunnels had been invaded by a band of urban savages. Remembering that, Pascal said in a troubled voice, "I don't know, William."

Breaking the uncomfortable silence that followed, Father voiced the all-but-unthinkable: "William. What kind of weapons do you suggest?"

"Clubs. Ropes. Tripwires on the stairs and serpentines," William enumerated slowly, scowling. "Takes time to rig a deadfall, a—"

"What's Vincent's advice?" Pascal interrupted. "What does he think we should do? Why isn't he here?"

Father's eyes were unusually cold and level. "Vincent's been under a considerable strain lately, as I thought I'd explained."

"I'd still like to hear his opinion before we start setting up deadfalls," Pascal responded stubbornly. Tunnel security was Vincent's province as the pipes were Pascal's.

"We've come to rely altogether too heavily on Vincent's...opinion," Father replied sternly. "I believe I need not speak of the result. Or the cost. To Vincent." As he looked around, nobody but Mouse — who'd clearly missed the sarcasm — would meet his eyes.

Still surveying them, Father stated, "The threat is to us all — to our world, our way of life. I don't wish Vincent to concern himself with such matters. He is neither a wall...nor a weapon. He is more than that. We fended for ourselves when he was young. It's time and past time we did so again. Such a burden must be shared among many. Borne by one, it's an unendurable weight."

Pascal found nothing to say. But William, harder to abash, commented, "But he's so good at it!" and endured Father's disapproving stare.

"That's a discussion for another time. Our problem is immediate, and Vincent has made himself...unavailable. By past experience, he may not return for some time. For the short term," Father said, putting on his glasses with elaborate deliberation, "until other measures can be implemented, access to the Home Chambers must be strictly limited. All intruders deflected...or detained."

"How are we to know who's an intruder?" William demanded. "Paracelsus can make himself look like anybody."

"Not like a child," mentioned Mary, steadily knitting.

"Correct," said Father. "Very astute, Mary. There are limits to even Paracelsus' deception. He could not, certainly, pass for a nine-year-old: only adults are potentially suspect. But William has a point. There should be some means of screening...."

Prodded by an idea, Pascal looked up. "A password?"

Father beamed such approval that Pascal ducked his head, embarrassed. "Exactly the thing. What would you suggest, Pascal?"

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Tidy in a fresh jacket, clean shirt, and tie — morning clothes — Elliot was checking over some plans when his phone rang.

“Yes?”

His new receptionist’s voice announced, “A Miss Chandler is here, Mr. Burch. She doesn’t have an appoint—”

“Send her right in.” Rising, Elliot had his back against the desk and arms combatively folded when Cathy entered. Before she could get a word out, Elliot said harshly, “If you came here to make more accusations, you can turn right around and go out the door you just came in.”

Cathy was wearing a droopy purple slack suit. No makeup. Hair dull and hanging loose. As she responded with a sigh and a wan, rueful smile, she looked worn out, sad, like a child bravely fighting back tears...and Elliot wanted to sweep her up and cradle her against his heart.

The outburst had stopped her at the doorway. “I came to apologize, Elliot. I was very wrong about you...and I’m sorry.”

Her reaction, and his own, was so different from what he’d been braced against that Elliot let out held breath and unfolded his arms. He couldn’t help smiling back. “Apology accepted.” As Cathy ventured a few steps into the office, Elliot admitted, “I’ve given you enough reason to doubt me in the past. Aside from which, even Spirko thought he was dealing with me!”

“How do you know that?”

“I had to try to clear my good name...such as it is.” A twinge of conscience made him want to confess about the bugs, the surveillance. He effortlessly suppressed it, offering a partial truth instead: “I had a private detective try to find out Spirko’s source.”

Cathy sighed again, troubled. “You should be careful. I know the man you’re looking for. He’s very dangerous.”

Somebody is, Elliot reflected grimly, recalling that decidedly odd visitation in the parking garage the other night. A large black shadow calling his name like a challenge... in a voice he knew. He was very lucky to have ducked that before something very unpleasant happened to somebody. Somebody who’d also thought him Spirko’s source...and didn’t figure to deliver just accusations. He glanced speculatively at Cathy, wondering if she knew about it. He thought not. And if she didn’t mention it, he certainly wasn’t going to. She had her secrets, and he, his. And never the twain would likely meet, particularly in an all but deserted parking garage in the wee hours...if Elliot had anything to do with it. That had been too damn close. Spirko’s source, who’d done everything short of drawing a target on Elliot’s head, had been trying to get one of them killed. Maybe both — with the hidden instigator safely on the sidelines. Like let’s you and him fight. Like where ignorant armies clash by night.

Dangerous, he thought. Oh, yes. Aloud, he said, “Why didn’t you call the police?” to see what she’d say to what he knew was a ridiculous suggestion. Cathy gave him a weary, half-amused glance, and then let her eyes fall. Elliot commented, “More secrets.”

Cathy's glance and helpless shrug confirmed what they both knew. They stood silently, sadly, smiling at one another in acknowledgement of the secrets, almost palpable, that separated them.

Cathy began, "If you find him—"

"You'll be the first to know," Elliot assured her. His reward was another wan smile; in spite of himself, his own grin broadened — foolish, happy. It was just so good to see her again. Watch the feelings pass like clouds across her vivid face. Bask in the sunshine of her smile. Be the focus, even for a moment, of her attention. Love her and know, even though she didn't love him back, he still held a special place in her regard.

Have as much of her as he could. Any way. Any way at all.

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Striding swiftly, Vincent paid no attention to the hidden young sentry's voice demanding first that he stop, then that he offer some password. Vincent had no concern for such things, single-mindedly determined to seek out Father's study...and Father's answers.

He likewise paid no heed to an alarm signal passing on the pipes. When young Zach, Pascal's apprentice, stepped into the center of the tunnel ahead holding a staff, calling in his just-breaking voice, "Vincent?" Vincent halted, momentarily deflected, distracted. Although, locked into his own absolute focus, he had no sense of the boy, Zach sounded upset, afraid.

"What is it?"

Zach ducked his head as if embarrassed. "Nothing. I was—" Zach moved aside, backed away. "Nothing, Vincent."

Dismissing the puzzle, Vincent brushed past the boy and continued.

He likewise barely noticed that Catherine had returned Below and was leaning on Father's desk, the two clearly in conversation.

Descending the study stair, Vincent declared to Father without preamble, "Anna...was John Pater's wife."

It was an accusation. A challenge.

Looking from Vincent to Father, alarmed and plainly recognizing this as an excruciatingly private matter, Catherine murmured, "I'll wait in your chamber."

Turning to shrug off, then dump his cloak, Vincent didn't even watch her leave. He had no attention to spare on distractions. There was only Father, rigidly sitting in his desk chair and staring straight ahead, offering no greeting, a fortress of determined silence.

Which now must be broken. Whatever that required. Vincent felt anything would be tolerable that would end the spinning, the uncertainty. Any mere fact, he could face and endure. Perhaps he already knew the worst. And however hateful that suspicion, he'd managed to force himself to contemplate it, make a sort of peace with it, on the long journey back.

Approaching Father's desk, he could even say it, though the words tried to choke in his throat: "Is it true, then? Was Paracelsus...my father?" When Father refused to respond, Vincent asked softly, sadly, "Father, what have you done?"

Father gave him a quick glance. "It was done out of love."

"The greatest crimes," Vincent retorted, "are always committed in the name of love."

Father was looking at empty distances again. "At the time, it seemed so obvious. But now.... Dear God, sometimes I feel so lost—"

Vincent wasn't to be deflected into a discussion of Father's uneasy conscience, either. It was all Vincent could do to hold himself in place, force himself to do the unthinkable: call Father to account. Force an answer. When all he wanted to do was fling himself at Father's feet and, clasped in Father's forgiving embrace, accept and believe whatever words or silence Father offered him. Be safely Father's child again. Which was impossible.

There could be no compromise, no retreat. They must both face this. Together.

Flatly, quietly, Vincent directed, "Tell me."

"The beginning," Father said finally, with resignation, "was John. He and Anna had tried for so long to have a child. But it was impossible. The fault was in John. He was unable to father a child."

It wasn't what Vincent had expected. He frowned, trying to adapt his guesses to fit in this new and strange detail. To find again a balance that would allow him to stand steady against whatever might come.

"Yet Anna became pregnant," he stated, puzzled but still pursuing.

Father made something like a reminiscent smile. "To Anna, it was a miracle." His implicit incredulity became stronger, darker...as though Father wouldn't completely accept, himself, what he reported. "But John just smiled...as if he knew what was going to—"

Another unexpected unknown to brace against. Steadying, Vincent prompted quietly, "Go on."

As if overcome with distaste, reluctance, Father blurted, "Vincent, please."

"Go on!"

Father's answer was to swivel his chair away. Vincent spun it back. They confronted each other, practically nose to nose, Vincent very much aware of his violation of Father's personal space — in itself, almost a form of attack, all but unthinkable. But the reaction had come suddenly, faster than thought, and he didn't withdraw it, demanding, "Why didn't you tell the others?"

Father retreated, reclaiming his space. Rising, he slowly circled around the far side of the desk, putting it between them. "I didn't think there was any need. I thought it best not to frighten them."

"I was an infant: what could they have feared?"

"The unknown," Father said heavily. "Vincent, men are afraid of what they don't understand. And they hate...that which is...different."

As Father moved into the open, Vincent moved too, to cut him off, both unconsciously enacting the dance of hunting, attempted escape, evasion, pursuit.

As they faced each other in the middle of the study, Vincent formulated, "Someone must have known...Anna was pregnant."

"No. No one knew. You see, Anna was.... Vincent, Anna was only in her third month when she went into labor."

Another strangeness—this time, one Vincent could make no sense of at all. Unable to make it fit, he contemplated it blankly. "The third month?"

"As soon as it began, I knew something was wrong. But I never could have imagined—"  
Now it was Vincent who stared into vacancy. He breathed, "Paracelsus," like a curse, the final name for all mysteries, all horrors.

Disengaging, moving around Vincent to stand behind him, Father continued, "John was a genius...in his own way. But unorthodox. Even so — no one could have dreamed that he would perform medical experiments...on his own wife!" Even now, after all this time, Father's voice was sharp with incredulous distaste.

Vincent tried to take it in. Not wholly a mother's child. Well, he'd known that. Not even a father's, though that father is Paracelsus. Who was, however warped, still a human man. Even that would have been tolerable. Eventually. Instead, Vincent found himself confronted by the miasmatic shadow of unholy Science—nothing natural at all. Science created not persons but things. Experiments. Monsters. An answer that was no answer, only a haunting, intolerable suspicion of fundamental wrong—without detail, unknowable—frightening. The Unknown.

He couldn't take it in. The shaking began again, escaping his difficult control. The pendulum swung — a downward arc.

He asked, finding and forming the words with effort, "Did...Anna know what he was doing?"

Behind him, Father confirmed sadly, "Right at the end. When she was too weak to scream any more. She looked up at John...and I saw the knowledge in her eyes."

Father seated himself in another chair. As Father became still, Vincent was forced into motion, pacing, trying to get it all to fit, face it all. For this was surely all of it, the worst. And even Science, even beginning as an experimental thing inflicted on an unknowing, unwilling innocent, he might somehow be reconciled to. Being the product of evil didn't not make one evil oneself: he'd comforted enough cruelly abused and helplessly drug-addicted children, born to that state, with that solace to have confidence in it even now, for himself. Nobody was responsible for the wrongs done by their parents.

As long as it was the truth, he could face it.

And yet Father's vivid, brutal images threatened to overwhelm all thought: Paracelsus' smile; a screaming woman, whose horrified eyes were full of the awareness of the most intimate betrayal, violating the most ancient bond between father, mother, child....

Pacing the confined space with the sense of walking a last, thin edge beyond which lay an abyss, somehow still maintaining balance despite everything shaking and whirling, Vincent formulated, "So — Anna died in childbirth...like Devin's mother."

“No,” Father blurted immediately, as though the contradiction had escaped him. “Ah—no. Not...like Devin’s mother.”

Vincent stood, stared. Each time he thought he’d found firm footing, another trapdoor had opened beneath him. Every door forced open revealed only another sinister door beyond. Surely there could be no more.

“Well then, how?”

Father turned his face away and wouldn’t speak. Fast, before Vincent had realized it, he’d lunged and seized Father by the shoulders, claws heedlessly digging deep.

“How?” he shouted — a guttural, feral growl.

Wincing but not attempting to pull away, as though memory were more painful than anything Vincent could do, Father admitted, “Vincent, you were — you were not born like other children.” With a pained, horrified grimace, Father disclosed the final revelation: “You ripped your way out of your mother’s body.”

Vincent was barely aware of releasing Father or straightening. There was a blank moment of drift, absolute emptiness, confusion. Then impact and a sense of falling.

The corridors reechoed to his raw, erupting roar of anguish and despair.

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Standing by the table in Vincent’s chamber, Catherine’s first reaction to the cry was to recoil. It didn’t sound like anything that could have come from a human throat; yet she knew it must be Vincent’s. She took a lunging step toward the entrance, then restrained herself, shaken by the sound. Unsure what to do, hand clapped to her mouth, she wandered to the far side of the chamber.

After the cry, the rattle of a passing subway and the endless tapping on the pipes seemed loud. Hearing slow, deliberate approaching steps, she turned to find Vincent in the entryway, standing and looking at her — absolutely without expression.

“What is it?” she asked anxiously, carefully.

As she came toward him, Vincent moved aside, circling the other way around the table. He said curtly, “Catherine — you must leave me.”

“No—”

“Yes!”

Left standing by the entryway, where he’d been, Catherine demanded, “What did Father tell you?”

“Go back to your world. Go back to the life you once led. Put all your memory of me behind you.”

This wasn’t appeal or the tentative retreats of self-doubt — offering to go, offering to release her. It was certainty. It was command.

Vincent’s pacing had brought him half-circle, to the side of his bed. He wasn’t looking at her, absorbed in his own pain. Catherine went to him quickly, grasping his arms, then

letting her hands slide to his hands and hold them as she sank down on the stacked mattresses, declaring softly, "I love you, Vincent." No response, not even a glance. She went on, "Whatever it is, we can face it togeth—"

He pulled away, turned away. "What you love is only part of me."

As he leaned against a wall, bending his forehead against it, Catherine rose and followed, wanting to hold and comfort him but trying not to crowd him. "No, Vincent," she said firmly. "I love all of you."

"How can you know that?" Turning, he declared, "There are darkness's inside of me that you cannot even imagine."

Keep to the point, ordered her lawyer's mind. Facts. Don't debate reactions, side issues. "Whatever Father said, it doesn't matter—" As he turned away again, she added, "You haven't changed — you're still kind and gentle and strong—"

"No!" He escaped again, circling the other way around the table. Pacing the space between a piled bookcase and the entry, he commented bitterly, "You and Father — you wouldn't admit the truth even if it stood right in front of you."

Whirling, he confronted her, scowling. "Look at me, Catherine." He stooped, bending almost double — as though in an instant he'd drop onto all fours. Shadows emphasized the jut of muzzle, the unhuman, flattened nose, the wide mouth cleft and subtly distorted by the large canines, the tangled flow of mane across his shoulders. His deep-set eyes were slanted pits of darkness. Holding that crouched pose, he challenged again, "Look at me. What do you see?"

Catherine swallowed, then declared resolutely, "I see the man that I love."

It wasn't the answer that brutish crouch required. But it was the only one she'd give him.

Defeated, Vincent straightened and turned away, remarking, "There are no mirrors in this chamber. But there are mirrors in the soul. And I cannot live with what I see there."

As Catherine came up behind him, reaching, he burst out, "Don't — touch me!" so fiercely that Catherine snatched her hand back as though he'd warned her away from something white hot.

He gave a shuddering sigh. "It is not...safe to love me, Catherine." His eyes ranged the chamber unseeingly. Then he spread his huge hands, regarding them as she'd seen him do once before — as though he couldn't understand how such taloned monstrosities could be attached to him.

In a voice thick with grief, he confessed, "I killed Anna. These hands...ripped apart my mother's flesh. Tore me from her womb. I was born in blood...."

"No," Catherine breathed, horrified. Then she said, more strongly, "I don't believe it."

He stalked away again, to the far side of the chamber. "Believe whatever you like — only leave me."

Catherine swallowed, thought, then followed, reaching out. He whirled, fangs bared, breath expelled in a snarl. Catherine recoiled in gasping shock — not only startled but, for an instant, genuinely frightened. Seeing the face his victims saw. In that instant, he was dangerous; and Catherine's pounding heart and dry mouth knew she wasn't exempt.

That was what he'd wanted, expected. His glittering eyes said her reaction was admission, confirmation. Then he stared at her quite expressionlessly, as though she'd been the stranger that, in that moment, she felt herself to be. Deliberately.

He turned away. "Don't look back."

If she kept on, kept prodding and pursuing — however lovingly — something awful was going to happen. She'd had two warnings — the third would be a blow, and something irrevocable and terrible would have occurred between them.

There was no reaching him, as he was — distraught, dangerous, and on the edge of explosion.

He'd been right: she should leave him now.

Striding away across the chamber and then out the entry, Catherine didn't look back. And so didn't see the hopeless longing in his eyes as he stared after her.

## 9

Wracked with grief and guilt, Vincent ranged his chamber, trying to regain his composure and failing. Marginally, he felt the pressure of the community's fear and agitation; it fed his own, inner and outer jumbled and colliding, preventing him from finding a still center.

It seemed to him he'd destroyed everything he'd ever loved. Destroyed it or contaminated it beyond redemption by the simple fact of being, loving. And yet he loved it still and couldn't bear to let it go, though his embrace be death to it.

This time no consoling, hallucinatory angel came to persuade him it would not, after all, have been better never to have been. This time, he wouldn't have listened to her if she had.

Catherine was gone... as his mother was gone. But it wasn't abandonment, because it was deserved. He had no right to be angry or defend himself in any way against such rejection: it was deserved. He'd driven Catherine away and slaughtered his mother. Destroyed innocents. In common justice, he acknowledged the fault, the responsibility, as his own.

Yet he was angry — overwhelmingly, unthinkingly, unendurably angry. At Catherine. At Father. At Anna. Which wasn't tolerable. He again opened the locket and stared at the picture, the face vivid with humor and intelligence, the stranger's countenance he felt he'd known and loved all his life. Impossible, intolerable to be angry at one whose sole fault had been to become his victim. Impossible not to be, when it hurt so badly.

Always before, he'd been able to swallow down such rage. Shut it away, keep it private, secret even from himself. But this time he couldn't. The image of a monstrous, alien thing tearing its bloody way out of its... host's body cavity in the blind, heedless drive to survive, kept erupting like fire before his eyes. The image had poisoned his imagination. And if he could not somehow rid himself of that poison, he knew instinctively that he would die.

But he deserved to die. From his first breath, he'd been a crime that demanded atonement. He was that monstrous thing: he had no right to survive.

He couldn't evade the contradictions...or the rage. It would strike either outward or inward; but it would strike.

Uttering an inarticulate noise, Vincent bolted from his chamber.

He paid no attention to where he went; and yet he knew where he was going. His inner tumult drew him where it always had — to the Whispering Gallery and its perennially unrepaired slat-and-rope bridge. Where what he felt — his wistful and irrevocable separation from the world of living voices — and his state — suspended in a bottomless, mysterious, annihilating gulf even his eyes couldn't pierce, as though it were Life precariously poised in the midst of illimitable and unknowable Death — corresponded with physical reality. When there was no sense, the Whispering Gallery always made sense to him. It satisfied his affinity for absolutes.

The Abyss was the reality behind his every dream of falling. It drew him as it had always drawn him — with a kind of bodily curiosity, the danger so obvious and without compromise, yet passive — no threat so long as he merely stood and wondered what it might be like to fall. Wondered if there would, after some long while, be an impact or if the Abyss were truly as it was said to be, bottomless, and to cast oneself into it would only be a sort of flying, forever. Peace. Silence. Like a dream, only better; a final freedom....

Now, its attraction was stronger. More compelling. In two places, the thick hand-rope had broken and dangled from the bridge posts. One would only have to step out....

He gripped a post, shuddering, trying not to imagine.

It was frightening to be unable to shut out the rage. Catherine had left him. No matter to the rage that he'd demanded she do so. No matter that it was for her own protection. The rage cared nothing for fairness and knew only that she'd at last truly seen him, all that he was, and left him. And something in him was furious and wanted to either hold her fragility in a crushing grip...or else strike out, retaliating for the pain of rejection and loss — arrogant and unconditional in its vengeance as Melville's Ahab, who'd aspire to assault the sun itself for causing him distress.

Vincent's claws dug into the dry, punky old post. He shut his eyes. At least he'd been able to spare Catherine that, he thought. At least she'd gotten safely away before his control failed and that within him — the Other — escaped either to seize or to strike.

He should be glad she was gone. But his heart resonated like a struck bell with fury for her going. It made no sense.

And it made no sense to be angry at Anna, who perhaps had loved him before she knew what he was. Who had been delighted with the miracle of her pregnancy until the parasite implanted in her had been ready to free itself...with claws....

Vincent shook his head hard, hair slapping across his muzzle, and tried to fight back that image again.

His present agony wasn't Anna's fault: it was Father's silence that had wronged her, protected her slayer. Nor was it her fault Vincent had been born a creature no woman could love. He closed the locket. Cherishingly, his thumb rubbed the smooth gold case,

warm from his holding it. He gathered the chain into his palm. Then he hurled the locket as hard as he could into the Abyss. He wasn't aware of it as an act of destruction. He imagined the locket falling forever, immune to further hurt. Finally safe.

Minutes passed with no distant clink of landing. Nothing — not even sound — ever returned from the Abyss.

It was impossible to be angry at Father, lodestone and center of all his days, the only love that had not inevitably left him, the only love that reached back as far as memory did. For it was frightening, dangerous to be angry at Father, who alone stood between him and utter abandonment. Who, if displeased, could withdraw all the love there was or ever could be. Without whom Vincent would surely die.

He'd always known that.

He was never angry with Father.

Or if he was, he immediately thrust away that unacceptable emotion as deep and as far as he could — into the secret inner cage, for the Other to gnaw at and take bitter sustenance from. The Other hated Father as Father hated him, so that Vincent could be safe in the abiding shelter of Father's approving love.

It fought to rise in him now, aware of fundamental threat to its being. And the Other's being was to survive — regardless of right or wrong, regardless of love or deserving. Amoral, lawless, and ferocious, it threw its defiant anger against the dark, against the guilt, against the pain....

Pulling in sobbing breaths that would not draw deep, Vincent grew dizzy fighting for breath, for command of his divided soul, on the frail old bridge in the middle of the dark. He hated himself. And one could not so detest one's life and yet wish to live.

Father had tried to protect him from this moment, this realization. Father had meant him only good. But that love had been tainted by its object. It had turned to lies and deluded hope the bitterer in being revealed for the deception it was.

And not only Vincent's hope: Catherine had suffered for this. She'd been led to dream of perfect and unconditional love whose broken shards, Vincent knew, would cut and wound her all her days. Perhaps break her faith in love altogether and forever. Father's kindly lie, and Vincent's ignorant belief in it, had done that. That was beyond forgiving.

And the community, too, had been deceived into another dream — a dream of tolerance, mutual support, and sharing all based on and expressed through their tolerating, supporting, and sharing with the monster in their midst, believing him a unicorn wonder miraculously come among them. Which was all false and would be known to be false when they knew the lie upon which it had been founded: a gleaming snow-white unicorn harbored no rougher, darker beast within.

That dream now, too, would die.

The community he'd served, cherished, loved, and killed to protect, all the defenseless children, would know he'd failed them. Failed them simply by being, and by being what he couldn't help but be. Which Father's tacit lie had allowed Vincent to delude himself he could unlearn or hide or control.

They'd been betrayed. Catherine, Anna, and the community. And he was the instrument of that betrayal. Because Father had refused to see the monster in the man and in misguided mercy kept alive what should have died with its first breath.

That was beyond forgiving.

Unthinkable to be angry at Father. The fault was Vincent's; and by common values, in common justice, a proportional punishment was due. Payment offered for failure and betrayal on such a scale. But before that final atonement, Father must be made to realize the enormity of what he'd done — the cruelty he'd inflicted in the name of love. In simple justice and for the sake of all the injured innocents, Father must admit the harm done by his indiscriminating mercy and his long lie of silence.

As Vincent came to a decision, something closed within him, cutting off the pressure of other lives, other feelings.

The post he held shattered in his hands.

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After the building shut down for the night, Elliot heard out Manning's report, which was nothing, nothing, and more nothing. With a fraction of his attention he was following a televised news report, sound low: Dan Rather going on about upheaval in China, where Burch Enterprises had contracted to build a luxury hotel. That was plainly down the tubes now. Three million dollars already sunk in the project; a hundred people, engineers and administrative personnel, who'd have to be snatched out ASAP. Send a couple of cargo jets, write the rest off. Elliot was getting very sick of politics.

He interrupted, "Patience isn't one of my virtues, Manning. How long's it going to take to get us some answers on this?"

"Mr. Burch—" Manning began in a conciliatory tone.

Then they both looked around because the office door whacked back. Elliot had assigned only one person a standing, unquestioned pass through lobby security.

"Cathy," he said in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

She steadied, then strode toward the desk, inspecting Manning. Her face was flushed and tight, her jaw set and her eyes determined: this wasn't the wan waif of this morning's apology.

"Is this your detective?" Cathy asked without glancing Elliot's way.

"Yeah—" admitted Elliot, seeing no reason not to.

"The Spirko source," Cathy demanded bluntly of Manning, in her best courtroom voice.

"How much have you found out?"

Manning looked to Elliot for instructions. Elliot thought a second, then smiled at Cathy and nodded permission to Manning, making an openhanded "be my guest" gesture.

"Well," Manning reported uncomfortably, "we traced him to a penthouse. On Sutton. But the man seems to have vanished."

“He’s good at that,” commented Cathy bleakly. Finally she consented to notice Elliot, announcing, “I need to get inside that penthouse.”

Elliot blinked, then decided to let himself be bulldozed. Lazily he remarked to Manning, “Ah, that shouldn’t be too difficult to arrange.... Should it, Mr. Manning?”

“Mr. Burch, you’re talking about breaking and entering: I could lose my license.”

“Cleon,” rejoined Elliot blandly, “I will buy you a brand new one.”

Tightly returning the smile, Manning rose, commenting, “Let’s go — Elliot.”

All chums together, thought Elliot sardonically, feeling he and Manning were like two large dogs being bossed around by an imperious kitten.

They took Manning’s car, less conspicuous than the limo. In the back seat with Elliot, Cathy sat leaning forward as if that might make the lights change or the car go faster.

“Do I get an explanation?” Elliot inquired mildly, half-prepared for a blunt No.

But Cathy glanced around, her face momentarily strained and unhappy in the shine of a passed streetlight.

“It’s...a matter of physical evidence. A locket. The whole case rests on it...and on the testimony of a witness. I can’t shake the witness. So I need to go after the physical evidence. See if there’s any corroboration for its authenticity. Or anything that would call it into question.”

“I thought,” said Elliot carefully, “that was what the cops did.” When Cathy said nothing, Elliot prompted, “Got search warrants and things...?”

That got him a flash of grey-green eyes half-observed by dark honey hair. “It’s...not a court case. Yet. Something I’m trying to work out...before we’ll know if there’s a case or not. Grounds to prosecute.”

“Ahuh,” said Elliot, hiding none of his skepticism, none of his conviction that this had never passed through the doors of the DA’s office and Joe Maxwell would be scandalized if he knew. Manning wasn’t the only one whose neck and reputation would be on the line if this excursion became public knowledge.

Elliot offered his most engaging conspiratorial grin; a little tremulously, Cathy smiled back, visibly relieved not to be asked any more or forced into out-and-out lying. As reward for his tactful and amazing lack of curiosity, Elliot gave himself the present of holding Cathy’s hands for the next several blocks. He would have enjoyed it more if he’d thought she noticed.

“Can I interest you,” Elliot inquired, “in a nice little condo in Ibiza? I was going to offer it to Spirko, but he got dead on me and had to pass it up. Developer is a friend of mine. Well, not exactly a friend...but you know. I could let you have it real cheap. Hardly ever have to share it except in festival season, and I’m sure we could work something out. Be a place to get away from it all. What do you say?”

“What?” Cathy responded abstractedly.

“That’s about what I thought you’d say.” Elliot could tell she still wasn’t listening. He guessed it didn’t matter. He’d probably find a buyer for the condo long before Spirko’s killer went to trial. So the investment wouldn’t be a total loss.

After parking the car, Manning left them to wave in the surveillance: one guy in a van, another lounging in a doorway. While the lounge played lookout, the van op forced the street door. Then the five of them crowded into an elevator that looked like the anteroom for a gas chamber. Copper sheathing. Shellacked.

Interesting effect, Elliot thought, regarding their distorted golden reflection that suggested they'd all been transformed into something rich and strange: it might do for a resort hotel/casino complex he was building on the Jersey shore. He made a mental note to mention it to the architect.

The ops scouted ahead, down the darkened hallway and stair. Pushing open a very nice set of etched glass doors, lounge clicked on the lights while van reported, "Nobody home, Mr. Manning."

"All right," Manning directed, "toss this room. I want to know who lives here and where they've gone."

While the ops went hunting, Manning went toward the desk, then halted, looking intently at something on the good (though modern) Iranian carpet. He moved a chair to get a better look. A large, brownish stain in irregular patches.

As Elliot hunkered down, too, to inspect it, Cathy observed, behind him, "Bloodstains."

Manning commented, "This makes it a police matter. You want to do the honors, or should I phone in an anonymous tip?"

Elliot was spared having to answer by the van op, tapping a walnut-paneled wall. "Manning! I think we got something here."

The op lifted down a large, ornately framed picture. Manning and the other op lifted a sideboard out of the way. Manning stroked molding strips and edges for a second and was rewarded with a click: hidden panel, springing slightly ajar. As lounge reached for his gun, there was a groan from inside.

Sliding in to check, lounge demanded, "Who the hell are you?"

A man's voice replied weakly, "Please...help me."

Cathy burst past, down on her knees in a second before the opened panel through which Elliot could see, on the floor, a rumped, bearded old guy who, under other circumstances, he'd have taken for a garden variety doorway wino. The look, the smell, and the vaguely glazed, disoriented eyes all fit. But you didn't commonly find winos with their wrists and ankles tied with sash cord. Dried blood from a scalp wound, liberally spotted over the man's face and shirt, would account for the stupid expression. And the smell was about what you'd expect if the old guy had been locked in there awhile. Which left only the shiny-ancient but unpatched Goodwill-style suit without a reasonable excuse.

Cathy blurted, "Father!"

"Catherine...?"

Elliot asked Cathy, "Is this the man?"

"No. Help me get him out of here."

As the op produced a pocket knife and started working at the sash cord, the old guy said urgently, "Vincent — warn him: Paracelsus is below!"

"Of course," Cathy said tightly, as if the warning was something she was kicking herself for not already knowing but intended to back-burner for the moment. Elliot got out of the way as she shifted around to help the op drag the guy clear of the tight space.

Six months ago, Elliot might have wondered below what? or Father what? Taking the guy for one of those ex-priests who'd formed the habit of getting a little too heavily into the communion wine. Now he knew he'd intruded deep into the secret, where nobody else belonged. Where Cathy, with Charles Chandler dead a year, could call somebody who looked like a derelict, "Father," with automatic familiarity, concern, and respect. Where she was called, with unvarying formality, "Catherine." The secret whose name was Vincent.

Unraveling a mystery took only one loose end and a hard tug. But you had to learn a good chunk of a secret to know how to protect the rest.

Elliot gestured sharply, waving Manning and the ops back, then murmured to Cathy, "You want an ambulance? Private ambulance?"

Cut free, the old guy called Father was struggling to his feet, leaning heavily on the wall and on Cathy's shoulder.

"Catherine, go—please."

"They're changing the passages again. I needed a guide to see you—" Cathy shook her head in unexplained frustration and leaned to reach for a cane propped against the closet wall. Elliot silently handed it to her.

"I don't know enough pipecode to send a message. And who'd believe a note?"

"Surely, just the suspicion—" Father broke off, giving Elliot a cold glance as if just noticing the conversation was being overheard. Elliot had known priests with less intimidating, exacting eyes.

"Don't mind me," Elliot offered mildly, politely looking away.

Cathy rejoined, "Don't worry, Father. Elliot's safe."

"Very well. Then I suppose I must go myself. If you'll help me? Thank you," Father said, taking the cane from Cathy's hand. The two of them headed for the door at a brisk stagger. Manning and the ops stood ready to intercept them but Elliot shook his head. They were allowed to pass.

Crouched by the hidden closet, Elliot found himself wryly thinking that should be on his tombstone: Elliot Burch: he was safe.

Insulted to be dismissed as harmless and at the same time absurdly happy if that meant he'd regained Cathy's conditional and close-mouthed trust, he watched her steer the old man up the stairs and along the railed hallway. When he heard the elevator door close, he wondered if he'd ever know what the hell had been going on.

It didn't matter. Whatever it was, it was none of his business. Given the choice between trust and nothing, he guessed he'd settle for trust. It wasn't a total loss.

Time, he thought, to clean up the loose ends. Finish being safe.

Slowly straightening, he stood for a moment, easing his back and taking a final look around. Then he told Manning, "All right. I guess you can phone in that anonymous tip." He leveled a warning finger. "Cathy was never here."

Manning looked affronted. "That goes without saying, Mr. Burch."

"Sure," rejoined Elliot wearily. "Sure it does."

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Except for getting, from Father, the location of the threshold least likely to have been a high priority for being closed down or rerouted in a sudden fit of paranoia, and except for giving the address to the cabbie, Catherine was silent, wondering if she wasn't more than a little paranoid herself. But Paracelsus did that to people: made them mistrust one another. And even mistrust themselves.

The entrance was through the shop of a helper, a wizened little tailor named Saul Fishbine. Showing them to the basement, Saul kept up a running appalled commentary on the state of Father's suit: wanting Father to change into another left for alterations months back and never called for, practically good as new, just take it in a little through the shoulders—

"I very much hope," rejoined Father tartly, holding to the basement handrail with both hands, "not to need such attire again for a very long time to come."

"At least sit a minute, won't you? Have a nosh, nothing much? I hate to tell you, but you look like hell, Father," Saul persisted, leading the way by backing before them. "A shower wouldn't hurt, even."

"Please — Saul. We're in somewhat of a hurry. I promise I'll explain, another time." As the hidden plywood door, disguised as the back of a closet, shut behind them and they entered the familiar cool of the tunnels, Father sighed and slowed, remarking, "Saul's a good friend. But since he's been windowed, he does tend to become... overhelpful at times."

"Father," said Catherine, in such a tone that Father halted and looked around at her. "Forgive me. But I've been thinking that injury can be a particularly effective disguise because it's distracting, and nobody expects someone to be quite normal under those circumstances. One of you is an impostor. I have to know which."

"Quite right. No apology needed. What would you suggest?"

Catherine had considered that in the cab. Anything she and Father had said to one another, anything private, might have been coerced from Father by Paracelsus. And Paracelsus, like Father, was a doctor, which eliminated familiarity with medical jargon as a means of distinguishing between the two. Both men knew the tunnels, and the tunnel community, thoroughly.

She displayed on her palm the opened pin she'd taken off her paisley vest with the thought that, in extremity, it might serve as a weapon. "May I scratch your cheek?"

“Of course.” Head obediently bent, hands folded over the top of his cane, Father stood patiently, not wincing as Catherine drew the tip of the pin down a clean place next to his nose. Blood followed the scratch. Father asked, “Quod erat demonstrandum?”

Catherine refastened the clasp and stuck the pin in a pocket. “I’ll take that as definitive: masks don’t bleed.” As they started on again, Catherine added, “I didn’t really doubt you, considering what’s been happening. What....Paracelsus said. To Vincent. But that, in itself, was enough to make me unsure — my own preconceptions, my willingness to believe.”

“Very astute. And precisely what has been happening?”

Catherine told him — what she knew and what she inferred had passed between Vincent and the impostor.

“Dear God,” said Father softly, when she finished, and tried to hurry his wavering, tottering pace.

“Is any of it true?”

“It is a tissue of lies from first to last. Except that Anna was John’s wife, and she did die. Oh, not in childbirth — what a diabolical thing to tell someone! Even were the circumstances normal. I had to be particularly careful, concerning a similar situation, with Devin, lest he blame himself: children believe the world revolves around them and as a result, it’s so terribly easy for them to hold themselves responsible for whatever happens, good or bad.... Catherine, I believe I must rest a moment before attempting that.”

A descending spiral stair lay before them. Seeing nowhere he could sit, Catherine helped him steer to a wall he could lean against. Mopping his face with a handkerchief, Father shut his eyes. Where his face wasn’t bloody or smeared, it looked grey.

“Are you going to be all right?” Catherine asked anxiously.

“Eventually,” said Father in a breathless voice, eyes still shut. “I’m merely thinking that some wounds never do heal. And that, though you may find it hard to believe, I’ve often regretted the lack of any strong attachment to a woman. For Vincent. Chiefly when he was a child. I’m thinking that he took all that unfulfilled longing and projected it onto you.” Father’s shrewd grey eyes blinked. “Do you find that a disconcerting thought?”

“I don’t know why I should — he’s been brother, father, teacher, friend to me. Almost everything a man can be to a woman. And sometimes I just want to take him and hold him....” Catherine felt herself flushing. “Sometimes I do it.”

“It is clearly a complex relationship, with many layers. Which is probably why it has endured. Against all expectation, all trials. Even, I confess, against my fervent hopes, at times. But that was long ago.” Sighing, Father pushed away from the wall.

As they started slowly, haltingly, down the stone serpentine, Father reflected, “Anna would have been a good mother to Vincent. Filled much of that lack. But alas, it was not to be.”

“Paracelsus wouldn’t let her keep him?”

“On the contrary.”

Father stumbled. As Catherine, nearest the edge, steadied him against the inner wall, Father's cane escaped his hand and went skittering off, bounced at a turn, and disappeared into the dark. "Oh, dear," Father said mildly, and allowed Catherine to draw his arm across her shoulders.

The passage at the bottom of the stairs had been bricked up. Catherine's cautious shove had no effect. They'd have to go back the way they'd come — all the way up the stairs again.

"A detour," Father commented resignedly, when they'd labored to the top. "But I believe I can guess what alternate route will have been left open. Let's try the left-hand way at the next cross-passage."

Then he sagged, and for a second Catherine was afraid he'd fainted. But he gathered himself and recovered his balance before he'd quite gone down.

They continued along the tunnel, Father's weight resting ever more heavily against Catherine's support.

As much to keep himself focused, Catherine suspected, as to finish the story, Father continued in panting bursts, "Anna did, in fact, become pregnant. In the usual way, one presumes. But Anna lost her baby...in the third month. And something... seemed to happen to John. Shortly afterwards, she found a child...in the snows outside St. Vincent's hospital. And things seemed to get very confused...in John's mind. At least—"

Another abrupt sag, that almost took Catherine down, too. She helped Father prop himself against the nearest wall. "Are you all right?"

"Yes — thank you," said Father unconvincingly.

Catherine prompted, "How did it become confused? He began to see Vincent as the son he'd lost?"

"Yes. Oh, Anna loved Vincent. But she could see that John's...obsession with the child was becoming...unhealthy. It broke her heart — but she thought it best...if the child stayed with me."

Father pushed away from the wall. They started on.

"Didn't she know how Paracelsus would react?" Catherine asked.

"Well, in spite of everything, she still loved John. And she thought, in time, the grief would pass, and he'd forgive her. Instead, he gave her poison...in a glass of wine. Afterwards, he told me it was the hardest thing he'd ever done. That he'd done it for Vincent... How in heaven is one to tell a child such a thing? Saddle him with such undeserved guilt?" Father demanded angrily of himself. "No, it was better—"

"Stop right there," ordered a voice from an ankle-high grate. "Now!"

As Father immediately leaned against the side of the tunnel, Catherine guessed, "Jamie. It's all right, it's really Father—"

"I saw Father less than an hour ago and he didn't look like that. And how do I know who you are?"

"We can't both be Paracelsus," Catherine argued.

"It only has to be one of you. And he has confederates. Go away, or say the password."

“What’s the password?” Father muttered to Catherine as the pipes began sounding — Jamie sending an alarm signal, Catherine assumed.

Catherine whispered back, “I haven’t a clue. When I came Below this evening, Eric was on sentry duty in that passage and made me wait until Cullen came to meet me — guide me, I thought, because the routes had changed again, because Eric couldn’t leave his post. We talked a lot about Vincent but there was nothing said about a password...”

“Well, we’d better think of another expedient because I very much doubt Cullen will be dispatched to escort us anytime soon.”

“It’s past curfew.” Jamie’s voice had moved to a new direction and was farther away. “Nobody comes in or goes out.”

Father responded, “I’m afraid, Jamie, that we are going in nonetheless. Our errand will not wait.” To Catherine, Father added softly, “Do you still have your pin?”

“Stay there! Don’t move or I’ll shoot!”

Crossbow armed and leveled, ponytail swinging, Jamie came warily sidestepping down the tunnel, stopping about 15 feet away. Single-minded as only a stubborn, scared 18 yearold could be, Jamie ignored Catherine’s attempts to explain about what the pin could demonstrate, demanding that she drop it and then toss her purse so Jamie could inspect its contents. Next, Jamie ordered them to remove their jackets and toss them, too. Catherine began complying, but Father didn’t stir.

“Jamie. I am going to take something out of my pocket. Don’t be alarmed. But I’m afraid...if I drop it, someone might be hurt. I need to make sure...the safety is engaged.”

Father’s hand came out of his pocket holding a pistol — gingerly and with obvious distaste, as though it were a dead fish. Catherine recognized her gun — which had no safety. Jamie instantly backed off into the shadows, but Father continued methodically inspecting the weapon.

“You’re not Father!” Jamie accused. “Father would never have a gun!”

“Yes,” responded Father regretfully. “I have certainly done enough to create that impression. And I heartily wish I had never contradicted it.” Starting to bend to place the pistol on the ground, Father stopped, swaying toward a fall. “Catherine. I don’t believe I can—”

“Stay where you are!” Jamie screeched as Catherine reached for Father, for the gun.

That very bad second, with everybody poised on the edge of something unthinkable, was broken by Mouse ambling up from behind them; catching Father’s bent arm and helping him to straighten, giving the gun no more attention than if it’d been a hammer.

Turning to Jamie, Mouse asked in a casually annoyed tone, “Heard the alarm — why?”

“They’re intruders. Father said—”

Mouse tilted his head—frowning, puzzled, exasperated. “Silly — not intruders. Father. Catherine,” he said, as though he couldn’t understand what Jamie’s problem was, why she hadn’t recognized them.

Bless Mouse, Catherine thought fervently. Subtleties were lost on Mouse, and his sunny deviousness's were of another sort than Paracelsus practiced.

Jamie tensely readjusted her crossbow, trying to cover both suspects at once, scowling under her smooth bangs. "They could be anybody; Paracelsus can look like anybody—"

"Not Paracelsus," Mouse commented with cheerful calm, bringing Father's hand over his shoulder.

"He could be, Mouse. We can't trust anybody!" Jamie declared worriedly.

Immune to argument, Mouse started supporting Father along as Jamie watched helplessly. Catherine risked stooping to collect her jacket and started pulling it on as she sidled by nonplused Jamie, who protested, "We're not supposed to let anybody through!"

"Not anybody," Mouse responded, over his shoulder, in the same reasonable tone. "Father — Catherine."

"But Mouse, what if they're not?"

As Catherine caught up, Mouse leaned as though whispering to Father. Then he looked aside expectantly and Catherine leaned, thinking he was going to whisper something to her. He didn't. He just beamed.

"Catherine smells like Catherine," Mouse reported complacently. "And Father...smells." Mouse chuckled, delighted by his own daring irreverence.

Jamie, now a fair distance behind, wailed after them, "But they didn't say the password!"

This time, Father leaned toward Mouse. "What's the password, Mouse?"

"Fried shoes," Mouse whispered back conspiratorially.

"Fried shoes," Father echoed, bemused. "An excellent password: no one would ever hit on that by accident."

"Pascal thought of it."

"That explains it, then." Father looked back to call, "Fried shoes, Jamie! Now may we stop this foolishness? For if I am who I claim and seem to be, someone else most assuredly is not!"

Jamie came at a trot.

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"Jacob."

Come silently to the head of the study stairs, silently standing to watch the man reading below him, Vincent let the word, with its disavowal of relationship, stand baldly between them. As Father glanced up, Vincent asked simply, quietly, "Why did you let me live?"

Father shut the book with vexed abruptness. "You don't know what you're saying." His face softened reminiscently. "I remember the first moment I held you in my arms. You were so tiny — drenched in blood—" (Vincent flinched; Father didn't appear to notice.) "— but I could feel the life in you."

“Death has its own power. Perhaps that is what you felt.”

But Father was still far away in inexplicably wondrous memories. “You opened your eyes...and you looked at me! You knew me. And I knew...that something new had come into the world. That you were destined for unimaginable things!”

Slowly, Vincent descended the steps. He formulated, “And it was up to you to see that nothing stood in the way of that destiny.”

“Yes,” Father confirmed fervently, as if pleased Vincent had understood so quickly. “Oh, yes!”

“No matter who you hurt. No matter how many lives were warped and destroyed by your lies.”

Father frowned, disappointed with him again. Vincent saw the changing expressions but had no sense of Father at all. Father declared, “But they didn’t matter — don’t you understand that? I mean, they were ordinary — unimportant. But you—!”

Vincent had expected Father to accept his fair share of the responsibility. It had never occurred to him Father would instead expect him to share complicity in maintaining an elite of two, self-declared as superior to all others...based on those same freakish differences that were the source of the crime, the guilt.

Justification by destiny. Which could justify anything.

Vincent would submit himself to the guilt due him by common values, accepting that they included him even if only to condemn him. What he would not submit to was this monstrous vindication that would render him twice alien, doubly a freak — that would thrust him outside the human community altogether, among dark and primal things.

Abruptly he headed back toward the stairs, simply refusing to consider the question in those terms.

Father rose, pursuing anxiously. “No! No, you have to listen. You have to understand!”

Father seized Vincent’s arm. A chilling avidity, passionate conviction, and a kind of adoration flowed in from that contact. For the first time in years, Vincent’s couldn’t bear Father’s touch. He recoiled, snarling a warning.

Father didn’t retreat, staring directly into Vincent’s face from a distance of inches. “Do you think it’s been easy for me?” he challenged. “You don’t know the price I’ve paid...for you. For years afterward I could see her face — hear her screaming. Sometimes, as I pass through the Chamber of the Winds, I hear it still. The screaming — and the sound you made...as you tore your way into the world!”

Bludgeoned by those awful, vivid images, Vincent bent, hand to head in a futile impulse to shut them out. Father bent with him, crowding him, allowing him no retreat. Rising suddenly, Vincent dodged and escaped toward the desk, exclaiming, “Stop it — stop it!”

“No — you must hear this!”

“No more!” Vincent commanded, begged — a harsh, guttural sob, almost a growl.

Father demanded impatiently, “Why do you resist your own nature?”

Vincent lunged past Father to the stairs. On the second step, he was caught by Father’s voice snapping, “Where are you going, Vincent? You can’t run away — you know that,”

in a tone from Vincent's childhood — that insisted nobody simply walk out on Father until Father's lecture was done. Until Father allowed one to leave.

And it was true: there was no escape. Nowhere to run. Noplace but here, and Father's shameful adulation, for which so many had been hurt, betrayed...through Vincent. Shoulders slumped, Vincent held onto the railing — sickened and horrified. Anger rose up again, a bitter taste in his mouth.

Behind him, Father laughed. "Oh, yes — they tried to smother it with their piety. Chain it with their little moralities." Father's voice was acid with contempt. "But you can still the singing in your blood, can't you?" Father had followed and was crowding him again. "Hah? Can't you?"

Vincent wheeled, blank-eyed, teeth bared. Father was not intimidated. The quick, reflexive turn, the pose of threat, was confirmation of Father's words. And the singing pulse was a throbbing whine in Vincent's ears.

"Don't fight it, Vincent: it's who you are! It's what you've always been...since the moment you were born! Good and evil — these are human concepts. Let go of them, Vincent!"

Vincent remembered once striking out at Father in madness, then being driven back with torches into the pathless dark. It felt like that now — except that Father held the torch, the light of his lucent, fanatic eyes; and it was he who was driving Vincent into the gloom where the beast laired. Vincent dropped down on the stairs, head in his hands.

Father stood a little away — erect, triumphant, almost theatrical in his joyous earnestness.

"Let the power fill you," he exhorted. "Make you its own!... All your victims knew the truth," Father added slyly, and Vincent jerked and stared: Father never spoke of or acknowledged the victims. That was Vincent's alone, intensely private. Father demanded, "Couldn't you see it in their faces? Couldn't you remember their eyes...as they beheld you for the last time? The smell of their blood in your hands?"

Crouched on the stair, Vincent panted and growled, feeling the images, the memories, burning within him...and hating himself for what he felt. Blind with the heat of it, lost in it, admitting it...yet refusing to affirm it. Refusing to accept it as justification.

"Oh, Vincent," crooned his tormentor, relishing each word, "imagine — the taste of it! Like copper...and fire...on your tongue!"

It was too much. An intimate obscenity. The wild rage the images invoked broke free and made its answer.

Snarling, Vincent rose up and almost casually shoved his tormentor back onto the desk and, with one, long, powerful stroke, ripped him open from collarbone to crotch. The smell of blood was almost a taste, dizzyingly sweet, more intoxicating than wine.

His tormentor had made no resistance. Had not even cried out. That was very strange. As Vincent stood swaying, it slowly came to him that it was Father disemboweled upon that desk, laid out like a sacrifice upon an altar. Father, whom he loved — slaughtered by Vincent's hand.

He'd defended his right to be judged by human norms by the one act no man might do, whatever the provocation: murder his own father.

"It's all right," the victim reassured Vincent softly, solicitously. Lovingly. "Don't be afraid." Smiling, he lifted both hands to his face...and removed it. The mask dropped to reveal bubbled scars, a panting mouth, eyes agonized yet soft, proud, exultant. Paracelsus.

Speaking with difficulty through the blood, Paracelsus said, "At last...you are my son!"

Then his eyes went fixed and lifeless.

Stupid with horror and shock, Vincent became aware he wasn't alone in the study. Dazedly turning, he found Father, supported between Catherine and Jamie, gazing from the stairtop at the scene of butchery before them. Vincent swayed a little, trying to make it connect — that he'd been goaded into killing Father, yet Father was before him, regarding him with a terrible pity. That they'd seen him, and what he'd done. They'd all seen him, beyond any possibility of excuse.

Catherine had come back. But she'd seen him — seen it all. Heard Paracelsus claim him in sonship for this unspeakable act, making it truly, and still, a father's murder.

It was too much. Blankly standing, Vincent went away somewhere, within himself.

He was vaguely conscious of hands on him, voices near him; of walking as he was pushed or led, without will of his own even to shut his eyes, which could still see nothing but the three of them, seeing him. Still locked in that instant.

A voice he vaguely knew to be Catherine's asked worriedly, "Will he be all right?"

Another voice answered, "I don't know. I hope, in time.... Catherine, I'll sit with him, if you have to, ah—"

"No," said Catherine's voice. "I'll stay as long as he needs me."

Someone touched his inert arm. Fear, concern arced through him; but he couldn't connect with his body enough to pull away, and endured numbly the stress that tugged at him like hands and refused to let him remain in the safe, blank unfeeling.

Catherine's voice murmured, "Vincent — it's finished. You did...what had to be done...and we're free. The nightmare is over."

Reluctantly Vincent found himself rousing to the present moment. It felt like rising through deep, cold water — as the dead were said to rise. His eyes blinked, and he contemplated the newest thing that had registered in his mind.

"No," he found himself responding, with the indifference of hopeless distance. It was all a blur, senseless, and except for the contact, it was comfortable to be that way. "It's not over."

Had he been capable of wishing, he would have wished the contact would release him into the drifting emptiness that was almost like peace. But it did not. So he endured it, with no will to do otherwise.

The voices either went away or he ceased to be aware of them. But the contact remained, tethering him to consciousness that something existed beyond the vague dimensions of his retreat.

Presently, after a time that was neither short nor long but had merely continued until a new sensation occurred, hands tugged at him and someone wanted something of him. The hands guided him when he listlessly responded to the dual pressure. He moved as

long as someone wanted him to, stopped when the pressure lessened, sat passive and empty of thought while his boots, vest, and belt were removed and his shirt was pulled free. Then he was tipped to lean against something he knew as only warm and alive. A larger contact gathered him in and surrounded him.

There was a voice, humming something simple and slow. Both a music and a voice. Undemanding as air. The contact seeped in like quiet. He drifted in it. After another timeless time his knees drew up and he curled into himself, feeling very small. The contact approved and gathered him closer. The humming continued, as if it had always been and always would be — a condition of his existence.

He didn't know when his eyes at last shut and he slept.

## 10

Catherine put off waking Vincent, heavily asleep across her outstretched legs, as long as she could. But as she started to hitch higher against the stacked pillows propping her back, almost as she thought of moving, Vincent's arms clamped around her waist.

"Vincent."

No reaction; no change in his steady, slow breathing. Capturing her had been some instinct deeper than thought. But she might as well have been pinned by a beam.

Catherine gazed around the candle-lit chamber, then rubbed her eyes, considering her predicament. Then she began gently stroking his rounded shoulders and back, hoping to wake him gradually. Given his absolute withdrawal before, she wasn't sure how he'd wake...or if she'd be able to wake him at all. But she had to try.

Pushing aside his tumbled hair, she bent and kissed his cheek. "Vincent. Vincent, please wake up." He tensed; his arms contracted around her. Softly, against his ear, she said, "Vincent. Please wake up. I need to ask you something."

A moment passed. Then he took a deep, startled breath and rolled to balanced kneeling with the suddenness and immediate poise of the athlete he was, the kinesthetic intelligence that had nothing to do with conscious choice.

She watched him for the second it took him to orient himself, settling from the readiness to spring in any direction. He looked alert, aware. Surprised to find her here and a little ragged from waking so abruptly, but otherwise normal.

He wasn't, of course: a few hours' sleep could barely begin to mend a shattering like that. But at least she could talk to him now.

"You have to help me decide," she said calmly, soberly. "A case is coming to trial today — the Van Dyne case. Domestic violence. Joe wants me to prosecute. I—"

"Yes. Of course." Vincent surveyed himself, the rumpled quilts, her — quick, assessing glances. "If you'll give me a moment, I'll take you home."

Everything about him was suddenly deflected, averted. Waiting, Catherine realized, for her to give him privacy to get dressed. Specifically, tuck in his shirttail and put on his boots.

Her lips twitched a smile he didn't respond to and maybe didn't notice. Curling her legs under her, Catherine lifted onto her knees, too, facing him, and captured one of his hands.

"Don't understand me so fast. The prosecution is important, and Moreno thinks a woman should handle it — the defendant is a woman. But the only other woman assistant with trial experience, Gail, is out on maternity leave. So that leaves me. And I promised. There are children involved. We've been preparing the case for over a month —"

"Of course, Catherine. No explanation is necessary."

His hand, between hers, was cold. Faint tremors of tension ran through it. But he was going to be polite, maintain that facade of normality, no matter what.

Lovingly exasperated, Catherine said, "Vincent. Look at me," and waited until, reluctantly, he did. Under other circumstances, she could have found that hesitant, sleep-mussed expression adorable. But she wouldn't patronize him that way.

"It's not that simple. Not automatic. I have a responsibility, yes. But I also have other priorities. Please tell me how you're feeling now. What you're feeling. Will you be—?"

"You must not concern yourself—"

His hand tried to draw away. Catherine pinned it against her knee. "No. I need an honest answer, Vincent. Not politeness, not duty: the truth. What you truly feel. If I go to court today, will you be all right?"

His head turned, his expression hidden by the shielding hair.

Catherine continued, "Because I could tell, Vincent. I saw it in your face: you didn't expect me to come back at all. Ever. Did you."

"No." Barely a word, barely breath.

Gently, but with a certain indignation, Catherine asked, "How could you even imagine it? How could you think I'd leave you?"

"Because...they all do. They all have."

Catherine couldn't help it: she clapped both arms around him, held him close. And for a moment it was like their farewell after Spirko had left with his deadly photos: Vincent braced against the contact, then unable to hold that inner distance and gathering her strongly against him. But now, he was the one who was shaking and leaning into her support.

Dully, automatically, he murmured, "I'm sorry."

Catherine shook her head, that he'd consider his despair something he felt he must apologize for. But there was nothing to do. That was how he was.

"I don't leave. Do you hear me? I have a life Above, and there are times I can't be here with you. But I don't leave."

"Of course, Cath—"

Her fingers across his mouth stopped the words. "No more 'of course.' Please, no more desperate politeness. Say it: Catherine won't leave."

He got as far as “Catherine will not—” and then couldn’t finish. He bent his face against her neck, hiding there from her eyes and her insistence. She just held him...as she’d done all night.

The politeness was all he had right now. Maybe it was wrong to try to make him give it up. But she had to, to reach him. And if, without it, he fell apart again, well, then they’d know. And she’d hold him together. As long as he’d let her. As long as it took.

“Vincent. It’s over. You can let go now. I can be strong for us both, now — it’s my turn. I won’t let you fall.”

By his choked, ragged breathing and his shoulders’ shaking, she knew he was crying. Good, she thought: he needs to cry. She held him. When finally he quieted, she asked again, “Do you need me to be here today? Will you be all right?”

He leaned back, so that she was clasping his upper arms but no longer supporting him. Absently he wiped the tears away, two slow gestures. At last his sad eyes lifted again to meet hers and he confessed simply, “I don’t know.”

Catherine nodded. “All right. Then I’ll need to get to my apartment — my notes on the case are there. Whoever handles the prosecution will need them. Or maybe Joe can get a continuance. I’ll have to phone him—”

She broke off because Vincent had suddenly cupped her face in both his hands. Eyes gone wide and dark, he looked at her searchingly. The sense of his intense focus stilled her: suspended, she waited for a kiss.

He said, “But you saw.”

She remembered to breathe. “What?”

“You saw. Me. What...I had done. How...can you still bear to look at me? How?”

“I saw you do what was necessary to keep us all safe,” Catherine interrupted firmly. “I saw you defend yourself against attack.”

His hands fell and he looked away. “It was not that. The only attack was words, Catherine. I killed him for speaking to me truths I could not bear to hear. And I believed that it was—”

“Lies, Vincent. He told you lies. Anna was not your mother. She died by poison. She found you — that’s all. And then surrendered you: because she loved you. To protect you from Paracelsus.”

Vincent gave her an odd, remote glance. “Is that what Father says?”

“It’s the truth, Vincent!”

“Yes. Of course.”

Catherine captured his face as, before, he’d captured hers. But he kept his eyes averted, wouldn’t look at her.

“They were lies, Vincent. Don’t give them power now. They hurt you — terribly. But they were lies, and it’s over.”

“Yes,” he said again, dully. “Of course.”

She wasn’t going to budge him. At least not now. Catherine sighed. And then was startled to find Vincent’s fingers slowly, gently, brushing her hair away from her cheek.

The fingertips trailed down her temple, pausing at the scar by her ear: tracing its outline as though examining it, learning it. His face was rapt, forgetful of himself. The gesture was all the more intimate for its unexpectedness.

Their eyes met. And in his, Catherine found a lingering shadow of last night's blindness — a dreamy blankness, as if he wasn't fully aware of what he was doing. And yet she felt he was very much aware: drifting on the currents moving between them, not questioning the impulse that had twice made him reach out to her in a way he'd never before allowed himself.

Something within him, some governor that normally warned him back from the customary limits had plainly been broken or lost. Catherine felt the trailing contact, against her scarred skin, of his claws.

Kneeling before him, knowing she could not finally resist anything he was impelled to do, Catherine stayed very still. Not precisely frightened but in suspense. Suddenly sharply conscious of the folds of tumbled quilt under her legs; of the candle-lit dimness; of the privacy, like that of the tunnel under the concert shell. But she held herself completely quiet, knowing that if this time she broke his sensual dream, he might shatter — perhaps beyond all mending.

For that moment, they were both adrift.

His eyes changed then: regarding her soberly. His palm flattened to her cheek; he didn't pull away. And neither did she, still holding his face between her hands.

Softly she said, "I'm not afraid. You could never hurt me."

"Yes. Of course." He let his hand fall then, and Catherine released him. He looked slowly around his chamber with a pensive expression that attended in, not out.

Finally he said, "You should go, Catherine. Not neglect your responsibilities on my account. I...will be all right."

She looked at him hard, trying to judge if that assurance was just more politeness. She thought not: when truth was required of him, he'd either give it or be silent.

"Are you sure?"

He smiled at her. Not much of a smile, but still a smile. "It is enough...that you would have stayed. That you have stayed. Others rely upon you...whose need is now greater than mine. Let me free you to care for them, support them. Let me do this — give them the gift of your concern. I will be all right. And...I think I must be alone for a little while."

"I understand."

"Give me a moment. Then I'll see you home."

Obediently, Catherine clambered off the mattresses and collected her things from his table. She waited in the corridor to give him privacy to put on all his layers that defended him from everyone's eyes.

As they crossed the bridge of the Whispering Gallery, Vincent slowed and stopped, looking out into the darkness. And although Catherine trusted his assurance to her, she suspected he'd spend the day in morose brooding. She had no confidence at all in his perfunctory, dutiful of courses.

She touched his cloak's sleeve. "Vincent, there's something I'd like you to do."

He turned, immediately attentive.

"Don't be alone today. I know, it would be easier: the last thing you feel like is being sociable. You don't have to be. But find something to do in the Commons or the candle works — where there are people around, busy with other things. Talking to each other, if not to you. Company. Will you do that?"

He gave her another of those odd, inward looks that didn't see her at all. "I am not...cannot truly be alone anymore...." His toneless voice was thoughtful...almost grim. Then his eyes focused, recollecting her. He made the effort of smiling. "And of course, there's the bond. So you are with me, too. When we are apart."

"What do you mean, 'too.'?"

"Nothing. I mean...." He shook his head, then spread his hands in a graceful, helpless gesture. "I don't know what I meant. I'll do as you ask, Catherine. I'll be all right until you come."

"And after, I hope," she replied in pretended indignation, hoping he was up to a little teasing.

"Yes. Of course."

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She still hadn't seen.

Halting on the Whispering Gallery bridge on the return from Catherine's threshold, Vincent shook his head. Somehow, confronted by the clearest possible proof that when he lost himself he could do anything...to anybody — that there could be no one safe from his violence — Catherine still somehow continued to trust him. As though nothing had changed, nothing had happened at all.

He couldn't imagine how that was possible. Paracelsus had arranged the... demonstration, and Vincent had enacted it fully, fatally. The irrefutable evidence had been splashed all over Father's study. How could Catherine have witnessed it and yet failed to be revolted?

Except that she loved him, and saw only what she chose to see. Only what was tolerable. Only what was human and explicable in human terms....

He should be relieved. Pleased. Honored by her faith. Instead, he was leaden with depression.

He couldn't understand any of it—either her reaction or his own.

He made up his mind to seek out Father, who would surely judge the matter more harshly, more justly. Validate Vincent's overwhelming sense of guilt...based now, not on any lies, but on the truth of his own feelings, his own actions. And in doing so perhaps offer the hope of eventual reconciliation, eventual forgiveness. No matter how long his expiation took, no matter how severe the estrangement, Vincent would prefer Father's condemnation to the disorientated isolation of having experienced a profound trauma in

some vacuum, some awful dream that, waking, no one else would confirm and seemed to dismiss as though it had never happened.

He knew it had happened.

He felt it still, the moment of all-out attack, striking out; the shock of discovering, in Paracelsus' unmasking, that he'd murdered not one surrogate father but both; Paracelsus' dying satisfaction in seeing that horrible knowledge bloom in him.

Paracelsus had seen. And Paracelsus was dead. At Vincent's hands, as truly as the imagined tale of Anna and his birth. He had killed a parent. It had happened.

For reasons he didn't fully understand, that was terribly important to him.

And yet he wanted to be accepted, loved — didn't he? He wanted to be what Father and Catherine could approve, put the unspeakable lapse behind him, and still be safe in their approval — didn't he?

Shaking his head again, Vincent turned and crossed the bridge, pacing steadily until he came to the head of the stairs of Father's study. And found all clean, orderly. Except for the lingering pungency of carbolic soap and an indefinable overtidiness from the cleanup, all was as usual, as though no slaughter had been done here...last night? Or was it longer? How long had Catherine been with him, nursing him? In his chamber, alone with him there, which was no way prudent or safe...?

Looking up from a work schedule ledger, Father rose in some haste, pulling the robe about him as he came around the desk. No accusation on his face — only concern.

"Vincent. How are you? Come, sit down, I'll pour us some tea—"

As Vincent descended the stair, Father was already bustling away to the gas ring, clicking spoons, cups. Vincent looked after him, bewildered, automatically settling into the large, familiar chair Father had pulled out in invitation.

"What an awful business," Father continued, over his shoulder. "Thank heavens it's over. Has Catherine left?"

"Yes. She's due to try a case. Involving maltreated children.... Father?"

"Here we are," declared Father, returning with the cups, setting them down and then taking a place around one of the table's angles. "I'd suggest, under the circumstances, that you not try to undertake the rerouting today. I'll tell Mouse we'll have to postpone that...say, a week? In the meantime, people will simply have to go around. It's only a minor inconvenience. And your health is more important. I trust I can make even Mouse understand that." Father smiled briefly and drank tea. "Have you eaten yet?"

"No, Father."

"Fine, then we'll have breakfast together. I'll tell William we'll need two trays."

Unable to understand why Father was lunging off on such unimportant topics, unable to attend to them, Vincent reached out and laid his hand on Father's to get a true sense of what lay underneath. And found only warmth, a little surprise at the gesture Father took for a caress and responded to by patting Vincent's hand, which slowly withdrew.

Nothing. No blame. None at all.

Vincent drank tea without tasting it, feeling its warmth only afterward.

“Father, how long has it been...since...?”

“Only a night. Though I dare say some times seem endless...” Father leaned back in his chair, frowning thoughtfully. “How he could have supposed the imposture could remain undetected — not for a few hours, this time, but several days — utterly escapes me. And why he left me alive, when he could easily have killed me, is as much of a mystery, I suppose. One we will never know the...Vincent? Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes, Father,” Vincent responded automatically, when the fact was that the whole chamber had lurched and blurred, and all breath seemed to have deserted him.

Father hadn’t seen either. Father believed Vincent had known who he was killing.

“I think breakfast is indicated sooner rather than later,” Father remarked, getting up with the plain intention of going to the Commons.

Left alone, Vincent folded his hands together and leaned his forehead against them. The reprieve was more than could have been hoped for. It was also unbearable. Impossible to maintain, even by silence, such a lie. Impossible to live it, day by day. Yet Vincent didn’t know how he could possibly find the courage to contradict it. To deliberately hurt Father that way, knowing that the resulting estrangement between them might well be virtually as unbearable as the lie.

When Father returned, remarking on something William had said, Vincent reached out and halted him as Father passed the table. “Father, please—”

“Yes, Vincent—what is it?”

Vincent waited, trying to find the breath, the words. Finally he said, “Father, I did not know.”

“Know what, Vincent?”

“That...it was Paracelsus. Until the last. Until...he unmasked himself.”

Through the contact, Vincent could feel Father considering. Now it would come — the realization, the implications. The horror, anger. Perhaps even fear.

“Nonsense,” said Father abruptly. “Of course you did.”

Vincent bent his head against Father’s arm, unable to look him in the face and say it yet again. “No, Father. Truly.”

Father patted Vincent’s hair. “I think you underestimate yourself. Mouse recognized me...by smell, Vincent. And Catherine, as well — a pleasanter experience to contemplate, considering the condition in which Catherine found me.... And your senses are far more acute than anything Mouse can call on in an emergency. You touched the man, surely?”

At Vincent’s wordless, helpless nod, Father said confidently, “You knew. Even if, in the heat of so terrible a moment, you didn’t know that you knew. Or how you knew. You’ve not been...well, Vincent. One can imagine all sorts of terrible things when one is unwell. I don’t doubt that it will be some time before we can fully put this behind us. But above all things, you must not castigate yourself for imagined wrongs.”

Gently disengaging, Father took his former place at the table. Vincent remained bent, clenched over his lone knowledge.

Holding his tea mug, Father added, "In roughly similar circumstances, I did nothing — paralyzed, unable to act. I had gone armed, Vincent: !! I had gone, I believed, fully prepared to do whatever was necessary to safeguard you and our world. And I could not. So I am the last one to arrogate to myself the right to judge between us, and where the right truly lies. Whereas I could not act, you did. I am answerable to my conscience, which is none too easy, either. As you are answerable to yours. But with time, I'm sure we'll both be able to see our own actions more clearly. Don't think about it, Vincent. Let John's evil die with him, not haunt and distort our present. And our future. For then, you see, he would have won."

It all made sense. Except that it wasn't true. Not Vincent's truth, anyway — not what he felt, with a guilt as sharp as pain.

Father had not seen. And could not be made to see. And Vincent could not find in himself the determination to insist any further. He had the sense of folding his lone awareness very small, as though it were something written on paper, and pushing it away deep inside himself where so much was already stored, unspoken.

"I gather, from Catherine, that John tried convincing you of some hideous lies about the manner of your birth...." Father's tentative voice made a question of it, a conversational door left ajar.

"He said something of the sort."

"Should we discuss it? Do you know it to be a thorough falsehood?"

Vincent at last looked up to meet Father's eyes. "All you know of it is what Anna told you. Such hearsay testimony would be unacceptable in any court of law."

"But Anna was a good woman," Father protested.

"So I've been told. She was also...John Pater's wife."

"What possible reason could she have had to lie to me?"

"What reason, indeed?" Suddenly the matter didn't seem worth pursuing. "As you said, Father — it will be forever a mystery. We will never know. She was not my mother and died by poison. And he was my father...only at the end."

Father looked at him oddly. "Why do you say that, Vincent?"

"He claimed me. As his son. Because I had done...what I had done."

"Nonsense. You mustn't take any of that seriously. Did he say...other things to you, Vincent? Besides what you told Catherine?"

The pain finally went away. It was, after all, an accustomed pain. He should be glad Father didn't hate him, wasn't going to reject him. The intolerable things were not only hidden but apparently invisible. Unreal. As though his deepest convictions and deepest fears didn't exist, however fiercely and heedlessly they demanded acknowledgment. As though he himself weren't quite real....

Or perhaps Father was right: perhaps he had known, beyond any conscious knowing. It seemed so reasonable; and Vincent no longer trusted his own memory, his own

feelings. It all blurred, as such moments tended to do, afterward. He was no longer sure of anything except that Paracelsus had impersonated Father and had died. Only those facts were beyond dispute.

Plainly, that was how Father intended to view the matter. There was no acceptable alternative. Vincent had a helpless sense of futility. Probably Father and Catherine were right, and his memory was not to be relied upon. It should be pleasant to think so....

“Nothing. Nothing that matters, Father. Nothing at all.”

“Ah,” said Father, glancing up at William’s heavy approach, “here’s breakfast. Good. You’ll feel better, Vincent, when you’ve had something to eat.”

“Yes, Father. Of course. I’m sure I shall.”

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Vincent wrote in his journal:

*Tuesday.*

*I went as far as the Palisades tonight. The escarpments were very beautiful in the moonlight. A bird was singing nearby, in the woods beyond the river bank. I didn’t know any sang in the dark. I must remember to ask Cullen, who knows about these things. Perhaps he can tell me what sort of bird it was.*

*I was late, returning. Perhaps I had misread the train schedule. Or the expected train was early, and I missed it. In any case, it took hours on foot until I reached the furthestmost north subway terminus point. It was near dawn before I came to the Bronx threshold. But I am safely home, before breakfast. No harm came of it: Catherine did not need me.*

*Wednesday.*

*I wonder if there is anywhere from which one can see the true sea?*

*Thursday.*

*Catherine brought cookies, enough that each of the children could have one. I wonder if she knows the children barter them, among themselves, against work duties and to secure favors. A harmless enough bribery. Samantha likes the ones made with peanut butter. I do not care for those. The reading group went very slowly today. We have begun Jane Eyre. The children do not understand the milieu. I think I will need to provide more social context before they will appreciate Jane’s situation. The orphanage scenes may upset Geoffrey; I will have to discuss them with him. If Catherine has noticed I no longer visit her balcony, she has said nothing of it. My control is still very poor: I dare not risk it. I am grateful not to be obliged to explain. Or perhaps Catherine understands without need of explanation. It is always more difficult in the spring.*

Friday.

*Tonight I climbed a building near Catherine's and watched her windows for a very long time, as in the months before I hit upon the pretext of delivering a book and it all began again, between us. Her balcony seems very far away. Our bond told me she was content...sleeping. There can be no harm in it.*

Saturday.

*Catherine spent all day Below and has only now left. It was difficult finding things to do that would keep us continually in company. Father persists in trying to teach her chess. If he succeeds, she will beat him: she is a formidable strategist in her own right. It was she who suggested we eat in the Commons. Sometime, we will have to discuss this.*

Monday.

*I have seen the sea. Father is extremely annoyed with me: I was away all day yesterday. I had left a note. I took precautions, and food. I find it difficult, sometimes, to hold my temper with Father, who is concerned only for my safety. I reminded him I am always restless in the spring. He found that insufficient excuse and extorted my promise not to be away overnight without having discussed it, beforehand, with him. And I suppose he's right in one respect: Catherine might have had need of me, and I too distant to answer. But I cannot always be waiting, nor always come in time. I have long worried about this — it is among my greatest fears — but I see no answer for it. I avoided mentioning the trouble with the dogs: it would only have upset him.*

*The sea is very large, rushing in foaming lines from the horizon, waves rhythmically breaking on the sand. I knew that, but it is different to see and hear it for oneself. It is stronger than at local shores around the harbor, which I have visited. The scent is cleaner and comes in gusts. I have not bathed since returning, to keep the smell a little longer. It will be different, now, to read Conrad, and Melville. I saw no shells like the one Catherine sent me from California. Those I collected were simpler—hinged ovals. Mary says the dark ones are mussels and the chalky ones, oysters or perhaps clams. I will look them up when I can borrow Father's book on the subject without attracting his notice. He is still annoyed. I will do the rounds of helpers tonight. Perhaps that will appease him.*

Wednesday morning.

*I must not have kept busy enough yesterday. The dreams came again. Again, they concerned Catherine. They foretell nothing. They mean nothing. They are not that sort of dreams. Perhaps there is some heavier, more demanding work I could do. Being tired enough seems to keep the dreams at bay. Since Kanin is away, the stonecutting schedule has fallen steadily behind. Only emergency repairs, on the tunnels themselves, are being accomplished. Marcia and her family have been waiting six months for a chamber of their own. Perhaps I might volunteer for that.*

*Cullen says mockingbirds sometimes sing on bright nights, warning rivals away from what they consider theirs. So it may have been a mockingbird. Elliot asked Catherine to accompany him to ceremonies at a museum to which he has made donations. She declined. Sometimes I wish Elliot had seen me. It would make so many things simpler. But it is Catherine who would suffer for it; and I do not think my voice is one suitable for singing all night. I must trust her. She comes when she can.*

*Thursday.*

*It is so long since we have heard from Devin. I wonder where he and Charles are now. They set out for the Catskills, but have surely moved on by this time. Seeing a mountain is out of the question, beyond even my most reckless imaginings. Lena's child has come to be called "Katie" and is cutting another tooth — to both her own distress, and Lena's. I held Katie and walked with her for awhile tonight, which seemed to help and gave Lena some respite.*

*Katie is so soft, with large blue eyes. Though no longer an infant, she still seems to me very small and delicate. She smelled of powder, diaper, and sweaty-haired bad temper caused by her discomfort. I was filled with tenderness. Although all children are precious, Katie remains special to me. Lena seems content and is helping Rebecca in the candle works. It's a long time since I did candle rounds. Half a lifetime. Perhaps whatever child now has that duty might surrender it to me for a consideration.*

*Catherine could not come tonight, but sent a note. It's been nearly a week. There will be a concert in the park on Saturday. Perhaps she will be able to make time for that. I have not mentioned it yet. I'm not certain it would be wise. It is difficult for her, to be so divided. Sometimes I'm not sure if what I feel is her loneliness, or my own. At least she has been physically safe for months, now. Since the theater. No: since the two men in the passage under her basement. I must not forget any of them, any of the faces. I owe them that, at least. Less than two weeks, then, of peace. Without having killed anyone for Catherine. Only for myself.*

*Father is right: I must not allow my thoughts to dwell on this.*

*Perhaps she can keep herself safe without my intervention. That must stop. She must not need me that way. But in what way, then, would she need me, that I dare answer?*

*If denied one outlet, the hunger will find another and become accustomed to it. Even prefer it. Perhaps I can become accustomed to this peace, which does not feel like peace but like absence. I am starved for her touch. I need her need of me and am terrified of losing it. Of losing her. What is to become of us?*

*Sometimes I am certain we cannot go on as we are. But then I am as certain it is this or nothing at all. And so I do not speak of it; and so we continue. I had more courage with Father, even if it accomplished nothing. She still has not seen. I pray she never does. I could not bear it. And yet I am angry, that she does not. How can one explain what one understands so imperfectly oneself? This will pass. It must.*

*It is early yet — barely midnight. I can feel that all is still, Above. The city's immense heart yet beats, but it sleeps now. I could go and watch her windows for*

*awhile. But I think I cannot allow myself that anymore either. My dreams persuade me that it is not as harmless as it seems. I want*

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Vincent woke suddenly to the smell of freshly cut grass and the insistent cheeping of sparrows, the protests of jays. He lay, sprawled prone, with the vague and fading sense of having been struck down in that position. But there was no injury. His startled eyes registered the brightness: it was morning. Somehow, impossibly, he'd fallen asleep in the park.

He froze at a whistling that were not birds greeting the dawn. Metallic rattles and bumps sent him scooting backward behind the trunk of a lone sycamore at the edge of the path. From that scant concealment he watched a park maintenance worker sleepily trundle by pulling a garbage can on a dolly, collecting trash. The man passed slowly: Vincent hadn't been seen.

Vincent stared around with wide, frightened eyes, finding everything subtly alien, strange: he never was out in the park in daylight! The open grassy slope where he'd awakened seemed terribly exposed, menacing. Wind rustling the leaves overhead and the rising growl of traffic beyond the park's margins competed with the pounding of his heart.

How had he come here? And how was he to get home? He'd gone to sleep in his own chamber, his own bed. And then there had been a dream of running....

He pushed to his feet and ran into some dense bushes and crouched there, automatically drawing the hood of his dark cloak up over his head, wishing he could cover himself more completely. He'd never felt less safe, less hidden.

A breeze carried to him the scent of the lake; he then knew roughly where he was. Much too far away. Nearly half the width of the park lay between him and the threshold.

Footsteps approached along a macadam path. Vincent slid away, following the scent of the water.

His route was irregular, with abrupt turns and retreats to avoid early joggers and dog-walkers: dogs were a particular threat. Near any dog, he could overawe it with sheer size and an indefinable domination he'd never felt the need to name or analyze. But leashed or illegally running free, confident of its owner's protection, any dog catching his scent would begin barking insistently; at worst, it would pursue him. He was heartily afraid of dogs right now and took great pains to stay downwind of those he couldn't avoid altogether.

He also enforced long halts upon himself before sprinting across any substantial stretch of open ground, to make sure he wouldn't be observed. Soon the sun was well and truly up, casting a crouching, desperate shadow at his heels.

Circling the foot of a bare, slatey hill grey with debris, as he passed on one side of a screening margin of bushes, he caught sight, on the other side, of a young mother astraddle a picnic bench, alternating her attention between a newspaper and an infant

unseen within a baby buggy. Her little daughter played beside her at the table. At that same moment, the dark-haired child caught sight of him.

Vincent's breath caught in his chest: children were nearly as great a threat as dogs. They were unpredictable, as apt to weep or scream as to delightedly exclaim on his presence and point him out. This child did neither but only solemnly stared a moment without reaction. Then she resumed playing with her toy. Vincent ducked and hurried on.

Finally, across a seldom-mowed meadow, he saw the welcoming darkness of the cement drainage culvert. Concealed within heavy foliage, he tried to look, smell, listen, sense in all directions simultaneously because once he left this cover; there was no more, short of the culvert. He'd have to take it in one headlong dash.

Suddenly, he heard hoofbeats bearing down on him. A policeman barreled out from among the trees higher on the slope, charging directly toward him. Abruptly, present danger was overlaid with the vivid dream image of another mounted officer whose horse he'd startled into rearing while he'd continued running heedlessly, urgently, taking no notice, locked into one absolute focus. And that in turn elided into a beast — enormous in memory — ridden by a tall man angrily shouting while pursuing Vincent and Devin after an illicit boyhood visit to the carousel; and then policemen on motorcycles, yanked apart in a few savage seconds, and though that had been real, too, not dream, they somehow hadn't been policemen at all...

Battling terror and confusion, Vincent flattened himself against the nearest tree as the rider pounded toward him...and then past. He hadn't been seen.

Without another instant's hesitation, almost without thinking, he bolted for the culvert across the sunny meadow. Running...as in the returning fragments of his dream. Toward the culvert, reaching it, and then, breathlessly, inside and into the safe dark and the sliding door thudding solidly shut behind him.

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Running, then jogging, then running again, cloak flapping about him like flailing wings, Vincent made his way down through the levels of the tunnels toward the Home Chambers and Father's study.

The more he remembered of his dream, the more frightened he became. And when he recalled how it had ended — Catherine, lovely, unapproachable, and serene, looking on as he struggled to reach her across the moonlit grass, falling to his knees as a surrounding circle of police fired bullet after bullet that slammed into a body which no longer struggled but accepted this, its fate — he became more frightened still.

This dream had the strong resonance of those which contained truth. Though they rarely came true in point-for-point literal correspondence, neither were they empty imaginings. They foretold, not events, but convergences, forces. Potential on the edge of becoming fact. A sense of fatality constricted his breath.

He reached the rear entry of Father's study just in time to nearly collide with Mary, coming out. Both recoiled.

Mary recovered first, declaring with a nervous smile, "Oh — you startled me!" When Vincent only continued to stare at her, Mary told him brightly, "I was looking for you... Do you think it would be possible to take some of the children down to see the Crystal Cavern?"

She might as well have asked him about mean temperatures on Mars. Brushing past Mary, he strode into the study.

Seated at the desk, Father greeted him heartily, "Good morning, Vincent."

Trailing along, perplexed, Mary persisted, "Vincent — is it safe there?"

Vincent glanced back to Mary, then around at Father, then at the carpet. "Safe," he repeated blankly. "I don't know."

Reacting to Vincent's plain and uncharacteristic agitation, Father rose and came around the desk, asking, "What is it?"

Vincent pitched his cloak aside. Now that he'd come where he'd meant to come, he didn't know what to say or do. He responded, "Father,"—something between a greeting and groan of appeal.

Father changed expressions and silently waved off Mary's hovering concern, for which Vincent was most profoundly grateful. He couldn't handle Mary's solicitude right now.

Coming toward him, Father asked, "What's happened? Are you ill?"

Finally still after his long escape, Vincent found himself wavering on his feet, the study blurring. "I don't know."

Father directed, "Vincent. Come over here and sit down. Come on." As Vincent obeyed, Father asked, "Can I get you anything? Some tea?"

Vincent waved off the suggestion, then propped his sweaty, overheated forehead with a spread hand, trying to think what to say. Finally, painfully, he stated, "Something is happening...to me."

"Try to tell me."

Vincent took a deep breath, eyes vacantly searching the chamber as though that might help bring it all into focus. As though some book on Father's shelves might provide the answers. "I went to sleep last night...and when I awakened this morning...I was in the park."

"It was a dream," Father proposed, expecting confirmation.

"No." Vincent was abruptly on his feet again, pacing, gesturing sharp denial. "No! I woke up! In the park!"

"Last night?"

"Just now! In the daylight!"

Following with wary tact, Father formulated, "And...you didn't know you'd left the tunnels."

"No." Turning, laying a palm on Father's prized, colorful oriental jar simply because it was large and looked solid, Vincent admitted hoarsely, "I had a dream—"

"Tell me."

That helped. Father would help him sort dream from memory and from unthinking panic. Slowly, with difficulty, Vincent remembered, “I was running. At great speed, without caution. Running to Catherine—”

“Are you certain that was a dream?”

Interrupted, losing the elusive sequence he was trying to reconstruct, Vincent shook his head, frustrated. “I don’t know. I don’t know where the dream began. I don’t know what happened!”

“Where did the dream end? Do you know that?”

Vincent nodded grimly. Oh, yes — he certainly did know: “In death.” Wandering back to the chair, dropping heavily into it, he again propped his forehead, momentarily shut his staring eyes. “My death.”

Father prompted gently, “And then...you woke up, hmm?”

“In the park.” Vincent was up again, circling toward the stairs, then around to lean locked and shuddering arms on the desk. “Father — I’m losing my hold. I can feel it.”

“Vincent, tell me, as best you can....”

“My hold. On myself.”

Coming to the far end of the desk, Father asked, very tentatively, “Was it anything like...um...what happened before? When you were young? Was it anything like that?”

Vincent slowly nodded — only now recognizing the connection. “Like the beginning of it. Only stronger....” The desk was no barrier and no support. He left it, again circling to the far side of the chamber. Seemingly of themselves, his hands closed into fists clenched before him. “Something terrible.... Something terrible is burning its way through me!”

“Not terrible,” Father contradicted at once. “There is nothing terrible within you.”

In as sharp and desperate a contradiction, Vincent blurted, “That’s not true. We both know...for me, that’s not true.”

It was terribly important to Vincent that they abandon all consoling falsehoods and evasions: that there finally be, between them, only truth, however devastating.

But Father declared strongly, “It is true: especially for you. Because your struggle is greater.”

Unable to follow the sense of that, Vincent could find no refutation. His fragile certainty of what was true collapsed against Father’s unshaken conviction.

Vincent turned away, bending his hot forehead against the cool brass of a large candelabra. He proposed wearily, “And if I lose the struggle?”

“You must watch it carefully,” Father formulated: a physician prescribing treatment. “Now, more than ever before. Be aware of everything — your physical...and emotional state.” Father considered a moment, biting his lip, and then reluctantly spoke his thought: “And you must let me stand by you. Whatever may happen.”

Father’s vagueness was ominous...and justified.

Vincent took another compulsive turn around the chamber, ending near the desk. Leaning on it, he said hoarsely, “I remember those nights...those dark nights. I

remember the dreams....” Again, Father had followed and was standing close. Regarding him in realization, in memory, Vincent recalled, “You never left my side.”

“No,” Father admitted gruffly, as though any reference to that devotion now embarrassed him.

Suddenly, Vincent turned to seize Father’s wrists, holding them in anxious demand. “We can’t let that happen again.”

“It won’t.” Father was doing his best to sound confident, definite. Vincent recalled Father’s frequent observation that doctors never confessed to being at a loss, lest they demoralize the patient with the extent of their own abysmal ignorance.

Vincent insisted, “It would kill both of us!”

Kindly, warmly, Father inquired, “Do you remember how we came through those dark nights?”

“You read to me.”

“Anything and everything,” Father confirmed proudly. “The Iliad, the Odyssey, all of Shakespeare....” Smiling, he declared, “You came out of it a scholar!”

Vincent tried to smile in return. It took a very great darkness to render precious the shared recollection of so small a light.

Father advised, “I—I think you’d better rest now.”

Nodding, turning obediently, Vincent whirled back and snatched Father into a desperately hard embrace.

On some level, Vincent was aware of Father’s loving anxiety. But the image that haunted him was that of Catherine, serene and aloof, watching the servants of Law enforce the immutable limits upon the bestial suitor who had sought to break them.

And, fleetingly, the certainty in Vincent’s mind was: I must love Catherine or die. Very well: I’ll die, then.

There was, for him, no third possibility.

## 11

Vincent wrote in his journal:

*Friday morning.*

*It sickens me to contain such a thing.*

*Somehow Paracelsus freed it. Or permitting it that kill freed it. What it does, what it did, I permitted. But it acts now, whether I permit or not. I awoke this morning in the park.*

*Keeping Catherine safe has been at the cost of loosing against her, against us, a danger greater than any from which it protected her.*

*I don't know if I am strong enough to cage it a second time. As I have lost conviction, it has focused its hunger. As I held back, it lunged forward. My longings are its fierce opportunities. What I want, it seeks to take.*

*It has surfaced too often: it now knows the way.*

*Having been given much, it wants more. It wants all.*

*It must never harm Catherine. I will kill it rather than permit that. It wants to survive. It waits. I feel it waiting.*

*It ebbs and flows now. At times I feel as though all is well. And then I am reminded — by a sound; the reflection of a flame; or some distant echo inside — that it is returning. Of how immense it is. That it is rising up within me and burying me in its path.*

*I will not be harnessed and chained again. I will fight them if they try. No: I will leave before they can try. It is not their fault. They are entitled to defend themselves. They would have to.*

*I no longer know how not to want.*

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It wasn't unusual for a week to pass without Vincent's visiting Catherine's balcony. The work Below, abrupt emergencies, didn't keep nine-to-five hours or union time.

Though it generally tottered along peaceably enough and therefore seemed secure, Catherine had seen enough to realize how fragile the world Below really was — continually wobbling on a precarious edge. Maintaining it was an unending, routine battle — mostly planned by Father and executed, if all else failed, by Vincent.

Nobody, Below, was dispensable: the work of simple survival still had to be done. If any worker was sick or injured, Vincent was the one who filled in. If any unusually heavy labor was required, Vincent did it. If seemingly impossible feats of endurance, compassion, or reconciliation were required — as when Cullen had turned against the community, wounded Mouse, and then been forced to lead a ruthless man Below — Vincent somehow supplied them.

Cullen now occupied a seat on the tunnel council, and he and Mouse were again the best of wrangling friends...because Vincent had forgiven him, setting the general example.

The tunnel's ceilings were that world's sky; and Catherine often visualized Vincent as a colossus holding up that sky.

And she herself was often overburdened — as Joe sometimes readily admitted, smugly grinning — with the demands of her job: holding off, a little longer, the collapse of the city Above into lawless chaos; stopping the barbarians at the gates.

That, too, was an unending battle. Most weekday nights, she brought case files home and worked until the print blurred before her eyes. After a lifetime wasted — it seemed to her — in self-centered idleness, it was important to her to give fully, unselfishly, as

Vincent did: to make a difference. What she did, she did for them both: carrying their light where Vincent couldn't go, protecting the injured, the helpless, whom Vincent couldn't reach. Vincent respected the resulting constraints on her time and attention. When she was fighting her way through tons of conflicting detail, Vincent seldom interrupted her concentration.

Final arguments having been presented by both sides, the Van Dyne case had gone to the jury. It had, finally, gone well: after a somewhat incoherent and rough start — Joe had half-seriously threatened never to allow her a day off again, if it meant she was going to show up ill-prepared and looking like that — Catherine had rapidly regained whatever advantage she'd lost. Deceptively mild in her style of questioning and cross-examination, alert in countering the tactics of the defense attorney, pleasant and deferential to the judge, concise and pointed in her summaries, she could feel the case shifting into the desired channel; by the third session, even Joe had been confident of victory.

Every case involved somebody's pain. The pain didn't vanish because she chose to think about something else for a few hours. And nobody could cure all of it — not if they spent all their energies and every waking moment on the task. They'd just burn out, trying. Or become bitter from fighting a war with only small and limited victories, no large or lasting ones. Catherine had seen it happen.

That was one of the reasons the moments when she and Vincent could turn to each other, be absorbed in one another, were so precious to her. Because law was only a limited and superficial answer to pain. Finally, the only answer was love. And only in Vincent's life-affirming presence, could Catherine remember that and renew her strength and her faith that even the little that one person could do was still worthwhile, still mattered.

His tempered, resilient idealism was her touchstone; his love, her haven; his company, a necessity in the life she'd chosen. If for whatever reason he didn't come to her, she went to him.

So although she didn't think much about the fact that he hadn't visited her balcony lately, she surely did notice that, whenever she came Below, somehow there were always other people around. They were never alone. He didn't even come to meet her, or walk her back to her threshold. If he was away from the Home Chambers, if an escort or guide were needed, he sent one. No private moments.

Hmmmm, she said to herself, striding down the passage.

She checked first at his chamber, standing just inside the entry and calling. Then she looked in at Father's study, finding him in conversation with William.

"Excuse me, Father, but do you know where Vincent is?"

"Oh, hello, Catherine. Was he expecting you? I'm surprised he—"

"No, I just came. Do you know where I might find him?"

Father considered. "If I recall, I think he said something about trading assignments with Steven. If so, he'll be at the Mirror Pool. Catherine?" Father called after her, as she turned. "You remember, don't you, that's one of the routes that have been changed. Shall I call you a guide?"

“No, thanks — I’ll be fine. If I come to the Whispering Gallery, I’ll know I’ve missed the turn. Really, I’ll be fine,” Catherine insisted and darted with unflattering haste along the passage until she reached the next turn and was sure William wouldn’t come chugging after her. Nothing against William, but the last thing she wanted was his admiring — and persistent — company.

She had no trouble finding her way: shrill hoots and yells reached her while she was still two cross-passages off. Her heart sank: he was with the children. She’d never pry them off. The irony didn’t escape her that she’d been the one to insist Vincent seek out company. She’d asked for a spoonful and gotten a bucket’s worth.

When she reached the walkway that ran along the side of the pool, she found swimming lessons in progress, children doing eel-like turns and dunking each other, and assorted vertical, wavering pairs of childish legs as somebody tried a handstand and then collapsed with a splash. Dolphining bottoms and occasional fronts showed that bathing suits weren’t required.

Presiding over this noisy chaos, Vincent was balanced — fully clothed — on his heels at the far edge, wrapping a towel around a shivering Eric, whom he sent pattering away toward Catherine as she approached.

Eric stopped, squinting up at Catherine. Without his glasses, his face looked very naked and young. “Catherine?” he asked uncertainly.

“Hello, Eric. How’s the water?”

“Cold.” Throwing off the towel, he grabbed her hand and started towing her toward the edge. “Watch me do a cannonball!”

“I don’t think—”

“I’m not cold, Vincent — honest!” Eric protested, as Vincent scooped up the discarded towel and rewrapped him, disengaging him from Catherine in the process. Catherine backed onto drier stone.

Eric said, “But I want to show Catherine my cannonball!”

“Another time, Eric,” Vincent responded firmly. “When your teeth aren’t chattering. You wouldn’t want to get me in trouble with Mary, would you?”

“No....”

“Go on, then. Back to the dormitory, dressed and warm.”

“Goodbye, Catherine!”

“Goodbye, Eric.”

Turning to Vincent, Catherine had her mouth open to make some small joke about how wet he was — his vest sodden black and his patched bluejeans soaked to the kneepads and liberally dripped on, below — when Samantha showed how he’d gotten that way: flinging her dripping self against him, pointing indignantly at the pool and complaining that she’d nearly done a perfect handstand and then Hal had pushed her.

What was obviously Hal, dark-haired and sullen-eyed, hung with both arms folded across the edge of the pool like a basking frog. As Vincent looked around, Hal called, “I

didn't do anything, Vincent! She just tipped over and banged into me. She can't do a handstand anyway."

Holding Samantha, Vincent pointed a commanding finger. "Two laps. Underwater."

Hal brightened. "I can do six laps, Vincent. Watch!"

"I did do a handstand, Vincent. Almost," Samantha declared, dashing the few steps to the water. "Watch!" She plunged in just as Zach's wet head and thin, adolescent chest surfaced. The boy's eyes immediately found Vincent's.

"How many?" Vincent inquired.

"Thirty," reported Zach solemnly.

"That's fine. Have Father put you down as qualified. I think the Tuesday swim time below the falls needs supervision."

"Right, Vincent." The boy turned and swam off with long, easy strokes.

"Vincent!" called some anonymous child's voice from the middle of the pool. "Vincent, look at me!"

Before Vincent could get embroiled with another demonstration, Catherine hugged him...despite his protests that she'd get wet, as of course she did, and didn't care.

Smiling, her cheek against his chest, head under his chin, she said mildly, "Hello, Vincent."

Chuckling, he accepted that no more damage remained to be done and closed wet arms around her back. "Hello, Catherine. I'll get you a towel."

"No rush." Catherine held him against his abortive lean to perform that service. "I believe this dance is mine."

"How does your case proceed?" he asked after a moment.

"It went to the jury today. I think—"

Somebody screeched from the pool. Vincent's arms hugged her tighter an instant, then let go. Regretfully taking the hint, Catherine released him to sort out a dispute between LaDonna, Alice, and another girl with wet, crooked braids about who'd kicked who and who'd pulled whose hair.

Collecting towels from the stack, Vincent called the girls out of the pool and wrapped them, one by one, as though he were settling mantles on princesses.

"Bad temper is a sign you're cold and need to get warm and dressed right away. So that you can help William lay the tables for supper."

"It's not my turn," LaDonna objected, but wilted at Vincent's unmoved gaze. Heads together, the better to whisper, the three girls walked off in a conspiratorial huddle, like a complex three-legged race.

Straightening, Vincent remarked absently to Catherine, "They're not yet disciplined enough to swim below the falls, in the currents."

Resolutely ignoring another call of Vincent's name, Catherine commented, "They all want you to notice them." Deliberately, she looked up into his eyes. "I can understand that."

He didn't smile. Turning away, he called several more of the smaller children from the water. Catherine helped cocoon them, then sent them on their way. Rising, Vincent wordlessly passed her another towel, for her own use. This time, she accepted it with thanks: the air was definitely chilly on all the wet places.

Scarving the towel around her neck and holding it before her like a large shawl, she asked, "Where do you swim, when you swim? If you swim?"

"Near the falls," he responded, after a moment's pause. "Downstream of there. Below the cliffs."

Catherine thought about asking whether a bathing suit was part of his swimming preparations; but on second thought she decided not to embarrass him. Besides, she figured she already knew.

Instead, she asked, "Alone?"

He nodded, his attention on the pool. "Usually."

"Is that safe?"

That got her a brief smile. "No," he admitted. "But Father permits it. Having no choice."

Four children pelted up — wet, hopping, and shivering — and private talk lapsed until they'd been well wrapped and sent off with a hug apiece from Catherine.

"I noticed," Catherine said, patting her sleeves dry yet again, "that there's a concert tomorrow. In the park." Waiting a minute, getting no comment, she went on, "Since you haven't mentioned it, I assumed you expect to be busy that evening."

"Marcia and her family have been in need of quarters for over six months. Since Kanin is...away, I've been trying to help."

Catherine nodded as gravely as if she believed him. Well, she did believe him; but she also knew a lame excuse when she heard one. "I figured there was something."

"I'm sorry," he said woodenly.

"I'll miss seeing you. But not the concert. I think it's Vivaldi, and you know how fond I am of Vivaldi. I'll just go anyway." For an instant she thought of hinting she might invite Elliot to escort her. But that would have been mean and might really have upset him, which she truly didn't want to do. All she wanted was to coax him back into confidence; into enjoying a private evening together she was certain he wanted...and needed...as much as she did.

His mention of swimming alone suggested to her another angle, and she added, "It's quite safe in the park after dark, now that they've funded the mounted patrols again. I'm sure I won't have any problem. There are generally lots of people, at least once you get there; and almost all the paths are quite well lighted...."

His head came around. His face had no particular expression, but something about his eyes would have suggested, in anyone else, that he was angry. He said, simply, "No."

"No what," Vincent? I'm sure you're not suggesting I can't attend a concert I've been looking forward to so and want to hear."

“No — of course...” He looked at her some more, then reached out and touched her elbow: making contact, to focus and isolate more clearly whatever their bond conveyed to him.

“I don’t mind going alone,” Catherine declared steadily. “There’ll be other concerts we can listen to together. And I’m sure Minnie’s need for living space is very important.”

“Marcia,” he corrected automatically. Then he shut his eyes and sighed. “Marcia has waited this long. I couldn’t finish by tomorrow anyway. It will take weeks. Please, Catherine. I would prefer it if you came Below, to hear the concert.”

“Is that a preference or an invitation?”

Another sigh. He looked at her. “An invitation. I’m fond of Vivaldi, too.”

“Then I’m glad you won’t have to miss it.” Catherine smiled and waited until she got some approximation of a smile back, even if a rueful, resigned one.

Handing him the towel she’d been using, she leaned a moment against his arm and whispered, “Confess it: you can deny me nothing.”

When she looked, his eyes had gone suddenly soft and gratifyingly intense. “I can deny you nothing.”

“There, now: that wasn’t so hard, was it?” she inquired cheerfully.

Another half-dozen children skittered up; only three or four hardy souls still remained in the water. Catherine let Vincent take care of the wrapping and left before he had to concoct some group they’d need to join whenever the pool emptied.

She’d wait until tomorrow evening, she thought, to explore the logistics of swimming below the cliffs, downstream from the falls — accompanied, of course, by a qualified lifeguard. Bathing suits optional.

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The day, Vincent thought as he returned to his chamber to prepare for the concert, had gone well. Though much remained to be done, good progress had been made on Marcia’s chamber. He’d worked most of the night — worked, in fact, to the point of exhaustion...which pleased him, since the night had therefore passed without dreams. Rising after a few hours’ sleep, he’d immediately resumed the excavation, pounding at the rock. He’d achieved another few feet of entryway before he’d had to break off to convene the reading group.

Good progress had been made there, too. They’d finished the next-to-last chapter of Jane Eyre, and Samantha had demonstrated the strength of her curiosity about how the story would turn out by absconding with the book. At least he thought it had been Samantha, last to leave. Truly, it didn’t matter: by the next session, the book would have reappeared as mysteriously as it had vanished. No child Below would mistreat a book.

The concentrated work he’d put in on Marcia’s chamber stilled any lingering uneasiness about passing the evening in anything as unproductive as listening to a concert. And the

stern discipline of stonecutting had steadied him, as it always did. Though he admitted it was harder on the hands than reading.

His palms were too layered in callus to blister. But gripping hammer and chisel for hours of methodical pounding had left his hands sore and stiff. No matter. They'd be fit again in the morning. They always were.

He felt he'd honorably earned his time with Catherine.

Having stripped off his grimy clothes, he filled the basin and washed off the surface rock dust. It was always better that way: bathing would have made it set like concrete — worse than the sand had been, in his fur.... Laying out fresh clothes, he was wistfully remembering the sea.

All went well until he tried to fasten the ties down the front of his loose shirt. His stiff fingers were clumsy on the laces. The knots slipped out and the laces escaped him, as if by intent. Leaning against his chair, he took a deep breath, experimentally flexed his hands, and concentrated harder. He could thread a needle: he could do this. It was merely a matter of concentration, control, and patience.

The lace broke in his hand. He flung it from him.

Frustration instantly transmuted into fury. Whirling, he yanked the sides of the shirt apart and the seams gave. A heedless sidewise kick slammed the chair against his wardrobe. And then the rage, having shattered his peace, was gone like something furtive sliding through a door that shut and vanished behind it.

Shaken, he settled slowly on his bed, uncomprehendingly staring at his awkward hands that broke things — that had become unfit for delicate adjustments. Whose brutal strength he couldn't control. As he turned and flexed them, unconsciously rocking back and forth, his hands seemed alien to him — less hands than claws.

He'd be late for the concert. Somehow he couldn't bring himself to care. But Catherine would be waiting, expecting him. He'd promised.

Dully rising, he pushed his wardrobe door wider and concentrated on choosing another shirt. Anything would do — anything without laces.

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Arranging the pillows on the tunnel floor, waiting for Vincent, Catherine reflected that she knew the exact moment when she'd begun considering him as a possible sexual partner. Or, more precisely, the moment when she first realized she'd been doing so — unconsciously and intermittently — for some time.

Considering what she now knew and suspected about him, it was an embarrassingly short time ago. She could have counted the weeks.

While planting a rosebush in a container on her balcony, she'd stuck her finger on a thorn. And the combination of pain and blood had caught Vincent off guard. Too fast for the mind to overrule and quite unselfconsciously, he'd caught up her hand and touched the bleeding finger to his tongue.

The implicit sensuality of the contact had electrified them both. Their eyes had locked with the awareness.

He'd immediately averted his eyes and would have turned his face away; but she wouldn't let him, cupping his chin almost roughly, forcing him to look at her and at the knowledge in her eyes. The moment had passed. They'd never spoken of it. But after that instant of revelation, it was no longer possible not to know...for either of them.

Incredibly to her now, it simply had never occurred to her that it was possible. From the first, they'd shared a particularly intense and unique relationship. Stronger than friendship or love; different from either. Spiritual. Transcendent. Pure and absolute. Like the bond itself, magical and inexplicable. She'd taken him at his word that it necessarily excluded passion. A word that clearly cost him a lot to say and to hold to. A word therefore validated by his own pain and regret that it was so.

A word, a limit, she'd been willing to accept. Too willing, she thought now. In the wake of trauma, the fragments of her shattered life had needed a catalyst to reform around. That catalyst had been Vincent. Something you needed so much, you weren't apt to question with any objectivity. Right then, merely surviving from one day to the next had consumed all her energies; passion had probably been dead last in her priorities.

Even before the attack that had brought them together, she'd never had all that much luck with passion. What had it gotten her? Well, for one thing, Steven Bass...who bullied her. And afterward, Tom Gunther. Who bullied her. And since the attack, very nearly, Elliot Burch. Who would almost certainly have bullied her, transformed her into a magnate's useless, ornamental consort, a desirable social asset worth investing in...except that she'd escaped her fascination in time and never given him the chance.

She had to admit she'd always been attracted to men who were just itching for the chance to make her over into somebody they could approve of. Domineering types who'd run her life. Tell her who to be. Demand that she conform to their expectations, as the condition upon which they'd regard her as lovable, desirable. And then there'd been Vincent, sweeping her into his protection at the lowest point in her life. Who'd looked at her slashed, disfigured face and found, nevertheless, an untouched beauty within. Who felt her despair, humiliation, and fear and calmly announced that he knew who she was: strong. A survivor. Like him. And then, incredibly, he'd escorted her home...and let her go, unconditionally, to prove to herself whether he'd been right or not.

To her, his faith had been nothing short of miraculous. It was like nothing she'd ever known, just as he was utterly different from any man she'd ever known. Accepting it, she'd accepted it all, implicitly — no part more strange and surprising than the others. She'd reconstructed her life around it, like a pearl...or a scintillant crystal. And never questioned his absolute conviction that sex could have no part in what burned between them, hotter, brighter, and more consuming than any passion she'd ever experienced.

In telling her what he believed, he'd also been telling her what she desperately wanted to hear — that their relationship existed on a different plane from anything she'd ever known. That she need do nothing to earn or hold his adoration, but had it as a free and irrevocable gift. That as long as she kept faith with this exalted, selfless ideal of spiritual

love that gave, and gave, and asked for nothing in return, she need never fear any physical aggression — from him or anybody else.

A strong inducement to be oblivious.

And she'd never questioned it. Not in tenderness or in dread or solace. Not in the deepest moments of communion, as when he'd literally snatched her out of death. If anything, that experience had reinforced the sense that their bond bypassed the physical, linking not bodies but souls. Their connection was so deep and so strong that it was almost impossible to notice, much less regret, what it didn't include. Possibilities surrendered or sacrificed seemed nothing compared to what they did have...until that moment on her balcony: the rose and the thorn.

Until she'd realized that all the while she'd thought him thrice-armored in virtuous chastity, like some medieval knight, he'd been miserably, hopelessly wanting her and trying to deny it...both to himself and to her. It had been a considerable revelation. All the while since, she'd been deciding what to do about it...and what she wanted to do about it.

As she'd said to Father, Vincent had become everything to her: father, brother, son; teacher, mentor, best and truest friend; rescuer, touchstone, and confidante. Everything except her lover. And he, at least, was convinced that could never be.

Since that evening, Catherine wasn't so sure.

It plainly wasn't that he considered sex intrinsically degrading or shameful, given how tolerantly he regarded informal couplings like Laura's with Jerry, or the union of Kanin and Olivia, solemnized only by Father and the community's acknowledgment. Vincent had been principally responsible for persuading Father to allow Lena, a prostitute, to take up residence Below. He still counted another prostitute, Lucy, among his friends Above. However strong his personal inhibitions, Vincent certainly was no prude.

Nor was he an innocent. Though lacking direct experience, Vincent was both an empath and an acute observer; Catherine suspected that if he'd been less discreet, he could have told her things about the sexual side of life in the tunnels and on the streets that would have curled her hair...or her toes.

Although he'd never detailed them, Vincent's misgivings were, she gathered, more specific and basic: he was afraid that if he once relaxed his massive and continual self-control, he might rip her to pieces. Which of course was absurd. His fears stemmed, it seemed, from some minor scratches he'd accidentally inflicted on a childhood friend, Lisa, in the throes of adolescent desire. Time and guilt had magnified the incident out of all proportion. Certainly it'd been nothing to justify swearing off sex for life. Certainly Lisa hadn't....

Absurd to imagine Vincent hurting anyone he loved. Catherine had never known a gentler, more considerate man. Or a shyer, less assertive one, which she found both frustrating and endearing. Her one brush with such primal dread had been the attack; and she'd long since put that behind her, except in occasional nightmares of being helplessly overpowered by something large, irresistible, and male that slashed and destroyed her, body and soul. Those were only dreams and had nothing to do with her and Vincent.

Some lingering subconscious echoes of such nightmare terror might, just possibly, have had a role in her inability to view Vincent as a man early in their relationship. There were, after all, some resonant correspondences: his size; his strength; his claws; the fangs. He did, on occasion, rip people to pieces. But only in her defense.

She admitted there'd been a time she'd been physically afraid of him and knew her mistrust had hurt him deeply. But that was long past. If she had a horror of being forced, what woman didn't? Anyway, the moment during the last concert they'd listened to here, that had ended with Vincent's head peaceably in her lap, had demonstrated that Vincent feared it even more than she did. All it had taken was a single word: his name. She was perfectly safe with him and always would be.

It needn't be all or nothing, right away. There were degrees, warm intimacies and cuddlings that she flushed, thinking about. And surely he'd like them too, a man so uniquely sensitive and responsive to touch. There'd be a lot of gentle exploring they could do before either of them had to fully and irrevocably decide. There'd be time for indecisions, approaches, reverses, meetings, soft sensual intoxications.... Time together. Like tonight.

She needed her private times with him. She wasn't going to give them up without a struggle. She loved him and wanted to expand that love to include whatever either of them could give...and take...and share.

Maybe this wasn't the best time to try to change things. Though Vincent seemed outwardly composed, Paracelsus had hurt him terribly and broken his confidence in everything, including himself. The last thing Vincent needed now was pressure to open channels of emotion and sensation already scalded raw. But he did need reassurance. He needed somebody's patient, tolerant love and unshaken faith in who he was — the same as he'd given her in her own time of shattering. It was her turn now. Maybe now, after such upheaval, with all the old patterns of constraint broken, was exactly the time to forge a new stability, another level of connection.

She imagined looking deep into his marvelous sky-colored eyes, so expressively human...and having all her desire by giving him his. She imagined his joy at realizing there'd never been anything to be so afraid of, after all.

The concert was beginning: a cello concerto. Vivaldi, as advertised. And Vincent still hadn't come. Catherine knelt on the pillows, unworried. He'd promised. He would come.

He could deny her nothing.

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Vincent ambled along the passage, subtly disheveled and carelessly unaware of it, absently scratching. When he heard the music he remembered where he'd been going. When he saw Catherine, raptly kneeling in a dark blue dress glowing with moonlight, he remembered why.

Centered in the low round of short connecting passage, she seemed an exquisite portrait in a frame. Her head was tilted back; her eyes were shut. Lost in the piercing beauty of the music, she seemed one with it, rightfully partaking of its glorious

simplicities. A visitor from some ethereal, timeless dimension where music had its being.

Vincent halted, utterly arrested, able to do nothing but stare.

Baroque; symphonic; storms of strings. The Four Seasons, second movement, his mind supplied; and he remembered where he was, and that he was late.

He tried to check himself: his orderliness, his fitness to be seen. It would do. It would have to.

Ducking to enter the cross-passage, he whispered reverently, "Catherine...."

She heard him and looked around, smiling. "I was afraid you'd forgotten."

"No...." He had no sense that she was angry or disappointed in him; so he supposed that was all right. "I didn't forget."

Clasping his hand, Catherine drew him forward into the larger space, under the grate. The music was everywhere. The moonlight was everywhere. Catherine's touch dazzled and disoriented him. She was so happy....

She was saying, "I wanted you to hear this, tonight. The whole evening's Vivaldi. So far, it's been wonderful." Taking both his hands, she drew him forward again, toward the cushions on the floor, inviting, "Come, sit with me."

He concentrated on settling, as a task that required thought, control. He lost the music for a moment into a rushing, senseless cacophony. But as soon as he'd found balance, the harmonies smoothed out again and caught him up like a river in whose strong currents he might simply drift. But he mustn't allow that. He stayed locked, staring straight before him.

Catherine had seated herself a little apart from him. No longer touching. That helped him concentrate on lasting out this time, keeping his promise.

Catherine presently remarked, among the swirling violins, "I love this music. So full of life!"

She glanced to him for a response but he had none. His mind seemed emptied of words. But she seemed to accept his silence, so he supposed it hadn't been a major lapse.

He could smell her hair. And other varied personal scents he could usually block out. Soap; the pungent mint of toothpaste; the leather of her shoes; deodorant, which itself had a smell. The moisture of her skin. Other moistures, each a different flavor.... He hoped she wouldn't suspect. It embarrassed people to realize how intimately he sometimes was aware of them. It was an intrusion; a liberty he couldn't help taking. More strongly than touch, it conveyed to him a sense of her physical being. It was everywhere, surrounding him. With every breath, it entered him. There was nowhere within him Catherine was not touching.

It would be wrong to take that as meaning anything — as invitation. She couldn't help it. It was him. His fault. His stressed and hyperacute senses. He held himself still as wood and tried to control his breath.

The moonlight grew insistent, demanding his notice, flaring red-tinged before his unfocused gaze as though angry he hadn't been paying it enough attention. Catherine's

face, turning toward him, was a shimmering moon that filled all his vision as her voice asked tentatively, "Are you all right?"

He thought about that, to separate the sounds and distinguish the sense. Gruffly, he said, "Yes..." and it was apparently enough. She subsided. The music continued, tangling itself into intricacies he could no longer follow. It didn't matter. All he had to do was be here and last out the time until the music stopped.

He found himself remembering how it had felt to lay his head in her lap. So cherished. So accepted and loved. He remembered the pressures, before that: her breasts flattened against his chest, his arousal focusing everything on itself, painfully ready; her small, abrupt motions that never could have freed her but angered him as all resistance angered him; the stimulating flare of her fear arising from her depths, touching and opening the deepest places within him, intensifying the hunger and the rapport; being, for that endless instant, of one breath with her, all the subtle rhythms converging.

He wondered if Catherine would allow him to find those rhythms again. If that was why she'd insisted on their being here, alone, with no possible interruption. People seldom gave direct voice to what he could plainly sense they wanted. Sometimes they didn't even know what they wanted, and would deny it, but he could sense it all the same, beating just beneath the skin....

"This part," Catherine's glad voice remarked, "is like flying."

He concentrated to make out the words against the screaming of the violins.

"Flying...?"

She was smiling at him. The contours of her face blurred into the red-shifted haze of light and scent and jagged noise. "Isn't it? Two birds — soaring and swooping. Soaring and swooping..." Her arms undulated and jerked — strange, disturbing motions. They made him feel dizzy and ill. He wanted them to stop. He could stop them.

Shaking his head sharply, he tried to dismiss such thoughts. Holding himself rigidly still, he tried to remember stone, that the waves pounded against but could not move, hard granite engulfed by soft waves, deep within them, the torn, ecstatic foam, the beating tidal pressures like the beat of blood.

She leaned toward him, touched him. It was like fire. "What's wrong?"

He was breathing in great gasps now, all of it coming in, flooding him, bearing him away beyond sense or choice. "No," he gasped. "No!"

"Vincent?" Her face was enormous, her eyes great mirrors of darkness. "Talk to me!"

Vincent stumbled to his feet, away from her. Flinging back his head, he shouted it all out of him — a raw, feral scream of pain and pressure and release: "Nooooo!"

Everything seemed shocked into silence by that erupting unhuman howl. And in that silence, he realized how he'd betrayed himself, revealed himself. Realized what he'd felt. And what he'd wanted. And what dark thing had so very nearly captured him...that he'd so very nearly loosed against Catherine.

He could feel her appalled stare against his bent, shuddering shoulders but could not bear to meet her eyes. She'd know now. Surely now she would have seen....

Abruptly ducking, he was through the short cross-passage and off down the tunnel, hearing Catherine's astonished, anxious voice calling after him, "Vincent...!"

He didn't turn or pause.

## 12

Her calls to wait unheeded, maybe unheard, Catherine pursued Vincent all the way back to his chamber. Leaning, breathless, in the entryway, she found him agitatedly pacing and muttering to himself:

"—I must be strong. I must not let them see. Or frighten them. And I must prepare...carefully. Prepare...for whatever may happen—"

Suddenly he whirled and saw her — and reacted as if she'd scared the living daylights out of him, caught him doing something terribly personal. She'd never seen him so thoroughly unstrung. And his chamber was like that, too — bed unmade, a chair overturned, clothes strewn about, the wardrobe standing agape.

Gently, she said, "Tell me what I can do."

He jerked his eyes away. As though the state of his chamber embarrassed him, he ranged around making abrupt, random efforts to tidy it: collecting a torn shirt draped over the wardrobe's hanging door and pitching it inside, righting the chair. As though concealing the evidence of his turmoil could control it.

He declared roughly, "It will pass."

He shoved the wardrobe door shut. It promptly drifted open. He stood, shoulders slumped, hands clenched. Shivering.

Normality wasn't working anymore. Even politeness was failing him. He looked ashamed. Defeated. And explosively tense.

Half choked with concern and sympathy, she asked, "What is it you're feeling?"

He looked at her with wide, still eyes. "Words," he said at last, haltingly. "The words...would only frighten you."

Bluntly, she declared, "I'm already frightened."

For a long moment they regarded each other, as though her admission made a connection, however tentative.

Softly, barely more than a whisper, he confessed, "So am I."

"What happened?" she asked carefully, watching him. "What is it? You...lost yourself?"

The momentary rapport was ended. She'd set him off again: he spun to his table and began stacking the books lying there. Then he leaned on the pile, head averted, still avoiding her eyes. "Yes. I...lost myself."

It was too easy. As though the phrase were an acceptable substitute for something else, that he would not say: some other, rawer confession he found intolerable. He was still trying to slam all the doors, bear it all himself, share only the pleasant things and shut her out of his pain.

She reached toward him but he dodged away convulsively. She said, "You've been through an ordeal. What Paracelsus did to you is—"

"He's dead!" Vincent erupted, his back to her. "I should sleep...peacefully." He slammed a spread hand against his heart as though caught by a sudden pang, breathing in rough gasps — anything but peaceful.

Following with almost tiptoe care, Catherine insisted, "You've been in a struggle for your life. There are wounds...in deep places. Let me help you."

He looked around with a terrible shyness, an unspeakable sad resignation, and let her come into his arms.

"You must not worry, Catherine. The worst is...behind us."

She didn't believe him. And what was worse, she knew that neither did he. She held on hard, hearing his difficult breath, the heavy pounding of his heart against the prison of his ribs.

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When, finally, he seemed calmer, Catherine let him talk her into leaving and exchanged good-nights. But once in the passage, she made a dash for Father's study.

Descending the stair, she demanded without preamble, "What is happening to him?"

Standing by the desk, Father didn't even pretend not to know what she was talking about. "He's been under a tremendous strain these past weeks. It's taken its toll."

She wasn't about to be put off with generalizations: Vincent had already tried that, and she wasn't buying it.

"Oh, no, Father — it's more than that. Something is very wrong!"

Father surveyed her measuringly, as though deciding how much of the truth she could take. Then he confirmed curtly, "Yes. It is."

Catherine settled into the chair nearest the desk, both relieved that Father would give her answers and uneasily braced against what those answers might be.

Father continued, "I'm not sure that any of us can begin to understand. How can we know what he must endure? What inner forces he has to battle...in order to be who he is...to us? The Vincent we know is a fragile balance — a balance that requires every fiber of his being to maintain itself. That he can do it at all is a miracle.... And now, that balance has been lost."

Judges spoke sentences that way. And Catherine wasn't comfortable with Father's implied distinction between "the Vincent we know" and some unspecified, mysterious other Vincent they presumably didn't. She wouldn't concede that. There was only one Vincent...who was frightened to the point of admitting it and in almost visible torment. But she wouldn't debate such a thing now.

As Father settled into his chair, Catherine declared, "I want to help him."

Father gave her a warm glance. "I know that."

She was reviewing the past week, freshly aware of Vincent's determined avoidance of privacy...until tonight. And tonight's totally unexpected eruption. There clearly had been some factor Vincent had been aware...and wary...of, that she hadn't known. Or known to take seriously.

Though the idea made her heart contract, she asked, "Do you think it would be better...if I stayed away?"

Father looked surprised — no wonder, considering her past refusal to let Father make her end what he'd once called the "tragic mistake" of her relationship with Vincent. Father even seemed moved.

"Catherine — dear Catherine. You must know by now that you're part of that miracle." Their eyes met, acknowledging themselves at last fully allies. Acknowledging, as well, Catherine's right to be concerned. "You saw him...and all that he is.... And you gave him...you gave him a dream" Father added, his voice a little unsteady. "For that, I shall be ever grateful."

Touched, Catherine bowed her head a moment, responding gravely, "Thank you, Father." Then she frowned, continuing to sort the options. "Do you think there's a possibility that what's he's going through might be...treated?"

"I'm not sure this is in the domain of medicine," Father responded heavily — again, from him, a considerable admission.

"Maybe there's...a medication? A sedative, even?"

"His biochemistry is...very different." Father folded his hands, looking both grave and uncomfortable, clearly deciding whether to continue. After a moment, he went on, "There was a time, in his adolescence, when something like this did occur. We tried sedatives...and other treatments. It only seemed to aggravate the condition. In the end we were forced to...restrain him."

Imagining a cage, chains, Catherine reacted in shock. Father's wincing expression said he'd not only anticipated her reaction but, sadly, shared it.

"It was the darkest time of his life," Father stated. "And mine. He would fall into deliriums and these would go on for days—"

"What happened?"

Father regarded her quietly. "He came a breath away from dying. All his vital signs stopped. And then...it simply passed." His sigh admitted that the passing of the crisis was as much a mystery to him as had been its onset and nature.

Urgently Catherine asked, "What can we do now?"

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Sitting on the edge of his bed, Vincent was being very calm, very methodical in thinking about death. First he'd.... And then he'd.... And Father would.... And the classes could.... But Catherine.

It all stopped there. He couldn't get past it. He'd begin all over, review everything, and then it would all collapse at the thought of Catherine.

Catherine would be devastated. Might even be destroyed. There had to be some way to prepare her for the loss. Something he could do that would make her know that beyond loss, there still remained hope so long as life lasted. So that when he was gone, she wouldn't merely continue, endlessly grieving, but would seek and reach out to the happy life that had always been her destiny and her right, from which her relationship with him had temporarily deflected her. If the only legacy of all they'd been, and hoped, and dreamed were the destruction of Catherine's capacity for love and joy, only then would his death be truly bitter to him.

Fists clenched between his knees, he thought about it. There was something. Something he'd read once; but only the ghost of affirmation and reassurance remained in his memory. Not the words themselves. But he'd known it once, it was so close....

Frustrated, hunting, he was instantly catapulted into motion, sorting first through the books on his table, then through those in his bookcases. He didn't look at titles. Without being aware of it, he was focusing his search on smell, touch: the weight of one particular book in his hands, the remembered textures of its covers, the distinctive sent of its glue and its pages.

Words were withdrawing from him. Other more visceral perceptions dominated.

As he searched he urged and berated himself, "Find it. Find it! Can't stop— I read it! Where?"

He'd heft each book, then fling it aside when it didn't match the shape in his mind. After pawing roughly through the volumes in his wardrobe, he dove across his bed to check those stacked in front of his fanlight, tossing them in all directions. He still hadn't found it. Standing, staring fiercely at nothing, he tried to think where else a book might try to hide from him.

hurling, he yanked open his wooden chest and started rummaging in there, pitching whatever wasn't book, or rightbook. The recognition came slowly, from his hand to his eye. He'd just touched it: that had been the one. Rightbook. He pounced on it, captured it on the floor. He had it now. It couldn't escape.

Absently shoving sweaty, disordered hair out of his face, he stood and started rapidly thumbing pages to find the right shape: two columns, several solid stanzas — he could imagine it, remember it...

Pacing, concentrating, he forced the marks on the page into words, into sense, and spoke that sense in hoarse bursts:

*Though they go mad they shall be sane*

*Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again*

*Though lovers be lost — love shall not;*

*And death shall have no dominion*

That was it. That was what he'd been hunting. It made the right shape in his mind.

Panting, he held the volume against his forehead as though the contact might help the words penetrate, help him hold onto them. Calmer, he sank onto the edge of his bed, checking whether he truly did have them now, reciting the verse again to himself — not merely the sense, but the words.

That was it. The loss of a lover was not the loss of love itself. Which survived. Which was always a possibility. As his own experience demonstrated. If he, being what he was, could find such a miracle, then surely it would be possible for Catherine when he was gone. Wounds healed, losses faded. Beyond grief, the living memory of their love would remain to guide and strengthen her: give her the courage to reach out again to life and possibilities. And when she loved again, death would have no dominion.

The thought galvanized him, brought him at once to his feet, holding the book like a rick, like a talisman.

He reflected, "She must hear this."

While there was still time. While he could still speak the words to her. Catching up his cloak, he strode out of his chamber, headed for the quickest route to Catherine's balcony. Intent. Hunting. Going to Catherine.

The French doors of her bedroom were dark. Having rapped on them, quick and hard, Vincent paced the balcony, feverishly muttering the words to himself like a litany of protection, of sanity. His gift to Catherine. After two lines, he lost patience and spun back to the doors, calling out, "Catherine!" Nothing answered him. The doors stayed dark.

It didn't occur to him she might not be there. She had to be, because he had to speak to her. His need required her. Therefore she was, for some reason, refusing to come, to answer his urgency.

In sudden motion again, he forced himself through the second two lines. When they were done, he couldn't wait any longer and lunged to the other set of doors behind which a lamp burned on a table.

He shouted, "Catherine! You must hear this!" heedless of anyone else who might hear and wonder what a massive, cloaked, menacing figure was doing on Catherine Chandler's balcony, shouting, late at night.

Catherine still wasn't answering him. Was still refusing to come, to accept the gift he'd brought her. Suddenly that was beyond bearing. With one powerful shove, Vincent broke the locked doors and burst into the forbidden sanctuary, Catherine's apartment.

His arm brushed the lamp, which fell and shattered, startling him. He wheeled, taking the noise as attack. But the lamp lay broken, dark: no threat. He forgot it.

She couldn't hide: he'd find her. Scanning the alien, smooth walls, he caught sight of motion and jerked around to confront it. He saw the image of a beast's dark-flushed face: hot, feral eyes and a snarling muzzle that exposed white, strong canines, all within a lank, disordered mass of mane. Challenging him. Mocking.

Here: in Catherine's apartment.

Quicker than thought, he struck at the intruder, the rival, in the unrecognized mirror. At that same instant, it struck at him. The brittle barrier separating them shattered. The beast's image vanished. But he'd been hurt: a shock of energy, of pain, had entered his hands at the contact. They'd become the beast's hands, that had done violence where no violence must ever be. Backing unsteadily away, he regarded them uncomprehendingly.

He had no sense of Catherine or where she might be hiding. But her scent was everywhere, attesting to her presence. She didn't want his gift. Furious, he flung the book through the broken doors into the night.

Weaving, he wandered farther into the apartment to find Catherine. He'd forgotten why except that he wanted her, and she hadn't come, and that was refusal, rejection, abandonment. That was rage, that dizzied and sickened him with its force.

He put a hand against a cool upright thing to steady himself. But it was like everything else in this forbidden place: too fragile for his touch. As he lurched against it, it tipped and the room tilted with it. He stumbled on an unexpected step. Falling, the tall glass cabinet struck him...and burst into shards that seemed to whirl in his darkening vision like ice, the first breath of an all-encompassing cold that stole his strength and then his words and then his mind.

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Entering and switching on the lights, Catherine noticed the doors to her balcony standing open on the night. Her immediate thought was that her apartment had been broken into. It was now dangerous to be here. The intruder still might be—

Then she saw a dark, long-legged shape sprawled unmoving on the floor, surrounded by the shattered glass and frame of one of her pair of glass and chrome étagères. Her heart gave a great lurch: Vincent. She ran to him, dropped down carefully because of the glass, called his name.

His eyes opened — dull, unseeing.

“Can you hear me?”

His eyes drifted shut again.

She thought he perhaps had driven off the intruder and been hurt in the encounter. But her patting hands found no wounds, no blood; and the layers of clothing had kept him from being cut by the glass. She glanced frantically toward the phone, thinking ambulance; hospital, knowing at once that was impossible. None of her automatic responses to injury, illness, was any help now.

The glass shards enclosed him like a barbed hedge. Before she could move him, before she could even attempt to tend him, that had to be cleaned away. She pushed aside the louvered doors of her kitchen alcove and returned with dustpan, whiskbroom, and trash can. When she'd removed all the big pieces of glass, she started gingerly rescuing from the remaining mess her small treasures the case had displayed: crystal and porcelain eggs, seashells, enamelware trinkets. Her hand momentarily hovered over the cracked

pink cup that had been a Limoges egg — a gift from her father — then resolutely left it among the rest of the sharp rubbish. Her eyes stung; she ignored the stinging. People were more important than things. Sometimes more important than dreams. She would not be sad. She would simply count that egg as having hatched.

Sweeping up the fragments, she abruptly noticed the French doors again, and the night beyond. Anybody could look in. Anybody could see. That it would have taken binoculars or a telescope made no difference to her sense of dangerous exposure: she'd been spied on before. Nobody Above must ever see Vincent: that had become axiomatic, almost instinctual — the automatic wariness of any wild thing.

She sprang to shut the doors. The lock, she found, was broken — the doors had been burst inward. She couldn't think about that now and impatiently propped a dining chair to hold them shut, then returned to Vincent, carefully collecting the last slivers of glass she spotted glinting in the strands of her rug.

Crouching by him, she drew one of his unresisting arms across her shoulders and tried to straighten. She might as well have tried to lift a bus. She found she couldn't even tug him into a sitting position long enough to prop pillows behind him. She folded her arms, anxiously biting her lip. There he was and there he was plainly going to stay until he regained consciousness and could move under his own power. So she threw herself at a more manageable weight, her couches: shoving them out of the way by grunting inches, clearing space to move. Then she brought out blankets and enclosed him within them as best she could.

His forehead was cold, clammy. His hands were frigid. She clasped one against her breasts, rocking, trying desperately to think what to do. Medicine was no use, Father had told her. Although that was frightening, it was also reassuring: there was nothing to be done, then, except what she could do. Be with him. Love him. Hope. No special qualifications needed.

Turning the lights off and the heat up, she shoved one of the couches to a different angle, to be a backrest for her. Settling on the floor, against the couch, she nudged and eased and pulled until she had her legs on either side of Vincent's shoulders and his head in her lap.

He'd begun to shiver, abrupt shudders running through him. She pulled the blankets up to his chin, then hugged him a second. Brushing his ragged bangs aside, she kissed him.

All this while, he hadn't wakened. Fear closed her throat.

She drew another blanket up around her shoulders, so that they were tented within it. Warm. Then she began slowly, slightly rocking, patting his shoulders, stroking his face, humming to keep the fear away, thinking he might feel it through the bond, even in his unconsciousness; and she couldn't allow that.

It was her turn now, to hold and comfort him. To be his strength, his healing, his safe place.

Finally, the humming eased the panicked constriction of her throat enough to let her softly sing the words of the lullaby:

*“Sleep, my pretty one; rest now, my dearest one. Close your eyes, the day is nearly done....”*

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Vincent was deep in the hunt. Every sense awake, alert, and all the surrounding world therefore vividly alive around him, he moved fast through a hodgepodge cityscape of alleys, corners, stark upright surfaces, half-lidded bent garbage cans and hanging fire escapes that stank of rust. Among harsh lamp-cast shadows he was a larger darkness, untamed and purposeful.

If he were seen, he would die. That awareness mattered only because of its corollary: when he was seen, when he revealed himself, he would kill, striking back at unquestioned threat. He was permitted. Loosed against threat, he was permitted anything. His danger was his sanction.

Catherine’s fear was beacon, catalyst, and target, a quickening momentum as irresistible as that which drew a boulder downhill. He was close now. He could feel it, strong and directional as a bonfire’s heat.

A wall blocked his way. Gathering himself tightly, to be one thing, one force, he broke through that wall and in the dust cloud stood roaring challenge at the faceless figure that held the white gleam of a knife at Catherine’s throat. A man: always a man. Both danger and rival — rightful prey.

The attacker’s recoil and disbelieving terror were gratifying, as was Catherine’s surge of relief and triumph; the fierce gladness; her approval and pride in him — his aspect and his coming, that was the confirmation of unspoken promises, the deep compact between them.

Roaring, he did her will and his own upon the attacker, knowing in that moment a purity of movement and intent never available to him except at this burning convergence between love and death. For that moment, he was whole and beautiful and perfect in his ferocity. It felt wonderful. The reaching and striking, nothing held back, everything within him flowing easily and unconflicted toward the transcendent instant when hunter and victim fully met, touched, and became what they were. All within the glorious aura of Catherine’s stirred and intense awareness and favor.

The victim died, fell. The sweet, hot scent of blood incensed the air. Exultant, he turned to claim from Catherine his natural and inevitable prize — her intimacy, her body, the fullness of her favor — in the primal flow of one consummation into another. He’d won it, earned it — honorably, in battle. Her fear had summoned and loosed him to this state. Her love had greeted and approved it. Thoroughly aroused, he required and expected her surrender so that he could give her the gift of all he was.

And yet, as his demands became direct and insistent, she tried to refuse herself to him. She attempted to push him away, then to scramble free and escape. When he would allow neither, she struck at him, screaming.

A part of him wanted to draw back, horrified, finding justification for her refusal: no woman could love or accept such a beast. No woman ever had. But the other part was

strong with the wild momentum of the kill, starved with a bitter hunger, and kindled to rage at her resistance. He would not draw back. He would not let go. He shook free of whatever tried to restrain him.

The compact's incompleteness broke the mortal linkage between destruction and creation. She wanted the beast he was to be only death for her and at her will; never love, at his. The beast he was skewed passion into violence and, at the height of his heedless power, would break any barrier that kept him from his desire. He was not tame, not to be kept in perpetual starved submission, to come when called and be dismissed at another's whim when the danger was past. The urgencies that drove him became solely his and lost all savor of compassion. He tolerated no rejection, no challenge, no limits. He would not be denied.

As he reached for her, she vanished. He would be forever alone. He flung back his head and howled.

But she was here.

Desperate for reassurance, for her touch, he was being touched, floating in the impossible comfort of her embrace. Inert and drained of all strength, he lay in a bright place, his head in Catherine's lap, and she was slowly stroking his hair.

She was here and murmuring, "It's all right. It's all right."

Though he felt his howl of anguish still raw in his throat, it had been a dream. Nothing had happened to destroy Catherine's trust. Somehow he'd turned the ferocious, inadmissible hunger aside yet again, again shut the compact away deep within himself in its aching incompleteness. Asked nothing. Expected nothing. Demanded nothing. Merely accepted the miracle of Catherine's living self as enough and all there could be. Somehow he'd driven the beast away in time and kept Catherine safe.

As his vision momentarily cleared, her face shimmered before him, luminous with caring. Infinitely beautiful.

His heavy eyes fell shut and he relaxed, unquestioning, into the complex mystery of her warm presence and concern. After a time, the warmth increased to a fevered agitation and he was thrust into another dream of visionary sharpness and intensity. It seemed to him he was running through the dark. Running to his living beacon, his only direction. Running to Catherine....

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He roused again to a strange, diffuse brightness and to the touch of a cool, wet cloth against his pounding forehead.

Kneeling beside him, holding the cloth, Catherine muttered worriedly, "You're burning up...."

As he made the effort to lift his eyes and focus on her face, something moved behind her. A dark, fanged face leered at him: menacing Catherine, who hadn't seen it, was still unaware of her danger. Somehow it had escaped from dream, from within him, from the

far sides of mirrors, and now crouched behind Catherine. Waiting. Taunting him with the visible fact of its freedom. It was loose in the world. Here: in Catherine's home.

At once he bared his teeth and gutturally hissed at the beast in warning and threat. He'd kill it if it tried to harm Catherine: it knew that. But it was taking advantage of his weakness to force the inner cage, challenge the prohibition he'd laid upon it.

Fixing its wild, hungry eyes with his fevered ones, he growled and lunged across Catherine to strike at it.

"What?" she demanded, startled and alarmed. "What is it? No. No!"

The beast had vanished. Vincent let himself lapse back, exhausted but satisfied he'd driven it away. But only for the moment. It would be back as soon as his vigilance failed. He must stay awake to fight it off when it returned — bolder, stronger as his own strength waned.

When it dared, it would fight. It always fought. That was all it knew, and its being. No truce was possible. He had to be ready. Somehow he must keep it away from Catherine. But he was so tired, so terribly tired, and the cloth was so cool against his face....

He sagged and sank into a new dream in which Catherine, relentlessly pursued and cornered, raised a pistol and shot him. He had a fading instant to be proud of her, and glad, before he died.

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Catherine had finally been able to track down Peter Alcott — physician, helper, Father's friend and, incidentally, her godfather — through his answering service and two pediatric hospitals. He came about eight, the night of the second day, and left with a promise to tell Father what was happening...and with a sample of Vincent's blood.

Having reset all the security latches behind him, Catherine thumped down cross-legged on a couch and leaned her head back into its corner, wearily rubbing her eyes.

Sending Vincent's blood for analysis might be a risk, Peter had warned: the lab technicians might well see something they'd never seen before. Dammit, Catherine thought with a kind of incredulous fury, even his blood isn't safe, Above! And she remembered Father's offhand comment, His biochemistry is...very different. Accent on the "very." Wasn't there any end to it, the matter-of-fact and most unwelcome evidence of how thoroughly alien Vincent was?

Scraping both palms down her face, she looked at him: jerking and muttering on the incongruous ruffled pillows she'd finally managed to get under him. One arm flung out, and Catherine smiled, recalling how a random swing like that had sent her banging on her rear while Peter had been examining him. And then she stopped smiling, remembering the grave, wary expression she'd caught on Peter's face as she'd picked herself up, giggling at her pratfall, mildly slaphappy from worry and weariness. Her answering glare had nailed him into silence and so he hadn't actually said it; but she

knew his thought, all the same: Peter was worried about her safety, alone with Vincent...under these circumstances.

And now that Peter was gone, now that it wasn't a question of loyalty, Catherine started considering soberly whether Peter might be right.

In love and in kindness, she'd always done her best to ignore Vincent's differences and focus on those aspects of his appearance and especially of his character that transcended difference — his idealism; his intelligence; his patience and kindness; his continual willingness to put concern for others before any for himself; his profound love of poetry, literature, music. She'd have died rather than make any remark about his fur, his fangs, his claws, the everyday fact of his enormous and preternatural strength and agility, his weird prescient visions, his acute eyesight in darkness.

His empathic sensitivity, she tended to regard as merely a heightened compassion so it could be something she could understand and share. The bond, that unarguable strangeness, she wasn't directly aware of and so could forget most of the time.

When she looked into his face she tended to focus on his expressive, beautiful — and entirely human — eyes and discount the winged brows, flattened feline nose and cleft upper lip, the large canines on whose account he seldom smiled, so as to keep them hidden. Unless she was actually touching it, she could consider the soft and never-shaved down on his cheeks and chin as beard stubble, like any man's. But it wasn't. It was fur. And though she'd never been rude enough, or bold enough, to confirm her conjecture, she was reasonably certain it didn't end at his neck or wrists.

Now she wondered if she'd been right to discount the unfitting things. If in refusing to acknowledge all the anomalies — the number and scope of them! — she'd been dismissing the forest to see only the one preferred tree. If in trying not to embarrass him, she'd been treating him like a cripple or a freak whose deformities it would have been tactless and unkind to remark upon. But they weren't deformities: they were Vincent. Maybe even the most of Vincent.

To Father and Peter, with their scientists' objectivity, it was a matter long since accepted and beyond question: down to the cellular level and demonstrably, Vincent wasn't a man at all. Or as Father, then bitter with mistrust, had once put it, she would inevitably hurt Vincent because "Part of him is a man." Which amounted to the same thing because it meant another — and perhaps greater — part...wasn't?

Catherine thought about that now — about whether her expectations of the man, Vincent, were unfair and unreasonable for the...creature it seemed everybody else accepted Vincent as being.

If, in intimacy — even that between patient and caregiver — he ever hurt her, and knew that he'd done so, he'd die. Vincent had told her that dozens of times. It didn't matter whether she believed it: he did. Nothing gross or melodramatic: he'd simply stop fighting the daily battle to live, the way he'd done in the cage where the two amoral Columbia scientists had confined him.

As it happened, she did believe it. So she wondered now, soberly and dispassionately, whether in tending him like this, she was being willfully reckless in her determination to prove there was no risk since Vincent was just a man and what he had wasn't catching. Who was she proving it to? And was it worth proving?

Was she expecting more of Vincent that he truly had to offer? For him, there was no middle ground: in compensation for his differences, his own expectations held him to a nearly superhuman standard of conduct in all things. If he failed of that transcendent perfection, was the only alternative to fall, not merely to the human, but to the subhuman, the bestial?

If so, it would be the death of hope for their love. But was hope worth his life? Was the risk worth taking on an all-or-nothing toss...not merely for her sake, but for his?

Father, whose love for Vincent was beyond question, had, in similar circumstances, imposed restraints on his foster son. He'd described them to Catherine: a leather harness with cuffs to keep Vincent's hands locked to his chest. In effect, a sort of strait-jacket. And then straps and chains to keep Vincent on the bed, not rambling through the tunnels where he might contrive to fall or become lost. Father had stopped short of a muzzle. He'd done without that. But he had, he'd admitted with something like a wry smile, gone through a considerable number of spoons, and only heavy gloves had allowed him to keep all his fingers....

And that had been Father!

Conscious and in control, Vincent was someone she unhesitatingly would trust with her life, and had trusted him so countless times. He'd never failed her. But he now was neither conscious nor in control. He was deep in delirium and sometimes fighting off hallucinatory enemies: snarling, groaning, striking out at them. One swat like the one that had sent her sprawling on her rear could easily have broken her neck if it'd landed a little higher. It wouldn't be intentional, no possible blame...but it could happen. She had to face that it could happen.

Dammit, come to that, he could simply roll over on her and crush the breath from her body if she couldn't get him off soon enough!

Was her selective and deliberate blindness fair to Vincent? After he'd tried so desperately hard to keep her safe and to be only a man for her, was it unkind, ungrateful, and reckless of her to seize avoidable jeopardy in order to prove a point?

Was Vincent a man? Or was he a creature of some unknown sort who'd been forced by circumstances into an uneasy masquerade as a man for the stake of acceptance? Because human was the only acceptable standard and any divergence from that norm was, by definition, abnormal? Because beyond that line of difference lay only freak; monster; creature; beast?

He'd been severely agitated when Peter was examining him — evidently aware, on some level, that someone other than Catherine was with him, was touching him. Peter's caution had been plain in the way he'd balanced on his toes beside Vincent: ready to duck or jump if he had to but not letting that deter him from attending to this other godchild whom he'd known practically from birth...as he had her. The concern and determination would have been the same if it'd been Catherine in the throes of fever and delusion. But at Catherine's bedside, Peter wouldn't have been poised to run.

Vincent had quieted down since, while she'd been meditating upon him. But now he was beginning to move again, tossing and grimacing and reaching as if anxiously searching for something he couldn't find. For her, she knew. Only when she was holding him could he settle into anything approximating peaceful rest...and not always then. But

it had been quite consistent. Whenever she had to leave him for more than a minute or two — to grab something to eat or use the bathroom — she'd find him flailing around and muttering by the time she got back. Disconnected phrases, senseless, but repeated so many times she now knew them by memory: no dominion. lovers be lost. through the sea. though they be mad.

The phrasing and cadences told her it was poetry. Something that plainly haunted his imagination, with an edge of desperation to the compulsive repetitions. And the only words he'd spoken since she'd found him in this state.

His fever must be rising, she thought clinically. Either that or he was going into another siege of chills. Sometimes, in the chilled times, he knew her — she could see it in his eyes, whether anguished or mutely adoring. Sometimes, painfully, they were apologetic and turned away, wasting on shame the precious instants of connection and communion between them.

Unfolding from the couch, Catherine stooped to lay her palm on his forehead. Immediately the agitated jerking stopped and he breathed out a long sigh. His skin was cold: it would be chills, then, for the next few hours. Straightening, Catherine looked from him to the disordered pile of blankets tossed aside after the last bout. It seemed to be about a six hour cycle, from chills to fever and back again.

The moment she'd risen, the fretful reaching began again. He knew she was gone. He was reaching out to her.

With sudden decision, she scooped up the blankets and began roughly stuffing them around him. Then she stretched out beside him and held him, giving him her warmth, holding on hard, rejecting all caution, all categories.

It didn't matter what he was. She knew who he was: Vincent, whom she loved without reservation; who was sick, and needed her. Whatever the physical differences, she knew his heart, that was hers. Nothing else mattered.

When presently his eyes fluttered open and his gaze steadied, she said to him at once, firmly, "I'm here."

She stroked his hair, the furred cheeks, the slightly open and alien mouth. Then she met the wonderful, incongruous blue eyes again, that wanted so much to speak and couldn't. She cradled his shuddering body against her.

"You'll come through this, Vincent. You'll come through this."

His eyes no longer strained to speak but simply, softly regarded her until, inevitably, they slowly shut. She fell asleep with her cheek against his, breathing the sweetly musky scent of his hair.

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When Vincent woke, the strange, pleasant brightness was back again —shadowless and lying equally upon everything, not directional like the light of a lamp or a candle. Objects seemed independent and unconnected in such light, each at its precise distance from the others, nothing blurred or superimposed.

He'd wakened to Catherine's absence and yet the reassurance of her voice. Speaking, as he saw, into the telephone. Sitting at the glass table in her dining area, with a larger and stronger brightness behind her, where the balcony doors stood shut, with their gauzy curtains.

Not so very far away. She would come back soon. It was all right.

Catherine was wearing old, wrinkled clothes. Her face looked drawn, tired, and unhappy. Perhaps because she was lying: without need of thought, he knew that, from her tone and the flavor of her unease, that the bond conveyed to him.

Catherine was telling the phone, "No, I don't need anything. It's just this stomach flu.... Could you have Rita meet with the Wilkinsons' attorney?... Great. Thanks, Joe. I'll call you tomorrow...."

As Vincent looked idly around in the strange light, motion, a dark shape, arrested his eyes and his breath. Hidden behind one side of the louvered doors of Catherine's bedroom, the beast peeked out. It glanced at him slyly, dismissively, then turned its unblinking hunter's eyes to Catherine. As she hung up the phone, the beast pulled back into concealment.

Lying in wait for her, in that most private of places. Pure predator, pure hunter, it waited with a predator's endless patience for her to unwarily enter....

With a huge effort Vincent lurched to his feet and lunged at the doors. They shattered at the impact. He landed — elbows and knees, all fours — on the floor of Catherine's bedroom. As the door's wreckage tumbled about him he swung his heavy head, scanning the empty room with hot, hunter's eyes while the blood pounded its urgent rhythm in his head. The only beast in this room was himself.

Catherine had come. She was standing in the doorway with a hand pressed to her mouth. She was frightened. He could both sense and smell her fear. He wanted to tell her she needn't be afraid: he'd driven the threat away. But words were gone from him. So he smiled at her, then let his head fall onto his forearms as the pounding continued.

"Good," Catherine declared shakily — c lose beside him now, her arm lying across his bent back. She was still frightened, but trying to suppress it. "That's most of the way, anyhow. Can you make it a little farther? Vincent? Can you—?"

Because she was pulling at him, he tried to move, although he didn't know what she wanted. That she wanted it was reason enough to try. Eventually, he was balanced on his knees, upright. That pleased her, but it wasn't enough. So he held to the seat of a chair she set before him and for a moment was dizzily standing — long enough for her to drag him into a forward step before he began to fall. What he struck was soft and smelled powerfully of Catherine. Her bed. Her pillow. He was afraid of enjoying such intimacy and hiked up on an elbow, attempting to move away from it. But Catherine's small hands, pushing at his chest, were too strong for him to resist. He relapsed onto the softness.

Perhaps it would be all right. When the beast came again, he'd be here, at the warm and private center of this place, where he'd need to be to meet the final confrontation. Where he was somehow deeply content to be. And it was what Catherine wanted. She

was pleased with him. So pleased with his protection that he felt the softness shift to her weight as she curled up beside him — another softness, and gentle touch.

He allowed himself to enjoy it because no threat could come to her here without alerting him. It was safe here. And Catherine was pleased with him. Loved him. Needed and trusted his protection. He sighed contentedly and let himself drift.

Presently, her voice brought him to a sharper attention, saying, “*Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again; Though lovers be lost — love shall not; And death shall have no dominion.*”

Those words connected to something deep within him, unlocked something that had been shut, and he repeated, “*And death shall have no dominion.*” After a moment he found the words to ask, “You knew those lines...?”

“You’ve been repeating them for three days.” There was amusement in her voice, and great happiness to have a conversation with him. “Who wrote them — was it Dylan Thomas?”

He found in himself no need to answer, realizing that he’d safely delivered his gift to her, after all. She knew now. It was all right: he could let go of his fear and his vigilance, and rest.

His dream was of a peaceful night sky full of stars, suffused with the awareness that Catherine was with him.

## 13

Crossing from her kitchen to her bedroom while licking toast crumbs off her fingers, Catherine rocked on her toes, startled to find Vincent quietly standing and looking out the glass doors, bathed in the bronze glow of sunset like some large feature of the landscape a storm had scoured and left finally at exhausted peace.

His shirt hung loose and his shoulders were slumped. But he was on his feet. Awake. Aware.

Joining him by the doors, she commented tentatively, “You’re feeling better.”

“Yes.” Still looking outward, Vincent added gruffly, “I’m sorry.”

The apology wrenched her. She quickly embraced him from the side, rubbing his back and shoulders in reassurance. “Oh, Vincent — don’t be sorry!”

He drew a shuddering breath. “It’s been my struggle always. Now, when I have so much to fight for...I’m losing.”

She suggested hopefully, “Maybe the worst is over.”

He looked at her then, with eyes and an expression that had no defenses. A large attention that encompassed her utterly. Like being, somehow, looked at by a pitying, sad sky.

He said, “If it’s not, I — It’s best down Below: I should go back.”

Though it hurt, she accepted it: he'd be safer there. "It'll be dark soon," she offered, acknowledging another bittersweet inevitability. Dark was his safety; it also meant his absence.

Day and dark, sleep and waking, high and low, her world, his — the most primary and elemental things, always separating them. But for this bridging moment, they were together.

She rested her cheek against his arm — to be close to him in the time that was theirs. A gesture that said soon...but not yet.

Meditatively, softly, he confessed, "Catherine...I don't know what will happen now."

In his voice, in his eyes, were a terrible helplessness and a still more terrible resignation — suggesting that, whatever came now, he no longer felt he had the strength or the conviction to resist. That tone foresaw nothing good and tried both to warn her, so she'd be prepared for the worst, and to gentle it for her, lest she be afraid.

Catherine suddenly found she'd had enough of being protected. She didn't need it; didn't want it. After the ordeal and the closeness of the past few days, such disproportionate protection felt too much like being shut out.

"You must promise me one thing." When he again looked at her, she said with firm determination, "That you will share it with me — whatever happens, whatever comes."

Slowly and very tenderly, he put an arm around her and drew her close against his side, so that they were holding each other.

In a voice rough with emotion, he responded, "Whatever happens, whatever comes... know that I love you."

They remained like that, facing the encroaching darkness but standing together in the last of the light.

Catherine thought her heart would burst with the joy and the sorrow of it, and that he'd at last put into words what she felt she'd known forever. Yet the words mattered; and that he'd finally said them, admitted the full of his feelings, withheld so long so as not to burden her. To leave her utterly free.

Until it happened, she hadn't realized how much she wanted to be claimed. Unfree. Connected.

Balanced between anxiety and exaltation, her heart soared.

The dark came soon, and he was soon gone. Afterward, Catherine wandered around making vague, automatic attempts to tidy up, return things to normal. When the phone rang and the answering machine cut in, Peter Alcott's voice roused her from a sort of trance, hugging a pile of folded blankets against her. She set them down as carefully as though they'd been a sleeping child, then dashed to pick up the receiver.

The sample, Peter said, had come back from the lab, but he didn't want to discuss the report on the phone. One of his patients had just gone into labor, and he was due at the hospital in half an hour: could Catherine come to him, at his office?

Catherine nodded numbly, then thought to say, "Yes, I'll come," glancing around the meaningless vacancy her apartment had become, now that Vincent had gone. No reason, anymore, to stay. Nothing to hold her here.

She remembered to take her purse, check that she had her keys, and lock up behind her, but her thoughts were still afloat in that sunset glow and Vincent's avowal.

It wasn't until she was in a cab in noisy evening traffic that her lawyer's mind noted that an avowal wasn't a promise. That however lovingly, Vincent had evaded her demand to be allowed to share all the times, good or bad, and had gone on to meet whatever happened alone.

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Leaving Catherine was the hardest thing Vincent had ever done.

It was physically difficult: reaching the elevator's access hatch seemed to take all his strength. He rested, slumped on the elevator's roof, through several ascents and descents before he could gather the energy to jump to the wall cleats and go down the rest of the way to her basement. Once past her threshold and in the tunnels again, he found it took concentration and a kind of bodily stubbornness to keep putting one foot before the other. Pacing along the level passage felt like climbing a long, weary hill.

But the true difficulty was an inward one. He found it almost unendurable to be separate from her now and feel the distance increasing with every step. The bond seemed to him a tether drawing tighter the farther he went, like an elastic already strained to its limits. Unless he resisted the pull with all his strength, he felt its recoil would snap him instantly back to the comfort of her home, her presence, her love. And nothing in him but his will wanted to resist.

But he had to resist, to keep Catherine free of this. Everything in him knew there was no longer any safe or harmless way to go to Catherine. What he'd done, and dreamed, and partly remembered, during his invasion of her apartment told him so with a finality that admitted no excuses, no exceptions. The beast was close as his shadow looming behind him, sliding and reforming upon the rough rock walls as he reached the first candle-lit passage, the outer margin of the Hub. He felt it in the surging desire to return to her that took no account of reasons or rationality, cared nothing for right or safety, but simply and powerfully wanted. The beast was close; and he knew he must remove his divided and shattered self as far as possible from Catherine before it could fully escape and overwhelm his will.

He would speak to Father. Request the harness and the chains. Submit himself to them, while he still could. Though his mind, his soul, flinched away from the thought of such surrender, and the beast within him raged against it, he would do it. Only in that way could he ensure the safety of those he loved against the beast he feared. The beast he was.

It was enormously hard to leave Catherine and to keep leaving her, step by step. He had no attention left for anything else. So a child's voice urgently calling his name startled and confused him. He turned slowly, putting a hand against the tunnel wall to keep his balance as Samantha came running up the passage from behind.

The girl demanded with ten-year-old impatience, "Where were you?"

It seemed a simple question, but any answer was too large and complex, and defeated him. A child's question; an adult's helpless silence.

Samantha persisted, "Did you forget our reading group?"

With difficulty Vincent tried to recall the context of the ordinary, the normal flow of life in the tunnels, that now seemed to him more alien and incomprehensible than ceremonial court life in Imperial China, of which he'd read. He couldn't do it. All he could take in was that in some vital way, he'd failed Samantha, disappointed her. Failed to be what she wanted, needed, and had a right to expect of him. And could not be that, do that, anymore. Feeling it, how he'd failed them all — the children, whom he loved; the whole of the community—was a sorrow almost beyond bearing.

But a sorrow that must not be allowed to trouble this child or disturb her secure notions of what was expected, and possible.

Hoarsely, humbly, he said, "Forgive me...Samantha."

Hands on hips, Samantha announced, "We were supposed to finish the book today."

Vincent tried to think about it, force the words and what they stood for into sense. "Finish...the book?"

"We're all waiting to see what happens."

He vaguely recalled that such eagerness once would have pleased him. Was supposed to please him. He could feel Samantha expecting his pleased approval, but within himself could find only a deepening emptiness...that he must not inflict upon this bright-spirited and loving child.

Fishing for an appropriate response, he hazarded, "Great Expectations?" naming the only title he could bring to mind.

It was the wrong answer. Puzzled, Samantha said, "No, Jane Eyre. The one we've been reading."

He had no least recollection of it. A poor student. A poorer teacher. Impossible to be that anymore.

Regarding him uncomprehendingly, worried and troubled by his strangeness, Samantha prompted, "We're on the last chapter, remember?"

No use pretending. Despite her kind prompting, he had no reply that would satisfy her. He wasn't prepared for the lesson. There could be no excuses and no evasion.

Carefully balancing, he knelt to meet the child's eyes on a level. "If— If...I'm ever...not there, Samantha," he said, finding and speaking the words with difficulty, trying to soften his failure for this child, "you read...in my place. You read the last chapter...to the class."

However he tried, he'd truly dismayed her now. The prospect of being without him loomed, vague and frightening, between them. Even a child could know and fear absence.

Shakily, she protested, "It wouldn't be the same...."

Trying to offer an alternative solace, he forced a smile and complimented her: "But you read...so beautifully."

It didn't work. Anger, fear, and frustration clouded her face. No unsubtle blandishments, no excuses would do.

Requiring fiercely, "Just be there, Vincent!" Samantha fled away down the tunnel, leaving him to contemplate the inevitable hurt he'd do them all, hurt he was powerless to prevent.

The bond tugged at him sharply, with an anxiety very like Samantha's. A cry of the heart: an inchoate and unqualified demand that he be there, forever, which he knew he couldn't fulfill.

He noted that the direction of the pull had changed: Catherine had left her apartment and was moving north by straights and angles, stops and starts, conforming to the restrictions of streets and traffic. The direction, the motion, weren't things he had to think about. They were simply things he knew.

Against his despair and exhaustion, against the taut and strengthening pull of the bond, he eventually straightened and forced himself on.

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When the first of the sentries reported in, the discussion in Father's study paused, listening to the tapped message. The council members exchanged glances of happiness and unease: Vincent was coming home.

Pascal — who, except for Father, was the only one who remembered the other terrible time, broke the silence, asking bluntly, "How serious is it?"

"I'm afraid," said Father, "it's very serious."

Pascal bowed his head. Father had a gift for understatement: his very serious would have been anybody else's disastrous.

William asked uncomfortably, "Should we be concerned about our safety?"

Tight-lipped, Mary declared, "I can't believe Vincent would ever hurt any of us."

"Certainly not intentionally, Mary," Father responded. "But we're dealing with something...extremely volatile." Looking to William, Father admitted, "Yes, I believe we should be concerned about our safety. And about his, as well."

Mary burst out, "Why did this have to happen? He's been through so much...!"

There was no answer to that, Pascal knew, except that the much Vincent had been through had been too much and brought on this present crisis. People bent until they could bend no longer. Then they broke. Life didn't relent. It wasn't fair, but it was true.

Quietly Pascal asked Father, "What should we do?"

"Stay in communication with each other. Let's try to keep the pipes open in case of emergency...."

"Right." Pascal could see to that.

Father continued, "And we must all keep a close watch over Vincent. Until this passes."

"What about the children?" Mary asked. "What shall we tell them?"

“What we always tell them,” replied Father forthrightly. “The truth. That Vincent is...not himself.”

Which was a sort of truth, Pascal supposed. One way to put it, anyhow. At least the way Father intended to put it. Pascal vividly remembered Winslow’s struggle to force their closest friend into the restraints. Pascal had been knocked clear across the chamber. He’d broken his wrist. Vincent certainly hadn’t...been himself then, either. To put it mildly.... Absently Pascal rubbed his stinging eyes.

Mary was protesting, “But they love him. I don’t want them to be frightened.”

Somberly, Father responded, “Mary, anyone who loves Vincent already knows what it is to be frightened. The children will be all right.”

Pascal glanced aside at the chair where the restraints were piled. He’d prepared the harness and provided new straps: Vincent was so much bigger now. And even as a teenager, his strength....

Shutting his eyes, Pascal let the talk continue around him. He didn’t like to think about it. It was going to be awful.

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Holding the stapled pages toward Catherine across the corner of his desk, Peter commented tersely, “Here’s the lab report. They’re asking for another sample.”

“Why?”

When Catherine made no move to take the papers, Peter rose and handed them to her. “They...they think there was a mixup. They claim...that what we sent them wasn’t human blood.”

Well, that was certainly blunt and definitive enough. Objective. Scientific. No ruling out the testimony for narrow-minded bias or prejudice. They’d seen the blood, examined it, and pronounced on it the only possible verdict: not human. Crushing the report on her lap, Catherine sat blankly staring and defeated.

Standing beside her, then settling a hip on the edge of his desk, Peter went on, “I don’t think it’s safe to pursue it this way. I’ve got a friend at Columbia in Biochemistry—”

Catherine winced at the mention of Columbia, remembering the two scientists avidly running their experiments on the captured “creature” while Vincent drifted toward death.

With bitter indignation, she responded, “He’s the most human...the most human being I know!” And glared up into Peter’s sympathetic eyes.

“Jacob may be right. When you go beyond the definitions, scientific knowledge can only break down.”

Catherine gazed up at him helplessly. “Where do you go after that?”

Peter brushed her hair back from her forehead and gently patted her cheek. “Back to your heart. Where the definitions don’t mean very much.”

Catherine nodded, because Peter was honestly trying to help. But she couldn’t manage to find much reassurance in it.

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At last, Vincent reached his chamber. The long, final journey was done.

Once inside, he leaned against the wall, resting, trying to convince himself it should mean something to him, that he was home.

Everything was as he'd left it: a shambles. Books strewn everywhere. He shut one that lay open on his table like a shot bird. Slowly sitting on the bed, he collected another from the floor and wearily reached to set it aside.

He'd heard the messages running ahead of him on the pipes: soon Father would come. With the harness...and the chains. And this chamber would become his prison. Again. And then there'd be no escape. No hope, ever again. Catherine would come and pity him, perhaps. They'd all pity him. And they'd all be safe.

It was necessary. He tried to face the terrible prospect, hold steady within himself the needed resignation and resolution.

But suddenly everything that was not resigned and never reconciled rose up within him with overwhelming force: the rage, the rebellion, the absolute refusal to submit...to anything. The indomitable will to survive. Looming before him with its snarling, defiant beast's face, it fell on him like a descending wave. Engulfed and swept away, he and his shadow were one: charged with a purpose and a desperate energy.

The second he stopped resisting, the bond's tension yanked him into motion with enormous power, so that he was racing blindly, heedlessly through the tunnels.

Running to Catherine.

After many turns and climbs, he encountered someone shouting words at him and trying to block his way. He struck the man carelessly aside and continued until he came up against the steel door of the park threshold. He threw himself against it several times without result. But the knowledge was in him of how the door operated. With concentration, he could find that knowledge — hunting within himself. Seizing it, he glanced to the control box and carefully, as one unused to mechanisms, pulled the lever.

The door slid back.

Behind it were bars. And they did not give to his push. The gate stood between him and Catherine and would not move as the knowledge within him said it should. The knowledge was useless...as was all knowledge that didn't bring him closer to Catherine. Discarding it with a snarl, he began hurling himself at the bars, over and over, without hesitation or pause, completely lost into unthinking fury. He would not stop until either the barrier broke...or he did.

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Leaning on his stick. Father stood staring incredulously at the wreckage of Vincent's chamber. Before, it'd been merely untidy. But now...!

Behind him, a sentry rushed in, breathlessly blurting, “Father—!”

At once, Father knew, and asked grimly, “Where is he?”

“Up at the park entrance. He’s trying to go Above. He won’t stop—”

Pushing the man before him, Father responded, “All right: quickly—!”

Long before they reached the threshold, Father could hear the roaring as well as a loud, irregular metallic clanking like the strike of hammer against anvil.

“We threw the master lock,” reported the sentry, hurrying ahead of Father’s lagging pace. “The gate should hold—”

Standing watch at the final turn, another sentry held a cloth to his bleeding head. Father asked, “Marc, are you badly hurt?”

Marc shook his head, advising, “Be careful,” as Father went past.

At the end of the concrete passage, Vincent was slamming himself against the bars of the gate like some caged wild creature. Growls and grunts of impact alternated with full-throated roars of frustration. One would think no barrier could hold against such heedless, all-out assault. And then one would think flesh and bone could not withstand such crashing shocks.

Something would surely break. Perhaps only Father’s heart: filled, by the sight, with sorrow, terror, and pity. Or perhaps Vincent’s....

Father couldn’t help recalling Paracelsus’ photographs and his claim that they showed the truth of Vincent. Father denied that: always, and absolutely. Yet such violence as he beheld now was indeed a terrible sight in its lawlessness and immoderation. More like some primal force, like a storm, than anything bounded by human, civilized limits.

Not precisely the face of the Medusa, but something as mythic and dreadful that Vincent continually battled to contain unexpressed. Something like the implacable face of one’s own death, which no one could gaze upon steadily without being paralyzed by fear — in effect, turned to stone....

Father took a deep, steadying breath, then advanced toward the raging creature, his beloved and dangerous son. Because this too — this still — was Vincent.

Father quietly spoke Vincent’s name and was ignored. Holding the bars, Vincent wrenched at the gate, then braced himself and repeatedly threw his shoulder — and his whole weight — against it in oblivious fury. Father went another limping pace closer, holding out his hand. “Vincent....”

Vincent whirled: snarling, fangs bared, eyes glittering in his fever-flushed face. There was no recognition in that hating gaze. No acknowledgement of the kinship between them, that was only by choice and memory, not by blood. And choice and memory were gone, along with rationality, from that feral visage. Father felt himself to be confronting a monstrous stranger — Vincent’s enemy as well as his own. His only concern was to banish it, to reclaim his son from the beast.

Fully aware of his danger, Father refused to budge, refused to let himself even blink, knowing the enraged creature before him would sense and react to any fear or any gesture which could be interpreted as threat.

As the clawed hand lifted to strike, Father patiently, calmly said, "Vincent. Come with me."

In the very act of striking, Vincent's expression changed to one of blank horror. He sagged away against the wall, staring at the man he'd nearly attacked.

Father said steadily, "We'll go home."

For a moment Vincent merely stood there, disoriented and agonized. Then he took a faltering step and collapsed into the arms Father reached out to him. Borne down by the weight, Father held his distraught son tightly and was held with desperate tightness in return.

"Father...when...? I can't— when will it end?" Vincent muttered brokenly.

"Soon," Father declared, fighting back tears. "Soon." Trying to sound soothing, certain, he added, "And all will be well again."

Vincent began sobbing. They were both crying then, holding each other.

Presently Vincent grew quieter — not calmer, Father thought, but nearly fainting with exhaustion. In a low, uninflected voice, Vincent directed, "Bring Catherine."

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Sitting empty-eyed and fever-hot in Father's study, Vincent was very near collapse. He wasn't doing anything. Wasn't thinking anything. He was occupying a certain space, for a certain time. To the degree he was aware of anything, he was aware of that. Sometime, he'd be somewhere else. But for now he was here. Everything hurt, but with a generalized, remote, throbbing ache he didn't wonder at or question.

People were gathering at the study entrances. But they were quiet and Vincent wasn't aware of them, suspended in the most profound solitude he'd ever known.

A flare of alarm reached him through the bond, and he realized he was, in fact, doing something, after all. He was waiting for Catherine. For a moment it made perfect sense to him: he could not go to her, so she would have to come to him. There was a placid inevitability about it.

Then, as he sensed her approaching the tunnels, some spark of unease woke in his passive awareness. And he was slowly but strongly aghast at himself, realizing that she was coming because he'd summoned her. What could he have been thinking? Catherine — here? With him? As he was? That must not happen!

And yet he still sat, unable to summon the energy to act. It became like a horrible dream, where one knew one was dreaming and yet unable to stir or fully wake. The beast would grant him no energy. It was the beast which wanted to be here, content to be waiting for Catherine.

For several minutes Vincent concentrated the whole of his will on rising from the chair. He failed even to straighten from his near-comatose slump. The beast was contemptuously amused at his powerlessness, content to let the body be shackled by the extremity of exhaustion and overstress.

Father, Vincent reminded himself, was waiting for Catherine, too — back at the park threshold. When Catherine came, Father would be with her. And then there would be shackles in truth. Then there would be the harness and the chains. And did the beast really expect it could overcome the body's lethargy enough to fight off that final restraint?

The beast's complacency was broken: it feared the chains. Vincent raised his head... and only then became aware that the whole perimeter of the chamber was filled with people whispering anxiously to one another...and looking at him with worried concern. While keeping their distance. Whether from a diffident reluctance to intrude or from simple fear of the beast he was, he didn't know.

There were so many of them. So many eyes, seeing him, afraid for him...or of him; or perhaps there was no difference, since even he feared himself. It was terrible to have the power to inflict sorrow on so many people, and yet lack the power to do what he now knew he must. It was terrible to feel how utterly he'd failed them.

His family. His friends.

From the stair, Olivia asked timidly, "Vincent, can I get you anything?"

"Do not— Do not," he warned harshly, "come any closer."

Some phrases still came easily, automatically. But the words he had to think about, reach for, were now almost beyond his mind's grasp or his fanged mouth's ability to say.

Near Mary, on the stair, Mouse declared boldly, "Mouse isn't afraid!"

"You should be," Vincent declared starkly, feeling that statement echo down the emptiness within him. "You should all...be...afraid." Suspended, he tried to think out what he must say: the necessary and dreadful confession. "Listen to me. All...all of you. I...I do not know...how much...longer I can protect you. From...me. So...I must go from you."

"Go?" blurted William, puzzled.

"No!" cried Mouse in protest.

Vincent looked at them all and was humbled by the confusion of love and dread and alarm surround him, flowing from them all like an embrace. They deserved so well of him, and he'd rewarded their trust so poorly. His shame and grief for them tormented him.

Attempting halting reassurances, he earnestly said what he thought Father might have said: "I will see you again...when this passes."

"Where will you go?" Mary asked, one hand tightly clasping the other.

"Can't go!" Mouse exclaimed, instantly seeing through the reassurance.

William cried, "Vincent!"

Interrupting, cutting off the protests, Vincent insisted, "Listen to me now. All of you. I... I cannot...speak...more.... I must say goodbye," Vincent realized, a fluent, unselfconscious burst.

Openly weeping, Olivia declared, "Vincent, you can't do this."

"I must do this," Vincent reflected. The strength was there, after all. It flowed to him from their concern, their love. The strength he needed to protect them all...in the only way now left to him.

Yet it hurt him, that they should be sad.

Slowly, but with resolute determination, he pushed himself out of the chair and stood erect. Speaking his deepest feelings, he assured them, "But I will...carry you with me. Always. You've given me...everything. Everything." Almost, he broke down in sobs again. But the strength was there to stave off collapse a little longer and make a proper end. Regarding all the anxious faces, he finished his benediction: "Give that much...to each other."

The people parted for him, opening a way to the back entrance of the study as he approached it. Somehow he kept himself steady on his feet to reach it. And there found himself confronting perhaps a dozen solemn children. He and the children regarded each other with mingled sadness and uncertainty.

With an abrupt gesture, Samantha thrust a book toward him. "Jane Eyre. Take it...take it with you. So you can finish it."

So kind a gift; so brave. Vincent wanted to embrace them all, to make their sorrow go away. But he didn't trust himself to touch them...or even remain among them: the beast, in its profound aloneness, felt no tenderness toward children.

He couldn't remove the sorrow. All he could do was remove the cause.

Replying, "You finish it...for me," he turned and moved away from them down the passage.

It was so terribly hard to feel himself leaving behind everything that he loved. At the next junction he blundered to a halt, overcome by anguish. Leaning back against the wall, he cried out; and the cry changed in his throat. By the end, it was an animal howl of rage and uncomprehended pain.

It could change that fast. The beast moved as freely within him as water into water. He held shaking fists before him, fighting back to control. He and the beast were agreed: there could be no going back. Rounding the corner, he scuffed slowly onward, seeking a place so deep and so distant that the only pain he could cause or feel would be his own; and if he cried out with it, there would be no one to hear and judge whether it was a man's voice or the keening of a beast.

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Finding, at her return from Peter's office, the note poked under her door, Catherine spun and immediately started for the park, accompanied by a stabbing apprehension like the stitch that jabbed under her ribs with each breath as she sprinted across the paths and among the trees.

Once in the tunnels, she found Father waiting for her at the first junction.

At once, as they turned together, she demanded, "What's happened to Vincent?"

The note, obviously a hasty scrawl, had given no details — only requested her, urgently, to come.

“It’s striking him more violently now,” Father replied in a grim, anxious voice. “There’s no pattern to it,” he said, as if he’d have found a pattern reassuring, a confirmation, at least, of some specific diagnosis, and its absence was a particular vexation. “I don’t know how much more — the strain on his heart! I’m not sure now much more he can endure.”

“Please,” said Catherine, seizing Father’s arm and trying to quicken his pace. “Let’s hurry!”

Father’s study, when they reached it, was full of people...but none of them was Vincent. And all of them quiet, subdued: in mourning.

Rapid discussion with gruff, upset William and weeping Mary made clear that Vincent had said a final goodbye and left to avoid their coming...and the authority, parental or emotional, that would have kept him here, had he waited. Catherine’s misgivings had been right: this time, Vincent had gone on alone.

As Father’s worried questions pursued further details of Vincent’s intentions, Pascal returned, reporting, “I know where he is. Mouse is following him. Keeping watch.... He’s gone below the catacombs.”

When Pascal was dubious about guiding Father, with his limp, to a place apparently so distant and inaccessible, Catherine broke in imperiously, “Take us there!” When Pascal looked more dubious still, she insisted, “Pascal, please — take us there!”

A singularly gentle and humane man, Pascal didn’t have the heart to refuse her.

The way was down, into deeper dark than Catherine had ever imagined. The light of the lantern Pascal carried often reached no walls, no ceilings. Empty, echoing vastness surrounded them. She’d always been frightened of mere denatured, feeble, city nighttimes; and this was the Dark itself, absolute and implacable.

It seemed impossible that Vincent could have come this far. And horrible to imagine that he’d wanted to.

After hours spent clambering through cracks where no paths were and ducking through irregular, twisting tubes where Catherine had to grope her way, they at last came upon Mouse, huddled miserably against a wall, keeping vigil over the entrance to a cave.

Pascal’s lantern showed a succession of roughly concentric throats narrowing upon utter blackness. And from those throats shouted, roared, howled, and wailed a voice like a stormwind in agony.

Remembered sermons had tried, and failed, to evoke such cries: for surely the rage and despair must be implicit in the voices of the damned in hell.

On the sandy cave floor, a little way in, lay a black heap Catherine abruptly recognized as Vincent’s cloak — cast aside, because he expected never to need it again, to range through the streets, Above. Or perhaps whatever owned that hideous and intolerable voice had decided it didn’t deserve the dignity of clothing, or upright stance, creeping into this final and tomblike lair.

As Catherine took a lurching step forward, Father seized her arm, aghast. “No! You can’t!”

Catherine regarded him with a distant concern. She felt the horror, the fear, as keenly as Father could. But it didn't matter. What Vincent would not promise her, she'd promised herself: she would share it all. No matter what it was. She would not allow Vincent to be alone in this.

Almost calmly, she told Father, "I must."

Wincingly anxious, Father did not release her. "Catherine — please!"

Catherine discovered she was shaking uncontrollably. Something in her was embarrassed and ashamed for Father to know it. And another part didn't care because terrified or outright hysterical, she was going into that cave. She didn't want to. But she would. The courage would have to be in the going, not in doing it with dignity or any pretense of fearlessness. Appearances didn't matter.

She didn't care that her voice shook as she explained to Father, "He is my life. Without him...." She paused, imagining that impossibility: a life without Vincent. One might as well imagine living without air. She ended simply, "—there is nothing."

Reluctantly, Father's grip opened. He and Catherine looked at each other a moment in a kind of recognition, like two soldiers acknowledging their respective duties: that she would go, and he would stay, and that would be the way of it. How it had to be.

Then Catherine turned away. Stumbling under rough overhangs, finding the projections and turns with a hand trailing along a side wall, Catherine slowly went into the cave, into the throat that devoured all light, all hope.

## 14

Howling, Vincent battered himself against the limits — the walls; despair; his failing and alien body. He saw, in blood-colored smears, vague shapes that loomed as he lurched and stumbled around the empty dark. He struck at them because they were there and it was his nature to contest whatever bounds attempted to circumscribe his possibilities. And because the beast he was knew that the moment he stopped fighting, he'd die.

His taloned hands slashed at the air and at the sound of his voice in the air, as though the harsh echoes were solid things, buffeting him from one wall to another. Each indrawn breath seared like naked flame. Each breath expelled was a roar.

No longer Father's Vincent nor Catherine's Vincent, free of all expectations including his own, in extremity he was united to all that breathed and moved, fighting out the final struggle of any lone life against its own annihilation.

Whirling, he fought the cold intractability of stone, the dark's indifference to his pain. The creeping numbness of all that did not feel, did not suffer. The beast roared defiant challenge to Death, which did not answer but only was, lapping body and spirit with slow lethargy that, some moments, seemed perilously like peace. It wasn't: it was death.

As he was now, he'd have struck out against anything within his reach. So while he could still think, he'd made sure nothing would remain within his reach that could bleed except himself.

He'd stopped thinking some long, unmeasured time ago. Now he felt, raging against the limits of stone, darkness, and mortal flesh.

Rebounding from a rock wall, he staggered and sagged against the opposite wall to recover enough strength to lunge again. That was when he realized some intruder was slowly approaching through the twisting tunnel: he'd been pursued, even here.

Setting his shoulders against the wall, the beast turned at bay.

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That the sandy floor was level was a definite plus. Sidling along in a continual stoop, ready to duck or turn aside, Catherine thought this must have sometime been the channel of an underground river. She imagined water bursting through this flume, carving out the irregularities of this passage and eventually leaving its sand behind — soft underfoot, rough in her shoes. Edging through some angle that caught at her unbuttoned trench coat with sharp edges, where it seemed impossible anyone larger than a child could pass, she found it reassuring to imagine the ancient water, that could crack stone and by sinuous persistence force its way through anything. Where water could go, she could, too.

She'd been away from the lantern long enough to be able to see a little. Instead of walking into some overhang or prominence, she could often notice the change of dim contours before being banged or poked. Another plus.

Thinking about such things helped distract her from the horrible reverberant cries that rose to roars or diminished to rough moans but were never still. No matter what it sounded like, it was only Vincent, she insisted to herself. No monster, no elemental force bellowing its rage and despair. Only Vincent. She had to believe that to make herself go on. Since she went on, she must believe it. Self-evident.

The passage opened into a cave wider than her arms' span and of unknown depth. As the roars fell suddenly silent, she thought, He's here. But her straining eyes could see nothing. Then either some slight motion or the lighter blotch that was his torn and blood-spattered shirt drew her eye. She found his shape among the dead, varied greys.

He slouched low against a wall — propped there, his battered hands hanging. His face, turning toward her, was ashen within the unkempt thicket of mane. Then he was moving: a lurching charge in which was still the ghost of the terrible smooth quickness that was his in attack. His face a snarling mask, fangs fully bared, pale eyes wide and unseeing, his hand swung heavily back to strike.

Catherine screamed, "Vincent!"

The blow had already begun to descend. Either suddenly knowing her, or knowing himself from her naming of him, he stopped the blow the only way he could: by stopping himself. His eyes clouded and lost focus, blinking slowly, then drifted closed as he collapsed toward Catherine. He thudded to his knees, then toppled sideways in a ponderous sprawl that took her with it, unable to break or gentle his fall.

Fainted, she thought, hoped; but as she muttered his name, her frantically patting hands could find no lift of breath in his chest nor pulse at his throat. Her ear couldn't find the familiar slow, strong beat of his heart. She knew then that there'd been a death waiting in this place. He'd come to confront it, then made himself its ground when it would have sparked out at her. He was still and cold as stone.

"No," she protested, leaning on him, holding to him. She sobbed the refusal several times.

No reaction. He was gone.

For a moment she was paralyzed by a sense of appalling loss; helpless and total grief, both a pain and a numbness that seemed to extend into an eternity of meaningless succession like a drab, purgatorial road without signposts, that she'd walk forever, alone.

Then arose within her a horrified indignation that brought her sharply back to now. This was intolerable: not to be allowed. She, Catherine Chandler, was not going to allow it.

She blurted, "You can't. You can't! Not without me. I won't let you!"

Vincent had once pursued, along the bond, her fading soul and retrieved her from the very border of death. Could Catherine have done the same, she would have. But she couldn't. Unable to transcend mortal limits, she'd have to call him back within them: affirm their connection in a way that would be a living bridge between wherever his soul had drifted and his body, this place — her side of the river. Make the oldest and most primal connection, life's affirmation of itself.

Bending, Catherine fastened her mouth — demandingly, passionately — to his strange, still lips.

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In a place or condition neither light nor dark because no seeing was possible, truly adrift in the dimensionless calm, he felt a touch. A very small touch, like the brush of a fingertip; but he felt it. And feeling it, he couldn't help feeling what flowed from that touch — what seemed to him the familiar summons: Catherine wanted him, and was afraid.

Bodiless, he tried to go to her as he'd always gone. And could not answer that expectation, that demand. The emptiness he was falling through was too great. And he'd already fallen too far, scattering away on gusts of a cold, silent wind. Not enough of him remained to answer Catherine's summons. He had already resigned himself to the falling, the emptiness, the silence.

Yet her touch remained, flowed through cracks and openings to all that was left in him that wasn't resigned, never stopped fighting, always reached toward the light. Part of him was still falling; but part of him wanted to fly. Part remained inert, cold; the deeper part kindled to the warmth and wanted to be a star. Where he couldn't go, he was taken.

Through the slight connection held by that fingertip contact, the flow swirled and became a bursting flood of sensations. Cold and weight, which were pain. The stuttering, beginning rhythm of heartbeat, which was pain. The first heave of breath,

which was pain. And yet such overwhelming sweetness that he couldn't wish it ever to end.

As in a dream, he couldn't move. Couldn't think, only feel. Perhaps it would be all right to float in the diffuse awareness of the touch that was happening to him, everywhere alike, all the skin waking to itself and to sensation. The generalized, comforting warmth that was affection, the love of heart for heart, swirled into caresses; had always been caresses. Smooth and soft, circling, or rough, shoving against the lay of the fur. A sharper awareness. Points of heat gathering at his throat, where her lips touched and moved, where her hair brushed and trailed, where her warm breath was; at his chest and belly, where her fingers stroked and probed; lower, where her weight lay upon him, every point of contact throbbing like a burn, suffused, aching.

An exquisite pressure made him draw a hard, panting breath. The flowing rapport approved, demanded, repeated the pressure, and forced another such breath from him. It wouldn't stop. He wanted it never to stop.

With inner sight he was presented with a vision of Catherine in the midst of flames, slowly and sweetly beckoning to him to join her there. So that they could be consumed together. Already incandescent with her touch, he opened his eyes and saw the vision confirmed: luminous and intent, Catherine's face hovered over him. Lips heavy and slightly parted; eyes heavy too, dark, sleepily half-lidded; skin flushed and glowing with the heat that flowed from her in a visible aura, a radiant corona of all shades from rose-pink to rose-scarlet, her face the disk of a loving sun and the express shape of all dreaming desire.

As he watched, she took up his right hand in both of hers and laid his palm against the softly resilient mound of her bared breast.

Kneeling above him, she stiffened, back and neck arching backward, still holding his hand tightly against her, and uttered a small sound of satisfaction and hunger. Her reaction blasted through him: through all his senses and, still more strongly, through the bond. A massive charge of feeling more intense than anything he'd ever felt except for the rapport of the kill. Which this could not be. Must not be. But his hand still took from her skin a brilliant heat he could in no way pull away from, locked as though by live current, and everything flared sullen red with the primal bloodsong and the want of the rest of it — already almost past control. And beyond the limits, dreadful things could happen very fast. That the Other desired her too would be no protection. The body's lusts were indiscriminate. Sensing in her any least inevitable twinge of reluctance or fear, passion would instantly skew into rage and rage would lash out, faster than thought or choice, seeking a different, deadly, and familiar satisfaction. Once the hunger was fully aroused and loosed, there could be no turning aside.

He cried out to her, within, that this was impossible, that he'd been death for her too often to be anything else to her now, that she must push him aside and run at once back to the safe, surface places where the beat of blood was kept decently under the skin. Implicit in the inner calling, too, was all his love for her, the splendor of tenderness he often felt toward her that asked no return and so was safe, the joy he felt in wishing joy for her and felt in her sometimes, so it was vindication no matter from what source the joy came, so long as she felt it and he affirmed it, gladly.

Voiceless, he called it all out to her, all of what he felt and was — the fear and the longing and the love. And got, as reaction, her jubilant satisfaction at his hand closing, of itself, where she had held it, the pads of thumb and fingers beginning tactile explorations. She, too, hungered for completion and knew nothing of his warning or his cry.

She did not run. And he no longer wanted her to.

The hunger wholly took him then: the aspect of the beast.

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Something had changed. Catherine wasn't sure what but was glad of it anyway because change meant life. She'd reached him, touched him. Felt, in his breath and slight stirrings, some response. The bridge of touch and vivid sensation was there, between them. Now all she had to do was make him want to cross it. Come back to her.

Almost the first thing she'd done was yank off the trench coat, folding it as a pillow for his head, and then the baggy coral-colored sweater, leaving herself bare to the waist for lots of good skin-to-skin contact, as soon as she'd wrestled loose the laces and the ragged layers to similarly bare his torso to her hands.

As she'd suspected: furry as a rug. And, as she should have expected, fairly rank from days in these clothes, fevered and unbathed. But not unpleasant: only stronger and more identifiably what she'd always been aware of, close to him. A constant undertone to the sharper smoke-and-candle smell of his clothes, that she'd always vaguely thought of as the odor of Below.

Not at all like a man's smell: more discriminating than her eyes, her nose couldn't be mistaken about something like this. Like nothing and no one else. After one deep breath, she'd have known him anywhere, in an instant, in the dark. The realization made her shiver. Or maybe it was the cave's chilly air on her back and arms.

Prompted by a linked thought, she bunched up the sweater, that might similarly smell of her, and used it as part of a brisk and slightly hysterical massage that at last was rewarded by a long, slow sigh. She rewarded herself with several celebratory hard hugs and maybe a dozen wet, sloppy kisses placed indiscriminately wherever, in the hugging, her mouth happened to be.

He was breathing again. But unsteadily and intermittently, with long, frightening silences between. With the hammering of her own heart, she still couldn't feel a pulse. He still was barely here, and she had no certainty that he'd stay or that anything she could do would hold him. He was so hurt, so worn. His hands were brutally skinned and bruised, some of the nails broken down to the quick: surely painful. And she knew he'd been hurting in far stronger, deeper ways, to have come to this black pit at all. Such pain as there'd been in his voice....

But she couldn't allow herself to feel that, dwell on that. Couldn't feel sorry for him or for herself, not with his life at stake. If he was at all aware of her, he'd be feeling what she was feeling. And what she was feeling was barely-controlled panic and conflicting urges to hold him gently and cry for his poor hands, and to somehow shake or pummel some

response from him to prove to herself she was reaching him. But giving in to tears and wailing meant giving up, and she wouldn't do that. She bit her lip hard to keep from doing that. And scrambling around in the sand and shoving at him with the zest for body contact of a linebacker would convey more a distraught attempt at CPR than a lover's touch....

Slow down, she ordered herself. Less first aid, more skin.

She set herself to court, not Vincent but his body, like seducing awake a lover deep asleep. Small nudgings and nuzzlings and languid pettings came easily, naturally. Then she began stroking and discovering him: from the collarbone, along the flat, resilient pads of pectoral muscle, the ribs tapering to waist and abdomen. Then — after she unlatched his belt, undid the buttons, and pushed the material aside — the curved pillars of his upper thighs.

All but blind, she found her tactile sensitivity increased and became fascinated by the different textures of him.

Across his chest, the fur grew in whorls and was short, springy, and coarse; along his sides, it was longer, silkier. At his waist it all but disappeared — worn away, she supposed, by the abrasion of his clothes — leaving a band of quietly breathing skin. Unprotected. She laid her head there with the thought her hair would be warmth to him.

The fur below the band, across his lower abdomen, was short again and plush as a peach. Softer against her cheek than she'd ever have imagined. Soft even to her mouth. She wanted to cry at the thought she might never have known this about him.

She began wishing very much, and very personally, that he'd wake up sooner rather than later.

She felt toward him a rush of such tenderness as she'd never felt for a man before...not even for him, sick and thrashing around on her floor, or the night she'd held him after Paracelsus' death. Then, there'd been limits to respect, other concerns and distractions. Now there were none. Now there was nothing else worth doing or even considering; nowhere else she'd wish to be; no other time than now. Now it was both right and necessary to feel, as fully as she could, how wonderful he was and the unconstrained immediacies of her desire for him, her curiosity no insult and each sensation a discovery to be savored and indulged so that he might feel it in her, what she felt toward him.

So that, through their bond, he might feel her with him, in all ways, and be willingly drawn back even to such a place as this, that was a splendid and magical place so long as they both were alive and together in it.

With no haste she began loving him with all her senses, trying to awaken his. Sliding across him or lying upon him to reach or touch or kiss: expecting response, imagining response so that she wasn't aware when response began — a breath more deeply drawn; slight, heavy stirrings. First in lagging counterpoint, then imperceptibly altering to deep tidal rhythms drawn by and subsiding with her motions.

His reactions intensified hers. She forgot the larger urgencies into a turgid expectancy and rising need. Pressing her mouth to his made her lips ache for deeper contact, more pressure. His quickening breath made hers come fast and tight. As though they were

already in some sense one being, and each stimulation shuddered and gasped across one acutely sensitized skin, kindling to a fused core.

When at last the change came, and his eyes fluttered open, it was a triumph of contact. She soared on the gladness of it. Instead of clapping her hand to her hammering heart, she caught his up and clasped it there — no longer a passive object but a living part of him whose touch was a revelation and a greeting, consequential as a newborn's first cry. Her back arched as she was overwhelmed by her awareness of living response, each of them to the other. Her eyes shut and her wanting mouth opened in a perfect O of astonishment and gratitude as she felt his body surge beneath hers.

The next thing she knew, she'd been dumped off, thumped onto her back on the sand, and solidly pinned there by the heels of his hands on her shoulders. He was breathing in short, rhythmic grunts, almost a growling; she couldn't make out his expression, but both sets of canines showed.

The suddenness startled her. The roughness startled her. And his silence, as he stared down at her with eyes fathomless in shadow, was like being doused with a bucket of cold water.

She didn't know what the abrupt change of manner meant or what was going to happen, except that this was no reciprocal sensual courtship, no shy approach that hoped for her permission or even cared about her consent.

The unnerving, silent inspection went on for some time. He did nothing except breathe in those harsh grunts, look at her, and lean with casual, warning weight anytime she made the least attempt to move. She wished she could see his eyes.

"Vincent," she asked finally, in a shaken whisper, "what is it?"

No reply. But not one of his familiar pensive silences, either. Simply no reaction. Then, clearly by his own impulse and not as an answer, he bent and nuzzled under her ear. She jerked in electrified startlement at the hot and slightly raspy exploratory touch of his tongue at the hinge of her jaw, by the scar. Not unpleasant, but so unexpected, so viscerally strange!

Instantly, he straightened, sitting back on his heels, chin lifted in a pose of rigid indignation. Pure body language; and, unused to communicating on that level, Catherine momentarily interpreted his withdrawal as the predictable shamed recoil. She lifted a hand toward his cheek, intending to reassure him.

He ducked away, wouldn't be petted. Growled at her when she tried a second time.

Although she still wanted powerfully to touch him, she let her hand fall. She was puzzled, uncertain, but not in the least afraid: this was, after all, only Vincent. There was nothing he could do to her that she feared. Nothing could now happen between them she wouldn't want to share.

Nothing could signify beside the risk of losing him. She was quite fearless, not because she believed herself safe but because her own safety was no longer an issue of any importance to her. She'd given up any concern about preserving herself when she'd come into this place. There was no other choice, no other direction.

Cautiously she hitched up by degrees onto one elbow, ready to drop flat at any gesture of objection, even though it probably would have come too fast for her to react. She was

no more afraid of a blow than of the odd caress. Nothing could prevent her from reaching out to him in all ways, tangible and intangible, continually. But she didn't want to reach out in some way that, for reasons she still didn't understand, he couldn't tolerate or would interpret as rejection.

"Vincent, it's all right. I love you. I was only startled, that's all. I...." Her voice trailed off because there was no reaction. Absolutely none.

In the days and nights in her apartment, he'd had no words but the incoherent, repetitive fragments of poetry. So the muteness wasn't entirely strange. But his manner was: eerily strange. She might as well have been talking to a rock.

"Vincent—" she began, and then froze because his quick hand had snapped up under her chin, the fingers solidly cupping it...and the points of his nails against her throat.

He slowly leaned forward — she could feel his breath — his head hunched forward, chin lifted and squared. Practically nose to nose with her. A pose of intense challenge... but in reaction to what, demanding what response, she hadn't the least clue.

Almost, she shook her head in frustration; but his nails' sharper pressure halted that motion as an impulse. It was like having a knife held at her throat. Slowly she sat up — his hand moving with her exactly to hold her head at the same angle, so that she felt as though she were carefully shifting her body under something precariously balanced. Then, without suddenness, she lifted both her hands and clasped them around his wrist. Not fighting. Not trying to push him away. Simply holding his wrist — as, before, she'd held his hand: affirming even this as a connection and therefore wholly welcome to her.

"Vincent—"

With no warning he yanked away and was on his feet, pacing, swinging to glare at her at each turn: paused, slightly bent, like someone trying to see through fog. And she recognized and remembered that hunched, confrontational posture. The demand repeated in her memory: Look at me.

Which was what his hand had been saying, not allowing her to look away.

Can you love even this, the suddenness that has killed for you, the quick violence whose only voice is growls and roars, whose only conversation is motion and gesture, pure act? Whose touch makes you flinch, whose nearness makes you afraid? Wholly male but not a man, not any sort of a man.

Look at me, insisted his crouched stillness. See me, demanded his angry, deep-shadowed eyes, fixed on her.

Catherine found herself recalling the children at the Mirror Pool, similarly requiring his notice, seeking the only true reflection — that in the eyes of someone who loved them. The most fundamental of validations. The only tolerable mirror.

She made him the only answer there was or ever could be, for her: "You're the man that I love. Vincent. Come to me." Answering gesture with gesture, she held out her hand.

Flinging his head back, he began shaking, a dark and massive shape above her. For a moment she thought he'd collapse again, or else begin that terrible roaring. Twice he swayed, leaned away as though trying to resist the pull of that boundless welcome, that

naming. Then he dropped onto his knees...and slowly reached out to her, across the distance between.

The two hands met, the furred and the pale. The fingers interlaced. And from that point of contact other contacts came as they were drawn irrevocably together there in the sand, all of it strange, so strange, but entirely wonderful and like nothing Catherine had ever known or imagined.

She'd expected she'd need to guide him, teach him what was permissible in lovemaking, and continually reassure him of her acceptance. There was none of that. Wherever he wanted to touch her, he did, without hesitation and seemingly regardless of her response. Holding was important to him, and being held: he kept her snuggled close, generally within the circle of an arm, she either kneeling before him or lying across him, however they happened to have come for that moment; and, prompted by some long, slow stroke of hers, particularly along his spine, he'd suddenly lean against her or nudge his head against her shoulder or ribs and then be quiet for several breaths, inviting her embrace.

Another sort of stillness came over him, one she misinterpreted the first time it happened. In the process of tangling her hands into his hair, she chanced to press her knuckles into the back of his neck. Immediately his head leaned aside and he became completely inert — resisting, she thought; withdrawing from something he wasn't yet comfortable with. But when it happened a second time, ending with a humming moan and perceptibly more urgent ardor, she realized that for no reasons she knew, any strong pressure to the back of his neck was paralytically pleasurable to him and set off some reflex of ecstatic stillness...maybe even a sort of trance, that he'd come out of breathless and shaken.

She loved that reaction, offering such implicit vulnerability, absolute physical trust. To their mutual delight, she took him in and out of that state several times until neither of them wanted any further intermission in their celebration of one another.

And although he still said nothing, his breath and voice conveyed much — surprise, satisfaction, tense suspension, confirmations. His vocabulary of touch was even more of a revelation. The warm simplicities of the flat of his hands and fingers, combined with the starburst sizzle of his nails' ends; the deliberate solidity and motion of arms easily able to lift and turn her or clasp her close; all the varied textures of skin and fur, resting, passing, or returning, so that all of her seemed to be in some stage between blaze and shadow from the subtlest of contacts; the deeper dance of weight and shifting pressures, angles and hollows adjusting and seeking; the slower fluencies of need and response. More vividly aware of him than she'd been of any other lover, she tried to learn that language, touch answering the questions put by touch.

There were other differences. He didn't appear much interested in kissing, though he didn't seem to mind her kissing him. But he liked to take her into his mouth — the edge of her hand; her wrist; the bend of her elbow — and simply close his jaws for a moment around that angle or curve of flesh, immobilizing it but without any fervid pressure. Not until they'd further warmed to each other and fully joined, and she felt that firm clamp of long incisors locking at the top of her shoulder, did she realize it had been a progression of token half-bites and each accepting response from her, permission to the further intimacy. Pressed heavily into the sand, arched backward in her first receiving of him,

she found herself thinking, *How strange*, knowing that she'd never come to the end of discovering him, the strength and the softness, the linked claiming and surrender, each to the other, forever new and renewed as all thought ended and they were taken by the flood tide that dissolved all difference and carried them away into the perfection of touch and love's ultimate celebration.

What stayed with her, what burst within her, was less any physical sensation than a sense of benediction: that from their disparate elements was being fused, in this moment, something wholly new and transcendent, as simple and intricate as a rose.

As they lay together in the drowsy aftermath, she knew they'd come beyond the silence when his voice, guttural with disuse, suddenly uttered her name like its first word: "Catherine."

**THE END**