

2011

RR -- A Novel

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RR – A Novel

Gabriel Routh
Senior Honors Thesis

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I

Raphael Rousseau looked into the wide, nervous eyes of the young woman sitting across the table from him and said, "I hated it."

He wasn't trying to be scathing. He was just being honest. Anna's story was poorly-written and riddled with meaningless symbolism in an uneducated attempt at depth. One of the characters had gone on at length about Jungian philosophy and the idea of one's 'shadow.' The tangent had nothing to do with the plot and just served to illustrate the schizophrenic nature of her work in general. He seemed to be the only one who saw this.

Professor Lopez leaned back in his chair at the head of the table. Raphael would describe him much the same way he would describe the classroom: small and bland. The fourteen students in the workshop could barely fit inside; Raphael had been late, so he couldn't get the coveted seat at the opposite end of the table where one actually had elbow room. "*Constructive* criticism, Raphael. 'I hated it' is not going to help her improve her writing. You need to tell her *why* the story inspired such feelings of antipathy."

General murmurs of consent arose from around the table. Anna gave Raphael a fierce look, temporarily armored by her classmates' agreement. The one person in the room who didn't do the same thing was Lissa, who had managed to snag the end of the table today. She kept her eyes on the table, not looking up.

"Where do I start?" Raphael asked. "You don't understand that 'a lot' is two words. You mix up 'their, they're, and there,' not to mention a whole bunch of just straight-up typos that your spell-checker should have caught. The sentences are choppy and haphazard. Some of them don't even have a subject, and others run on for ages and are loaded down with a lot of needless descriptors. Who actually thinks 'said dramatically' is good writing?"

Professor Lopez made a noise in his throat. He had several throat noises, each of them with distinct meanings. This one was the 'a word please' noise, so Raphael looked at him, expectant. "This is a *beginning* workshop, Raphael. Issues of prose are important, yes, but we're trying to get a handle on how to write a story, period. I also found some of the errors distracting, but I thought Anna had the beginnings of a story."

"The narrator says she's got problems with her boyfriend. We then get this kind of existential, roaming rant about how unfair life is and how nobody understands her and then you bring in Jung for no reason at all. And then it just sort of ends. She hasn't changed or made a decision about him, she's just adopted a 'wait-and-see' attitude about the whole thing. You're doing a whole lot of telling and almost no showing."

Brandon spoke up. He was an exchange student, like Raphael, from Boston. "I don't think you really get what Anna's trying to do, man. She's showing us a piece of this girl's life, right, and she's letting us into her head so we can see what's going on in there. I thought the Jung thing was cool. People have random tangent thoughts like that all the time."

Ready with a retort, Raphael clicked his mouth shut when Lissa spoke up. "I agree with Raphael." The class's attention turned to her, which made her turn a little pink and keep her eyes firmly fixed on the table. "I mean, I get what you're saying, Brandon, but I don't think it works very well. People don't think like this. And even if we do have tangential thoughts, how does that advance the story? What *is* the story? We've got a problem with her boyfriend, but she doesn't do anything about it, just sit around and mope. Am I supposed to sympathize with her? Right now I don't really feel like I care about her."

Righteous anger got the better of Anna. “You’re just saying that because you’re fucking Raph, Melissa.”

Professor Lopez made his ‘now now’ noise. “I think that’s enough of that, Anna,” he said, his voice not going a decibel above ‘mild.’ “Thank you for your input, people. I think we can call it a day a little early.”

As the rest of the class filed out, Raphael stayed in his seat, ignoring the looks they were giving him. He’d only been here for three weeks and he certainly hadn’t made any friends in *this* class. It didn’t help that he hated all his classmates.

Except for Lissa, of course. She represented a completely different set of problems.

“Raphael,” Professor Lopez said once the three of them were the only ones in the classroom. “I can’t help but feel like you deliberately antagonize people in my class. It’s not a healthy attitude for a workshop.”

“I’m not going to sugar-coat anything,” Raphael replied. “Especially for these people. None of them can write worth a damn and you know it.”

With a small smile, Professor Lopez shook his head. “Nobody can write worth a damn unless they’re helped along by their peers, Raphael. Think about that for next time.” He grabbed his briefcase and floated out of the room, leaving Raphael alone with Lissa.

“Well, thanks for trying,” Raphael said after a moment. “Sorry.”

Lissa shrugged, only now taking her gaze off the table to look at him. She was a striking girl, with pitch-black hair and dark brown eyes set against light brown skin. She wore her hair long, with her bangs crowding in front of her face to hide her features, which Raphael didn’t understand. He thought she was beautiful.

“It’s fine,” she said. “Anna’s a bitch anyway. I had her in my intro to critical thinking course last year. She would never shut the fuck up.”

The two of them exited the classroom together. Raphael kept a respectful distance away from Lissa – he knew her stance on public displays of affection, specifically how he should not indulge in any of them with her. It was a short trip down the hallway to the exit, which let them out next to the brilliant green Cut, a long swath of grass sandwiched between academic buildings. They both headed toward the university center for lack of anywhere else to go. The University of Stoughton had a small campus with few attractions, and the island was just as unimpressive to Raphael, who was used to New York.

“So,” Lissa said as they walked. “Did you hear about that girl?”

Raphael chose not to remind her how he wasn’t omniscient and thus didn’t know what girl she was talking about. However mercurial Lissa might be, he *knew* she would hate that. He instead settled for, “No.”

“Do you even know which girl I’m talking about?” Lissa asked.

“No.”

She stopped walking. When Raphael turned to face her, she was giving him an irritated look and had her arms crossed. “You should have said something.”

Raphael shrugged. “Sorry. I figured you would tell me who she was next.”

After breathing a small sigh, Lissa started walking again. “Amanda Perkins. Disappeared right out of her dorm room two days ago. Her roommate saw her go in, but when she got in later that night, Amanda was gone and nobody’s seen her since.”

“She probably went home to see her family or something,” Raphael said, swerving around a pair of students too engaged in conversation to watch where the hell they were going.

“Maybe,” Lissa replied. “I don’t think so, though. It’s only three weeks into the semester, after all, and she was a junior. Would a junior get homesick that easily?”

“I don’t know what most juniors think,” Raphael told her. “I just know what I think, and that’s that I don’t want to even think about going home right now.”

They walked in silence for a minute before Lissa asked him, “So why do you do it?”

“Do what?” It was becoming a real strain not to point out Lissa’s hanging pronouns.

“You told Professor Lopez you’re not going to sugar-coat anything, but you could at least be nicer. You know, tact.”

“There’s no tactful way to say something’s crap,” Raphael said. “And sometimes people need to just hear that. That’s what I think, anyway.”

Lissa shook her head. “You’re impossible sometimes, Raph. You know that?” She abruptly peeled off from the sidewalk, heading across the Cut toward the street. “I’ll see you later.”

Regret flooding him, Raphael opened his mouth to say he was sorry, then thought better of it. It would just sound insincere and forced, probably because it would be. Being polite to people he couldn’t stand was just more than he could do right now. And while he liked Lissa as much as he could like anyone he’d only known for a couple weeks, he wasn’t going to fantasize about mysterious disappearances with her. That sort of thing just didn’t happen in real life.

He kept trudging toward the university center.

* * *

The problem with being such a harsh critic, Raphael reflected, was that he was perennially unable to satisfy his own high standards. He didn’t think he was a writer by any stretch of the imagination; he was taking this workshop class because he didn’t want to take a sciences course, and he hated writing lengthy academic papers – which was a faux pas for an English major, he supposed, but there it was.

Now he found himself staring once again at the half-written story he’d been hacking away at for two weeks. Part of him wanted to laugh and remind him how it could take decades to write a really solid novel. Two weeks was not a lot of time at all, in the grand scheme of things. The problem was that his workshop classmates were making pointed noises about how he had no problem ripping their work to shreds, but had yet to produce any work of his own upon which they could visit similar and karmic treatment. They didn’t say it in as many words or as honestly, of course, but he knew the score and wanted, in a perverse way, to avoid it. He wanted to stun them with a story that showed he wasn’t just all talk, that he actually knew what he was talking about.

“You’ve been looking at that for like ten years now,” Anton spoke up.

Raphael scowled over his shoulder at his roommate. Anton was a good-looking guy – sleek dark hair, skin that tanned easily, a frame that was lanky but not skinny. He was also, in Raphael’s estimation, an enormous hypocrite.

Right now, Anton was lounging on his bed, reading a book of philosophical writings. Raphael would normally assume it was reading for a class, but Anton was the sort of person who would launch into a length discourse about the fallibility of humanism in casual conversation – and he wasn’t even a philosophy major. He was a fucking *business* major. Raphael didn’t enjoy being shown up on his best days, especially not by a business student.

“Don’t you need to read that?” Raphael asked.

Anton shrugged. “It’s all crap anyway, Raph. We talk about it for an hour and a half, but we’re only graded on our short summaries and there’s going to be like *one* paper. Most of the time I contradict the professor because nobody else ever says a fucking word.”

“You’re a saint,” Raphael muttered, looking back at the Word document.

The problem he was having was very simple. He’d been reared on Star Trek, Lord of the Rings, and fantasy-based young adult novels which maybe he shouldn’t have read until he was older but they were just so much *fun*. Literally every story he’d seen in the workshop so far, including the ones Professor Lopez had handed out as examples of good writing, had been contemporary. They were about people trying to get tech support to fix their computer or convince an ex-lover to drop the ex. Raphael appreciated that these stories were important; they were the mainstream for a reason, after all. Most people could relate to them and understand them. But he didn’t find this kind of material particularly interesting.

But, dammit, he wasn’t going to give his classmates any ammunition. They were sure to have plenty already. So he was trying to write a story about a college guy’s self-actualization through the process of debasement, or at least that was how he’d phrased it to himself when he was trying to make himself excited about the project.

He had about two hundred words. He had a vague suspicion that not one of them was good.

“You having trouble? Need any help?” Anton volunteered.

The thing that irked Raphael most about Anton was that he really was sincere when he made these gestures – if Raphael said yes, Anton would get up, read his story, and suggest where he might go next or how to improve it. And then he did things like sexile Raphael the night before a test or nail a crucifix onto their dorm room door, insisting Raph’s “heathen ways” would get them both in trouble. Raphael didn’t understand any of it and certainly couldn’t reconcile it all.

“I’m fine,” he said a little more shortly than strictly necessary. “It’ll come to me. Otherwise I’ll just feel like I’m forcing it and it won’t be any good.” This described his thought processes for the last half hour quite accurately, but Raphael wasn’t about to admit this to Anton. He firmly believed everybody had at least one good story in them, and even if this was the only one, he was determined to get it out there.

Of course, Raphael had a feeling that maybe in order to get to that good story one had to get through a lot of crap, but that was defeatist thinking. He was smart; his grasp of English was superb, so his prose was good. Or at least it was technically proficient. That formed a great deal of what he’d been ragging on his classmates about, so as long as there were no typos he would still end up looking better than them.

Anton laughed. “Like picking up the desperate drunk chick at a party because you feel like you’ve got a civic duty, right?”

“Yes, Anton. Precisely like that.” Raphael leaned back in his chair so he could stare at the ceiling, one of his favorite pastimes when trying to ignore Anton.

It never seemed to work. “So how’s Lissa?” Anton asked.

“Fine,” Raphael lied. “We’re getting on well.”

“That’s good. Dark, broody guy like you needs a girl to obsess over.”

Raphael shot him a look which Anton seemed to miss completely. “Thank you, Anton. You’re a helper.”

“Anytime, bud.” Anton returned to reading his book for several minutes as Raphael waffled between continuing to attempt to write, reading more of *Heart of Darkness* for his

literature course or screwing it, putting a video game in the console, and trying not to think for a few hours.

“Oh, forgot to tell you earlier,” Anton said.

The familiar dread settled into Raphael’s stomach. Anton always ‘forgot’ to tell him inconvenient things. He wasn’t sure if the man was cruel or just absentminded. “What?”

“I’m having a Bible study here tonight. About an hour from now.” Anton put down his book again, gave Raphael a grin. “You know you’re more than welcome to stay.”

“Not what I need right now, thanks,” Raphael told him. “You couldn’t hold it in the lounge?”

“Of course not. They’re doing that retarded orientation kumbayah bullshit for freshmen there tonight.”

Well, Raphael reflected, at least he’d be able to come back later that night. Anton’s religious obligations tended to be shorter in duration than his sexual ones, though Raphael thankfully couldn’t attest to the vigor involved in either. That essential dichotomy between the very secular and the transcendental seemed to define Anton and at the same time defy definition. He didn’t see how a man who held Bible studies, went to church every Sunday, and insisted on nailing a crucifix to their door could also have *so much sex*. It honestly baffled him, but he refused to bring it up. Anton hadn’t asked about Raphael’s eccentricities – he glanced somewhat guiltily at the large game collection lining his bookshelf where most people kept books – and Raphael figured that if he returned the favor he might make some actual progress with Anton before the semester was out.

Otherwise, he thought, it was going to be a very long semester indeed.

Raphael sighed, reaching for his coat and shoes. He’d taken to retreating to a coffee shop on a street corner near the University during these Bible studies of Anton’s, and he saw no reason to break with tradition now. “What time do you figure you’ll finish by?” he asked, also grabbing *Heart of Darkness*.

“I dunno. Probably by nine.” Anton gave him another grin and mimed firing a gun at him, snapping his fingers to provide a sound effect. “Thanks, buddy. I appreciate you understanding.”

“No problem,” Raphael murmured, already making his way out of their small dorm room. At the last moment, he decided to grab his laptop as well. If *Heart of Darkness* failed to entertain him – more *when*, but he tried to keep up a façade of optimism even in his own head – then he’d try his hand at writing his story again. Maybe being the asshole with the laptop in the coffee shop would invoke some kind of creative élan in him.

“Oh, dude!” Anton called as Raphael began to walk down the hall.

“What?” Raphael asked, stopping.

“I heard about Amanda!” Anton said, appearing in the doorway. “She’s in my cog-psych class and she just up and disappeared. Be careful, huh?”

Raphael smirked. “Thanks, Anton, but I think I can take care of myself. I’m just going across the street, anyway.”

“Sure, sure. Break a leg.”

“Uh-huh,” Raphael said, choosing not to question his roommate’s use of the phrase when they were neither actors nor anywhere near a stage. “See you.”

Raphael took the stairs. In his hurry to get the hell out, he missed a step. He managed to grab onto the handrail before he broke something and hung there for a moment, all his weight on his arm.

Great, he thought. Thanks, Anton. You're a helper.

II

Raphael had gotten thirty pages into *Heart of Darkness* before he realized he'd just been gliding over the words. When he tried to determine just what had happened in the pages he'd read, he came up blank.

The café's wi-fi was shitty at best, but he wasn't trying to stream anything – just get to the Wikipedia article on the story. He struggled with it for a while, clearing his cache, trying to get a different IP address, but the Internet seemed stubbornly closed to him. Maybe it was his laptop, maybe it was the coffee shop – either way, it darkened Raphael's already-foul mood. It didn't help that much of the talk he could overhear from the other patrons centered on the missing Amanda Perkins.

He opened up his story so he could stare at it again. He'd never understood the complexities of human relationships; his father was away much of the time due to his line of work, his mother was – had been – distant, and he had no siblings. What friends he'd had in school were few and far between, and often just as strange and judgmental as he was. So when it came time for Raphael to write a convincing descent into nihilistic madness, he had only his own experiences to go on. Raphael wasn't comfortable making assumptions about the way other human beings operated, but he had little choice if he was going to make this story work. Many of his concerns centered on the female lead. He could already see the workshop jumping on that: *the narrator is just you with a different name. You treat the female lead awfully badly – are you trying to make some statement about how she's punished for her feminism? Are you sexist?*

Raphael closed his eyes, trying to find his creative zen center or whatever quasi-mystical bullshit would help him figure out how to write the rest of this damn story. He had the plot laid out perfectly in his head. He could write a summary of it or recite one if asked. But it seemed to do him little good when it came to committing the words to paper. It didn't help that the only other obligation he really had was *Heart of Darkness*, which was just not holding his interest. Conrad went on and on in a vaguely racist way about the natives which made Raphael uncomfortable, and he could never shake the feeling that he would rather be reading about elves. It was shameful, particularly for an English major who took his literary taste quite seriously, but he couldn't deny it. He would much rather be reading some dime-store novel about elves fucking than *Heart of Darkness*, and if that was wrong – which it was, he knew – then he had to admit himself a total lack of desire to be right.

Despite his best efforts, Raphael's thoughts wandered to Lissa. He wasn't exactly sure what he'd said to set her off earlier, but he already regretted it. Maybe he should call her, see if she'd be amenable to some dinner. She didn't like the word "date" – said it reminded her of deadlines and commitments. It was the time when most normal people ate the evening meal, after all. Just because he tended to eat late at night didn't mean Lissa did.

Raphael was reaching for his phone when he heard a familiar voice. Anna was walking in through the door with a pair of friends. Immediately, Raphael looked back at his computer screen, trying to pretend he hadn't seen her. She was just the sort of person to hold a grudge about his assessment of her "work," and he had no doubts about her willingness to rip into him in a public place for perceived faults. The best plan was to wait until she and her friends went up to the counter to order, then close his laptop and slip out.

"Raph."

He'd been made. Anna walked right up to him, put her hands on her hips. "I didn't know you came here."

“I don’t,” Raphael replied, trying to kill the conversation quickly. “I’m waiting for someone.” Technically true, since he was waiting for Anton to finish his Goddamn Bible study, but of course Anna didn’t need to know that.

“Who? Lissa?”

“I don’t think that’s any of your business.”

“I’m not stupid,” Anna said. Raphael bit down on the urge to contradict her; that was the last thing he needed to do right now. “I know you two are banging, Raph. It’s really obvious. I just wish you didn’t let it affect the way you behave in class.”

Raphael scooted his chair around so his entire body was facing Anna. He wanted to stand as well, so he wouldn’t have to be looking up at her, but that seemed excessive, so he instead draped an arm over the back of the chair in what he hoped was a sufficiently nonchalant gesture. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Anna. My opinion of your piece was honest. I didn’t change it because Lissa and I are friends, or involved, or any of those things which still aren’t your concern.”

“Don’t bullshit me. Lissa’s had it in for me ever since critical thinking last year. She doesn’t like me or something.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Raphael said, perhaps a touch drier than he should have.

“You –”

Heads were beginning to turn in the coffee shop now; Anna’s friends, rather than providing her the backup she was obviously expecting, instead slid away toward the counter, not willing to expose themselves to public ridicule. That was good – the situation wasn’t out of Raphael’s control yet. He could still win the argument.

“Anna, I honestly think it’s petty and somewhat paranoid of you to believe that just because Lissa doesn’t like you personally she has to criticize your stories in class – not only that, but she has to do it through me, or at least have me support her. Lissa hasn’t asked me for anything like that, and I don’t think she ever would. That’s all.” Raphael turned his chair back toward his laptop, made a show of scrolling down to the bottom of his story. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

“Oh?” Anna said, trying to steal some kind of victory out of the conversation. “That a story you’re working on, Raph? Gonna finally let us see some of your work?”

“You’ll see it when I’m satisfied with it,” Raphael said. “And as you already know, I have very high standards. Have a good night, Anna.”

He could sense her trying to decide if it was worth it to flip him the bird while everyone was watching. Ultimately, she settled on “no,” instead moving away to the counter and loudly ordering an espresso. Raphael glanced at the clock on his computer; it was quarter of seven. She’d be up all night if she drank that. Still, he’d just told her to mind her own business, so he should probably follow his own advice.

Nothing came to him for several minutes. Raphael was seriously considering going back to *Heart of Darkness* when he heard an astonished gasp, followed by the unmistakable splatter of coffee hitting the floor. Something wet and hot hit his pants leg – not a lot of it, but Raphael still jumped in his seat. Anna stood a few feet away, her expression distraught, espresso all down her front. Raphael hadn’t seen it happen, so he didn’t know what had made her spill, but she still clutched her styrofoam cup, the plastic lid lying on the floor between her boots.

“Are you all right?” he asked, instinctively getting to his feet.

“I’m fine,” Anna said, her voice small. “Just an accident.”

Raphael fetched some paper towels from the girl behind the counter, knelt, and began to work at the spill. “It happens, I guess,” he said, retrieving the lid. He stood up, made to hand it to her, stopped.

Two small tears were running down Anna’s face, one on each side. They left glistening trails of moisture on her cheeks as they made their way toward her jawline. Raphael opened his mouth, then closed it, not sure what to say.

“Fuck you,” Anna said, very quietly. She walked past him to the exit, dropping what was left of her espresso into the garbage. Raphael was left standing there, lid in hand, the eyes of the patrons all on him.

* * *

One of the University of Stoughton’s main draws for many exchange students like Raphael was that it was a fifteen-minute walk from the beach. Raphael himself didn’t care; he’d just wanted to get away for the semester, away from all his problems and various crises, and Stoughton had seemed like a good way to do that.

But even on the deserted beach, the world seemed to press in on him. In the deepest, darkest parts of his mind, he had to admit to himself that he wasn’t really sure what the hell he was doing here, if it was making things better or worse, if maybe he should have stayed home and dealt with things as they’d come.

His pants leg was still damp from the espresso, but Raphael had tuned it out by this point. The surf pounded the rocks of the beach and occasionally hit him with a bit of spray as he wandered along the coastline, which seemed appropriate. Maybe next a gull would shit on him and really complete his day.

His laptop was heavy in his bag, and Raphael considered putting it aside and coming back to it, but then decided the last thing he needed to was to lose his laptop. That really *would* be the perfect end to a shitty day.

Lissa’s words from the other end of the line still seemed to echo around him. “I’m still mad at you. Don’t talk to me right now.”

So he’d hung up, then started walking toward the coast.

The sun was well and truly set now, the sky a deep violet which was slowly fading into black. There was little light pollution from Stoughton, so Raphael could see the stars quite well. For a moment he thought about completely changing the story he was writing for workshop – removing himself to the familiar ground of science fiction and starships or wizards and magic. He quickly rejected the idea. Nobody here – or anywhere, as far as he was concerned – had any real respect for genre fiction, well-executed or not. *Why couldn’t this story be set in the modern day?* someone would inevitably ask. *Why do we need the spaceships and aliens?* Raphael doubted that “because they’re cool” would satisfy that particular line of questioning; he certainly wouldn’t accept that if he were the one in charge of critiquing it.

So Raphael walked down the beach, thinking dark thoughts about himself and his writing and everyone who would ever read his writing, especially that bitch Anna. He wasn’t normally one to get upset by arguments, but the one he’d just had with her in the coffee shop was weighing on him more and more heavily. The fact that it was upsetting him just served to irritate him further. What was her *problem*, anyway?

His reverie was interrupted when he realized he was walking past a cave.

With a frown, Raphael turned to regard the entrance. He didn't recall hearing about any caves when the island had been described to him – first by the brochures, then by the effervescent and too-helpful people on the other end of the exchange program's phone line. Then again, they had all concentrated on the city and university, which wasn't surprising. That was what they had been trying to sell him on, after all.

His curiosity mounting, Raphael started toward the cave entrance.

There was some part of him that tried to insist he not go in. It tried rational approaches first, insisting that the cave was probably slippery or treacherous in some way, that he would fall and break a leg and not be found for days. When he still felt like going in, it insinuated that there was some kind of awful predator – one out of the depths of his nightmares – lurking inside the cave, waiting for him. When Raphael contemptuously dismissed that notion, it resorted to positing that the inside of the cave was probably covered in bird shit and would be disgusting.

He went in anyway.

Trying to put his mind in a scholarly place, Raphael rummaged around inside his backpack for a flashlight as he stood just inside the lip of the cave. *Caves. Symbolic of the womb. Secret places. Liminal places.* He had a vague idea that the word “liminal” meant more than he wanted it to in this context, but it made a certain kind of sense to him. As he retrieved the pocket flashlight he kept in his backpack, Raphael made a small, triumphant noise. It echoed back at him from the cave, seeming louder than when he had first given it voice.

The part of him which had so far failed to convince him not to go in resorted to basics: he *was* scared of the dark, wasn't he?

In response, Raphael flicked on the flashlight and proceeded deeper into the cave.

Raphael remembered enough from middle school about geology to recognize the rock surrounding him as limestone. *Sedimentary rock mostly composed of built-up minerals from the ocean.* He was vaguely pleased that he remembered. Stalactites hung from the ceiling at irregular intervals, and large stalagmites thrust themselves up from the floor in inconvenient locations, forcing Raphael to step around them. Several times he nearly slipped and lost his footing on the uneven ground, but he caught himself each time.

As he made his way into the cave, Raphael began to hear an omnipresent dripping sound. Could this place have been formed by an underground river, one that was maybe still active? Did caverns normally form this close to the ocean? The questions bounced around in his skull even as he was aware that they were cover for his actual thoughts, thoughts which concentrated on unpleasant subjects like Lissa and his mother.

Raphael had never been prone to bouts of brutal self-analysis, normally being satisfied with himself and not particularly convinced that he needed to change. But if he were completely honest with himself, he had to admit that maybe his anger at Anna was misdirection. Maybe his anger at Lissa too, for that matter. He didn't like to admit to himself that his emotions might simply be more difficult to understand and control than was convenient; he didn't like making assumptions about the way other people thought, but he felt justified thinking nobody else liked to either.

His chain of thought was interrupted when the cave passage sloped sharply down in front of him. Raphael blinked; he'd been too lost in thought to notice until he'd almost stepped out into what was essentially empty space and sent himself tumbling. This thing sloped down? How much deeper did it go? Now fixated on finding out, Raphael banished all extraneous thoughts from his mind and eagerly headed down the passage.

What had to have been more than a hundred feet later, he was still heading down. The flashlight dimly illuminated the path in front of him, making the stalactites and stalagmites cast long shadows on the walls in a phantasmagoric, shifting display of dark lines. The dripping sound grew louder as he went deeper.

His foot caught on something.

Raphael felt himself tumbling. The flashlight slipped from his hand, its beam dying, plunging him into darkness. He could hear a banging sound as his bag, and the laptop within, met the hard ground. The rest of his body followed suit; he grunted as soft bits of him met angular bits of stone.

The floor was slick beneath him, so he kept rolling for more than a dozen feet before he managed to bring himself to a stop. Unfortunately for him, this meant his legs were immersed in freezing cold water at the bottom of the tunnel where it finally began to level out again.

For a moment, Raphael lay there, gasping for air, then heard a *plunk* as his flashlight finished its stately roll down the passageway and ended up in the water.

He began to curse, loudly, richly, with more color and feeling than he'd injected into his vulgarities in recent memory. He was at the bottom of a hole in total darkness, he was soaked to the knees, his laptop was probably fucked, he'd lost his flashlight –

As inconvenient facts are wont to do, one struck him now. In his hurry to leave after the incident with Anna, he'd left his copy of *Heart of Darkness* in the coffee shop.

“FUCK me!” Raphael shouted, the sound echoing through the cave. This wasn't the worst day of his life by far, but it seemed like every little thing was lining up to annoy him, like the universe was actively trying to fuck with him. He couldn't recall ever being this angry about stuff which really wasn't that important.

He decided to blame Anna. If she had less of a stick up her ass, he thought, she might be able to take some Goddamn constructive criticism without flying into a wailing hissy-fit because he'd offended her oh-so-tender sensibilities. You needed thick skin if you were going to be a writer, and she didn't have it. She wanted the truth? She couldn't *handle* the truth! He wished she would just stop showing up to class. To anything, for that matter. He couldn't conceive of any possible way her existence made the world a better place.

With a groan, he shook himself, trying to dry off a bit. It only made him woozy; he realized he might have cracked his head on the way down. Raphael retreated away from the water, moving carefully in the darkness, then settled on the passage floor. He wanted to see if his laptop would still boot.

Several agonizingly tense seconds later, he decided there was some justice in the universe after all. The laptop had been cushioned by a jacket he'd stuffed into his bag and promptly forgotten, and the machine's built-in hard drive protection probably hadn't hurt, either. He restarted it to make sure it wasn't trying to trick him into false optimism, then began to navigate his way back toward the cave entrance, using the laptop as his light source.

No wonder nobody had mentioned this cave to him. There was nothing in it but pain and freezing water.

III

The next day was, by comparison, uneventful. No progress was reported in the search for Amanda Perkins. Raphael tried to get in touch with Lissa but she wasn't picking up. He cruised through his classes without paying much attention, distracted by looming thoughts of the breakup he knew was coming. He shouldn't have gotten involved, it had only been setting him up for another fall, all that. On a rational level it seemed melodramatic to indulge in this kind of thinking, but Raphael was in no particular mood to be rational. He went and retrieved his copy of *Heart of Darkness* from the coffee shop; the staff there had thankfully displayed good common sense and kept the book for safekeeping after he'd left it there the night before. He was still achy and sore from his fall yesterday. Still, it could have been much worse.

The day after that, however, when Raphael showed up at his fiction workshop, Anna wasn't there.

Professor Lopez gave the class his usual bland smile. "Good afternoon, people. Does anyone know where Anna is?"

A chorus of murmured negatives was the response. Raphael, for his part, wasn't particularly concerned. If Anna wasn't here, the quality of the discussion would probably go up several notches. She routinely contributed bad advice and meandering anecdotes which had little or nothing to do with the topic at hand. Raphael was more interested in Lissa, who had decided to sit near him at the table and looked contrite, or at least not angry any longer. He tried to catch her eye, but she seemed to be focusing on the professor for the time being.

"Well," Professor Lopez said, "we'll just have to get started without her. Now, did everyone read the assigned stories?"

The class proceeded without incident from there. Raphael sat, contributing little to the discussion, eager for the class to end so he could talk to Lissa. Maybe things were less dire than he'd thought. It was certainly a nice prospect.

When Professor Lopez adjourned, Lissa didn't move, so Raphael didn't either. He watched the rest of the class file out, wishing impatiently that they'd move faster. For his part, Professor Lopez looked at his watch, looked at the clock, and made his "displeased" noise. He hurried to the door, brushing past several students, murmuring about being late. That cleared the room quickly enough.

Before Raphael could say anything, Lissa said, "Anna's missing."

A cold feeling coalesced in the pit of Raphael's stomach. "How do you know?"

"One of my roommates is friends with her. She said she disappeared the night after she had that argument with you in the coffee shop."

The cold feeling intensified. "She knew about that?"

"Raph, she has a lot of friends. All of them knew about it after she decided to bitch about you on her Facebook."

Raphael leaned forward so he could put his head in his hands. "Great. What do you want to bet that she put that up and is now hiding somewhere to make people think I killed her or something?"

Lissa frowned. "This isn't funny, Raph."

Exasperated, Raphael dropped his hands to the table. "Do you really think I'd kill someone or do something awful to them just because we had an argument, Lissa? I'm not a violent person. And even if I were, I'm not stupid enough to do something that obvious."

“I don’t know you that well, Raph,” Lissa replied. “I think you’re a fun guy who’s a bit of an ass, but I could be wrong. I want you to look me in the eye and swear that you didn’t do anything to Anna.”

“I didn’t,” Raphael told her, locking gazes with her. “Believe me.”

For a long moment Lissa held his gaze, then dropped her own to the table. “All right. I believe you. But not everyone’s going to be persuaded that easily, you know. Where were you after you had the argument with Lissa?”

“I went down to the beach to get some alone time.” Raphael sat up straighter in his seat. “And I found this cave when I was down there, actually. It was interesting right up until the point when I fell and nearly killed myself.”

Lissa frowned. “Raph, there aren’t any caves along the coastline. I’ve been living here for years and gone to the beach I don’t know how many times and I’ve never seen any. I don’t think anyone else has either.”

“That’s impossible. There was totally a cave,” Raphael replied. “I’ve still got the bruises from when I slipped and fell in it. Nearly ended up in an underground river or lake or something.”

The look on Lissa’s face concerned him. “Raph, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Stoughton’s a continental island. It’s not like there’s anything underneath it but tectonic shelf.”

Raphael got up. “Here. I’ll show you. It’s a neat cave, you’ll like it.”

Though she continued to look incredulous, Lissa followed his lead. “If you say so. Maybe people’ll believe you if you show them this place.”

“What people?” Raphael asked. “Unless the police are getting involved, Anna’s friends can think whatever they want. They’re still wrong.”

“We haven’t gotten any emails about her like the school sent out about Amanda. I think they’re trying to keep it quiet to keep people from panicking. I mean, there still hasn’t been any word on Amanda, right?”

Raphael shrugged, beginning to descend the winding stairs to the building’s exit. “Not that I know of. I’m sure Anton would have said something if there had been.” Talking about his roommate jogged his memory. “Let’s drop by my place on the way so we can leave our stuff there. You don’t want to be carrying books and a laptop into this place. It’s tricky.”

“All right.”

Anton was in the room when Raphael and Lissa arrived, in one of his usual effulgent moods. When he saw the two of them, he swiveled around in his chair to grin at them. “My favorite couple! What’s up?”

“Not much,” Raphael replied, hoping to avoid a lengthy conversation. “We were just dropping our stuff off before heading out.”

“In the middle of the day? Behave, you two!”

In his peripheral vision, Raphael could see Lissa rolling her eyes. She had never bothered to come straight out and tell him she didn’t like his roommate, but he wasn’t stupid. “We’re just going for a walk,” he said. “Don’t have to get all *excited*, Anton.”

Anton’s face brightened. “Excited! That reminds me –”

“Jesus God no,” Raphael muttered, dropping his backpack by his chair.

“– I’ve got a friend coming over tonight. Could you stay over at Lissa’s place maybe?”

“He might not be able to,” Lissa said before Raphael could speak up in his own defense. “One of my roommates put her foot down about him sleeping over. She’s kind of a judgmental religious bitch.”

“Well fuck that,” Anton said. “Didn’t Christ say ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself?’”

“Nobody wants to know precisely how you love yourself, Anton,” Raphael replied. “But thanks for the support. I’ll just sleep on the couch in the lounge tonight.”

“Thanks, buddy. I really appreciate it.”

“Of course,” Raphael said automatically, moving for the door. One of these days he was going to convince Lissa to spend the night with him here, and then he’d get to tell Anton to go sleep on the hard, uncomfortable piece of shit in the lounge which bore the misnomer of a couch. For now, however, he contented himself with the fact that Lissa obviously didn’t hate him yet and their assuredly inevitable breakup had been delayed for the foreseeable future. It felt good to be optimistic for a change.

“See you!”

“Bye,” Raphael muttered, closing the door behind himself and Lissa.

“I really don’t get him,” Lissa said as they headed out of the dorm.

Raphael shrugged. “I don’t either. But what’s this about your roommate putting her foot down?”

The embarrassed look Lissa gave him told him all he needed to know. “I think Dawn’s just freaking out because we made too much noise on Monday.” She flushed when several passersby turned their heads to look at the two of them, then lowered her voice. “I think she’s still a virgin. Kind of scared of the whole thing, you know.”

“Fucking great. Project your insecurities onto everyone else and hide behind your faith. That’s just fan-fucking-tastic,” Raphael said. By now they were only a few minutes away from the coffee shop, from which he intended to retrace his steps.

“Don’t blame her that much, Raph. We *were* really loud.”

“She can put on headphones or something. God knows I’ve done it more than once. This one time, my roommate was in the shower with his girlfriend but I *really* needed to brush my teeth and get the hell over to class, so I just —”

“That’s just weird,” Lissa cut him off. “And you might not be squeamish about that kind of thing, but she is and we have to respect that.”

Raphael snorted. “No. We really fucking don’t.” They stopped across the street from the coffee shop, looked both ways, crossed. “Well, whatever. You can just come over to my place instead.”

“You’re making some pretty big assumptions about how I’m not still mad at you,” Lissa observed.

“No, I’m just stating a fact. You have the capacity to come over to my place regardless of the status of your feelings toward me at any given moment. It’s true.”

“That’s just kind of convoluted.”

“Whatever you say.” Raphael surveyed their surroundings, trying to remember precisely which road he’d taken. It was difficult, since he’d walked out in a random direction and any landmarks he might have referenced had been hidden by the cloak of night, but he eventually recognized a broken streetlamp. “This way.”

The walk down to the beach was silent; Lissa obviously had more to say on the subject of the two of them but was holding back. For his part, Raphael didn’t want to discuss the matter any further. He’d deal with whatever happened when it happened and that, as far as he was concerned, was that.

“Which way now?” Lissa asked as they came to a halt at the point where the surf met the shore.

“I turned left,” Raphael replied, suiting action to words. “Then I walked for fifteen, twenty minutes maybe. I don’t really remember how long it took. But the cave is impossible to miss.”

So they walked, heading down the beach at a good clip. Twenty minutes later, there had not yet been any evidence of a cave.

“I don’t get it,” Raphael said. “It was right there, in the rock wall. I mean, I remember this cliff. Sheer overhang, lots of seaweed on it. But I don’t see the damn cave.”

“You’re sure this was the place where you found it?” Lissa asked.

“I am. But it’s not here. What the hell is going on?”

Lissa frowned. “Raph –”

Raphael spun around to face her. “I told you the truth, Lissa. This is where I was last night before I walked home in soaking wet shoes and found out the hard way that one of the girls at Anton’s bible study hadn’t exactly left. I lost my fucking flashlight in that cave and nearly broke my laptop.”

“I know, and I told you I believe you. Maybe you were walking faster than you thought or your sense of time was off,” Lissa suggested.

“Maybe.”

Another several minutes’ walking produced no results. For its part, the cliff had reached its peak at the point where they’d stopped to talk, and now shrank back down into the landscape until it was less a cliff and more a step.

“I don’t get it,” Raphael said. “I don’t fucking get it. *I remember* that cave.” He kicked at the sand, producing a spray of pebbles and grit. “Fuck!”

“Calm down,” Lissa told him. “Listen, I believe you. I really do. But maybe for now we should say that you came and spent the night at my place.”

Raphael glowered at the traitorous cliff wall in the distance, trying to will the cave into existence without any effect. “All right. Thanks, Lissa.”

“It’s nothing.” He glanced at her and saw worry written across her face. “I just – Dawn goes to bed early anyway, and maybe I can talk to her. Do you think you could start staying over? Even if we don’t get up to anything?”

The prospect of a permanent refuge from Anton and his fucking Bible studies and late-night booty calls shone before Raphael like a divine beacon, but he hesitated. “Well, of course not. But why the sudden change of heart?”

Lissa gave him a hollow look. “I’m scared, Raph. People are scared. The second disappearance in four days and the police are trying to keep the whole thing quiet. It could be a serial killer or a psychopath or something. It could even be somebody we know.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Raphael told her, trying to sound soothing but only managing to sound lame even to his own ears. He wanted to make a joke about how he’d protect her from the scary bogeyman, but he could tell that she really was scared. Maybe if he had any sense he’d be scared, too, but he wasn’t. He was having trouble this was even happening. Disappearances and vanishing caves and open invitations to sleep in a girl’s bed without any real talk of commitment were things that happened to other people, as far as he was concerned.

Lissa visibly shivered. “Let’s get out of here.”

Raphael followed her back up the beach. He wanted to put an arm around her shoulders. He didn’t.

* * *

Despite the Problem of the Vanishing Cave, as he was beginning to think of it, by the time Raphael got back to his dorm room he was in a much better mood. He had an alibi that people wouldn't scoff at in case they decided to blame Anna's disappearance on him, Lissa believed his protestations of innocence, and he had a refuge from Anton's constant philandering. He was thinking about which of his clothes he would take over to Lissa's that night as he opened his door.

Anton wasn't in. What was in, however, was a skinny black cat, recumbent on his desk. It had golden eyes which he could feel resting on him even from across the room.

Raphael frowned. "How the hell did you get in here?" he asked the cat. It was a rhetorical question, of course; the window was clearly ajar and they were on the first story of the building.

"I walked, of course," the cat said.

Raphael was not overly prone to hysterical reactions. He'd read enough books and seen enough movies with talking animals in them to know, instinctively, that the last thing a talking animal wanted was to be asked, "You can *talk*?" in an awed tone of voice. That would earn its disrespect and condescension.

But he'd never encountered a talking cat before. As far as he knew, they didn't exist. At all. They were made up. A children's fantasy.

"You..." he started to say as all this flashed through his mind.

One of the cat's ears twitched. "Yes?"

"...are a cat," Raphael finished lamely.

"Your higher education has obviously given you deep insight and perception," the cat said. Its voice was deep, wry, with a British accent – close to Received Pronunciation, but just slightly off. His – Raphael was guessing it was a male, from the voice – mouth opened when he spoke, the voice issued from him, but his jaw didn't move beyond that and his lips, such as they were, didn't move to articulate any of the sounds. It was a far cry from the cutting-edge animations Raphael had seen where talking animals actually contorted their jaws enough to make human-like sounds.

"What are you doing in my room?" Raphael asked. It belatedly occurred to him that he was standing in his doorway speaking with a cat, and in case he was crazy and the cat wasn't actually on his desk or it simply wasn't talking, anyone passing by in the hall would see him standing there, talking to thin air. So he closed the door behind him, making sure it locked.

"Lying down," the cat said. "It's much warmer in here than it is outside, don't you agree? I prefer being warm."

"Why my room?"

"Its other occupant was kind enough to open the window for me."

"Anton let you in?"

"So his name is Anton. He never introduced himself."

Raphael felt one of his eyes twitch, not a good sign. "Anton let you in? And you talked to him?"

"Of course I didn't speak to him. He didn't speak to *me*. He made a lot of patronizing, high-pitched noises and called me several 'adorable' names which I will not dignify with repetition. Then he said he had class and told me to make myself comfortable before he left."

"So you made yourself comfortable on *my* desk."

"Yours is the one next to the window. The sun hits it."

Raphael took a deep breath. “Are you real?”

The cat began to lick one of his paws, as though offended. He kept speaking while he was doing this, reminding Raphael of a ventriloquist. He wasn’t sure if it was a pleasant association. “As real as you are.”

“What’s – what’s your name?”

“Charles William Richard,” the cat replied. “You may address me as Charles. If you call me Charlie I will have to scratch you.”

“Okay,” Raphael said, trying to stay calm. “I’m Raphael, but my friends call me Raph.”

“A fine Christian name,” the cat said. “Do you need to use this desk? I can move if you like.”

“I’m – I’m good.” Raphael decided on the obvious course of inquiry as the best. “So... am I dreaming? Or crazy?”

At this, the cat – Charles, Raphael said to himself, Charles – sat up, primly tucking his hind legs in, placing his forepaws together, and curling his tail about his body. He would have fit in perfectly in an Egyptian mural. For the first time, Raphael noticed that one of Charles’s ears was mangled, perhaps from a fight with another cat or an encounter with a larger animal.

“I don’t know. Are you?”

“That’s not very helpful.”

“Young man, I could be nothing more than a solipsistic projection created specifically to deceive you into thinking you are speaking to a cat, and I wouldn’t know it. Would an illusion *know* it was an illusion? Can it not serve its purpose and perhaps take greater joy in the short life it possesses without knowing its ultimately ephemeral nature?”

“This is kind of important, though,” Raphael said. “I’ve never met a talking cat before. As far as I know, they’re not real. So I’m either crazy, or everyone in the world is wrong.”

Charles rubbed at his face. “Which do you think is more likely?”

“Dammit, this just doesn’t happen!” Raphael screeched, making Charles jump. He forced himself to calm down. “I’m sorry. I’m just a little spun out right now.”

“Clearly.” Charles’s ears twitched. “Anton is coming.”

Raphael spun around just in time to see the door swing inward. Anton flashed him a smile as he walked in. “Hey, Raph. I see you’ve met our newest roommate.”

“Yes,” Raphael said. “I have.”

Anton moved past him to Raphael’s desk and began scratching Charles behind the ears. “Isn’t he the cuddliest little guy?” he asked, his voice rising in pitch and increasing in obnoxiousness as he baby-talked to the cat. “Who’s a sweet kitty? Who is it?”

“I somewhat resent this condescension,” Charles said. “I am neither sweet nor a ‘kitty.’ I wish you would treat me with the respect due a grown cat.”

Not seeming to hear him, Anton continued. “It’s you! It’s *you!*”

“Anton,” Raphael said, “I’m not sure he likes that.”

“Of course he does! Of course he does he does he does!” Anton laughed, his demeanor beginning to make the Teletubbies look grave by comparison. “What do you think his name is?”

“Charles,” Raphael replied.

“That’s an awful name for a cat. Let’s call him Tuna.”

“Please, please do not,” Charles said.

“I don’t think he likes that name either,” Raphael tried. “See, he totally likes Charles. Come here, Charles!”

The cat gave him a look which eloquently communicated his utter contempt at Raphael's weak attempts to persuade his roommate. After a moment of clear indecision about whether it would be more humiliating to come when called or continue weathering Anton's affections, Charles bounded to the floor, walked over to Raphael, and settled himself firmly on top of his feet.

"See? Charles."

"Pathetic," Charles muttered.

"Well, if he likes it," Anton said. "Good one, Raph."

"Thank you."

"This idiot is your friend?" Charles asked.

"What?"

"What what?" Anton asked him.

"You said your friends call you 'Raph,'" Charles said. "He just did."

"Nothing," Raphael said to Anton, trying not to shift his feet lest he disturb the cat now resting on them. "Don't worry about it." Maybe this answer would satisfy both of them.

"I am worried," Charles replied. "If I'm going to have to deal with this nincompoop on a daily basis I may go walk in front of a bus."

At the same time, Anton shrugged. "Cool." He dropped his backpack on his bed and seated himself at his desk.

"Well? Explain yourself!" Charles demanded. Raphael tried to give him a desperate look conveying the difficulty of the situation, but the cat just returned his gaze, his golden eyes unblinking.

"I'm going to take Charles for a walk," Raphael said. Before the cat could protest, he scooped him up in his arms. "Back in a few."

"Okay. I'll leave the window open for him."

Raphael hurriedly stepped out into the hall, closing the door behind him. Charles immediately jumped back down to the floor. "You presume too much!"

"Sorry. He obviously can't hear you, what was he going to think when I started talking to myself?"

"Nothing. He is dense as a meat pie and lacking even its nutritional value to justify his existence."

"I mean, if you ate him you'd probably get some protein." This hardly seemed a bizarre thought to Raphael when he was voicing it to a talking cat.

"I somehow doubt it."

"What did you mean, if you have to deal with him every day you'll walk in front of a bus?"

Charles began licking himself, still offended. "Exactly what it sounds like. I only say what I mean."

"I mean, *why* would you have to deal with him every day?"

"Because I have decided to live with you."

Raphael coughed. He decided to address the immediate problem. "Um. I'm not going to be staying here for a while. I have a – well, there's a girl who wants me to stay over..."

"Thank God. I doubt she could be worse than that fool. Shall we go, then?"

This wasn't working. Raphael went to the next most obvious tack. "*Why* have you decided to live with me?"

“A cat need never explain his reasons for anything he does,” Charles replied. “That is our privilege.”

“But I sort of need to know. If I’m going to agree to this, that is.”

Charles laughed. The sound coming from a black cat was disturbing, to say the least. “You don’t have a say. Don’t you understand anything *about* cats?”

“No?”

“Clearly.” Charles began padding away down the hall. “Go about your business, Raphael Rousseau. I will find you again.”

The cat turned a corner, vanishing from Raphael’s sight.

Raphael stood there for a moment, then let himself back into his room. Anton looked up. “Where’s Charles?”

Sitting down at his desk, Raphael said the first thing that came to mind. “He decided he wanted to walk by himself.”

IV

“Mistah Kurtz, he dead.”

Raphael, who had installed himself at his desk and resolved to get through *Heart of Darkness*, jumped. He’d hoped that concentrating on his work would enable him to forget that he’d just had a conversation with a Goddamned black cat who called himself Charles. So far, he had been less than successful. “What?”

“Sorry,” Anton said. “Didn’t mean to startle you. I just saw you were reading *Heart of Darkness*. So you know. ‘Mistah Kurtz, he dead.’”

“You’ve read it?” Raphael asked, suddenly interested.

“In high school,” Anton replied. “I don’t remember much about it. My teacher talked for a while about Darkest Africa as a metaphor for the anxiety of debasement through the invasive colonial process of unveiling, but nobody was really getting it so we just moved on.”

“Jesus,” Raphael muttered. “When I was in high school we read *Macbeth*. Nobody but me understood it. That was a really depressing time.”

“Were there at least any good-looking chicks in your class?”

Raphael sighed. “I really don’t get you, Anton. You have Bible studies and one-night stands *on the same night*. I didn’t want to say anything but you really fucking puzzle me. How do you reconcile that?”

“You’ve been confused this entire time and you didn’t say anything? Jesus, Raph, I wish you’d spoken up.” Anton looked embarrassed. “I just figure that God wouldn’t make sex fun if he didn’t want us to do it. I use protection and don’t try to force anyone into doing anything they don’t want to do, and I think that as long as I’m straightforward about not really wanting a relationship things will work themselves out.”

“Huh.” Raphael still didn’t feel like he necessarily *approved* of Anton, but at least this went a long way toward explaining the apparent hypocrisy of his roommate’s behavior. “Well, thanks.”

“No problem. Man, I’m just embarrassed. You probably thought I was pretending to be pious to get into girls’ pants or something all this time.”

“Not really,” Raphael replied, trying to sound more flippant than he felt. “It’s not like I care. Well, I still don’t think we need a Goddamn crucifix on our door, but whatever.”

Anton grinned. “Sorry, man. A room’s not protected from the Devil until it’s warded with a crucifix.”

“Do you actually think the Devil’s going to sneak in here and steal your soul or something if you don’t have a piece of wood with a dead Jew nailed to it on your door?” Raphael asked.

“No. The Devil’s got better stuff to do. But there’s no sense *inviting* him.”

Raphael sighed, putting down *Heart of Darkness*. “Can’t argue with that logic.”

“What about you, Raph? You’ve never really said anything about your faith. You a Christian?”

This question gave Raphael pause. He hadn’t had to explain where he was, spiritually speaking, for a while. “I was raised Catholic. I’m not sure how I feel about that right now. A lot of shit’s happened.” Like the talking cat, for one thing.

“Like what?”

Raphael hesitated. This, he *really* had not discussed. Not even with Lissa. He had never wanted to bring it up.

“It’s a long story,” he said. “I’d rather not talk about it.”

Anton nodded. “I feel you, man. Everybody’s got shit they’d rather not deal with.”

“Something like that.” Raphael stared out the window at the setting sun. He should be getting to Lissa’s in an hour or two. He should finish *Heart of Darkness*. He should figure out if he’d really just had a conversation with a Goddamned black cat. “I just don’t know where I stand on much right now.”

“I’ve been there.”

Somehow, this surprised Raphael. “Really? I mean... you don’t seem like the type to have existential crises.”

“I’ve had a few. This one girl, Zoe?” Anton leaned toward Raphael, his shitty dorm chair creaking with the motion. “I was with her for almost *three months*, and she dumped me. Said I was ‘shallow.’ I was basically crushed for *days*.”

Raphael felt his respect for Anton returning to its previous low, if stable, level. “I see.”

“Yeah. So I feel you there.”

“Thanks.” Somehow Raphael felt as though he shouldn’t quite be accepting that as a compliment, but he was past caring at this point. All he could think about right now was that Goddamned black cat.

Deciding to try to distract himself, Raphael put a game in his console and started it up. He loved video games. If somebody asked him if he wanted to have wild, kinky sex or play a great video game, he would ask who the sex was with and which game was in question before making his decision. He would probably end up deciding that he would go with the sex, if he were completely honest with himself, but he knew that there had to be some combination of undesirable woman and excellent video game that would end in favor of the latter.

This particular game was a role-playing game. The main character was a man in showy armor with a large sword; the characters Raphael usually had accompanying him were a busty female mage and a bow-wielding ranger. Raphael thought the story was absolute tripe, despite his usual affection for fantasy, but the characters were entertaining and he enjoyed the combat system. His last saved game had left him in a forest; it only took a few moments after he’d resumed playing for a pack of wolves to leap out of the trees and attack his characters.

He began dispatching the wolves, feeling his mind slowly settle into the comfortable groove of play. The problem was that upon realizing his mind was doing this, Raphael immediately began thinking about how he was distracting himself, and from there he thought about the thing from *which* he was distracting himself: the magical mystery cat.

Raphael blinked as one of his characters took a nasty hit which he should have easily been able to avoid if he’d been paying attention. He cursed softly to himself, trying to make himself focus, but his mind kept returning to the problem of Charles and his sanity. Cats didn’t talk. This was commonly acknowledged as the truth, because it *was* the truth. Yet here was a cat which flagrantly violated that comforting absolute, and apparently the only person in the world who could tell he was doing it was Raphael.

Was he going crazy?

The cat was real, that much was for sure. Anton had let him in, after all. He’d petted him and tried to name him Tuna. So had Raphael just hallucinated the cat talking, or was it magic or something? He didn’t want to even consider the possibility that magic was real. It seemed like far too much to deal with. He liked magic, yes, but he liked the idea of magic the way ignorant people liked the idea of literature: it’s there, I’m not really doing anything with it, and as long as it doesn’t affect me I’m okay with its existence. If it was real...

Raphael shook his head. Charles hadn't even – no, not Charles, *the Goddamned black cat* – offered an explanation about anything. If his speech had just been a hallucination, wouldn't it have least made *sense*? Raphael's dreams, disjointed and illogical as they tended to be, at least always made sense to him while he was having them.

He realized he'd lapsed into a reverie when Anton said something and he didn't really hear it. "What?"

"I said sorry, by the way," Anton said. "I just realized the whole 'Mistah Kurtz, he dead' thing is a spoiler. Since you might not have read the book already."

"It's fine," Raphael said automatically, ordering the mage to dispense fiery death to the alpha wolf which continued to hound his party. "There's a statute of limitations on this shit. It was his sled and all that."

"What's that from?" Anton asked.

Raphael opened his mouth, the words *Citizen Kane* on his lips, then decided against it.

"*The Karate Kid*," he said.

"Never seen it. Thanks for nothin', man." Anton's tone of voice told Raphael that he was very far from actually being upset.

"No problem," Raphael replied, watching the alpha wolf burn to death with no small amount of satisfaction. "No problem at all."

* * *

As he'd hoped – well, more suspected, but he'd sort of hoped it too – the cat was waiting outside when Raphael left the dorm.

"About time," Charles said. "I was growing worried that I might have to spend the night with that... fellow."

"God forbid you should have to sleep in the same room as him," Raphael said, his voice a monotone. "I'm sure it's like a living hell."

Charles sniffed. "Your deplorable lack of standards need not extend to me simply because we are now living together."

"Okay, no." Raphael stopped walking and looked down at the cat. "All things considered, I think that I'm taking the fact that I'm speaking with a Goddamn talking cat pretty well. But I'm drawing a line here. Why the fuck have you decided that you're staying with me? For that matter, *who are you*? Do you just live in Stoughton or what?"

"A cat need never speak about himself unless he desires it." Charles, for the first time Raphael could recall, blinked. "But since you asked so *politely*, I will tell you that I am here to help you."

"Help me do what?" Raphael asked. "How do you even know me? Have you been watching me or something?"

"I watch everyone. You are not particularly special."

"But you're saying you're going to live with me!"

"You seem overly excitable," Charles said, casually licking the back of a paw. "Clearly you suffer from an excess of the choleric humors."

Raphael closed his eyes, controlled his breathing. "What. Are you going. To help me with?"

"Whatever gives you pause," Charles replied. "Cats are guardians, after all. The Egyptians revered us for good reason."

“Because if they didn’t you’d piss on their rugs?”

Charles hissed at him. “If you will lead on.”

Raphael smirked. That had felt good. “So... am I going to have to feed you?”

“I am a fully autonomous individual,” Charles said, sounding somewhat irritated. “I can see to my own needs, thank you. All I require is a roof over my head. The novelty of being an outdoor-dwelling cat has worn thin.”

“Okay.” This might not be so bad, then, assuming he wasn’t just crazy. It wasn’t like he was making a huge commitment. And Lissa liked cats; she would be fine with it. On a whim, Raphael decided to ask, “Charles, do you know of any caves on Stoughton?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“I was in one yesterday and now I can’t find it again. You’re some kind of magical animal, I figured you might know.”

Charles bristled as he padded soundlessly after Raphael. “I find such occultism derogatory and insulting.”

“Love you too,” Raphael said. “I think we’re going to get on well.”

“I’m sorry if my answer is not satisfactory to you,” Charles replied with a sniff. “But I do not personally believe in magic. If that is the only way you can acknowledge my existence, I suppose you must do what you must do, but please know that I do not approve of such thoughts.”

“I’m sorry, Charles, but you’re not giving me much to go on,” Raphael said. “I’d like to believe you’re real, because it means I’m not going crazy, which would please me to no end. But, as far as I know, talking cats *just don’t exist*. Can’t you tell me anything about yourself?”

He heard what could have been a laugh before Charles bounded on ahead. “You really do know nothing about cats.”

* * *

Lissa opened the door when Raphael knocked. “Hey,” she said, moving aside to let him in.

“Hey,” Raphael returned. “Uh – so.”

Before he could ask about the situation with Dawn or how she was doing, Charles oozed in past his legs. The cat sauntered down the hall into the living room, surveyed the place, and settled down in the middle of the large black couch against the west wall.

“What the hell?” Lissa asked. “Is that –”

“His name’s Charles,” Raphael replied. “I’m – well, I’m not *looking after* him, but he’s taken to hanging around me. He’s an outdoor cat, so he feeds himself and takes care of his business outside. All he needs is a window.” He cast an imploring glance at Lissa, trying to make his eyes as big and vulnerable as possible. He succeeded in looking like he was thinking about eating her alive.

Lissa shuddered. “Stop making that face, it’s awful. I mean, he’s friendly, right?”

“Well.” Raphael looked at Charles, who had begun fastidiously cleaning his flanks. “He lets people pet him. And he doesn’t have fleas.”

“Certainly not,” the cat huffed.

“That sounds fine then,” Lissa said, giving no indication that she’d heard Charles speak. Raphael suppressed a groan. *Great. I really am the only one who can hear him.* She closed the door behind Raphael. “So Dawn says she’s okay with you staying over if we promise we won’t do anything.”

“Sure,” Raphael said. “Nothing at all, huh? Guess I should stop breathing, then.”

Lissa rolled her eyes at him, moving past him to get into the living room herself. She stepped around the counter which served as the divider between the living room and the kitchen as she got herself a mug. “Tea?”

“I’m fine,” Raphael said. The living room was modest: there was the couch on which Charles was situated, a coffee table, two other chairs. A small television sat on an entertainment stand across the room from the chairs, to the left of the couch. The door to Lissa’s room was in the east wall of the room, adjacent to the kitchen. The walls were painted off-white and were bare save for a large poster for the first Twilight film.

Raphael eyed it. He’d seen it before, of course, but he still felt obligated to comment upon its presence whenever he saw it. “Is this Joy’s or Dawn’s?” he asked.

“It’s mine,” Lissa said. “In the absence of any good men I’ve turned to fantasizing about Edward sweeping me off my feet and taking my vampire virginity.”

For a long moment, Raphael gave her a flat, expressionless stare. Then he said, “Good knowing you!” and walked back toward the door.

He felt her seize him by the back of his shirt. “Oh, go fuck yourself. Look, it was a phase, okay? You have to admit that Robert Pattinson is pretty.”

“Pretty bland,” Raphael said.

“Shut up! The first book came out when I was like fifteen, okay? I didn’t even know there *was* good literature at that point. I just sort of subsisted on Gossip Girl and romance novels. This seemed like a bold new move for me. And besides, I see the Star Wars books you keep on your shelf above the huge stack of video games.”

Raphael grinned at her. “At least nobody in Star Wars sparkles in the sunlight.”

“Okay, enough out of you. Did you bring all the stuff you needed?”

“Of course. I’ll need to go back to my place in a few days to do laundry, but I’m good for now.”

“Good.” Lissa gave him a peck on the cheek. “You’ll be happy to know that like five people asked me today if I knew what happened with you and Anna and they all believed me when I told them you came here afterward.”

“That *is* good. Maybe they’ll stop fucking gossiping about the whole thing now.”

“Don’t count on it,” Charles said.

Raphael ignored him. “Can I just put my stuff in your room?”

“Of course. I just need to finish making this tea.”

Lissa’s room was about the size of Raphael and Anton’s entire dorm room. It had a full closet, a handsome black desk, and a queen bed on a low-standing IKEA frame, as well as a pair of large bookshelves. Lissa owned several hundred books, which she kept in meticulous alphabetical order by author’s last name. How she could remember all these names, Raphael had no clue; he was lucky if he retained a fact for five minutes before needing to recheck it on Wikipedia.

“She’s quite beautiful,” Charles said from the couch.

Raphael put his backpack down at the foot of Lissa’s bed, began taking off his shoes. “Thanks,” he said in a low enough voice that it wouldn’t carry through the wall to the kitchen.

As he’d expected, Charles could hear him perfectly – he *was* a cat, after all. “How did you two first meet?”

“We have a class together,” Raphael murmured. “After the first meeting I dropped a book and she handed it to me. Then we talked on the way to the university center, and... well. Yeah.”

Charles made a contemplative noise. “Young love. Like fireworks, really.”

“What?”

“Brilliant, loud, and short-lived.”

Raphael snorted. “It’s not like we’ve said the I-word. Or even known one another that long. Or said that we’re together.”

“You and the young lady share a bed but have no established relationship?”

“Something like that. You’d have to ask Lissa.”

“Raph, are you talking to somebody?” Lissa called from the kitchen.

“Just muttering,” Raphael called back.

“I cannot ask her that,” Charles said. “It would not be proper of me to ask a lady about her private life.”

“You say shit like that, and then you ask me about *my* private life. That’s a ridiculous double standard.”

“Of course it is. Nobody ever said I wasn’t free to maintain hypocritical or two-faced beliefs. That is one of the joys of being intelligent, after all. You can justify essentially anything by speaking about it at enough length.”

Raphael shook his head. “You said you’re going to help me, or something, but all you’ve done so far is sit around and snark. I get enough of that already from my friends. So what is it you’re really here for?”

Charles sniffed. “I *am* here to help you. The first part of that help is breaking you of the troublesome notion that you are the cleverest, most self-aware person in the room. That, in turn, begins with abusing you outrageously. Do not lecture me on how to do my job, thank you very much.” He began to clean himself vigorously.

Lissa appeared in the doorway, holding a steaming mug. “Want to watch something?” she asked, motioning at the couch. “We can cuddle with Charles.”

Charles immediately relocated to one of the chairs.

“Sure,” Raphael said, letting the smile Charles’s act prompted appear on his face. “That sounds nice.”

V

Raphael drew the sword from its scabbard. He knew it was called Durendal, which was important, though he couldn't remember why, exactly. It didn't matter that much. He and his men were the rear-guard for Charlemagne, and they were going to hold back the Saracens if it cost every last one of them their lives.

"That's a morbid thought," Charlemagne commented. He was there, suddenly, which made sense to Raphael. His voice was the same as Charles's, which also made sense. "You know how this is going to end, don't you?"

"Of course I do," Raphael replied. "They outnumber us twenty to one. They're going to achieve victory; all we can do is make it a Pyrrhic one."

"Unless you blow your horn," Charlemagne said. "Then I will come, and bring the wrath of my army down upon the Saracens, and your men will be saved."

"I can't do that. I can only blow the horn when I'm among the last men standing, to let you know to come avenge us. Otherwise the story won't go the way it should."

"Is that really why you can't blow the horn?"

Raphael turned to look at Charlemagne. His king was old, very old, yet he still burned with a righteous fire. It was the hand of God on him, Raphael knew. That was just the way things worked in this world.

"What are you asking me?" Raphael asked. "I mean, of course it's why I can't blow the horn. I can't change what's about to happen."

"You can't change what's happened. But your defeat is not foretold. This is not your tragedy, Raphael. You can avert this."

"No," Raphael said. "I don't think I can."

Raphael looked at the sword in his hand. Now it was called Excalibur, and the army facing him was led by Lancelot, a man he sincerely did not want to fight.

"Let me fight him," Gawain said in Charles's voice. "He has killed Gareth and Gaheris. He has stolen your queen. He has shamed the Knights of the Round Table. Let me fight him, for my power grows with the sun and I will surely overcome him ere noon."

"You won't be able to beat him," Raphael told him. "I know. You'll fight him twice, then we'll be called back to regain the kingdom from Mordred. You'll die in that invasion. Maybe you'll live if you save your strength and don't fight him."

"Are you so sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure!" Raphael rounded on Gawain. "I know what's going to happen. I've read it. I've studied it. There is no way for you to avoid it unless you don't fight him."

"But you were just saying that you cannot change what is about to happen. Now you're saying we can only prevent it if we deny anything that could make it so." Gawain held up his hands, palms up. "Which one is it, Raphael? Denial is a two-faced creature, is it not? Or perhaps it is merely encompassing. Rejecting your ability to change the future, rejecting your desire to act in the present... It consumes you."

Raphael let the sword, which no longer had a name, fall from his hand. It landed with a soft *thud* on the sand of the beach. A moment later, it was a long strip of seaweed.

Charles, a cat once more, stood next to him. "Go inside," he said, indicating with his gaze the cave which loomed in front of them like a gaping wound in the cliffside. "Surely you can't know what will happen if you do."

“Everyone knows what happens when you walk alone into a dark and mysterious cave,” Raphael said. “You end up being the guy who dies at the start of a *Star Trek* episode to let the audience know that this is serious business.”

“If everyone knew that, those people would never go into the cave,” Charles replied. “Do those characters put themselves in danger because they know they will die? They do it because they are compelled, whether by duty or desire or fear. They are as real as you or me, after all.”

“But I’m still not convinced you *are* real,” Raphael said.

“Then what does that tell you about yourself?”

They were suddenly standing in the entrance of the cave, staring into the inky depths. “I’m not going back in there,” Raphael said. “And didn’t you say you didn’t know anything about any caves on this island?”

“My ignorance does not preclude their existence.” Charles began to pace around Raphael in a large, lazy circle. “I don’t know what you want to hear, Raphael. But I told you I am here to help you, and so I am. And in that capacity, I am telling you that *you will have to choose to go into the cave eventually.*”

Raphael opened his eyes.

Lissa was sound asleep next to him, half-curved into a ball. For his part, Raphael was on his back, hands at his sides, as though he’d been sleeping in a coffin.

Charles was sitting on his chest.

“Did you do that?” Raphael hissed as quietly as he could. “What the hell, Charles?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Charles replied, his voice at its normal volume. “Except, of course, try to help you.”

“I can figure out on my own what I need to do, and going into a creepy fucking cave isn’t one of them,” Raphael whispered. “Thank you very much, now get off me.”

“You’ve been there before and turned back. And when you went to see it again it was gone, wasn’t it? The door was open and you slammed it shut. Now you can’t just trip through it into whatever lies beyond. You have to open it again yourself.”

“What the fuck *are* you, Yoda? Is that why you’re talking in riddles?”

“Raph,” Lissa murmured, still half-asleep. “What’s up?”

“I’m talking in riddles because that’s the only way to have this discussion,” Charles snapped.

“Nothing,” Raphael told her. “Go back to sleep.” He looked back at Charles, then indicated with a jerking motion of his head that the cat should get the hell off him, now.

With a sigh, Charles obliged him. Raphael let out a long sigh, then rolled over, draping one of his arms around Lissa so he could feel the steady motion of her stomach.

Just a dream. He would wake up tomorrow and not remember it had even happened. He told himself that was how it was going to work. It was going to happen that way, he knew it.

But even as he thought that, Charles’s voice sounded in his mind again. *Denial is a two-faced creature*, the cat had said in his dream. *Or perhaps it is merely encompassing.*

Raphael didn’t want to think about any of it. He wanted to go to sleep, and wake up the next morning and be able to write a story that was worth a damn and understand why people said *Heart of Darkness* was good and know the magical solution to all the problems buzzing around him like a swarm of angry bees.

He knew it wasn’t going to happen. But he wanted it anyway.

* * *

Between his classes, while he was seated on a bench outside the university center eating lunch, was when it happened.

Raphael was taking a break from his interminable struggle with *Heart of Darkness* and indulging in a book he actually enjoyed, a book with spaceships on its cover, when a shadow fell over him. He looked up to see who the hell was blocking his light.

Much to his chagrin, it was one of the girls Anna had been with the last time he'd seen her. Raphael recalled that her name was Sarah. She was short, a little pudgy, with curly blonde hair and blue eyes. She had her arms crossed and her hips slightly cocked in a way that told him she was here to cause trouble.

"I don't really care what you want or why you're here," Raphael said. "Let me enjoy my lunch in peace, will you?"

"I know you had something to do with it," Sarah shot back. "Lissa may say that you went over to her place after that fight, and maybe she's right, but she fell asleep at some point. You snuck out and did something."

"Believe whatever you want," Raphael said. "Like I said, I don't care. Unless you have some kind of evidence, which I know you don't because it doesn't exist, then you're just flapping your mouth."

"I'm not the only one. You're a weirdo and a creep and you expect us to believe you when you say you didn't do anything but you're the only person with a clear-cut motive?"

"I dislike Anna. So does Lissa. So do half the people in the school, if they've got any brains. I don't know why *you're* friends with her. I don't like you very much right now, but I'm not going to do anything except keep telling you to piss off and leave me alone."

"Fuck you," Sarah said. "We're watching you, Raph. You slip up one time and we're getting the police involved."

"Slip up how?" Raphael asked, trying to remain calm despite the mounting rage he was feeling. "Have a fight with one of you in public? Say something mean in my fiction workshop? I'm trembling."

"All I want to know is if Lissa put you up to it. Did she tell you how she didn't like Anna, Raph? Did she fuck you in exchange for –"

"God, I wish you'd fuck off and die!" Raphael snarled. "Lissa has *nothing* –"

He stopped talking when Sarah's eyes went very wide, then rolled up into her head as she fell over.

For a moment, Raphael sat there, staring. Sarah wasn't moving. He dropped his sandwich as he rushed over to her, laid his fingers against her throat. She had no pulse. None at her wrist, either. Her eyes weren't responding when he opened them. She wasn't breathing either.

Instinctively, Raphael cast a glance around; for the moment they were alone. This side of the university center was used infrequently at best, especially during the irregular hours at which he took his lunch.

He started panicking. What was going on? Had she had a heart attack? Raphael fished into his pocket for his phone, intent on calling the police, but then hesitated. How was he going to explain this? Sarah's words about watching him came back in full force. This wasn't going to look good. He was innocent, but – well, was he? He hadn't done anything, right?

"Oh, you killed her, all right."

The speaker nearly gave Raphael a heart attack himself before he realized it was Charles, who'd appeared out of a nearby shrub.

"What?" Raphael hissed. "Are you fucking kidding me? I didn't really mean what I said!"

"Of course you did," Charles replied. "Intent might be different from action, but when all it *takes* is intent..."

Raphael swallowed and firmly told himself he was not going to throw up. "What – how did I – the hell is – what the *fuck*?" he finally said.

"What do you think?" Charles asked. "Your wish was granted. Do you have anyone else you want dead, while you're at it?"

"Fuck this," Raphael said. "You're not real. This isn't happening. I'm going crazy and I need help or something. Jesus Christ, I –"

He yelped when Charles scratched him right through his jeans. "There. You're not losing your mind. This is real, this is happening, and you must choose what to do about it."

Raphael pressed a hand against the wound; it came away red. "Okay. Okay. What the fuck do you do after you've just killed someone? Hide the body? Turn yourself in? I mean, there is *no* evidence that I've done anything. I've checked her pulse and her eyes and that's it. No jury could convict me. Jesus, I'm talking about juries now."

"I don't know," Charles replied, cleaning off the paw he'd used to swipe at Raphael. "I've never killed anyone."

"Okay. Think," Raphael muttered to himself. "I, uh, wish that this conversation had never taken place."

Sarah's body stayed precisely where it was.

"I mean it!" Raphael said. "I really, really, *really* fucking wish Sarah had never decided to come over here and talk to me!"

Nothing.

"Maybe it doesn't work retroactively. Okay, I wish Sarah would come back to life!"

The only sound he could hear was Charles's tongue scraping against the pads of his paw. Sarah was still not breathing.

"It seems rather obvious to me," Charles said, "that whatever force is granting you these wishes only does so if the wishes themselves are malign in nature."

"Thanks, shitwizard, I'd just figured that out." Raphael blew out a long breath. "Okay. I wish Sarah's body would disappear."

Nothing.

"Well, fuck. I think it just likes screwing with me."

"That is certainly the most likely interpretation of what is happening." Charles finished cleaning his paw. "The question is what you are going to do about it."

"First I'm going to get the fuck out of here," Raphael said, picking up his sandwich, pocketing his book, and shouldering his backpack. "That's what." He left at a brisk clip, heart pounding. All it would take to fuck everything up was someone walking around the university center at the wrong time. They would see him walking away from a dead body and draw the first logical conclusion.

But fortune seemed to favor him for the moment; as he left, nobody showed up to scream bloody murder and get him arrested. Charles padded after him, any sound of his passage concealed by the whisper of the wind.

Raphael thought furiously. If Sarah had announced to somebody she was going to come confront him, they might be expecting her to come back and would be suspicious when she didn't return. On the other hand, he didn't think much of Sarah; she had probably been passing along that side of the university center, seen him, and decided to take a few potshots at him in the hopes of making him nervous or at least making him angry. That was probably what had happened, he decided. It would have been easier for her to catch him in one of the classes she knew he had if this meeting had been premeditated. He winced at the word *premeditated*. This was third-degree murder – he remembered the distinctions between the different grades from a Wikipedia article. He hadn't meant to kill her, but he'd gone and done it anyway.

Or was it that whatever had granted his wish had done it? But Charles *had* said intent was all it took in this case. But Raphael hadn't known that. He turned it over and over in his head, trying to figure out if he was avoiding the blame because he didn't want to be responsible for having murdered someone or because he felt that he really was in the clear here.

"Do many people know that you take lunch there?" Charles asked him.

"No," Raphael said. "Nobody does. I kept it that way on purpose so I could be guaranteed a few minutes' peace each day. She must have just seen me while she was passing by and decided to harass me."

"Then you may not be in immediate danger," Charles mused. "Still, she *will* be found, an alarum *will* be raised, and you are still a prime suspect in the disappearance of one of her close friends, despite the existence of an alibi. What do you intend to do?"

Raphael scowled. He knew Charles was prodding him toward something. He remembered the dream from last night perfectly, with a vivid clarity that told him it hadn't been an ordinary one. "You want me to go into the cave, don't you?"

"I didn't say that. This is a conclusion you are drawing on your own."

"You said that in my dream."

"But that was only a dream. It couldn't have been real."

"Dammit, Charles, stop *fucking* with me!" Raphael snapped, loudly enough that several passersby turned to look quizzically at him. He immediately averted his gaze from the cat. "You said you're here to help me," he continued in a lower voice, keeping his eyes fixed straight ahead. "So help me. Is going into the cave what I'm supposed to do?"

"You are not 'supposed' to. There is no greater force impelling you to do this, Raphael. It must be your choice."

"But you said I have to go in eventually."

"No, I said you will eventually have to *choose* to go in. The choice is what is important."

Raphael groaned. "Where are you getting this information, Charles? What do you know that I don't?"

"What do you think?" Charles challenged him.

For a moment, Raphael hesitated, pausing in mid-step. Then he angled toward Lissa's place. "I think I should drop my stuff off and then go find that fucking cave again."

"Good man." Charles continued following him. "Surely it will be for the best."

Raphael kept walking, not responding to that comment. He'd just killed someone by *wishing* they'd die. He was still talking to a Goddamned black cat. And now he was going to go look for a mysterious, disappearing cave, the kind of place that people with death-wishes sought out so they could slip on a rock, break their neck, and die alone and unloved.

Why couldn't his problems be easy, mainstream ones, like wanting someone back or having to deal with an irritating coworker at a party in a strikingly postmodernist and clever

way? Clearly God hated him. That was the only possible explanation. Jesus Christ the Almighty was personally trying to fuck with him. And he was succeeding with flying colors.

“Look on the bright side,” Charles said. “At least you didn’t kill someone you cared about.” He paused. “At least nobody else has wished anyone dead today.”

Raphael looked at the cat, who returned the look without comment.

He increased his pace.

VI

When Raphael got to the beach, it was deserted.

It was cold out, but there still should have been people walking along the shoreline, enjoying the smell of the ocean or the view of the coastline. The fact that it was deserted was unnerving. Did whatever he was going to go meet expect him? All Raphael knew was that he was in deep, far over his head, and that he had to figure a way out.

His phone showed a missed call from Lissa. He hadn't picked it up, dreading what she might have to say. "Did you just kill someone? You really *did* have something to do with Anna disappearing, didn't you?" The possibilities echoed unpleasantly through his head despite his best efforts to banish them and focus.

Charles, mercifully, had remained silent for the better part of an hour now. He might have spoken up at many points, but he'd kept his peace, letting Raphael heave up his lunch into one of the dorm's toilets and then pace around his room swearing to himself without comment. Raphael had drunk some water after that, but his mouth still tasted of bile. It seemed appropriate, somehow.

He began to walk along the beach toward where he hoped the cave would be.

At length, he asked Charles, "So what's going to happen when I go back into the cave? Do you know?"

"I'm just your aid," Charles replied. "I don't know what's going to happen any more than you do. I just know that you're making the right choice. I don't have any power beyond that."

Raphael was somewhat suspicious of this statement, but he couldn't bring himself to challenge the cat. Right now Charles was the only help he had in the world, the anchor to which he was clinging, and he needed that if he was going to figure out how to fix everything. He was positive that if it were all left up to him he would be lost.

He tried to reassure himself that it was just the situation, that this kind of negative thinking wouldn't get him anywhere and as long as he kept a cool head he was going to be fine, but then he remembered the sight of Sarah's body and felt his stomach churn again. No, this was some deep shit. He was going to need more than a cool head to get through this.

The cliff was just as he'd remembered it from the night when he'd entered the cave, save for the fact that he could see it much better in the daylight. He kept walking, keeping his eyes fixed straight ahead as he'd done that night, then turned –

There it was.

Raphael breathed a sigh of relief. At least he knew where he stood, now. Either the cave was real, or whatever kind of psychosis he was having was remarkably consistent. Neither of these things was particularly reassuring, exactly, but he would take whatever he could get at this point. If all this was real, then it operated on some kind of logical principles and could therefore be reasoned with, or beaten, or avoided, or *something*.

"Well?" Charles asked. "Are you going to go in?"

Raphael nodded. "Just give me a minute. I really, really don't want to go in there, you know."

"Of course you don't," Charles replied. "That's the entire point, after all. But you eventually have to step inside if you want to continue forward."

“I know, I know.” Raphael took a deep breath, tried to steady himself. He was Raphael Rousseau, dammit, and he’d been through worse than this. He would figure out what the hell to do and get out of this alive.

Of course, this *was* actually the worst thing he’d been through in his entire life. He’d never murdered anyone before. Never had to try to deal with a talking black cat who seemed entirely too knowledgeable about dark caves and needing to go into them. The worst thing he’d done before this was act like a dick and occasionally yell at people in line in front of him in the grocery store.

Well. That wasn’t the worst thing he’d done, really. Not by far. But he didn’t like to think about the other things. Raphael scowled. So much for steadying himself.

He walked into the cave.

* * *

Despite the fact that it was broad daylight outside, it was as dark inside the cave as it had been the first night he’d entered.

Raphael pulled out the flashlight he’d brought, a much better one than he’d had before. He thumbed it on and swept the beam around the cave. The stalactites and stalagmites hadn’t changed, as far as he could tell. The ground was still irregular and uneven, forcing him to watch his footing carefully. The last thing he wanted to do after forcing himself to come this far was crack his head open and die alone in a cave.

He paused for a second, wondering if the thing – force – whatever – which had granted his wish could hear him think that. He briefly considered trying to wish for something bad to happen, but rejected the idea. Either he would have to wish it on something or someone outside the cave, which would necessitate his egress, or he would have to wish it on the cave or himself, neither of which seemed like a good notion.

So he kept going. The cave sloped sharply downward as before. Raphael’s flashlight revealed the water at the bottom once more, lying still and calm. He moved cautiously down the slope. As he moved, a sense of mounting dread took hold of him, a kind of cold animal panic the likes of which he’d never experienced before. If he’d had hackles, they would have been raised. For a moment he stopped dead, his heart pounding in his chest, but he made himself keep moving forward. He wasn’t about to admit defeat after having come this far, dammit. After all, it was only a cave. There was nothing weird or supernatural about it; he was sure its little disappearing act had been some trick of the light.

Yes. A trick of *all* the light.

Raphael forced himself onward until he stopped just short of the water. “Charles,” he called. “Am I supposed to go in now or what?”

There was no response.

The realization of Charles’s absence hit Raphael much harder than he’d anticipated it would. The cat might have done nothing but snark at him and make him question his sanity for the past few days, but he’d grown to be a familiar presence, a kind of constant. Now Raphael was alone, without Charles’s guidance – how quickly he’d grown accustomed to it, he realized – and afraid.

Raphael could hear the omnipresent dripping sound of the cave thundering in his ears. He felt like he was entering a heightened state of awareness, or an out-of-body experience. He was very aware of himself, standing on the lip of this pool or underwater river or whatever it

was, gripping the flashlight in a white-knuckled hand. He was perspiring despite the relative fridity of the cave. His teeth were grinding. He was alone.

This was the choice Charles had been talking about, he realized.

Raphael crouched in front of the water, dipped a hand in. It was freezing cold.

He got up, turned around, and thought very hard about putting one foot in front of the other and walking out of this fucking cave and never looking back.

Looking up at the entrance, he thought he could just barely make out the silhouette of a cat.

Raphael swallowed. Enough was enough. The flashlight, fortunately, was waterproof, and he'd need it in there. Sometimes there was no easy way to get accustomed to the water before jumping in. Sometimes you just had to take the plunge.

He hurled himself into the water. It was even colder once he was submerged; he felt his fingers go numb almost instantly, his limbs grow heavy. For a moment he floated, paralyzed by the cold, but then he forced himself into motion, kicking his legs and striking out with his arms to propel himself deeper. The flashlight revealed that he was entering a tunnel – a very round, smooth one, obviously carved by eons of erosion. Raphael had little room to move his arms, so he kicked his legs harder. He could see that the tunnel didn't dip or turn; instead, some distance away, it curved back up, hopefully to someplace with air.

Raphael got about halfway through the tunnel before he realized it was getting smaller. His shoulders were beginning to scrape along its sides. Panic gripped him. He couldn't turn around, and it seemed like the tunnel got even narrower up ahead. What if he got stuck? He felt his lungs beginning to burn with the need for oxygen. How long had he been down here already? A minute? He could only hold his breath for a minute and a half, maybe less. He didn't swim that often. He wasn't in very good shape. He was going to die down here –

The flashlight flickered out.

Enough.

Raphael had come this far. He wasn't going to drown. Not now. He had to see what was on the other side of this fucking tunnel. Charles would never let him live it down if he didn't. For that matter, he probably wasn't going to live, period, if he didn't. The prospect of dying alone and freezing in this place was unpleasant enough that Raphael swore he would get through, if only so he could die in a less awful place.

The tunnel no longer seemed quite so constricting. He kicked, pushing himself through the water. He thumbed the flashlight on and off several times, trying to get it to come back on. The tunnel began to brighten, making him think for a moment that he'd succeeded.

Then it occurred to him to look straight ahead rather than at the still-dead flashlight. The water was brightening.

Raphael gave one last kick, now desperate for oxygen. His head broke the surface and he gasped, sucking in air before breaking down into a coughing fit which wracked his body. Hauling himself out of the water, he collapsed onto smooth rock, shivering fiercely. For a long minute he curled up there, clutching at himself, just relieved to be alive. The feeling slowly began to return to his limbs as he lay there in the fetal position, hugging his knees to his chest. He was still soaking wet, but at least he was no longer drowning. Overall, he would say things were definitely improving.

He was forced to revise that assertion shortly afterward. "I see you made it," Charles said.

Raphael opened his eyes, not remembering having shut them. Charles sat next to him, his tail curled about his body. But it wasn't Charles the black cat: this was Charles the jaguar, a great feline amalgamation of coiled muscle and killing instincts towering over him, something straight out of the Jungle Book. Raphael sat bolt upright, nearly falling back into the water.

"Relax. I don't intend to eat you."

"I hope not," Raphael gasped. "You're supposed to help me out, after all."

"So I am. Now get up, we have places to be."

Raphael staggered to his feet, woozy but recovering. "Places? Where are we?"

"Follow me," Charles said, "and you will see." He turned his great, powerful body and began to pad silently up and out of the cave.

Raphael followed. He was out of it, but not far gone enough to miss the fact that this part of the cave was very different from the one which he'd entered. There were no stalactites or stalagmites here, just smooth rock. In fact – he looked down at the floor. Steps were carved right into the limestone, steps he'd been taking without even being conscious of it.

"What part of the island is this?" Raphael asked. "I don't remember hearing about anything like this in the brochure."

He heard Charles chuckle. "Come." The big cat had reached the exit of the cave and was waiting patiently for Raphael, whose progress had been slowed by his fatigue and soaking wet clothes.

"Why are you – big?" Raphael asked as he ascended the last few stairs. "I mean, I can't say I'm *surprised*, exactly, but..."

"Just come look outside," Charles told him. "Your questions will be answered."

Raphael did as he said, stepping out of the cave into blinding daylight.

He was still on a beach, but it was *different*. It was pleasantly warm, the surf seemed a brighter and clearer blue, and there were people occupying it. They were dressed in bright colors, whether they were wearing clothes or swimsuits. He recognized none of them. Looking out at the horizon, Raphael could swear he saw the coils of some kind of great serpent rise above the water for a moment before submerging once again.

Feeling very out of place in his relatively heavy clothing, all of which was soaked, Raphael began to walk up the beach, Charles at his side. The people gave no indication of noticing him or the enormous black predator stalking next to him. They chatted amongst themselves, made jokes, tossed volleyballs back and forth.

"Is this some happy side of the island you can only get to through that cave?" Raphael muttered.

"Just wait," Charles said as they began to walk up the stairs leading off the beach and back to civilization. "You'll see."

Raphael was beginning to get tired of Charles's reticence, especially after the cat had done nothing but talk his ear off before. It seemed, however, that this was all he was going to get until he saw whatever it was he was supposed to see. Trying to ignore the squelching sounds made by his wet shoes, Raphael climbed the last stairs and found himself on the side of a paved road.

The city, and by extension the campus, lay spread out below him. He began walking down toward it, feeling like something was vaguely wrong.

The streets, for one thing, were bustling. Stoughton was never this busy, not even on Saturday afternoons. People he'd never seen before, all of them dressed colorfully, went about their business, exchanging courteous and chipper greetings as they passed one another. The sky

was a perfect shade of blue, without a cloud in sight, yet women still walked around carrying parasols. Raphael stared at one of them; she gave him a big smile and a wink that was half playful, half suggestive before twirling her parasol and moving past him. The sound of her footfall prompted Raphael to look down; as he'd thought, she was wearing ruby-red high heels. For that matter, all the women were. All the men were wearing loafers and suits if they were adults or tee-shirts, jeans, and sneakers if they were his age.

Raphael stopped and did a double-take as he passed by what he knew, intellectually, was a 7-11. Instead of the familiar logo and the bored-looking cashier, however, was a candy store, something straight out of the Gene Wilder film. Chattering children crowded inside, waving coins at the jolly, bespectacled proprietor, who tossed out candy bars like they were on fire.

"This is some serious Stepford Wives shit," Raphael said. "This isn't Stoughton. Charles, for the last time, where the hell *are* we?"

"Oh, this *is* Stoughton," Charles replied, wending his way around a group of mothers pushing baby carriages down the street. "Call it the Stoughton-That-Should-Be, or the Stoughton-You-Want. You've finally stepped through the looking-glass, Alice."

"I'm not a girl," Raphael said automatically.

"But you could be one here if you wanted!" Charles replied. "Or an astronaut, or a fireman, or a brain surgeon! All you have to do is believe."

"Okay, Cheshire. Now, what the fuck is this place for real? And you can skip the saccharine bullshit."

Charles laughed. "I didn't create this place, Charles. You did. If there is any 'saccharine bullshit,' as you so aptly put it, it is your own invention." He indicated something farther down the road with a jerk of his head. "Look. Your friends are here!"

Raphael turned just in time for Lissa to wrap her arms around him and kiss him, the kind of kiss that sent thrills down his spine and lit a fire inside him. She'd never kissed him this way before, not even while they were having sex. The feel of her breasts pressing against his chest told him she was wearing some kind of push-up bra. For a few seconds, too shocked to think of anything else, he returned the kiss, then came to his senses. "Lissa! What the hell are you doing?"

He realized, as she stepped back, that she was wearing a uniform – the kind of uniform boys wished high school girls actually wore. White button-down shirt, short skirt, high socks, buckle shoes... Raphael drank it all in, somewhat shocked. Her dark hair was pulled up into pigtails, and she was wearing lipstick that was a bit too red. Without even thinking about it, he reflexively wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand. It came away scarlet.

"You're my boyfriend, Raph!" Lissa said. "I'm giving you a kiss!" Her voice was different, too: she normally spoke in fairly standard American English, without much of an identifiable accent, but now her voice was breathy, the ends of her sentences rising in pitch despite the fact that they weren't questions.

Behind her was Anton, but he wasn't the man Raphael knew. He wore thick bifocal glasses, a tucked-in checkered shirt, and tan slacks. Raphael stared; standing in front of him was the archetypical presentation of a nerd since the nineteen fifties, and it wore Anton's chiseled features.

"Hey Raph!" Anton said. His voice was different, too – nasal and somewhat grating, not the smooth tenor Raphael was used to. "We're going to study together later, right? And don't worry, I don't mind taking the couch tonight. You and Lissa need your space, right?" He gave an exaggerated wink.

“Who the fuck are these people and what have they done with my friends?” Raphael asked Charles, not even caring that the statement implicated Anton as a friend and not a despised nuisance.

“Wouldn’t you prefer it this way?” Charles asked. “I can only assume you would, since this is what they’re like in this place.”

“If that’s the whole of the law here, then why are you a giant killer cat? I’d frankly prefer it if you didn’t exist.”

Charles’s expression didn’t change, but Raphael nonetheless felt like the cat was smiling at him. “Being Cheshire has some advantages, Alice.”

“Who are you talking to?” Lissa asked breathily, as though to prove Charles’s point.

“I’d rather Anton and I didn’t room together at all,” Raphael said, ignoring her. “I’d rather live in a giant fucking mansion made of solid gold and swim around in my own Goddamn Money Bin like Scrooge McDuck, and do blow off the backs of high-class whores.”

“A mansion like that one?” Charles asked, his gaze settling on something past Raphael.

Raphael turned. Sitting where a large branch of the Bank of Stoughton had been was an enormous golden mansion, positively ablaze in the sunlight. It sat behind a large topiary garden guarded by wrought-iron gates.

“This is not happening,” Raphael said. “This is crazy. *I’m* crazy. How did swimming through a fucking hole take me here? This isn’t Stoughton. This isn’t the real world. I’m pretty sure I’m still in that tunnel, having a near-death experience as my oxygen-starved brain hallucinates wildly.”

“Denial just makes everything here more real,” Charles said. “Why not enjoy it? You don’t ever have to go back, Raphael. You can stay here and have all your heart’s desires.”

“What’s wrong, Raph? You’re worrying me.” Lissa wrapped an arm around him and pressed her body close to his. “I don’t like it when you’re upset.”

Raphael tried to ignore the signals she was sending his endocrine system and stayed focused on Charles. “I don’t buy it. This is the kind of shit that gets waved in front of people who don’t want to face reality. Why am I even here? There’s nothing here that I really want.” He stopped himself from instinctively looping an arm around Lissa’s waist. “Nothing.”

That was when he heard a familiar voice say, “Raphael Rousseau, I have been looking all over for you.”

Raphael whirled, looking for the voice’s origin. It wasn’t possible. None of it was, but this was *especially* impossible, this was –

His mother stood there, arms folded, her foot tapping. She was dressed in the same bright colors as everyone else, but she was otherwise identical to her actual self. Her green eyes were pinched, as though she had a mild headache; Raphael’s father had always teased her, saying she looked grumpy. Her skin was smooth and fair, the result of years of meticulous care and avoiding too much sun. What few wrinkles would normally show were carefully concealed with makeup. His mother was careful about her appearance, after all. Her dark brown hair was cut relatively short, hanging to collar length. Raphael knew that her hair was actually grey, but she dyed it, or at least her hairdresser did. She’d once told him she wasn’t ready to be grey-hair-old. Raphael was slightly taller than her, as he had been since he was thirteen.

“Mom?” Raphael asked, not believing the sound of the word coming from his own mouth.

“You’ve been neglecting your chores,” his mother said. “I know you like hanging out with your friends, sweetie, but this isn’t going to wash. You still need to mow the front and back lawns. We’re not giving you your allowance until you do.”

Raphael looked at Charles. The cat stared back at him for a moment, and then his jaguar face split in a horrible Cheshire grin.

That did it. Raphael disentangled himself from Lissa and ran, bowling past his mother. He could hear her calling his name as he rushed back up the road to the beach. “Raphael Rousseau, you come back here *this instant!* I’m not going to chase you, young man!”

He leapt down the steps to the beach. He almost tripped and fell, but he caught himself on the rail at the last possible instant, managing not to dash his brains out on the concrete steps. He kept running, still-wet shoes kicking up goutts of sand as he went. He sprayed several people on the beach with it, but they took no notice. They kept chatting and laughing, and Raphael abruptly realized they weren’t saying anything. They were spouting gibberish, nonsense words, as though they were having actual conversations.

The cave was where he’d left it, a great gaping hole in the cliff face. Without a second thought, Raphael charged into it, taking the limestone steps into the depths three at a time. He wasn’t thinking, he just knew he had to get out of this place, this insane place with smiling jaguars and brightly chattering beach mannequins and people who shouldn’t exist.

The bottom of the cave was full of water, just as he’d expected. Raphael dove straight in, kicking as fast and hard as he could. He had to get the hell out of this place. It grew dark again as he pushed himself in, and the tunnel seemed to close around him, the cold of the water strangling the air from his lungs. His arms were pressed uselessly against his sides, he couldn’t see or think, he knew he just had to keep kicking and he would be out of here –

The flashlight in his pocket came back on, shining dimly through the denim of his pants. It was enough to let him see that he wasn’t being constricted by the tunnel at all, that he had all the room in the world to maneuver. Raphael gave three great strokes with his arms, pulling himself through the water, and surfaced on the other side.

He hauled himself, drenched and colder than he’d thought possible, onto the uneven stone floor of the cave. Charles, the small black cat, was waiting for him. “How did it go?” he asked.

“Y-y-you know how it f-fucking went!” Raphael gasped through chattering teeth, not giving himself the luxury of curling up into a ball but instead pushing his freezing body up toward the exit of the cave. “You were there, you were a f-fucking jaguar and you *grinned* at me!”

“You’re making assumptions about my nature,” Charles said. “Even if I were there, why should I remember it? Why should I keep that knowledge from world to world?”

“So it was a different world?” Raphael spluttered, still heading doggedly for the exit.

“I suppose that’s one way of putting it. But I think it’s ultimately up to you to decide. Is calling it ‘another world’ acknowledging that it’s real? Or do you still think it’s all in your head?” He looked pointedly at the flashlight in Raphael’s pocket.

Raphael, knowing it was probably a bad idea, pulled the flashlight out. When he’d gone into the cave, it had been made of plastic. Now it looked like it was made of gold. Etched into the handle was a monogram.



For a long moment, Raphael just stared at the flashlight, not quite sure what to say. He turned his gaze to Charles, who just sat there, looking expectant.

“Maybe this is all real,” Raphael finally acknowledged. “Maybe I’m not just crazy. Which, I guess, is a comforting thought.”

Charles began to clean the back of one of his paws. “So what do you intend to do about it?”

Raphael hesitated. An idea had hit him, an idea that was so ludicrous he could only laugh and seriously contemplate whether it might be less irritating just to kill himself now than go through with it.

“Well?”

Resuming his trudge back up to the exit of the cave, Raphael replied, “I’m going to go talk with the foremost religious figure in my life about all this.”

Charles made a noise. “You’re not serious.”

“I’m dead serious.” Raphael pocketed the golden flashlight. “If anybody’s going to believe me, it’s Anton.”

VII

Anton wasn't in their room when Raphael returned, so he decided to strip out of his soaking wet clothes and take a hot shower.

When he got back to their room, feeling much better, Anton was back. He was supine on his bed beneath the gyrating form of a woman. Raphael could not bring himself to be surprised, though he was somewhat embarrassed when he recognized the girl from his abnormal psychology course. Fortunately, they were both fully clothed, which was more than Raphael could say for some of the other times he'd walked in on one of Anton's conquests. He cleared his throat.

The girl – her name was Becca, he remembered – twisted around to look at him and shrieked. “WHAT THE HELL?” She clearly didn't recognize Raphael when his hair was still wet and he was wearing a towel.

“Becca,” Raphael said. “It's Raph. I live here.”

“Oh. Jesus Christ, you scared us.”

“Hey, Raph,” Anton said, rolling out from underneath Becca. “Sorry 'bout that. Thought you'd be over at Lissa's place like you said.” He said it matter-of-factly, as though talking about the weather.

“It happens,” Raphael said, a little too worried about how this talk was going to go to care about having caught Anton in the act again. “Anton, could we talk? Alone?”

“Sorry, babe,” Anton said to Becca. “My man Raph needs me.”

Becca made an unflattering noise in the back of her throat. “All right. I'll see you round then.” She gave Raphael a cool look before walking out the door.

“So what's up?” Anton asked after she closed the door.

“Hold on. Let me get dressed, I feel weird talking about this shit wearing a towel.”

Anton obligingly turned away while Raphael pulled on clean clothes. When he was finished, the business major turned around. “So?”

Raphael opened his mouth to start talking when Charles leaped through the open window. The cat strolled over to Raphael's desk and settled himself down on it, right on top of a stack of papers that Raphael had been trying to keep orderly.

“Well?” Charles asked. “Are you going to tell him?”

Taking a moment to steady himself, Raphael said, “Anton, I don't know how much of this you're going to believe, but I want to tell you that everything I'm going to say is true as far as I can figure it. I don't think I'm crazy and I hope you'll indulge me and not think I'm crazy either.”

“Sure man. What is it?”

Raphael took a deep breath. “Well, first of all, Charles can talk.”

Anton gave him a blank look, then turned to Charles. “Well, can you?” He said it in his normal voice, not condescending to the cat at all.

“Of course I can,” Charles replied.

“Huh. Okay, what else?” Anton asked.

Raphael blinked. “That's it? ‘Huh?’ Anton, the *cat can talk!*”

Anton nodded. “He totally can.”

“I'm just surprised that – well, that you're not more surprised. I mean, I freaked the fuck out the first time he started talking to me.”

That got a chuckle out of Anton. “I wish I’d been around to see that, but I guess Charles waited until I was gone, huh?”

“You give yourself too much credit,” Charles said obliquely.

“Whatever, man,” Anton said. “Anyway. I’m sure I’d normally be flipping, like, an entire shit, but right now I’m pretty blazed on Robitussin. Can you take my word for it that I’m totally surprised that Charles can talk?”

A lecture on the dangers of Robitussin abuse for a cheap high could wait. Raphael plunged onward. “Well, the night he showed up I’d found a cave on the beach and gone inside and there was an underground lake or river or something but I said fuck that and came back here. Then Charles told me I needed to find the cave again, just after Lissa told me that Anna had disappeared and people thought it was my fault, so we agreed to say that I’d spent that night at her place. So this afternoon I was eating lunch and one of Anna’s friends Sarah walked up and started getting up in my shit, and I said ‘I wish you’d fuck off and die’ *and she fucking died right in front of me*. So something granted that wish that I didn’t really mean, but I sort of did mean it, and it won’t grant any *good* wishes, just bad ones I guess, and Charles told me that if I was going to figure out what the hell it was I would need to go back to the cave, so I did. The cave has a tunnel full of water and when I came out the other side Charles was a jaguar and I was in Stoughton, but not really Stoughton, it was like some kind of creepy fake Twilight Zone paradise where everything I could ever want would just show up if I asked for it. Then Charles gave me this fucking terrifying Cheshire Cat grin and I got the fuck out of there and came back here.”

Anton nodded slowly. “Okay. So why tell me?”

“I thought you might believe me,” Raphael replied. “And I couldn’t just keep this to myself. I needed to have someone else that wasn’t a talking cat know my side of the story.” He paused. “You got all that, right? The Robitussin isn’t keeping the neurons from firing?”

“I’m not *that* far gone,” Anton laughed. “No, I got all of it. What I meant, Raph, is why you told me instead of Lissa.”

Raphael paused. It hadn’t even occurred to him to tell Lissa. “I don’t know.”

“It makes sense that you wouldn’t want to tell her,” Anton said. “Like, you don’t want her to think you’re a crazy murderer or anything, and she probably *would* freak out when you told her that you killed Sarah.”

A cold knot of fear twisted Raphael’s stomach. “The police found her?”

“We just got an email about it. They say it looks like a heart attack. No foul play’s suspected.”

“Except people our age aren’t supposed to get heart attacks,” Raphael said. “They’re not the least bit suspicious about that?”

“I mean, an autopsy’s going to take place and stuff, but what are they going to find? If you say all you did was wish she was dead in a moment of anger, well, I don’t think an autopsy’s going to find that.”

“I guess so.”

Anton got to his feet, a little unsteady. “The question, Raph, is what the fuck you’re going to do about it. If you can bring her back to life, or stop whatever this thing is that granted that wish of yours, you’ve got to do it. Repentance is about doing everything you can to make things right again, as right as you can make them. I don’t think you meant for this to happen, but it still did, right?”

“Right. No, you’re right, Anton. I just – this has something to do with the cave, I know it. I just don’t want to go back there.”

“Give me an hour to sober up and I’ll totally go with you,” Anton said. “This is important, after all.” He paused. “But first you’re gonna have to fill in Lissa. She deserves it.”

“My, my,” Charles purred. “The fool has some good qualities after all. Perhaps I misjudged him.”

“Thanks, guy.” Anton paused, obviously thinking very hard about something. “Lemme try something, though.” He grabbed the pillow on his bed, an ugly, lumpy thing that had probably been passed down through generations of irritated undergraduates forced to live in a dorm room. He glared at it, then dropped it on the floor. “I hate this fucking thing and I wish it would just burn up,” he said aloud.

The temperature in their dorm room instantly went up by thirty degrees when the pillow ignited, flames leaping off it in great orange goutts. Raphael swore, backing away from the intense heat, batting at embers that had landed on his jeans.

Then the fire alarm went off.

* * *

Two hours later, after a lecture from the university police and the jeering of their dorm-mates who had been forced from their rooms and their Smash Brothers tournaments, Raphael and Anton stood outside Lissa’s building, Charles bringing up the rear.

“Well,” Anton said, much more aware now that he wasn’t blazed on cough syrup, “at least we know it’s not just you.”

“It’s true,” Raphael said, looking at the window of Lissa’s apartment. “Nice to know we can prove it to her even if Charles doesn’t want to talk to her.”

“I have no qualms about speaking to her,” Charles said, “on the grounds that she not patronize me. Very simple. So far she has been exceptionally well-behaved in this regard, simply because she has not spoken to me in that disgustingly saccharine, high-pitched voice you think appropriate when addressing animals.”

“Uh-huh,” Raphael said. He was not looking forward to this. “Of course, this means that if anyone *else* says ‘I wish blank’ to someone, this is going to happen again.”

“Exactly,” Anton said. “Whatever’s going on, we’ve gotta stop it.”

Raphael waited a beat. “Why us, specifically?”

“Hey, man, the cat showed up to talk to *you*, remember? You’re the one who found this crazy cave. You’re the chosen one, or whatever.”

“That’s comforting. So what does that make you?”

Anton grinned. “You know how Luke Skywalker is the hero of the Star Wars films, but you like Han Solo because he’s cooler and less whiny?”

“Yes,” Raphael said, not liking where he was going with this. “Are you implying that Lissa is Princess Leia? Because I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t wear the slave girl outfit even if I asked *really nicely*.”

“No way, man. If she were Princess Leia it’d be like when she and Luke make out in the second movie *even though they’re siblings*. That’d be gross. She’s more like Chewie or Threepio.”

“The giant hairy space monster or the gay gold-plated robot,” Raphael said. “Oh yeah, she’s going to be thrilled with this analogy of yours.” He waited another beat. “So are we going in, or what?”

“After you, man. You’re the one with the open invitation.”

Raphael took a deep breath before opening the front door.

* * *

It seemed neither of Lissa's roommates were in, which was a blessing. The last thing Raphael wanted was for them to stumble into the room when he got to the part where he'd accidentally wished someone to death.

Lissa was in the den, reading a book. With a start, Raphael recognized it as his copy of *Heart of Darkness*. At the sound of their entry, she looked up from it. A smile began to form on her face when she saw Raphael, then it wavered as her gaze moved past him to focus on Anton. "Hey, boys. What are you two doing here?"

"Are Dawn or Joy here?" Raphael asked.

"No," Lissa replied, her expression shading into suspicion. "Why?"

"This is top secret information," Anton said, waiting for Charles to walk into the apartment before closing the door and locking it. He moved across the den to the windows to draw the blinds. "What we're about to tell you cannot leave this room."

"What?"

Raphael rolled his eyes. Anton, in his opinion, was taking this entirely too lightly, but he couldn't help it if the man was excited. Maybe he was an adrenalin junkie in addition to being a playboy and a religious devotee. Maybe the prospect of dropping dead from somebody's ill-conceived exclamation was exciting to him.

"There's some weird shit happening in Stoughton," he told her as he moved to sit down on the couch with her. "Remember that cave I told you about, the one that disappeared when I tried to show it to you?"

"Yeah."

"It is real," Charles said.

Lissa's head snapped around, her eyes wide. "Did you –"

Charles jumped up into her lap and settled himself there. "I did. I am here to serve as Raphael's guide."

For several long moments, Lissa stared at him. "I always thought, in the back of my mind, that animals maybe really could talk and were just holding out on us," she finally said. "But –"

"It's just Charles," Raphael said. "He's magical. I think he's my spirit guide on my vision quest or *something*."

Lissa frowned. "So you've known? And you didn't tell me?"

"I thought I was going crazy," Raphael said. "Honestly. But he can talk to you and Anton, and – well, there was some other stuff, too."

He narrated the events of the day to her in roughly the same manner as he had to Anton. Lissa's face throughout was a study in stony silence. When Raphael finished, she sat there, just staring at him, for a long while.

The tension thickened until it was almost palpable. Even Anton wasn't saying anything. He clearly wanted to stay out of this for as long as possible.

"You killed Sarah?" Lissa asked. "Like, you murdered her?"

"No," Anton said before Raphael could reply. "No, he didn't. Murder takes premeditation and willful execution of plans. Raph didn't have any plans. He just wished she would fuck off, maybe a little violently, and told her so. That's his problem; he's just too

fucking blunt. But he didn't premeditate her death. He didn't think him saying those words would do anything but hurt her feelings. And it's not just him. Watch." Anton fixed his gaze on a coffee mug sitting on the table. "I wish that thing would break."

It did so, right down the middle.

"And I tried to undo it," Raphael said. "I wished for her to come back. I wished that I'd never said what I did. Whatever's going on, only destructive wishes get granted. It's like some kind of negative force is powering them."

"And you think it has something to do with that weird shit you went through in the cave," Lissa said.

"I don't think, I know. There's too much crazy stuff happening; it has to be related. I mean, no matter what the root cause of all of this is, the point is that it's making destructive wishes come true, and I think if I head back into the cave I might be able to figure out what it is and stop it, or undo it, or something."

Lissa blew out a long breath. "Okay. I believe you, Raph. I really do. Call me crazy or stupid, but I've always believed in the supernatural. And I understand that you didn't mean to do what you did, and you're trying to fix it. But why tell me all this? What do you expect me to do?"

Raphael shrugged. "Anton pushed me to do it, actually. He said you deserved to know. I don't know if you want to just stay out of it or help or what. Anton's already said he'll help, but I figure the more people who are in this with me, the better my chances of – well, the better my chances." He hesitated, but decided it was a good idea to disclose another bit of information. "And you guys showed up in the weird vision-world-thing I had in the cave. There are lots of other people I know here – not as well as you, but it could have picked any of them. Whatever made me see what I saw chose you two."

With a sigh, Lissa let herself fall back against the couch. "I don't know, Raph. I don't know about any of it. I don't know how I feel about you or why this is happening or a lot of stuff about myself."

"Then come with us," Charles said, "and learn."

Lissa looked down at him. The cat still rested in her lap, his legs tucked beneath himself so he looked like a small black bundle with a head. He returned her gaze with wide, unblinking eyes.

"Are you here to guide me, too?" she asked.

"Stranger things have happened," Charles replied, his voice wry. "Cats speak. Wishes come true."

Lissa ran her fingers along his head, which he seemed to enjoy rather than take exception. She looked back up at Raphael, who for his part was sitting on pins and needles waiting for her answer.

He felt the pressure in his chest ease when she smiled.

"All right," Lissa said. "I'm with you."

VIII

Raphael pulled Lissa out of the water with a heave. She surfaced, spluttering, and lay on the floor coughing for the better part of a minute before she finally managed to gasp, “That was a long tunnel.”

For his part, Anton pulled himself up onto dry land with seemingly no effort. He shook himself, spraying water everywhere, before starting to pound the side of his head. “Water in my ear. Hate that.”

“You’ll live,” Raphael said, trying to be flippant and ignore the dread roiling in his stomach. He did not want to be back here. He would rather be sitting in his dorm room, waiting for somebody to wish him dead. Maybe he’d start a new play-through of a game and see if he could finish it before he met his untimely end. That would at least be painless and probably entertaining.

Unless someone wished him dead of horrible burns or a flesh-eating virus or something. Then it might be incredibly painful. The more he thought about it, the more determined Raphael grew to stay here until he could figure out precisely what was going on.

“Stone steps,” Lissa said after she’d caught her breath. “I’ve never seen anything like this in a cave before.”

“Just wait until we get outside,” Raphael said. “You’re in for a real treat.”

They ascended the steps cautiously, not wanting to slip and fall on the slick limestone floor. When they arrived at the cave mouth, Charles was waiting for them. This time, he was an enormous black tiger, his amber eyes resting steadily on Raphael. “Welcome back. You look uncomfortable; maybe you would like to be dry.”

“I wish I were dry?” Raphael tried. He remained quite soaked. He frowned. “I don’t get it. Last time I was here I wished for a giant mansion made of solid gold and it appeared. And now I can’t wish myself dry?”

“To be specific,” Charles replied, “last time you said, ‘I’d rather Anton and I didn’t room together at all. I’d rather live in a giant fucking mansion made of solid gold and swim around in my own Goddamn Money Bin like Scrooge McDuck and do blow off the backs of high-class whores.’” Raphael’s words sounded very strange in Charles’s deep voice and British accent. “What’s the difference between those statements, Raphael?”

“I’m hurt,” Anton said. “I didn’t know you felt that way, Raph.”

Raphael gritted his teeth. “It’s nothing personal, Anton. I just like my space. That’s all.”

“Nah, it’s cool. I was kidding.” Anton paused for a second. “Well, you said you’d rather *not* room with me, right? You started off that whole wish with a statement of negation. So maybe we should say we wish we weren’t wet.” Anton was suddenly dry. He laughed. “I wish I didn’t not have a lightsaber.” When the device failed to materialize in his hand, his smile faded. “Aw. I guess it’s not as simple as the way we word it.”

Hiding a smile, Raphael wished himself not-wet as well. If he was honest with himself, a lightsaber was very high up on the list of things he would wish for himself.

Lissa also wished herself not-wet and gave a small squeak of surprise when it happened. “I – wow. That’s really fucking weird.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” Raphael said. “Let’s go.”

Not-Stoughton, as he was beginning to think of it, was just as he’d left it. It gleamed in the sunlight, filled with happy people going about their daily lives in blissful ignorance of any

possible ill or misfortune. Raphael watched Anton and Lissa as they walked down the street with him, gauging their reactions, trying to determine if they were seeing the same things he was.

“Holy shit,” Anton said. “This is crazy.” He pointed out the candy store Raphael had noticed on his previous visit. “That store hasn’t been around since I was a little kid. It had to close up because the owners were in debt. Let’s go get something!”

“You really think it’s a good idea to eat something here?” Raphael asked.

Anton looked at him. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“It’s a recurring trope in fantasy that food from a faerie or otherwise supernatural world shouldn’t be eaten by mortals,” Raphael said. “It traps them there, or it makes them hate the taste of all other food, or they can’t eat anything but that food anymore.”

“You seem to know a lot about faerie worlds,” Anton said. “I knew you read Star Wars books, Raph, but you’re into fantasy stuff too? What, is that leather-bound copy of Ulysses you keep on your shelf just for show?”

“Shut up,” Raphael muttered. “I’m going to get to it eventually. I just haven’t had time, what with all the talking cats and wishing people dead and weird teleportation caves and stuff.”

“I guess that’s a fair point.”

“So you think we’re in some kind of faerie realm?” Lissa asked, staring at a crowd of gorgeous surfer-dudes who were walking by and giving her winks. “Because that doesn’t seem so crazy all of a sudden. I’m just waiting for these people to sprout hundreds of sharp teeth and start eating us.”

“I don’t know,” Raphael replied. “There are so many possibilities. I mean, I’m just as much out of my depth here as you are.” He looked at Charles. “You got anything to add here?”

“No. I think you’ve analyzed the situation quite aptly. You *are* out of your depth.” Charles indicated the candy shop with a nod. “Regardless, paths are only made by going forward. Shall we?”

“Exactly.” Anton headed toward the shop. “Let’s check this shit out.”

Reluctantly, Raphael followed him into the store. It was full of schoolchildren, as it had been the last time he was here, but they made way for him and Anton. Lissa followed in their wake, casting her gaze around in a fashion which made clear her earlier fears of being eaten alive here were still looming.

“Hello,” Anton said to the shopkeeper, a jolly old man with rosy cheeks and an impressive moustache. “Can you give me a Hershey’s?”

With a smile, the shopkeeper slid a Hershey’s milk chocolate bar across the counter. “That’ll be five cents, son.”

Anton shot Raphael a wide-eyed look of pure joy as he fished around in his wallet for a nickel. “There you go. Have a nice day.”

“You, too,” the shopkeeper replied.

The three of them stepped outside before Anton unwrapped the chocolate bar. Anton immediately took a large bite out of the bar. “This is awesome,” he said. “It’s like the best chocolate bar I’ve ever had. Here, try it.” He shoved it at Lissa, who shook her head, too spooked by the whole ordeal to want to risk it. “Raph?”

Raphael hesitantly accepted the bar from him. He broke off one of the chocolate squares which Anton hadn’t bitten into and popped it into his mouth.

It didn’t taste like chocolate. It didn’t taste like anything.

“Anton,” Raphael asked, swallowing the square of nothing, “you’re sure this tastes like chocolate to you?”

“Totally. What, it tastes different to you?”

“It doesn’t taste like anything at all.” Raphael handed him back the bar. “It’s like it’s not even there.” He looked at Charles. “What does it mean?”

“Does a chocolate bar mean anything?” Charles countered.

“A chocolate bar that doesn’t taste like a chocolate bar does,” Raphael said. “Especially in a crazy world that’s imaginary or supernatural or whatever-the-hell-this-place-is. Does it mean that nothing here has any substance or something like that? Is that the conclusion I’m supposed to draw?”

“I don’t know,” Charles replied. “But is the absence of taste in one chocolate bar enough to make you think that? How did Lissa taste when she kissed you?”

“Excuse me?” Lissa asked.

Raphael managed to avoid cringing. “Different,” he said. “Like lipstick. So maybe she was more real than this chocolate bar.”

“When did I kiss you here?” Lissa insisted.

“Remember when I said you two showed up the first time I was here? It wasn’t really you. Anton was some kind of crazy nerd and you were a total slut.”

“Uh-huh,” Lissa said, her tone shading into the frosty spectrum. “And I kissed you.”

“*She* kissed me,” Raphael said. “It wasn’t you. It looked like you, but I could tell it wasn’t. There was something really wrong and eerie about it.”

“I’m beginning to think that describes this place to a tee. This isn’t Stoughton, and it isn’t any other place either. Nowhere in the world is this perfect.”

Raphael looked at Charles. “You said that I should call this place the ‘Stoughton-That-Should-Be’ or ‘Stoughton-I-Want.’ So, *is* this some kind of fantasy realm? Am I in charge of how this world works? Am I going to wake up in a few minutes and get pissed off that the answer was so cliché?”

“I’m here as your *guide*, not an omniscient hand-holder,” Charles replied. “I can give you a push in the right direction if you need it, but that’s all I’m prepared to do. This is your journey, after all. Anton put it very articulately before.”

“Hurray for that.” Raphael rubbed at his eyes, trying to think. “The wishes we make here only work if they’re denying something. The chocolate doesn’t taste real to me. But you said this is the ‘Stoughton-I-Want.’ Are you telling me that what I want isn’t possible?”

“Keep going,” Charles said.

“So if that’s true – if what I want is impossible – then this whole place exists this way because of it. It won’t give me things I want that are possible, like being dry when you’re wet, but it *will* give me impossible things, like being not-wet when you’re wet.”

“What about my lightsaber?” Anton protested around a mouthful of chocolate.

“Perhaps that’s just stupid,” Charles said severely.

“Ass.”

“So,” Lissa said. “If all this is true, Raph, the question isn’t ‘what’s going on’ anymore. Right now the question is ‘what do you want.’”

“I –” Raphael stopped, considering. “I don’t –”

He felt *something*. It was a strange feeling, hard to pin down. Detachment, numbness, apathy; maybe it was all of these things, but he couldn’t put a single word to it. He saw something in his peripheral vision, turned to look down the street at it.

His mother was standing there, arms crossed. “Don’t make me come over there,” she called out. “I told you you’ve been neglecting your chores. Pretending they aren’t there isn’t going to make anything better!”

Raphael felt his chest constrict as panic seized him. It was too much all over again. Charles wasn’t grinning, but he felt again the incredible urge to run away, to run back to the cave and jump back into the real world where he wouldn’t have to try to wrap his mind around incredible shit like this. He began to back away without thinking about it, eyes fixed on his mother, his heart pounding.

“Raph? What’s wrong?” Anton asked.

“He’s starting to understand,” Charles said. “Tell them, Raphael. Tell them what you kept from them about your last visit to this place.”

“I can’t,” Raphael said, the words coming unbidden from him.

“Yes you can. You just refuse to. Why do you refuse to do it, Raphael? Why are you denying the obvious truth?”

“Raph, whatever’s going on, you can tell us,” Lissa said, starting toward him. “You can tell me.”

“No!” Raphael barked. “I can’t!”

“Don’t you mean ‘I won’t?’” Charles asked.

“Same fucking thing! I don’t have to do this! This place isn’t real!” He jabbed a finger at his companions. “Maybe you guys never made it out of the tunnel in the cave. Maybe I’m imagining both of you, maybe Charles isn’t real either and I really am crazy. This place could just be trying to get inside my mind or under my skin or whatever the fuck the appropriate expression is!”

“I think it’s already done that,” Charles said, looking at the judgmental figure of Raphael’s mother. “The question is whether you’re going to let it or if you’re going to stand up for yourself and take the first step toward repentance.”

Raphael turned and ran. He pounded down the street toward the beach, then at the last minute turned away, heading down a side street which eventually would loop back around into the center of town. Some part of him knew he couldn’t return to the cave, that he was well and truly committed by this point, but the rest of him just wanted to run. He could hear Anton and Lissa chasing him, but they didn’t have the same manic determination he did. He would lose them soon enough.

Then he would be safe. He was sure of it.

* * *

They found Raphael in the highest room of the enormous golden mansion which dominated the skyline of Not-Stoughton. It was a small room, but it was packed to the brim with electronics, furniture, and other signs of excess. There was also a large pile of white powder in the corner of the room which was probably not talcum powder.

Raphael was stretched out in a chair, his feet up on a rest, bathed in the glow of an eighty-inch flatscreen television. He was playing a video game, one with a lot of bright colors flashing constantly as he twitched the sticks on the controller back and forth and pressed the buttons. His gaze was deadened, almost unfocused.

“How’d you find me?” Raphael asked without giving much indication that he cared.

“Charles led us here,” Anton replied. “He’s a tiger. He has a good sense of smell.”

For his part, Charles sat outside the room, there being no place in it for a creature of his size. “Going into the cave is only the first step, Raphael. You have to come to terms with what’s inside it if you’re going to continue on your path.”

“Yeah,” Anton said. “You remember *The Empire Strikes Back*. ‘That place is strong with the Dark Side of the Force!’” His Yoda impression left much to be desired.

“Thanks for making me feel better about the situation I’m in,” Raphael said humorlessly.

Lissa moved to stand between him and the television. “Listen,” she said. “I don’t know what’s going on, Raph, but it can’t get any better unless you talk to us about it.” When Raphael tried to crane his neck to look past her, she reached back and tipped the television over. It landed with a crash. The sounds of the video game abruptly ceased.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Raphael said, putting down his controller.

“That’s why you’re here!” Charles insisted. “You’re trapped in the Stoughton-You-Want because of your inability to move past it. It’s not enough to want to move on. The first step to fixing a problem is admitting you have one.”

“What are you, Alcoholics Anonymous?” Raphael asked.

The surprise registered on his face when Lissa stepped forward and slapped him, hard. He stared at her, speechless, as he instinctively moved a hand to his stinging cheek. “Dammit, Raph, I am tired of your bullshit!” Lissa said. “I said I’d help you figure out what the hell was going on, and I said I’d come with you, because I care about you. But I can’t help you unless you’re willing to let me! Stop being stupid and just accept the fucking help we’re trying to give you here! We didn’t come along to make your life worse!”

Raphael kept staring at her for another long moment before he dropped his gaze to the floor. “It’s stupid. *I’m* stupid. This happens to everyone eventually. I’m just weak and not able to deal with it.”

“Enough with the fucking pity party!” Lissa snapped. “*Spit it out!*”

“My mom’s dead!” Raphael shot back.

Silence reigned for several seconds before he continued. “My mom’s dead, and it’s my fault. Five or six years back, she got cancer. The kind you don’t ordinarily survive. But she got surgery, and chemo, and she beat it. The doctors didn’t know how long she had until it came back, because it was *going* to come back. But we were all really fucking happy about it and life seemed like it was good.

“Mom had been interested in a coworker of hers for a while, she just hadn’t pursued him because it had only been a couple years since the divorce and she wasn’t sure if she was going to live. So she started seeing him just around the time I was applying to college and stuff.

“His name’s Arnold. I hate this fucking guy. He thinks he’s slick, and that he’s a fucking big-shot because he dresses in nice suits and makes a lot of money. I could tell from the first moment I met him. I told Mom straight-up I didn’t like the guy, I didn’t think he was good for her. She asked me what the hell business it was of mine, we had a big fight. I ended up applying to a college on the other side of the country so I wouldn’t have to see the guy.

“Mom tried to patch things up a couple times, but she pretty much got the message when I didn’t come home for winter break. I spent it at my girlfriend’s house and didn’t answer the letters she sent. I figured she would eventually leave the guy and we could get back to the way things were.

“That idea went out the window when I got a wedding invitation in the mail. I wanted to go, but I told myself I needed to stand by my feelings. I wasn’t going to lie and pretend to be

happy that she was marrying this douchebag. I told myself it was the principled, grown-up thing to do. So I tossed the invitation in the trash and didn't go.

"I think that's what made Mom give up on me. The fact that her own son didn't go to her wedding. I stopped hearing from her at all. I was on a full scholarship, so it wasn't like she could stop paying my tuition or anything. Dad tried to patch things up, since he said he was still friends with Mom, but I told him exactly what I thought and why I was doing this and that he couldn't change my mind.

"So he was the one who told me when Mom killed herself, five months ago. Her cancer had come back and Arnold was facing an indictment for embezzlement, so he was basically screwed. I would've been happy about having my feelings validated except for the part where she killed herself because she didn't feel like she had anywhere to turn."

He sat there, eyes closed. The blood had receded from his face, making him look almost anemic. The only sound in the room was his heavy breathing.

Finally, Anton spoke up. "How do you know it's your fault, man?"

"If I hadn't been so fucking stubborn about Arnold," Raphael replied, "Mom might have felt like she had somewhere to turn. I don't know how I could have helped her, or even if I could have, but at least I would have been able to try, you know? At least she wouldn't have died thinking her only son hated her for no particularly good reason. I fucked up, and I'll never be able to fix it. I'll never be able to fix *me*."

"That's why you came to Stoughton, right?" Lissa asked. "To get away from everything?"

"Yes," Raphael said. "I thought if I could get some distance, maybe it'd give me a new perspective or something. Or at least I told myself that's what I thought. I think in the end it was just me running away again."

"So stop running, Raphael," Charles said. "No matter how far you run, this problem will always be just behind you. The only way to destroy it is to confront it. Stop running; turn and face it. This world exists because of your denial. Look outside."

They moved to the only window of the room. Night had fallen outside, which seemed impossible – only a few minutes ago, it had been high noon, the sun unwavering in the sky. Raphael's eyes widened when he realized that it wasn't just nightfall – a solid curtain of blackness had begun sweeping inland from the ocean, swallowing up the landscape as it moved.

"It's already coming apart," Charles said. "Because you've admitted what plagues you. You're almost ready to move on."

"To where?" Raphael asked. "Back to the real world?"

"I just said the first step to dealing with a problem is admitting it exists," Charles told him. "The next stage awaits you. You must come to terms with your grief and yourself. That is where you will go if you are willing to move on."

"But who's orchestrating all this?" Raphael asked. "You? God? Is it all in my head?" He watched the darkness creep closer, swallowing up buildings as it came. People in the street seemed oblivious, calmly moving through the streets. They didn't look up or cry out as the darkness swept over them, engulfing them completely. It seemed they were completely unaware of it.

"Does it matter?" Charles asked. "Perhaps I'm your guardian angel, or a friendly spirit trying to put you on the right path. Or I might be a devil trying to lead you astray. The point is that all this pontificating about what I am and why I'm here is not going to get you any closer to the next step."

“So how do I move on?” Raphael asked. “Do I wish I wasn’t here?”

“This world’s power is fading. It can no longer let you deny whatever you find objectionable. It is, as you can see, falling into darkness.” Charles nodded at the oncoming wave of black. “It’s much simpler than that. You need to want to move on.”

“Oh, yeah, because that’s totally easy.”

“Simple and easy are two different things.”

Anton clapped a hand on Raphael’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, man. We’re with you. Whatever happens, we’re going to get through this so you can stop being such a self-obsessed asshole. I still have to spend the rest of the semester rooming with you, after all.”

Lissa slipped her hand into Raphael’s. “What he said,” she told him. “It’s a little late to back out of this now. So let’s see it through to the end, huh?”

Raphael looked at both of them, words failing him. Nobody had ever stepped up to the plate like this before – not for him. What had he done to deserve such good friends? Maybe it was karma. Maybe it was Providence. At this point, he didn’t really care. They were with him, and he believed them when they said they were going to stand with him.

He looked at the oncoming wall of darkness, watched it swallow up more and more of the town. The only problem now was that he wasn’t sure how to proceed. Should he just announce his intention to move on? Did he have that intention?

“Let’s go,” he said. Nothing happened.

“You have to mean it,” Charles said, his tone chastising.

“I do!” Raphael insisted.

“Not yet, you don’t. You haven’t looked inside yourself and said, ‘Do I really want to spend the rest of my life in this place?’ You haven’t thought about the kind of life you will lead if you spend it in denial, ignoring whatever doesn’t suit your tastes.”

Raphael closed his eyes. On some level, it was true; he didn’t want to go. The darkness of the unknown sweeping toward him was frightening. He was sure that anything good which might lie beyond it was far away, surrounded by pitfalls and obstacles. He felt safe here in this little room, surrounded by trappings and people who cared about him.

People who cared about him –

He opened his eyes.

He wouldn’t let the darkness eat up Lissa and Anton. Or Charles, for that matter – the cat might be annoying and judgmental, but deep down, Raphael felt like Charles really did want the best for him and was placing himself at great personal risk to do it. He might want to stay here and hide in the darkness for his own sake, but for the sake of his friends, he would make himself move on.

“Let’s go,” he said a second time, just as the darkness began to seep through the window. This time, a beam of light stabbed down from above, encircling them. Raphael felt himself rising, pulled up by some kind of force. The darkness surged around the light, unable to penetrate its borders, and the three of them rose skyward, moving faster and faster.

“To infinity and beyond!” Anton laughed.

Raphael smiled. Leave it to Anton to make jokes at a time like this.

Whatever happened now, he was committed. He would see this through to the end.

IX

Before he could see or hear anything, Raphael was aware of feeling heavy.

When the light faded and he could see again, he looked down at himself. He was wearing showy, impractical-looking armor, and on his back was a large sword.

“What the hell?” he said aloud.

Nobody answered him. He became aware that he stood alone in a forest clearing. The forest looked deciduous and vaguely reminded him of Yosemite, which he’d once visited; beyond that, he didn’t recognize it. A forest was a forest was a forest, as far as he was concerned, which helped him very little in this particular instance.

After a few moments of standing there, feeling confused, Raphael heard a familiar sound: Lissa’s voice. He strained his ears, trying to determine the direction, and decided it was coming from behind him.

He crashed through the undergrowth, calling, “Lissa! You there? Can you hear me?”

“Raph! Over here!”

Raphael cleared another line of trees to find Lissa standing atop a log which had fallen and formed a bridge across a river. Despite himself, Raphael stared at her; she was wearing long, flowing red robes which had inexplicable but deliberate holes that bared her midriff and cleavage. On her back was a large, metal staff, though Raphael couldn’t see how it was attached to her. For that matter, he realized, he wasn’t wearing any kind of sling to keep his own sword on his back. It just seemed to stick there.

“What the hell is going on?” Lissa called, starting to make her way toward him. “I’m wearing some kind of trumpy cosplay outfit and you’re in *armor!*”

“I don’t —” Raphael started, but he was cut off as something leapt down from a nearby tree and landed with a whoop. He whirled, heart pounding in his chest, and then cursed as he recognized Anton. His roommate was dressed in a leather jerkin, grey trousers, leather boots, and a flowing green cloak. On his back was a bow and quiver.

His ears were pointed.

“Check this shit out!” Anton crowed. He drew the bow from his back, nocked an arrow to it, and let fly. The projectile thudded into a nearby tree. “I’m Legolas! You have my bow, Raph!”

“Oh, God,” Lissa said. “You’re kidding me.”

“Would *you* prefer to be Legolas?” Anton asked her.

“If it meant getting out of this stupid outfit, yeah.”

“Anton,” Raphael said. “I didn’t know you were an archer.”

“I’m not. Never fired a bow before in my life. But all of a sudden I can do it like I’ve been practicing for years. Try something with your sword!”

Feeling very embarrassed but too curious to pass up the suggestion, Raphael pulled the sword off his back. It was sheathed and longer than his arm, so it should have been awkward to remove it, but he pulled it free as though he did this every day. It was a bastard sword, or hand-and-a-half sword, as he’d read once.

Raphael assumed a two-handed grip and tried an experimental swing. His body moved with lethal speed and precision, slicing the weapon through the air and stopping on a dime when he wanted to. Intrigued, Raphael walked over to the log and cut it. He cleaved off a large chunk of wood with a single swing.

“This is kind of awesome,” he observed. “I’m a fighter, it looks like Anton is a ranger – so, Lissa, you’re probably a mage. Try casting a spell!”

“Sure, Raph,” Lissa said, waving her hands. “I’ll just wave my hands and set a tree on fire, that’s totally –” She stopped talking when her gesture produced a fireball which rocketed at a nearby tree and exploded in a gout of flame.

“This is clearly the best supernatural world *ever*,” Anton said. “I don’t know what we’re doing here, but it’s obviously going to be badass.”

“I get the feeling you might be right about that,” Raphael said. “This is one of the games I’ve been playing lately. I’m the main character, and you two are the party members I tend to use the most when adventuring in the overworld. It makes sense. But where’s Charles?”

They cast their gazes around the forest for a few minutes, occasionally calling the cat’s name, with no success. He was nowhere to be found.

“Well, dammit, how the fuck are we supposed to know where to go without Charles?” Lissa asked. “He’s been pushing us in the right direction this entire time. It’s shitty of him to just abandon us like this.”

“Maybe that’s part of the test,” Anton said. “Maybe Charles can’t help us from here on out and we need to keep going on our own.”

“Test?” Raphael asked. “You think we’re here for some kind of test?”

“Definitely. Why else would we have all this sick gear and these new abilities? There’s got to be some sort of trial coming up that we’re going to have to pass together.”

“I think he’s right,” Lissa agreed. She hesitated, then said, “I wish my outfit wasn’t retarded.”

Nothing happened. She muttered, “Of course this would happen to me *after* the wish stuff goes away. Fucking wonderful.”

“Hey, don’t stress so much,” Anton said. “You look great. Right, Raph?”

Raphael shot Anton a dire look. He had been placed in the worst possible position: he had to either tell Lissa her outfit wasn’t retarded, which was a bald-faced lie and would make her angry, or he had to agree and say it was, which was honest and would make her angry, or he had to make some kind of innuendo or salacious comment, which she hated and would make her angry.

He was saved from his predicament by the timely intervention of a pack of wolves which exploded out of the trees around them and attacked.

These weren’t ordinary wolves. They were huge, the size of a horse, had glowing red eyes, and large quills stuck up out of their fur at regular intervals. One of them leaped, snarling, at Raphael, its mouth slavering and its paws sporting wickedly curved claws.

Raphael sidestepped, sliced his sword along the creature’s flank as it passed him. Its blood poured, steaming, out of the wound. Raphael could see intestines beginning to protrude from the gash. The wolf hit the ground, tried for a moment to rise, then fell over, dead.

For his part, Raphael was too busy staring at the numbers that had appeared in the air over the wolf – as well as the words “CRITICAL HIT” in flashing red text – to notice. He had apparently just dealt a hundred and thirty-two damage to the wolf. He knew, rationally, that they were inside a video game, or at least a world with marked similarities to one, but actually seeing the numbers flash up there was more than he had been expecting. For a moment, Raphael let his guard down as he looked at the numbers rise into the air before they faded and eventually disappeared.

Then he remembered what was going on as a wolf tried its best to sink its teeth into his leg. He grunted as the pain hit him and 19 appeared above his head. His retaliation split the wolf's head open. Above the creature's corpse floated, in white text, 57.

Raphael took a second to survey the battlefield. Lissa was projecting a magical shield around herself to ward off the wolves, which was good. The wound on his leg hurt like a bitch and he didn't want the same thing to happen to her. Even as he considered heading to her aid, she pointed her staff and one of the wolves exploded in a gout of flame. She seemed to be taking care of herself.

Anton was dodging and rolling all over the place, deftly avoiding the fangs and claws of the wolves. He fired once, twice, three times, taking out three of the creatures. They toppled to the ground, arrows protruding from between their eyes. Anton was whooping as he fought, the look on his face making it clear that he was enjoying himself. Raphael couldn't quite bring himself to blame him.

He returned his attention to the corner of the conflict, dispatching another wolf with a clean cut to its head. He dodged more attacks, took out three more wolves in a similar manner before the survivors decided the party wasn't worth the effort and retreated. Raphael massaged his leg, expecting it to be bloody and wounded, but it healed up before his eyes, his torn flesh knitting beneath his armor. The blood disappeared almost instantly. That was right; in this game, the party's health was restored at the end of every combat. It was a feature he liked, and never more so than right now.

"Holy what the fuck," Lissa said. "What just happened?"

Feeling very foolish, Raphael nonetheless said, "I think we just had a random encounter. We're done with it now, so our health and mana's going back to full."

"This is the weirdest thing that has *ever happened* to me."

"Agreed."

"Hey," Anton said, pointing at one of the wolves' corpses. "That one's glowing." Indeed, the corpse was emitting sparkling gold motes of light which rose a few feet into the air before disappearing. "That means we should loot it, right?"

"That's right," Raphael said. He moved to the wolf, which had an arrow sticking out from between its eyes, and knelt next to it. Immediately, a window popped into being in front of him, as though he were using a computer. It gave an accounting of the wolf's possessions: three silver and a gnawed bone which was apparently worth two copper.

Raphael pressed the 'take-all' button. There was a clinking sound as a coin pouch at his hip grew three silver richer, and though he didn't feel any different, he knew he was carrying the bone in his inventory. "I've always wondered why these random monsters in the woods would be wandering around with money," he mused. "Not that it really matters that much."

"But who would pay two copper for a gnawed bone?" Lissa asked. "I mean, it just doesn't seem like there would be a high demand."

"It's vendor trash," Anton said. "Items that are only meant to be sold for money. You've played role-playing games before, right?"

"Yeah, but I've never been inside one."

"I sympathize," Raphael said. "Knowing what something means in a video game and applying it to my own life are totally different things. I understand what's going on, but it's still weird that it's happening." He opened his pouch and another window appeared detailing its contents: one gold and three silver, a gnawed wolf bone, and a letter.

Raphael touched the letter's icon; it was suddenly in his hand. He opened it up and read aloud, "Dear Raphael and Companions, I regret that I am unable to join you for this portion of your journey. However, what lies before you must be overcome without aid, supernatural or otherwise. Three trials will you face, and three you must complete. I wish you only the best in this endeavor. Signed, Charles."

"How about that," Anton said. "Who called it?" He raised his hand, as though expecting Raphael or Lissa to high-five him. When they both gave him irritated looks, he let his hand drop with a downcast expression on his face.

"This seems awfully familiar," Lissa said. "Three tests. How many movies have we seen this kind of thing in, right?"

"Well, it's just numerology," Raphael replied. "The number three is important. Crops up in religion, mythology, everywhere. One of those things that's just burned into the human psyche. Three people make one god, three Fates, the Three Jewels of Buddhism, third time's the charm..."

"I get it," Lissa told him. "So do you think that means whatever made this world is human if it's using the number three? Or at least thinks like one?"

"I don't know. At this point I feel like I'm just along for the ride." Raphael stuffed the letter back into his pouch. "Anyway. Where the hell are we supposed to go?"

"I've got it," Anton said. He had pulled up another window, one which was titled 'Quest Log.' "It says here that we're looking for the Lost Temple of the Forest God."

"Great," Lissa replied. "I don't suppose it says where the temple is."

Anton pointed in a seemingly arbitrary direction. "It's that way. A few miles."

"If the quest log knows where the fuck the temple is, why is it called the Lost Temple?"

With a shrug, Anton pulled open a map. "Don't look at me. All I know is that the marker telling us where to go next to continue the quest is in that direction, so we should follow it. Unless you like wandering around in a forest with no idea where you're going, anyway."

"No, that sounds totally awesome. Can we set up a camp somewhere and tell ghost stories? We just have to remember to bag all our food so the ridiculous fucking dire wolves don't smell it and try to steal it."

"That's dire *bears*, Lissa," Anton said, his tone severe. "Dire *bears*."

She flipped him off and started walking in the direction he'd indicated. Anton exchanged a wry glance with Raphael, who shrugged. They had no better leads and only one quest, so they might as well follow it.

They trudged off in the direction of the quest marker. Raphael could only hope the Lost Temple was poorly named.

X

“Land ho!” Anton called.

“We’re on land,” Raphael told him, trying not to let his irritation bleed into his tone.

“Oh,” Anton said. “Temple ho!”

He had crested a small ridge in front of Raphael and Lissa; now he stood atop it, pointing dramatically at something just outside their fields of vision. Raphael jogged the rest of the way to join him, hearing Lissa’s footsteps crunching through the undergrowth not far behind him.

Sure enough, there was the temple. It was an impressive structure, jutting up from the earth in the middle of a large clearing. Raphael thought its architecture was Mayan; it was a pyramid, made from large bricks, its entrance at the pinnacle up a long flight of stairs. The fact that it was in a deciduous forest rather than a Central American jungle was not lost on him. The game they were in, or at least supposed to be in, had been made in Japan, and the Japanese understanding of Western culture – particularly architecture – had always seemed slightly suspect to Raphael. “That seems like the temple we’re looking for.”

“I hope so,” Lissa said. “Marching through the forest in this outfit for an hour has not been fun.” They had discovered, much to Lissa’s chagrin, that her ensemble had come complete with high-heeled boots. Walking barefoot hadn’t been an option in the forest, so she’d stumbled along behind them, cursing up a storm the entire way.

Anton gestured for them to follow him as he started down the slope. “The trials we have to complete are probably in there. What do you think they’re going to be, Raph?”

“No idea.”

“Come on. You’re the hero here, the hero’s supposed to know stuff like this.”

“How do you figure?”

“You’re the only one with a sword. The main character in an RPG like this usually uses a sword, since it’s the weapon of knights and other noblemen.”

“I know that, Anton. I already said I’m the main character of this game. What I actually meant was how do you figure *I’m* supposed to know what’s in there?”

Anton shrugged. “Wild guess.”

“Great. My confidence is at an all-time high thanks to your steadfast support.”

They started up the steps, which were large and steep; walking up them was like taking stairs three at a time on an ordinary staircase. By the time they reached the top of the temple, which was much larger than it looked from atop the ridge, all of them were panting with the exertion.

“Fuck me sideways,” Raphael gasped. “I’m way out of shape for a fearless hero.”

“I mean, video game characters don’t get tired even though they do nothing but run,” Anton said. “Be nice if that applied to us.”

“And if wishes were horses we’d all eat steak.” Raphael straightened up to inspect the entrance to the temple. It was a large stone door, emblazoned with three icons: an eye, an ear, and a mouth. Engraved below it was a familiar monogram:

RR

“RR?” Lissa read aloud. “That stand for you, Raph?”

“Maybe,” Raphael replied. He reached out to touch the monogram. The stone was cold and smooth beneath his hand, but as he touched it, it began to glow, the monogram and then the

images suffusing with a bright orange glow. With a loud grinding sound, the door slid into the floor, revealing an unlit stairway leading down.

“I remember this part of the game,” Anton said. “We go in, then we get the sword and the boomerang from the old man –”

“Funny,” Raphael cut him off, recognizing the reference but not in a particularly jocular mood. “Let’s go.”

They headed inside. The stairs sloped sharply downward and also started to curve; after a few dozen steps, Raphael began to get the impression they were descending a spiral staircase inside the temple. He felt along with his hands, moving carefully in the pitch blackness.

“A Mayan temple with a spiral staircase,” Anton said. “This seems kind of weird.”

“We’re walking around in a video game and you think the architecture’s weird?” Lissa asked.

“Consistency is all I ask,” Anton replied.

“Sure, Guildenstern. Or are you Rosencrantz?”

“If the two of you are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, then that makes me Hamlet, and I’m not okay with that,” Raphael said. “Plus, it would mean we all die at the end. I’m not okay with that either.”

“Good point. The architecture’s still weird, though.”

Raphael shrugged. He opened his mouth to share his feelings about the Japanese lack of cultural comprehension, then ran smack into a door as the staircase ended. “Ow.” He was promptly smacked into it again as Lissa ran into him, followed by Anton. “Ow.”

“What the hell happened?” Anton asked. “Did you take damage? I don’t see any numbers.”

“Either you can’t see them because it’s dark or getting my face crushed into a door doesn’t count as damage,” Raphael said, rubbing at his nose. “Either way...” He ran his fingers along the surface in front of him until the same orange glow began to appear. An icon of an eye burned brightly in the darkness, then disappeared as the door slid into the floor, revealing –

Raphael felt a cold, leaden feeling settle into his stomach. They were standing at the door to a hotel room.

“What the hell?” Anton asked. “Did we change worlds all of a sudden?”

Glancing down at himself, Raphael saw he was still in his armor. “No. We’re still where we were. I think this is just the first trial.” He stepped into the room, the smells around him suddenly changing from the dampness of the temple to the mustiness of an unfamiliar hotel room. It was a modest room, with a single bed, a table with a television sitting atop it, a nightstand, and a door to the bathroom. The one window displayed a panoramic view of what Raphael knew was downtown Chicago.

“Why are we here?” Lissa asked. “I mean, it’s a hotel room. Is there going to be a monster for us to fight or something?”

“I don’t think so,” Raphael replied, looking at the unmade bed with its torn sheets. “I have a different feeling about this.” He headed toward the door to the bathroom, opened it.

He had been expecting this, but he wasn’t prepared for it. The sight still made him reel backward, his stomach roiling, his heart thudding in his throat.

His mother was in that bathroom. She was hanging from the showerhead by strips of torn bedsheet she’d tied around it and her neck. There was a stool in the tub with her, kicked over. Her face was swollen, her tongue lolled grossly out of her mouth. Her eyes were open, but they were dull and unfocused. She was wearing a suit, complete with pumps, which seemed

appropriate to him; his mother had been a stickler for tidiness and he couldn't imagine her hanging herself in a nightgown or something similarly unprofessional.

"Holy fuck," Anton said as he stepped around the bed so he could see inside. "Is that –"

"Yeah," Raphael said, forcing the word out despite the nausea gripping him. "It's Mom."

Lissa also stepped around the bed and recoiled in disgust. "What the fuck," she said.

"Why is this place showing us this? What the fuck are we supposed to do?"

In response, a dialogue window popped up in front of Raphael. In shining golden text, it asked him, "Exit Game?" There were two buttons beneath the text, one with a green checkmark and the other with a red cancel sign.

Raphael felt his stomach clench even more. He had a way out of this. All he had to do was press the green button and he would be away from this hotel room, away from his mother's corpse, away away *away*. Before he remembered making any conscious decision, he was reaching for the button, his finger extended to press it.

"Raph!" Anton said, interposing himself between Raphael and the dialogue window.

"Don't! This is the trial, right? It wants you to press that button and give up! Didn't you say 'let's go?' You were going to see this thing through to the end!"

"It was easy to say that in a room full of imaginary shit I never actually owned," Raphael said. "But this – this is mine. This is my fault." He felt bile rising up in his throat. "This is MY FAULT!"

He slashed the dialogue window with his sword. The weapon cleaved through it as though it weren't there; the window remained hovering in front of him, asking him if he wanted to exit the game.

"That's not how you're gonna make it go away, man," Anton said. "I think you gotta press 'no.'"

Raphael stared at the red cancel sign. It seemed to burn, hovering there, its redness almost painful to look at. He stared past it at his mother, hanging there from the showerhead, her eyes staring at nothing.

Well, what the hell. If he pressed 'no,' they would keep going, but at least they would keep going to the second trial, right?

When he pressed no, however, the window disappeared and things began to change.

The hands of the alarm clock next to the bed began to move backward. The clouds, visible through the window, began advancing in the opposite direction.

"What the fuck?" Anton wondered aloud as he looked out the window at the cars moving in reverse along the street below. "How –" He stopped talking when he saw Raphael's gaze, fixed on the interior of the bathroom.

There was no sound, for which Raphael could not help but feel grateful. But his mother began to move again, succumbing to asphyxiation and then increasing her struggling in reverse, her face changing from purple back to its natural hue and her tongue retreating into her mouth. Her legs started kicking, the light glinting off her pumps as she did so. Her eyes blinked, began to focus.

They focused on him.

Raphael choked as his stomach tried to expel its contents. He managed to keep it down, but he staggered away from the sight, slamming into the bedframe behind him. The window popped open in front of him again, asking if he wanted to exit the game.

He pressed 'no.' The window disappeared, affording him a brief glimpse of his mother in mid-strangulation, then popped back up again. Raphael growled, pressing 'no' again, harder

this time. It disappeared, then reappeared once more. It kept doing this every time Raphael pressed 'no.' Staccato flashes of his mother burned themselves into his consciousness in between the glowing red light of the 'no' button. He was slamming his fist against the window now, punching the button until his knuckles split, screaming as he did so. "NO! NO NO NO NO NO!"

Lissa, who had until this point stood by unsure what to do, moved to the bathroom door and closed it.

The world seemed to screech to a halt. Nothing in it moved. Raphael pounded his fist against the 'no' button, drew back, and floundered forward when the window failed to reappear. He was breathing heavily, panting, tears in his eyes and throbbing pain in his hand.

After a minute, he managed to swallow through his sore throat and say to Lissa, "Thanks."

She pulled him into a hug. "You weren't going to give up. I didn't think you needed to see any more."

"It seems like the temple agrees with you," Anton said, pointing at the door through which they'd entered. A glowing arrow hovered above it, what had to be a quest marker. "I guess we go back out of this room now."

"Just give me a minute." Raphael sat down heavily on the side of the bed, unable to stop shaking. "Ugh. I feel like shit."

"I'm not surprised," Anton said. "The way you were punching that thing I thought you were going to break your hand."

"Maybe I did," Raphael said, wincing as he tried to make a fist. "Ow."

Lissa moved to sit next to him. "We're still in a video game, and I'm a mage or something. Let me see if I can..."

She laid her hand on top of his. There was a bright, green glow. The pain receded from his hand, and his split knuckles closed up.

"Ready now?" she asked.

Raphael took a deep breath. "Not really. But what the hell else are we going to do? I didn't tell it I wanted to quit, after all, so the only thing to do is keep going."

"That's the spirit," Anton said. He seemed outwardly unperturbed by what he'd just witnessed, but Raphael knew him well enough to detect the loss of energy in his voice, the hesitation behind his words. He was shaken too. "After you."

Raphael got up and opened the door. The staircase was waiting for them, curving past the door to continue down into the temple. Raphael didn't want to think too hard about how that had happened. It would probably only confuse him.

"Let's go," he said.

The stairs went much farther down this time. Raphael held his hands out in front of him the whole way, which kept him from smacking into the next door. The smooth stone surface he encountered began to glow with the same orange light as the first two doors; this icon was of an ear.

"I'm starting to draw some connections here," Anton said.

"Congratulations," Lissa told him. "You're now at the place we were when we got to the entrance."

"That's harsh."

This room was bare, constructed of the same stone as the exterior of the temple. It was lit by a dim, omnipresent light source. Its only feature was a small wooden table in its center. Resting on top of the table was a telephone.

It began to ring.

Raphael exchanged glances with Anton and Lissa, then moved to pick it up. "Hello?"

"Raph," his mother's voice came through the phone, "we need to talk about last night."

He remembered this conversation. "You heard what he said, Mom. And he smacked your ass in front of everybody."

"It was a joke," his mother told him firmly. "Adults can make those kinds of jokes, Raph. It wasn't worth you flipping over a table, screaming at him, and storming out."

"Goddammit, don't talk to me like I'm a child!" Raphael said, not even questioning why he was repeating the words he'd spoken years ago. "I'm seventeen, Mom. I can handle this kind of shit. What I can't handle is that fucking asshole walking around like he's the king of the world and he owns you –"

"It is *not* like that –"

"You just think it's not like that because you don't want to see it! Dad left you because of Francine, so now you don't feel pretty and you want someone around to tell you otherwise."

There was a pause from the other end of the line. "How dare you. How dare you talk to your own mother like that, Raphael Rousseau –"

"Oh, you're angry 'cause it's the truth? Because I think that's what going on here, Mom. And don't tell me I don't know any better 'cause I'm a kid. I'm not. I'm not stupid either."

Here, he knew, he was supposed to hang up. He felt his arm moving to slam the receiver down on the phone. But he also knew his mother was about to say something. When this had happened years ago, he'd heard her begin to form a word before he hung up.

But he was angry. He was so angry. He didn't want to listen to any more of her bullshit.

Anton caught his arm. "Dude," he said. "Say 'bye' at least. I mean, you're probably not going to be able to talk to her again after this, right?"

Raphael felt a lump form in his throat. The raging flames of his anger suddenly went out. Anton was right, as much as it pained him to admit. He returned the receiver to his ear in time to catch the tail end of her sentence: "...anymore, Raph. I know that." Her tone had changed; now she sounded resigned, sad.

"What?" he asked. "You're – you're breaking up a bit, Mom."

"I said I know you're not a kid anymore, Raph." His mother sighed. "But you'll always be my baby. You know that. That's why I really do want you to like Arnold. At least try."

"Even if you like him for the wrong reasons?" Raph asked, still belligerent despite himself.

"Even if," his mother replied. "I know you feel strongly about this, Raph. But please do me a favor and try." Pause. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Mom," Raphael said. "I'm sorry."

The line went dead. Frantic, Raphael pressed the clicker on the phone several times, but it was no good. His mother was gone.

He replaced the receiver. They stood there in silence for a minute before Anton spoke up. "I only got half that conversation, but it sounds like you said some stuff you needed to say."

"I did," Raphael said. "But mostly I heard what I needed to."

"What'd she say?" Lissa asked.

"What I should have known all along," Raphael replied. "That she still loved me."

A door-sized section of the wall on the far side of the room slid into the ground, revealing the stairs. “Only one more to go,” Raphael said. “Let’s get it over with.”

He stepped through the door. A moment later, he heard Anton and Lissa shout as the door shot up behind them, closing him inside the stairwell alone. Raphael pounded on the door, pressed his hands against it – nothing worked. “Guys!” he shouted, trying to make himself heard through the thick stone, but he was sealed in. They might be right on the other side, or they could be a million miles away for all the ability he had to communicate with them.

There was clearly only one way to go. Raphael had played enough video games to recognize when the designers intended you to walk down a corridor and open a door. Nothing was going to happen until he did that.

So he proceeded blindly down the stairs, feeling in front of him as he’d done already, and saved himself another collision. A glowing mouth burned in the darkness above him before the door slid into the floor, taking the mouth with it.

This room was his.

He recognized his room from his old house. His bed still had the ugly plaid blanket and pillows on it, his stuff was strewn all over the floor, his desk was covered in papers, and the shelves on the walls held over a dozen model ships from *Star Trek*. That was one obsession which had died with age.

Sitting at his desk was – him.

The other Raphael rose to his feet. He was dressed identically to Raphael, resplendent in plated armor with a sword sheathed at his waist. But when Raphael looked at him, he recoiled. His face was *wrong*. The eyes, the nose, the ears – all of those things were normal, but his mouth was open in what was either a Glasgow smile, his cheeks split open, or a Cheshire grin which stretched his mouth so wide it seemed like a Glasgow smile.

“Hey, Raph,” his doppelgänger said. “Back in your old stomping grounds, eh?”

“What the fuck are you?” Raphael asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” the doppelgänger said, drawing his sword. “I’m –” he lunged forward in an attack – “you!”

Raphael jerked his own sword out of its sheath just in time to turn the doppelgänger’s blow aside. The doppelgänger followed up his strike with a knee to Raphael’s groin, which his armor helped absorb but didn’t totally negate. He felt his knees buckle and his stomach churn at the pain. A glowing, white 42 appeared above his head. He managed to clock his double across the chin with the pommel of his own sword, which did a measly 18 in comparison. Disengaging, Raphael leaped back onto the bed, trying to get enough room to maneuver.

“You know she killed herself because of what you said?” the doppelgänger asked. “You told her she was just a stupid old bitch and hung up on her, and years later when it turned out you were right the entire time she killed herself.”

“Shut up!” Raphael snarled, trying for a cut at his double’s head. The doppelgänger ducked his wild swing, prompting the appearance of MISSED over his head, then retaliated with a swift stab at Raphael’s gut. The armor turned the point, but the doppelgänger still managed to cut him for 32.

“And the thing is, you didn’t even *try*. You knew you were right, but you didn’t try to see it from her perspective or bridge the gap that was growing between you or *anything*. You did nothing and she died because it!”

Furious, Raphael struck at him again, managing to do nothing but draw sparks from his armor. The doppelgänger’s counterattack cut Raphael clean across the throat; if the wound had

been any deeper it might have been the end of him. The pain was worse than anything he'd ever felt, but Raphael didn't care. All he could focus on was killing this son of a bitch.

"You know what?" the doppelgänger laughed. "Her cancer was probably treatable. It doesn't always kill the second or even the third time. If she'd gotten on it and tried really hard she might have been able to beat it and live for another five or ten years, right?" He dodged Raphael's next swing, not bothering to counterattack. "Shit, she could have at least *tried*. Wishing it away, faith healing, any old bullshit. Where there's a will, there's a way, right?"

Raphael thrust at him, but the doppelgänger caught the tip of his blade in his armored hand. With a grin, he twisted it out of Raphael's grasp and sent it flying across the room. The sword smashed into a shelf full of model ships and sent them flying. The *Enterprise* landed on the floor and snapped clean in half along a fault line Raphael remembered discovering years ago.

"But she didn't try. All she wanted to do was die, even though she had a duty to you and to Dad and everyone else who cared about her." The doppelgänger pressed the edge of its sword against Raphael's already-bleeding throat. "Oh, never mind, just kidding. I guess the two of you were the only ones she could count on to care, and you weren't there. Dad was off with whatever girlfriend he was fucking at the time and you were busy being bitter about an argument over a bag of shit who didn't even deserve your pity, much less your anger."

"I didn't make Mom kill herself!" Raphael snarled. "That's not my fault!"

"Oh, but it is, buddy," his doppelgänger said. "And you believe it. If you didn't, the stuff I'm saying wouldn't be getting to you, would it? You'd brush it off and not be getting your ass kicked because you can't concentrate. Here, I'll prove it to you." He removed his sword from Raphael's throat. "Go pick up your sword. We'll see who's right by finishing this."

Raphael took a deep breath, despite the pain it caused him, and moved to pick up his sword. He had to concentrate, keep a clear head, or the doppelgänger was going to make good on his boast. No more aggressive moves. He had to play it defensively –

"You know what happened that day, right?" the doppelgänger asked. "When you hung up?"

Raphael ignored him, staring ahead in stony silence. He would have to make his strike quick, surgical. He wasn't going to win a war of attrition at this point.

"You broke her heart. She stopped loving you."

All rational thought went right out the window. Raphael screamed, stepping forward with a murderous swing which would bisect the doppelgänger from right shoulder to left hip if it landed.

The doppelgänger sprang back out of range of the attack. Raphael's sword thudded into the carpet. While he was pulling it back up, all too slow, too sluggish, the doppelgänger stepped in with a quick, clean cut, exactly what Raphael should have done. His head went flying off his body.

Darkness crept in at the edges of his vision and the last thing he could clearly remember was seeing a flashing 158 accompanied by CRITICAL in red text above his body. Then the pain overwhelmed him and he had to shut his eyes.

"You lose, Raphael," the doppelgänger said.

Everything went black.

XI

Raphael woke up.

For a moment he lay there, feeling his heart thudding in his chest, wondering why he was vaguely surprised to be awake. Then he remembered what had happened and sat bolt upright, touching his neck to make sure it was still in one piece.

His head was attached to his body. He didn't feel any pain. As far as he could tell, the fight with his doppelgänger had never happened.

He no longer wore showy armor and a sword; he was back in a tee-shirt and jeans, his normal attire for as long as he could remember. He was back in his dorm room, lying on his bed, sunlight beginning to creep in through the blinds. Even as Raphael remembered his fight with his doppelgänger, it seemed to fade in his mind, becoming less important. A sudden desire seized him to leave, to go outside, so Raphael put on a pair of tennis shoes and left the room.

The dorm was quiet – far quieter than he ever remembered it being, even at night. The only sounds which reached his ears were his own breathing and the soft tread of his shoes on the carpeted floor. He passed by the bathroom and saw there was nobody inside. The stairs were similarly deserted.

There was nobody at the front desk. Raphael frowned, letting himself out of the dorm. He headed toward the university center, looking around, but saw no sign of life. It occurred to him that he felt no wind on his face, that he couldn't smell anything. The temperature had not changed after he'd walked outside. He clearly wasn't back in reality – if there *was* a reality, at any rate. Raphael was beginning to doubt the existence of a real world, given everything he'd gone through.

"I don't know what's going on, exactly," Raphael said aloud to the air. "I don't know if you want me to say that I'm dead or that I give up or whatever. All I know is that this isn't really Stoughton."

There was no reply. On a sudden hunch, Raphael decided to head into the university center and check his mail. He couldn't say precisely what motivated him to do that, only that it seemed right.

He headed down the stairwell into the basement of the university center, walked down the row of mailboxes, stopped at his own. He entered the combination carefully, knowing that his mailbox was finicky about stopping the lock precisely on the right numbers.

There was a letter inside. The envelope was a creamy off-white. It was shut with a red wax seal. The seal itself bore an extremely familiar monogram:

RR

With trembling hands, Raphael broke the seal, then tore open the envelope. He hadn't seen it in years, but when he unfolded the paper, he instantly recognized his mother's hand – a kind of faux-cursive, the characters written with looping lines and curving tails but only occasionally joined in cursive fashion. Raphael tried to read it, but he couldn't make out the words. It wasn't just that he found his mother's handwriting difficult to decipher; the words seemed to twist and curl on the page, defying his attempts to make any sense of them. Angry, Raphael shook the letter, trying to will it into making sense, but it remained stubbornly opaque to him.

"Do you know why you can't read it?"

Raphael turned. His mother stood behind him, her expression one of worry. “No,” he said. “I don’t.”

“It’s because you don’t want to,” his mother said. “It’s because you’re afraid of what it might say.” She gestured for Raphael to walk with her, then led him along a stately path back toward the stairs. “Do you remember when you got this letter, Raph?”

“It was just after you’d died,” Raphael replied. “I got this letter in the mail.” He squinted, trying to remember what had happened. “I saw it was from you and – I didn’t open it. I threw it out because I didn’t want to know what you had to say to me. All I knew was that I was hurt and angry and I blamed you just as much as I blamed myself.”

“Where did you get this letter?” his mother asked.

“School,” Raphael said. “My mailbox. Why?”

“What were you doing that day? Who were you with? Why were you checking your mailbox? What classes were you taking?”

“What does any of this have to do with you?” Raphael asked. “I don’t remember this kind of stuff. I usually don’t remember what I had for breakfast yesterday. Why does it matter?”

“Because you may have left Not-Stoughton, but your anger and your guilt have kept you from seeing the truth.” They walked through the door to the stairwell, but there were no stairs here. There was just a room, painfully white, bare of any features. When Raphael turned to look at the door through which they’d entered, he found it was gone. “Why did you hate Arnold, Raphael?”

“The guy was no good,” Raphael said. “He thought he was a big shot because he dressed well and made a lot of money, but he was just a stupid little bastard who saw something he wanted and decided he was going to take it. He lied to you about a lot of stuff and ultimately got caught embezzling company funds, so I was right about him the entire time. Calling him scum would be too generous.”

“Those are all very good reasons to dislike someone,” his mother said. “But it takes a lot more than that to earn the kind of vitriol you display when you talk about him. What is it really, Raphael? What really makes you hate him?”

“I don’t know!” Raphael said. “All that stuff *isn’t* enough? How about the way he talked to me, like I was a stupid kid who didn’t know anything about anything? That’s when he even talked to me, anyway. When you were around, he ignored me. All he cared about was pleasing you, he only kind of tolerated my existence because he wanted you and I was just baggage you were carrying around. The kid’ll go off to college in a couple years anyway, just tough it out, you know, and fuck him if he doesn’t like it. Arnold’s here to fucking stay!”

“You’re getting closer to the root of your problem. But that’s not really why you hate him.” His mother made an encompassing gesture. “Think, Raphael. Think hard. What did he really do that made you hate him?”

Raphael stared at her, trying to form the words to articulate precisely what he was feeling. He chewed on it for a while, thinking, circling the inevitable conclusion at which his mother expected him to arrive. Finally, with great difficulty, Raphael muttered, “He kept you and Dad from getting back together.”

“That’s right,” his mother said. “It wasn’t the fact that Arnold perhaps took a little too much pride in his appearance, or the amount of money he earned. It wasn’t that he was a little shallow, that he wasn’t interested in you nearly as much as he was interested in me. It was the fact that ever since your father and I separated, you’d kept a secret hope that it would all

eventually work out and the two of us would get back together. Like something out of *The Parent Trap*.”

“I know,” Raphael growled, beginning to pace back and forth. “It was stupid. I didn’t like admitting to myself that I even thought it might be possible. I mean, Dad left because of Francine. You don’t get back with a guy after he goes and pulls that kind of shit. But I still hoped it might happen. I thought he might see the error of his ways and come back to beg your forgiveness and you’d lead him along for a while but eventually take him back and all that sappy crap. I feel like an idiot for even saying this.”

“But it’s good that you are.” His mother laid a hand on his shoulder, bringing his pacing to a halt. “You’re angry because you feel like it’s your fault – that we broke up, that I got with Arnold, that I eventually ended my own life. That compounds the grief you already feel about losing me and puts you in this situation. You can’t deny it any longer, Raphael. You can’t pretend nothing happened and that everything is going to be okay without talking about it. That’s why this place began to leak across the boundaries and affect Stoughton. Your grief awakened something and gave it form.”

Raphael looked at her. “Is it magic? Is Charles actually a talking cat or am I just crazy? Is there some kind of ancient evil sealed underneath Stoughton?”

“I don’t think it matters,” his mother said. “I think what you need to do now is keep going. You’re here because you’re going through a lot of guilt, and regardless of whether this is real or magic or all inside your own head you’re dealing with it as you go. You’re acknowledging the fact that there are problems you haven’t been trying to fight and you’re finally doing something about them. That’s all I would ever want for you.” She pulled Raphael into a hug. “Now get out of here. You have a trial to complete.”

Raphael didn’t question how she knew what she did; he merely held his mother tight to him, knowing it might be the last time he ever hugged her. At this point, he knew, she was right; it didn’t matter whether this was real or not. What did matter was that it was happening.

When he stepped away from her, she was gone. All that was left was a door on the opposite side of the room, which itself no longer seemed painfully white but instead clean and comforting. Raphael strode across the room, opened the door, and stepped through.

In a flash, he was back in his room, head attached to his body, dressed in armor and wielding a sword. His doppelgänger was leering at him, triumphant, but his expression changed when he saw Raphael’s head magically reappear on his body. “What? How the hell did you do that?”

“I didn’t do it by myself,” Raphael replied, assuming an en-garde position. “I had help.”

His doppelgänger laughed at him. “So you cheated. That’s the only way you’re able to even put up a fight, eh? You know I’m right, you know that she died because of you and you can’t bear to admit it!”

Raphael glared. He knew on a rational level that what the doppelgänger said wasn’t true, but the accusation still tore at his heart. “Fuck you,” he said anyway. “I’m through listening to you. I think it’s time you just shut the fuck up.”

“Try and make me,” his doppelgänger taunted, blending into a quick thrust at Raphael.

It seemed so easy to turn aside the doppelgänger’s blade and stab him in the chest. All the difficulty Raphael had had before vanished, went right out the window. The doppelgänger shrieked as Raphael’s weapon pierced him, exploding out his back in a shower of hot blood. His sword slipped from his fingers as he fell to his knees, raising his hands to try to pull the sword out of his chest but failing to do more than budge it an inch. “This doesn’t make sense,” he

whispered. “I’m right, I know I am. It’s your fault. It’s all your fault.” His eyes began to cloud with tears. “It can’t be *mine*.”

“Sorry,” Raphael said. “But I’ve gotta move on now.”

He walked out of his room, leaving his sword behind. The door opened back up onto the temple stairs, leading down. Lissa and Anton were waiting for him.

“The fuck happened in there?” Anton asked. “The door closed behind you and by the time it opened for us you were totally gone.”

“I guess it was something I had to do myself,” Raphael replied, looking back at the door. “I think all of this is – well, maybe something I have to do *for* myself, not necessarily *by* myself.” He looked at Lissa and Anton. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Lissa raised an eyebrow. “You okay, Raph? What happened in there?”

“I lost a part of myself,” Raphael replied, heading down the stairs toward what he knew would be the last door of the temple. “A part that I’m okay with losing.” He reached out to touch the final door, which glowed with all three icons – the eye, the ear, and the mouth.

“Let’s go,” he said. He stepped through it.

* * *

The vestiges and trappings of the video game were abruptly gone. Raphael was wearing his normal clothes once again.

He sat at his desk in his dorm room, staring out the window at the campus. A sense of déjà vu hit him; was he dead again? No, he distinctly remembered walking through that final door in the temple. For that matter, he could see people moving about on campus, and when he turned around, Anton was sitting at his own desk, working on something.

“Anton,” Raphael said. “You’re seeing this too, right?”

Anton turned to look at him. “Yeah, man,” he said. “I’m seeing this too.”

“What happened to the temple? Where’s Lissa?”

“The temple was just to get you to this point, dude. You had to get past all that anger you had at yourself so you could start moving on. To face the real trial.”

“How do you know all that?”

Anton smiled faintly. “I got some ideas, that’s all.” He gestured at Raphael’s laptop, which sat on top of his desk. Open, it displayed a Word document. “Whatcha workin’ on there?”

Taking a look at the document, Raphael replied, “A short story for my fiction workshop. I’ve been wrestling with this fucking thing for weeks now and I just can’t fucking get it to work.”

“What’s it about?” Anton asked.

“The main character’s this guy in college,” Raphael said. “Named John. He’s got lots of friends, a girlfriend, good grades, everything seems peachy. But the plot kicks off when he meets a magical homeless guy – well, he’s not really magical, but that’s the term I’ve been using, you know – who asks him for some change. Since John’s a nice guy, he gives the homeless guy a dollar. The homeless guy is really grateful, so in exchange he promises to impart a word of wisdom to John, and that word’s actually a question: ‘Why are you here on Earth?’

“At first John doesn’t really get why the homeless guy’s even asking this question and kind of laughs it off, but then things start to go wrong. He starts noticing how shallow all his friends are. They do the same things every week and tell the same dumb stories about stuff that

happened years ago. His girlfriend is kind of vapid and shallow and not really that interesting, even though they've been together for more than a year. His classes aren't challenging him or interesting him anymore. Stuff that used to engage him, like talking about philosophy or deconstructing a text, just kind of rings hollow.

"He starts asking people why they think they're on Earth and gets a lot of the regular bullshit. 'Because God put me here.' 'No reason, I don't believe in anything.' 'Why do *you* think?' And other trite, cliché crap like that. John realizes nobody really knows and they're all lying to themselves in order to make their lives bearable, to distract themselves from the stark existential terror of their existences, and figures out that's precisely what the homeless guy wanted him to know. But he can't take the pressure, and he kind of cracks and decides to kill the homeless guy.

"So John goes and buys a gun, and he goes looking for the homeless guy. He searches for days in the neighborhood where he first met him, but he can't find hide nor hair of the guy. So after the third day of searching, when he's about ready to give up, he goes back to his dorm room and finds the homeless guy waiting for him inside.

"The homeless guy asks him, 'Do you know why you're here on Earth yet?' and John tells him no, he doesn't know. 'Well,' the homeless guy says, 'the first step to gaining wisdom is admitting your own ignorance. The next step is dealing with it. Do you want to deal with your ignorance or are you going to shoot me?'"

Anton said, without hesitation, "And John shoots him."

"Exactly." Raphael laced his fingers behind his head. "I'm having a hard time getting everything right, though. The words don't want to come. I find myself staring at the page trying to figure out what's going to happen next. I've never had this problem before, Anton."

"Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know. I've only ever written fantasy or sci-fi before, not literary fiction. But nobody in my workshop, least of all the professor, likes fantasy or sci-fi. They're not literary, significant genres, right? So I'm trying to do something realistic, or failing that at least contemporary, and it's just kind of hanging."

"I know why," Anton said. "You want to hear it?"

"Sure, magical homeless guy," Raphael replied. "I'm all ears."

"It's 'cause you're hung up on trying to make it *mean* something. That's a story that professors might love you for, or they might call it pretentious crap and call you out for trying to be all literary and stuff. You can't please everyone, so you should work on pleasing yourself. You have to write what you're interested in writing."

"That's all well and good for you to say, but you're not getting an English degree," Raphael said. "You don't feel the departmental and peer pressures there. You're a fucking business major, dude. No offense."

"None taken. But there's a point where you have to start ignoring the pressure and *stop compromising*. If you want to write about homosexual space elves, you fucking do it. And don't apologize. Apologizing is like letting them smell your fear. They pounce on that shit. You don't want to let them smell your fear, do you?"

"Not particularly." Raphael hesitated. "Why are you telling me all this, Anton? Are you really you? Or are we still inside the temple and this is another one of its trials?"

"No more trials, bud. Not like the ones in the temple, anyway. This one is all you." Anton got up, motioned for Raphael to follow him. "Come on. Let's go for a walk."

The day was pleasant, the sun bright without being obnoxious and the temperature somewhere in the mid-seventies. Raphael walked with Anton, not pausing to reflect on the strangeness of the situation.

“You ever see *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*?” Anton asked.

“Of course,” Raphael said. “It’s a classic.”

“Well, there’s a reinterpretation of it that turns it into a crazy fucking horror flick. You want to hear it?”

“Since I know you’re going to tell me about it regardless of whether I say yes or not, sure, go ahead.”

“Good man. So, Ferris is this crazy awesome dude who’s just good at everything and everyone loves him except for the unreasonable authority figure of Mr. Rooney who he’s constantly vexing and perplexing. His girlfriend Sloane is this stone-cold fox, exactly the kind of girl who doesn’t exist at that particular age, and his best friend Cameron is a regular dude who’s also a hypochondriac and yet somehow hangs out with this awesome guy who everyone loves.

“What the reinterpretation is, is that the film is all in Cameron’s head. He’s not good at anything and nobody really likes him – or even hates him – so he invents this imaginary friend, Ferris, who’s popular and great and envied even by the adults. And they hang out and go on wacky adventures together so Cameron can be included and live vicariously through him. And he invents Sloane as the perfect girl for him, but since he knows she’s too good for him he pairs her with Ferris, who is the only guy who could possibly be cool enough to warrant her affections.”

“That’s kind of a scary interpretation,” Raphael said. “So what’s the point?”

“Well, think about it,” Anton replied. “What if you really are crazy? If you’re just hallucinating all this – the temple, the cave, the talking cat – who’s to say that you aren’t also hallucinating Stoughton? You could be curled up in a nice padded room somewhere, blazed as fuck on happy pills, imagining this place where your problems are all solved and gone. You’re having a crisis of faith right now because your Mom killed herself and your Dad’s kind of an asshole and you’re not sure if there is a God or not. And you’ve got a bunch of issues with women, you can’t figure them out and they all seem to be crazy but you love them anyway even though they ignore you. Well, here comes good ole Anton to assure you that there totally is a God and you can get a ton of tail even while you’re conducting Bible studies in your dorm room. And here comes Lissa to assure you that just because women are fucked up and crazy doesn’t mean they won’t bone you and be all tortured and let you try to fix them and shit.”

Raphael looked at him. It made a frightening kind of sense. “Where are you getting this idea?”

“Just your own head, man,” Anton replied. “You know it’s true on some level. This is reality trying to get through to you. This is you trying to wake up from the happy pills and the self-delusion.”

“But Mom said it didn’t matter whether this was real or not,” Raphael said. “She just said it’s helping me to work out these issues I have, and that’s all that matters. Why should I be concerned about whether it’s taking place in reality or not if I’m going to wake up, like you’re implying, and be fixed?”

“You don’t believe it yet, though. Just like you don’t believe that what happened with your mom wasn’t your fault. Sure, it’s easy to tell yourself that it wasn’t, and justify why, but deep down you still blame yourself and you’re trying to find some way to fix it, to compromise,

to make it right. Well, that's not happening. You've decided to stop actively blaming yourself, but you've gotta stop passively blaming yourself too."

"How? How can I possibly make that choice? You make it sound like it's easy, Anton, but if it were that easy I would have done it a long time ago."

"Don't look at me, dude. This is your head we're stuck in. You're the one who's making all of this happen. You're doing it to yourself. I'm just a projection of your fantastic ideas." Anton shrugged. "I don't know any more than you do. Everything I've told you is stuff you know yourself."

"Or," Raphael said, "this is actually real, and you're some kind of magical incubus thing trying to tempt me into thinking I'm crazy so I can take the easy way out and just tell myself it's all in my head until I believe it and 'wake up' but I'm not actually woken up."

"If I denied it I'd just sound suspicious," Anton replied. "Because I can't absolutely deny it. If this is a solipsistic fantasy of yours and I'm just a P-zombie designed to interact with you in a way that's utterly convincing and lifelike but I don't actually have any soul or essence, then *I wouldn't know it*. That's the whole problem with solipsism, after all. As far as I'm concerned, what I'm telling you is conjecture based on stuff that you know but I don't."

Raphael hadn't been watching where their walk was taking them, but they were suddenly standing in front of another door. It looked like an entrance to the university center, but emblazoned on the glass were the three icons done in the style of warning-signs.

"This is where you go next," Anton said. "My part's done."

"Thanks," Raphael replied. "I guess."

He opened the door.

XII

The gates of Heaven were much prettier than they had any right to be.

Raphael looked up at the arching ivory gates, trying to figure out exactly how tall they were. They seemed to stretch up into the sky forever, which was an impressive feat, considering they were already *in* the sky. Raphael stood on a bank of clouds, all of them white and fluffy. They weren't cold; he doubted they were made of water.

"Come on," Lissa said to him. "He's waiting."

Turning to look at her, Raphael saw that Lissa was now dressed in flowing white robes. A halo shone behind her head. Trying to look her in the face was difficult, as she now glowed with the same heavenly radiance as the rest of his surroundings, but with much greater luminosity. He held up a hand to shield his eyes, peering through the cracks between his fingers. "What the hell's going on, Lissa? Are we in Heaven now?"

"You're here on a tour," she replied, extending a hand to him. Acting on instinct, Raphael took it. He immediately felt his weight vanish, a strange and not entirely pleasant sensation. Lissa lifted him into the air; the gates opened before them, admitting them entry.

"So," Raphael said. "You're an angel now?"

"No. I don't have any wings."

"You realize that accounts of angels with wings were the same accounts where they were described as having metal bodies with many eyes and breathing fire," Raphael said. "The whole 'human-with-wings' image was pretty much made up whole cloth by the Catholic church."

Lissa rolled her eyes. "It's a metaphor, Raph. All of this is. Did you honestly think you'd really be in Heaven?"

Raphael looked down at the landscape passing beneath their feet. Pristine, grassy hills rose out of the clouds, covered in wildflowers and streams. In the distance, he could see an entire forest springing up out of the clouds, some of the trees reaching hundreds of feet into the sky. A mountain loomed on the horizon, its snow-capped peak contrasting with the forest green covering its sides. He looked up further into the sky and saw the planets – not chunks of rock or balls of gas spinning though a vacuum, but the *real* planets, the celestial spheres of light and motion whirling around the fixed point of the Earth.

"I didn't think I was such a bad person that I wouldn't be able to get in," Raphael said honestly. "But I'm not sure if there is a Heaven anymore. It's been hard to keep believing lately."

"There's your problem." Lissa continued to ascend steadily into the sky as they spoke. The sky darkened as they rose, light blue fading steadily into the blackness of space, but Raphael wasn't cold. He didn't think things really worked that way here. "You don't believe any of this is real."

"Anton just told me as much," Raphael said. "He said I'm curled up in a nuthouse somewhere, totally blazed on happy pills and unable to separate fantasy from reality. This certainly seems like the kind of thing I'd want to hallucinate if I were fucked-up on vicodin or whatever."

"That," Lissa explained patiently, "was not Anton. It was a devil, trying to tempt you into disregarding everything you're seeing and hearing and thus making it unable to help you. It's imperative that you believe, Raph. Your soul depends on it."

Raphael made a contemplative sound in the back of his throat. "And I should believe you instead of him because...?"

“Because you love me and I’m not an asshole?”

“Anton’s not *really* an asshole,” Raphael said. “And I think you may be jumping the gun on the love thing, too. I think you’re great, Lissa, I really do, but we’ve only known one another for a few weeks. I don’t think love is a word that should be present in our vocabulary right now.”

She laughed. “So cautious, Raph. That’s something I like about you. You might make a big deal about not sugar-coating it for anybody, no matter who they are, but you actually care deeply about what people think of you and you don’t *really* want to hurt anyone’s feelings. Most of the time, you’re just being blunt because you don’t know how to behave like a decent human being.”

“Well, that’s a comforting thought,” Raphael said. “Mind letting me down so I can go kill myself now?”

The mirth vanished from Lissa’s face. “But you’ve already done that,” she said.

Raphael hung there in midair, letting her pull him along, for a long moment as he tried to absorb what she just said. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You’ve already killed yourself,” Lissa replied. “This is your near-death experience, or maybe your death experience. The oxygen’s not getting to your brain because of the rope that’s around your neck, choking you to death. So all the little dying neurons are firing off in a desperate attempt to wake you up so you can do something – not that there *is* anything you can do.”

“Uh-huh,” Raphael said, trying to ignore the sudden itching feeling around his neck. She might as well have told him there was a spider somewhere on him, he’d have gone crazy with the feeling of things creeping over his skin. “And my dying neurons have been making me hallucinate all this – Stoughton, you, Anton, this crazy fucking vision quest I’m on?”

“Well, maybe. The way I interpret it, you’re currently fighting for survival even while you’re dying, and this is all a metaphor for your struggle to bring yourself to care enough to even try to live. Maybe you’re really seeing angels and lost temples and stuff, or maybe your mind is just retreating to this fantasy to try to figure itself out in the precious seconds you have left.”

“This isn’t how I’ve heard most near-death experiences described,” Raphael said. “It seems too concrete. Even when we’re flying through all of this.” He gestured at the space around them, which was now totally bereft of clouds. They flew past the moon, which was a shining beacon suspended in an undulating sea of crisp blackness studded with points of light. If they really had been in space, Raphael would have been long dead, but he could see Mercury up ahead, so they clearly weren’t actually flying through the solar system. This was a medieval model of how the universe worked. “I mean, right now we’re flying through Heaven basically as envisioned by Dante Alighieri. It seems like a really rational hallucination for me to be having.”

“You’re not like anyone else, Raphael,” Lissa said. “For that matter, nobody is like anybody else. Everyone’s different on a personal, fundamental level. That’s what makes us individual people, after all. If we were all basically the same, we’d have no real way to differentiate ourselves.”

“So my near-death experience is heavily allegorical and vivid because I’m *special*.”

“When you put it that way, it doesn’t sound very intelligent, does it?”

Raphael couldn’t help but smile at that. “Not really, no. But I guess I get what you’re saying.” He made an encompassing gesture at the celestial spheres in the distance. “So if I’m dying, I guess we’re headed toward the Primum Mobile so I can meet God, right? And you’re my Beatrice?”

“Something like that. I’m your guide and your salvation. I’m the one who sends Vergil to bring you through Hell and through Purgatory so you can reach this place and achieve true enlightenment.”

“In this version of my experience, I’m guessing that Charles is Vergil?”

“He’s the supernatural guide that Dante receives to help lead him out of the dark wood and onto his quest,” Lissa said. “Then he goes through the trials of Hell and Purgatory before he meets with the Goddess, Beatrice, who in turn takes him to true enlightenment. Afterward, he doesn’t want to return, but he knows he has to, so he returns to the world to tell everyone of his experience.”

“Because she loves him and doesn’t want to see him lost in the dark wood,” Raphael said. “He was never going to get out of there himself, not without help.”

“Exactly. This is a process which you can’t accomplish by yourself, Raphael, but circumstances – whatever they are – are forcing you to do it anyway. So you’ve invented me, and Anton, and all the other people you know in order that we might help you out of your dark wood and through Hell and Purgatory. Anton says you have trouble writing a good story because you’re not invested in realism, but I say you have trouble because you’re already so busy writing another one, one which is much more important to you.”

Raphael watched the spheres flash past at increasingly high velocities. It reminded him of the shots of the *Enterprise* at warp speed from Star Trek, the stars’ far-off points of light elongated by the speed of the ship. He’d read *The Physics of Star Trek*, which had laboriously explained how warp drive folded space in a wave rather than actually moving the ship faster than light. It made a lot of sense, but then again, he was an English major.

He shook his head. There was a time and a place for woolgathering and streaking through Heaven at approximately ten thousand miles per hour was neither. “But if you’re both inventions of my own imagination, why are you saying different things? Anton said he was only telling me information which I already knew, but both of you think you’re telling the truth. So are both the things I’ve been told true?”

“That’s why I told you Anton was not Anton; he was a devil. You see how he’s making you doubt what I’m telling you even now?”

“That would be crafty, all right, if it were true,” Raphael said. “But I’m not sure any of this is more real than what *he* was just telling me.” He let go of Lissa’s hand.

Unsurprisingly, he kept traveling through space. After all, there was no gravity or air to slow him down with friction, but his momentum continued to build despite the fact that Lissa was no longer pulling him along. Instead, she floated alongside him, her arms crossed. “This is exactly what he wants, Raph! If you stubbornly decide that this isn’t real, you’re going to end up rejecting it all and dying! I’m not sure exactly where you’re going to go if you die right now, but the Almighty *has* fixed His canon ’gainst self-slaughter.”

“Good for Him,” Raphael said. “Maybe I’ll get the chance to talk with Him about it. After all, it seems like I’m headed there whether I like it or not.” He waved his arms, as though flapping them might let him control the path of his flight. “Unless there’s some way for me to brake so I can float out here in space and eventually die of thirst or however things work in this crazy world.”

“No,” Lissa told him. “You’re definitely on your way, Raph. I wish it could have been different. It might have just been easier for you to choose to die, actually.”

“That feels like it’d be taking the coward’s way out,” Raphael laughed. “I said I’d see this thing through to the end, come Hell – or Heaven, I guess – or high water, and I meant it. I

want to figure out what all of this means as much as the next guy, especially considering that I seem to be the *only* guy. So I'll talk with God, or whoever happens to be waiting for me, and hear what *He* has to say."

Lissa waved at him as she began to fall behind. She disappeared into the inky blackness of space as Raphael kept accelerating, heading straight for the distant radiance of the Primum Mobile. He wasn't up on his medieval cosmology, but he thought he could identify the spheres he was flashing past as Neptune and Pluto, which would make sense considering he was on his way past them to the most distant sphere. He couldn't actually remember the order of the celestial spheres from the *Paradiso*, considering it had been a year and a half since he'd had a class on it and he'd only read a bit of it, then bullshitted in class and on the papers he'd written.

When he finally began to decelerate, he could see the Primum Mobile in detail. It was infinitely intricate, layers within layers of light and information which he couldn't even begin to comprehend in their entirety. It was like what he imagined the Matrix code to look like if pushed into three dimensions and superimposed over a sphere, except in all directions at once and in brilliant gold rather than green.

He passed through the layers of the Primum Mobile as though they didn't exist, slowing all the while, until he at last came to a dead halt in the center.

"Hello again, Raphael," Charles said.

"Charles," Raphael replied, turning around to look at the cat. Charles was a housecat again, not a tiger or a jaguar. "You've come up in the world, it seems."

"How do you mean?"

Raphael gestured at the Primum Mobile burning around them. "I mean, since you're the only one here besides me, aren't you technically God?"

"Oh, no," Charles said. "I'm the same as I've always been. I'm just your guide. Really, *you're* the only one here besides *me*."

"But I just got here."

"So? What does that prove? God can go and take a vacation once in a while, can't He?" Charles seated himself in front of Raphael, looking up at him with his big, golden eyes.

"Welcome back."

"Why am I God now?" Raphael asked. "Lissa just told me I was having a near-death experience, and Anton told me I was crazy. Are you going to tell me now that I'm God and I was just fucking with myself?"

"Not exactly," Charles replied. "Listen carefully, Raphael. This may be somewhat difficult for you to understand, but right now you're in a metafictional novel you're writing about yourself."

"But I'm not Jorge Luis Borges. Why would I be writing this kind of thing? Anton just got finished telling me how I want to write about magical unicorns and elves or some shit!"

"You don't have to be Spanish to write metafiction," Charles said, a warning note in his voice. "That's a baseless and somewhat racist assumption. No, Raphael, you're the main character in a novel you're writing about yourself, a vaguely autobiographical one. You're writing about the difficult time you had getting past your mother's death, but nobody wants to read a book about dealing with grief, so you've enciphered it in layer upon layer of quasi-symbolic mysticism and bullshit. This is the denouement, where you meet the author – yourself – and have it all explained to you so that you come to the proper revelation."

"Which is?"

“What we’ve all been telling you. That you don’t need to feel guilty about something that was beyond your ability to control and that you can stop punishing yourself for it. Having finally internalized this truth, rather than merely realizing it intellectually, you will be free to let go of your guilt and return to the real world.”

“That sounds great, Charles. Except for the part where I fucking hate shit like that. I read that one story of Borges’s where his younger self meets his older self on a bridge and they have a cryptic conversation about something or other and *absolutely nothing is accomplished*. It bored the shit out of me. If I could go back and tell my younger self not to read it, I would.”

“I personally think you should give his work a second chance,” Charles said, “but that’s neither here nor there. It’s time for you to finish this.”

Raphael turned around and saw a desk sitting in front of him, complete with a leather-bound rolling chair and typewriter. A thick stack of blank paper sat to the left of the typewriter, there was a single half-completed sheaf in the machine, and there was another stack of paper to the right of the typewriter on which was written what looked like the better part of a novel.

“It’s up to you,” Charles said insistently. “Go on. You can do it.”

“If this is the denouement where I meet myself, why aren’t I here?” Raphael asked. “It’s just me – and you. Are you my stand-in?”

“No,” Charles laughed. “I’ve told you I don’t know how many times, Raphael, that I am only your guide. Lissa put it quite well when she said I was the Vergil to your Dante. I am very fond of you, despite how thick you can sometimes be, and I only want to see you succeed. That is my purpose.”

“If that’s all, then why couldn’t you have been a person?” Raphael asked. “What purpose was served by making you a talking cat? Just to annoy the shit out of me and make me question my sanity?”

Charles shook his head. “There’s no real *purpose* behind it. Recall what Anton said. The early part of this story is very contemporary, right up until the point where you wish someone dead and it happens – quite the stand-in for what you believe happened with your mother, by the way. I liked that a great deal. At any rate, as Anton told you, you have difficulty with contemporary, mundane stories, so you put in a talking cat to make the story more interesting for you to write until you get to Not-Stoughton and it becomes sufficiently surreal and abstract to really hold your interest.”

“Jesus Christ,” Raphael muttered, collapsing into the chair. It rolled backward until it bumped into the desk. “It makes sense. I don’t remember writing any of this, but that does sound like something I would do.” He shook his head. “Then again, everything Anton said also made sense. And Lissa’s deal wasn’t too far-fetched either. All of you have been telling me things that conveniently explain everything and make it so that if I just take your word for it everything will be fixed and good forever.”

“Your point being?” Charles asked. “Most people would be thrilled to be handed the meaning of life, the universe, and everything, Raphael. Or, failing that, the meaning of the strange and unsettling events through which they’ve been going, whether those events are you tromping through Stepford towns and video games into Heaven or if they are simply filing your taxes and going to the grocery store.”

“But it’s too *easy*,” Raphael pointed out. “You guys really are handing me the meaning of life, the universe, and everything, but then another one of you comes along and directly contradicts what the other person just said. There’s no consistency to any of it and, most importantly, I don’t have any agency in the whole process.”

Charles scratched himself with a hind leg. “I beg your pardon?”

“Agency,” Raphael said. “It’s what separates the good characters from the boring ones. A knight who goes out and slays the dragon to be with the princess has agency because he’s making things happen and is master of his own destiny. He’s moving the plot along. But the princess, she waits patiently in the tower for the knight to come rescue her, which is why people make fun of the princess today. She doesn’t do anything. She just kind of lets herself get dragged through life by forces far beyond her control.” He looked down at Charles. “Or like Alice, following the white rabbit through Wonderland and stumbling into all sorts of characters and crazy people. Right, Cheshire?”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t know,” Charles said.

“Of course you wouldn’t, because you guys have just been telling me the things I *want* to hear. Whether you really are figments of my imagination, or angels and demons, or just people trying to help me out by making a really convoluted point, you’re never going to stop coming up with bullshit reasons explaining everything that’s going on until I tell you that I don’t care anymore.”

“But you need to care,” Charles said. “How else are you going to get out of this?”

“It’s not that I don’t care about what’s happening,” Raphael said. “It’s that I don’t care *why*. Does it really matter whether this is all in my head, or if I’m having a near-death experience, or even if this is all happening in a book I’m writing about myself? That last one is *really* self-indulgent and douchey, so I hope it’s not the case, but even if it is, it doesn’t matter. The important thing is that this *is* happening, and I’m going to get through it and move on with my life.”

“You really don’t care that it could all be a dream?” Charles asked. “What if everything you’re doing right now is ultimately meaningless and self-defeating? Do you still want to keep doing it?”

“Of course!” Raphael said. “Look, there are two possible states of being: either this all matters, or it doesn’t. And there are two possible states of response: either I do something, or I don’t. Now, if you make a logic flow graph of these states and responses to analyze the outcome, you come up with this: if it all matters and I do something, I’m in the clear. If it doesn’t matter and I do something, well, it’s wasted, but at least I won’t feel that way, you know? I’ll still be doing something. If it doesn’t matter and I do nothing, the point’s entirely moot. But if it *does* matter and I do nothing, I’m completely fucked and it’s nobody’s fault but my own. When you compare the risks of wasting your life when it really does matter with the risks of wasting your life when it doesn’t and not having a life when it doesn’t, and the potential reward of not wasting your life when it *does* matter...”

“All right, I follow,” Charles said. “So you’ve decided to carry on, even if nothing matters?”

“Precisely. No second-guessing myself. No compromise or bargaining. It’s way too easy to say ‘oh this is all this means’ and ignore it on those grounds, when it might mean something completely different and wonderful.” Raphael rotated the chair so he was facing the typewriter. He’d never used one before, but it wasn’t like it was terribly different from typing on a keyboard.

“So what are you going to do now?” Charles asked.

Raphael lowered his hands to the typewriter, feeling the unfamiliar keys beneath his fingers. “I’m going to see what happens next.” He typed out, “There was another door.”

He got up out of his chair to see the door in question, sitting in the middle of the Primum Mobile.

Before he opened it, he walked over to Charles, who was still looking up at him with those big golden eyes. Slowly, reverently, Raphael extended a hand to scratch Charles behind his ears. "Thanks," he said. "For being my guide and making sure I got to this point. I appreciate it."

Charles accepted Raphael's ministrations without complaint for a few seconds before he shook his head to indicate he'd had enough. "You're welcome," he said. "I must admit it's nice to hear that my work is appreciated. But as my last act as your guide, Raphael, let me warn you: the place you are about to go is not for the faint of heart. It is where you end up after you have resolved to end all bargaining, to proceed with your life despite any outside influence or interference. You will be all alone, and I will not be able to help you."

"I understand," Raphael said. "And I also appreciate the warning. But like I said, Charles, I have to see the rest of this through. If I don't, I'm never going to get back to the real world, or whatever passes for one. I'm not going to be able to bring back Sarah if she did exist or learn that she didn't exist and that it didn't matter anyway. Whatever happens, I have to go through that door."

"I know. And that's why I wanted to warn you. It is now out of my hands." Charles got to his feet and began to pad away, leaving the Primum Mobile behind. "Good luck, Raphael. You will need it."

Raphael took a deep breath, then turned to the door. It was an unassuming door, just like thousands of others he'd seen throughout his life. But as he reached for the knob, he felt a sense of dread seize him. This was what Charles had been talking about. Somehow, he knew what lay beyond this door before he'd opened it.

He didn't want to go. But he knew he had to. He'd said as much to Charles. Closing his hand around the knob, Raphael opened the door.

XIII

Raphael was sitting in a waiting room.

He knew it was a waiting room, despite the fact that he'd never been here and the décor was more than a hundred years out of date. He was dressed like he imagined a Victorian gentleman would be, with a waistcoat, slacks, tie, nice shoes, and a pocket watch.

Choosing not to question this turn of events, Raphael got up when the nurse asked him to follow her. She led him into a private examination room, where a doctor gave him a quick once-over before commenting that he'd like to measure the circumference of Raphael's head.

"Why?" Raphael asked.

"We never get to measure them after they come back," the doctor commented offhandedly, reaching for his forceps. "But perhaps you will."

Time sped up. Raphael was on a boat, heading south. He placed the time period as the late nineteenth century. He also placed the story he was currently in, or at least a version of the story: *Heart of Darkness*.

It made sense. If this were Hell, its setting was admirably chosen. He'd tried to tell himself that he was just distracted, or busy, and that he was sure he would like the book more once he got further into it, but no matter what he'd done, he hadn't been able to bring himself to like *Heart of Darkness*. Maybe it was the less-than-subtle undercurrents of easy racism pervading the entire work, or the staggering amount of time Conrad spent describing everything in minute detail. Regardless, Raphael just didn't like it. He suspected, though he had no real basis for this feeling, that this was a crime akin to not feeling bad about the Holocaust, but there it was.

So it was with a vague dread that he found himself, without remembering having crossed the intervening distance, standing before the little cabin along the shore of the Congo River. He opened the door and saw, as he'd expected, the general manager, desperately trying to keep everything organized in the sweltering heat and oppressive humidity.

The general manager looked up at him. "Hello, hello. You must be the fellow they've sent to look for Kurtz."

Raphael didn't remember precisely how this part of the book went, and he had the sinking feeling that it really didn't matter. "Yes," he said, deciding to play along. "I am."

"Good, good. You must realize that Mister Kurtz was our finest. If some ill's befallen him, it's a terrible loss."

Raphael recalled the passages Conrad spent heaping praise upon Kurtz as a paragon of European-ness, vociferating about the man's inestimable worth and standing. It had all been, in his opinion, a blatant attempt at setting the reader up for the fall they would soon discover Kurtz had taken, and it didn't even have the good grace to be underhanded about it. "Yes," he said. "Terrible."

Now he remembered. The boat he was supposed to take upriver had sunk. He was going to have to wait for parts to arrive so he could repair it.

He sat, watching the natives work, shuffling along in their chained lines, carrying things and generally being downtrodden. He felt a kind of vague, fascinated revulsion as he watched their movements. Their gazes were fixed to the ground, their bodies seeming to move in a robotic shuffle which never varied in its pace or gait. Raphael found himself beginning to hate them, which he tried to brush off. If the racist undercurrents in the text had bothered him while he was just *reading* it, he shouldn't feel this way about the people in it. It wasn't right.

But there it was. Raphael found himself hating the natives as they mechanically shuffled up and down the shore, dejected, no spark of life or fire in their eyes, just blind obedience without question or protest. They had been so thoroughly beaten down that they no longer seemed remotely human to him. It was like they were looming up out of the uncanny valley, revolting him on a basic instinctive level with their proximity to humanity without actually achieving it. He kept thinking of Japanese robots with human hair and realistic skin blinking heavy-lidded eyes at him, their lips parting just out of sync with the words they were speaking. That was what he saw here.

Raphael wasn't aware of the passage of time. All he could do was sit there, watching the natives work, hating them and hating himself for hating them. The general manager, too, would occasionally come out to relieve himself or try to talk to him, and his movements also took on an eerie, not-quite-lifelike quality. Raphael began to anticipate his words before he spoke them. Nothing the manager had to say could surprise him. He would nod and make polite responses, but inside he wanted to strangle the man. It wasn't a violent feeling, or an angry one, just a dull urge to make him go away the only way Raphael thought would work.

The clouds drifted by overhead, lazy, almost indolent. The world seemed to be geared toward upsetting Raphael, to making him hate it. The silt-saturated waters of the Congo crawled past in thick eddies; the sun beat down on him, seeming to float perpetually overhead; the sheer humidity of the jungle had him coated in a fine layer of sweat which did nothing to cool him and would not evaporate. It was interminable, sitting here and being only able to watch. Raphael tried to get up more than once, but he found himself unable to summon any strength in his legs. He seemed doomed to sit here on the shore, waiting for parts that might never come to fix a boat he had never seen, on a quest to find a man he personally knew nothing about.

He didn't know how long this went on. Maybe it was just an hour, or it could have been months, as it had been in the book. At long last, however, the parts finally arrived. The next thing Raphael was aware of was being on the ship, the general manager in tow, with a crew of natives. He could tell just by looking at them that they were cannibals; it wasn't something he knew rationally, but rather an instinctive feeling, a deep-rooted sense of ill-being at the bottom of his heart.

The ship made its way up the river. Raphael remembered that they would soon find a hut with a stack of wood, and there would be a note warning them to take the wood but take it cautiously, left by the Russian trader at Kurtz's camp. He also knew that after they took on the wood, they would be surrounded by fog and one of the crew would be killed by natives firing arrows at them from the jungle. The knowledge should have upset him, he thought, but it was like trying to push his way through a solid wall of cotton. It seemed to crowd his thoughts, making it difficult for them to worm their way through his mind. Raphael drifted about the boat as though in a daze, only half-noticing the fearsome native piling coal into the engine.

This was a different feeling than he'd had in the dream with Charles, when he'd known how the story would unfold and been first unwilling and then unable to prevent it. He wasn't in the grip of denial; he knew all these things were going to happen, but he just couldn't bring himself to care. It was like a choking blanket of ennui shrouding his mind and his body. He felt numb. If someone were to leap out and stab him right now, Raphael doubted that he would feel it or even care.

They found the hut and its wood. Raphael could not summon the energy to warn the general manager or the crew about what was going to happen. It just seemed like far too much effort to go to. What did it matter? They were all going to die; it was just a question of how and

when, a question that seemed entirely academic. They took the wood on. The fog descended. The arrows came hurtling out of the jungle around them. Raphael, steering, saw the man next to him take a spear in the side. Raphael looked down at the man, who held the shaft of the spear in a death grip, the blade having vanished after it wounded him. His blood was filling Raphael's shoes, warm and wet. Their eyes met for a long, lingering moment. The man breathed his last, his gaze straying from Raphael's to look at a point somewhere infinitely far away, just past his head.

Other members of the crew showed up. They pronounced the man dead, took his body away.

Raphael felt nothing. It was like looking down at a broken doll.

They found the outpost. Raphael was vaguely aware that somebody was talking to him. It was a man dressed in something like motley; it wasn't motley, because he wasn't actually a jester, but his clothes were awkwardly covered in patches of many colors: blue, yellow, green, red. It exhausted Raphael to watch him move. Most things, it seemed, exhausted him in this place.

"You're here for Kurtz, aren't you?" the Russian asked him.

For the first time in what felt like months, Raphael managed to break through the fog which had been clouding his mind. "Yes," he said. "I am."

"You'd better follow me, then," the Russian said. "I can take you to him."

Raphael nodded. "Isn't there more?" he asked, struggling to form the words. "I mean, I feel like there should be more."

"That was Marlowe's story," the Russian said. "This is yours."

"I'm not sure what that's supposed to mean."

"Don't worry so much about it."

Those words were familiar. Raphael strained his mind. Hadn't someone else said that to him, or something like it? Don't worry so much. Don't think so hard about it.

He was beginning to remember. It felt like he had been here so long, looking for Kurtz, he'd forgotten everything that had come before. He'd been in a waiting room... no, that was still this place. The waiting room had been in Belgium, or at least was supposed to have been, but it was just an extension of this place, this dark continent. No, before he had been in Heaven, and before that he had been back at school, and in a forest temple –

"What the hell's been happening?" Raphael asked, feeling his voice grow stronger. "I almost completely forgot how I even got here or who I was. What *is* this place?"

"The center of your despair," the Russian replied, continuing to walk through the outpost. The natives stared at them as they moved, but now Raphael recognized why he felt an instinctive sense of revulsion: these weren't really natives. They weren't really people. He'd been right to think of them as robots, because they were little more than automatons. The only real person here was himself. Even the Russian moved with a kind of unearthly, stiff articulation, too precise to be human. He looked over his shoulder at Raphael, his head twisting just slightly farther than it should have been able to. "It's difficult to hold onto yourself, isn't it?"

"I'm getting better," Raphael replied. "But why? I've been totally gone for months now. Just drifting through life, watching the world go by and hating all of it because it didn't seem real. Now I know it wasn't real so I wasn't *entirely* unjustified, but still. Why did I remember all of this now?"

"Because you *have* been here for months," the Russian said. "You've been here since before you went to Stoughton, if it exists, and before you crawled into that cave, if *that* exists.

You've just been shutting your time here away, denying it ever happened, so you experienced it all at once. You can only dam the inevitable for so long before the dam bursts, after all. That's why it's the inevitable."

Raphael nodded. "I guess that makes sense. But why *Heart of Darkness*?"

"Didn't your mother tell you not to worry so much about the specifics?"

"Yes, but that doesn't stop me from being curious. Before, people were giving me pretty plausible explanations for what's going on, and they were interesting. I was wondering if you had a similar one."

"No, I don't. This place doesn't need any explanation, Raphael. It's self-evident." The Russian pointed a finger at him. "If you can't figure out that much yourself, then I'm not really sure you should see Kurtz. It might be too hard on you."

"It's fine," Raphael said. "I get it. At least it's pretty internally consistent with the other kinds of things I've been seeing. So, where is Kurtz? I'm thinking that to get out of this place I need to get him on my boat and try to bring him back with me, like in the book."

The Russian stopped in front of a house, if it could be called that; it was little more than four walls and a roof. "He's inside," he said, gesturing past the men standing guard at the entrance.

"Thanks," Raphael said. He walked past the men, who were wielding rifles and both gave him a nod.

Inside, looking thin and pale as death, was his father.

"Raph," he wheezed. "So you came."

"No thanks to you," Raphael said. He couldn't tear his eyes off his father. His blue eyes, which had always had a twinkle in them and conveyed an expression of mischief, were dull and lifeless. His hairline had receded dramatically, giving him a harsh widow's peak. His shirt, which buttoned in the front, hung open, showing his ribcage. "You sent those natives to attack my boat, didn't you?"

"Kurt does it in the book," his father replied. "I figured I should stick to form as long as you were in that funk. Help me up."

Raphael lent his father his arm. The man felt like he weighed next to nothing. As they staggered out into the daylight, Raphael could see the faces of the natives peering out at them from the jungle. One of them, a woman dressed in exquisite tribal finery and looking impressively fierce, ran forward, yelling, "Dave! Dave!"

"Who the hell is that?" Raphael asked, but even as the words left his mouth he recognized her. It was the woman his father had been seeing when he and Raphael's mother had been divorced. Francine, he thought. That was it. Francine. She looked very different in the tribal getup than she had in the picture he'd seen on his Dad's Facebook, where she'd been wearing a camisole, very tight jeans, and stiletto heels. Raphael felt his face burn as his mixed feelings regarding the natives began to make a very unpleasant kind of sense.

"Ignore her," his father groaned. "Let's just get on the fucking boat."

Raphael was more than willing to oblige; Francine stood there lobbying invective at his father as they staggered onto the boat, then set off back down the Congo.

"Thank Christ," his father wheezed as Raphael helped him into a cabin. "I thought I'd never be able to get rid of that woman."

"You certainly didn't seem like you wanted to get rid of her when you divorced Mom over her," Raphael said.

“That was different, Raph. It wasn’t really about Francine. Your mother and I had been growing apart for a very long time, you know. It’s the sort of thing that happens when you realize you’re not really in love anymore and there’s no easy way to fix things. There’s never an easy way to fix things.”

“You still should have tried harder,” Raphael said, seating himself opposite his father. The cabin was small, very cramped, but there was room for Raphael to sit down on a chair and his father to seat himself on the cot. “I was sixteen and just because I was mature for my age didn’t mean that I didn’t blame myself. I thought about every time I’d been irritating or thrown a tantrum in public and I wondered if I’d contributed in some way. It’s stereotypical and stupid for kids to think that a divorce is their fault, but I still thought it was, dammit. Just like I thought Mom’s death was my fault.”

His father nodded. “I understand, Raph. I sympathize, believe me. It was different since I was, you know, directly involved in the divorce, but as much as I wanted to pin it all on your mother, I knew it was my fault too. I mean, Francine *was* there. There was no way I could excuse to myself what I was doing.”

“Didn’t she at least try to stop you?” Raphael asked, feeling his hatred for the natives – for Francine – beginning to flare again. “If she really cared about you, Dad, wouldn’t she at least suggest to you that you try to save your fucking marriage? Isn’t that what selfless love is about?”

“Love isn’t selfless, Raph. Love is possibly the most selfish and jealous thing there is.” His father coughed again, a long, wheezing cough which seemed to spring up from somewhere deep inside him. “No, she didn’t try to stop me. She wanted me to break up with your mother. She hated her. It sounds cruel, especially considering Francine was really a very nice person, but it’s the truth. She couldn’t stand your mother, not just because she knew I went back home to her every time we said goodbye. There was just a personality conflict there that I think has to be ordained by the stars or something. They just did *not* gel in the slightest.”

“So you’re saying it’s not her fault that she didn’t try to stop you?”

“I’m not saying that at all. I’m just laying out how things were for you in as unambiguous a manner as I can make them. Really, the only person who’s blameless in the whole affair is you, just because you didn’t know what was going on until it had already happened. You were always closer to your mother than you were to me, so I figured you would naturally side with her. I wasn’t surprised when you told me to go fuck myself. I understood.”

“Glad to hear it,” Raphael said only half-jokingly. “Because I meant it.”

“I know you did. You may enjoy sarcasm, Raph, but you rarely say a thing without meaning it. That’s one of the things I’ve always liked about you. One of the things I tried to encourage in you. The world needs more men who aren’t afraid to speak their minds.”

“I don’t know about that. It just seems to come back and bite me in the ass.” Raphael thought back to the fiction workshops he’d had. “An awful lot, actually. I haven’t really been making any friends.”

“You never were very good at that.” His father laid down on the cot, the very act of breathing now seeming laborious for him to perform. “Listen, Raph. The fact that I’m here in your own version of this story means something. I think you know what that is, and I think I have a pretty good idea, myself. So go ahead and leave me here. Go up on the deck and steer the boat or something. Catch the general manager going through my papers. Do whatever. It’ll be over shortly.”

Raphael nodded. “I’ll see you later, Dad.”

“Maybe.”

Raphael headed up to the deck. Instead of steering, however, he went to stand at the prow of the ship, staring down into the murky waters of the Congo below him. What this all meant – well, he thought he had a pretty good idea. Maybe he’d known the things his father had been telling him all along, or maybe that really was his father in there. He certainly hadn’t moved with the stiff, automaton-like qualities of the other people Raphael had seen in this place.

Either way, Raphael waited, staring into the river. Time started to slip past him again, attaining that amorphous quality which had plagued him throughout his many months in this place. He could tell the sun was rising and setting, the heat fluctuated and seethed around his body, but he kept his gaze fixed on the river, trying to ride the movement of time. He stayed there, stubbornly ignoring the rest of the world, until he heard the cabin boy come out and announce it. “Mistah Kurtz – he dead.”

Time sped up. Raphael was still on the boat, the natives were burying his father – Kurtz – in a hole, they very nearly buried him as well but he was back in the city, dealing with legal proceedings, Kurtz’s papers. His mother appeared, then, though he knew it was not the same mother who had told him not to worry so much, who had helped him all those months ago. She meant something else, she was a symbol rather than a person.

He told her his father’s last words had been her name. Rachel Rousseau. She had changed her name back after the divorce, but his father had either forgotten or chose to forget.

Now Raphael was back on a boat, finishing the tale for the other men. He concluded, falling silent, sitting in the pose of a Buddha. Nobody spoke for a long time until the Director said, “We have lost the first of the ebb.”

Raphael opened his eyes then. He watched the men, looking for the narrator who turned his head to look down the Thames and observe that, as it flowed beneath the sky to the ends of the earth, it seemed to lead into a great heart of darkness.

Only one of the men did not attend to his station. He stood there, looking out along the river, his face obscured. Raphael walked over to look at him, but as he moved, he felt his feet begin to propel him of their own accord. He kept walking until he ran straight into the crewman, but there was no resistance, no impact. He slid smoothly into the space where the man was – had been – standing, taking up his position and staring down the Thames.

Now he turned to see Marlow still sitting there, Buddha-like, having finished his tale once and for all. He looked back down the Thames, searching for that heart of darkness at its end. Raphael felt his feet lift off the deck. He began moving along the river, bare inches above the surface. His speed picked up until the water whipping by beneath him was nothing more than a greyish blur. The horizon, rather than remaining a fixed point, seemed to come closer, as though he were flying straight off the edge of the world.

Blackness surrounded him. He came to a halt, cocking his head as the sound of someone crying reached his ears. It was familiar, somehow. He knew it.

Now he opened the door to his dorm room back at his first college. He was sitting on the floor, his back against his desk, holding his head in his hands and crying. His cell phone lay discarded on the floor, its screen showing that he’d received a call from his father which had lasted precisely long enough for his father to tell him that his mother had killed herself.

Raphael wasn’t sure what to do. He stood there, watching himself bawl pathetically into the palms of his hands. At this point, the image didn’t faze him. There was nothing left at this juncture which could frighten or dismay him. Nothing that could make him angry or force him to turn away. He was past all of that.

Even as he thought this, it became clear why he was here. He moved across the room and crouched down next to himself, wrapping his arms around his shoulders. "It's all right," he whispered. "I know it sucks, and it hurts a lot, but it's not your fault. You don't need to go and punish yourself for this. You just need to move on with your life."

A sense of peace, of well-being, washed over him. With a small smile, Raphael stood back up. He headed over to the door, gave himself one last glance, then closed the door behind him as he stepped out into the hall.

He was in no hurry,. He took the stairs one at a time, going at a measured pace. There was no rush. He had all the time in the world.

The mailboxes at this university were in the post office, which was a different building than the university center. He headed over there, admiring the view of the city as he did so. He remembered his mailbox's combination with perfect clarity, despite the fact that he hadn't touched it in months and had hardly ever used it when he still went here.

The letter was inside, as though waiting for him. His mother's seal was on the envelope, bearing the monogram: *her* monogram. He remembered everything clearly now. Raphael broke the seal, then opened the envelope with one quick tear. He retrieved the paper from the envelope, unfolded it. His mother's handwriting greeted him:

Dear Raphael,

By the time you get this letter, I'll be gone. My cancer's back, and it's not going to get any better this time. Arnold's been brought up on charges of embezzlement, so he's not being much help right now either. (Ha.) I always had a feeling, but when you love someone, you tend to overlook their faults.

I know you never liked Arnold, and I'm sorry for that. I didn't want him to drive a wedge between us, but I was a little too stubborn and a little too shortsighted. It's difficult for me to express my exact feelings about this whole matter, but let me just say this: if you want to say 'I told you so' at the funeral, go ahead. I'll be dead, I won't care.

What I do want to say is that you shouldn't blame yourself for this. I've lived a good, full life, and I'd rather go out now while I still have control of my faculties and my body than when I'm a wreck from the treatments and feel like shit all the time. This isn't something I'm doing out of despair, or anger, or any of that. You know I've always believed in the right to choose when one dies, and I'm going to exercise that right now.

I know it's going to hurt for a while. I'm sorry about that. But at this point, it really is inevitable. I've put my affairs in order and left you pretty much everything. I don't expect you'll feel it will make up for the falling-out we've had, but there's not much else I can do. You got your stubbornness from me, after all, and if I were in your position I'd still be pissed off after the fact.

But you're strong, and I know you'll get over it and move on with your life. Be brave. Know that I love you. Tell your father I love him too, still, despite the fact that he's a prick and he has terrible taste in women.

Goodbye.

*Love,
Mom*

Raphael tucked the letter into his pocket, pausing to wipe a tear from his eye with a smile. She'd always had a morbid sense of humor.

There was one more door for him to walk through. He opened it with a firm grip, no hesitation in his mind.

XIV

Raphael woke up.

For a moment, he just stared at the ceiling of his dorm room, not sure exactly what was going on. He looked down at Anton's sleeping form in the bed across the room. The glowing numerals on his desk clock told him it was just after midnight.

He could ask Anton if he remembered everything that had happened later. For now, he knew what he needed to do.

Raphael swung his feet out of bed, dressed himself as quietly as he could, and stole out of the dorm. He headed down the dark and silent streets of Stoughton toward the beach. The city was quiet and the streets mostly deserted, but he caught sight of more than one group of college students gamboling from one bar to another, and he could hear the sound of far-off cars. Everything certainly seemed to be as it should.

The beach was deserted save for a couple he could spot lying on the sand some distance away, obviously engaged in lovemaking. Raphael shook his head; beaches were dirty, hardly the ideal place to be doing that kind of thing. Almost as bad as doing it in a hot tub.

Not that it was any of his business. His destination lay in the other direction. He walked along the beach until the cave once more loomed before him.

It was dark inside, but Raphael could see by the light of the moon that the cave only extended a few feet back before dead-ending in a solid wall of rock. He moved up to it, ran his fingers along it. It certainly felt real. Whatever incredulity he might have entertained seemed to pale before the simple, solid reality of that rock. It was real, he knew it. *This* was real.

Or at least as real as it was going to get.

Raphael left the cave behind, heading back into town. Rather than return to his dorm room, he headed to Lissa's building. He still had the key she'd given him, so he let himself into the darkened apartment, then slowly opened Lissa's door.

She was also asleep in her bed, legs tangled in her sheets as though she'd been trying to run in her sleep. Raphael moved to sit at the edge of the bed, reaching out to shift an errant strand of hair out of her face. Lissa was a light sleeper; she came awake almost instantly, her breath hitching for a moment. "Raph?"

"Yeah," Raphael whispered. "Lissa, do you remember what just happened?"

Lissa sat up, looking confused. "Yes. Kind of. I know we went somewhere, and all kinds of fucked-up stuff happened. It's like a dream, though. I remember images, and feelings, but the words aren't there. I just know –" she scooted closer to him so she could put an arm around him – "that whatever happened, it was hard for you, but you did it anyway."

"Do you remember flying me through Heaven to meet God?"

"I didn't, but then you said it and it felt familiar. Déjà vu. Raph, what exactly *did* happen, anyway? I know Anton was there too."

"A whole lot of fucked-up stuff," Raphael laughed quietly. "But we managed to get out of it okay, or at least as okay as I'm ever going to be. Thanks."

She hugged him, hard, and held him there for a long time. Raphael listened to the sound of their breathing in the darkness, concentrating on the sound's texture, the way the timing of their breaths aligned and diverged and aligned again. It seemed like that was the only thing in the world, the two of them breathing.

Lissa pulled him into bed and made her intentions clear in no uncertain terms. Raphael reveled in the feel of her, in the contact; he'd almost forgotten what that felt like, having spent so

many months in that quasi-Africa, alone and hating everything around him. He felt alive again, and he supposed that was all that really mattered.

They lay there for a while afterward, just listening to the sound of each other's breathing. Finally, Lissa whispered, "Raph?"

"Yes?" he said.

"Do you love me?"

"Can I have a second to think about it?"

Lissa laughed softly. "Okay. You're being a prick." She kissed him again and pulled him closer to her. "Now I know everything's back to normal."

* * *

"This story," Anna said, "is about elves trying to figure out who they're going to fuck at a big party." She said it with a note of triumph in her voice; it was vindictive and not entirely unwarranted. Raphael sat across the table from her, carefully maintaining a neutral expression.

"Yes," he said. "It is."

"You spend so much time ragging on all of our stuff, and this is the shit you bring in?" Anna scoffed. "I mean, Jesus!"

"Anna," Professor Lopez said, his tone as mild as ever. "Whatever Raphael may have said about other people's stories is not relevant here. We are only discussing his story."

"Fine," Anna said, evidently determined to get some kind of satisfaction out of this. "First: why are they elves? I don't see how it matters at all."

"Do humans have a specieswide masquerade lasting three days where they can let down all of their emotional walls and just cut loose?" Raphael asked. "No. We don't have anything like that, except maybe office Christmas parties, and those don't last more than a few hours."

"But couldn't they just be humans in a different world celebrating this festival or whatever it is? Why do they have to be elves?"

"The festival came about as a direct result of the strict emotional control these elves have to maintain at all times," Raphael explained. "This is their yearly outlet for all the frustrations and desires they usually set aside for the greater good. Unless every human being can maintain the same level of control, and we can't, then there's no need for something like this, because all the cutting-loose and wild irresponsibility is going to happen anyway. They're just more disciplined than us."

The rest of the class made murmuring noises, which could mean they felt he was being a smartass or that they were agreeing with him – it was difficult to read them when he was keeping unflinching eye contact with Anna, who was beginning to wilt under the strain.

"But maybe if they needed to be that way to survive in this world –"

"But if humans in this world had such strict control, they wouldn't really be human anymore," Raphael said. "Besides, I don't want to write about humans. Elves just interest me more. Is that such a bad thing?"

"It's not literary –"

"Anna," Professor Lopez said. "This is a beginning workshop. We're here to learn to tell a story, not debate the literary merits of a particular genre. As it stands, Raphael's story, though it has a few pacing issues and awkward sentences which I've outlined, presents the status quo, breaks it, and shows the characters dealing with the break in the best way they can. In the

end, they have been changed by the experience. That, right there, is a story. Unless you have some specific criticism, I think we're going to move on to our next story."

Anna, unsurprisingly, had no specific criticism.

As the class filed out twenty minutes later, Raphael blew out a long breath and smiled at Lissa, who had once again snagged the coveted seat at the end of the table. She returned the smile. "Want to get lunch?"

"If you don't mind, Lissa," Professor Lopez said, "I was hoping to borrow Raphael for a few minutes. Would you mind waiting outside?"

"Not at all," Lissa replied. "I'll see you in a few, Raph."

Raphael nodded, watched her leave. He turned to Professor Lopez. "What's up, Professor?"

"I wanted to say I'm proud of you for bringing this story in," Professor Lopez said. "It took courage, particularly after the way you've savaged your classmates' work." He slid a copy of Raphael's story across the table to him. "I've marked some corrections and possible changes to the story on there. I hope you find it helpful."

"Thanks, Professor." Raphael tucked the story inside his folder. "I appreciate it."

"So do I," Professor Lopez said. "Though let me ask you something, Raphael. What made you decide to bring this in?"

Raphael shrugged. "A lot of things. I just came to terms with some issues that have been dogging me for a while. I realized I've been kind of a prick and decided that it was time to start acting like a human being again. Just because I was hurting didn't give me an excuse to be a bastard."

"I'm glad to hear that." Professor Lopez leaned back in his chair, putting his feet up on the table. Raphael frowned at the uncharacteristic gesture, then felt his jaw drop open at what the man said next. "You've come a long way since you told me 'you are a cat.'"

Raphael just stared for a second before recovering his wits. "You."

Charles laughed. "Me."

"Why the hell are you Professor Lopez? Or why the hell is Professor Lopez you? I'm not sure which way it actually is."

"Does it matter?" Charles asked.

Despite himself, Raphael laughed. "No," he said. "I guess it doesn't."

Charles crossed his arms, a gleam appearing in his eye. "That seems to be a recurring theme around here. So, Raphael. Do you really no longer care if you're crazy or dying or perhaps yourself the figment of someone else's imagination?"

"I mean, I'll always wonder." Raphael stood up, tucking his folder into his backpack. "Too much crazy shit happened for me to just gloss over it completely. Did I really spend months in Africa waiting for a boat? Did Lissa, Anton and I explore the lost forest temple or some shit and also end up in a crazy Not-Stoughton where all our wishes were granted? Am I really even having this conversation right now? They're fun thought experiments, but ultimately I think what matters is that I dealt with my issues and life, as far as I can tell, is back to normal. I'm basically okay with that."

"Especially considering nobody is missing or dead," Charles said. "I saw Sarah walking with Anna earlier today. They were probably talking about what an awful person you are."

Raphael grinned. "Nothing I can do about that." He hesitated. "What about Amanda Perkins? Her up and vanishing was the whole reason I had disappearances on the brain when I went into the cave and wished general misfortune on Anna. Is she okay?"

“Oh, she’s fine,” Charles said airily. “She met a boy over the Internet and flew off to have a tryst with him without telling anyone for fear of public ridicule. Right now she’s in New York, deliriously happy and ready to jump headfirst into an ultimately doomed relationship.”

“So she was a red herring the entire time,” Raphael said. “That’s a pretty bitchy thing to do.”

Charles gave him a shocked look. “You speak as though it’s my fault.”

“I feel like a lot of things are your fault. In general. You might have been my guide, but you were also just kind of a meddler. Giving me weird allegorical dreams and shit.” Raphael shouldered his backpack. “Maybe I’m in the Matrix right now, and you’re a terrible machine intelligence who’s decided to make me its personal plaything out of spite or to figure out some bullshit about the human spirit.”

“You give me far too much credit. I don’t care one whit about the human spirit. I’m not even sure if it exists.”

“Neither am I. But I’ve decided to be sure, so. Yeah.”

“You’ve decided, therefore it is?”

“No, I’ve decided, and therefore I believe it. It doesn’t matter if it exists or not. The important thing is that I believe it does, so I can get on with my damn life.”

Charles raised an eyebrow. “I feel like that is some kind of ultimate, wide-ranging sophistry.”

“We work with what we’ve got.” Raphael patted him on the shoulder. “Anyway. It’s been fun, Charles, but my girlfriend’s waiting for me. When I come back for class, you’re just going to be Professor Lopez again, right? You’re going to deny ever having had this conversation?”

“What conversation?” Charles asked. “I choose to believe we never spoke about anything like this. After all, I’m just a cat. As we all know, cats don’t speak.”

“Right. See you around, you crazy bastard.” Raphael headed for the door.

“No,” Charles laughed. “I don’t think you will.”

* * *

Raphael and Lissa sat, eating sandwiches, on the grass just outside the university center.

“Anton said he’d be coming,” Lissa said, casting her gaze around, “but I don’t see him anywhere. You think maybe we should have told him exactly where outside the university center we were going to be?”

“It’s not like we’re hard to spot,” Raphael said, indicating with a sweeping gesture the rest of the mostly-empty field of grass. “He’ll be along whenever he feels like it. It’s Anton. He might be having random crazy sex right now for no good reason.”

“Doesn’t that make you jealous of him?” Lissa asked. “As a guy, I mean?”

“Not really. Random sex isn’t really the kind I’m interested in. I prefer to know the person I’m getting in bed with – I mean, really know her.” Raphael smiled at Lissa. “Like we know each other.”

“I’d hope we know each other,” Lissa scoffed. “After all the shit we just went through – Jesus Christ, I can barely remember half of it and I still feel weirded out. You had some *major* fucking issues, Raph.”

“Of course I did. I never do anything small.” Raphael winked at her.

“Ugh. I’d hope that a side effect of turning your mind inside-out or whatever the fuck would be that you’d be less insufferable.”

“That’s impossible. It’s part of my charm, it’ll never go away.”

Lissa gave him a smack on the arm. “You’re so full of shit. That’s why your eyes are brown, you know. Because of all the shit lurking behind them.”

“It’s lurking now, huh? Like some kind of predator or something?”

“Yes. A big old shit predator.”

“That’s fantastic. This is really helping set the mood for my lunch.”

Lissa smiled at him. “But you know what I’m sure about?”

“What?” Raphael asked.

“I’m sure that it’s a good thing we went through what we did. Because I learned a lot about you. You feel things really deeply, Raph, and you try not to let that show, because you don’t want anybody to know that you’re actually a big softie with human emotions. You’d rather everybody just think of you as this walking snark machine who dispenses nothing but pure wit.”

“That’s a cool image.”

“Shush. The point is that however you *wish* people would see you, you’re still you. I knew there was a reason I liked you. Once we cut through all the bullshit, it came down to the fact that deep down, you’re a good guy. Even if you didn’t believe it yourself.” Lissa’s smile widened. “That’s all I ever really wanted from you, Raph. For you to be a good guy. And now that you know you can be, maybe we won’t have quite as many arguments.”

“Are you kidding?” Raphael asked. “I love our arguments. They’re the whole reason I started going out with you.”

“Raph. Be serious.”

Raphael sighed. “All right. Being serious.” He wrapped an arm around Lissa’s shoulders and leaned his head against hers. “I’m glad you came, too, because without your help, I don’t think I would have made it out of there. I’d still be sitting in Not-Stoughton, playing video games, writing bad stories and pissing away my life.”

“Not-Stoughton?” Lissa asked. “It sounds familiar. I just – the details aren’t clicking.”

Raphael smiled. “Don’t worry about it.” He planted a kiss on her forehead. “Thanks to you and Anton, I’m not there anymore.”

Before Lissa could make another cutting remark, her phone began to ring. She jumped, surprised, before she came to her senses and answered it. “Hello? Anton, it’s not hard. We’re just to the south of the university center. On the big fucking lawn. Jesus, are you blind or something? Hold on.” She moved the phone away from her mouth. “I’m going to go find him,” she said, giving Raphael a kiss on the cheek. “Be right back.”

“Sure thing,” Raphael said. “I’ll be here.”

She gave him another smile before she got up and stalked off toward the university center, cursing into her phone at Anton. Raphael watched her go, feeling a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. He took another bite of his sandwich, then set it down on its paper plate, not wanting to finish his lunch before Lissa got back with Anton.

Raphael absentmindedly put his hands in his pockets, then paused when he encountered something there. He removed his right hand from his pocket, bringing with it a folded-up piece of paper.

For a moment he just sat there, considering the paper. He remembered putting the letter from his mother in his pocket; this must have been it. But even as he moved to unfold the paper,

Raphael hesitated. He had no way of knowing if whatever was written on the paper was the same thing as what he'd read before. Raphael stared at the paper for a long minute, trying to come to a decision. On the one hand, he desperately wanted to know for sure that what had happened had actually happened. He'd come to peace with the answers he'd found, and it was certainly easy enough to say that he didn't care when there was no easy way of ascertaining if it was true or not, but this –

A strong wind picked up, ruffling his hair and making the grass stir around him. Raphael looked up at the clouds, watching them progress steadily along their paths through the sky. They didn't know where they were going, or why; they just let the wind carry them.

Raphael let go of the paper. The wind caught it, tossing it high into the air, before carrying it away.

He saw Lissa and Anton heading in his direction, the latter making grandiose gestures which he guessed were supposed to communicate exasperation. With a smile, Raphael waved at them.

This was not a beginning or an end, he thought. It was *now*, and that was good enough for him.

Fin