

Where My Father's Paintings Went

The theater is dark except for the flash of lights that hang from thin wires and it shakes whenever the air moves. The room smells of dust and wet paint. Cables lie in long black lines where Dominic stands still.

“Nick?” Vincent’s voice sounds small in the wide room.

“You came early, huh?” He says as he steps into the thin light. His shirt is stained with paint.

“Hey! Watch your step. It’s a mess.” He calls.

Dominic looks down. Wires cross under his boots. Some are cut.

“They left it like this? Are these wires safe?” He asks.

“They’re dead,” Vincent says quickly. “Should be. Just don’t touch anything.”

Dominic steps closer to the stage. A light rig hangs low and tilts at an odd angle. One chain is slack and it looks ready to drop.

“Vic,” he says, “this one’s loose.”

“Leave it,” Vincent says at once. “We’ll get someone.”

“It’s going to fall...” he replies. “I’ll just steady it.”

He reaches up anyway. His hand closes around the metal frame. Suddenly, his world snaps white as the current rushes to him.

The loud spark was so sudden. His arm jerks straight and when he tries to pull back, he cannot.

“Vic—” he barely calls.

Across the room, a bitter smell cuts through the paint and dust. Like burning cloth—burning skin.

“Nick?” Through the white glare he sees Dominic.

Vincent drops the tools in his hands and runs. His boots pound against the stage each step.

He pulls him around the waist. The moment he touches him, the current leaps. The lights overhead burst—glass shatters. Sparks rain down in hot white lines.

Vincent’s body slams stiff as if the floor has grabbed him too.. Dominic’s knees give out. His head hits the floor as his grip on the metal breaks.

Vincent falls beside him. He rolls onto his back—gasping. His hands twitch without stopping. His palms are red and already blistering—the skin burns where the heat has passed through.

“Nick...” he whispers. His voice is thin.

Dominic’s eyes are open. They stare at nothing. He cannot hear him anymore.

“Hey, get up,” Vincent says. “Come on. Get up.”

He tries to crawl toward him but his arms shake too hard.

“Help!” someone shouts from far away. “Oh, god.”

“Call someone!” The voice echoes through the room.

Vincent’s vision blurs and the last thing he hears is feet running toward them. Then, instantly his body sinks back to the floor. The room fades before his name does.

My arm rests on the bed like it does not belong to me. I watch it. It does not move.

“Vince,” he says, “how does it feel today?” Dr. Robert stands near the window, reading my chart.

“Uhm... I don’t feel much.”

He nods once then takes my hand carefully.

“I’m going to press here,” he says.

He presses along my wrist. I see it happen but I do not feel it.

“Anything?” he asks,

“No...” I say.

He moves higher, near the elbow. A dull spark runs up my arm.

“Yes,” I say. “A... a little.”

“That’s good. The nerves are responding. Slowly.” He thoughtfully folds his hands.

“You experienced a severe electrical injury. The current traveled through your arm and chest. There is significant nerve damage.”

“Permanent?” I ask.

“It could be temporary,” he says. “Nerves can be stubborn. But they can also be brave. You may regain movement in your hand.” He says,

I look at my hand again. I was once known for these hands. They held brushes. I close my fingers with my other hand and feel nothing answer back.

“You’ve been here for four weeks,” he says. “Your body is healing. The rest of you... that will take longer.”

“I... I’m fine.” I say.

“Your brother... You haven’t spoken much about him.” His word cling on my shoulder.

“I wish I know what to say.” I keep my face still.

“Was he important to you?” He asks.

“He was better than me... He worked harder.” I say, “he doesn’t care... about applause.” I mumble.

“And how did that make you feel?” He asks.

“It made sense at the time. Now... it doesn't matter.”

“Fame is a visitor,” he says. “It comes loudly but stays briefly. It leaves like a bullet.” He sighs softly.

“When you're discharged today, you may need help—medical or otherwise—you call me. If you need company, you call.”

He stands and offers his hand. I cannot take it with my right. I use my left.

“Thank you.” I say, he smiles.

—

I walk toward Guggenheim Museum where we used to come when we were young.

I pull my coat tight and wrap a scarf high around my face. A cap low over my eyes. In the crowd, I am no one.

The people gather inside near the front display—cameras flash. There is a large banner hanging above—a new name—the famous artist of the season.

Once, my work hung in that very place—my name spoken as if it will last.

My arm aches with each step. Halfway up, I stop. Dominic's work is still here.

A small exhibition room. His masterpieces hang boldly on the wall—its colors is alive. He painted like he was not afraid of being forgotten.

I press my sleeve against my eyes but tears come anyway.

Fame fades. Lights burn out. But the loss stays. It settles into the nerves. Into the bone. Into the quiet space where applause used to echo.

I keep my head down as I walk past the stalls. I rehearse on how I'll pretend not to hear people whispering behind my back.

I wait for that.

I pass the crowd. The bakery. I expect stares—whispers. But no one does.

It hits me slowly.

They forget easily. Whatever I am. It's over. I'm old news. I almost laugh.

“Wow,” I mutter. “That's fast.”

I stop at the pharmacy stall. The pharmacist doesn't recognize me. Or maybe he does and doesn't care. I ask for the medicine—he hands it over without hesitation.

No questions. Just coins exchanged and a paper bag passed across the counter.

When I leave, no one notices.

I walk home with the paper bag tucked under my arm. It feels heavier than it should.

Along the streets, I try not to think about how easily the world keeps spinning without me.

“Vincent!”

I freeze.

Gilbert jogs toward me through the crowd—hair perfectly combed, like he measures each strand.

“I look for you,” he says.

“That’s rare.”

“Yes. I calculate the probability of finding you along your usual route home. It is high.”

“Calculate?”

“Approximately,” he corrects.

He suddenly reaches forward and takes the bag from me, holding it carefully, like it contains something fragile.

The relief is immediate. Embarrassing and immediate.

“I can do it,” I mutter.

“Yes,” he says evenly. “But you are experiencing visible distress.”

“I am not.”

“You are.”

My arms throb, now empty. I curl my fingers slightly, trying to hide the stiffness as we start walking again.

“I went to the museum yesterday,” I say after a while, then grimace.

“Oh.” He nods seriously. “For leisure or emotional processing?”

“Dominic loves that place.” I huff a quiet laugh.

“They have a painting I read about,” Gilbert says, clearing his throat.

“A painting?”

“It depicts a white house. Very plain. The artist is anonymous. No signature.”

“So?”

“So,” he says carefully, stepping around a crate of melons, “people find it disturbing. It feels... isolated. Like it exists without permission.”

I look ahead at the crowd moving around us.

“The house looks appealing. Yet inaccessible,” he continues. “It reminds me of you.”

I stop walking. “That’s the worst comparison I receive.”

“It is not an insult,” he says quickly, adjusting his glasses. “You appear composed. But I suspect entry is restricted.”

I stare at him. Then, against my will, I laugh—real laughter, sharp and surprising.

“There is a small gallery exhibit near the square this weekend,” he says. “You should come.”

I glance at him. He is completely serious.

“Why? You don’t even care about galleries.”

“Correct.”

“Then why invite me?”

“Because you are alone.” He shrugs awkwardly.

The honesty makes my chest tighten.

“Gilbert.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t need a gallery.”

“Understood.”

“I don’t need mysterious white houses.”

“Noted.”

I hesitate. The paper bag crinkles slightly in his grip.

“I just... need help carrying groceries.” My voice drops.

He blinks.

“So,” I add, quieter now, “can you walk with me here sometimes?”

He studies me like I ask him to solve an equation.

“Weekly?” he asks.

“If you want.”

“Yes. I can allocate that time.” He nods slowly.

“You don’t have to make it sound scheduled.”

“It is scheduled. Consistency improves friendship,” he says as if clarifying a term.

The word settles between us.

The shouting, the bargaining, the clatter of carts—it all continues. But for a moment, the world feels less empty.

The fame, the applause, the brief attention—it’s already gone. But someone is still here.

And somehow, that feels more permanent than any spotlight ever does.

I tell Gilbert I will not go.

“I don’t care about the painting,” I say. “It’s old. It’s pointless.”

I lie well.

And there it is.

The white house under a pale sky. The door slightly open—or perhaps that is only shadow.

No signature. No history. The label beneath it is almost apologetic:

‘Artist unknown.’

The painting is plain, but it makes me feel... something.

Not joy. Not grief.

A stirring. Faint. Like a match striking in another room.

I leave before it grows.

On the way home, a billboard leans over the street.

‘National Artist Competition.’

Gold letters. Young faces. Bright colors.

I do not slow down. I keep walking.

At home, I went to Dominic’s room. I push it open.

His canvas leans against the wall, an unfinished painting of sky waiting for weather.

I sit. I arrange everything carefully. Palette. Water. Cloth.

My right hand trembles before I even touch the brush. It slips.

Pain travels up my arm, slow and deliberate. My fingers do not close.

“Move,” I whisper.

They do not.

I try again. The brush falls. The sound is small, but it breaks something large inside me.

I used to begin without thinking. Now even the beginning refuses me.

There is no image. Only blankness.

I gather the brushes. The paints. The canvases. All of it.

I carry them to the garage.

I stop twice before walking out the door.

The cafeteria’s trays clattering, chairs scraping, someone laughing to a joke not even funny.

I sit across from Gilbert with a bowl of soup growing cold between my hands.

I tell myself this is simple. My fingers close around the spoon. They tremble immediately.

“You are holding your spoon incorrectly,” Gilbert says.

“I’m holding it,” I answer.

“Incorrectly,” he repeats.

I attempt the motion again. My hand shakes harder, as if resisting instruction.

The spoon falls.

Neither of us speaks for a second.

“The damage to your arm is not merely muscular,” Gilbert says finally. “Movement requires signal transmission. Yours is... disrupted.”

I stare at the thin film forming on the surface of the soup.

“So it’s broken,” I say.

“Temporarily impaired,” he corrects. “Possibly long-term. The prognosis is unclear.”

He pauses.

“Neural pathways can reconfigure. With effort,” he adds, almost kindly.

Effort.

I flex my fingers over the tray. They tingle—present, but uncooperative.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say.

Gilbert studies me as if I am an unfamiliar specimen. I give a small smile. It feels rehearsed.

“It’s just a hand,” I whisper.

But it isn’t. Something else has gone quiet.

I used to see color everywhere. In the shine of spilled juice. In the way sunlight catches in Gilbert’s hair when he talks too long about science and forgets to blink.

Now the cafeteria looks bleached. Like someone washes it once too often.

Gilbert slides the bowl slightly closer to himself.

“May I?” he asks.

I hesitate. Then nod. He holds it out to me—not feeding me, not quite.

It is a strange thing—to lose not only the ability to move, but the desire to try.

Art is a habit. A reflex. The only honest part of me.

Now, I can only see white.

And it is not clean.

The white house returns to me then. A house no one claims. A painting without a painter.

I wonder who stands before it first. Who loses enough to paint something so empty.

Perhaps the painter's hands fail him too. Perhaps he paints the house he cannot enter.

The curtains in his house remain closed for eight days. I count them.

On the ninth morning, I come to his door—it's unlocked. Of course, it is.

The room is as bad as I expected: clothes on the floor—dishes piled up—papers strewn.

Vincent sits on the sofa, left hand useless in its bandage, right hand holding the remote.

“You look,” I say carefully, “statistically worse.”

He smiles. “I'm fine.”

This is inaccurate. His room is intolerable.

I set the food down and begin restoring order. It is not kindness. It is necessity. Chaos irritates the mind.

“You don't have to,” he says, distant.

“I do,” I reply.

I finish with the cleaning and sit at the table across from him. The food's still warm—steak, eggs, potatoes.

We eat in silence, his hands slow and stiff on the cutlery. His injured hand hasn't fully healed yet. I'm not sure if he's trying to act like it hasn't affected him or if it genuinely hurts more than he admits.

Afterward, Vincent distracts himself with nonsense—anything but thinking.

I grab the remote and switch it to the news.

“It's depressing,” he says. “All this shit happening in the world...”

“Oh, well! Movies don't help. You become more depressed. Then unproductive. Then worse.”

He exhales. “I'm not trying to be productive.”

“That's what I'm talking about.” I say.

I leave the news on.

A headline breaks. A governor caught for child trafficking, exploiting people for profit. It's disgusting. Politics—dirty hands everywhere.

“Typical,” Vincent says, his mouth curving faintly. “They're all the same.”

“That's not true,” I protest. “Politics is a system. Systems are flawed because people are flawed. That doesn't mean improvement is impossible.”

He looks at me and shrugs.

“Uh... you hate politics.”

“Yes,” I say. “But hatred is not analysis.”

“And you think the system works.”

“I think,” I correct, “that abandoning it guarantees failure.”

He turns his eyes back to the screen.

“Why did od create those,” he whispers. “Why does he allow all this...”

I look at him, but I can't offer any answer because I don't believe there's one.

“Don't look at me like that,” Vincent says. “I don't expect you to have the answers.”

No, of course, he doesn't.

I stand and check my watch.

“Tomorrow,” I continue, “we'll take a walk.”

He doesn't argue, even though I know he doesn't want to. No protest. Not even irritation.

“Fine,” he says, voice flat. “Where?”

“We’ll go to that gallery exhibit you’ve been avoiding. You’ll thank me later.”

He blinks.

On the television, the news report disappears. Advertisements flash. Vincent watches the screen.

“Do you think people can change?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say.

He turns to me. “Why?”

“Because if they cannot,” I answer carefully, “then none of this has structure. And I prefer a universe with structure.”

He considers this.

I gather my coat. As I reach the door, he speaks again, softer.

“Uh... Gilbert.”

“Yes?”

“If there is a God... do you think He’s confused too?”

I pause.

“I hope so,” I say at last. “It would make Him more understandable.”

I stop at the door. Gilbert stands a few steps ahead of me.

“Vincent,” he says, “this is the entrance.”

“I can see that.”

“Then why are you not entering?” He says.

“I’m thinking.”

“About what?”

“Whether I should,” I say.

Gilbert steps inside—his eyes narrow.

Then a man approaches us.

“Good evening, gentleman,” he says. “First time here?”

His voice is warm. I already feel tired.

“Yes,” I say.

“I’m Geoffrey,” he says.

“Vincent,” I reply.

“Ah. Vincent.” He nods. “And you?”

He looks at Gilbert.

“Gilbert Wallace,” Gilbert says immediately. “I am here accompanying Vincent. Vincent used to paint.”

My stomach tightens.

“Used to?”

Gilbert nods.

“Yes. He stopped after his career collapsed.”

I close my eyes for half a second.

“Gilbert,” I whisper.

“Yes?”

“That wasn’t necessary.”

“But he asked,” he whisper.

Geoffrey looks back at me.

“So you were an artist?”

“I was,” I say.

“Interesting. People rarely stop.”

He studies me for a moment.

“Would you like to see the exhibit?”

“Yes.” Gilbert answers before I can speak.

Geoffrey gestures into the hall.

We walk among the paintings.

“This one is about distance,” Geoffrey says, pointing at a wide landscape. “The artist painted it after the war.”

We stop in front of a large canvas. The painting burns with color—deep blues and violent gold.

“This one won the national award last month.” Geoffrey says.

Before he can continue, a woman approaches him quickly.

“Geoffrey,” she says, “they need you at the reception table.”

He sighs lightly.

“Duty calls.”

He turns back to me.

“Vincent, we’re hosting a small art show next week. Local painters, collectors, critics.”

He pauses.

“You should come.”

I look at the floor.

“I’m not sure.”

“I’m rooting for you,” he smiles once more and walks away.

The room grows quiet around me. Gilbert says nothing.

For a while we just walk.

We stop before a portrait—A man. His eyes are steady—proud.

Suddenly, someone steps beside me.

“It’s Senator Arthur Kings.”

I glance at her. She wears a simple uniform and white gloves.

“He funded orphanages across the country,” she continues. “Saved thousands of children.”

The senator never asked to be admired. Yet people admire him anyway. I spent most of my life wanting that attention.

“Did he?” I smile.

“Yes,” she continue, “he believes children bring hope.”

Suddenly I realize something—Gilbert is gone.

I turn.

“Excuse me,” I say.

She nods politely.

I walk faster now. Through one room. Then another.

My irritation rises like heat.

And there he is—outside.

He sits on a bench beside the entrance.

“You left.”

He looks up calmly.

“Yes.”

“You dragged me here.”

“Correct.”

“And then you abandoned the gallery.”

“I did not abandon it,” he says. “I exited.”

“Why?”

“There are too many people inside.”

I rub my forehead.

“You knew there would be people.”

“Yes,” Gilbert says. “But knowing something conceptually and experiencing it physically are different conditions.”

I sit beside him.

“Did you enjoy it?”

I think of the paintings. Then Geoffrey’s invitation.

“No,” I say.

“That is unfortunate. I specifically selected this activity for your emotional benefit.” He says.

I almost laugh.

Dr. Robert presses lightly along my wrist. The pain climbs up my arm.

“What do you feel?” he asks.

“Nothing.”

“Vincent.”

“Maybe a little soreness,” I say.

“You’d rather lose a hand than lose your pride,” he murmurs.

“Hands are overrated.” I shrug.

“You make paintings with them.”

“I used to.”

Robert leans back in his chair.

“If you keep it like this, you might lose mobility.”

I nod, pretending to listen. My eyes wander toward the door.

And then—I see her.

The girl from the exhibit. She walks past the hallway. Her face is balanced. The kind painters spend years trying to capture.

“Vincent.”

Robert keeps talking behind me. He doesn’t even glance into the hallway, as if the girl walking there isn’t worth noticing.

I stand.

“Where are you going?” he says.

I'm already halfway to the door.

"Vincent," he calls.

"I'll come back!"

"You never come back!" He continues, "If you tear the ligament again, don't come blaming me!"

I step into the hallway. She's almost at the corner.

Should I say hello? No, that's weird.

Okay... I'll regret this.

Don't be weird. Just walk normally.

I walk past her.

Then I stop.

"What a coincidence," I say awkwardly.

She turns.

"Hey," she says. "You're the man from the exhibit."

I nod politely.

“Vincent.”

She smiles.

“I’m Elle.”

She tilts her head, studying me.

“You look like you escaped from a doctor.”

“I prefer the word ‘leaving’.”

“Your bandage says otherwise.”

I glance at my hand.

“Oh. This?”

She gently grabs my wrist before I can hide it.

Her hand is colder than I expect, like she came in from winter.

“That doesn’t look like leaving,” she says.

“It’s nothing serious.”

She rotates my wrist gently. Pain sparks behind my eyes. I keep my face still.

“You’re pretending that didn’t hurt,” she says.

“I’m not pretending.”

“You definitely are.”

I smile a little.

“Maybe a little.”

She laughs quietly.

“So, you paint?” she says.

“I used to.”

She releases my hand and gestures toward the hallway.

“Wanna walk with me?”

“Where?”

“The exit.”

“Oh.”

We walk together.

I watch every detail. The nose, the lips—the symmetry is remarkable.

“Your hand isn’t broken. It’s afraid to move,” she says.

“Sometimes hands forget what they can do.”

I nod slowly.

She lifts my hand and folds it gently into my palm.

“Open your hand.”

I do.

“Now close. Slowly.”

I follow.

We repeat the motion.

“Rotate your wrist.”

I try. The movement warms my fingers slightly.

She presses lightly along my knuckles.

“Better?” she asks.

“A little.”

The glass doors slide open behind her.

“Well,” she says, “this is my stop.”

I stand too.

“Goodbye, Vincent.”

“Bye.”

—

I sit before the canvas.

My hand throbs.

“Okay...” I murmur.

I pick up a pencil.

This time I use both hands. The right hand trembles. The left guides.

Slowly—her face appears.

The proportions are clear in my mind.

It's only a sketch. But it's accurate.

My hand cramps suddenly. Pain shoots through my wrist.

I drop the pencil and lean back.

The portrait is unfinished.

And for the first time in months, my hands tremble not from pain—but from something I thought I lost a long time ago.

“Vincent,” he says, “you’ve lost six games.”

“I know,” I say.

“You’re distracted,” he says.

“That happens.”

“It happens rarely during chess. The game demands attention.”

“I’m giving it attention.”

“You are just staring,” he says.

“I’m thinking.”

“You have been thinking for twenty minutes.”

I move the knight—Gilbert sighs deeply.

“Checkmate.”

The knight should move to e5.

Instead I remember the way Elle tilted her head yesterday when she spoke.

“It’s over,” he says, “I have a question.”

“Yeah?”

“Why didn’t you attend Geoffrey’s invitation yesterday?”

“The art show?”

“Yes,” he answers.

“I declined,” I say.

Gilbert nods seriously.

“You usually enjoy art gatherings,” he says.

“I enjoy art,” I say.

“Then why avoid people who also enjoy art?”

“Because they talk about it.”

I rub my eyes—Gilbert watches me.

“I might go out,” I say suddenly.

Gilbert freezes.

“You?” He continues, “voluntarily?”

“Yes.”

“For what purpose?”

“I don’t know yet.”

He stares at me.

“That is statistically unusual behavior.”

—

I buy two lunches and walk to the exhibit.

And there she is—Elle is standing at the front desk.

There is a reasonable probability she will refuse.

I consider turning around.

Then she looks up—too late.

“It’s you again,” she says.

“Coincidences happen.”

She studies me.

“You’re holding two lunches.”

“Yes.”

“And you just happened to appear beside me,” she says.

“Exactly.”

I realize bringing two lunches is not subtle. Gilbert would describe this as overcompensation.

Now I feel... foolish.

“You’re not very good at pretending.”

I lift the bag slightly.

“I thought you might want lunch.”

“That’s very direct.”

She laughs.

“So... would you like to eat?”

“I think I would.”

We walk to the back of the building. A few people sit at tables.

We sit in the corner.

I slide the lunch toward her.

“Thank you,” she says.

“You’re welcome.”

But she doesn’t eat.

“You’re not hungry?” I ask.

“Not particularly.”

“Then why accept lunch?”

“Because I was curious.”

“About the food?”

“About you.”

That seems fair.

A breeze slips through the window. The napkins flutter on the table—her hair doesn’t move at all.

She doesn’t seem to notice.

I begin eating slowly. While she talks, I study her face.

Her lips move lightly when she speaks, like brush strokes forming careful lines.

“You’re quiet again,” she says.

“I’m listening.”

“You’re analyzing.”

“Possibly,” I say.

She laughs.

“Well, that’s strange.”

“I’m a painter.”

“That explains the staring,” she giggles.

We sit quietly for a moment.

Then she stands.

“I should go back to work.”

“Of course.”

She smiles gently.

“Thank you for lunch, Vincent.”

“You didn’t eat it.”

“That’s not the point,” she says.

—

When I return home, Gilbert is still inside.

“You locked the door,” he says.

“Oh.”

“I cannot leave,” he says.

“Sorry.”

He gestures around the apartment.

The room is spotless. My brushes are organized. The books are stacked. Even the windows are clean.

“You cleaned everything,” I say.

“Obviously.”

Gilbert looks at the canvas on my desk.

“Are you going to paint?”

“Yes.”

He sits quietly while I continue the portrait.

I remember the colors clearly. Her eyes. Her hair.

My hand aches, but the strokes flow anyway.

Minutes stretch into hours.

At last I step back.

The portrait of Elle looks out from the canvas.

“Who is the subject?”

“The girl I met yesterday.”

“You met her once,” he says.

“Yes...”

“And you’re already painting her.”

I nod.

“That is... statistically impulsive.”

People crowd the front of the podium where Senator Arthur King stands.

Vincent stands still—hands in his coat pockets.

“Vincent,” Gilbert says, keeping his elbows close to his ribs, avoiding skin contact. “This is unnecessary.”

Vincent keeps his eyes on the stage.

“Relax.”

“I am relaxed.”

Gilbert moves instantly as a woman accidentally brushes his sleeve.

“That woman might have influenza,” he mutters.

Vincent sighs quietly.

“You’re fine.”

On the stage, Senator Arthur lifts his hands gently.

“My friends,” he says. “Children across the world deserve a future. In Vienna, thousands still need protection... education.”

Applause rises.

“They love him,” Vincent continues. “They used to look at me like that.”

Gilbert blinks. Vincent continues, almost to himself.

“They listen.”

“You sound jealous,” Gilbert says.

“No.”

A pause.

“Well. Maybe a little,” Vincent says.

Onstage, the senator continues.

“I lost my daughter,” Arthur says gently. “And when you lose a child, you realize every child matters.”

The crowd falls silent—Vincent swallows.

“Vincent,” he says. “I need to urinate.”

“Hold it.”

“I cannot hold it. The bladder is not a storage warehouse.”

“Just wait.”

“This is medically unwise.”

Vincent sighs.

“Fine. Go. But come back.”

Gilbert frowns.

“Why?”

“In case something happens.”

Gilbert blinks.

“What would happen?”

Vincent shrugs.

“I don’t know. That’s why I need an assistant.”

Gilbert straightens slightly.

“Oh... very well,” he says.

He turns and carefully navigates through the crowd.

Vincent glances sideways.

Then—

A woman stands a few feet away, holding a small camera. She looks calm in the moving crowd.

Elle.

Vincent smiles faintly.

“Well,” he says. “Hello.”

Elle lowers the camera.

“You’re here.”

“Where else would I be?”

Elle chuckles.

On the stage, the senator continues speaking.

“You’re documenting history?” Vincent asks.

“I’m documenting people who want to be remembered.”

Vincent smiles faintly.

Meanwhile, Gilbert returns from the restroom.

Bodies press shoulder to shoulder—fabric rubs—someone coughs.

He lifts his arms away from everyone like he is crossing a swamp.

“Please do not touch me.”

He moves forward—he sees Vincent ahead.

Vincent is talking. As if someone stands beside him.

But Gilbert cannot see anyone.

“Yeah,” Vincent says quietly. “I understand.”

“Who is he talking to?” Gilbert frowns.

He tries to move closer, but a wall of people blocks him.

“That is... concerning.”

Suddenly—

The lights go out.

Metal crashes from the stage—a loud clang. The crowd gasps.

Onstage, Senator Arthur stumbles backward. Security guards rush forward and grab him.

The lights flicker back on.

Vincent scans the crowd quickly.

“Elle?”

He turns in circles—gone.

Then Gilbert finally reaches him.

“Vincent.”

Vincent turns.

“You were speaking,” Gilbert says.

“Yes.”

“To whom?”

“To Elle.”

Gilbert blinks.

“There was no one there.”

Vincent frowns.

“She was right here.”

Gilbert crosses his arms.

“That is improbable.”

He lifts a camera in his hand.

“She left this.”

Gilbert stares.

“That belongs to her.”

“Yes.”

“Interesting,” Gilbert says.

“I should return it.”

Vincent scans the crowd.

A voice speaks behind him.

“I’m here.”

Vincent jumps. He turns.

Elle stands a few steps away. As if she never moved.

Vincent exhales.

“Where did you go?”

“I was called.”

“Called?”

“The museum. Something urgent.”

Vincent nods. He hands her the camera.

“Here.”

Elle takes it.

“Thank you.”

Vincent smiles gently.

“Bye.”

“Goodbye, Vincent.”

She turns to walk away.

A man walks straight toward her shoulder. Vincent reaches instinctively.

“Wait—”

His hand grabs her wrist.

The man passes through her shoulder. Like fog.

Vincent freezes.

Elle looks down at his hand.

Vincent releases her quickly.

“Sorry.”

Elle smiles softly.

“It’s alright.”

And she walks away.

Gilbert steps beside him.

“Where is she?”

“She just left.”

Gilbert looks disappointed.

“Unfortunate. I wished to verify certain details.”

Vincent’s face has turned pale. Gilbert studies him.

“You appear unwell.”

“I might be.”

“What happened?”

“I... don’t know.”

Something is wrong. And Vincent cannot explain it.

Gilbert Wallace stands at the board. His sleeves are rolled unevenly. Chalk dust coats his fingers.

“Look at the human face,” he says, “imagine reducing it to geometry. What do you see?”

“Eyes. Nose. Mouth.” A student answers.

“No. No, that is anatomy. I asked for geometry.”

He stares—horrified.

“Angles,” Gilbert says. “Ratios. Balance. The face is a problem waiting to be solved.”

The bell rings.

The class empties in a rush of backpacks and murmurs.

That night Gilbert walks home—it’s quiet. Blessedly quiet.

“Finally,” he murmurs.

He sits at his computer. Vincent’s portrait fills the screen.

“Let’s test perception,” he whispers.

He uploads the photo.

Caption: “Study: Geometry of the Human Face. What patterns do you notice?”

Gilbert leans back.

Nothing happens for five days.

Then the notifications begin.

Ping.

Ping.

Ping.

By the weekend the internet is roaring.

“OUR PROF MADE THIS???”

“LOOK AT THE FACE OMG.”

Art pages repost it.

Art bloggers call it: “A modern masterpiece.”

Vincent scrolls through his phone lazily.

There, on the screen—his portrait.

Shared thousands of times.

“Holy cow!”

Gilbert is eating toast when someone pounds on his door.

Vincent stands there, breathing hard.

“Oh,” he says.

Gilbert steps aside politely.

“Would you like tea?”

Vincent walks in.

“You posted it. Online. Without asking!”

Gilbert folds his arms. He opens his mouth to argue—

“Actually...” he says.

Vincent’s phone rings. Unknown number.

He answers slowly.

“...Hello?”

“Mr. Lautner?”

“It is.”

“I’m the Guggenheim’s manager. We’d like to discuss displaying your portrait.”

Vincent glances at Gilbert. He sighs.

“I’ll... think about it.”

He hangs up.

“Fascinating.” Gilbert says.

Vincent glares.

“This isn’t fascinating.”

Gilbert nods.

The next morning chaos waits outside the university gates.

Cameras. Students.

Gilbert arrives.

“...Why are there people?”

Someone shouts.

“That’s him!”

A microphone appears in his face.

“Professor Wallace! Are you the painter of the viral portrait?”

“Well technically—”

Someone interrupts.

“Sir! What inspired the mysterious girl in the painting?”

Gilbert frowns.

Another student grabs his arm.

“Professor can we take a selfie?”

“Why?”

“For Instagram!”

Gilbert sighs deeply.

“This is extremely inefficient.”

Flash.

Flash.

Flash.

Vincent and Elle walk slowly along the sidewalk.

They share a paper cup of ice cream.

Vincent's hand is bandaged.

“Here.”

She scoops some with the spoon and lifts it toward him.

“Open.”

Vincent obeys.

“So,” she continues, “you always wanted your paintings in a museum.”

“Yes.”

“Now someone asks.”

She feeds him another spoonful.

“And you hesitate.”

“Fame is strange,” he says quietly.

Elle raises an eyebrow.

“That's vague.”

Vincent sighs.

“When people admire you... they’re really admiring an idea.”

“And?”

“And ideas change.”

Elle studies him.

“You’re afraid?”

“Yes.”

“Of criticism?”

Vincent shakes his head.

“Of abandonment.”

Elle doesn’t speak.

“My brother used to paint all the time.” Vincent continues, “he painted because he loved it. Not because people watched.”

Elle gives him another spoonful.

“So,” she says lightly, “your problem is simple.”

Vincent looks at her.

“You’re trying to decide whether you love painting... or being admired.”

After a while Vincent answers—

“I’m not sure which one scares me more.”

Elle nods slowly.

“Good,” she says.

“Why?”

She hands him the last bite of ice cream.

“Because now,” she says, “you’re finally being honest.”

Vincent pauses near the entrance.

He keeps his hands in his coat pockets. They hurt already.

Vincent looks at a sculpture he does not understand. He wonders how much it costs.

Then a man arrives behind him.

“Mr. Lautner!”

Vincent turns.

Rob Belfort walks toward him—a grin shines too much. His suit is perfect. Everything about him looks recently polished.

“Vincent,” Belfort says, grabbing his shoulder. “Good to see you, my friend.”

Vincent nods.

“You look... grounded,” Belfort says. “That’s good. The public likes grounded artists.”

Vincent does not answer.

“Big crowd tonight. Collectors. Journalists. Donors. You know—people who move the world.”

Belfort gestures around the hall.

“And they’re very curious about you.”

Vincent finally speaks.

“I thought we were discussing the portrait.”

“Oh we are,” Belfort says quickly. “Absolutely. A comeback narrative—people love that.”

Vincent feels the word narrative press strangely against his ribs.

“My painting isn’t a narrative.”

Belfort chuckles.

“Everything is a narrative, Vincent.”

His eyes lands toward Vincent’s pockets.

“You still painting comfortably?”

“Yes.” A lie.

Before Belfort can reply, Geoffrey approaches.

“Comfortably?”

Both men turn.

Geoffrey stands like a man attending his own trial.

“Vincent,” Geoffrey says.

“Geoffrey.”

Geoffrey studies Vincent's face.

"I hear you're painting again."

"Yes."

"I was under the impression your hands were... compromised."

Belfort sighs.

"Oh Christ, Geoffrey—"

But Geoffrey continues.

"There was an accident, if I remember correctly. Nerve damage. Quite unfortunate."

Geoffrey leans closer.

"Or perhaps," he says, "this is simply theater."

Belfort groans.

"Geoffrey, not tonight."

But Geoffrey continues.

“A tragic artist returns after injury,” he says. “The press will adore it. Redemption sells very well.”

Belfort claps loudly once.

“Alright! Enough philosophy.”

He steps between them.

“Geoffrey, you’re a board member, not a prosecutor.”

Geoffrey stiffens.

“There are financial concerns we should discuss.”

“Oh God,” Belfort mutters.

“The donors are nervous,” Geoffrey continues calmly. “After the investigation last quarter, the museum cannot afford another—”

Belfort cuts him off.

“Visitors,” he says.

Geoffrey blinks.

“What?”

“Visitors,” Belfort repeats. “Vincent brings visitors.”

Geoffrey lowers his voice.

“The board has not approve—”

“The board,” Belfort says, “approves revenue.”

Geoffrey’s face grows pale.

“You worry too much.” Belfort smiles.

“I’m trying to protect the institution.”

“You’re trying to protect your dignity,” Belfort says.

A few people nearby pretends not to listen.

Geoffrey’s jaw tightens. His eyes shift to the crowd.

“Forgive me if I’m reluctant,” he says. “The last time we chased publicity, the museum spent six months repairing its reputation.”

Belfort studies Geoffrey for a moment.

“The portrait goes up next week.”

Vincent finally speaks.

“Next week?”

Belfort beams.

“Press release, interviews, maybe a televised segment.”

Vincent hands pulse quietly.

“Next week,” Belfort repeats. “You’re the centerpiece of the exhibition.”

Vincent looks down.

He imagines holding the brush again. The long hours. The pain.

Geoffrey watches silently. Something small and cold appears in his eyes.

Rain begins while Vincent drives home.

The road is empty. The car hums softly.

Vincent drives with one hand. The other rests on his lap.

The bandage feels too tight. Pain moves through them like electricity.

A faint stain begins to appear on the cloth. Red. Vincent notices it.

“Damn.”

He lifts his hand from the wheel and pulls gently at the bandage.

The cloth sticks slightly to the skin.

The GPS voice speaks calmly.

“Construction ahead.”

Vincent barely hears it.

“Road barrier in five hundred meters.”

The car drifts slightly toward the right lane.

Vincent presses the bandage harder. His fingers tremble.

Then—

“Vincent.”

A soft voice. It comes from the back seat.

His heart stops. For a moment he almost answers.

The voice is exactly the same. The way Elle used to say it when she worried.

He looks ahead. The barricade appears suddenly. Bright orange. Too close.

“—!”

He jerks the wheel. The tires scream.

The car swerves violently past the barrier. Then stops.

Engine still running. Rain taps against the roof.

Vincent sits there breathing. His hands shake on the wheel.

He slowly turns his head. The back seat is empty.

Vincent swallows.

He cannot tell if he heard her. Or if his mind simply remembered her voice too well.

Vincent’s fingers ache a little today. The stubborn kind of ache that never leaves.

Elle tilts her head at his portrait.

“Hmm... it’s very accurate.” She shrugs.

Vincent studies it. His own brushwork feels distant.

“They’re using it.”

Elle glances at him.

“Using what?”

“The portrait.”

She smiles faintly.

“Well... that’s what museum do, Vincent. They hang art. They sell tickets. They print brochures.”

“No,” he murmurs. “Not that.”

Elle crosses her arms.

“Belfort wants collaboration,” he says. “Interviews. Public appearances.”

Elle whistles under her breath.

“Mm. Fame. The polite word for slow cannibalism.”

Vincent almost smiles.

“So,” she says. “You have three options.”

Vincent sighs.

“Only three?”

“Yes. Life rarely offers four.”

She raises a finger.

“First option: you cooperate with Belfort. Smile for cameras. Speak about inspiration. People adore those.”

Vincent grimaces.

“Second option,” she continues, “you remain politely neutral. Let the museum use the paintings while you stay a mysterious artist.”

“And the third?”

Elle turns to him.

“Disappear...”

Vincent frowns.

“Completely,” she says. “Take your paintings somewhere quiet. Somewhere with no journalists.”

He breathes slowly.

“I don’t want any of that,” he says.

Elle’s eyebrows rise.

“I don’t want politics,” he says. “Or marketing.”

She studies him.

“I only want the work,” he continues. “If the paintings speak, they speak. If they don’t... then I’ll accept that.”

Elle doesn’t ask further. For a moment they simply stand there.

“Well,” she says, “I suppose the paintings will have to speak louder than the journalists.”

Vincent nods once.

And for the first time that morning, the decision feels solid.

The museum is almost empty. A few early visitors wander.

“I dislike this place,” Gilbert mutters.

“You’ve said that five times.”

“Yes,” Gilbert says stiffly. “Because repetition increases comprehension.”

A couple walks past them. The woman suddenly points at Gilbert.

“Oh! Excuse me,” she says. “Are you the painter?”

Gilbert freezes.

“I do not paint.” Gilbert says flatly.

The woman blinks. Vincent coughs into his sleeve.

“Yes, well,” Gilbert continues, “misidentification is a common human error.”

The couple drifts away—confused.

“Listen carefully.”

Vincent straightens.

“If anyone asks,” he whispers, “you don’t know anything about the painter.”

“I already don’t know anything about the painter.”

Vincent's hands tighten inside his pockets.

"If people find out," he murmurs, "they'll ask questions."

Gilbert squints.

"Such as?"

Gilbert's expression changes.

"Oh," he clears his throat.

"Then I will maintain secrecy," he says. "Though I must state, secrecy produces severe anxiety."

"I know."

"I also dislike journalists."

Vincent nods.

"That helps."

Vincent walks toward Manager's office. He expects Belfort inside.

Before he reaches the handle, Geoffrey steps in.

“Good morning, Vincent,” Geoffrey says.

Vincent stops.

“Where’s Belfort?”

“On vacation.”

Vincent blinks. Something feels wrong.

“You scheduled this meeting,” Vincent says.

“Yes.”

“And now Belfort is suddenly gone.”

“Circumstances evolve.”

Geoffrey folds his hands behind his back.

“I’m not interested in publicity,” Vincent says stiffly.

“Yes,” he says. “I suspected that.”

“Then why arrange meetings?”

Geoffrey's tone remains calm.

“Because the world does not share your preferences.”

He crosses his arms.

“Exposure is dangerous,” he says.

Vincent's pulse jumps.

“What do you mean?”

“Fame invites curiosity,” Geoffrey says.

Vincent feels the ache in his hands again.

“And curiosity,” Geoffrey continues, “is rarely gentle.”

Vincent exhales slowly.

“I don't want fame,” he says quietly. “I want the work.”

Geoffrey smiles.

“That is a very admirable sentiment.”

Vincent turns away.

Behind him, Geoffrey stands perfectly still in the corridor.

Like a gatekeeper. Or a wall.