

# ETERNITY IN AN HOUR

by Sandy P Shelton

(from All Things Are Possible VII)

The nightmares were back with a vengeance. They tortured Vincent's dreams and haunted his waking hours with a gnawing dread. He was afraid to go to sleep at night because he knew the images would return along with the voices. His restlessness was affecting Catherine and the children and it was driving him mad.

As he stared into the night sky from his vantage point atop Catherine's apartment building, he fought to put it all into some kind of perspective. The nightmares had returned shortly after Winterfest. The normally festive holiday occasion was the scene of a near tragedy. Just thinking of it now sent a shudder of fear through him. Since that night, life had not been the same for his family and he was beginning to wonder if it would ever be again.

The night had begun happily enough. The children were playful and excited and he was barely able to contain their childish glee. The best news of all had been that Catherine was feeling well enough to attend even though Father had insisted she be carried to and from the Great Hall. "No problem!" He would have carried her down Broadway if she had asked.

He remembered walking into their chamber and having his breath taken away by his wife's loveliness. She looked so feminine and vulnerable in her very pregnant state. The soft lines of her gown accentuated the swell of her stomach and he felt an uncontrollable urge to touch that slight protrusion and feel the life inside. He did just that. After gently stroking her stomach, he reached up to caress her cheek.

*"To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour."*

She smiled as she caressed the hand still stroking her cheek. "You've been reading my book again haven't you?"

"I need something to do with my hands," he laughed.

"Soon — I'll give you plenty to do with those lovely hands," she responded as she very slowly and erotically kissed his palm.

Watching and feeling her lips as they lingered against his palm reawakened long dormant desires. Desires, he quickly suppressed.

"Where are the children?" she asked.

"Mary, with help from Mouse, will take them down to the Great Hall."

"Are you sure you can carry me all that distance?" She patted her stomach gently. "I'm not as light as I used to be."

In response, Vincent swept her up in his arms and spun around slowly. "Light as a feather."

Catherine looked at him thoughtfully. "I never realized you were such an accomplished liar."

"I do not lie, Catherine. I might bend the truth a little but I cannot lie to you."

He remembered how painstakingly careful he was as they made their way to the Great Hall. He remembered the smiles they were greeted with along the way. He knew the smiles were masking the community's concerns for Catherine. Their love and acceptance of her meant more to him than he could ever say.

The evening began as they had hoped. The candle lighting ceremony, the delicious food, the music and dancing, the atmosphere of gaiety that enveloped everyone was exactly what they both

needed. Charlie was even there, being the ever-watchful big brother and playing uncle to Jake and Katie. It was his first Winterfest and his presence added to Catherine's enjoyment of the evening. And, although she could not dance with Vincent, Catherine watched with a joyful tear in her eye as Vincent and Katie danced about the Hall. After the dance with Katie, he walked back over to Catherine. Katie wiggled her way to the floor and immediately ran over to join several of the younger children playing in the corner.

"That was beautiful, Vincent."

When she turned to him and smiled, he could see the weariness in her eyes. "Catherine, I think we should call it an evening. You promised Father you wouldn't overdo it."

"Don't be silly. I'm fine."

"Catherine...."

She placed her hand on his arm. "Really, I'm fine."

Against his better judgment, he gave in. "All right, we'll stay a little longer."

A few minutes later, she asked him to get her a drink. As he turned to walk back to her, he noticed she was standing. Everything that happened after that seemed to move in slow motion. She looked at him and he could literally see the color drain from her face. Beads of perspiration quickly popped out on her forehead and at the base of her neck. She swayed unsteadily and Vincent dropped the glass and ran toward her. He got there in time to catch her as she doubled over in pain.

Vincent!" she screamed as loudly as she could.

He cradled her in his arms. "Catherine — what is it? What's wrong?"

She was gasping for breath between moans of pain. "Something's — wrong — I...."

"Father! Charlie!" Vincent shouted loudly enough to silence the crowd's festivities.

Vincent vaguely remembered that Charlie got there first, then Father and Mary. What they did, he didn't recall, all he knew was that Catherine was in pain and he was frightened beyond words. He remembered the fear in his children's eyes as they watched their mother slip into unconsciousness.

"We have to get her to the hospital chamber now!" Father ordered.

As gently as he could, Vincent gathered her limp body into his arms and began moving quickly. At the door, he hesitated. "The children...."

Several of the adults gathered around the children in response to Vincent's obvious concern. "We'll take care of them, Vincent — GO!" Kanin replied.

The children's fear gripped his heart but he had to concentrate on Catherine. She needed him more.

His legs couldn't carry him fast enough. His arms ached, his heart pounded, and his lungs struggled to keep pace. And even though a crowd followed him, Vincent was only aware of the ebb of life that flowed through Catherine and the pounding of his own blood as it raced through his body.

She was bleeding — he could feel the warm dampness as it soaked into the front of his vest and shirt. It was on the arm that supported her legs. *Stop — please stop*, he pleaded silently as he strained to move even faster. *Don't leave me, Catherine. Please!*

He wasn't aware of how long it took to get to the chamber, but he did remember that he had to wait for Charlie and the others to catch up. In those agonizing few moments, he carefully placed Catherine on the surgical table and tenderly stroked her pale cheek. "Where are you?" he cried out as he paced back and forth from the table to the curtain opening that surrounded the small area.

Charlie arrived first panting for breath as he ran past Vincent and began to examine Catherine. Father and the others arrived soon thereafter. The older physician's face was ashen and he looked in need of medical treatment himself. The flow of medical jargon began as the two doctors worked at a feverish pace. Mary quickly and quietly responded to the

commands with movements that seemed to anticipate their needs. Vincent never felt so helpless in all his life.

Each second that ticked by seemed an hour long, each hour an eternity. The words of the poem came back to him. "Eternity in an hour." He paced, he listened, he tried to wipe the blood from his clothes, and he prayed. He prayed like he never had before and realized, in one crystal-clear moment, the utter despair and emptiness that losing Catherine would bring and he knew he could not bear it.

Charlie's actions were frantic yet professional but Vincent could feel his fear. Whatever was happening was serious and Catherine's brother was afraid he was losing his sister. The battle became an intense one.

"Vincent — you might want to leave," Father suggested.

"No," he responded, his voice breaking with emotion.

Mary began pulling up Catherine's dress.

"We've got to examine her. You might not want to see this," Father explained.

"No — I will stay. You do what you must."

"Her blood pressure is dropping," Charlie reported.

Father turned his attention back to his patient. "We've got to stop the bleeding!"

"She needs surgery. Damn it — she needs to be in a hospital!"

Father's face turned crimson. "I agree with you but we know that is not possible."

"What is possible — is her death!" Charlie argued.

"There is no time, Charlie. Even if the circumstances allowed for that — we simply don't have time. She would bleed to death before we could get her Above."

"STOP IT! If you two don't stop arguing she will bleed to death. We have to do the best we can now!" Mary's curt statement got the attention of both doctors.

"Cut away her undergarments and prepare her for surgery," Father ordered.

"What about her blood pressure?" Charlie asked. "She's lost a lot of blood. She needs a transfusion. How do you do that down here?"

"Mary, we did blood types on everyone. Cross-match Catherine's"

"I'll do that." The voice belonged to Jamie. "Tell us what else we can do."

Father smiled at her. "Get Rebecca. She's helped in surgery before. As soon as you get a match with Catherine, bring the donor here. Mary will handle the collection."

As soon as Jamie left the area, Charlie looked over at Father. "A transfusion in these conditions? We don't have time to cross match. What about contamination? What about viruses for God's sake?"

"We know our people and they know the importance of honesty in matters of life and death. No one here would jeopardize another in such a way. Charlie, we must prepare. We don't have time to argue."

"But..."

"I have removed bullets from Vincent in this chamber. I stitched up Catherine's face in this chamber. It is not the best of conditions but it's all we have."

Vincent was getting a little annoyed and terribly worried as the two doctors argued. "What are you going to do?"

Both Father and Charlie turned to Vincent. Father took a deep breath and spoke in his most professional manner. "We've got to stop the hemorrhaging. It may mean that we have to terminate the pregnancy."

Knowing Catherine's feelings about this baby, that statement was a little hard to swallow.

"The baby?"

"Vincent — the pregnancy is not far enough along for the baby to survive."

The statement was not meant to hurt but it did — deeply. "Do what you must to save Catherine."

Father nodded solemnly. "We'll do our best. Wait outside — please!"

Charlie stepped up and put his arm around Vincent's shoulder. "We can work better and faster without worrying about you. Please — let us do our job."

Reluctantly, Vincent agreed. He walked over to Catherine, leaned down and kissed her forehead. "Don't leave me," he pleaded. "I love you."

The next few hours were a blur. Members of the community came by, sat with him for a while, then left. Pascal and Jamie turned out to be the blood donors and they gave willingly. All Vincent could do was wait and that was the hardest thing he had ever done.

Sometime in the wee hours of the morning, Father walked out and sat down beside Vincent. "How is she" he asked anxiously.

"She's holding her own. The transfusion helped. Her blood pressure is stable."

"What about — the baby? Did you have to....?"

"No, we didn't. The placenta tore away from the lining slightly but did not compromise the fetus. But — the situation is still very dangerous, Vincent, understand that. The only way to give the baby a fighting chance is to give it time to develop and grow stronger. It cannot survive outside of Catherine's womb for several more weeks."

"What do we do?"

"She will be restricted to complete bed rest. She must not exert herself in any way. She can only get out of bed when I say she can. She must have quiet. She must have peace."

"We will do whatever it takes."

"Vincent — you must understand. It's not just the baby's life we're concerned about — it's Catherine's as well. If she hemorrhages again and we can't stop it — she will die. This is a very risky pregnancy for mother and child. I can't stress that enough."

"I understand. May I see her now?"

"Yes. Charlie is with her. We want someone with her night and day."

"I will be."

"Vincent — remember to accept help when it is offered as freely as you give it. You can't do this alone. Your friends and family will not let you."

Vincent stood and gently laid his hand on Father's shoulder. "I sometimes forget just how much Catherine is loved in our world. Thank you for reminding me."

Father patted his son's hand then breathed a deep sigh of relief as he walked away. For now, the battle had been won but the outcome of the war was yet to be determined.

As Vincent walked through the hospital chamber, he saw Pascal and Jamie sitting on cots quietly talking. He stopped. With tears in his eyes, he fought to find the words. "How can I — thank you?"

Pascal stood up. "You don't have to. We — love you and Catherine. This is only a small thing, friend."

Vincent hugged his life-long friend. The gesture embarrassed Pascal slightly but he returned the embrace.

"Catherine — is special to all of us, Vincent," Jamie added. "She would do — has done — as much for us."

He pulled her into his arms. "Thank you. Thank both of you."

After saying goodnight to his friends, Vincent opened the curtain surrounding the surgery area. He saw Mary cleaning up and gathering the bloody supplies as Charlie sat by Catherine's bedside holding her hand and staring at her pale, sleeping face.

"How is she?" Vincent whispered to Charlie.

"She's a fighter — I'll give her that. I thought ...." Charlie bit his lip. He just couldn't speak the words.

"There are no words...." Vincent was struggling with his thoughts. ".... to thank you for..."

"She's my sister, Vincent. I would give my life for her."

Vincent reached over and gently squeezed Charlie's shoulder. "She loves you too. I'll stay with her tonight. You and Father need to rest."

"I don't think I can leave her."

"You've done all you can. Now — she needs me and the strength I can give her through our bond. I would appreciate it if you would talk to Jacob and Mary Catherine and help them understand what has happened. I know they are very frightened. They need their Uncle Charlie."

"All right — you win. I'll go check on the kids before I turn in. If her condition changes in the slightest ...."

"I will send for you, I promise."

Charlie studied Vincent's face for a moment then sighed. After placing Catherine's hand gently by her side, he stood up and looked at her face for a long time as if memorizing it. "You hang in there, sis," he whispered just before he leaned over and placed a kiss on her forehead. He then used his finger to push a strand of hair back in place.

Vincent watched the tender moment with a deep ache in his heart.

"I'll check with you later, Vincent. Watch over her."

"Always."

After Charlie left, Vincent leaned over Catherine and studied the lines of her face carefully. He noticed her pale skin and the dark circles under her eyes. There was an eerie peaceful expression on her face that caused Vincent to forcefully search their bond for her presence. He held his breath until he caught hold of that trembling, pulsing essence he knew to be Catherine. He released that breath slowly. She was still with him.

He sat for hours simply watching and waiting until he could no longer fight the weariness. He wasn't aware that he had fallen asleep until he felt himself falling forward. His whole body jerked in response and he grabbed the table at the head of the bed knocking over a glass in the process. When he righted himself, he looked over at Catherine and found that she had turned her head in his direction and was staring at him as if the noise had startled her.

"Catherine?"

She managed a weak smile. "Hi," she responded in a very strained voice.

He leaned over her and took her hand. "How are you feeling?"

"Awful. What — happened? Is the baby....?"

"The baby's all right and you will be too. You need to rest."

"Tell me — what happened," she insisted.

"Father said the placenta separated a little. He said you would have to stay in bed until the baby comes." He didn't want to frighten her but he knew keeping the truth from her would frighten her even more.

She reached up and gently stroked her stomach. "Whatever it takes — I'll do."

"I know." He leaned down and rested his forehead against her shoulder. "Catherine — I almost lost you. I've never been so frightened in my life." He couldn't stop the confession or the tears that followed.

Her hands gently began stroking his hair. "It's all right, Vincent. We'll get through this. You'll see. Everything's going to be fine."

Her words did little to reassure him that night. Only her slow but steady improvement eased his fears. When Father and Charlie returned to check on their patient the next morning, she was awake and fully aware. As soon as Charlie saw her, he flashed a beaming smile.

"Morning sis! I'm glad you're back with us." He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "How do you feel? Any complaints?"

"None that anyone can do anything about. Sorry I put a damper on the party."

"There's always next year," he responded in a cheerful tone.

Father was discreetly checking Catherine's vital signs. "Have you had any pain or bleeding since last night?" he finally asked.

Catherine shook her head. "I'm sore and I'm tired — that's all."

"Good. We're going to keep you in here for a day or two then we can move you back to your chamber."

"Can't I go there now?"

"We'd rather you stay here where we can keep a close watch on you," Father explained.

Charlie patted her arm. "I agree, Cathy. From now on, you've got to be watched twenty-four hours a day. You've got to stay in bed and you're going to have to put up with a lot of poking and prying from us."

Her expression changed to one of concern. "Is it that bad, Charlie?"

"Yes, Cathy — it is that bad."

Catherine closed her eyes a minute, fighting to find the resolve to go on. Once found, she resigned herself to the difficulties that lay ahead.

"Cathy," Charlie said softly as he squeezed her hand. "The longer we can keep that little fellow inside of you, the better chance he has. We've got to take it one day at a time."

In response, Catherine squeezed his hand firmly. "You have to promise me that you won't take the baby."

Charlie glanced over at Father and Vincent then back at Catherine. "We won't unless there's no other way. We want this baby to survive Cathy, but we won't sacrifice you."

"I don't matter," she replied.

"Catherine!" Vincent's shocked voice startled all of them.

"Cathy, listen to me. We will not rush to judgment on this. We're talking last resort. I just want you to be prepared because we'll probably have to do a Caesarian and we want you and the baby to be as strong as possible. You are not to worry — no stress, no exertion. I don't want you lifting your little finger unless there's someone there to help you. Understand? Am I right, Father?"

The older man smiled. "I couldn't have said it better myself. It's up to you, young lady."

"I know when I'm outnumbered. If I have to lie around and be a living incubator, I will. It's worth it."

Vincent remembered her words and the doubt he felt. Nothing was worth Catherine's life. They had two healthy children. He could survive the loss of the third but he could not survive the loss of Catherine. He made a vow to himself, at that moment, that if a choice had to be made, he would make it. Even if Catherine could never forgive him, at least she would be alive to hate him. And that option, although a dismal one, was better than the prospect of living without her.

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A cold breeze ruffled his hair and sent a chill through his body as he remembered the strain and worry of those first few days of Catherine's incapacitation. She was completely bedridden now. The only activity allowed her was the occasional trip to the bathroom and a bath in the warm springs.

For the most part, she was handling it fairly well. He could tell she was bored even though she read a great deal of the time. He could see her frustration in having the children around and not being able to play with them as she always had. He could feel her anxiety. But she never complained. Whenever things got to be a little too much, she would simply stroke her

stomach and talk to the baby within. It was easy to see that it was as much for her as it was for the baby.

The physical changes in her alarmed him at times. Despite the puffiness, there was an underlying gauntness that was most evident around her eyes. The once well-toned body now looked so fragile and weak that Vincent had not slept, in the same bed with her since Winterfest for fear of hurting her in his sleep. That made him think about the dreams again. It was a never-ending circle, it seemed. That was why he needed to come to this special place tonight. He needed to experience the city again, to feel the excitement of possibilities as he had when he and Catherine had first begun their journey.

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Joe Maxwell was sitting in his office trying to cope with the huge stack of files on his desk. The case that annoyed him the most was the Thanksgiving Day bombing. The few leads they had managed to unearth had quickly dissolved into nothing. The trail was as cold as it gets. He closed the file angrily. The department had taken a lot of heat over this one. "Damn," he swore. At times like this, he missed Cathy the most. *This will be here in the morning*, he finally decided. Before he could grab his coat, however, the phone rang. After debating a moment or two as to whether he should answer it or not, he decided he had better. It could be about Cathy. "Yeah — hello."

"Joe?"

"Yeah. Who's this?"

"It's Jenny."

"Oh — yeah. How are you? Have you heard from Cathy?" He heard a troubled sigh.

"I get letters from her occasionally but I haven't seen her. I just wish I knew what was going on. I've had these disturbing dreams about her lately."

Her voice betrayed her concern. "I know. I get letters too but they really don't say a lot."

"I really miss her — you know?"

"Yeah. I know."

"I'm sorry I bothered you, Joe."

"You didn't," Joe responded.

"I just needed to talk to someone about Cathy."

"Jenny...."

"Yes."

Joe wasn't sure why but he was feeling the same way. "You think — maybe — I mean — if you aren't busy tonight...."

"Uh — no, I don't have any plans."

"It's just.... I think we both need someone to talk to. Why don't we meet for dinner?" There was an excruciatingly long moment of silence.

"All right. I don't see why not. Yeah."

Despite his mood of moments ago, Joe was suddenly smiling. "Great. I know this little Italian place about a block from here." After giving her the name and address of the restaurant, Joe finally said good-bye. As he hung up, he was beginning to feel like maybe a New York Deputy District Attorney could have a personal life after all.

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About a half hour later, he was sitting in that little restaurant at a booth that gave him a clear view of the door. Surprisingly, he was beginning to feel a little nervous. That — he didn't understand. He had known Jenny for about six years now but he had only thought of her as Cathy's friend. For some reason, tonight was different. Finally, he saw her walk into the restaurant.

He sat there looking at her, not as Cathy's friend, but as the attractive woman she was. She was dressed in a dark business suit with a short skirt that accentuated her long, slender legs.

Her hair was neat and short but very soft and feminine looking. Joe even found himself staring with interest at the way the suit hugged her body. When the waiter pointed him out, she turned to him and smiled then walked over to the table. Awkwardly, he jumped to his feet.

"Hello, Joe. I'm not late am I?" she asked.

For the first time, Joe noticed just how warm and soft her brown eyes appeared to be. He also noticed her smile. "No," he stammered. "Please — sit down."

After seating her, Joe sat down across from her and suddenly couldn't think of a thing to say. All he wanted to do was look into those brown eyes.

"Joe?"

"Uh — I'm sorry. I was thinking about something." He smiled nervously. "I haven't seen you in a while. I guess the publishing business keeps you busy."

"I suppose that's why I like it. What about you?"

"The same, I guess. It doesn't leave me much time for a personal life though."

"I remember Cathy saying the same thing."

The mention of Cathy's name evoked strong emotions in both of them and they were soon deep in conversation about their mutual friend. So much so, they were completely unaware that two and half hours had passed.

Jenny finally glanced at her watch. "Oh my — it's late. I'd better be going. I've got an early morning meeting."

"I didn't realize it was so late. I've got a deposition to take in the morning," Joe added. After paying for dinner, Joe walked Jenny out and began looking for a taxi.

"Thanks for dinner. I really enjoyed the company," Jenny commented as they stood on the sidewalk.

"You're welcome. I enjoyed it too. Maybe we could do it again — soon?" Joe nervously awaited her answer. He felt a little more at ease when she smiled at him.

"I'd like that."

She opened her purse and took out a business card. "Call me."

Joe took the card and looked at the numbers. "I will," he responded.

Their eyes met and suddenly both of them became aware of that gentle stirring called attraction. It surprised them.

"I definitely will," Joe added with his most charming smile.

Jenny smiled back at him. "I really have to go."

"Oh — yeah, the taxi."

He finally managed to tear his eyes away from those liquid brown orbs staring back at him and began looking for a taxi. After flagging one down, he helped her into it then reluctantly said goodnight. As the taxi pulled away, he began to whistle. He shook his head and chuckled. *I wonder what Radcliffe would say about this?* Shoving his hands into his pockets, he started for home.

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Vincent walked through the now deserted common passageways of the tunnel community on the way to his chamber. At this time of night, he knew he would encounter no one. The citizens of this secret world were sleeping soundly. He wished he could.

As he neared his family's chambers, he decided to check on the children. He found Katie sleeping peacefully in her small bed, her stuffed lion cub held tightly in her tiny arms. She was his little angel. He tucked the covers around her then gently kissed the top of her head.

Moving on to Jacob's adjoining chamber, Vincent discovered that a very restless little boy had kicked away his covers. He moved in quietly and placed the covers back over the sleeping child. Studying him carefully, he noticed just how much he had grown. Soon, he knew his son would begin to venture into his mother's world. He felt both a sense of loss and a touch of envy at that thought. His son would experience what he could not — a normal life Above.



Vincent then returned to the chamber he and Catherine shared. Entering as quietly as he could, he walked over to the bed to check on her. She seemed well and was sleeping. At least, that's what he thought. Without warning, she suddenly opened her eyes and looked at him. "Vincent?"

"I'm here. Go back to sleep."

"How was your trip Above?"

"Invigorating — but I'm glad to be home. How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good, actually." She blinked her eyes a few times then focused them on his face. Her look was one of intense study. "You look almost as bad as I do. Haven't you been sleeping?"

"Don't worry about me, Catherine. I'll be all right."

"You can't be getting much rest sleeping on the floor. Why don't you try to lie down with me?"

He cradled her hand in his. "You know why. We can't take any chances. I can be a very -- restless sleeper."

"But, Vincent...."

"Ssh, no arguments. You need to rest."

She squeezed his hand. "Vincent — everything will be all right. Believe it."

With great gentleness, he pulled her hand to his mouth and kissed it. "I do."

"Will you rub my back?" she asked.

"It would be my pleasure."

She rolled over to give him access to her back then snuggled into her pillow. After only a few minutes of his gentle stroking, her slow, steady breathing assured him she had fallen back to sleep. He watched her for a few minutes then tucked her in as he had done their children. Then, with a troubled sigh, he rose and walked over to the bedding lying on the floor against the other wall. He needed the rest, but he dreaded the dreams that haunted him. After making himself as comfortable as possible, he watched Catherine until his eyelids grew too heavy to hold open.

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He walked through the darkness toward a strange light. As he neared, the darkness faded slightly into a dim, mist-filled shade of gray. Then he heard the heart-wrenching screams that he quickly realized were Catherine's. As fast as he could, he moved toward the light. A gauze-like curtain obscured his view but he could see the silhouettes. A man was standing over Catherine as she lay on a table. She was holding her stomach, screaming and writhing in pain. The man was doing nothing to help her. Filled with rage, Vincent reached up and tore away the curtain separating him from Catherine. He gasped in horror at the sight. Catherine's struggled had ended. She lay deathly still, her face pale and her eyes open. Her body was soaked in blood. A laugh that sounded as if it came from the depths of hell chilled Vincent to the bone. He knew that laugh. Everything moved in slow motion as he looked up. What he saw terrified him. He could not speak, he could not breathe, and he could not scream. He was frozen by terror and a revulsion so vile it made his stomach lurch violently. There, over Catherine's lifeless body, stood Paracelsus.

Rage filled Vincent. The other in him took control and that made Paracelsus laugh even harder. Just as he was about to lunge at him, Paracelsus held up a bloody, screaming infant. To Vincent's horror, the child was like him. He then realized that the child was his and Catherine's and that Paracelsus had killed her to get it.

**"NO!"** he screamed.

Paracelsus' laughter suddenly stopped. "He is mine! He was born as you were, Vincent. He was born in blood. He will claim his rightful destiny as you never did. I did not kill your precious Catherine — your son did. He ripped his way out of her as you did your mother. Look at her! Look at her!"

Vincent forced himself to look at Catherine's limp form. Her lifeless eyes stared back at him as if they were asking why had he allowed this to happen.

"Your seed, Vincent. Your true seed. This is the price she paid to bear it. You did this to her. Your true animal nature finally killed her."

Pain and grief welled up inside and threatened to choke the life from him. He fell to his knees and screamed "NO!" The laughter began again and Vincent felt something explode in his chest. The darkness enveloped him once again.

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Vincent's eyes opened suddenly. His heart was pounding, he was covered in perspiration, and he was gasping for breath. It took him a few minutes to realize it had all been just another horrible dream.

Afraid to close his eyes again, Vincent sat up and leaned against the wall to wait for the others to wake up. He didn't have long to wait. Katie tiptoed into the chamber still dressed in her gown and rubbing her eyes. A lump formed in his throat as he watched her walk over to the bed and tug on her mother's arm.

"Mommy?"

Catherine's head turned in her direction. "Katie?"

"I'm cold, Mommy."

Awkwardly, Catherine rolled over onto her back then slid over to accommodate the small child. She lifted the covers while the little girl crawled in beside her. "I'll keep you warm, honey?"

Katie snuggled into Catherine's arms as her mother kissed the top of her head. A single tear rolled down Vincent's cheek.

After settling the child in, Catherine looked over at him. Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Vincent — are you all right?"

"Yes. Get some rest, Catherine."

"Did you have another nightmare?"

The concern was evident in her voice. Lying to her was useless. "Yes."

"Come over here."

Vincent shook his head slowly. "I just want to watch the two of you. I'll be fine."

"I love you," she responded.

"I know and I love you."

They looked deeply into each others eyes and allowed their feelings to flow freely through their bond. Vincent could feel her love and comfort begin to heal the wounds left by the horrible images of his nightmare. Her warmth filled him.

An hour or so later, Katie began to ask for breakfast and Catherine was wide awake. Jacob, however, was nowhere in sight.

"Vincent, why don't you take Katie and get her dressed for breakfast. Apparently, Jake is sleeping in. You might want to wake him."

Vincent stood slowly and took a moment to stretch his badly cramped muscles. Their morning routine had begun. He would dress the kids, take them to breakfast and then to the makeshift classroom that all the children attended. He would then see to any community business that required his attention. Later, he would teach a class then join Catherine and the children for the evening meal. Even as he thought about the day's plans, he wondered just how many more sleepless nights he could take. As he had learned before, the end result of the toll taken upon him could be tragic — for everyone.

Entering Jacob's chamber, Vincent was surprised to see his son had already dressed and was gone. *Maybe, he was with Catherine*, he speculated as he looked about the small chamber.

"Daddy, I'm hungry," Katie announced with a tug on her father's sleeve.

"I know, angel." He lifted her up into his arms. "Let's find your brother and fill that tummy of yours."

The little girl giggled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jacob had not gone to his parents' chamber. Vincent found him already in the dining chamber eating breakfast. Vincent and Katie sat down beside him.

"Son, why didn't you come by and see your mother?"

The little boy merely shrugged his shoulders.

"Jacob, I expect you to answer me when I ask you a question."

"I was hungry," he answered.

The fact that his son would not look at him when he spoke told him something was troubling the boy. Also, he felt a coldness in the child he had never felt before. "Is something wrong, Jacob?"

"No."

The answer was in contradiction to what Vincent was sensing. "Maybe you and I should go down to the falls and talk," he suggested. It was their favorite place for a father and son discussion.

"I have to go to class."

Before Vincent could respond, Katie demanded his attention and the opportunity slipped away.

That evening, a very tired Vincent made his way back to his chamber. When he walked in, he found Katie sitting on the bed with Catherine, her head lying on her mother's stomach. Jacob was across the room playing with his favorite truck.

"Do you hear anything?" he asked the little girl as he walked over and kissed Catherine.

"I think it wants to come out."

"Really?" Vincent asked.

Catherine laughed. "I'd really like for it to come out too but we can't hurry it. When it's ready, it will be born."

Katie sat up and looked at her mother. "After that, will you be okay again?"

Vincent noticed that Jacob stopped playing and was listening intently.

"After a few weeks, I'll be back to normal."

"You promise?"

"Yes — I promise."

Again, Vincent looked over at Jacob. He was sitting there staring at Catherine with the oddest expression on his face and his emotions.... He actually felt anger from the boy.

"Jake, why don't you come over here and feel the baby? It's moving around a lot," his mother suggested.

The anger grew more intense as the boy picked up his truck and started for the chamber entrance.

"Jake?" Catherine called to him.

"I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

"Jacob!" Vincent placed his hand on the boy's shoulder and turned him gently toward him.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." The boy pulled away from his father.

"Jacob!" Vincent was angry and confused by his son's rude behavior toward his mother. "You will say goodnight to your mother and sister in a proper manner."

Vincent could feel Catherine's confusion and sense of hurt. She and Jacob had always been close. He had always been protective and affectionate toward her. Tonight — he just didn't understand his son.

"No!" the boy responded adamantly then ran from the chamber.

After a quick look at Catherine's tear-filled eyes, Vincent went in pursuit of his son. It only took him a minute to catch him. "Jacob, how could you treat your mother so badly? Your behavior back there was rude and hurtful and it will not be tolerated. Your mother is not well. She doesn't need this. Tell me what is troubling you." The little boy wouldn't even look at him but Vincent could feel the turbulent emotions within him. Something was frightening him and he was reacting with anger. "Tell me, son."

"It's nothing," he finally answered.

Jacob was a lot like his father. He wasn't going to talk about it until he was ready and no amount of prompting would move him. Of that, Vincent was certain. "All right, son. Go to your chamber and get a good night's sleep. Maybe in the morning your attitude will be improved."

The boy turned to go.

"Jacob, I want you to think about something. Your mother loves you very much and your behavior tonight hurt her deeply. She didn't deserve your rudeness. I will talk to you about this in the morning."

"Yes, sir," Jacob replied then turned and ran to his chamber.

This turnabout in his son's behavior, his own fears about Catherine, the dreams, and the sleeplessness were wearing Vincent down fast. It almost made him long for the days when he and Catherine's love was chaste and a romantic evening was defined as a visit to her balcony.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Charlie entered his sister's chamber, she was sitting up in bed and she and Vincent were involved in a seemingly serious conversation. "Excuse me," he apologized. "I'll come back later."

Vincent stood. "No. Don't go. Maybe you can help."

"Sure — if I can."

Vincent's description of Jacob's behavior stunned Charlie. The child had always been very openly affectionate to his mother. He would even describe the boy as one who adored his mother. "That's really odd. But you know, we haven't given much thought as to how all this is affecting the children. I have an idea. Since he seems reluctant to talk to you, why don't you let me take him Above for an outing. Maybe I can get him to open up to someone who's not so close to the problem."

Catherine sighed and rubbed her stomach. "He won't even hug me. It's almost as if he were angry at me for something."

Vincent took Catherine's hand in his. He could feel how upset she was. "Maybe Charlie's idea will help. He doesn't seem to want to talk to us."

"Maybe — maybe, it will," Catherine agreed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Charlie and Jacob's outing began with a trip to Coney Island. Later, they picked up a pizza then headed for Charlie's apartment. As they wolfed down the food, Charlie decided to try to get the boy to reveal what was troubling him.

"Jake — are you mad at your mom'?" The boy's expression changed dramatically. "Did she do something? I know how moms can be sometimes."

"No — she didn't do anything."

"Then, what is it? Why are you so angry?" Charlie could almost see the anger rising in Jake. "Maybe I can help."

"You can't help! Nobody can. She's gonna die. That baby is going to kill her!"

Charlie sat back, stunned at Jacob's sudden outburst. "Why do you think that, Jake?" he asked as calmly as he could. He watched the anger in Jake's face change to fear.

"I had a dream." His body began to tremble. "The baby — killed Mommy. It cut its way out. She died! I hate it. It's going to take Mommy away from me."

Charlie began to understand the child's anger. It wasn't directed at Catherine but at the baby. "Is that why you don't want to get near your mother? Are you so afraid of losing her that you're trying to push her away? You think it will hurt less?"

Tears began to roll down Jake's cheeks and his body shook with sobs. "I don't want Mommy to die. I hate the baby."

The child's confession reminded him of something he had experienced a few years ago. He had gone through the same thing when his own mother had died. Once he realized the anger was at the disease instead of his mother, their last few months together had been spent making peace with each other and themselves.

He got up, walked over to Jacob then sat down and eased the boy into his lap. He held him until the trembling stopped. "It's okay, Jake. It's okay to be scared of something you don't understand but you can't go on hurting your mom. She thinks you're mad at her and when you love somebody like she loves you, that hurts."

"Jake, look at me." When the boy raised his head and looked at him, Charlie continued. "I know you. I know how much you love your mom. I also know that you're pulling away so that if you do lose her, it won't hurt so much. I'm telling you — it doesn't work. All you accomplish is spending the rest of your life regretting that you didn't make the most of the time you had left. Jake, don't do that to yourself or to your mom. She needs you now more than ever."

"I'm scared."

"I know you are. We all are. We all love your mother. If anything happened to her...." Charlie couldn't finish the thought.

"I guess it all comes down to this, Jake. We don't know what's going to happen. Your mom is having a rough time of it and we're doing all we can to help her. It's not her fault and it's not the baby's. There's no one to blame. All we can do is help your mom as best we can. From you, she needs at least one good hug a day."

"Uncle Charlie!"

"You know what I mean. I know this isn't easy for you but you should at least talk to her. Let her know how you feel. Talk to your dad too."

Later, as Charlie prepared to take Jake Below, he wondered if he had gotten through to him. He knew the boy's fears would not be totally eased until the child was born and Catherine was well on the road to recovery. He also knew that if Jake would openly discuss his fears with Catherine, they couldn't put any more distance between mother and son. However they worked it out, it had to be worked out. Cathy didn't need this — not now.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Vincent."

"Yes."

"If something happens to me...."

"Catherine, please...."

"No, I have to say this so please hear me out. If something happens to me, Jake will need you the most. Katie deals with things better. Jake will hide his feelings."

Vincent did not want to hear this, especially after the dreams he'd had. "Nothing will happen to you."

"Let's hope so but I need to say this just in case. I love you. You have been the best part of my life. I do not regret one single moment of the time we've been together."

Tears were burning Vincent's eyes as he fought to control his emotions.

"If I have to leave you in this life, I will be waiting for you in the next. I will always be with you and the kids. Vincent, I want you to raise them with all the love and courage that you gave me. Don't shut yourself off from life. Live as I would want you to and — don't be bitter."

Before Vincent could respond, Charlie announced his presence.

"May I come in?"

Vincent choked back the tears and tried to regain his composure. "Come in, Charlie."

Charlie came in and looked at each of them with concern. "If I'm interrupting something, I can come back later."

"No," Catherine answered. "Where's Jake?"

"I left him with Father. I wanted to speak with you first. I think I know what's really bothering Jake."

"What is it?" Vincent asked.

"He's convinced he's going to lose you Cathy, and he's blaming the baby. He's pulling away from you in an effort to make it hurt less."

"My God," Cathy responded. "We've all gotten so caught up in this, we've overlooked how it must be affecting the kids."

"Did he say why he's so convinced?" Vincent was almost sure of the answer but he wanted to hear it.

"Something about a dream."

"He must have shared my dream," Vincent mumbled quietly. It all made sense to him now. The change in Jacob became evident the morning after he'd had the nightmare. The dream had been a frightening experience for him and he could only imagine what effect it must have had on Jacob.

Catherine's concerned voice interrupted his train of thought. "What dream, Vincent?"

He looked at her anxiously. "I dreamed that you died in childbirth because — the child was like me. Catherine, do you remember the story Paracelsus told of my birth?"

Horror became visible in her eyes. "Yes I do, but that was a lie."

"Maybe, but that was the content of the dream. Our child killed you."

Charlie was now totally confused. "What the hell are you two talking about?"

"Catherine, you fill Charlie in. I need to talk to our son."

"Vincent — be careful how you handle this. I don't want either of you letting some nightmare, based on a lie, scare you so badly that it tears us apart."

"I'll send him to you once I've explained that." With that, Vincent left the chamber.

Charlie looked over at Catherine. "Okay, sis, give."

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent had not been gone all that long but, as helpless as Catherine was feeling, every minute seemed like an hour. She wanted to talk to Jake. She wanted to hold him and comfort him as best she could. The sound of small footsteps caught her attention and she looked up. She saw Jacob standing just inside the entrance staring at her with tears streaming down his face.

"I'm sorry, Mom. Don't leave me."

His plaintive plea tore at her heart. Tears gathered in her own eyes as she stretched her arms out to him. "Come here, baby."

The child timidly walked over to the bed and crawled up beside his mother. She enveloped him in her arms as he burrowed his face into her chest. She could feel his body trembling with every sob.

"Please don't leave me."

Catherine held him tightly. "I'm not going anywhere, Jake. I'll always be with you no matter what. Always know that. I love you and I need you to help me through this. Don't ever pull away from me again. I can't stand it. You're my baby." Her own sobs made the words difficult to form.

\* \* \* \* \*

The weeks passed quickly. The bond between Jacob and Catherine mended even though Vincent could sense that his son's resentment toward the baby was still simmering below the surface. He kept telling himself that time would heal that too. Meanwhile, Catherine's condition was deteriorating. Her face was pale and her cheeks looked hollow. There were dark circles beneath her eyes and her appetite was sporadic at best. Concern was mounting. His own fears were threatening his sanity as well. He battled the lingering effects of the continuous nightmares. He struggled to help Jacob deal with their shared dream images and his desperate concern for Catherine left him incapable of fulfilling even his simplest duty. His mind and heart were completely focused on her every breath.

She was sleeping more and more and becoming too weak physically to spend time with Jake and Katie and that depressed her. She was clearly frustrated, often moody, and, at times, distant. Sitting with her hour after hour took all Vincent's strength. His world was falling apart and he was helpless to prevent it. The kids suffered because of their parents' absence, he suffered because he felt hopelessly trapped in a world of pain and fear and words could not describe how Catherine was suffering. *Why?* he asked himself time after time.

He lowered his head into his hands and fought back the pain. He couldn't let Catherine feel it. She had enough to deal with these days. With one long, deep breath, he managed to get it under control — at least, for the moment.

"Vincent?"

He lifted his head quickly. "Yes."

"Why don't you go for a walk. I'm sure you need to stretch your legs a little."

"I'm fine. Can I get you anything?"

"No, but I would like you to take a break. Go check on the kids. I worry about them."

"Catherine...."

"Please, Vincent. I feel guilty about taking up all of your time. I'll be all right for a little while — really. If I need anything, I'll ring the bell." She picked up the small bell and gently shook it. "With your hearing, you could be a mile away and still hear it or sense that I needed you. Humor me. Spend a few minutes with the kids."

Although reluctant, Vincent finally gave in. He stood up slowly and felt every aching muscle in his body virtually scream in relief. Being on his feet did feel better. "All right, I'll see what the children are doing but you are not to move a muscle unless it is to ring that bell."

"I'm not in any condition to go exploring the caverns now am I?"

"No." He leaned over and kissed her gently. "I'll be back soon."

Catherine watched him leave then sighed. She could feel his concern, she felt it every hour of every day. She felt it, not only in Vincent, but Father, Charlie, the children, and everyone in the community. It was all getting to be too much. She was tired, weak, and anxious for this pregnancy to come to an end — a happy end.

She lay there for a while trying to clear her mind and relax but it wasn't working. *Oh well — I'll read for a while*, she decided. After looking around the bed, she spotted the book she wanted lying on the table. "Damn!" she swore. She debated for several minutes whether or not she should risk the few steps to the table and back. She was warned not to move a muscle, but it was only a few steps. *What would it hurt?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent took a few minutes to stop by Father's chamber where Jake, Katie, along with their Uncle Charlie, were giving their elder a rough time. "What am I missing?"

They all looked at him. "Daddy!" Katie exclaimed as she ran to her father. He lifted her up into his arms and held her high above his head. "How's my little angel?"

Her response was a delighted giggle.

"How's Catherine?" Charlie asked.

"She practically threw me out. I think she wanted a little privacy. She promised me she wouldn't move until I got back."

"I imagine she's getting awfully bored," Father commented. "I couldn't endure it."

"Catherine will endure anything for her children," Vincent responded as he hugged Katie then put her down.

As soon as Katie's feet touched the floor, Vincent felt it. Pain, anguish, and fear ripped through the bond nearly tearing him apart with its intensity. "Catherine!" he gasped as panic overcame him. His knees nearly buckled as he turned to run to her. "Catherine!" he screamed.

Charlie was close on Vincent's heels during the mad dash through the tunnel and Father was doing the best he could to keep up. In the few seconds it took Vincent to get to his chamber, the pain and anguish he had felt earlier had faded into a frightening nothingness. He was scared beyond words.

When he entered the chamber, he saw Catherine lying on the floor in a pool of blood. "Catherine!" Falling to his knees, Vincent gently turned her face toward him. It was ghostly pale.

Charlie arrived and moved quickly to where she lay. He touched her face tenderly as a brother then began to act as a physician. "She's hemorrhaging again."

Father arrived and heard Charlie's words. "My God!"

"Vincent — carry her to the hospital chamber. We need to round up every blood donor we can. NOW!"

The tone of Charlie's voice shocked Vincent into action. He put aside his own panic and focused on what he needed to do to help Catherine.

"Try to keep her legs elevated as much as you can," Charlie instructed.

Each step was pure agony for Vincent. He was afraid he had lost the woman he loved more than life and he couldn't move fast enough. The thought of her dying in his arms aroused a panic in him so intense it blotted out all reason. *The dreams were coming true.*

*Paracelsus was right. Catherine would pay the price for loving him. His child was ripping her apart as he had his own mother.* Tears blurred his vision.

He reached the hospital chamber and laid his precious bundle carefully on the table.

"Catherine, please don't leave me. I love you. I need you. Please don't die."

Charlie entered the area and began the preparations. Father and Mary arrived soon afterward. "Vincent — wait outside."

"No," he pleaded as the tears streamed down his face.

Father walked over and put his hands on his son's shoulder. "Let us do our jobs. Go to your children. They're frightened. They need you. Right now, Catherine needs us."

Vincent's hands were trembling as he touched Catherine's pale face. "I'm with you, Catherine. If you go — I go with you. Fight, Catherine."

Somehow, he managed to walk out of the chamber on his own but once outside, his legs simply gave way and he fell to his knees. He clasped his hands over his heart then tilted his head backward. The anguished roar that escaped him echoed through the tunnels.

Charlie heard the heart-wrenching roar and looked over at Father. The pain in that sob brought tears to both their eyes. And, as the sound echoed throughout the community, everyone who heard it stopped what they were doing and simply listened.

As Vincent sat in the tunnel just outside the hospital chamber, Jacob and Katie walked up to him. Without saying a word, Jake sat down beside his father and Katie sat down on the other side. They both cuddled close and, together, they waited.

Inside the surgical area, the activity was frantic. Mary, Father, and Charlie moved quickly to try to stabilize their patient.

"She's losing a lot of blood. Have the donations started?" Charlie asked.

"Yes. We have four people donating now and four are waiting." The calm in Mary's voice disguised the desperation she was feeling.



"We've got to do a C-section. We don't have a choice. If we don't get in there and stop the hemorrhaging, we're going to lose her."

Father sighed in defeat. "You're right. Mary, get Rebecca prepared to care for the child."

She left the area quickly and without comment.

Charlie looked over at Father again. "You'd better tell Vincent."

Father closed his eyes. Facing Vincent with this would take all his strength. "Watch her carefully. I'll be back and we'll begin the procedure."

As soon as Father saw Vincent and the children huddled together, it broke his heart. Their fear was clearly visible.

"Father — what is it? How is Catherine?" Vincent's voice betrayed his raw emotions.

Father took a deep breath. "We must operate and we must do it quickly. The bleeding must be stopped. Vincent — I don't know if the child is strong enough to survive...."

"Will Catherine survive if you do not take the child?" Vincent asked in a barely controlled voice.

The answer wasn't an easy one but the words had to be spoken. "...: No, Vincent."

"Then do what you must to save Catherine."

A look of mutual understanding was shared and then Father returned to the surgery area. A tear slid down Vincent's face as the children huddled closer offering their support and love.

Inside, Charlie stopped his preparations briefly to look down at his sister's face. He gently stroked her cheek with his finger and all her admonitions to save the baby came back to him. "I'm sorry, sis. You might hate me but I have to do what's right for you." Father's return ended Charlie's apology.

Father looked down at Catherine. "We'd better get started."

After the blood supply arrived and the IV's were set up, the surgery began. Mary monitored Catherine while Father and Charlie handled the surgery. Rebecca stood by, ready to take the child. The surgery preceded quickly and efficiently.

"My God!" Father exclaimed. "Look at the damage."

"We've got a lot of work to do," Charlie responded. "Let's try to stop these bleeders first."

Charlie watched as Father opened the uterus and the fetus came into view. "There it is. Let's get it out of there quickly."

Rebecca moved closer. Charlie's hands lifted the child as Father continued to free it. "It's a boy," he announced as he handed the child to Rebecca.

Father looked up. "Was it...."

"It's still a mess but — yes. It's like Vincent."

There was a brief look and a slight shake of Father's head. The work continued.

After most of the damage had been repaired and the surgeons were closing, the worst happened — Catherine's heart stopped beating.

"Father!" Mary screamed.

Charlie's reactions were swift. He jumped onto the table and began administering CPR while cursing the lack of any life support systems. "Come on, Cathy."

While Charlie struggled to restart her heart, Father administered the proper medications and searched for a pulse.

From the tunnel just outside the surgery area, a piercing scream was heard. "CATHERINE!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Pascal ran out into the tunnel and found Vincent sitting there in a trance-like state with the children gathered about him. "Vincent?"

Jacob looked up at Pascal. "He's gone after Mommy."

The child's answer alarmed Pascal. "Vincent - can you hear me?" There was no response.

"Leave him alone," Jacob ordered. "He has to bring Mommy back."

Knowing of the strange psychic bond that existed between Vincent, Catherine, and their children, Pascal accepted the child's answer but decided to stay close. Vincent was breathing and that reassured him, but he couldn't quell the unease rising in him about his friend.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent didn't know just where he was. All he knew was that he had come here in search of Catherine. He heard a sound and turned. Through the darkness and mist, he saw her walking toward a brilliant light. "Catherine!" he called out loudly. She didn't respond. He began running to her in slow motion. He caught up with her just beyond the outer edge of the light. He grabbed her shoulder and turned her around. "Don't leave me, Catherine."

"I don't want to, Vincent, but I don't have the strength to go on."

"Yes, you do — you have to for me and the children. We need you."

"I... I can't."

Both of his hands were now gripping her shoulders firmly. She felt so cold to his touch. "Yes, you can. We have endured so much together. We can endure this. I will take care of you. Please Catherine, I cannot live without you. I will not!"

"Yes, you will," she answered. "I leave the children in your care. The little one will need you the most."

"I need you, Catherine. They need you. You can't leave us."

"I'm just too tired to fight anymore."

"Then I will fight for you." He picked her up and held her tenderly in his arms. "You rest, Catherine. I will watch over you, care for you until your strength returns. Just — don't leave me."

She rested her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes.

In the surgery chamber, Charlie's arms were growing tired but he would not give up. "Come on, Cathy," he pleaded. "Stay with me."

"Wait a minute, Charlie."

Charlie stopped his efforts for a moment while Father checked for a pulse. Time was ticking away.

"There it is!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes! We've got a pulse!"

"Thank God," Charlie responded. He climbed off the table and checked for himself. A wide smile spread across his face when he felt a reasonably strong beat. "That's my girl, Cathy." A tear slid down his cheek as he kissed her forehead.

Father breathed a sigh of relief and joy. "Let's finish up here before any more trouble develops."

\* \* \* \* \*

Pascal was watching as Vincent moved then opened his eyes. "Are you all right, Vincent?"

He sat there for a moment trying to refocus his eyes. "Catherine is back." Father walked out into the passageway and Vincent quickly got to his feet. "Father?"

"We almost lost her but she's holding her own. She lost a lot of blood and the damage was extensive. We are not out of the woods yet. Her condition is grave."

"But she is alive?" Vincent responded.

"Yes. By the way, you have another son." The news brought no reaction. "Vincent, the child is like you just as Catherine believed." Father couldn't believe the lack of response from his son. "The child is in serious condition as well." Vincent just nodded.

"When can I see her?" he finally asked.

Father scratched his chin. "We need to get her settled into a cot in the hospital chamber then you can come in. Charlie is with her. Vincent, it may be some time before she comes out of this."

"As long as she's alive, Father, I can wait."

As soon as Father left, Vincent turned to the children and enveloped them in a hug.

\* \* \* \* \*

After leaving Catherine in Mary's care, Charlie paid a visit to the secluded area of the hospital where Rebecca had taken the baby. Now that he had done all he could for his sister, he decided it was time to turn his attention to her unique child.

"How's Catherine?" Rebecca asked as Charlie entered the chamber. "She's holding her own. How's junior?"

Rebecca smiled warmly at the inference. "I've bathed and dressed him. He's small and quiet but he seems to be completely developed. He's breathing on his own and his heartbeat is steady." She looked into the crib. "He's incredible."

Charlie walked over and took a look. The first time he had seen his new nephew, he didn't have time to take a close look now he stared in wonder. There, in the crib, was the most fascinating creature he had ever seen. The small infant had a head of thick reddish blond hair, his skin was a delicate pink, and his eyes were dark blue. His most striking features, however, were the tilted eyebrows, the high cheekbones, and the cleft upper lip. In his own way, he was a beautiful little boy. He immediately captured Charlie's heart and he now understood why Catherine was so determined to bring him into the world. He was truly a gift.

With gentle hands, he carefully examined the child then lifted him into his arms. "Your mother is going to spoil you rotten." The child wiggled weakly. "We'll give Cathy about a half hour or so and then we'll see if he'll nurse."

"Will she be awake?"

"I doubt it but he can still nurse. This little fellow needs a steady diet of mother's milk. Putting him on something else could create all kinds of problems." Reluctantly, he lowered him back into the crib. "Did you do his navel?"

"Yes, Father taught me how."

"Good job. Just watch for any signs of infection. I don't know if Father plans to circumcise him or not. Is Vincent..." His face turned red. "I'm sorry."

"Yes, he is," Father stated as he walked into the chamber. "As is Jacob." He walked over to the crib and looked in. "Oh my."

Charlie watched a soft expression ease the tense lines of the older man's face. He was clearly reminiscing.

"Hello there, young man. You look just like your father. Have you examined him yet?"

"Yes, briefly. He seems fine but a little underweight and lethargic."

"Vincent was the same way at first. Then he cried for several days. I think now it was some sort of abandonment trauma. We need to make sure this one has plenty of contact with his mother. Breastfeeding should prevent a lot of the trauma Vincent suffered."

"Father — Catherine's condition is grave. What if..."

"We'll do the best we can. You know how beneficial breastfeeding is to both mother and child. As long as Catherine is not adversely affected by it, we must do what we can to give the child a fighting chance. Make no mistake about it, Charlie, both Catherine and the baby are borderline at best. The bonding between them on even the most primitive level is what they both need."

Charlie nodded. He had learned not to question the strange connection this unusual family shared. "You're probably right. When is Vincent going to see his son?"

"I don't know. His main concern right now is Catherine."

The look on Father's face aroused Charlie's curiosity. Something wasn't right.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent walked into the chamber and over to Catherine's bedside. He dropped to his knees and gently took her hand. "Catherine — rest now. I'll look after you. Don't worry about anything. Everything is going to be fine." He brought her hand to his mouth and gently kissed it.

Charlie walked into the chamber and watched the tender scene. He was never more convinced that the man simply would not survive without Catherine. Picking up a chair, he walked over to the cot. "You might as well get comfortable."

At first, there was no response but finally, Vincent raised his head and looked at him. "How is she doing?"

"Her heart stopped on the table. We had to do CPR until it restarted. Vincent — the surgery we had to do was.... The damage to her uterus was extensive. There will be no more children." There was no immediate reaction to his statement.

After several minutes, Vincent finally spoke. "I had already made that vow. I would not have allowed the risk again. I was ready to do whatever was necessary even if it meant not ever touching her again. As long as she is well, the sacrifice would be worth it."

The words were alarmingly calm and Charlie studied Vincent's face to try to get a reading of his emotions. He couldn't.

"How long will she be like this?" Vincent asked.

"I don't know. She's in a coma. It could last an hour, a day, a week, or — years. There's no way to tell."

Vincent stroked her cheek. "She needs time to rest and heal. She'll be fine."

Charlie wanted to believe that with all his heart. He prayed Vincent was right. "You haven't asked about the baby."

Vincent didn't respond. He just continued to stare at Catherine.

"Your son is small but we think he's completely developed. We'll have to watch him closely though." There was still no obvious reaction. "Vincent...." Before Charlie could say anything else, Father walked in.

"It's time we tried to feed the baby," Father announced just before Rebecca walked in carrying a small bundle in her arms.

Vincent stood up quickly. "She's not well."

"Vincent, we have to do this," Father tried to explain. "Catherine would want this. You know that."

He stood there for a moment battling some internal demons then abruptly left the chamber.

"What was that all about?" Charlie asked. "What's wrong with him?"

"With my son, it's hard to say. Right now, however, we have a more important matter to take care of. This child needs some nourishment and some contact with his mother."

Mary came in and, between the four of them and after several frustrated attempts, they finally managed to get the child to nurse. After the feeding, both mother and child seemed to rest a little easier. Soon Vincent returned and continued his bedside vigil.

Just before Jake and Katie's bedtime, Mary brought them in to see their mother. Katie climbed up on the cot and wrapped her little arms around her unconscious mother. Jake stood stoically by his father.

"Why doesn't she wake up, Daddy'?" Katie asked.

"Your mother has been through a lot. She needs to rest. She's just sleeping, angel."

The little girl sat up and kissed her mother's cheek. "I love you, Mommy."

Vincent choked back a tear. "She loves you too, Katie."

"Daddy — can I see the baby'?"

He didn't know what to say. Thankfully, Mary took over.

"Of course you can. He's probably asleep so we have to be real quiet, okay?"

"Okay!"

The little girl took Mary's hand eagerly. "Jacob, are you coming?"

Jake remained by his father's side. "No," he finally responded.

Mary thought that both Vincent and Jacob were behaving oddly but, due to the stress everyone had been under, it was understandable although puzzling. "Maybe later, then. Come along, Katie."

As soon as they left the chamber, Jacob walked over and looked at Catherine closely. "Dad — is she going to die?"

"Your mother is resting. She will be fine." Despite his best efforts, his words sounded mechanical and unconvincing.

As the vigil continued, Vincent left the chamber each time the baby was brought in to nurse. The feelings raging inside of him shamed him but he could do nothing to defeat them. His whole being was so connected to that small, fragile woman lying on the cot that nothing could distract him — nothing, that is, except that small bundle Mary kept bringing in. That bundle seemed to draw all those shameful feelings to the surface. Within an hour, fatigue finally won the battle and Vincent eyes closed.

"Vincent!"

His tired eyes opened reluctantly at the sound. They focused on Mary's distraught face. "What.... What is it? What's wrong?" His eyes sought Catherine. She was still sleeping.

"The baby's gone!"

His mind was still clouded in an exhausted haze. "What?"

"The baby is not in his crib." Mary's panic was evident in her face.

"Maybe Charlie or Father has him."

"No, Father is sleeping and Charlie went back Above to get supplies for Catherine's care hours ago."

"Perhaps Rebecca...."

The lady in question walked into the chamber. "Rebecca – what?"

"Have you seen the baby?"

Mary's question shocked the young woman. "Not since I left a few hours ago. Why?"

Vincent stared at Catherine. He was sensing some emotions that he thought were coming from her. "The child is missing," he finally responded simply.

"Oh, my God!" exclaimed Rebecca

Sarah walked in holding Katie. "Is Jake here" she asked.

As soon as his son's name was spoken, a horrifying image formed in Vincent's mind. "No, Jacob. NO!"

Sarah, Rebecca and Mary watched in alarm as Vincent dashed from the chamber without a word of explanation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent's instincts drove him on. He wasn't consciously aware of where he was going only that each step was leading him closer to Jacob. Soon, he caught up with his wayward son. "Jacob!" he called out. The boy stopped in his tracks then turned toward his father. In his arms, he struggled to hold onto a bundle. Vincent stared in shock at his young son. "What are you doing?"

Jacob's eyes filled with tears and they nearly washed away the intense look of determination blazing there. "I'm taking him Above where someone will find him."

"Why?" Vincent asked. "He's your brother."

"He made Mommy sick. He hurt her when he was being born. If I take him away, Mommy will get better."

A sharp pang of guilt tore through Vincent. "That's not true, Jacob. You can't blame an innocent baby for your mother's condition."

Jacob looked down at the baby then back up at Vincent. "You do."

The truth of his son's words cut through him like a double edge sword and he fell to his knees in anguish. Jacob was right and he had never felt more ashamed in his life. "I am so sorry, son. I have betrayed everything I hold sacred and dishonored your mother's love. I...." The tears began to trickle down his cheeks.

"Dad?"

Vincent looked over at his son and the bundle he carried. "Jacob, your mother suffered greatly to give your brother life. She bore it with love for him. He is a part of her as you are. To lose him would break her heart. A part of her would die. To blame him is wrong."

"I don't want Mommy to die!" the boy cried.

"I don't either but taking the baby away will not change what destiny has in store for her. She is in God's hands. We must have faith and we must not cast aside the gift He has given us in your brother."

Jacob looked down at the baby again. "I'm sorry."

Vincent extended his open arms. "Give him to me and let's take him back to his mother."

Hesitantly, Jacob walked to his father and placed the baby in his arms. Vincent cradled the warm bundle against his chest and, for the first time, felt his new son's quivering presence in his heart. The small infant was crying out for his father's strength and Vincent could no longer deny it. This was Catherine's child, a part of her, and he could not help but love it. As gently as he could, he pulled aside the edges of the blanket and looked into the most endearing face he had ever seen. A smile teased the corners of his mouth as he gazed down at the child. The infant looked up at him with surprising calmness. He seemed to be drawing strength from the comfort of his father's arms.

"Let's go home, Jacob," Vincent finally managed to say. "Your mother will get well faster when she feels that her family is safe and well."

Jacob walked over and hugged his father. Vincent placed a kiss on the top of his son's head then stood up. After nestling the baby safely in one arm, he took Jacob's hand and, together, they walked back home.

Father studied Catherine as she lay motionless on the cot. *How will we survive if you don't?* he asked silently. He took a deep breath just as Vincent walked in leading Jacob by the hand and carrying the baby in his arms. "Vincent — what...."

"I'll explain it all later. Would you please excuse us. My sons and I would like some time alone with Catherine."

Father smiled. Whatever demons Vincent had been battling were apparently defeated. "It would be my pleasure. Call me if you need me," he said softly then left the chamber.

After Father left, Vincent walked over to the bed and looked down at Catherine then back to the infant in his arms. The child's features weren't quite as dramatic as his own and the more square set of his jaw was evidence of his resemblance to his mother. He smiled as he felt the bond between father and son grow stronger with every breath.

Very carefully, Vincent lowered the child onto the cot and placed it within the bend of Catherine's arm. He then placed her arm around the child. After sighing with relief, he sat down on the edge of the bed and savored the sight of the two of them. Jacob walked over and climbed onto his father's knee and Vincent held him lovingly.

How long they sat there like that, Vincent wasn't sure. Time passed by unnoticed until the baby began to whimper. The whimper grew quickly into a cry that Vincent recognized as one of hunger. His son was demanding a feeding and he was demanding it now. Just as Vincent was about to get up and seek help for the feeding, he felt a sudden change in his connection to Catherine. He watched and waited. As the baby's cries grew louder, the change in their bond became more turbulent. "Catherine'?"

The movements began first. The slight fluttering of the eyelids, the twitching in her arms and legs, and the more pronounced rise and fall of her chest signaled her struggle to awaken.

"Catherine — wake up. Open your eyes."

Although she was responding to his voice, he knew it was the baby's cries that were reaching her, drawing her back. "Come back, Catherine."

"Wake up, Mommy," Jacob encouraged.

Ever so slowly, Catherine's eyes began to open. She inhaled sharply when the light began to hurt her eyes. Vincent could tell she wanted to go back to sleep but the baby's insistent cries spurred her on. Finally, her eyes opened and she fought to focus them.

Tears filled Vincent's eyes and he felt a rebirth of hope in his heart. The dreams were not the foretelling of the future after all. They were simply the very real expression of his fears. His hand trembled as he reached over and stroked her cheek. "The baby needs feeding, Catherine. It's time you saw him. He's extraordinary just like you said he would be. You've got to see him, Catherine."

She responded immediately. Her eyes became clear and focused and her hands began searching for the child. When she encountered the squirming infant next to her, she turned her head toward him. A weak smile played gently across her face when her eyes found him. A trembling hand reached for him and moved the blanket aside.

Vincent heard her soft gasp as she looked at the now quiet baby who was, in turn, studying his mother. That vision would remain with him for the rest of his life. A tear slid down his cheek.

Catherine looked at the baby for the first time. She then turned to Vincent and said with great pride. "I told you he was like you."

"Yes, Catherine, you did. He's incredible."

"I love you, Mommy," Jacob said softly.

After taking a deep breath, Catherine lay her head back on her pillow then touched Jacob's arm. "I love you too, honey. Everything's going to be all right."

Her voice quivered and Vincent was reminded of just how weak she was. "Jacob, will you go get Mary and Father to help us with the feeding, please?"

Reluctantly, Jacob climbed down from his father's lap and stood by the bed looking down at his new brother.

"What do you think of him?" Catherine asked.

Jacob shrugged his shoulders. "He's okay." He then looked up at Catherine. "I'm glad you're all right, Mommy. I was scared."

"So was I," She answered in a weak voice.

The little boy leaned over and kissed her cheek then ran out of the chamber. A few minutes later, Mary and Father hurried in. Mary rushed over to the bedside first.

"We heard the good news, Welcome back, dear."

"The baby needs feeding," Catherine responded.

"I see. Well — we'll just have to remedy that won't we?"

The already established routine was repeated with the help of Vincent this time. Instead of bolting from the chamber, he supported Catherine as Mary positioned the infant. He watched with interest as his son fastened his mouth onto Catherine's nipple and began sucking deeply. He heard a contented sigh escape her as she watched the child ease his hunger. After the feeding, both mother and child fell into an exhausted slumber and the baby was placed in a crib by Catherine's bedside. While they both slept, Vincent brought Katie in to see her brother again. She sat in her father's lap and stared down into the crib.

"Hello there, Katie."

"Mommy!" Katie crawled out of Vincent's lap and onto the bed beside her mother. She gave her a big wet kiss. "I love you, Mommy."

"I love you too, baby."

"Are you going to be all right now?"

"You bet. I just need time to get well."

"Speaking of which Katie, your mother needs to rest. You can come back in the morning."

"Promise, Daddy'?"

"Promise. Now — off to bed with you."

Katie kissed her mother again then crawled off the bed.

Vincent leaned over and kissed her. "Do you want me to walk you back to your chamber?"

"No, Daddy. I'm a big girl now. I have a baby brother."

Both Vincent and Catherine laughed as Katie left the chamber.

"At least I'll have plenty of help."

"Maybe," Vincent replied.

"Vincent — what happened to me? I know I had surgery."

"Are you in pain?"

"Some — when I move around, but Father's given me something to help. What did they do — a Caesarian?"

"Yes — and...."

"And what?"

Vincent stared down at his hand wishing the subject had never come up. "Perhaps Charlie or Father should explain this to you."

"No. I would prefer to hear it from you."

"I cannot give you the proper medical definitions...."

"Just cut to the chase, Vincent."

He took a deep breath. "There was damage to the uterus. You were hemorrhaging badly. Catherine — your heart stopped on the table. Charlie had to resuscitate you."

She closed her eyes to avoid seeing the pain in Vincent's.

"Until they told me you were all right was an eternity. I've never been more frightened in my life."

"I don't remember anything. How long have I been unconscious?"

"For several days. I've lost count myself."

"There's more, isn't there'?" she asked.

The moment had come for the truth. "Charlie can tell you exactly what was done but...."

"But what? Tell me."

"There is no easy way to say this. Catherine — there will be no more children."

She stared at him blankly for a moment. "Cannot be or should not be?"

"Cannot be." Vincent saw her wince in pain as she lowered her head. "I suspected as much."

He reached over and took her hand gently in his. "Are you all right?"

"I will be. I guess all that matters is that the baby is all right and I'm going to be around to watch all three of them grow up."

"We all need you, Catherine. I wouldn't want to live without you."

She looked up at him and smiled. "I haven't forgotten you. I'm glad I'm going to be around to grow old with you. I couldn't stand the thought of you taking up with some other woman when I'm gone."

"Catherine — I would not...." Her laughter ended his protests.

"Please — it hurts to laugh," she finally admitted.



The sound of her laughter was a balm to Vincent's battered soul. "You're not disappointed?" "I was planning to have my tubes tied anyway. Three kids are enough and this one will need a lot of extra attention from both of us. Are you disappointed?"

"We made that decision when I had the vasectomy. I will agree to anything that will ensure your health and happiness. I am happy with the family we have."

Catherine looked down at the sleeping child then over at Vincent. "He was worth it, you know."

Vincent didn't answer.

"Vincent, his being like you didn't cause all this. The problems I've had are not uncommon. I will not let you blame him or have you believe that story Paracelsus told you about your birth. Put the past behind you. You've got three kids to look after."

He could see the weariness in her eyes. "You need to rest, Catherine. Know that I love you. Know that I love each of our children. I will protect and guide them as long as I live. We have endured and survived the worst of it. Everything from now on will be fine. As long as I have you, my life is complete."

Her eyes were closing as he spoke. "I love you," she whispered as sleep claimed her.

Vincent sat back and stared at her peaceful face. The words were true but his own convictions had been tested beyond their limits. He now questioned the strength of his beliefs. As doubt filled him, Blake's words came back to haunt him.

*"To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an Hour"*

Those beautiful words now held a much deeper meaning for him. He sat back and said a prayer of thanks and made a promise.

Finis