

IMAGES

by Sandy P Shelton

(from All Things Are Possible VII)

Vincent often thought the darkness within him had no equal. The horrors he saw humanity heap upon humanity paled in the light of the carnage he could inflict when lost in that darkness. He didn't realize that beyond the darkness was a madness so vile and so deadly that it escaped all comprehension. He was also about to learn that the darkness in some men held more terror than he could imagine.

Both Vincent and Catherine were on Charlie's mind as he lay on the uncomfortable cot in the interns' lounge. He was supposed to be catching a few winks between shifts but he could not rest. In the weeks since Cassie's death, sleep, when it came, was often haunted by frightening images followed by feelings of guilt and overwhelming grief. Often, during that time, he had come close to forsaking the troubled world that had destroyed Cassie and retreating to the safe haven of the community Below. It was an inner debate that continued.

One of his arguments for making that move was Catherine. She was experiencing an extremely difficult pregnancy with limited medical aid. It wasn't that Father was negligent by any means. The man was completely devoted to his patient. Charlie's concerns were the primitive surroundings and Father's lack of training in the latest advancements in prenatal care. "Damn!" he swore. He wished he could bring her Above and check her into St. Vincent's. Shaking his head, he realized the impossibility of that.

Charlie had to find consolation in the fact that Catherine's condition had improved over the last few weeks. Her blood pressure had leveled off, the dizziness had not recurred, and the puffiness in her face and ankles had decreased greatly. As of yet, there had been no bleeding and the baby's movements were strong. They were all encouraging signs that perhaps she could carry this baby long enough to give it a fighting chance. But even that issue was uncertain. Catherine was only a little over four months into her pregnancy but looked and had the symptoms of someone well into her sixth month. The gestation periods for her children had varied so much, they could not be certain just where in the actual pregnancy she was.

That familiar tension headache came back as he tried to apply some logic to a completely illogical situation. *Why couldn't his sister have fallen in love and married some perfectly boring but completely normal accountant?* The image of Vincent in a business suit and tie brought a smile to his face and temporarily eased his headache.

As he rubbed his temples, his eyes focused on the calendar hanging on the wall at the foot of the cot. It was Thanksgiving. Below, everyone would soon be gathering for a community celebration. Father had even promised Catherine she could attend under strict supervision. A part of him wanted to share that traditionally family holiday with her, but the other part could not bear the absence of Cassie. A great sadness filled his heart as he thought about what might have been. His thoughts were disrupted when the resident on duty pushed the door open.

"On your feet, Hamilton. We need all hands in the E.R."

Charlie got to his feet quickly feeling almost grateful for the interruption. "What's up?"

"Someone set off a bomb during the Thanksgiving Day Parade. Every hospital in the area is going to be swamped." The resident hurriedly led Charlie down the hall.

As they rushed toward the E.R., Charlie continued his questioning. "Just how bad is it?"

The resident stopped suddenly and turned to Charlie. "Some son-of-a-bitch set off a car bomb at the exact time the streets were full with people — mostly kids. It doesn't get any worse than that. You'd better brace yourself. You're going to see some of the worst injuries you've ever treated. Some of these people are going to come in here in so many parts you won't know where to start stitching. And, in a lot of cases, there won't be a damn thing you can do for them."

The resident turned and continued his frantic pace down the hall. Charlie followed with his stomach in one big knot.

Below, the sudden boom shook the very walls of the hidden community. There were screams and confused shouts as everyone sought shelter from the downpour of dirt and dust.

Vincent and Catherine had been seated at the head table with Jake and Katie between them. Vincent was helping Jake cut up his portion of turkey and Catherine was trying to cajole Katie into eating her vegetables when the deafening boom reverberated all around them. Before Catherine could even open her mouth, Vincent had grabbed the children and pushed them under the table. He managed to get her on the floor as best he could then used his own body to shield her from the falling debris.

When the shaking finally stopped, it took several minutes before anyone could regain their senses enough to speak. William peeped out from under one of the heavy tables. "What the hell was that?" The question went unanswered as one by one his fellow residents crawled out of their temporary shelters.

Vincent straightened up slowly. "Are you all right, Catherine?"

"I think so," she answered in a quivering voice. "Jake! Katie!"

The two children had been gathered up in Vincent's right arm and were being held tightly to him. They were huddled together in their father's protective embrace.

"Mommy..." Katie began to cry.

Catherine pulled her daughter into her arms and tried to comfort her. "Jake, are you okay?" she asked as she checked Katie for injuries. She had never seen her son more frightened. He crawled over to her and snuggled up against her side. She put her other arm around him and held him close.

They seemed to be all right as far as Vincent could tell. The children were frightened but unhurt. He leaned forward and placed a hand on Catherine's stomach. "Are you sure everything is all right? You didn't injure yourself when I pushed you down did you?"

"No. I don't think so. I don't feel any pain and I'm not bleeding. I'm just relieved that you and the kids are all right. Was anyone else hurt?"

For the first time since the unexplained boom, Vincent began to look around. No one appeared to be seriously hurt. "I think everyone down here escaped injury." He looked up and studied the ceiling. "We'll need to check on the lookouts then begin assessing the damage." A hand on his shoulder interrupted his train of thought. "Father?"

Father peered beneath the table. "Is everyone all right here?"

"Yes," Catherine answered. "We're all a little shaky but we're not hurt."

"Good. As soon as possible, Catherine, I want you to lie down and let me check your blood pressure. Please don't exert yourself. Try to stay calm for the baby's sake."

"We'll do our best," she replied as she continued to hold Jake and Katie as close to her as possible.

Vincent took one last look at his family then stood beside Father. Since no one seemed to be seriously injured, his attention turned to the condition of the tunnels and caverns. "We'd better keep everyone here until search parties can determine the extent of the damage."

"I agree," Father responded.

After helping Catherine out from under the table, Vincent guided her over to a comfortable chair. He knelt down beside her and began searching their bond for any sign of distress. "I don't want to leave you."

"I won't be alone. You have things to do. The children and I will be fine." She leaned over and kissed his cheek "Don't worry about us."

Her smile comforted him. Gently, he wiped the dust from her cheek. "That will never happen," he responded then returned her kiss.

"Jacob, look after your mother and sister until I return."

"I want to go with you," the boy protested. "I want to help."

"I know and I appreciate that but, right now, you are needed here. Knowing that you are here protecting your mother and sister will help me more than I can say. Please — do this for me."

Reluctantly, the young boy agreed. "Okay."

Vincent tousled his son's reddish-blond hair. "Thank you, Jacob." He then kissed the top of Katie's head. "Don't be afraid, angel. Everything is going to be fine."

"Be careful," Catherine whispered. "Come back to us."

He gave her one last lingering look then turned his attention to the emergency at hand.

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Charlie had lost track of how many hours he had been on his feet treating some of the most horrendous injuries he had ever seen. But what made it even worse was the senselessness of it all. Whoever masterminded the bombing wanted to kill or maim as many people as possible. From what Charlie had seen so far, his plan had succeeded.

Just as he was about to take a break, a slender, dark-haired man walked into the E.R. carrying a badly injured child in his arms. "I need help over here," he called out. The resident in charge and two nurses surrounded him and took the child from his arms.

"Hamilton, take care of this man," the resident instructed.

His new patient watched as the nurses guided the gurney with the child on it toward the Intensive Care Unit. From what Charlie could see, the child was critical. He turned his attention to the man who had brought her in. "Come in here and let me check you over."

"The little girl — will she make it?" the dark-haired man asked.

Charlie found himself deeply touched by the man's concern. "Is she your child?" he asked.

"No. I just found her."

The man's face grew pale and he swayed unsteadily. Charlie grabbed his arm and guided him to an examination room. "Lie down for a while."

"I'm all right." A strong hand on the center of his chest forced him back down.

"That's for me to decide."

"I need to get out of here."

"You're not going anywhere until I'm sure you're all right," Charlie responded.

The man's dark eyes focused on him and Charlie could see the shock and, pain of what they had seen. "What's your name?" he asked.

"It's - Devin Wells."

"Do you have anyone you would like for us to call? Any family at all?"

The man thought about it for a minute then answered. "Catherine Chandler. I need to call Catherine Chandler."

Charlie raised his eyebrows and stared at the man. "Catherine Chandler?"

"Yes," the man stammered with uncertainty. "She's my - half-sister."

"Really?" Charlie asked as he folded his arms across his chest. "That's really interesting. She never told me we had a brother."

"What? What the hell are you talking about?"

"What the hell are you talking about? Catherine Chandler is my half-sister. I think she would have mentioned another sibling," Charlie responded angrily.

His patient studied him carefully. "Have you met her husband?"

The expression on his face told Charlie that this stranger was trying to find out just what he knew. He had to be careful. "Yes. Vincent's a real pussycat of a guy."

The man's expression didn't change for a few seconds but then, suddenly, he broke out in laughter. "You've met him!"

"Now - tell me who you really are," Charlie prompted him.

"The name is for real but Vincent is my adopted brother."

"Adopted?"

"If you've met Vincent then you've probably met Father."

"Yes."

"Jacob Wells, Father, is my biological father. I guess you've heard Vincent's story?"

Charlie took a couple of steps backward. Having someone Above who knew about the community Below, other than Catherine, was a little unsettling. "I don't remember him ever mentioning you."

"Figures. I'm the black sheep of the family." He shook his head then looked up at Charlie. "I bet the two of you have a lot in common."

"Especially now," Charlie laughed.

"Why now?"

"Cathy's pregnancy...."

"What? She's pregnant again? Damn!"

That response triggered a hearty laugh from Charlie. It was the first time he had laughed in — he couldn't remember when.

"I think my little brother is trying to keep Ms. D.A. barefoot and pregnant."

"Barefoot would have been better," Charlie responded.

"Is something wrong?"

Charlie debated the wisdom of discussing the situation with someone he hardly knew but he had already said too much. To assure confidentiality and to prepare him, he decided it best to tell all. "She's having an extremely difficult pregnancy."

"I don't like the sound of that," Devin replied. "Maybe you'd better tell me what's going on."

After bringing Devin up to speed, Charlie gave him a little time to assimilate it all. "I don't want you discussing any of what I've told you with them," he warned. "They're both worried enough already."

"Do they have any idea how serious it is?"

"Of course they do. Vincent wanted her to terminate the pregnancy but she adamantly refused. She's convinced the child is like him and she's obsessed with its survival."

"That figures. What's your spin on it? Can it survive without killing Cathy?"

"I don't know," Charlie finally admitted.

"I bet Vincent and the old man are at each other's throats. Father never wanted Vincent to even think about sex. I bet he's using this to prove his point."

"If he is, I haven't seen it. They're both worried sick about Cathy. In a way, it's drawn us together."

Devin sat up on the examination table. "All that going on Below and now this."

"Yeah. Do you want to tell me what happened?" Charlie asked.

"I was coming home to spend the holidays. I had started down an alley where I knew of an entrance to the tunnels when the bomb went off. I was thrown against a building. When I came to, people were hysterical. They were running in every direction — panic-stricken. I've never seen anything like it. They were running over each other trying to get away. That's when I found the little girl. She was trapped beneath the debris. I dug her out and brought her here."

"From what I can tell, you're not seriously hurt. It looks like minor cuts and bruises. Tomorrow, you're going to be terribly sore. You might want to stay here overnight."

"No," Devin answered. "I have to get Below."

"I guess you would be just as well off there."

"It's not that. That bomb went off over one of the sewer connections. The impact of it was felt Below I can guarantee you. I also have to talk to Vincent. I think I know who did this."

"Then why don't you tell the police?"

"It's complicated and I don't have time to get into it right now. I want to talk to Vincent first."

"Mr Wells!"

"Look — Dr. Hamilton, I lived in those tunnels until I was a teenager. I know them and I know the code those people live by. What I saw today affects them. It's something they will have to deal with — not the police. By the way, call me Devin."

"Since we're brothers, you can call me Charlie."

"Okay, Charlie, I'm out of here." Devin winced as he stood. "Could you do me a favor?"

"I suppose," Charlie responded.

"Could you find out how the little girl is?"

"Sure. Wait here."

Devin used the time to wash his face and hands. When Charlie returned, he was almost presentable. "Well?"

Charlie shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry. She didn't make it."

Devin felt as if someone had hit him in the stomach with a baseball bat. His shock quickly turned to anger. "Damn it! How could anyone do this?"

"I also heard that the fatality count is at forty-eight and growing by the minute — and the injuries.... If you know who did this...."

"I'll see you later. I have things to do."

Stunned, Charlie watched as Devin hurriedly left the examining room.

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Vincent was carefully making his way toward the impact point of the explosion. Luckily, the damage he had seen so far wasn't anything that could not be fixed. They would have to block off the section while the city crews made the repairs but the tunnels involved were not essential to the community. All in all, they had survived the crisis in good shape.

Just as he was about to turn back, his sensitive nose picked up the faint smell of smoke and dust. He was nearing the explosion site. With every step, the smoke became so heavy, his eyes burned and his lungs struggled to function. The dust obliterated every ray of light until even Vincent's keen sight could not distinguish the shapes. Believing there was no reason to continue, Vincent stopped and simply listened. The devastation was horrendous. *What could have caused such destruction?*

As he stared into the darkness, a faint whimper broke the silence. Turning quickly, he soon determined the direction from which it came then began moving toward it. He stumbled over debris as he made his way into the very heart of the destruction. Just ahead of him, he could see a few rays of light making their way around a huge concrete slab. Vincent stopped in his tracks. All of his old fears of the daylight surfaced but the anguished moan he heard pushed aside those fears.

He managed to squeeze through the narrow opening between the slab and the wall. The crevice was hard to negotiate but stepping through into the intense light beaming down from the gaping hole in the street nearly sent him scurrying back. The sight of it was overpowering. Rays of light broke through the dust like the beams of a thousand flashlights. Huge concrete slabs and steel beams lay crushed and twisted like a child's discarded set of building blocks.

Vincent stepped back and surveyed his surroundings. It was the worst disaster he had ever seen. He was so totally caught up in viewing the enormous amount of destruction; the scream that broke the silence caught him totally off guard. Leaping defensively into the shadows, he peered around the crater seeking the source of the sound.

Putting all his keen senses to work, Vincent detected some movement and sound coming from underneath a mound of debris. The sound was human. He had been seen. As he turned to flee into the safety of the tunnels, a plaintive cry stopped him.

"Please — don't leave me."

Vincent stopped. Every fiber of his being was screaming at him to run as fast and as far as he could — but yet, he could not move. He could not turn his back on someone in need even if it meant risking his own safety. Slowly, he turned around and began walking toward the pile of debris.

"Help me, please."

The voice belonged to a woman. Vincent could hear the fear and pain as she pleaded.

"I'm trapped. Don't leave me to die. Please!"

"Are you hurt?" Vincent asked in the softest, most reassuring tone he could muster.

"I — can't feel anything. I'm trapped under this support. I need your help."

"The rescue crews will be here soon." Vincent could hear her sobbing.

"It could be hours. It could all cave in on me!"

"Don't be afraid. I won't leave you." He took a deep breath. There was no way he could remove the debris without her getting a really good look at him. "Before I come closer, you must know that I am — different. My appearance might frighten you."

There was a few seconds of silence. "I know. I saw you in the light."

In Vincent's heart, he knew that was the reason for the scream. "You have nothing to fear from me," he tried to reassure her. An uneasy moment of silence passed as he awaited her response.

"I'm so scared."

"I know. You must try to be strong."

"Do you think you can get me out?"

Vincent studied the debris closely. He wasn't sure that even his superior strength could budge the concrete. "I don't know. I'm concerned that more debris will fall."

"You've got to do something! I can't stand it much longer."

"All right. Do you think you can crawl out if I can lift the support a little?"

"I'll try."

"Lifting the support may cause more pain." He was doing his best to prepare her. "I might not be able to lift it."

"All you can do is try."

Cautiously, Vincent stepped forward. She could see him clearly now. "What is your name?"

"Kathy."

Vincent sighed softly. "My wife's name is Catherine. Her friends call her Cathy."

"Your wife?"

Her incredulous tone of voice was nothing new to Vincent. Each time he told someone, the reaction was the same. "Yes, I have a wife and two — no, three children. My wife is carrying our third child." The conversation was meant to focus her attention on something other than the work he had begun.

"I'm surprised you.... I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I was surprised too."

"Are your children — like you?"

"The two oldest look like their mother. We don't know about the third one yet." He gave her a moment to think about that then returned to the problem at hand. "I'm going to try to lift the support. If you can, pull yourself clear of it. I can't hold it for long, so you'll have to move quickly."

"I understand," she responded.

"Are you ready?"

She took a deep breath then nodded.

Vincent took a deep breath of his own and focused every fiber of his being on the task of lifting the concrete slab. With a firm grip and straining muscles, the battle of brawn versus concrete began. His heart pounded furiously in response to the stress. His arms, his back and his legs quivered as they fought to move the heavy slab. Just as his body was reaching its breaking point, the woman began to pull herself free. Vincent could sense her pain as she struggled to free herself. "Hurry," he groaned as the quivering muscles in his arms threatened his grip on the slab.

The moment her legs were clear of the slab, Vincent's grip failed and the slab crashed down. Dust, once again, filled the air making a clear view impossible. "Are you all right?" he called out.

"I made it." Her voice betrayed her fear.

It took a few seconds for the dust to settle enough for Vincent to distinguish shapes in the darkness. His eyes strained to find the one thing he was praying to see. Gradually, he could see her lying in a fetal position just beyond the slab. Quickly, he rushed to her side. "How badly are you hurt?"

"I think my leg's broken. I...."

The abrupt halt in her response caused Vincent to look at her face. She was staring at him in shock. He quickly turned his face away and retreated a little from her.

"I didn't mean to stare."

"I understand," Vincent responded as he moved further away.

"You saved my life. How can I ever thank you?"

"You just did. Rescue parties will be here soon. I'll make sure they know someone is...."

In his attempt to move into the darker regions of the crater, Vincent had continued to move as he talked. Words failed him, however, when his foot made contact with something and he looked down. What he saw lying in the scorched debris took away his words and his breath. His stomach churned and his heart ached. His shock soon turned to rage and it took all his strength not to strike out at anything in his path.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

The sound of her voice refocused his attention. He stepped away quickly and tried to regain his composure. All he really wanted to do was run as far away from this place as he could get. "Nothing."

Before she could respond, voices coming from the edge of the crater startled them both. "I'm down here," she called out at the top of her lungs.

Vincent stepped back into the shadows. "I must go."

"Wait."

He turned.

"Thank you. I won't tell them about you. I promise."

Giving her a warm smile and a brief nod, he responded. "Be well."

He now did what he had wanted to do moments before. He turned and ran at top speed through the passageways until the terrain became familiar. When he neared what he knew to be the main center of the community, he stopped to catch his breath. Nothing, however, could erase the image of what he had seen. For as long as he lived, that image would be with him.

The anger Devin felt was fast turning into rage with every step he took. That anger, mixed with the fear of what he might find Below, clouded his mind and his vision. He didn't see or hear the man who grabbed his arm and spun him around.

"Didn't you hear me?"

"Who the.... I remember you. You're Joe Maxwell from the D.A.'s office."

"That's right. What are you doing here? I thought you left New York."

Before Devin could make up some kind of response, Charlie caught up with them.

"You shouldn't walk out before your doctor releases you." He turned to Joe. "Joe Maxwell, I believe. I'm Cathy's brother."

"Oh yeah. I remember. How's Cathy?"

"She's doing — all right," Charlie replied cautiously. He was hoping Devin wouldn't let anything slip.

"Look, you guys can stand here and chat all day but I've got things to do," Devin announced.

Charlie grabbed his arm. "Hold on. Joe, are you investigating this?"

"Everybody is on this one."

Charlie looked over at Devin.

"What's your connection to this guy?" Joe asked Charlie.

"He's my patient."

"Oh."

The look on Joe's face told Charlie there was something between these two he didn't know about. And, for some reason, Devin didn't want to discuss what he had seen with him. "I need to speak to my patient. It was nice to see you, Joe. I hope you find out who did this."

"Don't worry," Joe answered. "Oh. Tell Cathy I'd love to see her or hear from her. Tell her that if she needs me...."

"She knows." Charlie noticed the play of emotions in Joe's eyes when he talked about Cathy.

"Later," Joe said just before he turned and walked away.

As soon as he was beyond hearing them, Devin pulled his arm away. "What's the deal?"

Charlie studied Devin a moment. "We don't have time to get into it now. I have a feeling we both have secrets we need to keep from Joe Maxwell."

"No doubt. I've got to get Below."

"Fine," Charlie responded. "I'm going with you."

"You're needed here."

"Volunteers are coming in from everywhere. We interns are no longer needed. They might need me more Below."

Devin shook his head. "You are Cathy's brother. Okay, let's go."

* * * * *

When Vincent returned to the chamber where everyone had gathered, all he wanted to do was hold his family. He kissed Catherine, gathered both Jacob and Mary Catherine in his arms, then simply held them as close as he could get them.

Catherine knew what Vincent's silence and his need to touch his family meant. Something he had seen or heard had affected him deeply. Just what that was, he wasn't prepared to share with her yet. All she could do was offer comfort until he was ready to talk.

They sat there for some time in silence. Only the sound of hurried footsteps and familiar voices dispelled the atmosphere of fear. Catherine looked up and saw Charlie rushing toward her followed by Devin. When he reached her, he knelt beside her. "Are you all right?"

Playfully, she mussed his blond hair. "I'm just fine, baby brother."

"Thank God," he responded as he hugged her. "I see Vincent and the kids are okay."

"Yes. Luckily, we didn't have any major injuries or damage. How are things Above?"

Charlie sat back on his heels and debated what he should tell her. "The people Above weren't so lucky. It was a car bomb parked on a street near the parade route. The fatality count is going to be high."

"Oh my God," Catherine moaned. "Do they have suspects?"

"I don't think so," Devin spoke up. He had been watching Vincent as he sat in stoic silence. He knew that look. "Your friend Joe is on the case as well as every federal agency around."

"How did you get here, Devin?" Catherine asked.

"I was coming for a visit. And you know me — always in the wrong place at the wrong time. I met your little brother here at the hospital."

"How...." Catherine began.

"It's a long story best saved for later," Devin commented. He looked down at Catherine's stomach then gently patted it. "I see you two have been at it again. One of these days, you're going to figure out what causes this and...."

Catherine smiled. "And what? Stop? I don't think so."

Devin chuckled then looked over at Vincent. "You and I have to talk, brother."

At first, Vincent didn't respond. He just sat there holding his children close. Devin moved closer and made eye contact with him. "Vincent, we have to talk — now."

Devin's direct approach seemed to work. Vincent carefully placed his children close to Catherine then stood.

"If this concerns the bombing, Devin, perhaps we should all hear it," Father suggested. Devin turned and smiled. "It's a brother thing," he replied.

"If I didn't know better, I'd swear you two were kids again and plotting some prank." Father remembered those times well.

"It's nothing like that. Come on, Vincent." Devin literally began guiding him away from the others.

"I'm coming too," Charlie announced.

"I don't think..."

"You said it was a brother thing. You didn't specify whose brother."

The kid had as much spirit as his sister and he had to admit, he was beginning to like him.

"Oh hell. Why not?"

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Sometime later, the three men gathered in the privacy of Vincent's chamber. Vincent stared down at his hands as he sat on the bed he had shared with Catherine. Charlie sat in a chair at the table and watched as Devin paced back and forth. Finally Vincent looked up.

"What is it, Devin?" he asked.

Devin stopped his pacing and looked at his brother. "The bastards who did this escaped into the tunnels."

Vincent jumped to his feet. "What are you saying — that one of our people...."

"One of our former citizens. I recognized him. It was Jeff Mahoney."

"Jeff? He hasn't been a member of this community in years. Are you sure?" Vincent inquired.

"Oh — I'm sure. That birthmark on his cheek was proof enough for me. The other man, I didn't recognize."

Vincent could not shake the image of what he had seen from his mind. The thought that someone who had once been a part of them and knew so much about them could do such a thing terrified him. "They escaped into the tunnels? You are sure of it?" When Devin nodded his answer, Vincent groaned in anger. "We must find them."

Up until that moment, Charlie had been listening in silence. "What do you mean find them? This is a job for the police," he argued.

"We can't have the police searching the tunnels. We can't take the risk." Vincent responded. "Because we live separately from those Above, we have had to develop our own system of justice," he explained. "It is as fair as we can make it but even it has its limits."

"What happens when you reach those limits?"

"Then we must do whatever is necessary to protect the community." Vincent's answer was based on the reality he had grown up with.

Charlie studied Vincent's expression carefully. "It's the *whatever* that bothers me. It sounds a lot like a bunch of vigilantes."

"Believe me, Charlie; this community does not make rash decisions. Everything here is usually discussed to death before any action is taken. The problem is, we can't wait for a council meeting in this case." Devin walked over and stood in front of Vincent. "You know I'm right. It's you and me, brother."

"Yes," Vincent agreed.

"I'm going with you," Charlie stated as he stood up.

"This is not your fight, Charlie," Devin responded.

"You tell me there's a pair of kooks running around down here with enough explosives to blow up a city block and expect me not to care? All the family I have left lives in these tunnels. I can't walk away from this. I won't."

Vincent moved around Devin and stood in front of Charlie. "If something happens, Catherine will need you here."

"If something happens, you two macho types might need a doctor."

Devin looked over at his brother and shrugged. It was going to be Vincent's decision. "Maybe, if he goes, Catherine and Father won't be so worried that we're off on one of our adventures. They both believe he's too level-headed for that."

With a great deal of doubt, Vincent finally gave in. "All right."

"What do we tell the others," Charlie asked.

"As much as I hate to lie to Catherine, I have no choice. We will tell them that we are checking for structural damage around the impact site and beyond."

Without another word, Vincent turned and walked through the chamber's entrance. Charlie watched him thoughtfully. "You know him better than I. Is he all right?"

"Something's bugging him other than the obvious. I did think he agreed to my little mission just a little too easily. Well — we'd better get moving. I'll get together the supplies. You get your things together and meet us where we just left everyone. We'll leave from there."

Catherine's stomach was churning again. Despite every precaution they had taken, she felt miserable. *Re/ax*, she kept telling herself. She closed her eyes and tried desperately to do just that.

"Catherine."

That familiar, soothing voice calling to her made her open her eyes. Vincent's soft, blue ones were looking at her lovingly.

"Are you feeling ill?" he asked.

"Just tired. It's been a long day."

"I know and I hate to add to the burden but Devin, Charlie, and I will be leaving soon."

She didn't like the sound of what she had just been told. "Just where are you going?"

"To look for further damage near the impact site. Devin thinks he saw some problems we missed."

"And?"

Vincent looked over at his children and the image returned. He looked back at Catherine.

"What is it, Vincent? What did you see up there?"

"A lot of damage," he sighed. "That's all."

"You're hiding something from me," she persisted.

Vincent took a deep breath and lowered his voice. "There may be —, bodies in the area. The search for them could lead the authorities into the tunnels. We must prevent that."

"Can't someone else do it?"

"And just who would you have face such a task? Perhaps Mouse, Jamie, Pascal...."

"No."

"Exactly. Devin and I have dealt with such things before and Charlie may be needed if anyone is found alive. This must be done, Catherine, and I am the logical one to lead."

"I guess you're right. You must promise me you'll be careful. Do not take risks you don't have to for anyone's sake."

"I promise."

Devin and Charlie, laden with backpacks and other supplies approached. Catherine looked up at Charlie. "Take care of him. Don't let Huck and Tom go off on some grand adventure."

Charlie smiled uneasily. "I'll look after them. I promise. You take it easy, sis. We'll be back soon." He leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Love you."

"I love you, too. Be careful."

Devin stepped up. "Don't I get a kiss?"

"I suppose so."

He leaned over and kissed her gently on the cheek.

"Bring him back to me, Devin," she whispered.

"You bet. I don't want to keep him. He's all yours."

They all laughed then Vincent said his goodbyes to the children. He kissed Catherine affectionately then turned to go.

"Come on, man. She's already pregnant. Give it a rest," Devin shouted a little too loudly. The blushes his comment got were worth it.

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The trio traveled for some time toward the impact site. Just beyond it was a series of drainage pipes that led down into some uncharted tunnels and caverns. But to get to them, they would have to go through the crater left by the blast. It was something Vincent was not looking forward to facing.

When they reached the debris strewn tunnel leading to the site, Vincent halted. He was having a great deal of difficulty finding the courage to face what he knew lay ahead.

"What's up, Vincent?" Devin asked.

He continued to stare into the rays of light that streamed through the opening.

"Oh," Devin said quietly. "You're afraid you'll be seen. Just pull your hood up and stay close to the edges."

Vincent's reluctance had nothing to do with being seen and everything to do with what he had seen. The image returned as did his determination to find the men who had done this. Justice had to be served no matter what the price. He gathered his courage, pulled his hood up around his face, then ran through the area. He could not allow himself to pause even for a

second as he passed the debris that had hidden the horror. As soon as Devin and Charlie negotiated through the site, they continued their journey.

Several hours later, Vincent was still continuing his breakneck pace.

"Hey, Vincent," Devin called out. "We need a break. I think it's time we made camp for the night."

"We cannot waste time."

Devin grabbed his brother's shoulder and Vincent spun around. "Look — I know you want to find these guys but killing ourselves before we catch up to them is a bad idea."

Finally, Vincent agreed. "You're right. I apologize. We will rest here then continue after a few hours of sleep."

"That's more like it. I'm starved," Charlie admitted.

A camp was established. Bed rolls lay around a small fire and each man ate hungrily. As exhaustion took its toll, each lay down on his bedding. Devin and Charlie were soon asleep but Vincent lay staring into the darkness fearing sleep and the dreams that would come. Eventually, exhaustion won out.

Devin and Charlie were awakened abruptly by Vincent's loud roar of anguish. "What the hell...." Devin fully expected to find Vincent in some life or death struggle with some enemy by the way he had roared. What he found was Vincent struggling with some imaginary foe in his dreams.

"What's wrong with him?" Charlie asked.

"He's having one of his damned nightmares. We'd better wake him up."

That task was easier said than done. Vincent, with his superior strength, was thrashing about wildly. Finally, Charlie and Devin were able to calm him.

"Wake up, Vincent. You're dreaming," Devin shouted.

The sound of Devin's voice brought back memories of the childhood nightmares that had awakened him years ago. Vincent opened his eyes and fought to focus them. "Devin?"

"Yeah. Wake up. Don't tell me those monsters are still after you."

Vincent sat up slowly. "Monsters of a different kind, I'm afraid."

"Do you want to tell us about it?" Charlie asked.

"No. You two go back to sleep. I need to stretch my legs." Vincent got to his feet and walked into the darkness.

Charlie watched him with concern. "I take it he has these nightmares a lot."

"He's had them since he was a kid. Usually, it was some monster chasing him. The old man thought it had something to do with his dual nature." Devin remembered the screams that often awakened him.

"That shouldn't be the case now. From what Cathy's told me, he's resolved that. I think it has to do with Cathy's pregnancy. The thought that the child might be like him might be bringing all that back."

Devin sat down and sighed. "Just how likely is that?"

"From what I've seen, very likely," Charlie admitted.

"Well, if it is, it'll be better off than him. Vincent didn't have a mother like Cathy or a father who has been down the road he's got to travel. I can't imagine what it's like to live with the demons he faces."

Charlie smiled. "But he has something we may never find. He found the love of his life. I can imagine he thinks it's worth the price."

"Yeah," Devin agreed. "I just hope those demons of his don't mess it up."

The demons Vincent faced in his nightmares that night were not the ones of his childhood. What he had seen at the blast site haunted him without mercy. There, in the darkness, he vowed that justice would be served even if it had to be dealt by his own hand.

Catherine was lying in bed letting the tapping on the pipes lull her into a more restful state. The children were in bed, the community had recovered quickly from the day's tragic events, but Vincent was another matter. Yes, his reason for leaving was valid enough but she knew something wasn't right. There was something in his eyes that evoked fear in her heart — not for herself but for him.

As she lay there rubbing her stomach, she brought his image to mind. Concentrating on that image, she sent him her love and a prayer for his safe return. Instead of the warmth she usually felt in response to such a message, there was a frightening emptiness.

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Devin found his brother sitting on the floor of the tunnel in almost complete darkness. His legs were drawn up close to his body and his arms were wrapped tightly around them. Despite his size, he never looked more like the child he remembered. He watched him for a few moments then cautiously approached.

"What's going on in that head of yours, brother?" he finally asked.

"I want to be alone, Devin."

"I'm sure you do." He sat down on the dirt floor next to him. "I've seen that look before. You've made up your mind that you, and only you, will play judge, jury, and executioner. Am I right so far?"

"Devin...."

"Not this time, buddy. I saw those guys. I saw the damage they did. I — held a little girl in my arms. A little girl so badly burned and hurt, they couldn't save her. When she died, something inside of me snapped. What kind of animal kills children for no reason?"

Vincent was strangely silent and in response, Devin turned to him. In the dim light, he could see the pain in his brother's eyes as well as the tears. The sensitive man that was his brother keenly felt the pain of others and found the waste of human life unacceptable.

Angrily, Vincent got to his feet and began pacing. "Why? Why?" he chanted in increasingly louder tones.

His reaction startled Devin. He watched him for a moment then got to his feet. "We're in this together, brother. If it comes down to it, we will keep these guys from ever seeing the world Above again. We all have a stake in this."

Vincent turned to Devin and stared at him for a moment. He too had witnessed the horrors. "There is an image I cannot erase from my mind. It — eats at me like acid eats away at whatever it touches. It will haunt me forever."

"Vincent — what did you see?"

Devin watched as Vincent's eyes grew cold and filled with dread. "Vincent?"

"NO!"

Despite his brother's love of words, Devin knew that, at times, he had a great deal of difficulty finding the right ones. Whatever he had seen had disturbed him deeply and nothing he could say or do right now could help him.

* * * * *

After a few hours of sleep, the journey began again. There were only a few possible areas suitable for habitation in this section of the underground pipes and tunnels. That knowledge, plus the fact that Vincent's tracking abilities were keenly focused on the task, assured them they were heading in the right direction.

"How much further?" Charlie asked.

Vincent studied the ground then sniffed the air. "We are nearing their camp. I can smell something — unusual."

Charlie sniffed the air. "I don't smell anything."

Devin poked him with his elbow. "Super nose here can smell a pot roast cooking from over a mile away."

"That's impossible!"

"Charlie, I must warn you about my older brother. You must not take anything he tells you too seriously." Vincent glared at Devin.

A soft chuckle escaped Charlie as he listened to the banter between the brothers. "I hate to put an end to all this enlightening conversation but has anyone given any thought to what we're going to do when we find these guys?"

The expression on Vincent's face changed dramatically. "You do not want to know my thoughts on that subject."

"I honestly don't think they'll just give up and go turn themselves in just because we asked them to — do you?" Charlie questioned both of his companions.

Both were silent for a moment. Finally, Devin answered the question as best he could. "Our first priority is to find them. What happens after that — will be up to them."

Staring into the darkness of the tunnel ahead of them, Vincent urged the group on. "We must go. I don't want them to return Above."

When they took a rest break a few hours later, Vincent impatiently walked ahead to survey the area. Devin and Charlie took advantage of the opportunity to rest and to talk.

"How long have you known him, kid?"

Devin's use of the word *kid* reminded Charlie of one of the residents he worked with at St. Vincent's. "Only a few months — about the time Cathy found out she was pregnant."

"You mean she introduced you to him just like that?"

Charlie laughed. "No. We met by accident."

Cautiously, Devin asked his next question. "What did you think?"

"Honestly?"

"Yeah — honestly."

"I wanted to know why the hell my sister was involved with"

"A freak of nature?" Devin finished his sentence.

"He's your brother. How can you say that?"

"Believe me, it's not something Vincent hasn't already heard or said himself."

Charlie shifted uneasily. He still wasn't quite sure what to make of Vincent's foster brother.

"Cathy convinced me to give him a chance or I could go to hell as far as she was concerned. I decided to get to know him. I haven't regretted that decision."

"Have you ever seen him — lose himself?"

"What do you mean — lose himself?"

Devin sat back. "If you have to ask, you haven't."

The statement awakened Charlie's curiosity. "What are you talking about?"

"Let's just say that when we find these guys and they provoke him, you're going to witness something you'll never forget. Just remember, it only happens when he's given no other choice. Normally, Vincent's the gentlest man I know."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"I'm just trying to prepare you, kid."

"What..." Before Charlie could finish his question, Vincent suddenly appeared out of the darkness.

"It's time to go."

They walked in silence for some time into the dark, damp tunnels. Suddenly, Vincent stopped and turned his head to listen. "We're near," he finally said in a soft whisper. "We must go with caution. Spread out. If we are met with violence, the further apart we are, the better chance we have."

Continuing onward, they walked softly and quietly. Each step was carefully planned. If these men were smart enough to build a car bomb, they could most certainly rig traps to protect their lair. Because of this, Vincent led the way making use of his keen eyesight and acute sense of smell. After turning a corner, the trio walked right into a campsite and what appeared to be a makeshift lab.

"What the hell is this?" Devin murmured as he began to walk about the chamber.

Charlie walked around the chamber in the opposite direction. "Looks like some sort of lab."

After carefully examining several miscellaneous items on a work bench, Vincent made his own assessment. "A bomb manufacturing lab to be specific."

"These guys have been busy," Devin commented.

Vincent continued his search of the area while listening for the return of the lab's builders. Several maps and diagrams lying on a desk in the corner captured his attention.

Devin noticed his brother's fascination with the papers. "What have you got there — a how to book on bomb building?"

"Not exactly. I don't believe this!"

By this time, their conversation had attracted Charlie's interest. "What did you find?"

"The Lincoln Tunnel!"

"I beg your pardon," said Charlie.

Vincent's hands were shaking. "Their next target is the Lincoln Tunnel."

"Damn!" Devin grabbed the maps and began studying them as Charlie and Vincent examined the charts and diagrams.

"According to these notes, they charted the busiest times of the day. The loss of life would be enormous," Charlie concluded.

"Based on what we've seen, that's exactly what they want." Devin angrily threw the maps down on the desk.

"We must stop them," Vincent stated with determination.

"We'd better warn the police."

Looking over at Charlie and Devin, Vincent realized a decision had to be made. "We don't have time for that. They could be placing the explosives now."

"I don't think they'd do it this soon," Devin commented.

"How are we supposed to stop them?" Charlie asked.

Already knowing the answer, Devin simply remained silent. He and Vincent shared a look of mutual understanding:

"You will destroy their lab, Charlie. Devin will make sure they do not double back."

"And what are you going to do?"

"I'm going after them," Vincent answered simply.

"Alone! That's crazy," Charlie argued. "These guys are dangerous."

"Vincent knows what he's doing," Devin added as he put his hand on Charlie's shoulder. He also realized that Vincent was leaving Charlie with him so that he wouldn't witness what would happen once he encountered the enemy.

Looking back and forth between the two, Charlie's anger flared. "Cathy's in no condition to have to bury what's left of her husband. I don't want to be the one who has to tell her how you got yourself blown to bits. I don't know what all this is about, but it's not just you, Vincent. You have a family to be concerned about. You're no good to them dead. There has to be a better way."

"No one has a better chance of finding and stopping these fanatics than I do. Charlie, do not think for a moment that Catherine and my children are not on my mind constantly. What I do, I do to protect them and the world I call home. I do not take any risk lightly."

"Then wait for help," Charlie pleaded.

"There is no time. Charlie, promise me that if something does happen, you will look after Catherine and be a father to my children until Catherine finds someone else."

"What?"

"I know the others will do what they can, but you share Catherine's world and would be able to guide the children. I trust no other as I trust you. Catherine will need you."

"Wait just a damn minute...."

Before Charlie could finish his sentence, Vincent abruptly turned his head in the direction of the opposite tunnel. "Someone is coming," he whispered.

A few seconds passed as the trio held their collective breaths. It was Vincent who reacted first. "The two of you hide in the tunnel we just came through. I'll confront them."

"Vincent...."

"There is no time to argue, Charlie. Take him into the tunnel, Devin."

Reluctantly, Charlie was pushed along into the tunnel to hide in the darkness. They remained only a short distance away in case they were needed.

The silence seemed to last forever as they waited. Finally, voices were heard just down the passageway. There was a coldness in their voices that chilled Vincent to the bone. It made the image of what he had seen taunt him and demand vengeance. *How dare they treat the destruction they had caused with such casualness? How dare they care so little about human life? What depth of madness existed in the dark recesses of their distorted minds?* Those questions only served to fuel his anger. He stepped back into the shadows and waited. The burst of white hot anger he felt earlier was cooling into calm determination. *Justice would be served*, he repeated to himself.

Two men walked into the chamber. Vincent studied them closely. The tall, lean one was indeed Jeff. The young boy he remembered was barely recognizable. His companion was short and dark. This man was someone Vincent had never met. Remaining in the shadows, Vincent watched and listened as the two laughed.

"We did it, man!" Jeff proudly proclaimed. "They can't ignore us now."

"Damn straight!" his companion replied. "This is war! The higher the body count, the better."

Vincent could take no more. He stepped out of the shadows and focused his attention on the man he knew as Jeff. "That was not the philosophy you were taught as a child, Jeff."

The young man turned around abruptly and found himself face to face with Vincent's imposing presence. "What the hell.... Vincent?"

His companion's look of terror did not escape Vincent. If he were to be perfectly honest, he relished it. It was a feeling he would have taken great shame in normally, but what he had seen had convinced him that nothing would be normal again.

He watched the man stumble backward and fall over a box carelessly placed on the floor. "Your co-conspirator seems to be a bit shaken up. I imagine the, people you two killed felt a similar terror before they died."

"Who — what the hell is he?" the man lying on the floor asked in a disbelieving voice.

Jeff's gaze never left Vincent's face. "His name is Vincent. You could say we grew up in the same neighborhood. I left. Vincent stayed."

"You mean he lives down here!" The two men continued to talk as if Vincent wasn't there.

"Where else do you think he could live," Jeff answered.

The other man got to his feet cautiously. "What are you?"

Vincent looked at the man and felt absolutely nothing. Whether the man lacked a soul or if that lack of feeling came from him, was a question he would ponder later. Now was not the time to examine feelings. "What or who I am is not important. I came here because someone saw what you did. I am here because you have chosen to bring your madness into this world and — I will not allow it."

"You will not allow. What makes you think anybody gives a damn about what you think," Jeff's companion responded defiantly. "Kill him, Jeff. We can't let him out of here knowing what he knows."

Jeff laughed as he returned Vincent's cold stare. "Just who do you think he could tell? He can't go to the cops or anybody else. He can't do a damn thing."

In the tunnel just out of sight, Devin and Charlie were listening intently. Devin whispered softly. "He shouldn't have said that. He's pushing him too far."

Charlie didn't understand just what that meant but, based on the way Devin had said it, he got the feeling that was a bad thing.

"Don't make that mistake, Jeff. I will not let you walk away from what you've done. You must be stopped before your madness can take any more innocent lives."

"And just what do you intend to do, Vincent'?" Jeff asked sarcastically.

"I will do what I must."

Again Jeff laughed. "I know you. Father's inane speeches about non-violence gave you lofty ideals that no man could live up to. You cannot kill with premeditation. You don't have it in you."

"Unlike you?" Vincent responded.

"We are more alike than you think, Vincent."

"How so?"

"You are willing to do what you must for something you believe in. So am I."

Vincent was well aware of the mind game Jeff was trying to play with him. "And what is it you believe in so passionately that you would kill children watching a Christmas parade?"

"No one is innocent. This is war."

"War? Who declared this war and what is its purpose?" Vincent asked.

"We have declared war against the government. It's time all those fat-assed politicians stopped taking our money and controlling our lives. We are freedom fighters, Vincent, in the truest sense of the name. We are fighting for our rights."

That twisted philosophy angered Vincent. "Rights? You stand there and talk of rights! You had no right to take those lives. It is not your right to decide who is to live or die."

"Casualties in a war are to be expected. The more damage we can do, the more attention we will get for our cause?"

Vincent stared into the eyes of madness as he looked at Jeff. That look could only be paralleled by the madness he had seen in Paracelsus' eyes. It was a madness he could not understand or fight. In the deepest recesses of his soul, he knew there was only one way this would end. And — it would end.

"The only acceptable casualty is a life that is given for another. The taking of a life for no reason — cannot be allowed. You cannot be allowed to continue."

The other man with Jeff reached into his jacket and pulled out a gun. Vincent reacted quickly to the movement. He grabbed the man's arm and twisted it forcibly in the opposite direction. The sickening sound of a bone breaking and the scream that followed spurred Jeff into action.

A loud roar escaped Vincent as the darkness inside of him took control. He was lost in it, driven by the haunting image that had become a part of him. The rage he had held in check exploded in a burst of violence. As Jeff brought his own gun up to take aim, Vincent slashed savagely at him. His deadly hands made contact and the man screamed in pain as blood began to saturate his chest. Jeff fell backward to the floor and began to crawl away.

Jeff's partner had managed to get his hands on a knife and lunged at Vincent. The knife did not penetrate Vincent's thick clothing but did serve to fuel his rage even further. He grabbed his assailant's arm, spun him around, and caught his throat in a vise-like grip. As the man struggled, Vincent tightened the grip then tossed his victim onto the table. In one quick, deadly swipe of his arm, the man was dead.

As the scent of death filled Vincent's nostrils, he roared again and went in search of his other enemy. He found Jeff pulling himself to his feet and clutching a small device against his blood-stained chest.

"Stop or I'll kill both of us," he frantically ordered.

Jeff didn't realize that when Vincent was lost in his rage, words were just incomprehensible noise. The only thing that could penetrate that darkness was his connection to Catherine. Her emotions reaching out to him was the only power the darkness in him acknowledged. She had ultimate control and she was not there to dispel it.

With another loud roar that left Jeff shaking in his shoes, Vincent struck out at him once more. The force of the blow knocked the small explosive device out of his hand and sent it flying into the opposite tunnel. The blow also broke Jeff's neck and he fell to the floor.

Before the body stopped moving, a loud explosion sent dust and debris flying everywhere. For a moment, Devin and Charlie couldn't see anything in the thick gray smoke that filled the air. As his burning eyes searched the smoke, Devin finally got a glimpse of a massive figure stumbling toward them. He jumped to his feet and ran toward it.

"Vincent!" he shouted as he tried to help support his brother. "Let's get you over here to see if you're hurt."

Devin struggled with Vincent's great weight and finally managed to get him seated on the tunnel floor. Vincent was breathing heavily and seemed to be still lost in his rage. "Vincent. Vincent!" He clasped Vincent's face in both hands and stared at him. "Vincent, it's Devin. Are you hurt?"

When he received no response or any sign of recognition, Devin turned to Charlie. "You'd better check him over."

Instead of responding to Devin's request, Charlie just sat there. The terrified look on his face was a familiar one to Devin. Witnessing one of Vincent's rages usually did that to people. Right now, however, he didn't have time for explanations. "Get over here!" he ordered. When that didn't work, he reached over, grabbed the front of Charlie's shirt, and yanked him to his knees. "Damn it — get over here."

Charlie's hands were trembling as he reached toward Vincent. After a tentative examination, he pulled away. "He's in shock. He has some minor burns and bruises but, as far as I can tell, he's not hurt badly."

The quivering in Charlie's voice saddened Devin. The two had been close before — brothers-in-law and friends. He wondered what this experience was going to do to that relationship.

"Devin," Vincent murmured weakly.

"I'm here, brother." He watched as the realization of what had happened dawned in Vincent's eyes. The aftermath was always the toughest on Vincent. "It's over now. Those two won't be killing any more innocent kids."

Tears filled Vincent's eyes and despair filled his soul. No matter how justified, killing ripped away a piece of his heart and ate away at his conscience. That, along with the look in Charlie's eyes, brought him renewed awareness of just what he was — and wasn't.

"I suggest we get the hell out of here if you're up to it," Devin suggested. The need to get away from that place and what had happened there was the reason for his urgency. He knew that getting Vincent back to the man Charlie knew and respected was the first step in healing and that wasn't going to happen here.

Still weak from the ordeal, Vincent slowly stood on shaky legs. "I'll be all right."

"Are you sure?" Devin asked with genuine concern.

As Vincent nodded in response, he glanced over at Charlie who had been strangely silent. The young man's eyes stared blankly into the darkness of the chamber. His feelings of shock and confusion were keenly felt and understood. No words could make what Charlie had witnessed any easier to understand or accept. No words could ease the fear now planted in his mind. As he turned to walk down the passageway, his heart sank deeper and deeper into a bottomless pit of shame and guilt.

His brother's feelings were painfully obvious to Devin and Charlie's behavior, though understandable, angered him. He watched Vincent walk dejectedly down the tunnel then looked down at Charlie. "Get your ass up off the floor and get moving!"

Charlie looked up at him.

Devin leaned over and looked menacingly into Charlie's eyes. "I don't have time to sugar coat what you just saw. If you ever had any respect for him, show it now. Get on your feet and help me get him home to Cathy."

The mention of his sister's name, gave Charlie something to focus his attention on. He got to his feet and began following Vincent. Devin stood there for a moment shaking his head.

"Cathy, I hope you're up to this one," he whispered under his breath.

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The trip back was long and silent. Caught between Charlie's confusion and Vincent's guilt, Devin was about to call it quits. He couldn't get through to either of them. Charlie looked at him in a haze of shock and disbelief and Vincent — well, Vincent simply withdrew into that damn shell of his.

As they neared the community, the pace increased until it became a foot race of sorts with Vincent leading the pack. The need to get back to the haven of Catherine's arms drove him on. Only she understood. Only she could make him feel human again — and he needed that desperately. There would be no fear or doubt in her eyes. In her eyes, he would find only love and acceptance.

* * * * *

Catherine had sensed Vincent's approach and was waiting patiently for him in their chamber. She was disturbed by the emotions she felt in him. The fear, shame, and despair that permeated their bond made her heart ache. *What on earth could have happened to have caused such feelings?* she wondered.

The moment he walked into the chamber, the full force of his agony hit her. His eyes were so full of pain, words failed her. There was no greeting, no gentle, affectionate embrace. All that existed between them was a raw, powerful need for the comfort they found only in each other.

Catherine lifted her arms in invitation and Vincent moved into them. She wrapped her arms around him and held his trembling body. "I'm here," she whispered over and over again. After a few minutes, she asked, "Can you tell me what happened? Are Charlie and Devin all right?"

Vincent raised his head slowly but could not meet her gaze. He nodded in response to her question.

"Vincent, I've never seen you like this. What happened?"

He closed his eyes tightly and took a deep breath. After releasing it slowly, he tried to push the memory of what he had seen and done from his mind. He found that he could not. One haunting image would not go away.

"Vincent, you haven't been yourself since you went to check on the damage from the explosion. What happened? What did you see?"

As much as he wanted to spare Catherine the verbal image of what he had seen, he knew that telling her was the only way to relieve his own pain. He had long ago given up the notion that he could or should endure his pain alone. Sharing it with Catherine weakened its hold on him until he was strong enough to overcome it.

"Where are the children?" he asked.

"They're asleep in their chamber."

"I want to see them for a moment. When I come back, I will tell you — everything."

Catherine watched him walk out of their chamber with concern. Whatever had happened to him, was causing him a great deal of pain. The kind of pain that did not heal so easily.

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Devin had cleaned up and changed his clothes. The dust and grime had washed away easily but the memory of the last few days' events could not be rinsed away. He needed the solitude and splendor of the falls to put things into perspective.

Walking out onto the same ledge he and Vincent had frequented as boys, Devin was surprised to see Charlie sitting on the large boulder looking out into the falls. "Hey, kid. What's up?"

Without even looking at him, Charlie shook his head. "Nothing," he replied.

Devin walked over and sat down beside the young man. "Still having trouble with it, huh?"

"He's such a contradiction — you know?"

Devin chuckled slightly. "Yeah, you could say that. That's what you've got to remember. What you saw — was only a part of what he is. The intelligent, poetry-reading man that married your sister is another part — the biggest part."

"He wasn't even human," Charlie responded in amazement. "How.... I don't understand how Cathy...."

"Your sister fell in love with the man — the other, she accepts. From what I've heard, Vincent's rages have saved Catherine's life on more than one occasion."

"Is that what he is to the people down here — a protector?"

"To some — maybe. To most, he is a loyal friend, a patient teacher, a strong leader, and a symbol of hope. He makes us all believe that anything is possible. And when he met Catherine, everyone learned that love can truly conquer all." Devin studied Charlie's face for some sign of understanding.

Charlie got up and walked along the ledge. Looking down, he thought about Cassie. "Love does not conquer all."

"But it makes you believe it can. Look, Vincent's had to walk a very thin line all his life. People shunned him because of the way he looks. The battle he fights each day to keep a balance is — beyond anyone's understanding. If anyone in this world had a reason to be bitter, it was Vincent. But instead of being bitter about what he couldn't have or do, he dedicated his life to the people of this world. It's funny. All those years, I felt guilty about abandoning him. I thought he would be alone all his life. Now — he has a wife and kids and I'm the odd man out."

"He has what we both want," Charlie added.

"Kid — your opinion of Vincent means a lot to him. What he saw in your eyes hurt him badly."

Charlie shoved his hands into his pockets. "I couldn't help it. I wasn't prepared for —that:"

"And how do you think Vincent feels about it? Did you think about that?"

"I.... I don't know."

"Well, I can tell you. A piece of him dies every time he has to — get violent like that. It shames him. It stays with him always. It makes him feel less than human. And when he sees fear in the eyes of those he loves, it breaks his heart."

Charlie looked over at Devin. "What about those?" He pointed to the scars on Devin's cheek.

"We were both kids. I provoked it. It was the first time that — rage came to the surface. It scared the hell out of both of us. But I've learned that Vincent would kill himself before he would hurt someone he loved. You don't have to worry about Catherine, if that's what this is all about."

"I couldn't bear for anything to happen to Cathy."

"Do you think she would stay with him, have kids with him, if she had any doubts at all?"

"I suppose not."

"You've seen them together. Surely, you can see how much they love each other," Devin continued.

"Yeah. I'm just having a hard time dealing with what I saw."

Devin walked over to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Most people would. Just concentrate on the man Vincent is and not what you saw in that chamber. That part of him comes out whenever he, or someone he loves, is threatened. Charlie, let me tell you how it is. If you want to stay in your sister's life, you've got to get past what you saw. You've got to be

able to look him in the eye and not show fear. You've got to see him as you did before. Until you can, I suggest you stay clear of Catherine. She won't tolerate it for a minute."

Catherine was thinking about Charlie and wondering just what had happened on their journey. When Vincent walked back into the chamber, her thoughts returned to him.

He seemed calmer now. Perhaps the assurance that the children were safe and sound had helped him conquer his demons. But she was not going to let this pass. Something had upset him terribly and she was determined to find out what had happened. "Feeling better?" she inquired.

Vincent walked over and sat down on the bed beside her. "A little."

She reached up and gently combed a few strands of his hair with her fingers. This allowed her to get a good look into his blue eyes. "Tell me what's bothering you."

Vincent closed his eyes and sighed. That momentary escape from her questioning gaze only gave the horrible image he was carrying in his mind a chance to surface once more. He opened his eyes quickly. "I don't know if words can describe it."

"Try."

Reluctantly, he brought the memories to the surface. "Right after the explosion, when I went in search of damage, I found the impact point. The street had collapsed into the tunnels and a woman was pinned in the debris."

"She saw you?"

"Yes, but I could not leave her like that. I lifted a support off of her and she crawled out."

Surely, that could not be what was upsetting him so badly, Catherine thought. "Was she badly hurt?"

"No."

Patiently, she waited.

"Finding the woman and the fact that she saw me is not what is troubling me."

"Then what is?"

The words were hard to find. "It was what I found in the debris."

"Can you tell me?"

Tears burned his eyes and his chest felt tight and constricted. "There was — a child in the debris — or what was left of a child."

"Oh, my God," Catherine murmured softly.

The tears began to stream down his face. "It was a little girl, Catherine. She looked to be Katie's age. She had long blond hair." The words were tumbling out along with the sobs.

"Catherine, her little body was torn and twisted so badly you could hardly tell she was human. Her eyes were open and — and...."

Catherine pulled him into her arms and cried with him for a child she never knew. His pain was her pain and they held each other as it washed over them.

Several minutes passed before anyone spoke. Finally, Vincent looked up at Catherine and they wiped away each other's tears. "That image tortures me, Catherine. I cannot escape it. It cried out to me for vengeance."

Catherine had a feeling there was more to the story and that she wasn't going to like it. "You didn't go in search of more damage, did you? You, Devin, and Charlie went after the ones responsible."

"Yes."

"You lied to me."

"I — am, sorry but I didn't want to upset you in your condition. I didn't want to argue with Father. The men who did this knew of our world. They were using the tunnels to concoct their bombs. They could not be allowed to continue!"

Even though she already knew the answer, she had to ask. "What happened?" Vincent looked into her eyes. In his eyes, she saw the answer. "Oh, Vincent."

"What I find most disturbing, Catherine, is that I reveled in avenging that child. I have never felt that before. Also, Charlie saw what happened and that shamed me even more. The look of fear and — disgust in his eyes cut me deeply. I don't know if our relationship will ever be the same. I don't know that I can face him again."

"You can and you will, Vincent. Give Charlie some time. You two have forged a strong friendship. It will survive."

Vincent slowly shook his head. "I wish I could believe that and I wish I could erase that horrible image from my mind."

"Time will dim it. Just remember that I love you and that we are in this together. Don't be afraid to share your pain with me." Catherine leaned over and nuzzled his ear. She felt the soft strands of his hair against her cheek as she whispered, "As Blake wrote:

*"Love to faults is always blind,
Always is to joy inclin'd,
Lawless, wing'd & unconfin'd,
And breaks all chains from every mind."*

"Do you have a Blake poem for everything?"

"Almost."

Vincent turned and gave her a warm, lingering kiss. "I love you," he whispered into her open mouth.

"I love you too, sweetheart. Please don't worry about Charlie. Everything's going to be all right."

"You can make me believe almost anything," he responded.

"Then believe in me when I tell you how wonderful you are, how good a father you are, and how much Charlie respects and admires you."

Vincent looked deeply into her green eyes and felt her conviction. *Love had a way of blinding people to the truth*, he thought.

Catherine reached over and lifted his chin with one finger. "First thing in the morning, find Charlie and talk this out. The longer you two brood about it, the bigger the obstacle becomes. Talk to him."

"I'm not so sure he wants to talk to me."

"All the more reason not to delay. Promise me — tomorrow."

"All right. I promise."

All that night, Vincent thought about what to say to Charlie. *How could he make him understand when he didn't understand it himself?*

Those thoughts were on his mind as he drifted into a troubled sleep. There in the darkness, the image appeared but this time, the dread of it was gone. This time, the child seemed at peace. Gone was the demand for vengeance. There was only a sense of a soul finally finding

its rest. At that moment, Vincent realized that although the senseless tragedy of it would live with him forever, he could now make peace with himself.

Charlie was in his chamber preparing to go back Above when Vincent called to him from just beyond the entrance. "May I come in, Charlie?"

"Sure. Come in."

Vincent timidly walked in. Every speech he had rehearsed along the way left him. He stared down at his feet while he gathered his courage.

"How's Catherine?" Charlie finally asked.

"Oh — she's all right."

"Does she know what happened?"

"I told her everything. Catherine has been with me when I've — lost myself. She has seen the worst in me — yet still loves me. Like you, I wonder why."

"Love is blind they say."

Vincent finally found the courage to look into Charlie's eyes. "Is friendship?"

"To some things, I guess," Charlie answered.

"I don't know what to say to you, Charlie. I wish I had some explanation that would make what you saw easier to accept."

"I don't think there is one."

"All right, just tell me what you're thinking."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

Vincent was determined. "If we are to mend this breach, we must be totally honest with each other. We always were in the past."

Charlie paced around silently debating the issue. "Total honesty?"

"Yes."

"Okay — honesty. I had this image of you as a gentle, intelligent man who loves my sister and their kids. Yeah, you looked a little different but I could handle that. After all, Cathy loves you and your appearance doesn't seem to bother her. So I got used to it. After a while, the way you are became — just the way you are. I didn't give it a lot of thought. I got to know you. But what I saw in that cavern was something...."

"Inhuman?"

"Yeah. What did I see?"

Vincent shifted his weight nervously from foot to foot. "I'm not sure I can answer that. All I know is that when someone I love is threatened some — force deep inside of me takes over. It's a darkness that devours the man in me and I can't stop it. When it's over, I look at the carnage and feel a deep sense of shame and guilt. Charlie, I hate that part of me but it has saved Catherine so many times."

Charlie stared at him intently.

"Nothing I can say will take away the image of what you saw. Certain images — haunt you no matter what you do. Just know that I value our friendship and hope we can regain some of what has been lost."

"Vincent, there is a rage in all of us. Yours is just more primal than most. You talk about carnage. You should have been at the hospital that day. That day, I wanted to rip somebody's head off for the senselessness of it all — the waste of humanity." Charlie's fists clenched in anger.

"I was shocked, yes. It took me a while to come to terms with it. I'm still doing that. But Vincent, I believe you are the kind, decent man I've gotten to know over the last few months. Give me — us some time to heal. This tragedy has affected us all. All of this, along with losing Cassie, really shook me."

Vincent nodded in understanding.

"I'm sorry about my reaction. I just wasn't prepared. If I hurt you, I am truly sorry."

"It is I who should apologize."

"No," Charlie argued. "I was the one acting like a jerk. You didn't deserve that." He extended his hand. "Friends?"

"Friends," Vincent replied as he grasped the offered hand.

Several days later, the community gathered around a huge bonfire. They had joined together in memory of the lives that had been so senselessly lost in the world Above. Their world was separate yet bound by the shared loss.

Over to one side stood three very different men and a woman. Catherine stood with her arm linked with her husband's for support. To the other side of her was Charlie. His youthful face etched in sadness. Devin stood on the other side of his brother. His dark eyes full of tears. The image of the little girl he carried to the hospital was painfully fresh in his mind. And then there was Vincent standing stoically silent. He held Catherine's hand tenderly. His face was an emotionless mask. His eyes, however, mirrored the pain of the image that still haunted him. He knew that in time the image would dull and the pain would ease but the feelings of loss would remain.

They had all been changed by that day's tragic events. A little piece of them had died with the two hundred and twenty-one lives that had been cut short. Also lost, was their belief that such things didn't happen in this country. It was an innocence of sorts that had been cruelly lost in a mass of twisted debris. They stood together, unified in their grief and their hope that this would not happen again. Deep inside, however, were the doubts. No, life would not be the same.

Fini