

There is no other feeling like the movement of an unborn child. It's closer than someone touching you from the outside. It's purely, cleanly and clearly your own - moment. Hope surges up unendingly - into eternity from any new life. Each spring, the heart rejoices as it waits eagerly the birth of all things fresh and unspoiled. All the promises we felt when the earth was a veiled and special place, rise again with the birth of this unique and oh, so sensitive child.

He comes into a place – to a planet, that has yet to celebrate the existence of the first of his kind; his father. Yet, he is known, has been known, for those with the courage to see beyond the narrow limits of – reality.

To see with the heart the specialness of this being and all he truly offers us; all he is. He is hope and light, moonbeams and laughter, faith and truth. He belongs to all of us, this second Unicorn.

§§§§§§§§§§

THE SECOND UNICORN

by Patricia Kehoe

With a quick kiss to Vincent's fuzzy cheek, a tug on her stubborn slip and a gulp of hot coffee, Catherine peeked in at her twins, then stood in the chamber doorway to aim a last admonishment back towards her still half-asleep husband.

"Vincent, please don't forget about the concert tonight? Get in touch with Jamie or Brooke; we need a sitter. Vincent?"

He seemed to come back to himself with a startled look up. "Excuse me? Oh, yes, I won't forget, Catherine. You have reminded me three times in thirty minutes. Have a good day, my love."

She shot him a look that said he would pay for his bit of sarcasm another time, when she **had** some time! Grimacing at her watch, Catherine grabbed her briefcase and disappeared from sight.

Vincent stretched, yawning widely in the still shadowy light of their small kitchen. Mornings were long and lonely without her to share them; yes - most especially mornings when he had no work and she did.

Sighing heavily, he stacked the few dishes in the sink and started breakfast for his children. Marca and J.D would be up and demanding food any moment now. As though reading his thoughts, a childish voice drifted into the kitchen from an adjoining room.

"Daddy, can I get up now?"

With one finger to his lips, Vincent captured the small bundle called his daughter into his arms, whisking her from the room she shared with her still sleeping brother. After washing her face and seeing to her morning needs, her father settled her into her highchair.

"What shall it be, Marca, oatmeal or eggs?"

"Did mommy make the cereal?"

"No, I shall, if that is what you want."

The child crinkled up her nose. Daddy made terrible oatmeal. "P'budder toast."

Rubbing the back of his neck, Vincent glanced over. "Your brother finished the peanut butter last night, remember?"

"Old stinky thing!" Marca folded her arms over her tiny chest, pouting. "Want p'budder!"

The soul of patience, Vincent turned to the cabinet, bringing out two boxes of cereal, one called 'Oats 'n' Honey', the other plain oatmeal. He held both boxes out to his daughter with a tilt of his head. "Which?"

With a sigh of martyrdom, she pointed to the cold one, then picked up her orange juice to sniff the glass. If daddy made this, she'd soon know it; he always left pits in it - blah! Just as she finished, another tousled-looking child entered the kitchen, rubbing one fist in his eye.

"Breffest ready yet?"

Turning to his son, Vincent gathered him into his arms, smoothing the golden hair. "Good morning, J.D. "

"Morning. Can I eat?"

"After you wash your face and brush your teeth, yes, you may eat." He urged the child towards the bathroom, listening to the never ending argument as they went. J.D was truly the son of a lawyer; his arguments could be quite convincing at times!

"WHY do I havta brush my teeth? I brushed them yesterday and they'll only get dirty again when I have my breffest!"

Not about to get caught up in this battle again, Vincent put the toothpaste in his son's left hand, and the toothbrush in the right. "Brush them thoroughly, please."

Leaving the sputtering, muttering child on his own, he barely managed to set foot in the kitchen before a wail split the air. Dear Lord, now what?

"DADDY, I hurt my tooths!"

Checking his son's swollen gums, Vincent just retrieved his fingers in time as J.D clamped down, shaking his head. "Want grandpop to look, not YOU!"

Hunkering down to child level, he questioned this decision with some surprise. "I may not look? Why is this?"

"Grandpop wears gloves so I won't get 'fections. You don't!"

"Oh, I see. Very well; after you are dressed, I'll take you to your grandfather. Do you want to eat first?"

"Yeth." J.D rubbed his tongue over his gums and didn't look very happy. This was the third time this week he'd brushed his gums instead of his new and still tender molars. He looked up at his father as Vincent handed him his juice.

"Am I gonna have tooths like yours, daddy?"

"Do you wish to?" Vincent was curious to hear the response to this question.

J.D reached out a finger to poke into his father's mouth and gazed deep into the cavern.

"No, they're too big." He reached out again, but Vincent pulled away teasingly, shaking his head and smiling. "You don't have gloves on, J.D; I don't want to get a... 'fection!"

Slamming the drawer shut, Catherine locked her desk and reached for her briefcase. But she was too slow; Joe stood in the doorway of his office, tapping a thick manila file folder on his leg. "Not so fast, Wells!"

Pushing her hair behind one ear out of habit, Catherine sneered at her vexing superior. "Oh Joe, WHAT?"

He opened the file and handed it to her, grinning. "This is WHAT."

She glared at him. "You wouldn't DARE give me this case! Not THIS one, Joe! I was only supposed to be here for one special meeting, you PROMISED!"

"I lied." Joe patted her on the arm, shrugging. "Can I help it if Moreno wants you to handle this, kiddo? It's a woman's area of expertise after all, not a ... man's!"

Looking down at the paperwork marked 'Graves versus Timmons', she shoved the palimony/assault case back at him grimly. "No way am I handling this mess. Tell Moreno I said t..... "

Whatever Catherine was going to say lapsed into silence as John Moreno stuck his head into the office. "Ah good, you haven't left yet, Catherine. Has Joe filled you in...." John Moreno spotted the file in Joe's hand. "It's a dirty case."

"So why give it to ME?" Catherine struggled into her raincoat, hoping to get out of here before he could find a GOOD reason to stop her. "Joe can handle this just as well as I can, John. Don't tell me he CAN'T!"

With a smirk, Joe plunked the file on her desk and stepped back - out of firing range. Wells had a quite lethal aim when she threw things at you!

"Can't handle this too well from Bermuda, Cathy. I'm on vacation as of tomorrow morning. This can of worms is all yours, kiddo. You LUCKY lady!"

Swiping the file into her briefcase, Catherine threw John Moreno a last look and whispered to Joe. "I owe you one, Maxwell. Hope you burn your hide off!"

Poking him contemptibly in the ribs, she rushed from the stuffy office; suddenly desperate for a breath of the early spring air. In two more weeks, she and Vincent would be in Connecticut for three whole days. Alone - without children, without tunnel responsibilities and without..... FILES!

With a final kiss to her children, Catherine climbed into the van and waved to Jamie. "Remember, bedtime is seven-thirty, no matter what they say to the contrary. Bye, see you Monday morning!"

Tensing herself to the wails she knew would come as soon as she started the engine, Catherine winced anyway when two children's voices bawled... "NOOOOO!"

She turned to her husband as he removed his cloak and rested against the cushions for the ride out of the city. "This part kills me, you know."

"Hmm, yes, I know. I don't enjoy it either, you know that, Catherine. But, it stops almost immediately, or so Jamie vows." He reached forward, patting her shoulder. "Don't feel guilty."

"Thanks a lot! I wasn't until you mentioned it!"

The time spent together had gone all too quickly, Vincent decided, as he began loading unnecessary items into the van. This was the last night they would have here until the cabin was painted and the outdoor play area for the children was finished. After a final look at the lake, he turned back to the cabin.

Remembering that Catherine had promised him a 'special' dinner for this evening, he broke into a long-legged stride, taking a last look at the night sky as he climbed the small knoll to the house.

Sitting back in his chair and wiping the cheese sauce from his chin, Vincent smiled at his wife.

"Those were delicious, Catherine. What were they called again?"

Taking the last of her meal onto her fork, she smiled back. "Twice-baked potatoes with cheddar cheese; I'm surprised William never made these for you."

Vincent hunched his shoulders, then teased. "Oh, he did make these, but he never gave a name to them." He dug into the last bit of potato skin with his fork. "And his certainly were not this good, either!"

Filling first her coffee cup, then his own, Vincent kissed her gently on the neck. "And dessert?"

"You are nibbling it now." She pushed his chin away, laughing. "That stubble tickles, you know."

"So you've said before." With a determined look, Vincent nuzzled her again, more forcefully. His breath was warm on her throat as his words floated up to her. "Do you want that coffee - now?"

"Right this minute? No, why?"

Giving her a slightly torrid look, he put the two cups into the sink. "You know why...."

Catherine stood in the kitchen doorway, smiling radiantly back at him. "Meet you in the living room?"

As his eyes swept over her possessively, Vincent's tone was brusque; filled with promises. "Count on it."

Leaning on one elbow, he watched the waning firelight dance over Catherine's breasts as she snuggled against his arm. Drawing his fingers over one nipple achingly slowly, he whispered to her, "Are you sleepy?"

"No, just drifting; it's so quiet here and I love sharing it with you." Placing a moist kiss on his chest, Catherine tugged on the hair there lightly, watching him from beneath her lashes. "Especially tonight."

He nodded. "The anniversary of our first meeting is very special; I am reminded of all I found the night I found... you, Catherine."

Seeing her eyes slowly shut as his fingers moved on her breast, he began dropping feathery kisses all along her jaw. "I am filled with such wonder that you chose to love me, even then; when I could promise you nothing but disappointment and hopelessness."

Catherine wrapped both arms around his muscled neck, urging him closer. "I didn't believe you. I knew we had a future together, Vincent. I just had to wait for you to realize it, too."

His eyes swept the living room, then back to her. "And it all began here, in this place." His voice was throaty, almost rough. "I loved you so much, yet could not tell you; was so afraid you would not want to hear the words."

Catherine took his face between her palms, shaking him slightly. "It took me over two years to convince you that I did love you! Finally, you allowed yourself to believe it."

He laughed half aloud. "Oh, it was not that I allowed myself to believe it, Catherine.

Perhaps it was simply..." He hesitated for a moment, closing his eyes, as all her love swept over him. "I no longer had the strength or the will to deny your love, or my need of you."

He hovered over her - an avenging angel claiming what was his. "How I longed for you! Longed to touch you, as I do now. To put my mouth on you, to enter your body.... "

Nudging firmly against her, Vincent allowed his need to press at her; letting Catherine feel the hard, full erection throbbing against her hip. Letting her know how much he wanted her, how passionately he loved her. As if he had to prove anything, to Catherine.

His eyes sparkled as he moved, settling between her legs resolutely. "Two years I wasted. I shall not waste any more moments, my love, not ever again."

He taunted them both with slow, almost languid movements over and over again; moving close to her, then away once more, 'til she thought to die of it. Finally, he could struggle no longer. With a grunt of totally instinctive, male satisfaction, Vincent eased himself carefully into his wife. His penis ached; he was swollen with eagerness and ripe intent, yet did not want to cause her pain. He withdrew slowly.

Vincent knew his size and power at times did bring some discomfort to her, though Catherine would never admit to experiencing any. As far as she was concerned, any amount of pain was worth it, just to have this man's love.

To have him love her as he was now; totally, fully and without restraint, took away Vincent's aloneness forever and made them both complete and whole.

Running her hands over his hips and buttocks, she smiled, closing her eyes gradually; sensing his body tensing imperceptibly. "Your hands do such things to me, Catherine. Yes, like that. More... lower; touch me, keep touching me, please."

When her fingers slid along his penis and tightened at the head, he began to tremble. He groaned her name as she began to fondle the small sacs beneath; continuing the torment until his gasps of pleasure ebbed to slight moans. With a will of their own, his hips moved against hers urgently as his strong hands swept over her. Curving to the center of her body without hesitation, his fingers teased and stroked. "I am starved for you."

A look of voracious hunger was in Vincent's eyes as he hovered over Catherine. Carefully entering her in cautious increments, his breathing was ragged; he held back an instinctive need to plunge frantically downward, into her lush, welcoming heat.

But, as Catherine's inner muscles tightened against him, the pledge he had made silently of patient tenderness was merely a memory, replaced by endless desires. Feeling a slight change in the motions of Catherine's body, he moved to meet her passion.

Angling himself slightly upward, Vincent rose on his palms to the full length of his arms. Gazing down between them, he held himself from consummation only by sheer will, as he struggled to stay with her. Mirroring his moves to hers, Vincent watched himself sink into her, only to withdraw almost completely, before plunging again.

Her heady scent combined with a feeling of exquisite agony, to take his will. Rapidly arching his hips, he moved forward, then, retreated time after time, until he was lost in sensations, sobbing of his need. Pulling her frantically lower beneath his undulating hips, he could feel her womb against the tip of his penis. A satiny wetness seized him as powerful throbs answered his dominant urgent stroking.

With a cry of his name, Catherine shuddered and lay still beneath him. A constant, soul-deep pain tore through him. Grunting with satisfaction as she suddenly clasped him around the hips, pulling him even deeper, he began moving faster and faster.

Sweat coated his body in a splendid, glittering sheen as a snarl of gratification escaped him. The snarl turned to a throaty growl; demanding, ravenous, as he began moving finally rigidly harder, deeper with each thrust. They both knew he was nearly there; the urgency of his need to climax had overpowered him.

Clasping his buttocks tightly, Catherine held him fast; sensing his passions had left him adrift.... he trusted only her to bring him back from where lust had hurled him. An intoxicating aroma of musk rose from Vincent, his hands tipped her body upwards to receive all he was offering her. All of himself. The man's scent filled her nostrils as she felt him shudder above her.

Feeling her body climbing with his, Catherine pushed her hips up to him and bit his shoulder with almost savage ecstasy. Knowing he was beyond interruption, she hung on and was swept up in his ravaging orgasm. Snarling as her softness devoured him, a convulsive wildness overtook the man.

Sobbing with impatience, he caught her legs swiftly over his upper arms. Stimulated past the edge of pain; swollen with the relentless, consuming agony to climax, Vincent's eyes went wide and staring. Tossing his auburn hair back and out of his eyes, his lower lip curled passionately into a pout.

He began to take short, painful breaths; agonized... waiting.... expectant.... prepared to erupt; needing it desperately. Shaking his head from side to side, Vincent was unable to deny his thirsts even a moment longer. His body convulsed as he threw back his head; his face dark, flushed with rapture.

Crying aloud in satisfaction, Vincent pressed into the orgasm completely. Grinding his powerful hips from side to side, he struggled to get even deeper into Catherine's body. As the precious eruption of his semen exploded within her, he bit his lower lip - succumbing at last to what he craved ... what he had to have ... what he was born for. Passion.

Snapping his hips forward suddenly, he arched his back higher, filling her womb to overflowing with his sweet surrender. As her tongue cooled his overheated flesh, he unleashed a roar of power, as his extraordinary appetites were briefly sated.

Catherine handed the van keys to the rental agent along with her check. "Thank you, Tommy. Sorry to be so late getting the keys back to you."

The teenager nodded. "That's okay, Catherine, nobody else needed it until next week anyway. Tell Vincent and the rest I said hi, will ya?"

"I will. Remember - Father wants you and your family down for the children's concert on Saturday, if it's convenient."

"We'll be there, don't worry. Ma loves to visit where she was born; she's got a 'thing' about her old home, I guess."

With a wave, Catherine turned and left the building, stopping just outside to pull on her jacket. As she started on the short walk down Park Street towards the brownstone she had recently purchased as a surprise for her husband, a delightful aroma of pizza and freshly baked lasagna caused her nostrils to twitch appreciatively.

Suddenly, she wanted a slice of pizza more than almost anything in the world. Checking her watch, Catherine opened the door to 'Pizzeria Napoli'; stepping into the spicy smelling restaurant, she scanned the day's specials on the wall while she waited for her table.

Knowing that he would sense her presence, Catherine unlocked the front door of their new home and called out. "Hello, it's only me."

Dressed in paint-spattered jeans and a short sleeved cotton shirt, Vincent poked his head out of the library. "Hello, Catherine. I am in here for the moment, mixing the color you've chosen for the walls. I would like your opinion and could use your help. That new electric paint roller you purchased is much faster, but it tends to clog up on me. I cannot determine what I am doing wrong - exactly."

She grinned at him. "You've got paint on your nose again. I'll help; just let me change my clothes. Be right back."

Halfway up the curving stairway, she called down to her husband. Suddenly she had realized this house was WAY too quiet and she knew exactly who was missing! "Vincent, where are the twins, with Father?"

A soft laugh greeted this question. "No, with their Aunt Allegra and Uncle Devin; God help us!"

"I know, I know - they tend to spoil them a bit... "

Vincent peeked around the doorway and peered up at her. "A... bit, Catherine? The last time those two had our children, they allowed them to stay up until after midnight!"

"Oh..... it was New Year's eve, you disagreeable man. You stayed up!"

He lowered his can of paint to the floor, grinning at her. "I am a grownup or so I thought; I am allowed to stay up late and in general, do as I please." That voice teased her. "At least, most of the time."

Snorting in derision, Catherine didn't answer as she turned the corner of the second floor landing. Picking up his paint and brush again, Vincent turned back to the library, blinking rapidly as the heavy smell of paint and plaster assailed his sensitive nostrils. What a vile aroma; why couldn't paint be made that did not smell as revolting as this one did?

Hopping around the bedroom on one foot, Catherine finally located her left sneaker. Bending over to put it on, a strange feeling of lightheadedness washed over her. Reaching backwards to a chair, she sat down with a thump and began to rub the bridge of her nose. What was that?

Hearing Vincent on the stairway, she looked up just as he entered the room, moving quickly to kneel in front of her. "Are you all right?"

"I think so." She shook her head, trying to clear away the dull buzzing. "A funny feeling, that's all. I got so dizzy. It's gone now."

His face filled with concern, Vincent took one of her hands into his. "Stay up here and rest? I shall feed the children their supper early..." He looked at his wife again; seeing for the first time how pale she truly was.

"On second thought, I shall get a message to Allegra; perhaps her cooking won't destroy them for this one night." Vincent left the room quickly, before Catherine could argue about his decision.

He knew how she looked forward to giving the children supper and reading to them before bedtime. During the week, the turmoil of her job and the endless interruptions of work Below filled their days. Only on the weekend was there enough time to truly be a family as a rule.

But, he and Catherine were on a sort of holiday this week. Purchasing a house and renovating it would take longer than a week, but they had to start somewhere and Vincent insisted on doing most of the heavier work himself. He was enjoying this immensely; many of the things needing to be done were new to him. Below, Mouse did most of the rewiring, Zach and Jeffrey did the small amount of painting necessary and Cullen and Kanin took charge of the carpentry work.

Well, this was not the case here. Vincent had decided upon seeing this magnificent brownstone for the first time, that he wanted to be just a bit selfish and try to do his own repairs. He had gathered together all the books and information available Below in Father's library with great care.

Many nights he had been up 'til dawn, studying textbook after textbook. After one or two minor mishaps and a few bruised knuckles, Vincent now had enough confidence in his newly-acquired skills to inform Mouse and the others he would call on them only if needed. They took the hint without protest, but among themselves hoped their friend would not blow himself to kingdom come!

After Devin told them about his brother crossing two wires by mistake and nearly electrocuting himself, Cullen and the others had been hard pressed not to tease Vincent when they saw him. It never was a good idea to tease him too much anyway. Not if you enjoyed life as you knew it.

Allegra's only comment on hearing of his working alone was to Devin, in private. His mouthful of morning coffee came out his nose as his wife shook her head ruefully. "I give him two days until he'll need medical treatment! HA! MR. I CAN DO IT MYSELF, will get so confused with red wires, black wire, yellow wires and circuit breakers, he won't know whether to scratch his watch or wind his butt!"

At nine p.m., Vincent carried a dinner tray into the bedroom carefully, and placed it next to his wife on the bed. "I thought perhaps you may be hungry now. You did not have any supper earlier, my love. Will you try and eat something?"

Though still pale, Catherine seemed in less distress than she had been at six o'clock. Plumping three pillows at her back, she peeked under the cloth covering the tray and went wide eyed. "Did you do all this, just for me?"

A beautifully-made cheese and egg omelet, sliced tomatoes and toast were on the tray, as well as a large mug of orange scented tea and fresh, juicy looking, strawberries and cream. She looked up at her husband shaking her head. "You didn't have enough to do today, with all the painting?"

"The painting can wait, Catherine, your care cannot." He handed her a napkin, his eyes filled with love and concern. "Please eat while it is hot?"

Settling down next to her with a book, Vincent watched with satisfaction as she ate as though completely ravenous. When the last of the strawberries were on her spoon, she motioned him closer. "Open wide."

He did as instructed, laughing as some of the cream smudged on his upper lip. Before he could wipe it off, Catherine leaned forward and gently licked it away with her tongue. "Hmmm, you always taste so good."

His eyes were soft, but vibrant with emotion. "It must be the cream."

"No - it's you." Snuggling into the crook of his arm, she sighed with contentment. "Read to me?"

"Of course." Turning the page, Vincent began to recite a favorite piece of theirs by Kahlil Gibran.

"..... beauty is eternity, gazing at itself in a mirror. But you are eternity and you are the mirror...." He shut the book quietly, sensing his wife was now sleeping. As he did, Catherine slowly turned in his arms 'til her body was tightly pressed against his. "Don't stop, I'm not asleep."

"Oh, you are not?" He kissed the top of her head lightly, smiling.

"No, just somewhere in between, half dreaming..." Nuzzling into his neck, she rested her lips against his throat, feeling the pulse there leap and palpitate as she did.

Easing one arm around her, he turned; running one thumb gently over her lower lip. "In that place where everything glides, floats and shimmers exquisitely?"

"Hmm, that's the place. Am I floating?"

"You are, yes." Inhaling the scent of her, he closed his eyes, smiling. Such peace; to lay here with Catherine in this way, was glorious. Picking up the book, he began to read again; his voice cracking slightly - filled with so much love, it seemed to illuminate the room.

Once his children had been allowed to tiptoe in and kiss their mother, Vincent bathed them and quickly got them into their pajamas. Marca was surprisingly cooperative; her aunt must have worn her out playing this evening. Tumbling into bed, she captured her favorite stuffed toy into a fierce embrace. "...night, Jake, night Daddy."

"...night."

"Sweet dreams, my lovely daughter." Vincent kissed her gently, then tucked his son into the bed across the room.

After securing the window and making sure the adjoining bathroom light was on, he turned to the bookcase next to his son's bed. "Jacob, it is your turn to choose the story tonight. Which is it to be?"

No answer. He looked over, shaking his head with amusement. His usually rambunctious twins seemed quite done in. Yes, an evening with their aunt, uncle and their cousin D.J.

would do this! Vincent pulled the bedroom door almost completely closed, chuckling to himself. Perhaps his sister-in-law, the doctor, had drugged them into good behavior? Ha.

Back in the library, Vincent stirred the paint, allowing his mind to wander. When this last wall in this room was finished, only one room upstairs would need his immediate attention until the summer. As much as he had enjoyed doing the work, he would be quite glad to rest for a few months. His back muscles needed a rest.

Just as he lifted the roller to fill it, an odd sensation brought him up short, flinching. Catherine!

Taking the stairs three at a time, Vincent ran towards the bedroom, feeling suddenly extremely nauseous; cold sweat had broken out on his forehead by the time he reached the doorway.

Finding the bed empty, he looked around the room, calling out; a bit alarmed. "Catherine, where are you? Catherine?"

The unpleasant sounds of his wife being ill brought him to the bathroom door. "Are you all right?"

"Do I SOUND all right? I'm sick..." Pulling back a bit at the tone in his wife's voice, Vincent placed one hand on the door. "May I come in?"

Her words were almost wailed. "No! Not now. Please just... go away!"

His words louder than he meant to say them, as he felt a rush of anxiety emanating from his wife, Vincent spoke brusquely. "You know I will not... go away! Please allow me to enter; let me help you?"

The bathroom door slid open slowly; Catherine stood before him holding a cloth to her neck. "I'm sorry. I just feel so rotten and don't know why. Vincent, put me down!"

"In a moment." He crossed the room quickly, laying her carefully on the bed, then turned for the door. "I am going to get Father or Allegra."

She switched on the bedside light. "No! It's late, don't wake them. I'll be okay in a minute, just stay with me?"

Hesitating in the doorway for a moment, Vincent looked at her carefully. "You are sure?" Seeing a faint smile on her lips, he sighed heavily. "Very well, if you insist...."

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he looked at her; concern deepening the furrows on each side of his mouth. "Promise me you will see either Allegra or Father, first thing in the morning?"

"If I don't feel better, I promise. Maybe I just had too much to eat today; I had pizza earlier with a salad and a huge piece of banana cake..." She shrugged tiredly and pulled the covers up to her chin.

Vincent frowned; banana cake? Catherine loathed bananas in any form.

After making certain the house was secure for the night, Vincent took a hurried shower and climbed into the bed next to Catherine's still form. With a compassionate kiss to her shoulder, he watched her silently for a moment, then nodded satisfying himself that she was in no distress. Nestling down next to her, Vincent was quickly asleep.

§§§§ A baby was crying; sharp wails broke through the silence as Vincent picked up the blue-wrapped bundle. Softly rocking the baby back and forth in his arms, he sat down on the edge of the bed, and reached for a clean diaper.

Gently lifting the blanket away, he succeeded in soothing the cries of the infant with quiet words. Vincent pulled a flickering candle closer to hold back the darkness, then reached to extract the soiled diaper from around the tiny body.

Then, he gasped in shock as a miniature mirror of his own face stared up at him from the blanket. Stunned, staring eyes of vibrant blue locked to the child's deep bluish green ones; the boy waved a chubby fist at him, grinning toothlessly. §§§§

Her husband's tightly gasped words were indistinct, but the tone and pain in them roused Catherine from sleep. She shook him lightly and brushed the hair away from his face.

"Vincent, you're having a bad dream... shhhhh..."

He sat up, startled and disoriented. "What? A dream, was it only a dream then?" He sounded confused, unsure, as he faced his wife.

"Only a dream." Whispering to him, Catherine urged him to lay back down. "Was it a nightmare like those you used to have, long ago?"

"No, not a bad dream or a nightmare." As he turned on his side facing her, Catherine saw his eyes glittering like sapphires in the dawn's half-light.

He stared at her silently for what seemed like an eternity, then spoke; his words nearly inaudible. "Perhaps, a look into the future..."

The early light streaming in through the lace curtains at the window bathed his face in a saffron hue as he smiled widely. "My love, your illness earlier..." Trying not to shock her, Vincent searched for the right words. "It was not what you ate, Catherine."

"Oh no, then what was it?" Then, Catherine's mouth fell open as her eyes went very round. "Are you saying what I think you are?"

"We are having another child, my dearest Catherine. In the dream..."

His words were nearly choked from the man as his wife shrieked delightedly and grabbed him around the neck. "Oh Vincent! I've been hoping and praying for a baby for months and months!"

He must make her hear this - now. Dear God, what had he done; to burden her with... this? "Catherine, please - allow me to finish? In the dream, I saw our child, I held him in my arms."

She gripped him by the shoulders, seeing a look of pain and contrition wash over his face.

"But, why has this upset you so? You held him? We'll have a boy? A boy! Oh Vincent..." Catherine buried her face into his shoulder. "Our son."

Surprised when he pulled back from her, Catherine lifted her head, looking up at him.

"Please tell me what is troubling you about this child? Vincent, you're starting to frighten me."

"The boy will not - be as his brother is." There was a world of pain in the words. "Our son shall look like.... me."

He bent his head as his eyes filled with tears. "I am... sorry."

She knew this sense of guilt and anguish must be taken from Vincent NOW, before he was allowed to brood over that guilt, making it much, much worse. Catherine forced her voice to be calm.

"Are you sorry he will be born, Vincent?"

"No, that is not what I regret." The tears ran down his face, dripping onto Catherine's hands as she wiped them away gently with the tips of her fingers.

He shook his head slowly. "But, to have you and our son undergo what will have to be endured, because of his appearance, is something I prayed would never come to pass - for your sake and the boy's."

"Vincent, don't do this to yourself, please stop this? Will it do any good to tell you I want this child to look like his father?"

"How can you say that? You know what my life was, before I had you to share it with me, Catherine. The years of being alone, of always having to hide from strangers..." His voice broke. "How can I put another child through this?"

Capturing his face between her hands, Catherine tugged him towards her, forcing him to listen. "How can you deny him his right to exist in whatever form is chosen for him, Vincent? In whatever form."

He started to speak, but she put one hand over his lips, shaking her head. "This is a special child you've given me. Thank you, my love."

"Catherine..." He shook his head, looking so sad, it broke her heart. "Will he forgive me? Will our son forgive me when he is forced into a lifestyle he would not want?"

"I don't know the future, Vincent, and neither do you! How do you know the boy will ever blame you or hate his life? That might never happen, you know; our son may be quite proud of the fact that he looks like his father. Did you ever think of that?"

"Proud." His snort of disbelief made Catherine suddenly quite angry. "Why won't you believe me? You never do and I've told you over and over again!"

Straddling him, she nailed him with a look of fierce determination. "I wouldn't CARE whether you were pink, purple or puce, dammit! I love you. I'll love our son as I do the twins, because of who and what they are.... your children!"

Vincent scrutinized her as he listened with his heart instead of his head. Catherine had never, ever lied to him; he wanted to believe her now. Taking a deep, cleansing breath, he nodded. "It is too late to worry about it now anyway, isn't it?"

Catherine hugged him as hard as she could. "A bit." Rubbing her hands over his chest, she smiled at him warmly. "Make a deal with you?"

The nature of her mood lightened his own; Vincent smiled back. "What sort of a deal?"

"How about if I take a bit of your worry and concern from you and you take... some of my joy and anticipation from me in exchange? All right? Deal?"

"It never fails to astound me, Catherine; you are the strongest person I have ever known. Come here."

Gathering her to his chest, he placed soft, wet kisses along her jaw, breathing in her scent, touching the great determination and truth flowing from her heart with his own.

A sense of peace washed over him, he would trust in Catherine now; how could he not? Her truth and patience had led him from the darkness into a world he thought never to be his; a world of light and joy. Having her love, how could he fear – anything? Powerful emotions swept over Vincent like a raging river as he buried his nose in her hair. "I love you so."

Satisfied his somber mood was lighter, she patted her tummy, grinning at him happily. "I know that. But don't give me too much credit for being strong, Vincent." Her eyes locked to his. "I had the best teacher."

Carefully easing her bulk into a kitchen chair, Catherine groaned; the last day at work had been endless. Joe had taken her news four months ago in his usual "STYLE", he had winced, looked appalled, then accused her of doing THIS to HIM on purpose. After finally admitting how happy she looked, Joe had hugged her with exaggerated care.

"Lucky kid, having you for a ma. So, we'll have you back here in about six months, right?"

Catherine had handed him the last of her cases, nodding in agreement. Six months was the time she had requested as maternity leave. When she did come back, it would be only four half days a week and strictly investigative office work.

She had promised Vincent long ago - no more dangerous assignments would be undertaken. Those days of tempting fate had long passed for both of them; there was too much to lose now. And she was too busy being a wife and mother to really miss the work that much - right now anyway. With Vincent, the twins, the expected baby and this new home, her days and nights were very full.

Finishing her tea, Catherine stood at the sink, lost in thought. When she and Vincent had broken the news to Father of the new baby, he had seemed a bit uneasy at first. Over the next weeks, he had come to terms with something he had NO control over.

Allegra and Devin were pleased for her sake that Vincent had 'come around' - as Devin put it. He had teased his younger brother for days mercilessly; calling him the great 'stud' and other names until Vincent was ready to clobber him.

By the beginning of her second month, all the tunnel residents had been by to offer their best wishes and leave small gifts for the coming child. Mary had made a beautiful quilt for the new nursery; all in different shades of blue.

Even Narcissa had climbed the long way from her home up to Father's chamber to give Catherine and Vincent a gift of her own making; a talisman to bring the baby the best of fortune and the happiest of lives.

Catherine walked into the library, laughing quietly to herself. Father had been dismayed when he saw the gift from Narcissa consisted of a blue velvet pouch filled with small, colored crystals, jagged pieces of cloth and what appeared to be the bones of a small unrecognizable animal. But, he wisely said nothing then, knowing his son would not take kindly anything derogatory aimed towards Narcissa and her... magic.

All in all, these first four months had been happy ones, once the morning sickness let her be. Surprisingly, it had only lasted for a few weeks, instead of the time Catherine had expected it to. But, as Peter Alcott reminded her needlessly, this pregnancy was not a 'usual' one to begin with. When he had heard the news from his old friend Jacob, Peter had shared the worry he heard in the man's tone.

Catherine was certain Allegra had sharpened her sometimes acid-bearing tongue on the two men she called 'the old poops'; now Peter and Father seemed to smile at Catherine more, instead of frowning as in the beginning. Dear Allegra could make you do that - smile when you didn't want to - she did have her ways!

Standing in the doorway of the library, Catherine looked across at her husband. His back was turned as he stacked row upon row of books into a large built in corner cabinet.

"Having fun, are you, my love?"

He turned slightly, giving her 'the look'. "I have had fun before, Catherine; this is NOT it! I know I requested some books for our library, but you didn't have to buy me everything on the market since the beginning of recorded history, did you? There are so many, I will never finish this categorizing in one lifetime!"

Sitting on the desk, she threw a small wad of paper at him. "Then, you'll just have to live forever, won't you?" Dodging his return of the missile, she laughed and plopped into a chair near him. "Besides, it keeps you occupied."

"I can think of a great many things I would rather be doing instead of this, to occupy my... time." He threw her a scorching look, pouting slightly. "Many things..."

A tiny shudder went through her in this game of 'who will blink first', his eyes were truly the windows to this man's soul; they said it all. Bending over the desk journal, she lost the

staring contest as usual, with good grace. Catherine knew if she looked into that extraordinary face any longer right now, she'd attack him where he stood!

"Promises, promises... "

Those were the last words she managed to utter. Two muscled arms lifted her from the chair as if she were a cloud; he strode towards the stairway, tossing her a look of calm resolve. "A promise I shall fulfill – **now**."

Locking the door behind them, Vincent set her gently to her feet. "It has been nearly two weeks we've not been together, in this way, Catherine."

"I know. I was wondering when you'd find time for me again." Her tone was joking - impish.

Watching as he removed his boots, then tossed his clothing to a chair, Catherine opened her arms to him as he neared the bed. He stood over her for a moment, his depth of arousal fully obvious. An ironic look on his face, he glanced down at himself, then to her.

"You do see what only you can do to me?"

Nodding her head, she patted the bed. "Can't help BUT see. Are you bragging or complaining?"

Kneeling on the bed, he leaned towards her slowly. When he lay half on top of her, he nudged her gently with his body, smiling. "Bragging."

It had taken Catherine two minutes to win his heart, but two years to win his trust; it had been worth it to her. To have Vincent's love was worth everything. Everything.

There was an urgency about his love making this night; he was frenzied - wild - as he took them both beyond the heights of consummation. An impassioned bellow of her name, then hoarse words of satisfaction and pleasure burst from his lips as he finished deep inside her. His penis surged firmly within her loving body as the sweet excitement of his frantic, shuddering release flowed into her womb.

At last, they rested sated and content in each other's arms. Catherine tenderly pushed his long hair away from his face as Vincent sighed deeply, then smiled down at her almost shyly. "I am too heavy for you."

Catherine wriggled beneath him. "You always seem to think you are, but I can take it. Don't move unless you want to."

A sudden wet, slippery feeling made them both burst out laughing. With a wry grimace, Vincent eased himself onto his back, bringing her with him.

"Goodbye for... now... OH! I did not want to move, my love, but..... "

Wincing as he gently eased their sticky bodies apart, Vincent gritted his teeth against the agonizing feel of his chest hair being pulled away from him. He seemed glued to his wife! OUCH. As he drew Catherine up to his breast, he laughed again.

"One cannot always control what they wish to do at any given moment, my love."

She lay across his breast, half asleep. "So it seems." With a poke to his ribs, she teased her best treasure - just a bit. "But, I thought **you** could control **anything?**"

There was a note of surprise in his response. "I used to be able to, at one time long ago. Hmm, I wonder just what or **who** caused me to lose that particular capability?"

That remark finished her; Catherine giggled, slid from the bed and headed for the bathroom on legs that were not quite steady. His rumbling chuckle caused her face to redden slightly as she closed the bathroom door; still not quite believing that at times, her husband now managed to get in the last word.

Supporting his head on one hand, Devin slurped his coffee and tried forcing himself awake. Mornings were literally for the BIRDS - he'd gladly concede his worm to THEM if he was allowed to sleep instead. Looking at his watch, he groaned and shut his eyes.

She was trying to kill him, that was it! Working and helping Father and Vincent wasn't enough - now Mrs. Allegra Bellini-Wells had him moving STUFF up to their new brick RESIDENCE.

The new kitchen she had asked for was finally in, thank God! He didn't know WHY she wanted one; she couldn't cook to save her life anyway! He'd been listening to her bitch and complain for months of how slow the renovations were going. Finally, in desperation, Devin had Mouse take on the wiring and major plumbing work. Well, now it was done - but only the Devil himself knew if it actually WORKED!

Oh well, such was the price one paid when one married. Devin grinned to himself. It was a price well worth paying; having someone like Allegra love him was worth a hell of a lot. Without her and their son, Devin Junior, he had nothing. What sacrifices he had made to stay here, in this world, with her, were small ones; they paled next to the way that woman made him **feel**.

Devin looked up as Vincent entered the kitchen, but didn't say anything. Whoops. Old Vin looked mad enough to spit rocks. What was this, trouble in paradise? OHO!

He watched silently as Vincent poured a cup of coffee and banged the pot back on the stove, grabbed the cream, slammed the refrigerator door 'til it creaked in protest, then whacked the counter so hard, all the stacked dishes rattled.

Finally, Devin couldn't stand it; he had to know what had made MR. AFFABLE so pissed off!

"Vin?"

The answer was a snarled one. "WHAT?"

"Good day to you too! Somebody rub your hair the wrong way?"

"Stuff it, Devin. I'm in no mood for your warped sense of humor this morning, believe me. It's only seven a.m. and already the day ..."

Devin tried to help. "The day is a loss? A mess? Shot? Find one you like?"

Vincent sneered. "Down the tubes, is more like it!" He clumped to a chair and threw himself into it, stirring his coffee 'til he spilt some.

Sighing, he shook his head sadly towards his brother. "Catherine was never like this when she was having the twins! She's unreasonable; I cannot talk to her without having her..."

Mr. Helpful tried again. "Fly off the handle? Yell at you? Throw things? Hand you your ass?"

"Yes, all of those and more!" Vincent frowned and tried to explain. "This morning all I did - ALL I DID - was make her a nourishing breakfast; wholewheat pancakes, sausage, apple juice and a fresh fruit compote. She came into the kitchen, looked at the plate and burst into tears, crying that I was trying to make her get FAT!"

His eyes were filled with confusion. "Devin, she IS fat; she is SUPPOSED to BE fat - she is over six months **pregnant!** I don't know what to do...."

"Humor her, Vin. You gotta, man, or you'll never live to see your kid. Believe me, I know; I've been through it with 'Llegs. With pregnant women, little bro', you just don't win. Man, you're fighting their HORMONES - ya CAN'T win!" Devin shrugged knowingly and got to his feet. "Well, gotta get it in gear. Are you and Catherine still coming to supper tonight?"

"Is 'Legra cooking?" Vincent smiled up at his brother. "If she IS cooking, let me know NOW, so I can warn Catherine "

"No, smartass, I've already made a gorgeous pot roast; all her highness has to do is heat it up."

"And she can do that without burning it entirely?" A soft chuckle came rumbling up from Vincent's chest. Devin laughed, agreeing.

"Yeah, I know, she's a great doctor, but for the first time in my life, I SAW someone burn water! She really managed to do that, about a week ago. Burnt the whole brand new kettle. Oh well, see ya.... "

Waving his brother off, Vincent finished his coffee and decided to visit Father. He'd actually *rather* play chess with Father than go back home at the moment, trying to avoid for a while having to deal with his wife's extremely disconcerting and volatile disposition.

Catherine lay flat on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Boring. BOORRRING!! Oh GOD, would this pregnancy never end? It hadn't been like this carrying the twins; she had been comfortable almost to the last day, with them.

But this son was being quite a brat; thumping and bumping her all about, especially at night, until she was sick to her stomach and very overtired.

Turning carefully onto her left side, Catherine felt slightly ashamed of herself - well, all right... VERY ashamed of herself! Her poor husband; he tried so hard to please her in every way possible and she either cried or yelled at the man all the time, for Lord's sakes!

Silently promising herself to NOT yell at him again, Catherine whacked her pillow and groaned. "Ohhhhhh .."

Vincent scared the hell out of her by running from the corridor and kneeling in front of her. "What? The baby? Catherine, what is it?"

"What..." She struggled to sit upright on the bed. "I'm fine. Where were you?"

He looked down to his hands. "In the hallway."

"Doing what exactly?" She looked puzzled.

"Well?" Vincent shrugged uncomfortably. "I was... reading."

She threw him a scathing look. "You were... reading? In the hallway? WHY? We DO have ROOMS, you realize."

His brow furrowed as her sarcastic tone of voice edged along his spine to bury itself somewhere in his groin. He took several deep breaths before answering.

"I am aware we have rooms, Catherine; I was merely staying close, in case I was needed."

"Then, why didn't you come in and read at your desk or on the bed?" Yes - Vincent decided - she WAS definitely needling him and he had just about had enough.

"I thought it would disturb you if I did that." He looked forlorn, like a lost puppy who didn't even have a bone to gnaw on."So, I may bring my book in...."

Catherine bit the inside of her jaw... the word was patience, remember? PATIENCE."Bring the book in by all means, read out loud if you want. This IS your home too!"

Her heart nearly broke at the look of gratitude he gave her; as if she had given him a gift of great value – her esteemed company.

Settling back against the pillow, she covered her face with one arm and gnashed her teeth as she fought off the urge to ... SCREAM.

He was being kind, thoughtful and entirely wonderful. Vincent was being his usual PERFECT old self and Catherine wanted to ANNIHILATE him - and for NO reason! Peering out from under her arm, she looked to the ceiling.

"God? Pleeezzze? Keep me from DESTROYING him tonight! He's being SO patient, SO kind .. SO damned tolerant of me - I want his furry butt!"

Vincent read to her for a while, then closed the book with a deep sigh and rested his hands on his stomach. Catherine snorted rudely. Ha, he sounded like some kind of MARTYR, for cripes sakes. *Ergeeggh*.

She sat up as the bathroom called her name for the third time in less than an hour. Instinctively, he reached out to help her, but she slapped his hand away.

"Stop that I'm not TOTALLY useless, you know. I CAN get to the bathroom ALONE!"

Okay, he had HAD it. Getting to his feet slowly, Vincent followed her to the bathroom door and leaned on it until she came back out; his temper gathering momentum quickly. Catherine gestured to him.

"All yours..."

"It is not the bathroom I want, Catherine." His face looked a bit grim, she decided. So? Tough. HE didn't have to cart around this baby, SHE DID.

"Oh? So what DO you want, then?"

"I would like you to speak in a civil tone to me. Just once today, would be a great satisfaction, Catherine." Whoops.

When Vincent said her name in THAT tone of voice, he was NOT happy with her. Okay, she felt like a good fight!

"I have BEEN civil; as much as I am able to BE civil right now." Waving one finger at him, she backed him towards the bed, jabbing the finger into his chest. "I am pregnant. I am VERY pregnant. YOU are at fault. Don't push your VERY thin... LUCK... buster!"

She stood over him, hands on hips. "THIS is as GOOD as it GETS!"

"What you need is a good spanking, like any spoiled child would certainly have received weeks ago, dear wife."

"You would not DARE strike me in my condition!"

An anguished look came over his face. In a low voice he whispered to her. "I would never strike you, in ANY condition. But you have been very difficult, Catherine. All I do is try and please you, help you and care for you. What have I received in return? Bad temper, sarcasm and tears, that is what! I am only..."

Vincent took a cleansing breath. "I am only... human and only so patient, even with YOU..."

Catherine sank to the bed. Every word he said was the truth. She had been vile. She'd even cursed the man! *Ohhhh*.

"It's true."

She stuttered on the words. "All... t... t... true....forgive me, Vincent? I don't know what's come over me these last weeks."

When she began to cry softly, all the steam went out of his temper. Drawing her close, he soothed her hair and kissed her face tenderly.

"Hush, my love. Shhhh, it's all right, everything is all right - now."

She flung her arms around his neck tightly, wailing in her discomfort. "I'm a MESS...."

Vincent shook his head as he took her face between his large, calloused palms. "No, you are not a... mess. You are beautiful."

She wailed again. "I'm FAT and UGLY and can't even tie my own SHOES!"

Rocking her back and forth gently, his calm voice soothed Catherine and she stopped crying. "To me, you are lovely; you are always lovely in my eyes."

He rested one hand at her large tummy. "Especially now."

"I can't play with the children, I'm out of breath all the time"

Massaging her tight shoulders, his words were husky with love. "Catherine, you are seven months pregnant. I realize this child is very large, much larger than both of the twins. I didn't know he would be so big..."

"Of course you didn't." She swiped at her tears. "How could you have known?"

Trying to get her focus elsewhere for a moment, Vincent sat next to her on the bed. "Did I ever tell you of the dream I had over a year ago, at the cabin?"

"Dream? Of what?"

"This child." He smiled down at her, gathering her close to his heart. "I dreamt of this child, even then."

"You mean the time I surprised you with the horses way back then you knew...."

"It was just a dream; but I could see him, Catherine. I saw him then as I did seven months ago - that second time."

"When I really was pregnant." Letting herself relax against him, she could hear his heart thudding in her ear. "Yes, when you became pregnant, I dreamt of him again. I even know his name or what he was called in my dream."

She sat up, her eyes wide. "His name? We haven't yet decided on his name and we should soon!"

"There is time. But in the dream, his name was Christopher Charles Wells." Vincent smiled, remembering his son's green eyes staring up into his own.

Catherine pressed closer to him, hugging him around the waist. "Christopher Charles, I like that name. Do you?" Catherine looked up at him; an extremely thoughtful look was on his face, as he seemed to stare off somewhere she could not go with him.

"Yes, that is a good name."

He looked down at her, questioning. "You are certain you would not rather have it the other way 'round? Charles first, then Christopher?"

"No, the way it was in your dream is fine; who am I to argue with your sense of predestination, after all? I'm merely the mother of this very large child!" She sighed, burying her face against his chest. "Christopher Charles Wells is a moose!"

Vincent laughed so hard, the bed actually shook. "A moose, is he?" He turned on his side, arching an eyebrow at her., taunting in that very dry way he sometimes would. "If THAT is the case, Catherine, you owe ME an explanation. However in this world would I have a.... MOOSE for progeny?"

Sticking her tongue out at the man, Catherine began thumping him quite soundly with her pillow, then tickling him until he was nearly useless. NEARLY useless, Vincent still found the strength to give her a very long, very involved good night, sleep tight kiss. It took him some time....

Mary walked down the corridor to Father's chamber with Brooke at her side, carrying one of the largest baskets of candy Mary had ever seen in her life.

Looking up as Brooke and Mary stood in the entrance, Jacob Wells smiled warmly. "Ah, at last." He met them at the bottom step, taking the unusually heavy basket from the younger girl. "My, my - your message said a large gift had arrived, but I never expected something like this." He ran his fingers through the basket, then looked puzzled. "And no card of any kind? Nothing that denotes who sent it, Mary?"

"None I could find, Father. As I said on the pipes, it was just... there! William said he went into the kitchen this morning to begin preparing breakfast and that... thing... was in the middle of the longest table, wrapped just as you see it now. I have no idea who it's from; I was rather hoping you would."

Carefully setting the basket down on his desk, Jacob shook his head. "I don't know, truly I don't." He began undoing the myriad ribbons and small wooden animal decorations that covered the basket.

When all the wrappings were removed, Mary, Brooke and Jacob began lifting out the small individual gold boxes carefully. Peering into the bottom, Jacob picked up a small envelope.

"Aha! Here is something that may give us a clue. Now ..." Opening the envelope, he held the small inner card in his fingers as he pulled his glasses down from the top of his head - their usual "hiding" place. "Hmmm...'*to all our friends Below. Happy Thanksgiving.*' That's the entire message."

"Well, really!" Mary put her hands at her hips, shaking her head. "Why it could be poisoned or something...."

It was at this point that Catherine entered the chamber on her husband's arm. Hanging on to their parents, were two red-haired three year olds. Both Mary and Father held out their arms to the twins, smiling. But, with joyful shrieks, the children flung themselves instead at Brooke.

She hugged them both hard and looked up to their parents. "Hi Cathy, Vincent, I thought you said seven o'clock?"

Catherine smiled. "We did, but they were anxious to be with one of their favorite sitters this evening and we thought to save you a trip."

"Oh. Well, I did promise them a visit with Jamie and Mouse. Okay guys?" Brooke turned to Mary. "Did you need me anymore tonight, Mary?"

"No, we have all the napkins done and only the tablecloths need to be ironed a little; those can wait until the morning. Hello children."

First hugging their grandfather, then Mary, the twins weren't really paying too much attention to any of the adults at the moment; their eyes were fastened on a large brown woven basket filled with small golden boxes. Marca pointed, but J.D asked the question.

"What is DAT?"

Father shrugged good naturedly. "I was just about to open one up and find out. Would you like to help me, children?"

The words were no sooner out of his mouth then two pairs of chubby little hands grabbed at the basket. Now pulling it in two directions at once, the little DARLINGS seemed hell bent on trying to rend the basket into two pieces.

"Mine!" Marca pulled to the left.

"No, MINE!" Jacob Devin pulled to the right.

"Leggo!" She glared at her brother with dire threats in her pretty eyes.

He glared back, no longer impressed with her infamous 'looks'; only Daddy could still scare him with those looks anymore. "YOU leggo!"

Picking the most inopportune moment to step between them, Vincent winced as his daughter's tiny foot nailed him in the ankle instead of her brother. Oh oh.

Closing his eyes a moment, Vincent took a deep breath. Opening them, he leveled a calm, cool gaze at his children. "Stop this immediately."

Taking the basket, Vincent put it back on the desk as Father stared up at the second level bookcases. He just couldn't look at his son at the moment or he would surely laugh.

Holding out her hands, Marca looked up - WAYYY up, into her daddy's face and gave him a BIG smile. "I is throrry, daddy. I dint mean to kick YOU, I was gonna kick HIM!" She pointed rudely at her brother.

J.D pushed his luck at this moment as many of the male species did at times. He taunted his sister in a sing-song voice that grated on the nerves of all the adults in the chamber.

"Nah, nah. You kicked Daddy, you kicked Daddy, you're gonna get it, you're gonna get it...."

Catherine could swear she saw fire flash, as her husband's nostrils flared alarmingly. She winced, waiting for what she knew would follow. It did.

"Quiet! NOW!" Vincent pointed to a spot on the floor, just in front of him. "Come HERE to me, please."

Standing like little soldiers before their quite angry father, Marca and J.D looked at each other, then up to Mommy. But, Catherine gave them no hope of rescue; just a shake of her head that told them they were on their own.

"Apologize to everyone in this chamber, Marca and Jacob." Vincent spoke very softly. THIS was the voice that promised DOOM if not immediately obeyed. The twins knew it well, they HAD lived for three years, with that voice.

After apologies were made all around, Brooke took each child by a hand, whispering to them. "We better go, huh, before you get into any more trouble?"

Kissing their family, two unusually subdued children left with their sitter. Catherine sat down near the chess table and smiled up at her father-in-law. "WHY ... am ... I having another child?"

Looking back at her quite impishly, Father shook his head just a bit. "For all the... usual reasons, I would assume." Piercing grey-blue eyes locked to Catherine's as she blushed furiously and ducked her head.

Sensing his wife's chagrin, Vincent changed the subject, to Catherine's relief. He stood with one finger on the handle of the basket on Father's desk. "What is this? Are you being ... wooed, Father?" Vincent kept his face perfectly straight - it WAS difficult to do.

"Hrrumph, I should say not!" Giving him a baleful glance, Father sat behind his desk and tapped one finger on the basket.

"This was left in the kitchen earlier; Mary and Brooke just brought it to me before you arrived. I don't know who it's from. There is a note, but only who it's FOR."

Father passed the small card to his son and sat back, looking thoughtful.

Glancing at Catherine, Vincent read the card, then handed it to her. She read it, shrugged and gave it back. "It would appear we have a mystery on our hands."

Opening one of the small gold boxes, Vincent looked a bit surprised. "These are Lady Godiva chocolates; aren't these the candies that cost - as Allegra put it once - 'an arm, a foot and your firstborn?' Wasn't that the name, Catherine?"

"Lady Godiva? Whoa, somebody likes to throw their money around!" She held out her hand and he passed the box to her, smiling. Somewhere in these last five years, Catherine, it would appear, had most definitely acquired his bad habit - CHOCOLATE! "Yes, Lady Godiva's are good!"

Biting into a thick, gooey caramel, Catherine sat back, sighing. "These are sinful..." She chewed quite contentedly as Vincent and Father shared a second box between them and set up the chess board.

Offering to share the candy with Mary, Catherine Chandler-Wells seemed almost relieved, when Mary declined.

"No thank you, my dear. I mustn't eat too much now; it would spoil my appetite for William's lovely Thanksgiving feast later."

Patting her on the arm, Mary whispered. "Do see those two over there don't eat all of it, won't you?"

Catherine nodded solemnly, then put one hand over her heart, smiling. "Promise. Oh, must you go?"

"Yes, I have much to do tonight." Mary started up the steps. "See you for dinner, in a while, then?"

"We'll be there; my mouth is watering already. Bye." Catherine smiled at her, then turned back to her candy. Popping another into her mouth, she bit down - a look of pure ecstasy washed over her face. Ohh, these were TOO good!

When Father had won the second straight game, Vincent got to his feet, shaking his head.

"Have you been perhaps, brushing up with an expert, Father? Your game has rarely been better."

"Perhaps it's only that you're slightly distracted?" Father looked over to Catherine, then back to his son.

His son returned his look calmly; he wanted to burst out laughing, but would NEVER give his parent that particular satisfaction. "Hmmm, perhaps you are right. Be that as it may, I can withstand no further humiliation this night."

Turning, Vincent held out one hand to his half dozing wife. "Catherine, are you ready to return to our chamber?"

Startled, her eyes flew open. Looking up, her expression made him wink at her. "You were asleep."

"Yes, I guess so." Rising slowly with Vincent's help, Catherine gave Father a peck on the cheek. "See you for dinner."

"Why not rest in bed, Catherine; have Vincent bring your meal to you. You should rest more than you do, you know..."

Patting his face gently, she nodded. "I know. If I stayed in bed twenty hours out of every twenty four, you and Peter would still be AT me, huh?"

Having the good grace to look a bit nonplussed, Jacob nodded. "I admit you are probably correct. Goodnight, Cathy. Vincent, shall we plan on a return match tomorrow night?"

Laying one large hand on Father's shoulder, Vincent smiled down on him. "That would depend on the level of masochism I am at tomorrow night. Good day, Father."

After kissing the man's weathered face gently, he turned to escort his wife from the chamber before she fell asleep standing up. Gathering her close, Vincent gazed down at her with the love of a lifetime shining from his eyes. This exceptional woman could sleep on a picket fence! Vincent picked his wife up, before she could protest.

Allegra pushed her plate away and groaned audibly. "Ohhh, that second helping destroyed me; I'm stuffed!"

Devin nudged her, his voice low; his words meant only for her. "Next time you buy CHOCOLATES, Mrs. RICH DOCTOR, just buy one BASKET, not two. Then maybe you won't eat nearly the whole freaking thing and BE stuffed!"

She gave him a disdainful sneer. "I wanted a new yarn basket."

He waggled his eyebrows at her and shook his head. Nope, not an acceptable excuse. "You could have purchased one EMPTY and... cheaper!"

"Devin, your brother's right, ya know. Nobody likes a smartass!" Allegra punched him on the arm, then groaned again. "Don't hit me back, I'll explode! Oh, GAWD, I can't move!"

"You have to move, MOMMY; your son wants to use the bathroom and you know he won't go for me!"

"Oh, D.J!" Allegra sighed and got to her feet slowly "Okay, child of my heart, let's go do potty, huh?"

While Catherine talked with Jamie, Vincent looked across the table at Devin. "Did you say your son will not go to the bathroom... "

"For me? No way." Devin grinned and gestured for Vincent to move closer. "If I take D.J to the bathroom, I have to GO TOO, it's A RULE he made up! What can I do? 'Llegs says it's just a PHASE... "

"That is ridiculous, Devin. How...."

"You bet it is. HA! That kid's gonna give me a hernia trying to go when I don't HAVE to!"

Before he could say anything in reply, a stabbing pain shot through his lower back, then into his stomach. Vincent gasped as he got to his feet, looking for his wife. Father grabbed his arm as he hurried past him. "Vincent, what is it?"

"It's Catherine." Leaping to his feet, Father tried to keep up with his son, wanting him to answer questions. But, Vincent didn't stop walking as he spoke; his eyes searched the room until he pinpointed Catherine's whereabouts.

She was slumped in a corner, sitting on a bench next to Jamie on the other side of the Great Hall. Mary looked very upset as she rubbed Catherine's wrists and gestured for Vincent and Father to hurry.

As Vincent began to run, Jamie ran towards him, her eyes wide with fright. "Catherine fainted! Sh ... She's bleeding, Vincent!"

Struggling to push away the darkness, Catherine moaned, then felt a cold cloth at her forehead. "V... V... Vincent?"

"Yes, my love. I am here." His voice was uneven, coarse with worry. "You will be fine, rest now."

"Hmmm." Holding his hand fast, she drifted off again into a healing sleep.

Father paused over the bed, looking at his son. "Did I hear her speak? She's awake, Vincent?"

"Only for a moment, Father." His frightened eyes held the older man's. "Tell me."

Allegra waved Father off. "Let me do this, okay? Why don't you get the plasma set up; we better get it started now."

Nodding, Father held Vincent's hand for a moment, nearly crushing it with a grip of steel. "Allegra can surely explain it to you quicker than I; she examined Catherine. I'll go do what else has to be done..." Father's voice trailed away to silence as his hand touched his son's shoulder. "You understand?"

"Yes, I understand." Turning to his childhood friend, the look in her eyes made his heart plummet. Not wanting the answer he knew he must still ask the question. "The child? 'Legra, will Catherine and I lose this child?"

She rubbed a hand over her forehead nervously before answering. "I don't know yet, Vincent. If I can help it, she won't. But, Cathy has lost a lot of blood; I don't know ..."

Pulling up a chair, Allegra took his hands into hers, feeling his terror and pain in her own heart. "We won't lose Cathy, that I will promise you. But, that's all I can promise right now."

Leaving Vincent alone with his wife for a moment, Allegra went to assist Father in readying the plasma and surgical instruments - just in case. She turned as Devin came into the room and stood next to his brother with a hand on his arm.

Allegra's eyes filled with tears; she wiped them away viciously and straightened her small shoulders. *'Okay, God, if you're listening; you gave me the skill, now give me the courage. For if anything happens to Catherine, that man will die; you know it and I know it.'*

Looking up, Allegra bit her lower lip until it went numb. *'You take her, you take Vincent too. And on a personal not just between you and me, okay? I will never forgive you.'*

Devin sat in the chair next to his brother, staring down at his hands. He had no words right now; there were no words to comfort his brother. Devin watched as Vincent gently brushed the hair from Catherine's cheek, then turned his own face away.

Damn it. The look in Vincent's eyes made Devin sick to his stomach; he couldn't bear it. There was a world of pain in those eyes; and confusion. Such confusion and bitterness, Devin had to get to his feet, wanting to run. Wanting to scream - ENOUGH. His brother - and Catherine, had been through enough. Devin stood at his brother's left side.

"Can I do anything for you?"

Vincent shook his head silently, never lifting his eyes from Catherine's placid form. Wordlessly, Devin left the chamber; ramming his fists into his pockets, cursing to himself. And making deals with the devil as only Devin could make... deals.

The smell of soup brought Catherine awake; groaning, she tried sitting up, but two strong hands held her fast. "Lay still, my love. It's all right. Please lay still."

"Who... Vincent?" Catherine groped for his hand as she tried opening her eyes; it hurt to do even that much.

"Yes, Catherine, I am with you." His voice was soft; almost as she remembered hearing it that first time he said her name, over seven years ago. Wincing in pain, she blinked several times; finally his face came into focus a bit more. Dear God, what had happened to him? He looked dreadful - exhausted.

Catherine's hand went to his face, wanting the truth. "Tell me? Our baby?" She hesitated, then swept a hand over her stomach. "Vincent, the baby..... "

Kneeling by the bed, her husband gently lowered his head to her shoulder. "Our son is all right, Catherine; he is - truly. Allegra and Father say all will be well, for both of you." His voice broke. "Both... of you."

Nodding, trusting him not to lie to her, Catherine sighed and closed her eyes. Tired, she was so tired.

Father had just finished examining Catherine when Vincent came into the chamber quietly, to stand just outside the white curtain encircling his wife's bed. "Father?"

"I'm finished. You may come in now." Unclamping the stethoscope from around his neck, Jacob nodded at Catherine. "Everything sounds admirable." He patted her wrist. "You can go home in the morning, but remember what Allegra told you, hmmm?"

Catherine grimaced at him. "I will. Honestly, such a nasty thing to do to me; Allegra is getting as ornery as you!"

Vincent beamed down at her and handed her a cup of steaming cocoa. "Now, love; you should not berate your doctors. They are only doing what is best for you and the child."

"I know. I'm only teasing him; Father is aware of that." She winked at the older man ruefully as he nodded his graying head back to her. "Hmmm, but remember - no getting out of bed except to use the bathroom and no disruptions of any kind until this grandson of mine is born, all right?" That said, he left them alone, feeling a need for supper himself.

Sitting next to her on the bed, Vincent nuzzled his lips into her hair. "You sound better today than yesterday, my love."

"I feel okay." She shrugged. "I just wish all... this hadn't been so alarming - for your sake." Catherine handed him the empty mug and lay back on her pillows.

Vincent's words were nearly inaudible. "I was so frightened, Catherine; never had I experienced such a nature of helpless panic in my life. I could do nothing to help you. I..."

Shaking his head, he reached for Catherine's hand; squeezing it nearly to the point of pain. "If anything had happened to you, it would have also meant my own... ending. I could not endure living without... you. My... fault. Mine alone!"

A wounded look of consummate agony washed over his face. It was unnerving to see this powerful man collapse as he did now.

Wrapping her arms around him, Catherine held him fast to her breast, trying to ease his distress. Vincent sobbed uncontrollably for a few moments; he would not be comforted. His whole body trembled as he fought to master his desire to scream.

"You suffer this, because of me!" He shuddered once, then sat up stiffly, looking away.

Her voice stubborn, Catherine grabbed his face between her hands, shaking him hard. "Never say that again to me. Not ever, I mean it!"

The tone of her voice made him glance sideways at her. "Is it not the truth?" His whole body slumped forward. Resting his hands on his thighs, Vincent shook his head dispiritedly. "It is the truth."

"Things could have been much, much worse, Vincent." Catherine spoke softly. "I could have been alone Above, when this happened, instead of here for Thanksgiving week-end as I was."

She smiled wanly. "I COULD have lost our son, you know, but I didn't!" He still wouldn't look at her.

The nature of her words changed as she pushed him away. "All right, you want to brood? You want to blame yourself for everything, then go ahead, dammit! I can't stop you. You seem hell bent on suffering - do it alone then!"

As his sad eyes met hers, her chin quivered slightly. "Yes, I was in trouble, but it's over now. With the help of you, Father and Allegra, I didn't lose our baby."

"No, you did not lose the baby." He got to his feet, trembling. "But you could have lost your life!"

When he started to leave, Catherine grabbed him by the back of his jeans. "I could lose my life crossing the street, too. Should I live in a glass house and never venture away from it, so you will be SURE I'm safe, Vincent? I can't do that."

Seizing her to his chest, he gulped several times, searching for the words. "Catherine, all I ever wanted, all I ever wished for, was to keep you from harm - always. Can you comprehend how much it... hurts... to realize that I cannot do, what I wish to do all the time?"

"Vincent, I know you want me safe; as I want you safe. Don't you think there are times, when you go into the lower tunnels to work, I don't want to scream don't go? You could be injured or killed."

He looked at her quietly, feeling the truth of her words as she continued.

"I live with that fear every day of our lives; yet how can I stop you from doing what needs doing? To live, as fully as we can, involves risk! Didn't you tell me once to take life as it is given, one day at a time, with all the joys and the pain?"

Catherine held him in her arms. "How can I love you and not want to keep you with me - safe and away from hurt? I have days when I'd like nothing more to wrap you and the twins in a cocoon of safety. Each time you are injured or in pain, so am I! Life IS painful sometimes - yet what choices do we have, Vincent?"

Letting the burden lift, he looked back at her, smiling. "No choices. I simply love you so much. Perhaps, too much for your own good. I am sorry if I upset you."

"You're forgiven, just don't do it again! You love me too much, huh? Too much? No way!" She snuggled against him, breathing in his scent, warming herself in the FEEL of him, as he held her close. "My dear husband, you love me... just right."

He chuckled warmly, then kissed her neck. Content his mood has eased, at least for now, Catherine reached to the nightstand for a paper and pen.

"Okay now, if I'm going to be stuck in this dumb bed until tomorrow, there's a few things I'll need you to bring down to me."

He watched as she scribbled on the notepad, then handed it to him. Reading her rapid scrawl as best he could, he tapped the paper.

"All this, for one night?"

"Yes, all that. It takes work to look BEAUTIFUL, you know." She teased him. "Lots of hard work."

Vincent's blue eyes swept over Catherine's body as he reached for her. "No, it does not take ... work. Beauty such as yours needs no... work, Catherine. It simply is."

Marca peeked around the door at her mother and grinned. "Mommy, you still sleeping?"

"Hi! I'm up, come here you!" She held out her arms to her daughter.

Remembering Daddy's warnings about jumping on the bed, Marca came forward slowly and hugged her mother. "You still feel stinky?"

Catherine laughed aloud. "Stinky? Where did you get THAT expression?"

"Unca Debbin. He said you were feeling stinky. Are you?" Marca tilted her head at her mother, questioningly.

"No, I'm over feeling... stinky. I just have to stay in bed. Didn't Daddy explain it to you and your brother?"

Marca's long curls bobbed up and down vigorously. "oh yeth. But he said you'd be okay soon as HE'S BORNED!" She pointed to Catherine's stomach.

"So I shall. What's wrong, love?" Noting her daughter's use of the word - HE - when talking of the baby, Catherine thought to herself - *'a bit of jealousy already rearing its head?'*

"It's not fair! When you have the baby, Daddy says you're gonna have a BOY baby! It's not fair!"

Catherine looked puzzled. "I don't understand."

"It'll be HIM and J.D against ME; they'll kill me! I'm a girl and they'll get bigger than me. They'll beat me up!"

Allegra stood in the doorway, laughing. "Yes, you are a girl, Marca. But don't worry about the boys, okay? Being a girl... Well, that fact alone will save you!"

Laughing, Catherine held out one hand to her friend. "Hi you. It's been days since you've stopped in, to just visit me. Or ARE you here to poke at me AGAIN?"

"No poking, just visiting - promise. Devin is downstairs with our son, Vincent and your son.

"They're... " Allegra plunked into the rocking chair shaking her head and making a YUK face. "THEY are making a surprise supper - for US!"

Catherine looked pained. "They're cooking? Oh GAWD, that's what I smelled earlier! BLAH!"

"Yeah, yummy, yummy. What Vin doesn't BURN, Devin will overspice, as usual. Oh joy."

Allegra held out her hands to her niece. "Hey, imp. Come here and kiss your Auntie. NUH!"

Throwing herself at her Aunt, Marca succeeded in knocking the wind from the woman. "'Lo, Auntie 'Legra!"

Holding the girl, Allegra looked over to her hugely pregnant friend. "How goes it?"

Catherine hunched her shoulders wearily. "It... goes. Finish your Christmas shopping?"

Allegra looked at her friend, horrified. "Are you kidding? I haven't even started it yet!"

"You only have two weeks, you know, and don't forget...." Catherine mouthed the words. "You have to finish MINE too."

"Oh crap, don't remind me of that or I'll go SHOOT SANTA, or find myself a rubber room NOW and avoid the rush! She glanced around, glad Marca was coloring and hadn't heard the 'death to Santa' remark!

Both women turned to the door as Vincent called out. "Catherine, Devin is with me; may we come in?"

Nudging Allegra slyly, Catherine answered. "Devin! Oh.... just send HIM in, okay?"

Silence. Then, THAT voice called out - unsure. "Alone? You want... Devin... alone?"

Allegra couldn't stand it; he sounded like... he was pouting and probably WAS, for cripes sakes. "Oh, get in here, Vincent; bring the KING of the chefs with you. COME ON and feed us that POISON you guys have cooked up, before we starve to death!"

Taking her tray, Catherine looked mischievous.

Just as her husband bent over to kiss her, she pouted and looked quite sad. "Oh, I wanted - Devin ALONE."

Straightening up, Vincent, moved slightly away to stand at the head of the bed quietly watching his wife. He knew he was being teased. Wasn't he?

As Devin and his wife fed the children and bantered back and forth as usual, Vincent put his mouth near Catherine's ear.

"Shall I leave now and take 'Legra with me, so you can be ALONE with my brother?"

"You do and I'll bite you in the butt. Oh, sit down here, beside me." Patting the bed, Catherine reached out without warning and toppled him onto it, nearly spilling her supper in the bargain. Saving her plate, he tucked a napkin at her chin.

"Please, eat before it gets cold."

Picking up one of her husband's INFAMOUS habits, she leaned forward to the plate and began sniffing. "What is this - EXACTLY?"

"Try it first, then I shall tell you."

Looking up at him suspiciously, she tapped the plate with her fork. "Is this going to make me ill, whatever it is?"

"Of course not! I... I would never..."

She waved him off with a piece of bread. "Oh, all right, all right." Picking up a forkful, she bit down carefully into the.... goulash? ...and chewed for a moment. Her eyes widened and she dug in with gusto. "This IS good!"

He smiled. "I know. It's ragout of beef, or so Devin says. I ate two plates full and our son ate a man-sized portion."

"What's for dessert?" She licked the fork and handed the plate back to Vincent. He looked at her slightly appalled. "Did you chew it at all? You've eaten too fast!"

"Oh, quiet, I didn't have to CHEW it, I inhaled it! Answer my question?"

"Certainly." Capturing her fingers, he began licking them with his warm tongue until she thought to surely lose her mind.

The man's eyes darkened in hue with each word he spoke "Your dessert is the pleasure of having me give you a backrub as soon as we are rid of these.... visitors."

Laying back on her pillows, Catherine laughed quietly, then called over to the others. "Hey you two, can't you chew any faster!"

Christmas day had dawned bright and colder than the preceding days. Shivering in the shadowy light of the library, Vincent peeked cautiously through the curtains, smiling when he saw the great icicles hanging down like special decorations from the wires and houses across the street.

Outside, a few snowflakes drifted by his face to stick tenaciously to the frost covered window pane; their delicate patterns lacy and dazzling white. He traced them with the tip of one sharp fingernail. Beautiful. What a wonderful day this would be!

Turning, he knelt and lit the fireplace quickly and headed for the kitchen. The twins would be up any moment, as would children all around this and every city - anxious to see what Santa had left for them.

The house rule was - you ate first; before burying the living room under Christmas paper and strewn, ripped apart boxes. He smiled to himself; the children would have stood on their heads if it was a prerequisite to opening BOOTY. He didn't know who was worse actually, the children or his brother, Devin!

Catherine smiled over her shoulder to the gathering below as Vincent carried her down the flight of stairs. "Hello, everyone. Merry Christmas!"

After kisses were exchanged all around, her husband lay her gently on the living room sofa with a word of admonishment. "Now you have promised faithfully, Catherine, you shall NOT get up."

"Aye aye, captain!" She kissed his cheek, winked up at him, then turned to the anxiously wiggling children. Smiling at the adults gathered here for this special day, she looked around the room. "WELL, who's helping Santa this year?"

Devin groaned and sank to middle of the floor next to the tree, rubbing his hands together. "Ho, ho, HO, GUESS!" Allegra got the ball rolling - quite fast! "OKAY PEOPLE, let's start opening this LOOT!"

Pandemonium was the watch word of this morning in this home. As it surely was in other homes all over the country, if not the world. Children acted like children and many adults - acted like them.

Groaning, Vincent eased his tired body into the hot, soapy water. Ahhh, yes. Yes! Heaven, this was heaven. It was five p.m. The children had gone Below for the Christmas concert with the others, leaving him alone with his wife for the time being. Even though Catherine had urged him to attend the concert by the older children, he had naturally declined leaving her.

His mind drifted as he soaked away the aches and pains of the day. It wasn't bad enough that three child sized cars had crushed his toes; Devin had dropped snow down the back of his neck in the kitchen and DEAR Allegra had spilt egg nog on his head. Not her fault though, not really. He had dropped to the floor holding a pillow in front of himself, hoping to avoid Devin's son nailing him in the face with a new, shiny, squirt gun. Just then Allegra had entered the room with a heavily laden tray of eggnog for everyone. HE had scrambled backwards to avoid the gun, she fell over him. Voila - eggnog shampoo!

Catherine lay in bed admiring her many Christmas gifts, some funny, some completely useful. Two, naturally, very special; one from her husband and one from her children.

As her husband came from the bathroom, she had just hung up the new picture her children had drawn of her and Vincent, on the bedpost. She'd find a more appropriate spot for it when she was up and around again; it would have to hang in here for safekeeping and for privacy. Vincent walked slowly, towel drying his long hair. Catherine eyed him critically.

"I think we'd better plan on another haircut for you very soon; God, your hair grows so fast!" He sat on the edge of the bed leaning forward, his answer muffled by the towel as he rubbed his hair forcefully.

"What did you say, Vincent?"

Ho peeked up from under the towel, his bottom lip curled into a slight sneer. "I SAID, why cut it, it will only grow again."

"Because you are beginning to look somewhat shaggy, that's why!" She ruffled his hair in the way he hated from anyone else, but was tolerant of - with his wife.

A wonderfully devilish smile buried itself in the deep lines at either side of his face.

"Perhaps it was meant for me to look a bit... shaggy." He shrugged good naturedly.

Catherine poked him. "Only if you're related to sheepdogs, you exasperating man." Shaking her head at him, Catherine kept her words deliberately nonchalant, as though testing something only she knew of.

"So, have you decided to go Below for the concert, after all? I will be fine, you know. Allegra is coming back, before the concert ends."

"No, she is not; I asked her not to." He looked a bit secretive as he stepped into his sweatpants.

She frowned at him. "Why did you tell her not to return?"

Plumping three pillows behind him, Vincent handed her the hairbrush, knowing she loved playing with his hair. "I wanted you all to myself, that is why. I seem to have developed a somewhat... selfish streak, where you are concerned, Catherine. Or perhaps, it was always there. I do not know. I'm sorry."

Sitting up very slowly, she began brushing the long red-gold tresses, keeping her voice calm and even. "Well, you'll just have to go and get her, that's all. I'm surprised I've been able to keep it from you this long!"

Almost as if in slow motion, he turned to face her, his eyes wide. "Are you.... You're not.... You ARE in labor? But, it's too soon!"

"How do you know it's too soon? Yes, I am in labor; I've been blocking it from you since around... oh... two o'clock. I didn't want you having to deal with this nasty pain yet or ruin Christmas for everybody."

"How could you possibly think that you could ruin anything! Catherine, I shall get Allegra immediately!" He swiftly got into his tunnel clothes, throwing his jeans on over his sweatpants nervously and started for the door.

Pausing, he turned to her, hating to leave her alone even for a moment. "You will be all right? Are you in pain? Why can't I sense any of it?"

Wincing slightly as she lowered herself in the bed, Catherine smiled as bravely as she could under the circumstances. "I'm all right; it's just starting to get bad now. I guess my secret is out, huh?"

Her green eyes dancing with expectation over the birth of their son, Catherine spoke of her new ability. "I've learned... if I'm VERY careful and REALLY concentrate - for a time I can block out what I'm feeling, so you won't feel it too.

"For a time; not always, I'm able to do it. I'm still working on it. No husband should ALWAYS know what his wife is thinking. It's not a wise idea for a woman to have all her inner thoughts known, especially by a MAN."

He flung the words over his shoulder "We SHALL discuss this new ability of yours at a later time, Catherine! I will be right back...."

After quickly getting the message through to Allegra, who would get Father; Vincent turned for the hidden entrance to his home Above.

A sudden dull ache in his back made him stop dead still to take several deep breaths. Ah, that DID hurt; she hadn't managed to quite block that one, MMMM. Rubbing his back, Vincent quickly closed the hidden panel behind him, but didn't lock it.

Leaving the expectant parents alone for the moment to practice the Lamaze they had studied for the birth of the twins and still knew how to do, Allegra pulled up a kitchen chair and sat across from Mary and Father stirring her coffee round and around in the cup.

Taking a gulp of the brew, she glanced up to the clock. Where the hell was Devin? He was supposed to get the sitter and then get his tush up here with the rest of the things they'd need damn soon!

"It goes well? How is Catherine?" Father's tone was brusque, almost sharp. His feelings were just a bit bruised; he hadn't been allowed to see his daughter-in-law YET and he'd been here for over two hours now.

Taking a final swig of her coffee, Allegra rinsed the cup in the sink. "She's fine; the labor is getting down to the nitty gritty fast."

Crossing her arms over her ample bosom, Allegra leaned against the sink. "She won't take anything yet, said she doesn't need it. She never could lie very well."

Giving the man a teasing wink, Allegra turned to leave the kitchen. "Oh, Mary, I didn't tell you, Cathy says to come on up whenever you want."

Father's low growl made her bite her bottom lip. "And she said HE could come too, if he felt like it!"

He got to his feet quickly, glaring at her. "Oh, for Heaven's sake! And you've just let me SIT here. Allegra, you're a cruel, spiteful CHILD when you choose to be! Come Mary."

Father started for the stairs, Mary behind him carrying the Medical satchel. She laughed behind her hand, almost choking, as Allegra stuck her tongue out behind Father's back and made as if to pinch his rear-end and got caught by him in the process with a look that would have frozen any other woman. Allegra just GRINNED at him and followed him up the steps, laughing madly as Mary told the man to carry his OWN bag!

When Allegra had gone for coffee, Vincent sat quietly on the bed, behind Catherine. Leaning on the pillows, he gathered her into a semi upright position at his chest. Shaking his head to clear the pain emanating from Catherine, he tried to slow his breathing, finding it very difficult to do.

Wiping her face with a cool cloth, he spoke softly as he rubbed her lower back with a rolling pin; God's gift to the woman with back labor. Breathing with her, he took short gasps, puffing his lips out as she did. Catherine got through the last pain and relaxed against him gratefully. "That was a mean one."

"I know, I felt some of it. Take your cleansing breath, my love. You remember, like this."

He took the short gasps again, then let them out slowly as she half turned in his arms to look up into his face.

"That's the way you sound when we make love, did you know that?"

Kissing her hands, he rubbed his lips softly back and forth over her fingers.

"I shall have to take your word on that, Catherine."

His voice turned sultry, sexy. "When I'm at that point, I am not always sure exactly what I'm doing. I only feel.... you; it is all I am aware of, or care to BE aware of. I remember nothing else."

Just as she started to say something, another pain hit her; he closed his eyes as his head snapped back against the bed. Dear God, such pain was not to be endured; how could she go through this?

That one led straight into a second one, then a third one, as Allegra and the others came into the room. Quickly standing beside the bed, Father pulled on tight rubber gloves and handed Mary his cane.

"How are you doing, my dear?" He smiled down at Catherine; she tried smiling back, but didn't quite make it. Then he looked at his heavily perspiring son and frowned. "Vincent, you look simply wretched."

His son didn't open his eyes. "Good, I should hate to feel like... this and not look the part. UH!"

A stabbing, tearing pain hit just as Allegra got to the foot of the bed. "Okay, girl, you're almost there. Don't push, breathe. Cathy, breathe!"

Devin fairly dove into the room, throwing a bundle of towels and other paraphernalia at Mary, then turned on his heel. "Sorry I'm late. Don't worry, I'm outta here! I'll be with Jamie and Mouse; they're downstairs with Brooke and the kids. Hey Cathy, Vin? Hang in there!"

Catherine spoke her friend's name, then tensed. "Allegra!" Vincent held her tightly as she screamed for the first and only time.

Gasping, his head went back, fighting the pain off as best he could. The time was close now. Gritting his teeth, he whimpered in agony, as her scream tore through his soul.

Clutching at his vest, Catherine tried to speak. "Go.... Vincent, go! Get the... baby. I want you...."

Nodding, he seemed to understand; Catherine wanted him to be the first one to hold his child. Kneeling beside Father and Allegra, he took the thick cotton blanket Mary handed him and waited.

Suddenly, Catherine wailed as though wounded like an animal, then lay still for a minute, gasping. Finally getting the strength, she rose on her elbows, looking down to her husband. "He's coming!"

Vincent looked stunned for a second, then seemed to come back to himself. "I can see his head. I can see our son, Catherine! Push, one more push. Now - PUSH!"

The cries were loud and lusty as Vincent looked down at his newborn son. Waiting until Allegra checked the child's nose and mouth for mucous, Vincent then placed the baby gently on his wife's stomach and knelt beside her, kissing her sweating face again and again as she touched her son's pink, wet skin.

"Oh, he's beautiful. You've given me a splendid son. Thank you." She took her husband's hand and kissed it as he nodded, unable to speak.

Catherine gathered the child carefully in her arms as Allegra cut the cord and applied antiseptic. Allegra touched the boy on the head, then kissed him gently. "Hi, there, handsome, welcome to the world."

Father stood near the head of the bed, with one arm around Mary, looking down at his son and new grandson. So much alike, these two; yet very different. Vincent and this new child - each their own person with their own special, unique features. Yet, really one person, with a strong bond and a truly wondrous destiny.

Jacob cleared his throat roughly; it was hard at his advanced age, to start believing in miracles. But now, looking down at Vincent and his new son, believe in them he was. It felt rather good!

Touching Vincent on the shoulder, Father took Catherine by the hand, the man stumbled on the words as he tried finding his voice. "The child is truly a miracle. A true... miracle."

Father and Mary left to spread the news through the rest of the anxious tunnel world; many people were waiting for news of this birth, knowing how the child was supposedly going to look only made it more exciting. They were family, after all; each and every child was as welcome as the next one.

Where a stranger would perhaps see Vincent as a threat or sadly, even a predatory beast, these people saw a member of their family. They saw only..... Vincent, a man they all trusted and loved.

Allegra entered the living room to find Devin and Mouse sharing pacing room while Jamie and Brooke kept the children from getting stomped on by the two men. She tapped her husband on the shoulder and hugged him as he turned around.

"Well? 'LLEGS! I can't stand this! WELL?"

Her eyes misted as she patted his dear face. "Hi there, Unca Debbin, you got room for a wonderful looking, new nephew?"

Devin gave her a grin that would melt steel. "YOWIE, all right! Vinnie baby, you did it!" He grabbed his wife around the waist, spinning her about the room like a maniac, until she pinched his ear. "Put me down or I'll throw up on you!"

Mouse and Jamie were hugging Brooke and the twins, while Devin's son jumped up and down with excitement. "A new baby, a new baby. Yeaaa!"

Upstairs, the new parents examined their son from head to foot, taking in each detail with delight. Catherine lifted the tiny foot and kissed it.

"He might have your toenails."

Her husband nodded, too happy to speak very much now. "No, but he seems to have my rather sizable feet. And that hair!"

He touched his son's head in awe. "Such hair for a newborn, Catherine!"

She gave him a look that warmed him to his toes. "Look at his hands, my love, and his body."

"I already have. Christopher will have my hands, but there are no long nails and his body has very little hair, if any at all. But, that may change as he grows older."

He ran one finger over the boy's slightly cleft upper lip and gently sloping eyebrows. "He is wondrous."

The child slept on, seemingly unconcerned at being touched and fondled in this manner; he sucked his little fist quite contentedly, as his mother held him close to her heart, rocking him back and forth.

Lowering her lips to his ears, Catherine whispered to her baby. "Now, I'm giving you to your father, little one. Oh, you're going to love your daddy, as I do. He is very, very special, my son."

Taking the child, Vincent stared down at him silently, then looked at his wife, smiling. "You have done well."

"No. We have." Her smile lit up the room. "Vincent, look!"

Just at that moment, the baby opened his eyes. Deep bluish green eyes seemed to look into Vincent's soul. Oh, he knew the baby couldn't see anything yet, or could he? After all, this WAS a special child.

"Oh Catherine." Vincent shook his head. "I don't have the words..."

Tears ran down her face as she slipped one arm through his. "None are needed."

The baby contorted his face as though ready to let a good yell out. Catherine took him from his father's arms gently and put him to her breast. Unlike most newborns, this child seemed starved and eager to nurse already.

She lay back against the pillows to nurse her son as Vincent looked on, filling his eyes with the sight of them. Slowly, he leaned over and lay one hand against Catherine's face, tilting it up to his.

Opening his mouth wide, he moved the tip of his sensitive tongue against hers and kissed her sensually, erotically. His mouth and tongue felt swollen with love and passion as he increased the pressure.

Two immense hands disappeared completely into her hair as he moved his mouth on hers. Loving her so much, it was as a fire in his blood, burning him constantly. A devouring flame he welcomed gladly for all his life long.

A deep throbbing sensation enveloped her as she opened her mouth fully to meet his, pressing into his kiss as hard as she could; feeling him tremble as he opened his eyes, looking at her, then their newborn son.

"Catherine, I..." Vincent lay his head on her shoulder, unable to say any more.

Knowing his heart was as full as her own, Catherine kissed the top of his head and sighed with satisfaction. She smiled as Vincent put one finger into his son's hand and the baby grasped it firmly, not letting go; as though aware of who and what he held. With the twins, Vincent and this son, her world was complete.

This day would now be doubly celebrated in years to come, in this family. It was the birthday of the Christ child.

It was also the birthday of Vincent's son; the gift only a select few would ever know of. Christopher Charles Wells - the second Unicorn, was born.

What destiny awaited this child, only fate knew and fate guarded her secrets - quite jealously.

§§§§§§§§§§§§