

*Arc of the Shah*  
*The Bright and Boundless Path*  
*Book 3: The Honor Of Your Presence*  
*By Cindy Rae*



*Because Brigit O'Donnell needed a Vincent-like character in her life...*

Chapter One

*“The Honor of Your Presence...”*

☆☆

*Doctor Jacob Wells*

*requests the honor of your presence  
at the marriage of his son, Vincent,  
to Miss Catherine Chandler.*

*Nuptials will occur in the Great Hall*

*at 7:30 pm,*

*September 25, 1991*

*Dinner, Dancing and Poetry Readings to follow.*

*Honored guests are invited to prolong their stay.*

☆☆

*September 25<sup>d</sup>, 1991, at approximately 9:30 pm --*

Zachariah Shadow Hunter, Shah, Protector, and eldest of the Hunter clan, watched the new bride with her new groom, as they danced.

Vincent Wells, all but unknown to him a short time ago, had chosen wisely. His wife was beautiful, intelligent, and so in love with Vincent that the bond all but crackled, between them. Their love spiraled around the Great Hall as Vincent waltzed with his bride, enveloping everyone in a gossamer veil. To Zachariah, the air all but shimmered white. He wished them many happy years, full of strong, healthy children.

*Children!* The tunnels below Central Park fairly exploded with them, Zachariah realized, many cast-offs or throw-aways, but all clearly well cared for. Several of them were chasing each other around the large hall, now, weaving between the spinning dancers and helping themselves to the copious amount of food set out on the main table.

*This is a good place. A good Shahdom.* It was an impression Zachariah had had since he'd first entered the Tunnels.

He watched as an odd boy named Mouse danced with Chloe Blackmane, while her Shah father, Adam, waltzed with his magnificent, Titian-haired wife, Diana Bennett. All were smiling. Everyone was clearly having a good time.

*It's as if, lately, all roads lead back to here,* Zachariah mused, taking in this great stone kingdom.

Adam had come from a dark place and into the light, at his new wife's urging. Zachariah was happy for them, too. The bridal couple had bid Diana go to see Adam. So in a way, Vincent and Catherine were responsible for Adam's newlywed status, as well.

Zachariah scanned the crowded room, the Protector in him content that all was well. *No, more than well.* All was, at this moment, wedded bliss. Passing on the champagne, he sipped from a tankard of ale, and stood near one wall, surveying the huge, festive scene.

"Nice party," his brother Seth commented, as he stepped up beside him and drank from his own mug.

"It is indeed," Zachariah observed. "You picked a fine Shahdom to crash into, little brother." He saluted his younger sibling with his drink.

Seth took the jibe in stride. "Always happy to help." He grinned, clinking their earthenware mugs together.

"It's is beyond huge. Corinne's descriptions of the place barely do it justice," Zachariah complimented.

"Might have had something to do with me being flat on my back and in the Hospital Chamber most of the time I was here," Seth allowed. "I'm not sure how much of it she actually saw, the first time. There's a room with a waterfall in it down the eastern passage. And bathing pools, if you're game."

"Perhaps later," Zachariah demurred.

"Suit yourself." Seth took a long swallow of ale, then wove his way back to the table where most of his family were gathered. Seth's youngest son, Daniel, was making friends with every child there.

*The tunnel children have never seen a younger version of Vincent before,* Zachariah realized, as a little girl with blonde locks petted Danny's sandy-haired mane.

*Perhaps in a year or two... there will be more, God willing.* It was a fine thought.

He caught the supremely contented look on Vincent's face, as the newlyweds spun by. Strength and joy radiated from the groom, in almost equal measures.

*You are Power, my Solo friend, Zachariah thought, sensing both Vincent's inner and outer strength. Power held in check, but power, still. There is great strength in you. That is good.*

Zachariah knew more than most how valuable strength and intelligence were, as advantages. That his brother Seth had managed to find another being like themselves was exceptional enough. That Vincent was both brilliant and strong spoke well for the New York Shah.

*They are lucky to have you. And they realize it.* Seth's elder brother knew it was true. The regard everyone showed for the groom was apparent on every face.

*A Shah in New York.* Zachariah could still not quite believe it, and his head shook subtly, at the consideration. For his own part, he had no idea what it must have been like, to be raised apart from all others like himself, - and right beneath a major metropolis, to boot. Having been raised in Northern Canada, and with his Shah father, his mother, and five brothers, three of whom were Shah, he'd never had to deal with either of those particular circumstances.

The bridal couple waltzed by again. Catherine's green eyes shone with love, as she looked up at her husband. *She is strength, as well.*

*Strength for you, as well as for herself.* Zachariah sensed as much; had been sensing it, since the first moment he'd entered the Tunnels with his family.

Vincent leaned down to hear something his very new wife had to say, while they danced. He smiled indulgently, then nodded.

Love. Tenderness. A will to protect. Respect. All emanated from him, and did so, freely. Zachariah, more sensitive than most to the intentions of the people around him, smiled subtly into his drink.

*If you think you love her now, wait until after this night is over,* Zachariah thought, content with the prediction. His married brother Seth assured him it was so.

Zachariah had not only attended Vincent and Catherine's ceremony with his family, he had helped officiate at it. At thirty eight years old, he was the oldest Shah of the group in attendance. That position gave him certain responsibilities, among his clan.

And at nearly six feet eight inches, he was also the tallest. The hair on his head was so blonde that in places, it was white. His feline eyes were the color of fine, green emeralds. Somewhere, back in his genetic code, Scandinavian blood simmered.

The emerald eyes shifted. He had been subtly glancing the way of a particular auburn-haired woman all evening. Clad in a red velvet gown and matching heels, she was the picture of understated elegance, as she sat next to Father, at one of the smaller tables scattered around the huge room.

Zachariah had watched her surreptitiously since the reception began, hoping for a chance to speak to her privately, to compliment her on any one of the several books she'd authored.

Brigit O'Donnell had also been in officiant at the Chandler-Wells wedding. She'd read a passage from a story about an owl woman, at the invitation of both the bride and the groom. Zachariah had been charmed by it. And by her.

His hands itched to borrow her amazing book, the one that sat beside her on the table, as she leaned forward to hear something Father had to say. Copies of the children's fable were exceptionally rare, and exceedingly difficult to come by. His hands longed to hold it, and memorize it, and tell the story to his nephew Daniel, later. His

grandmother, who had collected rare books, had known of Owl Woman's existence, but had never managed to lay hands on a copy.

Now one sat not thirty yards away from him. Its author, lovelier by far in person than she was in all the newspaper photographs and book jackets he'd ever seen of her, sipped from a glass of champagne and smiled at something Father was saying. She'd used Catherine's own copy of the book, for the wedding. It sat at her elbow, now.

*Let's see*, Zachariah decided, setting down his tankard. Amid the room of dancing couples and happy children, He made his way over to the beautiful Irish author.

"Zachariah!" From where he sat, Jacob Wells reached up and shook the hand of the huge being standing before him. Even in a household that had grown up with Vincent at its center, he had never seen the like. What an NBA all-star was to humanity, Zachariah Shadow Hunter was to his race: Taller, by a few inches, if not more. Broader. Heavier, by a noticeable amount, if not a significant one. When they'd all arrived together, he'd come first into the room, flanked by his two brothers, Seth and Elijah, trailed by Corinne, the brood of Seth's children, and his longtime friend, Adam.

"You're enjoying the evening, I take it?" Father asked Zachariah politely.

"It would be impossible not to," Zachariah answered politely. "I've said it before. We are very fortunate Seth stumbled into this place; and by extension, sent Diana to help Adam. The room is full of newlyweds."

He smiled subtly as they all glanced Adam's way. He was whispering in his new wife's ear. She laughed at something he said, and they both looked to where Seth's twin girls were building a cookie tower. Diana

snatched one, and ate it. Then Adam did the same. The girls protested, and construction had to begin anew.

Adam's wife, Diana, was well known among the tunnel folk, for having been instrumental in saving Catherine from a madman, almost a year ago. Catherine had flown to Montana only a few months before, to attend Diana's sudden and unexpected wedding. Her groom was a dark lion of a Shah, darker even than Seth, with hair that was nearly black, to Seth's deep brown. To Father's eyes, the tunnels suddenly seemed to overflow with an assemblage of this ancient and mysterious race of people; people who called themselves simply, "The Shah."

"It is indeed full of newlyweds," Jacob smiled in return, realizing it. "That you came here to help Vincent marry Catherine... all I can tell you is, that's payment enough, for any help we might have extended to your brother."

Zachariah inclined his head in a Vincent-like gesture. "You are too kind," he replied.

Father could only marvel at his current circumstances. Even among this incredible assemblage, Zachariah stood out as a leader. What Jacob Wells was to the world Below, Zachariah clearly was to the people in the far north. Seth had introduced him as a "Protector," and so he was. His instincts were different than Seth's nomadic own, a thing Father – and for that matter, Vincent, were only just beginning to understand.

"I'm sorry your parents couldn't come," Jacob lamented. "I'm sure it would have been amazing to meet them."

"My Father is occupied with the nesting eagles on our land, and he doesn't care for travel. My mother leaves his side only rarely,"



Zachariah explained. He looked back at the crowd. "I will tell them both that they missed something... wondrous."

The column of his neck was impressive, as he turned. He was built in perfect proportion, just larger. Fairest by far of the Shah, his low voice carried a ring of authority, even in casual conversation. He was clearly a force to be reckoned with.

"Eagles is it?" Brigit commented, her own lovely voice carrying her Irish accent. "Well, isn't that the undertaking?"

Zachariah inclined his head again at her comment, as her blue eyes danced with merriment. "It is. There's more than a little climbing involved. And once started, it must be finished."

"Perhaps some other time, we can persuade them to come down," Father replied.

"Perhaps," Zachariah conceded. "But I think it far more likely that you'll see Seth, again, before you see them. He seems to be taking a liking to William's ale." Seth nodded to where his brother now stood.

"That he has," Father agreed. Seth was lounging near the keg, again, refilling his mug and chatting with William.

Zachariah felt Brigit's eyes on him, rather than elsewhere. It was a pleasant sensation.

*Look your fill, Milady,* he thought, pretending not to feel her lovely gaze.

He was dressed in a royal blue shade, and like Vincent, used a heavy cape to keep warm. The long cape was trimmed with silver brocade, for the wedding. His thick blonde hair was woven into a partial plait down his back, a way to tame his mane, for the formal ceremony, and keep it back from his face. His jawline was granite firm, his shoulders

broad. He looked like a picture of a crownless king. One of his ancestors might have been one.

*Aren't you a one?* Brigit thought.

"There are golden eagles in Donegal County, back home. *And none are as golden as you.* You're nearly as far from home as I am," she said conversationally.

The deep green gaze dropped back down to her. "Give or take an ocean," Zachariah replied deferentially. "We hold the northern edge of our territory."

"I can't tell you what it meant to Vincent to have you here. Have the both of you here," Father said, including Brigit in his praise.

"Since Seth returned home with his story, and then Adam... A fellow Shah getting married in New York. I would not have missed this joining for the world," Zachariah replied, sparing a quick glance at the book near Brigit's elbow. It was creased with age.

"Nor I," Brigit smiled, looking at Father as she did so.

"Seth tells me you often ... officiate over such things, for your people?" Father asked.

"Some," the big man admitted.

Father knew that Zachariah was being somewhat modest. Seth had told Father that his oldest brother often conducted ceremonies involving the Shah: weddings, funerals, dedications, and the presentation of new children all fell under his auspices. Uniquely, he was unmarried, even in his late thirties. - A thing unheard of, for one of his kind.

"It was my pleasure to do so, this evening. And in such fine company," Zachariah added.

*Well aren't you a gallant one?* Brigit thought.

"Well, I'm very glad you came, my boy." Father toasted him with a half-full glass of champagne.

Brigit smiled. Only Father could pull off calling this better than six foot giant "my boy."

Jacob contemplated the rising bubbles in his drink, for a moment, took a sip, then set his glass down, with a sigh. "It was a... marvelous ceremony this evening, wasn't it?" Father asked.

Zachariah and Brigit both sensed the wistfulness in his tone.

"It was. Your son and his wife seem very happy," Zachariah replied, nodding toward where Vincent was still dancing with Catherine. Even though the tune had changed, he seemed to not want to let go of her.

"He does. He truly does," Jacob answered. A soft, loving smile ghosted his face. "I wish... so much, for the two of them."

"It's sure you do," Brigit said, squeezing Jacob's hand, as she watched the bridal couple continue to dance. To her eyes "very happy" seemed like an understatement, a thing her Irish self had only so much experience with. The bridal couple positively radiated joy. It spread to everyone in the room, particularly those sensitive to the psychic bond between mates.

Zachariah felt the very air around him hum, and shimmer. It felt good.

"Yes, but you see, I have a problem, here," Jacob stated. "My hip is acting up, and this beautiful woman needs a dance."

*Snap*, went the subtle trap, and now there was no graceful way to refuse, even if either of them had wanted to. Not that Zachariah particularly did. With her keen mind, bright blue eyes, fair complexion

and dark waves of auburn hair, Brigit O'Donnell would be a lovely, if not absolutely fascinating, dance partner.

"Och, and now you've fobbed me off on this poor man like an unwanted relation." Brigit smiled, rising. She might have been "fobbed off," but she clearly didn't mind it. Zachariah liked the Irish lilt in her voice. Very much.

"And how am I supposed to dance with this great tree of a man?" She all but laughed, looking up at him, but holding up her arms in the expected waltz pose. Even in heels, he was nearly a foot taller than she was - and she was definitely in heels.

"I would suggest a waltz, over a tango, but we trees are known for being flexible." Zachariah offered her his arms in kind, and deftly moved her into the line of dancers.

"You're a willow then?" she bantered playfully.

"More of an oak, probably," he replied, taking her for a turn around the floor.

He shortened his step instinctively, to match hers. She was graceful, and lithe, easy to lead, and adept, as a follower. Any outsider might have concluded that they'd known each other for years, and had been dancing together at least that long. Brigit felt her tense muscles relax, as she let him guide her along. *So you know how to dance. Well! And aren't you just full of surprises,* she thought.

*There's a lightness to you, when there's music in the room. And a joy in you as well,* he thought, enjoying her proximity.

She was graceful for a small woman, he'd give her that. The large span of his hand rested lightly on both the small of her back and the beginning of her generously curved hip.

*How beautiful you are,* he thought.

She was. And she was clearly delighted with everything she'd seen, this evening. At the ceremony, she'd read from her book about the Owl Woman, Zachariah had read from Chaucer and John Donne, and Father from Shakespeare. It had taken all three of them to marry the happy couple. The ceremony had been, as Father had said, magnificent. Brigit hadn't stopped smiling since it all began. And now she was smiling at Zachariah.

*We helped a Shah to marry. And now here I am, dancing with a famous Irish author,* he thought, appreciating life's complexities, and the role "chance" played in it, often.

*And now here I am, dancing with such an amazing man,* Brigit thought, giving herself a mental shake at the amazing delights of life. She was clearly no less pleased than he was, at her current situation.

She gave him her thoughts. "Ah, and now here I am, come to read at a wedding, and then end up dancing with a great tree of a man." She looked to the side, and then back at him, her smile brightening, as she clearly got an idea.

"Oh, What a wonderful story that would make!"

He raised a blonde eyebrow traced with silver. "Would it, now?" he asked.

Her imagination took over, and her sharp mind was already racing, as he spun her around the room.

"Let's see. A girl goes into the forest, and ... ends up dancing with a tree! Yes, Yes, that's it. And he twirls her through the great woods, and he turns her in circles ..."

Zachariah let her go and spun her in a circle, with his hand above her head.

"Yes! Yes, like that!" She was delighted with him. "Ohhhhh, I can see it now..." Her gaze was avid, her smile no less so. She was vivid, and excited. And she was writing, in her head, while she danced, he realized.

"There's a cottage. And a great, huge, forest. And there are acorns everywhere, and mistletoe in the branches..."

"If there are acorns on the ground, then it's most likely autumn."

"Yes! Oh, a fine fall day! With the leaves all changin' color. How beautiful it would look ..."

She explained it to him as she pictured it. Her mind moved very fast, and she drew pictures with her words, inviting him to comment. She described for him a giant tree with a face in the bark of the trunk, using its branchy limbs to embrace a young lass. The girl would be standing on his roots, sometimes, as they waltzed through the woods. She would sneak out into the forest, to meet him.

"Is he a prince, in disguise?" Zachariah asked. *No. Too trite.* He thought it immediately. Clearly, she was the better author.

"Perhaps," she allowed. "Or perhaps he's just a tree brought to life by a magic spell. Or by her love of dancing, and having no partner," Brigit replied.

"She's not lost, in those woods?"

"Och, no! It's her forest. He's her tree!" They both laughed at that, and within the next few minutes, Zachariah found himself utterly captivated by her. She was both teasing him and including him in the making of her story. By the time the dance was over, she'd named her

heroine Meghann, but had no name for the tree, yet. No matter. She'd think up something, she assured him.

He kept hold of her for a second dance. And a third. Even Vincent and Catherine had stopped, by then. Brigit barely noticed. She had eyes only for her incredible partner.

She set her story aside, for a moment, as the music's tempo slowed.

"And so. How does a Great Tree learn to read Chaucer? In Middle English, with the right accent, no less?" she asked. "You did that beautifully, by the way. And John Donne. When others place his words in their mouth, it's all but mangled, sometimes, don't you know."

"Thank you." Zachariah inclined his head, and the motion brought him in closer proximity to her cologne. *Heather. You smell like heather.*

"My grandmother was an Englishwoman with a flair for ancient languages. I miss her reading Homer to me, in the original Greek. You also read excellently." *And you dance like you belong in my arms*, he thought. She did. And she made it seem effortless.

"Och, but me words were me own and no other's." She deflected his kind praise. "Wouldn't it just be a mad sin if I couldn't even read me own musings, properly?" Her blue eyes were merry, at the notion. "All I had to do was sit on a stool and read me own book. 'Twas you who had the challenge," she insisted.

His low voice had a velvet quality. "You are very kind," he returned. "But I only had to read from mine. You had to write yours."

*Gallant. Sure and definitely gallant*, Brigit thought.

She dipped her head in acknowledgment of his praise, then, glanced toward the bridal couple, who had finally stopped dancing long enough to drink a glass of punch.

"Vincent tells me that finding out that there are others like him was the best gift he'd ever received, save his lady. And aren't they the fine pair, now? I met them both at Samhain, two years ago, at a costume ball."

"Did you?" *Must be quite the story, there.*

"'Twas the night I was reunited with me father." Her smile grew reflective.

"I was sorry to read of his passing." Zachariah offered his condolences. He knew that Brigit was famous for a political book covering her very brief marriage, 300 Days. It had set off a firestorm of controversy in Ireland, making her a target for several factions in what had now been a long and bloody war. But after her father's passing, she'd written another book - this one much smaller.

"No sorrier than I was to write of it," she mused, thinking of the slender volume: Less Than Three Score. - The Days Spent With the Dying.

"It was easy to write about Ian, since we were both in love and full of fire," Brigit revealed. "Harder to live with the consequences of the writing. With me father, it was the opposite."

"How do you mean?" he asked, slowing down the steps of the dance, hoping she'd tell him more.

"Ah, with me Da, he was already ill when we reunited. We reconciled as he was failin'. 'We' healed, but 'he' was fadin'. It was more... complicated, for that."

"I think I understand. It must have been very difficult for you."

She gave a shrug, for an answer. "Livin' it was harder than writin' about it. And writin' about Sean made me seem like 'just a person,'



again. A grievin' daughter. Of the two books, the second may make more of a difference than the first." She shrugged again. "You know books. They are what they are... until they become somethin' else."

Her wisdom did not surprise him. The grace with which she carried tragedy did.

"Books have a way of doing that." He agreed with her.

She smiled slightly, realizing that she needed to lighten the mood, between them. "That they do. I had an editor of one of me children's stories ask me if the merman was a symbol for the Catholic Church. I had to tell him, 'No, you bloody imbecile. It's just a man with a body like a fish!'"

They both chuckled at that, and Zachariah discovered that he very much liked the sound of her laugh. For her part, Brigit was similarly entranced, by him. He was handsome, in his leonine way. And very intriguing. *You're literate. You're compassionate. There's so much strength in you. It shows, even in your smile.*

"So, well, I can't write the tragedies, so much, anymore," she went on. "They make me bleed too hard. Now the children's stories, those I could spend me days weaving happily." The almost violet color of her eyes was intoxicating to him, as the small orchestra finished their playing, for the moment.

He said nothing, to that, feeling a response was not required. The look in her eyes told him that she was thinking of the story of Meghann and the dancing tree, again; the story she'd just been weaving. The dancers applauded politely, and Zachariah escorted Brigit back through the crowded dance floor.

"At the ceremony... you had a very old copy of Chaucer. May I see your book?" she asked.

*Ah. The perfect opportunity,* he thought.

"May we exchange?" he asked, steering her back to where her book still sat. She nodded, and he produced a very battered volume of Geoffrey Chaucer, kept in the pocket of his cloak. In turn, she scooped her volume of children's stories off the table, giving Father a wink as she did so.

Jacob was deep in conversation with a teary Peter Alcott. Peter had given the bride away.

Zachariah gently handled the treasure she placed into his large hands. Her children's book was now plain-covered, for having lost the dust jacket, some time ago. Its binding was creased from many readings, and the illustrations were an unexpected delight. An owl woman sat drinking tea from a thimble, on the first page. She had a winged cape, and tufts behind her ears. Zachariah leaned it closer to a pillar candle, for the light, absorbing the picture with his sharp eyes.

"This is... extraordinary," he complimented, still reading.

"Thank you." She opened his book. The margins were full of handwriting: pronunciation marks mostly, some in pencil, some in ink. There were notations about meanings scrawled in the available white space. "**Aprille rood = April road**" read one. "**Alderlevest**" = "**Best Beloved**" read another. Brigit's avid gaze drank its fill.

His book easily fell open to several well-thumbed parts. *The Wife of Bath. The Miller's Tale*. It was not a modernized or updated version. It was written complete with the several odd alphabet characters common to Middle English. Even Shakespeare, much later, was easier to decipher. In some parts, it was like holding a foreign language book in her hand.

She glanced back up at Zachariah, as he was studying a page from her children's book.

"Your illustrator had a gift for translating words," he said.

*As do you*, she thought. *You read this like you were born hearing it*, she recalled. She knew that meant that her companion was gifted, in some ways, as well as handsome and literate. That made him a rare treat for a woman like Brigit.

"This has been had for a long time," Brigit noted approvingly, looking at the publication date of his book. 1932. At least two different sets of handwriting had made the notations in the margins. One was a masculine scrawl she assumed was his, the other a finer, more delicate hand.

"My Grandmother was an avid collector. She used to teach me from it. It was a gift."

*Her teaching, her library, or her grandson?* Brigit mused. *Or all three?*

"All teaching is a gift, as are all good books," Brigit replied, enjoying the picture that prefaced *The Knight's Tale*.



"That's what Vincent does, down here in these great caverns. Teaches the young ones to read and love books. Is that what you do where you are from, Zachariah?" she asked.

He shook his head. "My family is part of a small logging operation, in a place called North Edge. The children are mostly home schooled, by their parents or older siblings. My sister-in-law, Corinne, is an excellent math tutor, and her daughter Roberta may be even better at it. My mother is a demon about all the children finishing their studies, at least through high school. When the time comes, the children may choose to go to one of the cities, for college, or other opportunities. Those who don't are welcome to stay and work the land."

"Logging! Then you are a lumberjack, my Great Tree?" She couldn't resist the urge to tease him.

"Among other things, my Irish Colleen." He accepted her good humor. She picked up her neglected champagne flute and toasted him. "Slainte," she declared, taking a sip.

Her toast gave him an idea. "I know this would be a hideous stereotype, but you don't happen to speak some of the older Gaelic dialects, do you? I can read it, some, but I'm sure I'm mangling the pronunciations."

She set the glass down. "Ah, but you're forbid to leave County Cork without knowing how to say at least 'Hello,' ' Goodbye,' and 'I'll have another whiskey' in three kinds of Gaelic." She chuckled. "And if you're very pressed, ye must at least know the latter. Now *that* would be a stereotype." Her grin was infectious.

"If you're havin' a book of it, I can read you some," she offered.

"I did not think to bring one."

"Perhaps the Library has something?" she ventured.

"Let's find out," he replied.



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## Chapter Two

### *"Yesterday, In Ireland."*



The Tunnel Library was open to all, and (mostly) managed to maintain itself in a haphazard kind of order. Books were set on the shelves there for a variety of reasons, (not the least of which being that their previous readers had outgrown them) and the children's volumes dominated one wall.

While most tunnel dwellers kept a variety of books close at hand, (and Father and Vincent were famous for that) a goodly number of volumes sat in the large sized repository, waiting to be enjoyed.

The space had been hewn out of the rock above their heads, the scattered shelves cobbled together from scrap. The floor sloped upward from the entrance, and Zachariah realized it was a place of honor and importance, for that. In a warren of tunnels that could be prone to flooding, community books had been given the high ground.

They browsed volumes upon volumes. Library discards, coverless paperbacks, extra copies from Helpers' homes ... all sat in silent expectation of being read. Zachariah suddenly realized the tunnel inhabitants' good fortune at being located in the middle of such a major city. Books were commonplace here, and far easier to find than they were for his own people.

"I half expect to find a Gutenberg Bible, or a first edition Mark Twain," Zachariah said, eying the walls. The poetry section alone was fairly impressive.

"No, to the first, but yes to the second." Bridget replied, a few feet distant from him. His eyebrow went up. "Father said Catherine gifted Vincent with a first edition *Huckleberry Finn* for his birthday. But I think he keeps it on his own shelf, in his chambers. Robbie Burns!" she crowed triumphantly, snatching a slender volume from a bowing shelf.

"Elizabeth Barrett Browning." Zachariah stroked the cracked spine of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

"Will you read some?" she asked.

He inclined his head. "I will if you will," he agreed.

*Oh, this will be heaven,* she thought.

They both spent the next two hours seated on the floor, fetching one volume after another. She liked to read him bits of Robert Louis Stevenson, Walt Whitman, and William Butler Yeats. He liked to read her Poe, Wordsworth and Bryon. She gave him back Oscar Wilde. He returned with Rudyard Kipling. She brought out Lewis Carroll. He gave her Leigh Hunt, and the trochaic meter of *Jenny Kiss'd Me*.

Brigit sat on the stone floor, her expensive red dress spooled around her legs, her feet now bare of the heels she'd worn to dance in. Her bangs were slightly askew from her running her hands backward through her hair, as it fell forward, when she looked at a new page. She was delighting in a book of children's poetry that had a fearsome image of a Jabberwock.

By the end of the first hour, Zachariah knew he was falling in love with her. *Alderlevest*, he thought.

He pulled Homer off the shelf, and began reading *The Odyssey* in ancient Greek, aloud. Like her, he took time to admire the illustrations in the book.

*Once a child...* she mused, as he traced a long-nailed finger over a picture of a masted ship. Brigit listened, transported. His tongue seemed to have no difficulty with the old language.

He glanced over at her from time to time, watching her expression. Whatever it was he was looking for, he must have found it, because he continued for several verses. *This is an epic tale. Among the greatest ever written. And it sounds like one, when read the way it was originally intended to.* He hoped she understood that, even if she couldn't follow all the meanings of the words. He had a feeling she did.

Her rapt expression told him more than anything else ever could, as he closed the cover, softly. "And so, a great story... begins," he said.

"And so it does," she agreed.

*Is that what we're doing? Is that what we're about to have? A great story?* They both thought it at almost the same time.

He hadn't been showing off, when he'd read to her. He had been teaching her. Teaching her what he was, where his depths and heart lay. The feeling of attraction between them was clearly mutual.

"You reached for Robert Burns, first. Will you read him, now?" he asked. Happily, she did so, and again, he got to enjoy the lovely Irish lilt in her voice, as she decided to start with *Comin' Thro' the Rye*.

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"Didn't we come in here for something particular?" He asked later.

"I dinna think so," she replied, scanning a dog-eared copy of Through the Looking Glass. "Did we?" Her eyes blinked up at him, looking at the mess they'd made on the floor. Piles of books sat between them, many still open to "my favorite part" or "you'll love this one."

*What an amazing evening*, she thought. The entire night had been a feast for her senses, and for her imagination. And Brigit thrived on those.

"There was something..." His deep green eyes searched the pile. "A first edition? No. Let me remember ... Gaelic?"

"Oh, yes! We were looking for the dead language of the Celts!" She shook her head at the mess they'd made. "Ah, well. We haven't been gone that long. We can just go back and ask Father if--" She looked at her wristwatch.

"Oh!" her lovely blue eyes looked back at him, startled. "It isn't really almost midnight, is it?"

He scooted close to her, making as if he would help her re-stack the considerable number of books near her legs.

"I hope so," he stated.



"Whyever do you hope so, my Great Tree?" she asked, aware he was now very much in her personal space.

He cupped her cheek with his broad hand. "So you'll never be sure if I kissed you on the first day we met, or the second."

Realization flickered in her eyes. He saw it, let it settle, then lowered his head, fractionally. His mouth hovered an inch away from hers.

"Perhaps it's tomorrow, already?" she asked, breathless.

"Perhaps." He was very much enjoying the anticipation - and her reaction to him.

Her eyes became dreamy, and a little unfocussed. "I think it's yesterday, in Ireland." She said it on a sigh.

She felt his breath on her lips. "Then I kissed you yesterday. In Ireland," he whispered, brushing his mouth lightly, experimentally, against hers.

Yes. She wanted his kiss. Wanted it for the sake of the romance of the evening, and the amazing being that he was. Wanted it because she had often led a lonely life, and she sensed his had been much the same, though for different reasons. Wanted it because her life was full of people, sometimes, full to bursting with them, and none of them had touched her heart, in a very long time. Wanted it because he was beautiful, with a razor-sharp mind to go with his razor-sharp claws. Wanted it because she had smelled his mysterious scent all evening, when he'd leaned over her shoulder to read. It was something of a deep, enchanted wood, somewhere: cedar and amber, tinged with spice.

*Wherever Meghann is dancing... it smells like this,* she thought, as she felt him move fractionally closer.

One day, when she was a very, very old woman, she knew she would remember this moment. The midnight in a secret library, when she'd kissed a man who looked more fantastical than any character out of any of her books. *It's just a kiss....*

His mouth brushed against hers lightly, again, nudging, testing. Tasting, as it moved across her lips. She felt the strangeness of his riven lip, and the softness of his muzzle. She placed her hand on the side of his face and realized his skin was warmer than her own, and that the blonde hair that should have been a beard on his cheek was soft, like the hair on his head, not rough, like a normal man's beard.

She opened her mouth on a sigh, and all was lost, as he closed his mouth over hers.

She knew she would remember it because she was so amazed by it; remember it because it was everything she had not thought it would be. She'd thought it would be some fairy tale brushing of lips, something romantic, and tame. Something to put in a little box and take out again, when you were sixty-five or seventy.

No. No, and not by a long, long ways.

Heat passed between them through their mouths, and what started as a gentle nudging quickly escalated to something more exploratory. She worried his bottom lip between hers, and he returned the favor, avidly. His hand did not stray from her cheek, but his thumb began to brush against her face, gently.

Her tongue traced his upper lip. When it caught him at the cleft and lingered, he moaned. Drawing his other hand up to hold her neck, he slanted her head to the angle he wanted and took her mouth fully, loving her that way, rocking her, and coaxing her with his tongue.

He moved slowly, so she could feel his fangs. He wanted her to learn what he was, there, and not be afraid. She explored each of the four long teeth with a brush of her tongue, then returned to the rest of him, testing the ridged concavity of his palate, verifying that she understood.

*You're a man, and not a man. I see, Zachariah. I see what you are.*

He felt her heart pound beneath his fingertips, as they slipped to her throat. Her woman's scent was a primal lure. And it was growing stronger.

*Yes. Yes! His mind sang. That's it, beautiful lady. Feel it. Feel me, kissing you. Feel your desire for me. Let it warm you, and wet you, and make you impatient. We have found each other. At last. Now, we have all the time in the world.*

He broke off the kiss knowing he could have taken it at least a little further. But a certain amount of tact was called for, here. He didn't want to frighten her away, with his ardor. She was very comfortable thinking him a gentleman, at the moment. *Let her.* After all, it wasn't a lie. He could be that, too, when he needed to be. And for her, he wanted to be nothing less.

"I share a room with Elijah, and you are with Julia Blackmane. Or I would be trying so hard to charm you into letting me have more than a kiss." He admitted as much, as he brushed his cheek against her very soft one, allowing her a moment to compose herself.

He needed one, as well. The fire between them had been instantaneous.

"Oh?" she asked, a world of meaning in the syllable.

He leaned back to smile subtly at her, pleased to see her shoot him a playfully shocked expression. He rose, offering her his hand to help her stand, as well.

"I'll walk you to your door," he said. "It will save you having to slap me and call me a cad." She took the proffered hand. It was big, like the rest of him.

*Time to go.* She knew it was, as surely as he did.

She wasn't sure if she was angry with him or relieved by him, at his stopping the kiss. On the one hand, she didn't lie to herself about her reaction. Her body was fairly screaming for what she was fairly sure he could provide. On the other hand, no. They had only just met, and societal rules demanded *some* kind of restraint be paid, here.

*You're right. Of course. But it's not every man who would have admitted as much.*

She slipped her shoes back on her feet, they tidied the shelves, and he escorted her back to her room.

Later, Brigit would recall that they almost made it there without incident. – Almost.



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## Chapter 3

### *Shadow Hunter*



They wandered through the tunnel halls, winding their way through the maze of passages. They passed several of the wedding guests as some made their way home, while others were beginning to retire inside their assigned chambers. Zachariah realized they had missed the departure of the bride and groom. He was being a bad guest.

*Oh, well.* He thought his host, of all people, would probably understand.

Zachariah knew where the ladies' guest rooms were located, and kept his arm around Brigit as they walked, chatting. At one point, Brigit felt him put a bit of pressure on her shoulder, drawing her closer, as they strolled. He stopped moving a few paces later, and looked down at their feet, then scanned left and right, as if he was following something invisible, with his eyes. Something that was also moving. He frowned, then had them stepping forward, again. There was no one else with them, in the tunnel passageway.

Before she could ask him about it...

"Could you find your way back to the Hall, from here, if you had to?" he asked.

His question was curious.

"No. I'm sorry, my Great Tree. I was too busy enjoyin' your company to mark the path. Why?"

He feared as much. "Brigit, I take it that in your life you've had the occasion to be with a bodyguard." He stared hard at a space before them and to their right.

"Ugh. More times than I'm carin' to remember." She'd slipped away from those the very night she'd met Vincent.

"Then you know what it means when one says 'Stay behind me.'" He looked into her eyes, meaningfully.

"Zachariah?" She studied his face, as he looked back down the hall, seeing pure concentration on it. His eyes were narrowing. His nose was... scenting the air.

"There is something evil near us," he said, *sotto voce*, "Stay behind me, Brigit. Well behind. I do not want you caught in a fight, if there is one."

*What are you --*

"Bear in mind my size. I have a longer reach than most, and cover more ground, faster. Much faster," he emphasized.

Brigit tried to process his words, as she watched him approach a room in front of them, and to their right. *What in the name of CuChulainn?*

Zachariah took a torch down from the hallway, though she thought it might be more for her ability to see, than for his. Or for whatever protection the fire afforded them.

Very little, apparently. He set it in the ring made for that purpose, in the chamber they entered. It filled the small space with light.

It was not a guest room. Most of those were much further down the hall. It wasn't much more than a very broad, very deep, hole in the wall, used for the storage of tools.

A few mallets lay clustered together, on the ground. A few steel poles lay stacked against one wall. Zachariah's body was a thing of tension, though he looked steady. Brigit saw the hair on the back of his hands, rising.

He stared hard at the wall straight in front of him, as if he were seeing through it, seeing something she could not. He stared a moment longer, then turned back to her, pretending to adjust a lock of her hair behind her shoulder, as he whispered into her ear.

"We are being watched," he revealed.

*We are? By whom?* She knew better than to ask it, out loud.

"If it comes out, run. I would have you run, now, but I would not have you lost in a place neither of us know well, with something malevolent on the loose, who knows the ground better than I." She looked up at him, and absorbed the words.

He brushed her forehead with a kiss, but whether that was simply for her benefit, or to fool their invisible stalker into thinking that he was unaware of it, Brigit could not say.

"Stay close, but stay back." It was an order, and a bare whisper. "I will protect you with my life. You will come to no harm. I vow it."

He was sure of it. It radiated from him. He knew his abilities, and carried himself just that way.

"Is it... one of your people? Or one of mine?" Her eyes were confused.  
"A... a ghost?"

"Neither. It used to be a man. It isn't, now."

The explanation made no sense to Brigit.

He turned so her view of the room was all but blocked by his huge size, motioning that she was to get back, with his hand. He took one of the steel poles from the stack against the wall, and moved with it as though he would use it as a walking staff.

If the Great Hall had been enveloped in a white, gossamer veil, for Zachariah, this room was now crowded by its opposite. A dark, black cloud, one only he could see, emanated from the wall in front of him.

"I know you are there, Evil Thing." His deep voice rang against the stones in front of them.

*Who in the world is he talking to?* Brigit thought.

The low voice grew louder. "I am Zachariah Shadow Hunter. I am Protector to Those Assembled. And you... *Offend* ... me." The growl that punctuated that sentence left utterly no doubt in Brigit's mind that Zachariah took the word 'Protector' and 'Offend' to a whole new level.

"Begone! I do not suffer an Evil Thing to live, and I do *not*... take prisoners."

He unclipped his cloak, and tossed it backward, towards her. She caught it.

*So it won't tangle in his feet,* she thought.

If the sight of him with the cloak on was impressive, the sight of him with it off was jaw dropping. He was a perfect giant. His arms rippled



with muscle, and strained the fabric of his white dress shirt. His waist seemed impossibly taut as it spread upward, to his huge chest. To Brigit, he seemed to have thighs like tree trunks. Everything was in proportion, just on a larger scale. He planted his feet apart, bracing them.

"You will leave these tunnels in peace, Corruption...." He hefted the heavy pole in the middle. Brigit had no idea what he intended to do with it.

"Or I will have your *eyes!*"

At the last word, several things seemed to happen at once. Aiming the pole like a spear, Zachariah heaved the almost fifty pound rod backwards, then threw it forward into the rock wall, as if it were a light, sharpened javelin, rather than a blunt, heavy, steel pole. It powered through the wall, stuck, and quivered, the end making an impossible sound, as it vibrated in the rock.

Astonishingly, an angry shriek of pain issued from the other side of the stone wall.

*He had speared something?* Brigit's mind raced to catch up, and she indeed kept well back, as he had instructed.

Zachariah's snarl of fury split the room, as he grabbed the mallets from the floor. In a fluid motion, as if it were an Olympic sport, he spun in a circle, swung the hammers around, then threw them both at a place further down the wall, where they smashed through.

Rock fell. A passageway was revealed. The barest flash of a dark shape... *A cape? A man wearing a cape?* was seen, as the front of the wall fell away, where Zachariah had thrown the mallets through. Zachariah's prey was running. And bleeding, judging by the smear of red on some of the stones.

"Begone!" Zachariah thundered, as it fled. His angry snarl punctuated the thing's retreat. It would do the big Shah no good to try and follow down the path, even if the hole he'd just made were wider. The passageway behind the wall was too narrow for all but the slenderest of men. His bulk would never fit in the space. Even Elijah, more slender than he, would not fit through. Zachariah's menacing roar filled the small room.

*A lion. He really is a lion. A silver and golden lion,* Brigit thought, amazed.

William entered the room at Brigit's back. Seth was right behind him, having well recognized Zachariah's battle sounds. Cullen was behind Seth.

"What the hell?" Cullen questioned, taking in the scene.

Zachariah was panting, his teeth bared. There was no sign of the scholar in him, now. No sign of Brigit's gentle dance partner, who carried an annotated book of Chaucer, and read Ancient Greek. Eyes narrowed, he was in a half-crouch, his eyes following something only he could see, along the walls. Then he looked down. Then... nothing.

"It is leaving." Zachariah rose and moved to stand near Brigit. Very near. His large, booted foot was definitely in her personal space, protecting her. She felt his intention.

"Someth... someone was behind that wall," Brigit told Cullen. Zachariah took her hand and pulled her into the shelter of his embrace, keeping her close. *He's... shielding me,* Brigit realized. Cullen looked startled, but not exactly surprised. "Did you see him?"

"A narrow man, I think," Brigit answered. "Slender. Tall. Dressed in dark clothing. Perhaps a cape?" she described.

Zachariah's breathing evened.

"Paracelsus." Cullen breathed. The name meant nothing to anyone there, but William.

Seth walked up to the pole, shaking his head at the force it had taken to plant it there. He tried to pull the heavy cylinder from the wall. Couldn't. Zachariah left Brigit's side to join Seth, bidding her with a motion of his hand that she was to stay back. He took hold of the metal, and nodded to his brother. They both pulled until the rod came free. There was a trace blood on the end.

*Through a wall? He had struck a man through a wall of rock?* If the stone hadn't slowed down the force of his throw, Bridget had no doubt the strike would have been a fatal one.

"You hit it." Seth told his brother, looking at the blood on the end of the impromptu spear. Brigit stepped close enough to realize that small holes had been drilled into the stone. Eye holes. The pole had centered, in one of them. Whoever "Paracelsus" was, he'd moved just in time – and had good reflexes.

"Barely. Not enough blood for a mortal wound." Zachariah eyed the tip.

"Someone having a party in here, without me?" Elijah entered the space.

Zachariah answered. "An evil thing was here. Spying. It is ..." He cast his mind out... "gone, now. At least past the edge of what your people call 'the perimeter,'" he told Cullen.

"Can you tell where this leads?" Cullen looked down the narrow wedge of space between the old wall and the newly revealed one.

Zachariah shook his head. "My gift is not for paths in stone. It is for the Thing that uses them," Zachariah explained, taking his cloak back from Brigit. "I can tell you he moved down, from the end. That at one point, he was beneath my feet, in the hallway."

"There are tunnels beneath us." Cullen affirmed. "In some areas, this place is like a warren."

Zachariah looked down. "It is a warren he knows. And uses."

"We have to get word to Vincent," said Cullen.

Zachariah shook his head. "And ruin his wedding night? No. Vincent and his bride are far from here, and it is injured. Tell Father, if you must. But the evil thing is no longer near us. I would know, if it was. I would not suffer my family to be in danger, if there was any. Or my... Brigit." Zachariah added to her ears, knowing it was too soon to call her "my love".

"Which way did he go?" Elijah asked.

"Along the wall for a space. Then....straight down. Down a ladder, or a rope of some kind. As I said, I first detected him beneath my feet, in the hallway."

William and Cullen exchanged glances. "We keep thinking he's dead. He keeps... disappointing us, in that," William said.

Zachariah looked at his brothers. "Mark the scent. If you smell this again... kill it." His orders were succinct, and Bridget got the impression they would not be questioned. Each Shah scented the blood on the pole, and the fresh trail through the rock.

"Wait. There's something here." Elijah reached down behind the broken part of the wall. To their collective amazement, his hand

brought up a half mask in the shape of a man's face. It was made of gold.

"It's Paracelsus, all right," Cullen said.

*It used to be a man. It isn't now.* Zachariah's description came back to Brigit's sensitive mind. *Who would wear something like this?* she thought.

"He'll be wanting this back." Elijah tossed the mask to Zachariah.

The larger man snatched it out of the air. "Let him come and ask for it. I may return it." Zachariah left no doubt as to his meaning, as he tucked the mask inside a pocket of his cloak.

Brigit was astonished. *Zachariah. Zachariah Shadow Hunter*, she thought, recalling the name he'd given to his foe. *It's not just your name. It's what you do. You hunt the shadows. Protect people from them.*

"Don't let it get close to you," Zachariah ordered his brothers. "It stinks of poison. And pestilence."

*'It.' Not 'him.'*

"Come." He stepped away from Brigit and held up the bloodied steel. His brothers grasped it, with him.

"To a Good Hunt," intoned Zachariah.

Seth, the middle brother, spoke next. "May the prey be worthy."

Elijah concluded it. "And the end, swift."

Zachariah nodded, approving of the vow. "We are done, here. Now go back to the women, and make sure all is well. And tell Adam."

Seth's voice was ebullient. "A room full of beautiful women, a decent ale, and the smell of blood in my nose. God, I love weddings!" Seth

enthused. Brigit got the feeling that Seth was one of those “live life to the fullest” types, and that he loved a lot of things.

To Zachariah, the fairy tale quality of the evening had altered. To Brigit, it had just increased tenfold. She had danced with someone wholly noble, read with a scholar, and been protected by a warrior. It made her wonder who had kissed her, back at the library.

A few minutes later, he deposited her at the doorway of the guest chambers she shared with Julia Blackmane.

"I will stand watch a while, tonight, my Brigit," Zachariah assured her. "But you should have no fear. I will sense it, if it dares return."

"It's sure that afraid is the last thing I am," Brigit replied, her mind still replaying the sight of him heaving iron mallets through the wall, to bring it down.

"The violence. It did not upset you?" He was all too aware of her history with violent men. It would doom any chance he had with her, if she thought he was one.

She shook her head. "No, though it surprised me more than a little. I confess 'twas the first time this evenin' that I didna weave a story, while I was walkin'."

"I will leave you to go dream a few, then." He kissed her hand with great chivalry. It was something she thought he might do at the bridal rehearsal, this morning, but he hadn't.

*He saved that touch for now, she realized.*

She thought he might turn and leave, then, but he did something she would be thinking about, long into the night. He leaned just a bit forward and breathed in, deeply. Bridget got the impression he was taking her scent into his nostrils, pulling her inside himself. He closed

his eyes, and let whatever he was feeling wash through him. His body seemed to calm, almost instantly.

"Good night, Beautiful Brigit. I will see you in the morning."

With a swirl of blue brocade trimmed in white and silver, he was gone.

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Bridget did dream, that night. Of a dance and a secret library. Of heart pounding excitement as a villain was cowed. Of an earth shaking kiss. Of green eyes in the candlelight...



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## Chapter Four

### *“Lost To You”*



The aroma of pancakes: The universally symbolic smell of “breakfast.” As with the wedding buffet, the breakfast buffet was massive to the point of being overdone. Delightfully so. William scooped mountains of pancakes off separate griddles, heated by a fire pit. Bridget wondered if he had even slept, since the night before. Three kinds of syrup and six kinds of fruit sat in bowls for the assembling wedding guests. Ham and bacon simmered in warm pans. Pitchers of juice sat on the wooden trestle tables. Catherine's trust fund had been raided to pay for mountains of food and drink.

Many guests had accepted the invitation to stay more than just a day or two. Though some, like Master Wong, had to leave that morning, many lingered, basking in the good wishes and fine food that was the tunnels, at marriage time. Jacob Wells and Peter Alcott both awoke with hangovers. It was a fate shared by at least a few of the guests.



Brigit found herself seated to Peter's left, secretly grinning into her blueberry topped pancakes, at his condition. Peter assured Jacob there was a cure for their misery, and he had it in his bag. Somewhere. Maybe. Bridget's Irish upbringing doubted it was true. Jamie, Brooke, and several of the other tunnel dwellers Brigit didn't know very well, sat to her left. The trestle tables filled and emptied several times, as the morning clattered along. The smell of fresh tea and rich coffee filled the air.

Zachariah swept in, and every eye lifted, an homage to his size, if not his force of presence. He was dressed more casually this morning, in deep blue cords and a matching shirt, buttoned to the throat. Elijah followed him in, with Julia Blackmane on his arm.

"The Old Prince and the Young Prince." A black woman named Narcissa uttered from behind Brigit, in a voice only she could hear. Brigit had not yet made her acquaintance. The Irish author chafed slightly and internally, at the description.

*At less than forty, Zachariah could hardly be called 'old,'* Brigit thought, taking him in.

"Older than you think, Erin," Narcissa stated. Brigit startled. She was sure she had said nothing aloud. And she was unaccustomed to being called by her place name. Ian had called her that, sometimes. But she had never written of it.

The guests all returned to their breakfast, as Zachariah crossed the room to where Brigit sat. Narcissa moved away.

"I see I am not in time to take a seat next to you," Zachariah observed, still leaning over to brush her cheek with a soft, good morning kiss.

"You should have been up earlier, Great Slug. I'm enjoying my third cup of tea."

"Well you should, then, Lady Sloth," he returned her banter. "I finished with breakfast a few hours ago." He stole a blueberry from her plate, and settled himself next to her as Jamie and Brooke took a cue, and rose to leave. The teenagers were already concocting some kind of mischief. Elijah settled next to him, the lovely Julia Blackmane at Elijah's left. Like Vincent, Zachariah did not require a great deal of sleep, each night.

Father leaned down, from his position next to Peter. "Zachariah, I can't tell you how grateful I am for your intervention, last night. Things could have gone so badly..." Father thanked him. Cullen had clearly informed him of the night's events.

"You are all under my protection while your Shah is ... absent, and tending to other things," Zachariah said, delicately avoiding any description of what Vincent and Catherine were probably doing, right now. Catherine had a cabin in Connecticut she wanted to show Vincent. They were due back in about a week.

"You don't think Paracelsus would try to make trouble for them..." Peter began.

Elijah snorted. "Interrupt a Shah when he's on his honeymoon?"

Adam joined the table, grinning, having picked up on the conversation. "Only if he actually *wanted* to die," he finished, bending to kiss his daughter, Julia. In many ways, though Julia was utterly human, they looked much alike. She had the same fair skin, dark hair, and grey eyes as her father.

"You threw us out right after the ceremony," Elijah chided Adam.

"Now this, *this* is how to throw a proper wedding reception, Adam."

Elijah teased the other newlywed among them. Diana entered the room, smiling.

"Ah. I blame the outrageous gorgeousness of my bride for my rude behavior." Adam Blackmane went to get a plate. The table laughed at his back. Diana shook her head, wondering what the husband she loved more than any other creature in the world had done, this time.

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Brigit was beautiful, imaginative, and brilliant, and Zachariah was enchanted. That was all he knew. Perhaps it was all he needed to know, for this. She was not tall, but she was shapely. The fullness of her figure was most apparent at her bust and hips. Bluntly put, Brigit O'Donnell had the nearly hourglass figure of a very sexy woman. Not reed slender, by any means, but not too full.

She would be the kind of woman who always tried to lose a few pounds, only to discover her body had naturally found them, again. The kind who was unaware of the stares of men, but keenly aware of the way she filled out a blouse, or a pair of jeans. Slight in stature, she would use heels to give her height. Careless of artifice, she would let her hair grow longer than was fashionable, and cut her bangs only when they got in her eyes. She'd use eye liner for a 'come hither' look, but never fight her age with creams or foundation. She'd tint her lips with gloss or a light sheen, or even color, to give them a very kissable look, then neglect to re-apply it, as the day wore on.

As she finished her breakfast, Zachariah could tell that she was comfortable not just with who she was, now, but the girl she had once been, and the older woman she would one day become. They were all phases in the same journey, to Brigit.

He felt her response to his nearness, knew she was nearly as fascinated as he was. *Good*. Zachariah knew he wanted her just that way. Sitting next to her on the bench of the trestle table, the skin on the top of his thigh tingled.

Breakfast ended, and a place they called “The Reading Chamber” was being used for those who wished to share any bit of literature or story they fancied. Almost everyone gathered there, including Brigit. She’d brought a book of Irish folklore along with her, bookmarked by a story she wanted to share.

By the time Brigit was half way through the second page of her children's book, Zachariah was all but salivating to get her in to bed.

“And so it was that the children of Lir were transformed into beautiful swans...” she read.

He didn’t mean to rush her, and didn’t want to make demands. But she read to the assembled audience so beautifully, perched upon her stool, and even though the crowd was appreciative, he felt she was reading just to him. It was a sad story, and one about having to wait a very long time, to get what you wanted. Zachariah could relate to that.

*Beautiful woman. Be with me.* His heart sent her a longing message, as she closed her book.

She wore a beautiful midnight blue vest that was embroidered with winding white leaves. A pale blue off the shoulder blouse made her look like a gypsy. A long skirt that matched the vest made him think of dancing with her, again. She sat on the stool, her head inclined for the applause, her book in her lap. She tilted a smile at him, as she gave up her chair to Kipper.

Zachariah wanted her. His body was no longer in the mood to make apologies for that fact. He still felt the place where her thigh had touched his under the breakfast table. She came to his side as she put the book down on a table, reaching happily for him. Their hands entwined.

"Be with me?" he whispered in her ear, as she stepped close. She simply nodded, sensing the aura of power that enveloped him, and by extension, enveloped her, whenever she stood near.

Tugging her hand through the tunnels, she was not entirely aware of where they were going, except that she was. Reaching his room, he indicated she was to enter, then dropped the tapestry, behind them both. "Elijah knows better than to interrupt us," was all he said.

She entered the room. Two full size beds took up the space. One had been slept in, and hastily made. The other had been stripped bare except for the fitted sheet. The top sheet, blankets, pillows and top quilt were spread upon the floor. She knew without asking that the floor was where he had slept last night, the bed far too small a space for his long frame.

If she wanted to leave, she could. She also knew she didn't want to.

She looked around, knowing she was in the lair of the great beast himself. *Only this isna his lair, since this place isna his home. We're both strangers in a strange land, here in Vincent's tunnels.* She looked around the room. Would he use pretty words, to beguile her? Offer her some gift, some token? Worse, some lie, to get what he wanted?

"My heart is lost to you." He said it plainly, and with no preamble, placing his hand over his heart. "I mean to be your bridegroom, and love you as no man has ever loved his bride."

It was not an empty phrase. Brigit was Irish, and she had heard many of those. This was said like an oath, and he was offering it to her.

"If this is not a thing you want, you must say so, Brigit." He took a deep breath. "If it is a thing you think you could want, then you have the week to decide. After that ..."

"You must be getting back to your home," she finished for him.

"There are things I must attend to, there," he explained, without details.

*Well, then.* No words to charm her into his bed for a brief fling or a weekend encounter. His gift to her was himself, and the rest of his life. Completely.

In another man, she'd have either laughed at his temerity, or been furious at his artifice. But this was Zachariah, and she knew he was utterly serious, utterly sincere.

"We have only just met," she told him. That, after all, was true.

"I have lived inside your head and you in mine for more than half our lives," he responded easily. Also true.

How could she argue with him when he was so right?

He had given her honesty. She would meet it with no less. "The day my father died... I swore my life was meant to be lived, again, as much as I could. You're not wrong, to think I want you," she admitted. "I will do you the courtesy of not pretendin' otherwise." Her eyes blinked back tears she was unaware she had been carrying.

He extended his hand. "Be with me, beautiful Fey. I will treasure you as no other man possibly could."

"It will be complicated, to put our lives together," she warned, though she took his extended palm, and slid hers into it.

"It will be impossible to do anything else, though, Beloved. Alderlevest."

She offered no other road block, no other resistance. He was beautiful. And she knew his words were sincere. Any word uttered by this man was his bond. *Bond*. That was a word these people used often, it seemed. He was not offering her an affair, or a fling, or a brief encounter while they attended the wedding festivities. He was offering her a marriage, if she wanted it.

If she wanted it!

The thought burst like fire across her brain and settled inside her heart, warming her. Marriage. A thing she'd thought not to be able to want, ever again, and now she wanted it more than anything else. *This is madness.*

The thing she had never considered to have again now dominated her vision. A thing she had not considered to have with any man, and now this man-who-was-not-a-man utterly overflowed, in her brain. *Marriage?* It wouldn't be legal, of course, just as Catherine and Vincent's was not. But she had no doubt that it would be binding, on both of them.

*Lost to you...*

How many years had she bemoaned ever being a wife, again? How many useless days and nights had she spent being a symbol to a cause, years longer than she had ever been a wife? Her first marriage had been intense, yes. It had been as much an act of defiance as one of love. But so long ago, and so brief it was ... a grade of school lasted longer.

And now, here was the most amazing man she had ever seen, offering her all he was... if only she had the courage to step into his arms and accept it.

If there was one thing no one had ever accused Brigit O'Donnell of, it was cowardice. Even her enemies acknowledged her bravery. As she tugged him closer and stepped fully into his embrace, stepped into his kiss, all thoughts of other things fled.

His kiss was solemn. Then it was enflamed. There were things she needed to tell him, things he needed to tell her, but they would have to wait. Suddenly, he was starving for her. Utterly starving, like a man who had never eaten a meal before, being placed before a banquet.

He bore her to the floor, laying her on his makeshift sleeping quarters. Since no bed here fit his length, he had simply stripped the bedclothes and taken them to the floor, placing extra pillows there, for comfort.

"It feels like it has taken me forever to find you, Beauty." He brushed a clawed finger through her bangs.

"Was the wait all but intolerable, my heart?" she asked.

"Very nearly." He gently kissed her, then dropped his head to her chest, breathing in her smell. *Oh*. His eyes rolled backward behind closed lids. *The scent of her there*. Such a mistake to breathe her there, now, where her pheromones beckoned.

He wanted her breasts. Wanted his mouth to close over the place where her desire would thread and his children would suckle. Wanted to tease her, arouse her. Her curves were so lush. *Surely she would let him?*



The laced up vest was all that barred him. Once it was undone and opened, her cotton, off-the-shoulder blouse was so thin a barrier as to be no barrier at all.

He tried to restrain himself. Tried to be slow. He nuzzled her neck, trying to catch his breath. She responded by lining her thighs up to his, bringing her soft belly in contact with his rampant erection.

"God!" He squeezed his eyes shut tight and pressed against her, loving the sensation. Also, needing to make her aware of his size. He drew back.

*Slow.* He knew he needed to slow down.

"Ah, you're being patient with me." Brigit's voice indicated she was annoyed rather than pleased. "Stop it. I am no bogside girl anymore, and as for *you*." She grabbed his face and kissed him, leaving him with a warning nip, on his lip.

"If I'd wanted you tame, I'd have bought you a collar."

She reached up for the cloth at her breasts and pulled down one side. He had to shut his eyes against the vision she offered him, a moment before he had to devour it. Her Irish skin was autumn pale. The pink of her nipple was so light that it was almost not there. She was a man's fantasy, in flesh.

*Oh, fantasy...* There simply wasn't another word for it. She arched her hips as he rasped her large nipple with the flat of his tongue.

*Yes. Yes. More.* They both thought it.

The scent of her desire exploded up from beneath him, and he knew if he put his hands up under her skirt she wouldn't stop him, at this moment.

It was so tempting to simply let the bond spin out, between them. So tempting. But he would wait. He wanted her, this first time, to meet him as he met her. Blind. Urgent. On equal ground, as much as that could be had, each by the other.

He bared the second breast to his view, the look in his eyes telling her how much he appreciated her form. Full. Beautiful. Round curves for his pleasure. Palest pink nipples for his desire. Her moans filled the room, as he suckled her, and she thrashed her impatience.

She drew his mouth up to hers, seeking to press the fullness of his erection against her sex. She cried out when they touched. She wanted no gentle loving, right now. Neither did he.

She was half-afraid she would wake to find every moment since the wedding had been dream. That she would awaken back in some cold bed in County Cork, or New York, or Belfast. That it would just be another long week in a life that, while it was full, was increasingly lonely, isolated, and burdened with care.

Fame had afforded her certain opportunities, but she had always been cautious with her heart, after Ian. Sex for its own sake had left her unfulfilled, and sex with a dear friend had lost her the friend. She had not taken a lover since an ill-fated fling with a publisher she later discovered was married. That had been more than almost two years ago, after she'd buried Sean, after she'd met Vincent.

She had never been in love with Vincent. But she wondered if part of her had been waiting for his twin, or some other creature like him, to grace her days. Now one had. And she was half mad with desire for him.

She lifted her hips into the thrust of his sex, wanting. He groaned and growled at the same time, the sound making her labia quiver. *Please.*

*Please don't make me wait*, her mind screamed. Her hands began pulling at the fastening of his trousers at the same time his did.

He shook his head, to try and clear it.

"This...should be slower..." He tried to find control.

"No. You should be inside me, right now," she argued, pressing her hand against his engorged flesh.

The image of that nearly sent him into spasms.

"Too fast," he gasped, loving her touch, adoring the feel of her caressing him.

"No' fast enough." She stroked him, not just wanting to tease, but to make him frantic. She knew it was risky. His size was... very generous. But then, she always reasoned, looking at her hips, so was she.

Frantically, he grabbed at a bottle of lightly scented oil Rachel had left in each room, uncorking it.

"I don't want to... hurt you." he gasped, pressing it into her hands. She understood.

"Oh, the torments I can devise with this, some other day." She dabbed it on her fingers, and proceeded to do just that, as she reached inside his loosened trousers and touched the oil to his penis.

He tried to unbutton his shirt, but only achieved the first few buttons while she stroked his sex with her oil-covered hand. He thrust against her palm, aching, groaning. Deeply.

Turnabout was fair play. Taking the bottle back, he touched the shimmery almond fluid to his own fingertips, and lifted her skirt to touch her sex beneath her underwear.

"Aaaah!" She thrust against him, wantonly. "Oh my magic one. Please now. Do not make me wait. Do not make me... beg for you..."

*She would beg for him?* He knew it was not possible. Not now. Not with things the way they stood, even though she knew little about that, yet. If all went as he wished, there was much she wouldn't need know until much later, since it would no longer be relevant.

But she would beg for him? The notion was nearly offensive to him, right now.

Pushing aside the urge to bond with her again, he smelled her scent explode off her, once more. *She was meant for loving.* And had been denied it for too long. So had he.

"You will never have to beg me," he swore, massaging her.

"Ahh! Take them off!" she demanded, fastening her mouth to his throat. Her fingers bit into the muscles of his neck, hard, as she pulled herself against him, feeling greedy. She was swimming, with the sensation of it.

He moaned at the gesture, obeying, as his fingers gathered the satin that covered her sex. He offered his neck to her in a gesture of supplication. It was a gorgeous column of muscle and sinew, and Brigit, normally much tamer a lover, had an overwhelming urge to mark that territory, somehow. It was a teenager's gesture. And she suddenly felt very young, and very wild.

She nipped at his neck as he eased down her panties, and laved the wound with her tongue, once he got them clear.

*God.* She was open to him. Wet, writhing, and aching.

He pushed the hem of her skirt up to her waist, catching a glimpse of firm thighs and white skin. Her mouth was working at his neck,

coaxing him. She communicated so well, through her touch. He marveled that he had found not only someone so loving, but someone who was such an excellent lover, as well. He only prayed he could hold on long enough to please her.

Her hands were at his hips, pushing his dark corded pants down, allowing his erection its full freedom, from his clothes. She oiled her hands again, stroking his long length.

*Feel me, Brigit. How much too big am I, for you?* He couldn't bear to ask it, aloud, fearing the answer.

"Make love to me, Zachariah," she whispered, guiding him into her flesh before either one was even completely undressed.

Despite all her urging, he would not take her quickly. But neither could he bear to tease. Keeping his large hand between them, he gripped the base of his penis, easing in to her, slowly. She was so wet she was utterly slick with it. They had not needed the oil.

But it did make his penetration easier for her, or at least he told himself it did, when he was half way in. His passage through her body had been smooth, though it had clearly been a while since her last lover. He felt the closeness of flesh that had not been tried in a long time, and blessed her for it.

But he also cursed, inwardly. He did not want to hurt her. He did *not* want to hurt her. And he knew he could, here.

Her muscles started to work against him, squeezing. He was going to lose his mind. She would squeeze, then relax, then repeat the motion. At each relaxed interval, he would push into her, further. She was inviting him. He was accepting the invitation, unable to do anything else.

When the top of his finger and thumb touched her nether region, he knew he was as far inside her as he dared to go. Even at this length, using his hand to block himself from complete penetration, he was huge. He had seen other males, even well-endowed ones. He was not committing vanity, when he tried to care for her, but love.

He began to stroke inside her, not removing his hand, again hoping his self-control would not desert him, so he could make this good for her, before he ejaculated. She felt his hand still between them, knew his weight was braced a bit awkwardly, to one side. She had a moment to realize that for him, this kind of love making was normal. Yes, he was large. There was simply no question. Both in length and in girth. But she was in the mood to be greedy. She wanted all of him.

Brigit was no fool, nor was she a novice. She was very familiar with her body, and pushed it hard up the steep hills of her homeland, as she walked, daily. The muscles in her thighs and stomach were rich and full, tested and toned. Her hips were wider than she would have liked, a fact that did not change, regardless of what the scale told her. She was built for carrying a child, either on her hip or between them, inside. Her curves were both deep and pronounced. And utterly built for loving, even the most generously endowed of men. It was simply a fact of her anatomy, a gift from her feminine ancestors.

She realized he would not release his grip on himself, just by her demanding it. Something thrummed between them which she could not name. But in it, she sensed his utter terror at the thought of tearing her. *Something that had happened, some other time? With some other woman?* She knew better than to ask.

"More," she whispered into his softly tufted ear. He tensed, and at first she thought he wouldn't give her what she asked for. Guile. She

would have to charm him, here, make him want this as much as she did. "Just a little. Please, Zachariah."

She worked her hips against him, showing him she desired an even deeper loving. He let his hand slide down the shaft, marginally. His smallest finger now rested on his scrotum. He readjusted his other arm, bracing it over her head as he held himself less aloft. He began to pant as he reveled in the deeper seat, inside her. She felt fathomless. He felt on fire.

"Brigit..." It was just her name. Her name, as a love word. And a warning.

"Shhhh." she soothed, stroking the small of his back, caressing the smooth rise of his buttocks. "That's it. More. A little more. Don't you know how good you feel to me?"

He shook his head, his ring finger coming down. "God, you feel so deep." He moaned into her ear, waiting to feel the tension, the resistance to his sex. There was none. She was simply too ready for him, to begin with.

The oil on his phallus continued to ease his passage, though she whimpered with frustration at it. The oil meant she could not squeeze him so hard as she might like. He felt her muscles working against him, not resisting... welcoming. Opening to him from the inside, as each new millimeter was gained.

*God. Did she know? Could she possibly know, how this feels?*

He was holding himself back from her now by the barest margin. He had gone this deep inside what he assumed to be a far more... experienced partner, many years ago. She had been a passing affair, nothing more. He began to stroke inside Brigit in earnest, feeling her build.

She swatted her orgasm away. He all but felt her do it. Zachariah knew she had postponed her pleasure, with a turn of her head. *What are you doing?*

She turned back. "Please, my Great Beast." She nuzzled his neck. "Take your hand away. Let me feel all of you; know you the way you were meant to be known."

He stilled his body, stiffening, at her words.

"Brigit?" *Could such a thing be possible?* She had no idea how much he wanted such a union. She couldn't possibly know.

"Aye. Please, lover. You'll not hurt me."

It was the way she said it. The surety in her voice. He banished the thought of every other time he had ever been with another, aware on some level that they were all... inconsequential, now. Inconsequential to this.

He took his hand away but did not move forward, immediately. She knew better than to thrust up to make him enter her, and she relaxed her hips, opening, mind and body, willing him to feel that this was all right. Planting his great, strange hands at either side of her head. He searched her face for signs of pain. There were none.

"Can this be?" His voice was raw.

She felt him deep inside her. Knew he was struggling with the decision to push forward.

"Love me. Love me with all of you." She petted his buttocks in a soothing motion, meaning to rock him forward, gently.

He closed his eyes and lifted his chin, willing himself to stop if she so much as whimpered. She didn't.



She purred as he slid himself forward to where he had been before, then a little more, to the tiny fraction that was all but left. He moved forward until his testicles nestled against her curve, and her curls. He didn't move. He had never felt himself fully seated inside a woman, before.

His amours had not been too numerous, though he'd surely had them. More in his puberty and youth than now, due to his circumspect nature.

But they had all been at least somewhat afraid of him, of his size.

Perhaps that had been the difference. Whatever else Brigit O'Donnell was, "afraid of him" was not on the list. He realized that she was probably not afraid of anything.

"Yessssssssss," she purred against his skin, now beginning to rock her amazing hips. She smelled like the almond oil and berries and sin. And he would die before he came first, no matter how hard his orgasm was screaming at him, from this position.

The rest of his torso laid flat against hers, another unique sensation for him, considering the position his hand usually had to maintain. His belly was against hers. It felt... luxurious. He gathered her hair into his hands.

"Command me. Anything." his deep green eyes bore in to hers, intensely. She had no doubt he meant it.

"Slow." She worked the amazing muscles inside her against him. *Lord. There was so much there to squeeze.*

"Yes." He barely moved backward. *Not just slow. Slow was not all that she wanted.* She wanted him to stay inside her. She drew her legs up,

then set them back down, testing the sensation that brought her, brought them both; sometimes, demanding it.

This time, when her orgasm began to build she did not swat it away. He watched her. Felt her. Felt her rise with a sweetness that was mind-bending. Felt it against the base of his shaft and against the vein that ran up the length of his penis, the one that was already throbbing. he pulled at his buttocks with both hands. If he'd been able to give her more, she'd have taken him. Never had another woman made him feel "the right size." Always too large. Too much. Too thick. Too painful. He was something to be enjoyed as a novelty, at best, something to be endured at worst.

His disdain for either situation had always been palpable, for him. He enjoyed making love. But hated the limitations he always had to use, to achieve it.

He had often laid on his back, holding his erection to block the woman's penetration. Or straddled her from behind, keeping himself from driving too deeply, keeping his hand where it needed to be, so his partner was uninjured.

While he had enjoyed sex, he hated the sense of caution it required him to maintain.

Now, here he was, and a woman, *his* woman, was moaning with pleasure. And it wasn't faked, either to spare his feelings or curry some favor. She was not in discomfort or distress, or worried that she might be; not worried about what would happen if he let go of himself.

She was damp with desire, squeezing him with a muscular passion, and ... getting close.

He backed himself half way out of her, realizing it would be felt as a tease. Her brow furrowed, and her nails pulled at his back. *It's all right, Colleen. I'm here. Take what you need*, his mind whispered, as he began to stroke, again, loving the freedom he felt at being inside of her, the gorgeous contact of his pelvis against hers; of not having to hold his weight on one arm, while he held his sex with the other.

That had been unavoidably awkward, in its way. Fulfilling, in the end, but so much... less. So much less than this gorgeous, sumptuous feeling. He clawed for his self-control. He was about to...

"Mmf," she grunted at his throat, a whimper that he felt as much as heard. It was not a sound of pain. He felt an amazing rush of liquid flow around his penis. Her completion was viscous, and warm.

"Stay," she whispered, feeling it again. He remained inside her, eyes closed. If heaven had a sensation, this rapture was it. She was orgasming. All over him, all over his sex. He had only to drop his head and push himself barely forward, to match her completion. So he did.

He pulsed deep inside her, feeling himself fully inside a woman as he orgasmed, for the first time in his life. His abdomen rested completely against hers, and most of his chest. He knew he would never become totally accustomed to that marvelous sensation. He was far more used to holding himself away from women. Holding himself back.

He realized that he was going to have to learn how to make love to a woman all over again, so strange was this freedom, this sensation. He was too old to feel like a virgin. Yet he did.

The knowledge that he could make love without restriction excited him further, as he spasmed into her a second, then a third time. He groaned into her neck, with pleasure, realization, and love.

*So glad I waited for you.* He meant it in more ways than one.



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## Chapter Five

### *Whirlwind Romance*



Brigit snuck back to her room, washed up in a basin, and changed clothes. This time, a pale green blouse and a deep green skirt covered her well-loved form. An embroidered belt that matched the skirt cinched her waist. Doeskin boots hugged her calves, the heel of them slight, but there. She felt feminine, and pretty, as her love-slowed brain replayed the events of the last few days.

She hadn't actually answered his proposal. He had said she had the week to consider it. But Brigit knew she didn't need a week. She didn't need an hour.

She planned to ask him all sorts of questions, of course, about his home, and she tried to make some sort of coherent list of those, mentally. She knew he lived in Canada, and as such, it was cold, with long winters. That didn't bother her. She had endured many an Irish winter, and swore New York ones were colder.

She ran a brush through her hair, knowing she was thinking of changing her entire life, while she did it. The borrowed mirror reflected her contentment with that prospect. *I'm a writer. I can write anywhere*, she thought.

The thought had her picking up a writing tablet from her bedside table. It was one she could use for writing, sketching, or whatever came to mind. She'd jotted down notes about Meghann's story earlier, and flipped it open.

She was grateful for the tablet, now, since it gave her sharp mind something to do, while it actually considered other things.

The room stayed quiet, her roommate off doing as she chose. Brigit liked the soft, candlelit stillness that enveloped her. She was used to being a solitary creature. *I'll have to find out how he spends his days, and see what adjustments are needin' to be made*, she mused, making plans for the first few chapters of her new story.

She flipped to a blank page, knowing it was too soon to actually start writing the story, but wanting to do that, nonetheless.

**Tree Dancing**, she wrote, on the clean page. She liked the sound of the title, instinctively. Skipping a few lines down, she began to write:

***Once Upon an Enchanted Time, there lived a little girl named Meghann...***

After a few minutes of writing, she stopped, and clicked the pen closed. Writing was lovely therapy, but sometimes, it allowed her to avoid thinking about things she knew she should be. And right now, she knew she should be thinking about Zachariah, and all his offer meant, for her life.

*Am I really planning this?* She realized she was.

Her sister in Belle Claire would understand her long absences. There were years where she was barely at home as it was, so consumed was she with travel between European capitals and American major cities.

Book signings, speaking engagements, interviews about the film of 300 Days, and parties held by this publishing house or that one, often took up her time. Or she'd spend it with this author, that columnist, this cause, or that one. Requests for interviews flooded her mail box, along with requests for op-ed pieces, or commencement addresses. Brigit could pick and choose which invitations she would accept, and which she would decline, for the most part.

She knew that her year always seemed to vary between frantic over exertion, creation of new pieces and new ideas, and just plain boredom, when neither her muse nor her friends seemed to be in touch, for whatever reason, at the moment.

*I'll tell Siobhan I'm in New York, at first, for some made up reason. Leave my number with my publisher.*

It was a big planet. A vagabond Irish writer could certainly disappear, if she wanted to, Brigit mused. Those in Europe would think her stateside. Those in the States, would think her back home. It would be fine.

She felt like a gypsy, and began to imagine a story about a gypsy vagabond who was never in the place others thought him to be. *What fun.*

She scribbled down a note for it on the back of the notebook. Creativity was often like that, for her. No sooner had one idea begun to take shape than another one vied for her attention. When she caught the idea as she envisioned it, she clicked the pen closed, again. *One thing at a time*, she thought, knowing the thought pertained to not only her writing but of other things.

*We need to speak of some things, to be sure.* She could tell by looking at Zachariah that he had wanted to say more, when she'd left him. But bluntly put, they had been careless, and the back of her dress had gotten wet, from their lovemaking. She'd had to leave.

Bridget knew she had things she wanted to say to him, as well. *It will keep. We'll sort it all out. Seth told Vincent that Zachariah is thirty eight years old, nearing forty. Not a time in life when most men consider having children. It will be all right.*

She set aside the notebook and picked up her hairbrush, again. She brushed her dark mane until its auburn highlights shone. *It has to be all right.*

She would let no other thought dim her happiness.

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Elijah re-entered his bedroom to see a very content Zachariah giving his long black boots a last swipe, with a polishing cloth.

"It smells like sex in here." Elijah raised an eyebrow.

Zachariah shot him a subtle grin, then returned to his chore. "There would be a reason for that."

Elijah's eyes went to the makeshift pallet on the floor. He stood near the rumpled bedclothes. The scent was definitely strongest, there.

"Brigit, I take it?"

"Of course. How is Julia?"

Elijah chuckled at the obvious attempt to change the subject. "Not nearly so accommodating, apparently."

Zachariah gave the younger man an emerald glare. He would obviously tolerate nothing said against his love. "Careful," he warned.

"It's not just a fling?" Elijah asked.

"I've told her it isn't."

"Have you bonded?"

Zachariah shook his head. "I haven't told her about that, yet." He rose and selected a dark vest to match his pants, for the evening's concert. "Until I do, no. I want her to understand what she's getting into. At least as much as she can."

"Good luck." Elijah slumped on his own bed, looking dour, for a moment.

Zachariah eyed his little brother. "Trouble with Julia? I always thought she liked you, you know."

Elijah glanced back, then away. "Oh, she does like me. It's just the bond she's utterly terrified of. Unfortunately, we go together."

Certain facts lined themselves up, in Elijah's head. "It would have been a source of much misery for her, considering Celeste and Adam."

Zachariah said, referring to the marital implosion of Julia's parents.

"Yes, I imagine that's the heart of it. But you are good?"



"Yes." Zachariah's smile was the most self-satisfied thing Elijah had ever seen on him. "At the moment, yes. We will see."

*Ever the cautious elder brother.* Elijah thought. *You don't have so much more time to be careful, Zach.*

Elijah hoped for the best, for him. Fervently.

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The hot springs was a major attraction, for the wedding guests. And while it was customary for those in the tunnels to enter nude, it was by no means a requirement. At three and a half months pregnant, Corinne Hunter soaked blissfully in the altogether. Diana Bennett wore a conservative blue one piece swim suit. Bridget, having neither brought swim clothes nor favoring the idea of a nude swim among strangers, sat on the edge of the water, clad in a red satin camisole and matching underwear. She let her feet dangle in the water, enjoying the heat and the company of other women. She admitted a curiosity about these particular two, and of Catherine. All were married to the most exceptional kind of person.

"Oh, I have got to get one of these," Corinne Hunter groaned, letting her rounded body slip deep below the surface of the springs. "We have nothing like this at the logging camp."

"Nor at the mine," Diana stated, relaxing her shoulders near a rock. "The pond is fairly cold, even in summer. And in winter, well, it's ice. Adam says we should be skating well before Thanksgiving. Before Halloween, if the first snows hold."

Brigit shook her head. She could not fathom the sight of Adam Blackmane taking his red-haired beauty of a wife ice skating across a pond. *Stranger things have happened*, her mind mused. Then, her mind could not think of what.

"There's a question I'd have for you, if it would not be prying," Brigit asked Diana.

"Sure. What?" Her silky red hair was dark from the pool. Corinne wore her own lighter red mane in a loose bun, pinned atop her head.

"Your Adam touches his forehead, sometimes, when he looks at you. Does the gesture mean something?"

Diana laughed, and blushed as red as her hair. "It's where he says he feels me the most, through our bond. I usually touch behind my ear, when I see him do it." She demonstrated. "That's where I feel him. He's just saying he loves me." There was joy, in her blue eyes.

"Awww." Corinne teased. "That is beyond sweet." Brigit made a similar, sympathetic sound.

*Bond?* Bridget thought. *I've heard them speak of it, but what is that, exactly?* She knew Catherine shared one with Vincent. But she knew no particulars, other than it seemed to link them together.

"You saved his life, you know. Saved his family." Corinne definitely was one for giving credit where it was due, as she complimented Diana.

"He would have sorted most of it out for himself, sooner or later," Diana answered.

"Perhaps. But he wouldn't be happy. 'The Shahnna--"

"'Is the Strength of the Shah.'" they both finished it together.

Brigit's eyes widened. She knew she was witnessing a strange and very exclusive club. One Catherine Chandler now belonged to.

"Can you imagine how strong Zachariah would be, if he were married?" Corinne asked.

*So... marriage is ... strength, for them?* The thought gave Brigit a certain amount of pleasure. She'd have to ask Zachariah about it, later.

"The mind boggles," Diana agreed.

"It does that," Brigit concurred. She bet neither one of them had ever seen the man throw a pole through a stone wall - and hit a target, on the other side.

After a few minutes of soaking, Corinne began to stir. "Well. My fingers are all but pruned. I'd best be getting out. I've left Seth and Elijah babysitting long enough. I'm sure they'd like a chance in here." She rose from the warm water.

"Me, too. It's been lovely. But Chloe asked me to help her with her hair, before dinner. I'd best get going," Diana said.

Brigit sat where she was, content to stay a while longer, while the other women made ready to leave. She was used to her own company.

Corinne dried herself with a towel, then unpinned her hair. Diana did the same. Corinne's pregnant body gleamed.

*She is so beautiful,* Brigit thought. Diana must have been thinking the same thing.

"Corinne," the younger woman asked hesitantly. "If you wouldn't think it was too weird... may I?" she put forward a tentative hand. Nodding, the mother of five, soon to be six, smiled, wrapping herself in the towel so that her rounded belly still showed. "Right here." she guided Diana's hand to her stomach.

"I think it's a boy," she half-whispered. "I'm not allowed to say that to Seth, because he's big on saying he doesn't care, and that it's already

decided one way or the other, and no one of our children is more special than the others, but... given all we know about them... You know I'd love it if it were a Shah. Daniel needs a little brother to torment him. And the girls would fuss over him, so much."

Diana pressed her long-fingered hand to Corinne's swollen, firm stomach, smiling, as she did so. "I'm supposed to go get my shot in a couple months. The one that keeps me from getting pregnant. When we first got married, I thought we would wait a while, maybe a year or two, to see how things worked out, but...." She let the sentence drift. Corinne could see the wistful look in the younger woman's eyes.

"Talk to Adam and see how he feels, Diana. Like with most things, they know when they're ready. You already know he's an amazing father."

Diana hugged the other woman impulsively. "Speaking of his children, I need to get dressed, or I'll miss an appointment with one." She collected her bathrobe.

Brigit felt a tear of emotion slide down her cheek, as the other women donned heavy robes, and departed.

"No sense crying over spilled milk," Brigit whispered to herself, letting the melancholy feeling pass. Corinne Hunter would be mother to six in a few months, if all went well. She could not feel sad about that.

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She was still enjoying kicking her legs in the water when Zachariah stepped into the room.

He saw her there, all dressed in a red... something. Something silk his fingers itched for. *Red, again, like her dress, the night of the wedding.* She was perched on a rock, drawing a circle with her toe, in the water.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize anyone would be in here." Zachariah apologized for intruding on what was clearly a moment of solitude. "I saw Corinne and Diana in the hall."

"It's sure they had places to go and things to do there. I thought I'd stay, a bit. But if you want to use it..."

"You don't have to leave. From what I understand, communal bathing is the norm, here. Besides," He pulled off his soft blue shirt over his head, "It would be a sin to disturb you from that rock. You look so lovely."

His boots came off, then his socks.

"Of course, if you'd be too embarrassed to stay..." he began.

*Oh, was that a challenge? Considering what had already passed, between them?*

"I can take it if you can, Great Tree," she tossed his way. She'd been swimming at beaches all over Europe. This was far from the first unclothed or semi-clothed bathing experience she'd ever had. Though to be fair, it was the first time she was about to see her lover nude.

"Good," he approved, unbuttoning his slacks. He pulled off his under shirt, and heard her gasp. *Very good.* His mind told him. *She likes what she sees.* Though they had already been intimate, they had barely undressed, or taken time to truly see each other, thanks to their mutual impatience.

It would have been impossible, utterly impossible not to like his amazing body, Bridget concluded. The broad golden chest of the man was covered with white and blonde hair that lay as if it had been painted to perfection on his torso. What happened on the left side, happened on the right. In a way that was so identical she realized it

almost looked wrong, somehow. The flawlessness of his form made him look almost alien, not of this earth. His body hair slanted at a forty five degree angle, almost everywhere. It all arrowed toward his sternum, his navel, then lower. Some of it was silvery. His nipples were peach discs, begging to be kissed. Even as the blonde body hair dipped into his loose slacks, it steadfastly refused to darken. She realized she had never met a man with fair body hair, before.

Just as he'd had no compunction about baring his chest, he had no particular compunction about baring the rest of his body to her. He let the dark pants drop, and shook out of them. She had no idea where he managed to get clothes that fit. Then she stopped thinking about "clothes."

The blonde hair on his torso swooped low, and clustered around his sex, an organ that she already knew was impressive by any standards, and again, simply "fit" with the rest of his body. His navel dipped inward, the low point on a sculpted abdomen. His thighs were, like much of the rest of him, silky, blonde, and powerful. His feet were broad and well-formed, reminding her of a Michelangelo statue. The hard nails on his hands were echoed on his feet, but blunted, thanks to spending his life in shoes. Every line of him bespoke of a resting kind of power. She half expected to see a pair of angel wings unfold, from behind his broad back.

*You're a wingless archangel. Do you know that?* she thought.

He stood with his legs braced apart, head held up, proudly, allowing her perusal. *There.* After a moment, he nodded, indicating it was over, and made his way down the steps, into the pool. He sighed his contentment, as the water closed around his thighs, then his torso.

"Ahhh, it's all but steaming. We have nothing like this, back home. Wait until Seth and Elijah feel this. They're probably on their way, by the way."

"Ah, you mean I get to see two more of you?" she jibed at him. "Well. Won't that be a feast for me eyes."

"Don't." A look crossed his green ones.

She dropped her teasing smile, as she looked at him.

"I swear I'm not jealous. I never have been. I never will be. But don't... try to tease me about finding someone else attractive, Brigit. If you do, you do, and I will accept it. But don't needle me about it. Please."

"Ah you great fool of a Tree." She had sympathy for him. "As if I could find anyone handsome ever again, after having seen the likes of you."

It was a pretty compliment, and he accepted it, gratefully.

"You are so rare," he complimented back. "But you're not swimming. Do you not know how? The water is glorious and much of this seems shallow. I can teach you how to swim, if you want to learn."

She chuckled at him. "I've been swimming since my cousin threw me into Galway Bay, thank you," she informed him, "And I may be a croppie girl, but I know a wicked plot by a tree when I hear one. No, my dancing partner. I can swim. I just choose not to."

He waded over a bit closer to where she was sitting. To Brigit, he seemed like he was a respectable distance away, still. "What if I made a different choice, for you?"

"Then I'd be tellin' you to... Ack!" she squealed as his hand shot out of the water, and grasped her by the ankle. She'd thought him too far away. She'd forgotten the speed of the man, or the amazing reach of his arms. *Odd I could, after the storage room.*

With a shriek, he pulled her ankle forward into the hot springs, her body sliding unceremoniously off the rock and into water that was warmer than the warmest bathtub. She came up sputtering. He remained, laughing at her. The red camisole clung to her very shapely curves. The sight was too beguiling to miss.

"There, now. That's better," he concluded.

"You're a beast and a bully, my Tree."

"I prefer the term 'opportunist.' The water was dying to caress your breasts. Who was I to say no?" He was all charm. Zachariah knew his brother Elijah would have been proud.

"You're sure it's the water that wanted that, then?" She batted her dark eyelashes at him. She would show him some charm of her own. After all, she was Irish.

"Well... now that you mention it..." He reached for her shoulders, and gently tugged down at the strap of her sodden top. Her left breast floated in the water, exposed. He bent his knees so their height was even, lifted her, and took the waiting nipple into his mouth. She gasped at the feeling it gave her. His mouth was much warmer than even the very warm water. It made her sigh, and throw her head back. She felt his erection brush against her thighs, seeking.

"Someone will come," she whispered.

He lifted his blonde head. "Oh, you so don't want me to make a comment about that, right now," he whispered back wickedly, pulling the other strap down.

The wet satin didn't stretch, but the adjustable straps lengthened, at his tugging. In a moment, both her breasts were bared to him, and he



was feasting, again. She wrapped her legs around his waist, floating in the water.

Her panties were loose-legged boy shorts. He gripped the bottom of her muscular buttocks, loving the feel of her, as she pushed her sex against his.

"Move them over," she ordered, not willing to relinquish her hold on his amazing body. He reached a hand between them, pulling the loose crotch of her panties to the side. It was so easy. In a moment, he was penetrating her, gently, and she whimpered into his neck.

Buoyancy was both a delight and a frustration. A delight because it was foreign, and he did not have to hold up her weight. He kept one hand on her breast as he laved the nipple, the other at her back to keep her from floating backward. It was a frustration because he could not stroke so hard, inside her. The weightlessness of her was like an erotic tease. It was almost like trying to love a ghost.

"We have to hurry," she warned, using her legs to help her thrust against him.

He listened for the sound of approaching bathers. Nothing. "We have time." He began to lift her up and down. It was awkward. "Squeeze me," he begged. "Don't you know how good it feels when you squeeze me?"

She gave him an open-mouthed kiss, full of a licking tongue that marked his upper lip and muzzle. He reached between her to fondle her clitoris with his hand, mostly using the knuckle of his index finger against her engorged nubbin. She licked his mouth, again. It wasn't even a kiss. It was far more primal than that.

"Faster. Please, faster," she urged. "Don't stop, Zachariah." He embraced her firmly, only his hand beneath the water, moving. She

forgot to squeeze him. She forgot to do anything. The sensation of warm water and rapid, small strokes against her clitoris was killing her.

She wanted to bite his neck, when she came. So she did. He growled his approval. This time there was no warning gathering, inside. When she completed, it was ripping sensation, tearing through her nether sex. Her nipples blushed a darker pink, and she raised her head, trying to draw deep breath. He knew she wanted to moan her pleasure to him. He took the sound into his own mouth, with an open kiss. *There. There. I have you, Love.*

Arms lax, she barely clung to his neck, knowing she would drown but for him holding her. His penis jumped, inside her, at the sensation of her orgasm. This was too easy. She squeezed him only twice. He was already coming after the first one. A growling whimper of sound came from his throat, then, she felt his jerking motions, inside her.

*He's still not accustomed to being so ... encased,* she realized. She reached low between them and caressed his testicles, as he groaned. The frisson of delight that gave him was shock worthy. He spasmed hard, rather than lightly, a third time. Done. More, and he'd drown. The newness of this, the freedom of it, was still rare for him.

He loved that she faced him, as they made love. She had no idea how uncommon even that was, for him.

He guided her to the edge of the pool, turned, and leaned with his back against the far wall, panting. She held the edge of the rock, past his shoulders, so he wouldn't have to bear any of her weight, or control her body. His arms fell away from her back as he swallowed, gasping for air, though he'd taken no water into his mouth.

*You feel... so good.* His privates tingled.

He felt her disengage from him, gently. His eyes checked her position, as her hands dipped below the waterline to adjust her panties, then returned above to pull up the sagging straps of her chemise.

He didn't want her too far away. She knew it. She crossed her arms on the stone rim of the pool, her shoulder touching his as he struggled to return his breathing to normal. His body hair looked a little darker, yet still blonde, in the water.

"You're going to wear me out, woman," he commented to her, as the spinning world retrieved its sense of gravity.

"Oh, no you don't. There I was, minding me own business on t'other side, when you came and pulled me in, and took advantage of me helplessness." She batted her eyelashes at him, again.

*Lord, she looks glorious, when she's wet. All slick, dark hair, and creamy, glowing skin.* He planted a soft kiss on her bare shoulder. Then Zachariah's green eyes jerked upward, and toward the doorway.

"And don't I just wish my brothers weren't coming down the hall, so I could do it again," he warned her, a few moments before Seth, Elijah, and even Adam entered the pool area.

She had used the warning to put several long yards of distance between them, trying to look as if she were simply swimming, enjoying the water.

"Hey, Brigit. You still here? The rest of the girls just came back in a little while ago," Elijah commented to her.

"I was just about to leave, so I can get my hair good and dry before the concert this evening. You gentlemen enjoy your swim. And you, too, Great Tree," she teased Zachariah.

The three men laughed at the big one's expense. Brigit pulled her dripping wet form from the hot springs, wringing out her top a little, as she went.

Zachariah thought the wet, silky boy shorts did marvelous things to her backside, contentedly aware that he loved her.

She grabbed a towel from the basket, wrapped herself in it, and padded down the cool tunnel halls.

After she was gone, the three men shucked their borrowed robes, and entered the glorious water. A remarkably content Zachariah drifted, at the far end.

"Uh, Zachariah? Protector of the People?" Seth nudged.

"What do you want, Seth?" Zachariah's grumbled, barely opening his eyes.

"Oh, nothing." Seth muffled a grin. "I just thought you might like to know you have a love bite on your neck, and it's red as sin."



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## Chapter 6

### *In Concert*



Brigit took extra care with her appearance, that evening, and she noticed, so too, did Julia.

The concert was to be an unusual one, in that it featured none of the tunnel children, nor their adults. It was an Above concert, but discernible Below. A philharmonic orchestra was setting up in the band shell in Central Park. An area of the tunnels sat almost directly beneath it. It was a thing Brigit had no idea existed, until she did.

The space was not large, but would accommodate several people. Father, Peter Alcott, Mary, Michael, Elijah, Julia, Seth, Corinne, Adam and Diana, Zachariah and Brigit had arranged to attend. Too narrow for chairs, Father had ordered several large pillows and cushions be strewn about the chamber. They would sit in the dark, to avoid attention. They would listen to selections from *Peer Gynt*, and some other Grieg. Like so much else, it promised to be a unique and lovely time.

Brigit sat fussing with her hair, liking the way Zachariah made her feel.

At some point, she knew she was simply going to have to speak with him. But every time they were alone, it turned into something else. For two people who seemed to find opportunities to make love, they did seem to have trouble finding a place alone long enough to make plans, and confessions. Brigit shrugged at that. *His family is knee deep in children, with more on the way. It's doubtful he'd look at a woman nearing thirty and expect babies. After all, he's not young.*

Comforted by that idea, she brushed her hair until it gleamed, and donned the dress she had planned to wear to the concert.

It was actually two full layers of clothing, something she felt she'd need against the chill of late September. A white chemise brushed her calves, and a jumper of golden yellow buttoned over it. Unlike the blue vest, this one required a bra, so she chose a soft beige set that actually shimmered with a bit of metallic lycra.

*It's so wonderful to be in love, and plan what I'll say to him,* she thought, eying her choice of evening wear. The buttons down the front of the dress were figural, in the shape of ivy. They ran its length. Similarly-styled earrings dangled at her ears. A suspended pearl shone at her neck, and wide bangle bracelets cuffed each wrist. Doeskin boots completed the outfit, and although the heel was not very high, it did give her a little bit of a boost. Nearly all her shoes did. She was barely five foot five, in her stocking feet. *There. That should do it,* she thought, spritzing cologne on her neck.

But even Brigit admitted that if she was lovely, Julia Blackmane was stunning. Clad in a sapphire blue sheath, the jersey material clung to her curves, and the color made her grey eyes look impossibly pale. Deep blue eyeliner accented an eye shape that was nearly cat-like,

and she had swept her hair up, rather than leaving it down, for the first time since Brigit had met her. She looked regal. Elegant. And ready to do battle with the young Elijah.

Her jewelry was nonexistent, save for pearls at her ears. Patterned stockings the same color as the dress covered her legs, and a pair of dainty black pumps encased her feet. The dress had come with an almost sheer wrap. Whatever she was about, Bridget did not doubt that she would be successful. She was painting her lips blood red. Julia was clearly in no mood to trifle.

"Elijah's a fool if he doesn't call you the most bonny lass in all New York," Brigit told the younger girl, from across the room.

"Thank you. You look beautiful, too, Brigit." Julia returned the compliment but did not take her eyes off her reflection, for long. Brigit sensed that it wasn't vanity, moving her; it was something else. Julia pulled a wisp of hair loose from her upswept style, letting it laze down over her ear. Bridget had barely seen the girl in more than jeans, since she'd been here.

"Here, now." Julia removed the necklace from around her neck. "It's sure and for certain that this would look much better on you than it does on me, tonight. See? 'Tis all but a perfect match for your earrings."

Before Julia could protest, Bridget had removed her pendant, and began settling it at Julia's throat. The blue of her dress made the pearl look even more opalescent than it already was.

"Now. The fisherman who brought this up from the sea assured me that in every catch, there is one pearl with a wish inside it. But you never know if you have the one," she instructed the younger woman.

A woman who was sorely missing her mother, right now, and for some reason, seemed to feel there was no one else she could ask for advice.

"I've never made a wish on this one, lovey. So, if you'd like to use it...." Grey eyes met blue in the mirror, and Julia held the pearl to her chest.

"Thank you so much, Brigit." Her eyes brimmed with tears. "But truth to tell you, I don't even know what I'd wish for, right now."

"You mean you don't know the part where the handsome prince falls madly in love with you? And you live happily ever after?" she chided gently. Something was wrong, here. And she had no instincts to know what it was.

"I think he's already in love with me. Or nearly. But that may be part of the problem. And I just don't know if there *is* a solution."

"Does your heart not skip a beat, then, when you look upon him? He's handsome as any angel or devil that walks, though that isn't everything."

Julia turned from the mirror to face her newfound companion. "No, it does skip a beat. But being with them, well... it's much more intense than just what *you* feel. It's so complicated, with the bond...", she let the sentence drift away.

"Part of me wants it, wants him. But the other part of me... is terrified of it."

Bridget nodded, understanding at least a little. She had observed Seth and Corinne, Adam and Diana, remembered the conversation in the pool between the women. Something... intimate occurred with the wives and their husbands. Something that was more than just sex. Bridget wondered if this was usually the case, or if it was just between



certain couples, and only some of the time. Being an outsider, she had no real way to know.

If Julia wanted to tell her, she would. A tear slid down the girl's cheek. Now Brigit felt a touch guilty. She had made her young roommate cry. *Perhaps this isna the best subject, right now. She'll find her way.*

"Damn. I'm going to need to fix my eye makeup. Thank you very much for the necklace, Brigit," Julia said sincerely. "And for listening."

"It's yours for the evening. Longer, if you need it." Brigit gave her a brief hug, careful not to mess up her hair.

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An hour later, Zachariah dressed for the evening. His mind wasn't on the buttons, hooks and snaps of his attire, but on all that had happened, in the last few days. Rooms and hallways away from Brigit, he could relive what physical intimacy had been like for him, before. It made him realize just how inadequate a thing sex had been for him, compared to what it was, now.

His partners had been varied, but his predicament usually the same. He had always had to exercise care, in his endeavors. He had used either his hand, or his sheer force of will to practice restraint. He'd found that of the positions he usually had to adopt, he favored neither, hating the more bestial one the most. It wasn't the idea of mating like an animal. It was the lack of contact with skin.

To rise up behind a woman was to be all but absent any touch, save for his genitals. Bend down, and it was the awkward three point stance, again, one hand reserved to keep them separated, enough. Laying on his back was an option, but there, too. The contact was, in its way, minimal.

*Separated.* He had grown from adolescent to man thinking that lovemaking was an act that required a certain degree of it. Sometimes a great degree of it, depending on the woman.

He'd stopped trying, with the women near where he lived. He wanted neither to be the subject of gossip, nor scorn. When travel gave him opportunity, he had taken it, and in that, his education had formed well enough. There were partners for a Shah. Fewer than for most men, of course, but still available. Helpers who knew. Women who were fascinated. He was not unschooled, even before he got out of his teens.

And now, Brigit. A woman who was indeed a woman, no trace of coltish girl or curious teen left in her. Widowed. Wise. Imaginative and loving. He was so, so glad he had waited long enough to find her. Thoughts of simply trying to “settle” had invaded his mind, of late. He had pushed them back, but they had been returning with more frequency. His age had a good bit to do with that.

*I waited for you. For us.* He was beyond happy, as he tugged on a pair of black boots that came to just over the knee.

His heart had rarely sung as it sang now, and his skin tingled, as he stood to finish buttoning his shirt. He felt sure she intended to accept him. That wasn't vanity. Simply his hunter's instinct. He knew when the prey was about to capitulate. She was. She had given him no indication otherwise, and he knew Brigit would not play games with his heart to suit some vain sense of power, within her. He settled the last button on his collar closed. He was in love. He felt as much, from her. Their bonding would be magnificent.

Pulling his formal black cape off the hook, he fastened it as he walked, no longer wanting to wait to see his love.

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Of all the children present in the tunnels, clearly Daniel Hunter was everyone's delight. The fifth child of Seth Hunter and the fiery Corinne Blade Hunter, he was a rambunctious, curious, four years old, and the only one of the children so far that resembled his leonine father.

All the children assembled took turns holding him and spoiling him, and Chloe, the child of Adam and his first wife, Celeste, was Daniel's favorite. If she ate, he ate. If she picked two cookies from the plate, so did he. If he played hide and seek, he hid with her. Or found her. Or helped her count to ten.

The adults marveled at the obvious love between the two children, who both shared a Shah father – albeit a different one of those - in common. Before too many days had gone by, Daniel had earned the nickname "Chloe's shadow."

Zach, Kipper, Samantha, and the other children of the tunnels, were fascinated by their "Little Vincent," and the stories of a young girl who'd grown up with a Shah as a father. For the tunnel children, the revelations of the last few months had been extreme, just as they had been for the adults.

Possibly one of the most fascinated was Narcissa, though she seemed to accept the addition of others like Vincent with a seeress' aplomb.

Narcissa sat in a story circle, spinning tales to all the children, Daniel and Chloe included. She told stories of a younger Vincent, of a painter's ghost named Kristopher, of an evil spirit that was once a man named John. The fancy in them was obvious. Yet as Brigit listened, she got the idea that every story was true, in some way.



The children were enraptured. Narcissa, old and mostly blind, was clearly enjoying herself. The famous Irish author sat among the children and scattered adults, to listen, in the wide, stone chamber. The room hadn't been quiet all day.

Narcissa finished with the latest story of Vincent and Catherine, dressing it up as a prince who thought there was no more of his kind, until he met another prince who assured him otherwise. Emboldened by family, the solitary prince claimed his love. And after many adventures, they were married. The children cheered, and the adults smiled. Except for some of the boys, who simply said "ew."

Jamie took over story hour, reading her favorite volume of Peter Pan. Brigit recognized the illustrator. They had been good friends, when she'd published her last book of poetry. Jamie read beautifully, and with the fighter's spirit that imbued her.

After a few chapters, Brigit excused herself to get a cup of punch, meaning to return to the circle. She loved listening to people read to each other, especially younger ones. They knew just what parts were really interesting, what to point out in the pictures, and adored anything where a villain was impaled with a sword.

"Jamie would have loved the other night," Bridget thought aloud, glancing up to where she still read. Narcissa joined her at the punch table, and took the ladle.

"That chile' got more fire in her belly than t'ree men," Narcissa agreed, filling her cup. "Your man, he drew first blood on de Dark One. That be a good t'ing. Keep him back from these chillun'."

Brigit inclined her head, liking her description of Zachariah as "her man." Ireland had its share of women similar to Narcissa in talent, and more who pretended they were. Brigit hoped she knew the difference, when she met it.

"I'm thinkin' we've not been formally introduced. I'm Brigit O'Donnell. And you are Narcissa?" She'd heard others say the black woman's name.

"Glory be, and I know who you are, chile!" Narcissa smiled a nearly toothless grin. "You the one they keep in widow's weeds, for years, now. But Him. He seeks to put you in a white veil, he does. Not a black one."

Brigit inclined her head. She did not bother to ask Narcissa how she knew what she knew, or to clarify who "He" was. Be it tunnel gossip or clairvoyance, it was all the same to her.

Narcissa's next words chilled her.

"You going to refuse him. Break his heart, you will."

Brigit was shocked. "It's sure that I have no such intention, Lady Fate." She sipped from her cup.

"Then I be wrong." Narcissa shrugged and drank, also. But Brigit definitely had the feeling that she was being humored. The two women stepped away from each other, Brigit feeling disconcerted.

Several of the concert-goers entered the story chamber. Among them was Zachariah, clearly looking for his her.

As he crossed the room to her, Brigit brushed aside Narcissa's words. *Refuse him? No. No, I mean to accept him. Always. Handsome devil. No, not devil. Handsome angel.*

Her heart skipped several beats. He was dressed all in black, for the first time, save for a white dress shirt, buttoned all the way to the top. The hood of his ebony cape was down, held by a silver chain at his throat, ready to keep them warm, should it be needed. Clearly, many of his clothes had to be tailored or hand made. He was simply too large to have it otherwise. His boots gave him a rakish, pirate air. Just over the knee, they gleamed with fresh polish. As usual, the top of his mane was held back from his face by a half braid, tied off with a scrap of black leather.

She wondered if he could wear an earring, then forgot the thought, as he smiled in her direction. The light from dozens of candles revealed the silvery highlights of his hair, and the admiration in his eyes, as he beheld her.

*Was any woman in the room lovelier?* he asked himself. He knew they weren't. Though each man, of course, had his own opinion on that.

Elijah looked similarly resplendent in black pants and a royal blue coat edged with brocade and tails. The coat nearly matched Julia's dress. Father and Peter both wore brown suits of different decades. Mary had on a grey dress, edged with her own green embroidery, and a matching shawl. Michael, the college student with one foot in two worlds, wore jeans and a tan cable knit sweater. Adam looked similarly casual, in jeans and a black fisherman's knit pullover. The

beautiful Diana glowed in a forest green suede skirt and matching jacket. They were a handsome party.

Zachariah did not simply embrace her in a courtly fashion. He set his hands around her waist and picked her up, loving the sound of her squeal as he spun her around and then put her down.

The eyes of those assembled, stared. Those who did not know of the romance blooming between them now clearly did. Those who knew Zachariah were even more stunned than those who didn't.

Seth shot Elijah a look. *This has been a long time coming.* They might as well have said it aloud, to each other.

"If my lady love would stay safe in her bower, she would get picked up at her door," Zachariah teased Brigit, planting a kiss on her forehead. He inhaled, deeply. She smelled like the heathery cologne she'd spritzed on. *Gorgeous.*

"Yes, but if I'd have stayed, I'd have missed the part where the pirates get trapped by the mermaids, and Peter finds their treasure." She nodded toward Jamie. Brigit then smiled back at Zachariah, taking in his scent in, also. *Sandalwood and amber and something spicy, beneath. Something uniquely him.*

"Enjoy de fine music." Narcissa told the assembled guests.

"You won't join us, Narcissa?" Father offered, though the tunnel space would already be a little crowded. Several of their guests were not... unlarge, to say the least.

"Oh, Father, why for I be hearing a hundred dead cats and call it music? I be making my way back home, in de morning. That Cullen he promised to bring me. Another story with the chil'ren, and I'm on my way to bed."

Brigit saw no reason to inform Narcissa that violin strings were currently made mostly of steel and nylon, not catgut.

"Good night, then, Narcissa." Father bid her. "And thank you for coming. Mary?" he offered his arm gallantly, leaning on his cane, with the other. "Ladies?" he invited, and the couples and Peter and Michael followed him along to the Concert Chamber.

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The space had been swept as clean as it could be, and pillows cast about, everywhere. There were no lanterns, here, since the light might draw the attention of some passerby, through the overhead grate. The tunnel party settled in to the small space, as the orchestra tuned up. Father's bad leg required him to use a flat boulder as a kind of chair, since getting up from the ground was difficult for him. Mary knelt near his feet, comfortable with a cushion at her bottom and back. Peter sat near her, then Michael. The chamber continued to fill. By the time Zachariah and Bridget brought up the rear of the party, space was at a premium, and they were in the back, near the room's low, round entrance. *Thank god for small favors*, Zachariah thought.

Julia and Elijah, right in front of them, took up the last "space" framed by a semicircle of rock. Zachariah settled himself outside the circle, nearly in the circular entrance they had just come through. Others scooted over, as if to make room, but Zachariah held up his hand. He was well aware of his size, and them squeezing together further would only serve to make everyone uncomfortable. Besides, from here, he could keep trouble from entering the room, if there was any. He would take no other place but the one near the doorway. It was the strategic position, the one any Protector would take.



"You may want to sit with the others; get a closer seat," he offered to Brigit, knowing she would refuse.

"I may wish to walk off the pyramids of Egypt," she said, paraphrasing Jane Eyre. "But I should doubt it, My Great Tree." Her Irish sass was still at the fore.

*Then you'll sit near me. How fine a thing that will be.*

Zachariah arranged a broad cushion so that it gave her a soft place to sit. "Lean against me," he offered, drawing her back into his arms. She relaxed there, against his chest, realizing there was no safer, stronger place in all the world.

The orchestra began to tune up, and everyone in the chamber looked heavenward. Moonlight barely touched one edge of the open metal grate. After a few moments, "In the Halls of the Mountain King" started to drift down to them, low and lovely. Brigit leaned back further into his embrace, feeling the strength of his chest, and of his very presence. She was enchanted, all over again.

While the others looked up, Zachariah kept his face turned mostly toward the tunnel from whence they had come, seeing its distant torchlight. No intruder could reach them without going through him, at least not from this direction. And considering where the light was, he would see any interloper long before it saw him. He was well placed, his woman was in his arms, and beautiful music filled his ears. He was content.

Adam Blackmane nuzzled his wife's neck, and she swatted an intrusive hand away. Elijah and Julia sat separated by inches, as if neither dared to touch the other. Mary kept herself prim, as the lady she was, and Michael sprawled casually, one arm laying across a propped-up knee, as he listened. Father kept his hands on the head of his walking stick,

clearly enjoying the evening immensely. Peter Alcott opened the collar of his dress shirt, the picture of the relaxed, elegant physician that he was. His natal examination of Corinne Hunter had gone well today. Though with this type of pregnancy, he confessed he had no idea what to look for, to indicate otherwise. Seth sat contentedly behind his pregnant wife, serving as her backrest as drew one arm across her shoulders and settled one hand protectively, on her belly.

The evening grew more chill, and the ladies drew their coats and wraps about themselves. Zachariah pulled the edge of his own black cape about his love, reveling in the feel of her pressed against him, beneath the leather trimmed wool. Head turned to one side, she had been listening to his heartbeat as much as she had been hearing the music.

*I love you, she thought. How could I not?*

*I'm so in love with you, he thought. Even if it's too fast, I am.*

For her part, Brigit reached up to caress his blonde cheek, and thought something very similar. *I never thought to find a deep love, again. It's too sudden. And I dinna care.*

He kissed her palm. And as it always seemed to do with the two them, love led to desire. Protectively wrapped inside his cape, in the dark, and with his back turned to most of the others. Bridget and Zachariah exchanged subtle and some not so subtle touches beneath his cloak. Her slim fingers dropped down, and hidden, edged in between his shirt buttons, touching his magnificent chest. He responded by cupping her breast through her clothes, at first, then actually unbuttoning her jumper, and slipping a hand inside her chemise. She did the same with him, needing to only undo two buttons of his shirt to allow her hand free reign at his chest. His nipples pebbled beneath

her touch, and he shifted uncomfortably when she drew her hand out, set her tongue to her fingertips, then returned.

In turn, he worried her bra clad breast with his thumb, brushing the nipple, softly, and repeatedly, through her chemise. Like Diana, Brigit finally had to swat his hand away, realizing they were only in for a lot of discomfort, if they continued. He smiled at her, complied, refastened her jumper, and bent his head to kiss her, deeply. Not for the first time, she felt like they were a couple of teenagers, necking, and barely out of sight of the others.

At the orchestra's intermission, the party stood to stretch. Father begged off the rest of the performance, claiming the cold was playing havoc with his knee and hip. Mary accompanied him back to the commons, over his protests. Diana also gave her regrets, needing to get back to her loft apartment above, for a case that had been bothering her, with its numerous loose ends. Michael claimed a need to study before classes the next day, and Peter Alcott was his ride, who also felt the fatigue of the wedding revels and a long day spent checking up on the tunnel inhabitants, including Corinne. Corinne mentioned a sore back, so Seth took her to their guest chamber.

By the end of the intermission, only Zachariah, Brigit, Julia and Elijah remained, and once he realized that, Zachariah clasped Brigit's hand in his, keeping her from settling back down. They both knew that with Julia still here with Elijah, their bedrooms would be empty.

Overhead, the bright September moon had shifted, and moonlight now fully bathed the crosshatched grate above them. Zachariah took the opportunity to draw Bridget into its shadow-crossed glow, kissing her full on the mouth, not caring that his brother or Julia saw. It was too perfect a moment for a kiss, and he didn't want to waste it.

He realized how beautiful that same moon would look at home, now, and wished he could kiss her on the huge wraparound porch of his chalet styled house, or make love to her under the deep alpine pitch of the roof, in front of his roaring fireplace. *I can picture you there, so easily*, he realized, as the kiss ended.

As the orchestra resumed, Zachariah bid his brother and his brother's latest obsession good evening. He tucked Bridget's hand in his as they made their way through the tunnels, back to the guest chambers.

Hers were closer. As they went inside, Brigit prayed that the dropped tapestry meant to Julia what it seemed to mean in the tunnels, generally.

"I am wanting you, Beloved. Now," she said, clearly as eager for him as he was for her.

"Are you, now?" he asked, his voice a deep, sexy rumble of sound.

"Aye. From since when the music started. Before e'en that, more than likely."

He took each of her hands in his, and kissed each back, in turn. "Come and get me, then," he urged, settling her palms against his shirtfront.

She knew she was aroused, thanks to his teasing at the concert. And this time, she wanted to love and tease his chest as he had teased hers; wanted to kiss the fine hairs on his body. She tugged at the shirt buttons, unbuttoning them as he nuzzled her ear.

"Your hands... like magic on my skin," he purred, as her fingers moved across the broad expanse of muscle, going unerringly for his nipples.

"Ahhhh," the sound escaped him, as she caressed him in a place that seemed almost as sensitive on him as it was on her.

Nudging her backward, he moved her until the back of her legs hit her mattress. He bid her sit down.

He tugged off her boots while she sat on the bed, and tossed them wherever. She pulled his shirt wide, and pushed it down his arms, impatiently. *Ah. There.* His chest. Her plaything.

She had seen it in the pool, of course, and she'd sensed the godawful power of it when he'd thrown the iron bar and stuck it in the wall. Now it was there, warm, and under her hands, no longer hidden by clothing, or cooled by water. The silvery hair slid silkily beneath her fingers. She brushed the soft discs of his breasts, watching the peach circles pucker, and want.

He opened her dress and growled in frustration at her chemise. "You wear too many clothes," he complained, easing the beautiful gold jumper off her shoulders.

"So do you." She stood, setting the jumper to the side, watching as he removed his boots. Yes. She wanted him naked. Unrestrained. Inside her. She lifted her chemise to take it over her head, as he began to undo his belt buckle. As she set the satiny fabric to one side, he forgot to breathe. Again.

*Sweet unrelenting and merciful heaven.*

She all but bared herself to him, and he froze. Shimmery, golden lingerie cupped her breasts and her sex, framing her dark nether curls. He could almost see through the lace band that held the triangular front snug against her genitals. Her ample breasts filled the cups of her lace-topped bra, making her waist look impossibly small. Her navel dipped enticingly, begging for a kiss. She still wore her jewelry. And her perfume.

Bridget watched his eyes, taking his rapt expression for one of approval.

"Was it almost too long to wait?" she asked him.

"Even the concert felt too long. And it was years, before that." His voice had a raspy edge, as he answered her honestly.

She sat on the edge of her bed, again, enjoying the amazing vision before her. His skin looked nearly tanned, the gold and lightly silver hair on his body laying like shimmer and stardust, spun out on his skin. A soft mat of body hair arrowed down below his waistband.

She realized she had felt his sex several times, and intimately, and she had seen him flaccid. But this was the first time she would ever see him fully aroused.

He had not moved to continue undressing, however. He simply stared at her. "By my soul, you are the word, 'beautiful,' my lady," he told her humbly.

"Will you let me see you? Again?" she breathed, suddenly feeling as if she had undressed too quickly. He was still half covered, compared to her nearly nude state.

"Of course." He finished undoing his belt, standing before her in bare feet. The buckle of the belt jangled as he unhooked his slacks. The rasp of the zipper was a fascinating sound, to her. With not an ounce of body fat apparent on him, he undid his pants, and simply let them drop to the carpet. He stepped out of them, then kicked them aside. *His lady wanted to see him. His lady would be obeyed.*

Planting his feet, he let her take in the view. He knew he was a fine specimen of a being. Neither entering his prime or past it, he was in

full possession of his power. Power he would use to please her, all he could, tonight.

*We are finally going to take our time with each other.* They both knew it, and thought it at almost the same moment. The knowledge caused his penis to jump, and her tongue to unconsciously touch the tip of her upper lip.

He turned his palms toward her, hands up, waiting for her to give him permission to move. His penis was erect, and impressive, as she knew it would be. Some of the hair that embraced it was a soft tan color, the darkest hair on his body. His thighs and calves were covered in silvery silk floss, spread almost evenly down his legs, delineating every muscle there. He was a vision she had never dreamt of.

"Would you like me to turn around?" he asked.

Her blue eyes met his green ones, naked with wanting. "No." The word came out hoarsely, and with no strength. Swallowing, she tried again. "No, ... I would like you to kiss me."

He crossed to her and leaned down, needing to be on one knee so his head would be even with hers. Green eyes searched her fair face. He cupped her jaw and brushed her bangs back.

"I am yours to command," he whispered, right before his strange, beautiful mouth met hers. Heat arced between them, and his fingers never lost contact with her skin, as they trailed down. His hands settled on either side of her lithe body, as his thumbs explored her lingerie-clad breasts as he had before, during the concert. Eyes closed, now, the feel of the lace against his hands was familiar, as it had been in the dark.

Her reaction was familiar, as well. Her body rose on a sigh, as his lips left hers. He dropped his head and kissed her breasts through the

lace, worrying the straps with his teeth. He loved her lush curves, wanted to see them as he had done a thousand years ago/a few hours ago this afternoon, at the hot springs, when they had moved in the water while he had pleased her with all he was.

*I want to know every inch of you, my beautiful lady.* He was suddenly impatient with the lovely bit of lingerie that prevented him from seeing her, and he reached around her back to unhook it. Her ripe curves all but fell into his hands.

When her chest was bare, he cupped the weight of her, there, marveling at the soft filling of his palm. The pale pink sight of her nipples never failed to make him moan, and he did so again, an instant before he took her softly into his mouth. She sighed and arched her back, trying to bring herself more fully against his questing tongue. She held the back of his head, murmuring, making sounds more than words; telling of love more than want. She felt awake after a long sleep. She felt desired.

“Mo ghra” she moaned, in her native language. Zachariah knew he’d just been called “my lover.” “Crann mo’r,” she breathed. “Great Tree.”

Sensing what she wanted more than hearing it, he hooked his claws into the elastic of her panties, then eased them down over her thighs. They were sticky, at the apex. He knew they would be. He’d held her scent in his nostrils since the opening movement of *Peer Gynt*.

He lifted her ankles to remove the scraps of lace that had kept his eyes from taking in her sex. Like her, he felt he needed to see her, to stamp the naked sight of her on his memory.

She sat on the edge of the bed, her hands gripping the mattress, the pair of golden bangle bracelets at her wrist. She still wore her earrings, the leaves that had matched her beautiful, now-crumpled



dress. Her pupils were dilated, and she smelled of dusky heather and arousal. Dark, wispy bangs ruffled softly across her forehead, and a lock of her hair lay over her left shoulder, stopping just at the nipple of her breast. The sweet dark place of curls and secrets that was her sex was wet with enticement.

“You are the most... beautiful thing I have ever seen,” he vowed, feeling that the word “beautiful” was utterly inadequate.

He wanted to dip his nose and scent her where the smell was strongest, aware that the action would harden his sex like nothing else could. He wanted to hold her in his mouth and feel the trembling of her desire, beneath his tongue. *Yes. Oh, yes.* She looked like a goddess, awaiting a sacrifice. He didn’t want to remove her bracelets. He wanted to remember that she had made love to him with them on, a fitting symbol of her royalty, while he was down on one knee utterly naked, before her.

He would be her penitent, this night. The instinct was too strong to be denied.

*After all, you only saved my life.*

Keeping a bit away from her, he went to both knees, then his haunches, reaching to pick up her foot and place a gentle kiss on her pedicured toes. He slid his mouth up her foot, to her ankle, where he let his tongue explore its rise and dip. She shivered, and her eyes stared at him, in wonder. He slid his mouth up to her knees, stopping long enough to kiss first the right one, then the left. Opening her thighs with his clawed hands, he planted kisses up each side of the pale expanse of her thighs, feeling her jump with anticipation, as he neared his prize.

"Do you want to know what I want?" he drew her knees over his shoulders, stroking the skin of her thighs with his palms, up and down, lovingly. His eyes gleamed mischief and desire.

She could only stare.

"This." It was the only word of warning he gave before he slid his hands around and lifted her by the buttocks, then placed her sex into his open mouth.

Brigit screamed as he rocked her back and forth with his hands, feeling her feet kick against the muscles of his back, in reaction. *Silly butterfly. Didn't she know she couldn't hurt him?*

Holding herself up on her elbows, he let her lower herself to the mattress, following her down, worrying the folds of her labia with his lips. He heard the bracelets jangle as she buried her hands in his hair, urging him. As his tongue petted her open place, her fingers unclenched, splaying wide. She simply could not believe all she was feeling.

The bond tingled, at the base of his skull. *Not yet. Not yet. Not this time. Not until she knows.* He pushed the urge away. Then indulged in every other urge he was having.

He scented her, lapped her, drank her. Literally took into his mouth and swallowed what he drew forth from her body. *You are exquisite.*

She was warm butter, here, with a touch of salt and some other taste, something undeniably female. He knew she would always taste like this, at this time of her monthly cycle, and he allowed the flavor to seep into his brain, marking it. She was his. He needed to know everything about her.

For Brigit, the intimacy of the act was overwhelming. He was holding her legs apart, gently drinking from her. The motions were unmistakable. His tongue returned again, and again, to her opening.

*"A cat tasting cream."* The line came to her consciousness. She knew she would never again think of that tame image without feeling the far more sensual one.

She ran her hands up her own body, cupping her breasts for the comfort of trying to hold herself still. No man had ever kissed her in this nether place. And even if one had, she sincerely doubted if he would do so with this level of intimacy.

It frustrated her that she couldn't come, with her legs over his shoulders, this way. Desire was there, but it would not peak. She began to arch away from him, seeking some form of release.

His eyes looked up her fair body to see her hands cupping her breasts. *Ohhhh, that is a sight.* He wanted to hold that picture in his memory, a hundred years at least.

He felt her squirm against him, then away, without purpose or direction. *Was it possible no one had loved her this way, before?* His eyes grew positively predatory, at the thought. Oh, the rest of the male world was making this so easy for him.

"Shhhhh." He kissed the inside of her thighs, aware he was wetting those thighs with the juices that were now on his chin.

"Let me play. Let me please you." It was both a command and a plea.

He drew her legs down off his shoulders, and moved her so she could lay them on the bed, allowing them to stretch out flat, but still with him between them. He drew her knees together, a little. The tip of her mount now pointed upward, rather than down.

Nestling his tongue back between her nether lips, he returned to her opening, but this time moved upward, rather than down, all along the wet, pink length of her.

She cried out and slammed her hands into the mattress on either side of her, arching her back and her sex into his mouth, again. He took his tongue away, back to her opening, and made the journey a second time. This time, when he reached her heavily engorged clitoris, her hand held his head there, firmly, and none too gently, twining her fingers into the weave of his braid. He smiled as he lifted his tongue away again, then returned it to exactly the spot she wanted. They were learning each other. He felt powerful.

As he slid his great hands up her torso, she felt dwarfed by them. One broad, flat palm cupped her breast, while one warmed her stomach. His mouth no longer moved away from her clitoris, and his tongue again began the lapping motions he had tattooed on her opening.

"Mmm," she could not speak as she moved instinctively up the bed, needing her legs to extend. He followed her, letting her move herself as she needed. When she settled back again, she knew he would return to the devastating caresses. She pulled a pillow down, so she could scream into it, when the time came. Ladies were not... so loud. Even rebel ones.

"No fair." He tugged it away, gently. She was so close to the edge she was unable to argue.

"How will I know I am pleasing you if I can't hear you, Beauty?" His voice was seduction itself. "The sounds you make, the desire that is shaking you... that is my pay."

She looked down. His mouth and chin were wet from her. Her. She could smell herself, there. *You're not real. But you are.* Her lover was exquisite beyond words.

"Please." She begged the word, her legs now closer together, the raw knot of nerve endings all but screaming.

She watched his eyes leave her face to travel to her sex. Saw the pupils dilate and his nostrils flare, briefly. Watched him take in the sight of her feminine arousal. The deeply pinked flesh, the creamy liquid that covered her curls and her sex.

"Of course." he answered, dipping his head one last time.

The shock of it was like he had never touched her there, all night, but of course the shock of it was precisely because he had been touching her there. Spreading her labia open with his fingers, her clitoris throbbed under his tongue. He drew her legs closer together still, so that his chest was laying across her barely opened knees. *So sweet. So hot.* He knew she was going to come, very hard. He passed his tongue unchangingly across the knot of nerves and juices at her apex. Her thighs tightened, and her fingers left his hair and locked in the bedding near his head.

She screamed when the firebolt ripped through her skin. He took it as his payment, as he said he would, and considered himself well remunerated. If anyone heard her and interrupted him, he would kill them. Probably. That was that.

She trembled and he knew what she needed. Knew his mouth was now too sensitive a thing for her abraded flesh. He lifted his head and cupped her with his hand, pushing gently. Her shoulders lifted off the mattress as another shockwave hit her.

*Good. So good. Like that? Like that, my love?* He put one hand behind her back, pulling her to him. "More?" he asked. "Do you have more for me, Brigit?"

She nodded, and he pressed her there, again. She arched against him, and shook.

"Yesss," he encouraged her. "So sweet. So amazing. Let it happen, love. I want to feel them." She trembled again, less intensely this time, but still in wonder, and then once more, lightly. Aftershock echoes. She drew up her knees and placed her palm over his, holding him against her. She had never ...

She lay tucked against his chest, trembling. *That was... I've never.* Every part of her sex was quivering. It took her a long time to catch her breath, to return to earth. At no point was he demanding of her body. He simply stroked her from shoulder to hip gently, helping her to quiet, helping her to calm.

She did not want to quiet. And she definitely did not want "calm." She wanted him as quiveringly explosive as he'd made her. He was half on the bed, there being simply no way he could fit his long length upon it, even if she had not been in it, much less if she was. She nuzzled his neck, mewling her appreciation. She looked down between them, to where he barely lay on his side in her bed. She touched her fingers to her drenched sex, drawing out the earthy, viscous liquid.

His eyes narrowed, fascinated, as she carried it to his now semi-erect sex, painting him with the results of his labors.

He drew in his breath, caught it, and held. Her hand returned to the area between her legs, drawing up another palm full of her wetness. She covered his penis with it, this time, tracing slowly up around the

tumescent head, running her slick thumb down the ridged channel of nerves at his underside.

Now it was his turn to moan.

"This morning you liked it when I..." she returned to carry her wetness to his sex, but this time slipped her fingers between his legs to brush gently along his scrotum. She felt bold, and set her middle finger to rub the area between his sac and his anus. He moaned, nodding, drawing her hand back up to squeeze his sex. Her fingers were so long. He pictured them as he had first seen them, embracing the cover of a book while she read. Now she was embracing him. Slight. Strong. Always running her thumb along the underside, simply because she could feel how it drove him insane.

He'd been prepared to simply tuck her in and wrap himself around her, so ferocious was the orgasm, the orgasms, he had given her. But now, she was teasingly brushing the top of his penis with the tips of her delicate fingers, and he was about to lose his mind.

Sitting up, she knew their options in the bed were few. She swung her legs off the bed, and grabbed the pillow, setting it down at her feet, holding it there. "For your knees?" she asked him, nudging him back off the bed and over to where she sat, waiting. She put the other two pillows beneath her bottom, trying to make herself a little taller, to match his height. Even on his knees, he was tall.

She should not have worried. The bed frame was of the old-fashioned variety, higher than most, all to accommodate space under the bed, for storage. His eyes glittered as he realized that from his knees, he fit her here, perfectly. She continued to stroke his penis until he took her hand away, then planted a kiss in her palm.

"It will be over too soon, Colleen. Alderlevest," he said, using the word she'd seen in his book of Chaucer. *Best beloved. You just called me "best beloved," in a language no one even uses, anymore. I love you.*

She grabbed the towel from the wash basin beside her night stand and folded it on top of the pillow she was sitting on. "You make me so wet," she complimented him unselfconsciously, earning herself an earthshaking kiss for openly acknowledging his prowess.

He rose up on his knees before her, and this time it was she who teased. Sitting back from the edge of the bed, she spread her palms flat against his chest, as she had done this morning, in the water. Licking her lips, she bent to where his soft, peach-to-tan nipples beckoned her mouth. He planted his hand at the back of her head, holding her there.

"You can't. Not right now. You can't tease me," he whispered, his voice rough with need. He felt her smile against his skin.

"Says he who drove me mad for an hour," she chided him. "You'll suffer me to play just a little, will you not, Magic One? She bent her mouth to the other nipple, this time taking it hard, and open mouthed. She felt the muscles of his chest bunch beneath the onslaught, and kept her tongue flat, against his skin. For all the difference in their sizes, his tongue was slightly narrow, compared to hers. He felt a wide ribbon of wet heat arc across his torso.

With no patience whatsoever, he grasped her knees and pulled her forward, brushing her wet curls against the tip of his sex

"I can't." He was already beginning the thrusting motion of his hips, instinctively. "I can't, I can't. Forgive me, Beloved. I need you too much, too badly to let you play. I've been waiting...."

She brought her head up. "Since the concert. I know, lover."



"Since so much longer than that... Ah!" he slipped the steel and satin head of him into her.

He looked down between them, aware he was going to get to bury all of himself completely inside her, with no restraint.

"You can't know what this feels like, for me...", he whispered, easing his way into her treasure, unimpeded. "You just can't know."

He moved to the hilt. To the base and just a fraction beyond. She adjusted her hips, leaned back and watched the beatific expression on his face as he enjoyed himself, inside her. No oil this time. No water to go where it wasn't supposed to. Just him. Just her. He began to stroke rhythmically, inside, still astonished to not feel his own hand at the base of his penis, blocking his full penetration. The breadth of her hips pleased him, with its feminine curve. Like a violin, she was. A beautiful contrapposto curve with a place meant just for him. She dropped her head back and simply enjoyed him. He was amazing.

He opened his eyes to hazard a glance, and all was lost. With each forward stroke, her breasts moved. With each backward stroke her hips moved, her feet planted against the bottom of the bed frame. Then they pushed up to meet him and the impact caused his body to drive into hers.

The movement of her breasts had him clawing for some kind of purchase, some kind of way to slow down. Then she opened her eyes and he saw her expression, nearly as predatory as his had been. Her blue eyes glimmered with feminine knowledge, and its attendant power. She knew exactly what she was doing.

She slid her hands under her own buttocks, offering herself to him just a little higher. The motion made the underside of his penis stroke hard, into her wet, open sex. She didn't have to ask him to go harder.

He couldn't have avoided it. The action made her breasts move even more, and she pushed against him with both her feet against the bed and her palms at her buttocks. He looked down between them, just trying to look away from the image that was sending him headlong toward the cliff, only to see the sight of him driving in and out of her. Driving deep. Driving fully.

He clenched his eyes shut. He was doomed. She knew what he needed. Her. Beautiful her. He needed to feel her come. It would be so easy, now. Too easy, what had always been at least somewhat difficult, before. She instinctively began to pant, more rhythmically than the harsh gasps that were coming from him. Her thrusts against him became more vigorous, more demanding. His to her, sharper, more intense. If the first time had been all but solely for her, this would be so much more, for him. She willed him to open his eyes for just a moment, knowing he would keep the image of her in his brain, forever.

She squeezed, and he held his torso bow string taut. She put her legs around him, pulling him into her, making it all but impossible for him to escape. Another new sensation for him. No woman had ever drawn him in with her legs. The instant her wetness exploded all down him, his exploded up inside her. She welcomed his weight on top of her wrapping her arms around his back as he drove into her, again, and again, loving the feel of her, loving the heart of her, loving the spasms that shook his body without care. The bond licked at his brain, reaching out. He pushed it away.

*No. But soon. Soon, he promised it, spasming one last time. The rush of wetness she released every time she gripped him hard ran down his thighs. Never. Never had it been like this. I love you, Brigit. I love you.*



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## Chapter 7

### *The Scar From Long Ago*



He wanted to lay in bed with her, but the single bed was far too small. He wanted to pull her to the floor with him, but it was cold and hard. *Damn.* He missed his bed, back home. Could not wait to get her into it. Pulling the sheets, blankets, her, and everything else off the bed, he bore her to the floor in one smooth motion. He moved the pillow out from between his knees, flipped it over on its clean side, and set it under her head. It would have to do. He was too replete for much else, at the moment.

Long moments passed, and the stone room grew cool. They hadn't noticed it before, but there was no fire in the brazier that sat tucked against one wall, to keep the chill at bay. He growled a resistance to

the idea of moving, then got up and set a match to the kindling there. She was treated to the full glory of his back, and his behind.

She wasn't positive if his hair had ever been cut, at least not seriously. His braid, now at least somewhat mussed from having had her fingers in it, fell to his shoulder blades, the rest of his mane of hair, long and loose around him, to well past there. A thin line of nearly all white hair marked what little she could see of his spine. *He has a mane, of sorts*, she realized, or at least a marking of one. She itched to draw it, or describe it to someone who could. She suddenly found herself ridiculously envious, and wished she was similarly marked, now that they had made love.

She decided it was time to show him. *One good back deserved another. Or a bad one.*

It was not a thing she had meant to keep hidden. But in all their times together she realized he had never had occasion to see her bare back, or more specifically, the area on her hip that had been dominating her thoughts. She pulled the sheet up protectively a moment, while he returned to the tangle of bedclothes on the floor.

"Cold, my heart? Surely not shy, not now." He reached to pull the heavier quilt across her supple frame.

"No, my Tree. Beloved." She put her hand on his, to stay the motion of covering her. She felt ridiculously nervous. *I should have found a way to do this, before.* "Something I must show you. I only hope it doesn't..."

She looked at him, a touch of pleading in her eyes, and then away. She was nervous. He could feel it, and see it, in the way her eyes darted, a little. *Something about her body. What in the world?*

She turned her back to him, the sheet wrapped around her, and for a ridiculous moment, he thought she was going to show him a tattoo. Something he hadn't noticed before because it was on her back, somewhere, and he hated to take a woman from behind, so he had refused to move her that way. That was his old way of copulation. The easier one, for how things had had to be, so he committed no injury. He discovered his distaste for the position as soon as he realized he did not have to mount a woman that way, any more, like a dog, or a horse, or a bull. Like livestock. He could love her like a man, with no awkward hand bracing his erection from injuring her. He adored it.

So, he expected a tattoo. Something of Ian, or her father, Sean, or 300 Days, or some such bit of permanence she had committed, which she now regretted, or even didn't regret, just wanted him to see. He did not care. She could have it removed, if she wanted, or keep it. He felt no competition from a dead man. Or any living, for that matter.

She let the sheet fall low, and he saw only the cream of her back, and the ink of her auburn hair, looking impossibly dark against her fair skin. She was so lovely.

She turned her head, just a little. "The night they killed Ian, it was with a car bomb. I had kissed him goodbye at the door, and stood on the stoop. I turned to go in, when it exploded. The door saved me from most of the blast, really. But not all of it."

The sheet dropped as far as it would go. She looked over her right shoulder, not able to see what she knew was there.

A long, uneven scar made its way across the right side of her back. It was old, so it was barely pink. It had been sutured shut, the ridge still apparent. It was a meandering line.

Zachariah took it in. "You do not think I would love you less for this mark on your skin?" he questioned, placing his hand over the offended tissue. "All warriors have scars." Hair covered a few of his. Then: "No one should have ever done this to you."

"I agree." Her voice was steady. "It's part of why I wrote 300 Days." She pulled the sheet back up.

"When Ian was killed, the papers only said that he was dead and I was injured, but it wasn't life threatening." She shrugged, and turned herself around, some.

"'Twas was so strange. When first it happened, the door just... like it slammed in on me," she said, recounting the night her husband had been killed. He nodded, in understanding.

"It was like the wind had pushed it shut, but the noise and the smell... I knew 'twas not the wind." She hung her head a little. "I didna even realize I was hit, at first. I felt...like a sting, and it was hot, and then wet from me blood. I was knocked down, in the hall. I tried to get up, but Siobhan kept telling me to stay down, crying. I suppose I passed out."

He nodded, willing himself to stay still. If this was a story she felt she had to share with him, then so it must be.

*Did you think I would not want you with me because your life could be a dangerous one?* Nothing could be further from the truth. It made him feel like he wanted her bonded to him that much sooner, and more tightly.

Bonded, and in North Edge, where he could keep her safe.

"The door. Oh, you should have seen it. Bitten into, in three dozen places. Half the windows of the building blown in. Metal sticking

through the wood of the door and the frame. Melted plastic. Glass. There is so much metal in a car...." She let her voice drift, full of sad memories. Then, she sighed.

"They removed the piece that caught me, of course." Her eyes met his, full of sorrow. Then: "I canna have children, Zachariah."

The floor fell away from him. For a moment, there simply wasn't one. He was floating, then he was caught, and falling, but there was no end to it. He pulled her toward him, tears in his eyes.

"My poor Colleen." He drew her against his chest, reeling. Purchase. He was scrambling for it. He needed a moment to think.

"I know you're, well, not old, but older, and with all the other children in your life... we can help raise them, or adopt somehow, if you want... maybe." She was unsure of what to say, of what would help. And she was struggling to offer a "solution," if this was a problem.

"Yes. That would be fine." He bid one dream of his life goodbye, and clung to the other. *I will not lose you over this. This, or any other reason.*

He felt her sorrow, and took it into his large frame. Felt her relief at his words, and kissed the top of her tousled head. This was going to take a lot of explaining, to his family.

"One of me ovaries is gone, and there is damage to my womb, and scarring to the other tube. Half the doctors say I'll never get pregnant, the other say if I do, I probably won't carry it to term." She shrugged, then looked up at him.

"If this is important to you, you must tell me now." She begged him with her eyes not to put her away from him. "I wasna trying to keep it

a secret on purpose. It's just that... well, things have moved so fast, between us, and any private time we've had ..."

"I've been making love to you. It isn't important, Brigit," he lied. Though he didn't. At least he didn't feel as if he were lying.

Relieved, she kissed him, and retrieved her chemise. "I'd best put the room back in a little bit of order, at least."

He let her rise, unimpeded. "That might be wise." His uncanny eyes glanced toward the door. "I do believe Julia is returning. Though I don't hear Elijah with her." Zachariah managed to hastily put on his pants and don his shirt by the time Julia reached the doorway.

She stood outside, clearly not sure what to do. The tapestry was still closed. He'd pulled on his boots by the time Bridget crossed to open the entrance for her roommate. Julia's tear-streaked face told them both that things had not gone well, between her and Elijah.

Zachariah finished buttoning his shirt. "I probably have a brother to attend to." He eyed Julia, knowing trouble was brewing. Or already brewed. The curse of Celeste Blackmane continued. He hastily tugged on his cape.

"It's me who'll be taking care of this one." Brigit gave him a relieved smile and pushed him toward the doorway. "Go and see to your brother. Tell him there is always hope." She gave him a quick kiss on the lips, and shooed him along.

*Always hope.* Zachariah realized how true and not true that was, as he strode down the tunnel hall.

*For some things, perhaps. But not for others.*





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## *Chapter Eight*

### *A Sudden and Terrible Understanding*



"And what's this, then?" Brigit pulled a wash cloth from Julia's side of the basin and ran water over it, from the blue pitcher they shared.

"Lover's quarrel? And here Elijah was, not striking me like an unreasonable man."

Julia shook her head. "He doesn't know. Not really. He never lived it. Not the way I did." She wiped her eyes, grateful for Brigit's ministrations.

"Is it so wrong to want to wait before you have children? To maybe never marry, at all, Brigit?" she asked, taking the cloth from her.

"If that's what you're wanting for your life, Pretty, of course you can have it. Elijah is all of twenty something! Surely he'll wait a bit?"

Julia shook her head. "That's just it. For him, it's not about 'time.' It's about the bond. Their kind doesn't have affairs. It's... so much more intense with one of them. Once the bond starts, it's there for forever.

And I'm not Corinne. I don't live in a logging camp, whelping children, praying the next one is a Shah so they don't all die out."

Julia put her head in her hands. "God, that was such an ugly thing to say. I don't mean that." She did not see Brigit's eyes fly upward, realization dawning, swift and terrible, at her words.

*"Praying the next one is a Shah, so they don't all die out."*

With so many children running around the tunnels, Hunter and Blackmane and tunnel children alike, it struck Brigit just then, and only then, that Daniel Hunter was the only "next generation" Shah child she had seen. She had simply assumed there must be others, somewhere....

"And then he says we can live in Canada. Or Montana. Or some other place where there are no people for miles. But what if I want to see Paris? Or Vienna or ... my Mom wanted to hold her grandchild in her arms, before she died, and I couldn't bring myself to try and get married to some guy and make it work, then! What am I supposed to do, *now*?"

Brigit's mind was flying. *Seth Hunter's children. A human daughter, a human son, twin little girls, and Daniel.* And of course, Corinne was pregnant again, a thing which seemed to happen once every few years. She had already said she was hoping so much for another Shah child. *Which was to say she hoped for a boy. A Shah boy.*

*The Blackmane children. Julia, Michael and Chloe. One male, two females, no Shah.*

Having never met such an amazing man before Vincent, and now suddenly finding herself among a society of them, well, the four Shah still here seemed to fill any room, with their presence. Brigit had gotten the impression there were many more of these secret

creatures, somewhere, that children like Daniel were... well, at least that there was more than one.

"Julia. How many men like Elijah and Zachariah are there? Like Vincent and Adam?"

Julia shook her head. "That's the thing. Nobody knows for sure. But it seems damn hard to make one, and their numbers are dropping. Ramona is considered a marvel, having borne three Shah out of her five children. I guess it helped that she had all boys." She sniffed. "I only spent time with these, though my father says there are some more, in the Dakotas. But they're struggling. Bad. A father and a son. But the son is childless. The Shah... they're all so ... solitary, because of what they are. Even Adam, my father, has only a sister, and of course she's human. So if Diana doesn't conceive a Shah son, his Shah line will die with him."

Brigit sat down, hard. "That would be a shame." She knew she was expected to say something supportive, as her world collapsed around her.

*His Shah line will die with him.*

Julia held the soothing cloth to her hot face, and tried to compose herself. "They are wonderful fathers, Brigit. Wonderful husbands. But the empathy caused by the bond can be...terrible, at times. It tore my father apart, once my mother fell out of love with him. It would be bad enough to have to get a divorce from anyone. But from one of them?" She set down the cloth and rubbed her forehead. She had a headache. And was unaware that across from her, Brigit was putting two and two together, herself.

Things that had looked like separate pieces of a puzzle began to fall into place, for Brigit. Even the slight tingling she had felt at her

temple, when she and Zachariah had made love. *Something there, for a moment, then not.* Something she'd had a distinct feeling about, for a moment, then forgot.

*Other things to think about at the time, don't you know.*

"The girls all become empaths, to one degree or another. That's the thing. I dread that, Bridget. I don't *want* to know what he's feeling, all the time. I don't want to know what *anyone* is feeling, all the time. And marriage to a Shah? What kind of disaster would that be?"

*An amazing one,* Brigit's mind answered. *And one I'll never know.*

But aloud she said, "Your heart will tell you the right thing, Julia." It was trite and unhelpful. And as she gathered the disaster of her bedding from the floor, she didn't care.

"Oh Lord. I'm so sorry." It was as if Julia was taking in the messed-up bedclothes for the first time. "At least things are going better for you than they are for me and Elijah."

*Yes. So much better. So much better I'm going to have to make sure I never see him again, after tomorrow.*

"It doesn't matter," Brigit said quietly, blowing out the lantern. The room was dark except for the lick of kindling from the brazier, the fire Zachariah had started for her.

Julia, exhausted, undressed and went to bed.

Brigit lay on her haphazard bed, her back to her roommate, staring into the darkness, letting silent tears fall. She wasn't sure if sleep ever really came. Several hours later, the sound of tapping in the tunnels told her the day was about to begin.

Brigit arose, wearily. She had a heart to break. Or two.



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## Chapter Nine

### *Heartbreak*

"And I am supposed to simply accept that?" Zachariah asked angrily. "That you are returning Above, that we will see each other no more? So I can go make babies with someone else? You are mad, Brigit, if you think that this is the way things will be."

He was separated from her by the space of a common room. His arms crossed his chest, defiantly. "You told me about it last night. I said it doesn't matter. That's that," he finished, with an air of finality.

"Oh, as if it's *you* who's going to tell *me* the way of it." Brigit begged for his understanding. *Don't you see how hard this is for me?* "One day, when you're bouncing a fine son on your knee, you'll see that..."

"Let's get him a unicorn, too, Brigit. Or a pet griffin, since we're basing my life on one of your fantasies."

"Zachariah." Her voice was exasperated.

*Fine.* Exasperated he could deal with. "Brigit," he returned, aware that the reply sounded sophomoric. He had no idea what else to say.

"I hope we can be friends. I would hate to lose you completely. But you must find a wife to have children with. I canna do that. That is painful, for me, in a way it never was, before. Please respect my wishes, Zachariah."

Finality. He heard it in her voice. That he could not argue with.

"We will not be friends, Brigit."

That stung. Even as she realized it was probably for the best, considering how in love with him she was.

"As you wish," she replied, as evenly as she could.

He uncrossed his arms and swept a huge hand, before him. "How shall I introduce you to the future, nebulous Shahnna? 'Dear, this is the woman I love more than my life, but I picked you because she wouldn't have me. You never got hit by a car bomb. You win.'"

"You stubborn tree!"

"Oh, and my personal favorite, "When Brigit leaves we can screw some more. Because you know what a joy that is." His low voice dripped sarcasm.

"Zachariah!" Her voice kicked up a full octave.

"Brigit. I am here when you come to your senses. If you never do...." he let the sentence hang. "And I am going to throttle Julia Blackmane," he swore.

"This isna her fault. It isn't anyone's fault, though I should have said something sooner. And you were probably going to have a conversation with me about some sort of bond." She looked down. "That doesna have to happen, at least."

He turned from where she stood, about to swear. Something short, sharp, and satisfying. He could *feel* her being stubborn. He could feel her withdrawing. He could feel ... *wait*.

*Something was very wrong. Not with her. But just outside the room.*

He moved for the doorway a moment before he saw Corinne, as she began to enter. She leaned on the stones. She looked white. She smelled like ... *No. Oh, no.*

"Zachariah?" Her voice sounded frightened. And not of him, obviously. She raised her hand. Her fingertips were stained red. She smelled like blood. Faintly.

"Have you... have you seen Seth, this morning?"

*Oh, my God. She's having a miscarriage.*

Zachariah swept her into his arms and moved through the tunnels, making for Jacob Wells' hospital chamber as close to running as he dared, with his precious load. Brigit followed close behind, barely able to keep up.

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Roberta and Ben Hunter stayed with the younger Hunter children, keeping them away from what was happening with their mother. Almost everyone else waited in the hospital's antechamber. It was one of those times when the men paced and the women worried, but mostly sat still.

Seth was beside himself, as he held his weeping wife, as she tried to be brave

Father was moving his stethoscope across Corinne's swollen belly. Corinne wanted her husband near, and at the same time, dreaded having him in the room if she was about to lose their unborn child.

"I should have known something was wrong. I *hate* that there is no bond with you during pregnancy," Seth swore, as he held his wife's hand.

"No. No, don't say that!" Corinne cried. "If you don't have a bond with me, then you have one with the baby. That means it's still alive. It's still alive, Seth." Corinne sobbed.

It was. Seth could still feel the tiny life inside of her. Still there. Still... ending? It seemed like Jacob and Mary kept checking her, kept taking away blood-spotted rags. Seth was finally removed from the room as Peter Alcott entered, carrying a machine and a huge battery. They needed room to set it up. Seth had to go.

Brigit knew the brave red-headed mother of five, *six, no there were six, counting this baby*, struggled to hold on to hope, as her husband emerged from the room, and simply shook his head. His message was clear.

*I don't know. I don't know anything, right now.*

And so they all waited, separated by a chamber entrance covered by a white sheet.

Elijah held Julia to him as she wept, softly. Silent tears tracked down his cheeks, as well. Adam held on to Diana, who wasn't sure if Chloe should be there, considering that she was a young teenager. Adam had told her it would be all right. "She wants to help. We all do," he explained simply.

Zachariah paced, as did Seth. Then, the Protector held the Nomad's shoulders, as Seth's pain raged. "God, I couldn't even feel her. She woke up in trouble, and I wasn't there."

"You were close. You were near. You were feeding the children, while she slept. None of this is your fault, Seth," Zachariah murmured.

Seth shook his brother's hands off. "I should have been there. Right there. She had to come looking for help."



"Help which she is getting, now."

Seth paced a moment more. "Oh, Lord. This is one of those times I want to be on my knees, making deals with God." Seth sank to them, because it was easier than standing. Bridget realized how impotent men felt, at times like this.

He clasped his clawed hands together. "Please. Don't take my wife. on't take my baby." It was the prayer of every father outside a delivery room, when things were going badly.

Zachariah stepped behind his brother, and settled his hands on Seth's slumping shoulders. "Do you still feel him, Seth? Still feel your child?" Zachariah dreaded the question.

Seth searched. "Yes. He's there. So small. Too new. But there."

Zachariah squeezed Seth's shoulders in a massaging motion. "Hold on to that, Seth Night Hunter. You hold on to that. Let him feel you. Let him know he is loved."

*Him. Not her, Brigit thought. Even Zachariah is hoping.*

Zachariah's hands never left his brother's shoulders, rubbing them in a circular motion. *Comfort. Strength. Feel me, Brother. Feel me, for I am with you.*

Seth closed his eyes, trying to do it, trying to stay connected to a tiny life he had never met, before. Zachariah held him. Brigit could do nothing but stare into Zachariah's eyes, trying to send him her love, even though they were broken.

"Tell him you're waiting for him. That we're all waiting for him."  
Zachariah's eyes held his beloved's.

Chloe's voice came from near Adam. "Tell him I want to show him the Great Falls, here. And he can ride my new pony with me, when he's old enough to come to Montana."

"I'll teach him to fish in the pond. And slide on the ice in his sneakers," Alexander Blackmane added.

"Elijah and I will take him hunting," Zachariah's deep voice soothed.

"Elijah's mostly useless at it, of course, but I'm fairly good." Zachariah kept hold of Seth's shoulders, feeling the words of comfort take hold.

"We can take him swimming in the falls near the sawmill, in North Edge, and I'll show him how to draw," Julia added, tears on her face.

"And it isn't a childhood, lest someone reads you a fine story." Brigit's voice sounded stronger than she felt. "There's one with a great tree in it, I've just been thinking of," she added. Zachariah let a single tear slip.

Seth swallowed, calming, trying to send his unborn child all the comfort he could muster. Zachariah crooned and made noises of comfort. Julia knelt beside him and laid a hand on Seth's arm. Elijah did the same. As if on cue, they all clustered around him, placing their hands on him, trying to send him, and the unborn babe in the next room, their strength.

Brigit remembered what Julia had said about the Shah daughters being very empathic. But Michael Blackmane was doing it, too, so she did not feel like she was intruding.

She felt... something, as she tried to touch Seth's shoulder, one Zachariah was also holding. Something warm and comforting. *Was this the bond they all spoke of?* She couldn't tell. It was not aimed at her. It was for the baby in the next room. She tried to join it, send her

own hope and prayers and strength through it. Zachariah's eyes flickered toward her, as if he felt her.

They made an odd looking cluster of creatures, when Peter Alcott finally stepped from behind the makeshift curtain. Seth, still on his knees, seemed almost in a trance.

"They're fine. The bleeding has stopped, and so has the discomfort. False alarm. The baby's heart beat is strong and Corinne is asking for Seth." The group broke apart, and Zachariah helped pull Seth to his feet, and sent him in the room with his wife.

"She's to stay out of the hot springs, and can't travel for a few days. Bed rest. No more dancing at weddings. If, after that, all is stable, well, we'll see. I'd like to keep an eye on her, for a couple of days, obviously."

"Thank you, doctor." Elijah shook Peter's hand, then took him in a quick embrace.

"Thank Jacob. He did everything I would have done, with less equipment."

Peter turned to Zachariah. "Corinne tells me there is a midwife, at your camp, and what she calls 'sort of a doctor?'"

"There is a doula who acts as midwife to the women, yes. And a young man who grew up there, who is studying medicine. Bluntly put, she might be safer here, in your care."

"As long as there is no more bleeding, she can stay as long as she likes. It's always a bit of a mystery what causes these things. Broken blood vessel somewhere, stretching of the uterus. Let's not panic, yet. She isn't having contractions, and the baby's heart beat is strong. Right

now, there's no reason to think this was anything other than a bit of spotting. It happens, sometimes."

"It looked like so much blood," said Brigit.

"It always does," replied Peter. "I'm going to sleep in the guest chambers tonight, just in case."

The assemblage began drifting away, moving toward their respective chambers, or wherever it was they felt they needed to go.

Zachariah checked in on his brother and sister-in-law. Corinne was the picture of worry, yet contentment, as Seth held her. His face was care-lined, but his eyes were closed, still feeling his child. A portable monitor beeped a heartbeat. Zachariah assumed it was the baby's, but he didn't know, for sure. It might have just been Corinne's.

"Stay strong, little one. We are waiting for you," he whispered, dropping the curtain.

When he turned, Brigit was gone, along with most of the others. He knew she would be. He knew they were done.

He also knew there was something else he needed to attend to.



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## Chapter Ten

### *Shattered*



Brigit had intended to pack some of her things, but found she had no heart for it. The day had been far too trying. The atmosphere of the tunnels became subdued, as William served them all soup for a late lunch. Brigit ate, half expecting to see Zachariah walk through the doorway, not sure of what she'd say to him, if he did.

He didn't.

An hour later, knowing it would do no good, that it might do harm, even, she sought Zachariah out, anyway. He now felt like a bad habit she was loath to break.

She didn't find him in the common rooms, his bedroom, or at the infirmary. She found him in the storeroom, where he had struck some unknown thing, on the other side of a now-shattered wall.

"What is it you're doing?" Her voice reached him as he tucked a wicked-looking knife into his boot. She realized he had worn those boots, before. She hadn't realized they were the kind that held a sheath. She wondered if he always carried some sort of weapon. Probably.

At first, he simply didn't answer; didn't want to talk to her. Not now. Later, maybe, but not now. Too many emotions were near the surface.

"I asked, 'what is it you're doing?'" she repeated.

"Going hunting," he said tersely.

"Why?"

He didn't look her way, but stayed focused on his task. "Because it's either go hunt something evil or scream with rage and pain. And I don't feel like screaming." Zachariah was a mass of tension and an economy of movement. He hefted the pole. The same one he had struck Paracelsus with, earlier. He settled it against the nearest wall.

"Zachariah. Those canna be your only two choices."

"My third one has been rejected." He shot her a look.

"Please." She had no idea what else to say, to ask for his understanding.

"No," he refused, neither of them exactly sure what that meant. He eyed the hole in the wall. He was going to hunt the thing that had hidden behind it.

She prayed he didn't find it.

"I'll not be responsible for the doom of your race," she stated, trying to get him to understand why she'd made the decision she had.

"Just the doom of me, personally."

"You'll find another. You'll see this was just a mad dream."

"God. If you play that card one more time I *will* scream at you. Go drink tea with the others, Brigit. Have a scone." He tightened the buckles that held an impressive leather vest in place. "Write a book

about it. Write a book about any damn thing you want. You don't want us. I get it. Let it be." He tightened a pair of wide, leather bracers, on his wrist.

*Armor. He's putting on armor, she realized. Then: In more ways than one.*

Hard. He was so hard, right now. Frustrated. Angry. Waves of it came off of him. He turned his back to her, meaning to leave.

"How can you be the same man who quoted Chaucer at a wedding, a few nights ago?" she asked.

He rounded on her. "Not a nice little pet for you, anymore? Well. Get used to it. This is me, too, Colleen. As a matter of fact, this is probably me more often than the other. These people are under my protection, and but for wanting to spend my time charming you into my bed, I should have been hunting that thing an hour after I struck it."

The blue eyes that beheld his were utterly confused. "I never thought you were a pet."

"I never thought you were a brood mare." The words stung. They were meant to.

"But... you need a brood mare," Brigit pointed out. "You need a..." she searched for a word she couldn't find.

"God, the things you damn me to, woman," he replied.

She dropped her head at that, justifiably rebuked. Seeing she would not reply, Zachariah hefted the pole, and moved toward the door.

Her voice caught him, again. "You keep calling him a thing. 'Tis a man, Zachariah. What you're doing... this is murder."

Zachariah rebuffed her. "*It* hasn't been a man in a very long time. And from what I gather, it's responsible for *several* murders. And trying to kill both the bride and groom, at different points. Shall we catch him and give him a trial, in the city, Brigit? Shall we put Vincent on the stand against him? Shall we let the monster reveals all he knows? pfah." He spat.

"At least take one of your brothers, or Adam with you."

"No."

He said it in so stubborn a tone, she couldn't help but argue with him. "For God's sake, Zachariah. Why?"

The emerald eyes were hard with pain. "Because Seth is a father and his wife is pregnant with their child, and his place is by her side. Because Adam is a father, and will probably try to become a father again, soon. Because that makes him more *valuable* than I am, don't you agree? A proven stud? And Elijah is younger. More potential for a long breeding life. If you're going to think of us like livestock, Brigit, you're going to have to get better at it." His words were daggers in her heart.

He stormed out of the room, not leaving her a moment to reply. She staggered against a wall, and simply stood there, sobbing, her head in her hands.

*Narcissa... Narcissa was right*, was all she could think.

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Zachariah wandered the path below where he'd been, using a borrowed map from Pascal. The layout of the place was ingenious, and twisted back on itself, in several places. He scented the air and looked up, fairly sure he was in the right passage, as he travelled. This



tunnel ran beneath the one he and Bridget had meandered down, a few nights before. He put his nose to the air. *Ah. There it was.* The scent of prey. Old, but there.

Old and faint, but still discernible, Zachariah set off in the direction his nose took him. Down. Deep down, into a tunnel that veered through the dark. He could see without lamp light, but found several places uncomfortably narrow. If the monster wanted to elude him, it could probably do so, down here.

He thought about Brigit. Then forbade himself to. Distraction could get him killed. And loose whatever this monster was, on everyone.

He followed a branching path, staying on the scent. Nervous energy hummed through him. He hoped the monster the man had become was stupid enough to think he could stay in the low tunnels. That would be just fine. Eventually, and with a little luck, Zachariah knew he would find him, if that was the case.

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The eldest Shah did not return for the evening meal. Brigit ate nothing, and worried much. Seth stayed in the hospital chamber with Corinne. Elijah good-humoredly watched Seth's children and kept Julia Blackmane near. The tunnel children decided on a swim in the pool. At least half the adults and all the Hunter and Blackmane children went with them.

Remaining in the now-empty chamber where they'd all read stories to each other, Brigit sat, and worried. *Where are you, Zachariah? Please be all right. Please,* she prayed.

--

Zachariah returned to the guest chamber he shared with Elijah some time after eleven at night. The heavy pole was no longer in his hands.

"How did it go?" Elijah asked.

Zachariah shook his head. "I found a room he used as a lair. Nearly took a dart in my arm, for entering. Stupid trap. Much too slow." He removed the knife from his boot and untied his bracers. "He hadn't been there in a long time. More than a week, from the smell of it. I left his mask pinned to the floor with the pole through it, then threw his supplies into the abyss. That should be enough of a warning. Wherever he is, now, he isn't anywhere near. Hasn't been, since the first night. If he was, I would have had sense of him."

"I was talking about Brigit, actually," Elijah clarified.

Zachariah sighed, and tossed the bracers on the bed he'd never slept in. "Offhand, I'd say the hunt for the monster went better. And I didn't catch anything there, either."

Elijah shook his head.

"What about Julia?" Zachariah asked, hoping at least one of them was doing well with a beautiful woman.

"No," Elijah stated simply.

The elder brother embraced the younger.

"I really hate to admit this, but we may have to ask Seth what he's doing right."

"Okay. I wasn't depressed before. *Now* I'm depressed," Elijah stated.

"Vincent and Catherine will be back in a few days. If Corinne is strong enough, we should return home, then."



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## Chapter 11

### *The Running Sand*



Adam Blackmane sat feeding two year old Beatrice Hunter a muffin, for breakfast. The older children were entertaining Chloe and Daniel, somewhere in the tunnels, and Alexander had taken off with Ben. *Divide and conquer*, Adam thought ruefully, making sure she ate a blueberry.

Brigit O'Donnell found Adam somewhat taciturn, very in love with his red-headed wife, and seemingly very much at odds with his daughter, sometimes.

The Irishwoman picked at her own breakfast, still worried that she had not seen Zachariah. She hadn't been looking for morning conversation, but Adam decided to have one, anyway.

"Julia says things are bad between her and Elijah. Do you know the cause?" Adam asked bluntly. *No beating around the bush with this*

one, Bridget realized. She wasn't sure how much of what Julia had told her that she could reveal, in good faith.

"T'would be mostly things I'm not pretending to understand," Brigit answered, sipping tea. What she really wanted to know was had Zachariah returned yet? Was he safe? But Adam seemed unconcerned about the big Shah, so Bridget could only assume all was well on that score.

"Did she tell you about my previous marriage?" Adam asked.

"No, not as such. Married young, I take it?" Bridget veered the conversation away as only the Irish can do.

Julia was twenty. It took no great feat of mathematics to conclude that Adam had been a young groom. At thirty eight, Zachariah was the oldest among them. And while Adam's face was careworn, his form was vigorous. Bridget gave him his mid-thirties. And not by much.

"Married young, yes. The source of most of my troubles, as it turned out." He gave little Beatrice another bite, cooing to her.

"You?" he asked.

"Married young as well, before I was widowed. Me heart drove me to it. Not a smart thing, as it turned out, though it certainly seemed like it, at the time."

Adam could agree with that. "I'm with you, there. I can't wholly regret anything that gave me Julia and Alexander and Chloe. But it's probably why Julia's so resistant to Elijah, now," he said, bringing things back where he wanted them.

*Score one for the dark man with grey eyes,* Bridget thought.

"She thinks she can wait all she wants. That he has all the time in the world until the madness hits him. And yes, he has several years, yet.

It's not like he's Zachariah, after all," Adam said, holding a glass with a straw in it, while Beatrice drank.

*Say what?* Brigit thought. *What madness? What are you talking about?*

"Which is, of course, why I married so young," Adam continued. "I didn't want to go through the loss of control, the insanity of it, even for a while. So I chickened out, got myself a bride, and... well. You probably know a good bit of the rest of the ugly story, if you've been rooming with Julia."

She didn't. She really didn't. She and Julia had largely been occupied with their own concerns, and Elijah had all but monopolized Julia's time while she had been enraptured by Zachariah.

"This ... madness. I take it its ... very daunting," she guessed, again using her Irish guile.

Adam snorted. "Yes, I'd say so. They say the second time is worse than the first. And then there's the third time, of course. Which is pretty much fatal. I guess you could say nature gets tired of us taking our own sweet time about it. The sands of our hourglass run out."

*What in God's name?*

"Nothing like impetus to find a mate, huh?" Adam broke off another piece of muffin for the toddler.

"Were you in danger of the madness? Before you met Diana?" Brigit asked. She had no idea how long he had been widowed.

He shook his head. "No. No parent is. I guess our numbers are so low, nature is trying to make sure we don't waste our time before we find a bond mate, that's all. I understand a lot of animals are built that

way, when you think about it. The urge to find a mate... well, it hits them hard, too."

*Yes. Yes it does. Salmon run. Bears prowl, and rage, and wolves howl and fight. A lot of them will find a mate or die trying. But a man? Or... Shah? I never...*

"When will... Elijah face the madness again?" Brigit asked, trying to glean information about Zachariah without actually asking about him.

Adam shrugged, wiping up the mess with a napkin. "Not until his thirties. Thirty-one. Thirty-two. Maybe thirty-three, though nobody goes much past that. He has time, though Ramona, his mother, is starting to worry. You know how mothers are."

Brigit figured she did. But that meant Zachariah had endured this "madness" twice, already.

"Of course it's Zachariah who's the big concern. Or he was, until you." Adam gave her a brief smile. He had no idea that she and Zachariah were no longer a couple. "A couple years sounds like a lot of time. But they go so fast. And Zach maybe has less than that. Any time after forty, and..." He shrugged, letting the sentence trail.

*No. You can't... You can't mean...* But she knew he did.

She nearly leapt up at him. Brigit forced her voice to remain neutral.

"What if ... Elijah, or Zachariah, what if they... marry, but don't have children?" *I have to know. I need to know.*

Adam shrugged. "I take it Julia's still decided to postpone motherhood," he said cannily, thinking they were still talking mostly about his daughter.

He was. Brigit wasn't. "For... Elijah, does he risk this... madness, if he doesn't have children?" she asked again, a different way.

Adam shook his head. "All but unheard of with our kind, to be childless, but no problem. It's the bond you need, and to consummate it, to avoid the madness, to begin with. I guess nature takes care of the rest."

"And Zachariah has never bonded with anyone," Brigit confirmed, realizing she'd just shifted the conversation from Elijah and Julia to Zachariah. Adam felt that wasn't unusual, considering.

"No," Adam answered honestly. "He's had a couple close calls, maybe, but... well, his size might have been something of an issue." Adam had the good grace to blush. "And of course, we don't love that easily. It's a spiritual thing, when it happens. And then there's the question of whether or not the woman is willing to take on this life." He shrugged.

"But Vincent said he was bonded to Catherine almost from the day they met," Brigit was confused, now.

"He was. But as a foundling, he didn't know how to keep that from happening. So when it did, he knew nothing about what was going on. Just that it was there, between them, shortly after they met. Madness even caught him. But of course, they weren't married, yet. Weren't... well, intimate, from what I gather from Seth."

*Oh.* Brigit's sharp mind was scrambling.

"We're happy that you and Zach found each other. We truly are. I wish the best for Julia, but in the end, only she can decide what that is. But with Zachariah, well... time was beginning to be ... something of a problem," he said, lifting Beatrice from her chair. Brigit just sat there, stunned.

"I need to take this little princess for a story and a bath, before we start to pack up. Want to come sit with us at story time?"

Brigit shook her head, unable to stand. "N-no. Not right now."

Adam simply left the room, with his little charge.

*Zachariah would die if he did not find a suitable wife, in two years?  
Less, even?*

*Oh Lord. What have I done?*



--

## *Chapter Twelve*

### *The Saddest Words*



"I've all but finished the first draft of the book." Brigit told her love, standing in his chamber doorway. The tapestry drape was undrawn. Like the others, he was packing to return home.

"Does she get to live happily ever after?" he asked.

"Yes. Of course," Brigit replied. *This isn't what I want us to talk about. I'm just not sure how to--*



"Good. At least in fiction, that still happens." He stuffed a white shirt into a duffel bag.

"Zachariah...." her voice trailed off.

"It's all right, Bridget. Let it go." He zipped a toiletry bag shut.

"You're going to die, aren't you?" Her voice was weak with fear.

*Damn. God damn. I am seriously going to have to kill several friends, or members of my family.*

"We're all going to do that, my love," he replied, tossing the bag onto the now-made bed. At least he would get to call her that, before he left.

"No. I mean if you don't find a ... a mate. It's fatal to your kind, isn't it?"

He cut her off before she had a chance to finish. "If you seriously think I'm going to propose to you under the guise of 'Let me nail you or I'll die,' you so *vastly* underestimate what I think of you." He shoved the book of Chaucer into the bag. "Not to mention myself. Or the 'us' I thought we could be, together." He said it with finality.

*It was only a matter of time before she found out. Damn.*

"I have lived my life not bowing to this, Brigit. Don't ask me to start, now."

Brigit watched him toss boots into a duffel bag, not even looking at her. He was being stubborn. Very. In a way that probably only someone six and a half feet tall could pull off.

*Well. That was certainly that. I guess I'm being dismissed. And I'll be damned first.*

"You pig-headed tree," she accused, her temper rising.

"You're mixing your metaphors."

"In the name of CuChulainn, do you know what's the matter, with you?" she challenged, about to bring up "pride" as a possible sin.

"It can't be my Ancient Greek. It's flawless." He collected another book off a shelf.

"Stop being glib."

He rounded on her, anger spitting from his emerald eyes.

"If I'm serious, it will break my heart. That really is worse than dying, Brigit; or at least it feels like it is, right now. Death I was ready to accept. But this... this disaster. I don't even know where to begin." His brocade trimmed wedding cape got tossed into another bag.

"Do you have any idea how many years it's taken me to find you?" he asked, as he stuffed it in. "I've been looking, not just for 'someone,' but for you, since I was sixteen years old. You'd have been a child, then. And I *swear* if I'd have met you, then, I'd have known." He zipped the bag closed, nearly yanking off the tab.

"But no. I waited, and I endured the pain of the first madness, and came out of it, and I was good. And I protected my family, and I suffered through the madness a second time, and I damn near killed my father." His eyes closed, against a memory.

"And now I found you. And because of a maniac with a bomb, a man who hated you and didn't even know you ... for that, *for that*, my fate is sealed. Glib? We both better hope so, Colleen."

"If you'll just hear me out --"

"You gave him the power to hurt you again. To hurt us."

"I can't change what's wrong with me, Zachariah," she defended.

"Neither can I, for you, or for myself. So then the question was:

"Couldn't you love me in spite of it?"

"I already love you, you Great Idiot. 'Twas never a question, at all."

"Wasn't it? Isn't it? Because I swear, Brigit, I love you. And the only power on *earth* that could keep me from your side *is* the one that is keeping me from your side. It's you."

"You owe it to --"

"Don't." His hand sliced the air, and the word fell like a stone. "If you say 'I owe it to my people,' or my race or whatever, I swear my stomach will give up its breakfast. I already *pay* what I owe to my people. Every *one* of them is under my charge. *Every* day. Not just the Shah, but the other children as well. And the adults. I'm *here* because the Shah of these people is on his honeymoon."

He sighed, deeply. "Somehow, somewhere, there has *got* to be something that is mine, just mine. For me. Not owed to the madness, or the future, or my people, or anything else.

"And I will be God damned to a hell I'm not sure I believe in, before I look in your eyes and see pity. There has *got* to be something for me that this... doom we all carry doesn't touch."

He heaved another sigh, and stopped moving long enough to put his hands behind his head, and hold them there, partly threaded in his hair.

"A few days ago, I thought I had found it. And I was supremely happy." He dropped his hands, and then continued with his packing chore. It was nearly done.

A tear slid from her cheek. "I want you to be happy, Zachariah. I truly do. Please believe me when I say that." *How could it hurt so badly to end a relationship that was less than a week old?*

"I know you believe what you are saying, Colleen. It's the only thing keeping me on my feet, right now."

"We could... try..."

He cut her off. She knew he would. "No. We couldn't. I will not have you offer yourself up as some sort of sacrifice. I *refuse* to bond with you, under those circumstances. I couldn't bear to... feel your sorrow. And then later, feel your guilt, when no children came. Those are *not* the things I wanted from you, beautiful lady. So now it's all out on the table, and we figure it out. We weren't that marvelous a match to begin with."

God, it hurt to hear that. Hurt because until she'd understood the depth of his obligations, it wasn't true. She knew it wasn't. They were perfectly matched. Until they weren't. *Ignorance was bliss.*

"Please find someone else, Zachariah. Please," she begged. If he would not bond with her.... He had to find someone. He had to live.

Her words washed over him, fraught with meaning. Too much meaning. That she would wish he'd find someone else... "Ah, Bridget. Those are the saddest words you could ever have spoken to me," he replied.

He gave her his back, so she would not see the tears in his eyes. When he heard her leave, he knew he would not hear those footsteps in his hallway, again.

Peter Alcott had confirmed that Corinne Hunter was well enough to travel home. Vincent and Catherine were due back this evening. There was no longer any reason to stay.



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## *Chapter Thirteen*

### *North Edge*



September finally ended, and slid into October. November slammed the north with its usual vigor. Corinne Hunter's pregnancy continued without incident. It was the one thing most of the Hunter clan could think of, to be grateful for. December meant Christmas, for the children, and a kind of peace for the mining camp. Logging did not get done in sub-zero temperatures. Things shut down a while, for that "long winter's nap." Spring felt very far away, because it was.

*Canada is cold in December, Brigit thought. Which was a lot like saying the Sahara Desert is hot in July, she further reasoned. Three months, almost. Will he talk to me? Send me away? Scream at me? Shake hands and be friends, even though he said we never would? Kiss me, madly?* Bridget hoped for the latter but counted on pretty much any of the others. She knew she had it coming.

Tree Dancing would come out some time in spring, but she had an advance proof. The pages were planned, the writing done, and most of the illustrations, drawn by none other than Julia Blackmane. It was inscribed to Seth and Corinne's unborn child, the dedication reading simply, "to all the unborns." Since he/she had no name, yet, it was the safest way to do that.

Her publisher thought the dedication was very touching. Her political faction would think it a nod to her cause. Everybody was happy. *Well, not everybody*, she amended, sighing.

She had begun her journey in New York, with a quick visit to the tunnels to see Vincent and Catherine before the week of Winterfest. They looked every bit the happy couple, still obviously on their honeymoon. Diana and Adam were in attendance. So was a forlorn-looking Julia Blackmane. She'd needed to get a message to Seth. Diana had made the arrangements. None of the Hunter clan was in attendance. There was no reason why they would be.

Not liking to fly, Brigit had taken a passenger train deep into the country to the far north. It was a land of ice and mountains, and deep, deep forests. She knew if she closed her eyes, she would start dreaming a story. But she felt too tired for that, right now, so she waited for the journey of two days to end. It would, she knew. One way or the other.

A good map and a rental car got her from the train station. Seth had said he would meet her once she turned off a winding road, onto the one that went to the logging camp. She snuggled down into her grey coat with the fur lining. Her hands felt cold, even inside her gloves and with the car heater going. She followed a roadmap. And the only directions she knew.

Seven clicks of the odometer past where the paved road ended and became a hardpack trail, Seth Hunter stood near the tree line, pulling off a ski mask to show her his face. Clearly he had walked here, or run, to meet her. There was no vehicle in sight.

She stopped the car, got out, and tossed him the keys, which he caught. He would drive the rest of the way. She was too tired of not knowing where she was going, in all this snow. They both buckled themselves in, for the rest of the journey.

"And how's Himself?" Brigit asked.

Seth knew she was going to ask it without preamble. "Dictatorial. A pain in my ass. Miserable. Pretty much the way he usually is, with whatever happened back in New York on top."

He cut her a sideways look. She took that in, and sunk lower into her coat. He would not ask her why she was here. She was clearly here to see Zachariah. Whatever came of that was between them. Whatever it was, it would be more than Zachariah had now, which was worse than nothing. A raw kind of pain had settled into his older brother's chest. Seth could feel it from across the room, when they were in one, together.

"And how's Corinne?" Brigit asked politely.

"Glorious. Due any time. I don't think I ever thanked you enough for your part in that day, by the way." Seth referred to the crisis that was

now past. Corinne was a full six and a half months along in her pregnancy. From what Bridget learned from Peter Alcott, all was fine. At least, as far as he knew.

"You're more than welcome. I'll be tellin' Peter and Father that she's doin' well. That will please them."

*And how are you doing?* He thought, but didn't ask. Clearly, if she was here, the answer to that was anybody's guess.

"Everybody in the tunnels okay?" He rounded a hairpin curve, with the skill of familiarity. The car fishtailed, and straightened out, on the ice. He maneuvered as if that was of no concern.

*Thank God he was driving,* she thought.

"Fine, I'm thinkin'. Vincent and Catherine, well, they're the picture of wedded bliss, they are. And Julia is there, right now. If you want to tell Elijah. Or not. They're all getting' ready for something called 'Winterfest.'"

Seth took that in, but said nothing about it, one way or the other.

"There's a main house, that's my Mother's, and there's his place. Which one do you want?" he asked.

"Which one is he more likely to be at?" she asked.

"Right now, neither. He's releasing a pair of foxes that have been giving our hen house some hell. Should be back shortly after nightfall, with my brother, Connor." He shrugged. "His house is where he'll go when he comes in, is my guess. He doesn't come up to the main one, much, unless he has a reason to."

Seth drove through a small town. Bridget had seen fishing villages and mining towns before. This one, like others, was a main street of narrow businesses dotted by a small store, a diner, a dry goods and



general feed store, a “sort of” doctor's office, a bar that had a post office in the back, and some few other nondescript buildings of which she was not sure. Cabins dotted the landscape, as they drove through town. Some were clustered together, while others had a good bit of distance, between them. It was picturesque, in its way.



Brigit counted maybe thirty cabins that she could see, figuring there might be more, tucked back among the pines. It was beautiful country. Blanketed, and white. Peaceful.

"We can stop and pick you up something to eat. Or I can bring something over from my mother's," Seth offered.

"No. I ate on the train. I probably won't be here long enough to be underfoot, Seth."

*Oh. Well, that doesn't sound good.*

Seth said nothing to that. Whatever it was that had imploded between his brother and the famous Irish author, it was their business.

"He needs you, Brigit." Seth said it without any provocation to do so. "He's stubborn and proud, and hates to admit needing anybody. He likes to be the one who's needed. But he needs you. If you want to hold on to something, hold on to that."

And she knew she needed him. Needed him badly enough to come here. *But he doesn't want to need me. That's part of the problem,* she mourned.

"Zach is stubborn as hell. He can't get out of his own way, sometimes," Seth added.

Brigit acknowledged the truth of that. "And now it's I who am thanking you, Seth Night Hunter," she acknowledged, her voice tight, using his full name. She knew he was trying to help.

"Only Mom calls me that. Maybe Corey. And only when they're mad at me." He smiled a little as he said it, then spun the car a bit more forcefully than he had to. Seth clearly liked driving, or being inside a vehicle. Brigit remembered that he had first met Vincent after a motorcycle crash. Her stomach lurched, a little. *Please let us get there. In one piece.*

"Almost there," Seth encouraged. He turned off another winding path, this one utterly unmarked by sign or landmark. You either knew it was there, or you didn't, and that seemed by design.

*At least the car would leave tire tracks that I can follow out,* she realized. From here, she might well have to drive herself all the way back to the train station, in the dark. She had seen no hotel, in town. And she couldn't very well drop herself on Ramona Hunter's door step, given the circumstances. Brigit sighed. *One disaster at a time.*

They drove in silence for several long minutes. Seth finally rounded another turn and then stopped the car.

It was a two-story chalet. Her love lived in something that looked straight out of Peer Gynt.

White stucco. Dark beams. A wrap-around porch that had been swept clean. A steep, alpine roof, for the weight of the snow. Empty window boxes full of the white stuff, with icicles hanging off the edges. The kind of boxes that would have his mother putting flowers in them, come spring.

*Or his wife.* Brigit held on to the thought.

"You're seeing us at the toughest time of year. In a few more months, most of the snow will be gone, and everything will be green. After that, well, the summers are amazing." He was clearly trying to sell her on the good points of his home.

"It reminds me of Ireland, a little. They have mountains and pine trees and snow, there, too," she assured him.

They did, but he doubted that they had anything like this. He turned off the ignition and she stepped out of the car.

"The logging operation is a ways back, past one of the stop signs we blew through," Seth explained. "I'll let you in." He walked up to the front door, took a key off a ring, fitted it into the lock, and turned it.

"Won't he be angry?" Brigit asked, following him.

"Furious." Seth grinned. "But at me, not you."

"Oh, I wouldna be too sure of that," Brigit assured him.

"He needs you," Seth repeated, going back and opening the trunk of the car. *One light suitcase. Not good.* "He doesn't *want* to. Doesn't want to need anybody." He brought the case up the steps and set it inside the door. "He doesn't bend. Not to the madness, not to anything. He doesn't like to need. He hates how weak it makes him,

and to Zach, weakness is sin. Weakness is the opposite of everything he is. But he needs you," Seth insisted.

"So he doesn't die?" Brigit was honest that she knew.

Seth shook his head. "So that he remembers what it's like to really live," he answered, ushering her inside, then closing the door.

The house was cold, and Seth started a fire in one of the most impressive stone fireplaces Bridget had ever seen. He turned on a few lamps, and settled her in the living room.

"Do you ... need anything?" Seth asked, putting her one suitcase near the couch. The room had a huge, open floor plan.

*Yes. Zachariah to forgive me.*

"No. Thank you, Seth. Truly. No matter how things turn out... thank you."

"You're welcome, Brigit. Remember what I said," he instructed, leaving her there. The large wooden door closed softly behind him.

Brigit looked out one of the large windows. The paper white sky was starting to grey, a little. She knew how it was. When it got dark up here, it happened fast. And early. It was barely two o'clock.

A set of stairs set against one wall went up to the second floor, where she supposed his bedroom was. She had no urge to explore it.

She was left standing in a space that did not belong to her, yet in a way, she almost felt instinctively comfortable, here, just the same as she'd done in the Library Chamber, back in the tunnels. The space reminded her a little of her home, back in Belle Claire.

It was because of the books. Many of them. Books lined the walls, in some spaces, from floor to ceiling. His collection gave the one in the

tunnel library a run for its money. She recognized the Chaucer, settled on an easel, in a place of honor in the front. Keats sat behind it, and Donne. She scanned more of the shelves. Three volumes of Shakespeare. Romantic poets, and children's literature all vied for room. Myths, legends and philosophy crowded into veterinary medicine and a Farmer's Almanac. There were classic novels, and some contemporary ones. He liked Jack London. *Of course he would.*

A dusty cassette player attested to the fact that he did not listen to music, very often, or at least he hadn't, lately. It contained no Grieg, one way or the other.

The open floorplan showed a utilitarian downstairs kitchen, which looked barely used. There was dust on several of the canisters, except the one for tea and coffee. She did not want to feel like she was prying, as she tried to glean things about him based on his possessions. But again, some parts of his life seemed familiar, to her.

*He loves books and doesn't care much for cooking,* she concluded, feeling a kinship with him, for that.

The couch was huge, built for his size, and she was tired. The sky darkened further. Warmth suffused the room, from the huge fireplace. He did not own a television set, at least not one she could see. It seemed so strange to even see him living in a house. She was so accustomed to seeing him in the tunnels.

She sat on the couch, then leaned over to pull up her feet. Her toes were still cold. She laid her head down on a brown patterned pillow. *Just for five minutes.*



## Chapter Fourteen

### *Alderlevest*



Zachariah's initial reaction was to wonder who had left his lights on, and if it was he who had done so. He didn't remember. He was tired. The day's work was done. The vixen and her mate had been released a good two hundred miles from here. A mated pair, they would set up housekeeping somewhere else. She would be pregnant soon, and looking for a den. Someplace to birth her pups. He doubted she'd travel all this way to bother the livestock, again.

The house was warm, when he entered it. A fire burned in the grate. *Had Corinne been in here, for some reason? Seth?* He doubted it. He looked for a note on his table. Nothing.

*Oh well.* He would figure it out in the morning. It was after eight and he was exhausted. He'd snowshoed out with Connor to let the foxes go, near a deep pine forest. Then there had been the walk back, for both of them, and then the drive. It was too cold for a shower. Right

now he just wanted his bed. He hadn't been sleeping well, and prayed tonight might be the exception to that, at least.

He nearly missed her, tucked near the arm of the sofa. It was more proof that they had never bonded. The couch was arranged with its front to the fire, its back to the entryway door. But for the edge of her suitcase sitting near the corner of the couch, but for needing to bank the fire so he could close the flue, he might have gone right up without seeing her.

At first, he blinked, thinking he must have conjured her image; that the toil of the day had left him too exhausted to think clearly, so he'd made a lovely phantom. He blinked again, yet she remained.

The beauty of her sleeping form was like a spear in his heart. *God, I missed you so much.* Elijah had talked of going to Winterfest, of maybe seeing her there. But that was days away, yet. Days he'd been counting, as he decided whether or not he should go, too.

*But... she was here.* Sleeping on his sofa, wrapped in a winter coat, hands tucked between her legs so her now-gloveless fingers wouldn't feel cold. *Brigit.*

He'd conjured images of her so often he wasn't quite sure if he was going mad. But in his dreams and imaginings, she'd writhed in passion, or held him in the water, or tried to read while he teased her out of her clothes or ... something. Things they'd actually done together, or were likely to.

But this wasn't anything he'd ever imagined. There were no dark circles under her eyes in his fantasies of her, and she did not look careworn, as she did now, even in sleep. It was a look he knew too well, from his own mirror.

*Brigit. Alderlevest.*

He was too weak to send her away, this time. The last eighty days or so had all but broken him, and he knew he would take her on whatever terms she offered, if she would still have him. Pity. Love. Whatever there still was, between them.

He didn't want to need her this much. Didn't want her life to go from one cause to another, with no space to be "just Brigit" in between. Didn't want her to be with him because she felt she had to, rather than simply because she wanted to. But he would take it. The emptiness of the last few months had taught him that hard lesson, if it had taught him no other.

He felt humbled, and brought low. Desperate. All the things he had not wanted to feel, because of what he was, because of his circumstances.

And now he felt them full force. And it was not his fate that had caused it, but his passions. He missed her. A hollow ache of need lived inside him. A wound like a wolf bite of loneliness, and bled constantly, inside. Sorrow. Grief. Pride. Broken. His.

If she was here for some other reason, for Elijah and Julia, or some such, he would have to find a way to tell her. She was too important for him to lose her, again. *Assuming she hasn't found another.*

That last thought burned. *No bond. No way to know.* He had not been able to tell when she was happy, or if someone else made her laugh. He almost felt that would have been better than the nothingness he *had* felt, the last few months.

Aside from an occasional tickle from Seth and Corinne's baby, thanks to sharing Seth's bond with it in the tunnels, he felt empty, as always. But much more so. His world was not right. Not just ending, if he could find no way to stop it, but not *right*. In almost any way. In falling



in love with her, he'd lost his sense of balance. And it was a sense of balance he lived by.

He knelt by his love. He wanted to touch her so badly, he could taste it. Wanted to bond with her so much, he was shaking with it.

Zachariah looked out a dark window. And considered a dark thing.  
*She's here. I could do it.*

He'd made mistakes in his life, but considered himself to be a good man, a good Shah. To this point, he knew he'd committed only one truly unpardonable sin. He'd injured his father, badly, in his second bout of madness.

He knew he was about to sin again, right now, and egregiously. And he could not stop himself from doing it, for the world.

Bowing his head near hers, he began what he considered to be the second truly terrible transgression he'd ever committed in his life. Without her permission, without her consent, without her knowledge, he closed his eyes against tears, and sent the bond out to her. She was well suited to him. He knew it from the tunnels. It could be done. She didn't need to know. Catherine Chandler hadn't. Not until Vincent had told her.

Vincent had bonded with his Catherine with far less experience and understanding than Zachariah knew he had, now. Knowledge of that was a dangerous thing, for the big Shah. *It can be done. He did. I can.*

He would feel her. Even if she left, even if she didn't know. He would be with her, in this way, if in no other. The aloneness would stop, at least. The terrible, gnawing aloneness.

He sent the bond out to her. It felt like casting a line. *There. It... it's done.*

Except... it wasn't. The line fell flat. There was nothing to anchor it to.

"No," he whispered it, standing. He stared at her in shock.

The bond could find no purchase, in her mind. She was closed to him.

*She loves another.* Realization was an anchor, in an already weighed-down heart.

*She loves me no longer.* She was not a viable choice, not any more. He nearly wept with the sorrow of it. The taste in his mouth was bitter, and there was a lump in his throat he could barely swallow past. His heart felt like a closed fist.

"No," he repeated, louder, this time.

"Zachariah?" Brigit's eyes opened to see him standing over her, as she heard him say it.

When her blue eyes opened his sorrow was complete. *Oh, to never be able to feel you the way I did, before...*

She sat up. He looked tormented. "I love you," she said, as she adjusted her rumpled coat. She'd rehearsed many speeches, many arguments. This was the one she was going with.

"You can't." His voice was misery. He knelt by her again. "Does he make you happy, Bridget? I hate him for taking you from me, but it was as much my arrogance as yours. I don't know what to feel, now."

Brigit's brow furrowed. *What?* "I love you, Zachariah. And you're ... confused, My Tree. I'll have no other man in my bed or my heart, but you." She lifted her lips, in plain invitation.

He knew it wasn't true, but couldn't call her a liar. *She loves another. Perhaps part of her still loves me, but... she loves another.* The bond,

which had all but screamed at him to bind them together before, found her unsuitable, now.

In pain and in darkness, he didn't care. He only knew he wanted the kiss she was offering. Wanted it so much...

*I love you*, he thought desperately, lowering his mouth to hers.

Her words were a balm and the kiss was a medicine for at least some of the ills of his bruised heart. *Something is wrong*. But for the moment he would ignore that, just so he could own her mouth, again. There were tears on her face.

*Love her again*. He realized he needed to make love to her again. *Yes, that was it*. The bond could be a mercurial thing and was always best during times of extreme emotion, and intimacy. Throwing off his coat, he tugged at the belt of hers.

"Off. I need you to take this off, Brigit. Please, my love. I'm starving for you."

"Zachariah..." His name held a caution. And she placed a staying hand over his.

Brigit took him in. There was something wrong, here, and it was more than just the pain of their separation. He looked...confused? Of all the things Zachariah never looked, "confused" headed the list. She kept his hands still. "Why did you think I was in love with someone else?"

He dropped his great head in shame. Never had he been more humiliated. "Because I tried to bond with you, just now. I need you so much, Brigit. I hate that I do, but there it is."

Seth's words came back to her. *"He needs you. He'll hate that he does, but he does."*

"Please, forgive me," he continued. "I tried to do it against your will. You would not have been harmed by it. I... just... needed you so badly. Missed you... so *much*." His eyes were haunted. "It's the worst kind of risk, the worst kind of selfishness. To bind yourself to someone who may not want it."

She pulled his head down next to hers. "So. We are not paragons of perfection, you and I." He shook his head.

That he was willing to tie himself to her without knowing whether she was about to leave or stay... Her heart melted at the thought.

"Make love with me," he breathed. "I can fix it if we make love. Please." He loosened her coat, opening the front.

"No, love." She said it gently.

He stopped his hands, again. *No. No, she doesn't want to. Doesn't want me.* And he no longer had the power to make her want him, apparently.

"No," he repeated dully.

Zachariah." She held his hand softly. "Feel."

She pulled his hand forward to her bulky sweater and long sleeved undershirt. Piles of fabric blocked his hands. Lifting the hem of her shirts, she put his cool palm on her warm, bare stomach. She was always round, there, always lush. But now she was different. Rounder. Firmer. His eyes shot to hers.

"Pregnant." He whispered it, seeing fear mixed with hope in her eyes.

"Please dinna be angry with me. I didna know at first. Wasn't really sure until..."

He stopped her words with a sizzling kiss. "You're pregnant." He said it again, the wonder of it crashing through him.

"You have to understand... I never had regular periods after me surgery, and--"

*Whoosh.* She was off her feet and in his arms, and he was climbing the stairs to his bedroom more carefully than a man with a priceless antique. She was nattering something about regular periods, and not knowing, or she'd have told him sooner. He truly did not care.

"You're carrying a baby." He stopped at the landing to kiss her thoroughly.

"You do know that this is yours, yes?" She searched his eyes.

"Mine? Of course it's mine." He sounded insulted and happy at the same time. "It's why I can't bond with you, for one thing. For another, who else's would it be? You're not exactly a libertine, my Brigit."

"Maybe, but I'm certainly heavier," she warned.

"You're a feather. A precious, treasured feather. I could carry you from here to New York, if that's what you wanted."

He achieved the second floor. A huge bedroom dominated the space. The bed itself was more massive than any other she had ever seen. It was a king-sized mattress, with another twin one pushed long ways, across the bottom. A gigantic red quilt dominated it. He set her on it as if she would break.

"We can't make love. I'm sorry, Zachariah, but I can't." She went scrambling off one side. He lifted her and set her gently back to center.

"Tell me." She had been carrying this burden alone for too long. Five minutes was too long.

"Dr. Alcott says there is some risk. I'm supposed to take a lot of vitamins and not stand up for long periods, but I can't sit down too much either, and ... no intercourse. I'm so scared, Zachariah," she confessed. "I only found out for sure a little more than a week ago, and all I can think is what will you say, you were so sad when you sent me away, and now this is the worst kind of trap, if you look at it wrong, and you hate traps, and please, God, let this baby live. I remember Corinne..."

"Shhhhhhhhh." He wrapped his huge arms around her, feeling her fear, feeling his love for her. "I'm here. We'll face it together, my treasure." He held her against him, then lay her back on the bed.

"I love you." He kissed her hair, ran his hands down her arms, unable to bring them back up until he had touched her stomach. "Love you. Love you so much. Oh, my God. Brigit."

More gently than she could have ever imagined, he lifted her sweater and thermal shirt, exposing her stomach to his view. Tender. Firm. Not a huge swell, not yet, but definitely there. He kissed her abdomen from one side to the other, loving it. Loving her. Repeated the motion. Again. Again. "I love you," he said to both of them.

"You stay there. Stay safe, my little one." He stared through the skin of her belly. He suddenly understood so much more about Seth. He closed his eyes, gently touching his forehead to her stomach.

"Ahhhhh. There you are." His face held a ghost of a smile. "So it's *you* I've been feeling, right here." He pulled up her fingertips and pressed them to his right temple. "He or she is there, Bridget. They're fine. We're fine."

He let the sensation of bonding with his child overtake him. Such a faint, little feeling. Yet so huge. So new, was this heartbeat. She felt the dampness of a tear on her stomach. He was sensing his child.

"I thought it might be Seth's. Or ... just... something else. I've never felt this before. I didn't know, Beloved." He kissed her navel again, deeply.

She moaned, and shifted.

"It's going to be a long few months, my Tree."

"Three. Four, at most. Our babies are born a little earlier. I'll hold you in springtime, my daughter. Or son. Perhaps in April." Again, he addressed her stomach, kissing it, once more.

"Daughter? You don't want a son, first?"

"Don't even wade into that water, Beauty."

"You didna want me at all, in New York. I'm so relieved, I'm too tired to fight about it."

"I wanted you to my bones. I just didn't... it doesn't matter anymore, Brigit."

"I didna mean to trap you into this, Zachariah." The blue eyes were worried. She meant what she said.

He rose from the bed, going over to a massive steamer trunk at its foot. He pulled out the duffel bag she recognized from his travels, and dropped it with a thud on the floor.

"You're good at telling tales. Let's make up a story together, shall we?" he ventured. It was a reference to their first dance, together. How many times she had played that conversation, over again, in her mind?

"I went to Winterfest, hoping to find you there." He indicated the bag he had already packed, for the purpose. She lifted an eyebrow.

"Oh, and I was there, My Tree. Hoping to see you."

"I came to you at night and made passionate love to you."

"Poppycock. You crawled in on your knees and I took you back, you arrogant brute."

"After which we made love." He allowed her her victory. "Very passionately, so much so, you agreed to be my wife."

Her smile held a tear. "And who would it be that married us? Last time we went to a wedding, you and I were officiating."

"Father. We'll get Father to do it. And Vincent, if he's willing. It's his province, after all. His Shahdom. When? When do we get married, Brigit?"

"After the baby is born?" she ventured.

"So you can slip away, if something bad happens? Wrong."

"Zachariah, don't you think ..."

"No. I don't think. I don't think I want to be a moment without you, whether we raise our children or other people's. One or a dozen. It doesn't matter to me, Brigit. It never did."

Brigit knew it was true. "Very well. You set the date, then, Great Tree. I will be the bride, there with a tuppence in her shoe."

"I love you." He settled beside her on the huge bed. *Finally*. All was right with his world.

"I love you, Zachariah." The new life between them fluttered, sensing them, sensing their happiness.





## Chapter Fifteen

### *Geoffrey and Meghann Grace*

--

"I cannot endure this." Zachariah sat in almost the same place Seth had knelt, many months before. Bridget's moans pierced his ears. She was in pain. *Stop. This has to stop.*

"It's all right, Zachariah. Trust me," Seth soothed. "This is the part we all hate. The part that leaves you feeling so powerless." Seth rocked his newest son in his arms. A small fist suckled beneath a broad muzzle. Red, mostly, though some dark shades, too. A perfect auburn mix between Seth and his wife. Corinne took her new son, sensing he was hungry. "It will be all right, You Big Tree." Corinne tried to tease him the way Bridget always did.

"I need to go feed his majesty. Come, Shane," she cooed to her new Shah son. "Daddy will tell us as soon as there is something to tell."

Another moan came from behind the white curtain. Zachariah knew that Brigit never complained. Never. She became more beautiful the more her stomach grew, and she held her hand to her back, at the end, but never once did she complain openly of pain. Confessed fear, yes, but never complained of pain. It was as if she was afraid that she would bring down disaster, if she confessed her back ached, or her feet were swollen, or her energy had deserted her, all of a sudden.

And now here she was, in the tunnels, straining, with the force of what she had to do. He wanted to be in with her, but with Mary, Peter, and Jacob in there already, there was no room. Peter Alcott's heart monitor was back, taking up valuable space.

Her cry pierced his heart. He was about to go in and beg them to give her something for the pain, something to make this stop. Then a fierce little cry followed hers. Loud. Demanding. High pitched. Zachariah felt the bond whip snap from the child to the mother. *Brigit. Ah, God.* His heart. She was there. She was exhausted. Sore. *And happy. So happy.*

He pulled aside the curtain. The face that Peter Alcott held aloft was a mirror of Zachariah's own. His wife was panting, sweat-covered, and overjoyed. A silver bangle bracelet clattered against her wrist as her son was placed on her belly. *Not quite exactly like me.* Blue eyes like a summer sky blinked up at him. *His mother's eyes. Beautiful.*

Zachariah Shadow Hunter was now a father, a husband and a Protector of all. His world was complete. Almost.

Geoffrey Talon Hunter looked around him, sensing a world to protect. His mother rubbed his back. As Mary stepped aside, his father cradled his bottom. Voices he had known for months, now, cooed his name.

His journey was just beginning.

He turned a little on his mother's stomach, waiting to be joined by Her. He had protected Her inside. Now it was time for Her to come join him.

A spasm racked his mother's body, and he was lifted away. In a few minutes, a perfect, tiny baby girl squalled her way into the room. The rest of the bond embraced Zachariah, as his daughter howled. He took a step back, from the force of it. Brigit. *My God. How I love you.*

She wept as she laughed, surprise in her expression. This was unexpected.

Twins. She and Zachariah had had twins. Fraternal, obviously. Geoffrey did not like being separated from Her. She had dark hair and the green eyes of his Father. Geoffrey squirmed, wanting to be back near his sister. She was his, to defend. He had petted her, in the water between them.

His mother began to cry, but they were happy tears. His father's face was wet, with awe and wonder.

*Surprise.* Silly people. Didn't they know he would take care of everything?

Meghann Grace Hunter accepted the nuzzling kiss of her father's muzzle. That was actually familiar. *He* had been doing that to her, for days, now. Not this big He. The Other one. The Little one, the one she would have to look after, and pester.

Her mother had a nice voice, and read stories. Meghann didn't understand the words, yet, but she understood the sound. Rhythmic. Steady. Rise and fall. Comfort.

They swaddled her in fleecy down, and settled her next to her brother.

Her journey was just beginning.



*No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love.~*

*Cindy*