

Arc of the Shah
The Bright and Boundless Path
Book 4: Tokens For Passage

By Cindy Rae



Author's note: The following love story begins at Vincent and Catherine's wedding, the same time Book 3, The Honor of Your Presence does. The characters Elijah (who is a person like Vincent) and Julia (Adam Blackmane's daughter) interested me ever since they first appeared in Book 2, Constant Star. I decided they deserved a chance at happiness.

To that end, the two leads are characters created in my "Arc of the Shah" universe, and are not canon to the show. Many tunnel folk are here, obviously, including Vincent and Catherine, Father, Devin, and others. But this is Elijah Hunter and Julia Blackmane's story.

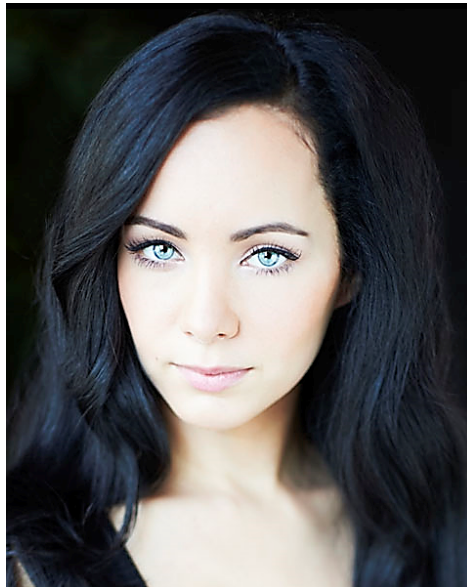
If you've stayed with me this far, I truly thank you for your kind attention. It's been a lot of fun playing in this little corner of the BatB world, and in doing that, some of the characters just plain wanted to be heard, before I veered back to a "canon" couple.

If you skip this story because it's not Vincent and Catherine centered, I completely understand. But if you stay along for the ride, I hope you have as much fun with it as I did.

The Beauty and the Beast Fanfiction Universe is large. It contains multitudes.

Chapter One

Julia and Elijah



Julia Blackmane watched the swirling dance before her and tried to be happy. Everyone *else* seemed to be, that was for certain. And to Julia's credit, she *was* trying.

It's a wedding. Everybody's supposed to be overjoyed, she thought, knowing it was true. And so it seemed - and among a larger collection of people, she could hardly imagine.

Vincent had married his Catherine. Tunnel folk were here in abundance, of course. This was his home, and these were his people, most of them dressed in tunnel clothing. But a fair number of topsiders were in the mix, as well, all part of a "Helper's network" that helped the World of Below survive. Julia was amazed at the strength of their numbers, as well as their diversity. An obviously well-heeled physician was speaking at length to an older Chinaman, while a street magician pulled coins from the ears of children. A vigorous black man strolled with a deaf girl, laughing at something she'd signed. Old, young, black, white, poor, and not so poor ... *This Shah has a mighty Shahdom,* Julia thought.

And as for the several other Shah in attendance, well. They were a group all their own. The Great Hall was filled to overflowing, as Julia remained sitting on a bench near one wall.

The bride and groom, a couple she had never met but heard stories about from her father's new wife, Diana, waltzed flawlessly amid their various guests. Vincent never took his blue eyes off his bride.

As far as he's concerned, there isn't anyone else in the room, Julia thought. The radiant woman in his arms was blondish, smallish, and named Catherine Chandler. Julia had met her when Julia's father, Adam, had married Diana Bennett. To Julia, Catherine had seemed like a good person. Lovely. Smart. Wealthy. And somehow, not as out-of-place down here as she might have once been.

Julia watched the newly married couple, as the new husband kept his new wife close, and almost continuously smiled down at her. There was nothing but pure love in his gaze.

Julia tracked the flow of the dancers with the uncanny grey eyes of her father, and remained focused on the bridal couple. *He's her opposite, in many ways*, she realized.

For one thing, he was tall to her short. Very. Coppery skin to her fairness, and leonine colors in a light blonde palette, in his hair. He had a broad muzzle. Broad shoulders. And a riven upper lip. And he wore second-hand clothes of good quality, while Julia would have sworn Catherine's white gown had come from the best of a high-end store on 5th Avenue.

It didn't seem to matter. None of it did. The room, large as it was, almost seemed unable to contain their joy.

Vincent. Vincent and Catherine. Catherine and Vincent, Julia played with the names, mentally. But he wasn't "just a Shah." He was a new one, for her family. Brand new.

And now, he's new husband.

The air around the bridal couple nearly shimmered, with his pleasure. And though she felt Catherine's happiness as well, it was Vincent Julia truly "sensed."

It was a gift she had. And one she was just coming to understand.

Vincent's happiness was so pervasive that Julia knew she had sensed it the moment she'd entered the tunnels. It was full of energy, and contained an almost ebullient kind of force, behind it. He'd been a man looking forward to becoming a bridegroom, and his empathic energy all but illuminated the dusty caverns of his tunnel home. It was

full of trust. It was full of love. And it was full of the groom's anticipation.

Julia knew he was there, the moment she'd descended the spiral staircase to his underground world. It was a feeling he still had. And if anything, it had increased, since the ceremony. *And why not? He's a married Shah, now.*

She watched as he drew Catherine's hand in from its aloft position to something closer. He planted a kiss on the back of her hand, then returned it to its customary place, for the dance.

He adores her. He truly does. Julia watched the bride tug her husband's great head down, and whisper something in his ear. He threw his head back and laughed with her, the sound blending with the other sounds of music, good cheer, and conversation, in the great, stone room. *And she loves him,* Julia concluded.

Julia watched their exchange, feeling the rush of the groom's pleasure, anew. *Hold onto it, Vincent. Hold onto that happiness. Because it can change. And it can change, so quickly.*

They were dark thoughts to think. And they weren't the only ones the Blackmane Shahrenne was having.

As the daughter of a Shah, she was coming of age. That meant she was coming into whatever empathic gifts she was destined to have. The ability to sense nuances in the groom's mood, pleasant though they were, was giving her no joy, at present.

While others in the room, like her uncle Zachariah, thought the glimmering atmosphere surrounding them all was a pleasant thing (and for him, it certainly was), Julia wasn't quite so sure. Sensing the feelings of others to this degree was still fairly new to her. And being able to pick up the psychic activity in the space wasn't a "blessing" or

a “talent” as far as she was concerned. It was a curse. One she’d been hoping she could avoid.

A balding man named Pascal walked by her, not dancing, and keeping the two long sticks he used for tapping out messages, close.

He’s glad he’s here. But he wants to be elsewhere, too, Julia sensed, as he moved to stand near an older man named Eli. There was no reason why she’d just “read” him. She just knew that she had. She also knew she was correct. The feeling was a strong one, with him. For now, strong feelings were the only kind she could pick up on.

Still, it was something she hadn’t been able to pick do, just a few months ago. *My abilities are growing. There’s no way to say they aren’t,* she thought glumly.

As far as she was concerned, this newly growing talent was something she wished she could rescind. It wasn’t that she had anything against the joy she felt in the room. Julia had nothing against happiness, itself. But she was growing increasingly uncomfortable with how receptive she was becoming.

You’re the Blackmane Shahrenne. The eldest female child of a Shah. What did you think was going to happen? Then, she answered herself: *I was hoping it would barely be there. I was hoping it wouldn’t happen at all. I don’t want to know what other people are feeling. I never did. Not everything is wedded bliss.*

Mary stood near Elizabeth, and the two older women laughed together, as they sipped their punch. Julia sent her talent out, and read them. *At least their joy is genuine,* Julia thought. Nothing was worse than reading someone who was pretending they didn’t feel what they were feeling.

Julia inhaled, and let it out, slowly. *Relax. Let it happen. If it gets too bad, you can block it. You can handle whatever comes,* Julia consoled herself. That had to be true. Otherwise, the empathic talent would drive a person mad. To that end, it was a thing Julia could “turn off,” if she chose to.

But I never wanted it to go this far, she mourned privately. And the ability to not do a thing she was becoming increasingly good at was cold comfort. *At least I knew it was time,* she consoled herself. Like the other daughters of the Shah, she’d been warned about what her approaching adulthood might bring.

But knowing the changes were coming and experiencing them were two very different things. And she knew she was growing more “sensitive” by the week.

She doubted if her younger sister could all but see the warm, glowing light that radiated from the newlywed couple, as they danced, and perhaps she never would, even when she aged. But Julia couldn’t miss it.

How much more will I be able to divine, by next year? How much? How strongly? She wondered, worrying about it. She knew she didn’t want to be in tune with what others felt. She didn’t want to “get vibes” from other people, either Shah ones or human ones. And right now, she knew she felt both.

Not all Shahrenne were so highly sensitive. Roberta Hunter, Seth and Corinne’s oldest daughter wasn’t. Or at least she didn’t seem to be. Julia glanced her way, just as Roberta tossed an auburn braid over her shoulder. *She’s what? Seventeen? Eighteen? Maybe?* Julia had to admit she didn’t know.

She's young, yet. Maybe in time, Julia thought, watching as Roberta “danced” with her two twin sisters, among the throng of guests. It was quite the party. Light “shone” from them, too. Especially when they laughed. *I guess Shahrenne have their own light,* Julia thought, watching the trio of them.

It was nothing compared to the aura that surrounded Vincent and his Catherine, however. Julia's grey eyes kept tracking back to them. They were the strongest force in the room. By far. Their elation outstripped everyone else's – and by a good margin.

And I know it, she thought. *They feel... invincible, right now. Beyond happy. Sublime.* Julia shifted uncomfortably, on the hard wooden seat. *He's strong. So strong.* It was almost uncomfortable, to take them in.

At twenty-one years old, Julia knew she was feeling her own power, as she watched them. And she was feeling that, distinctly. She let it flow through her, even as she learned more about how to manage it. Vincent's emotions came through clearly, even amid the throng of guests.

He's thinking how much he loves her. He's thinking how fortunate he is. That she's the most beautiful woman in the room, in the whole world. That there's never been anyone like her, and that he's the most blessed of men...

Julia then concentrated on Catherine, and sorted out her emotions from those of more than a hundred others people. *And she's thinking that she loves him with all she is, and how richly they deserve this. She loves him. With her whole heart.*

I hope it lasts.

Julia could almost see the shimmering bond between Vincent and Catherine race to keep up with them, as they danced. *That's funny,*

she thought. *As if one could outrun a bond with a Shah mate.* God knows her mother had tried. With spectacularly terrible results.

She blinked, and looked away from Vincent and Catherine, and back toward her family.

Adam, her father, had never much cared for dancing, so he wasn't waltzing with his new wife, the beautiful redhead, Diana Bennett Blackmane. Instead, they were seated at a long trestle table, which was covered with half-empty plates and beverage glasses, talking to Peter Alcott, Master Wong, and Alexander, Julia's younger brother. Everyone looked happy. Everyone.

Julia felt wistful. It made little sense.

"Here. The punch is good for what ails you." The voice came from her left, and it was familiar. Familiar since childhood. *Elijah.* Zachariah and Seth's very handsome youngest brother.

Auburn haired and smiling, he held out the proffered cup. *Elijah Dawn Hunter. Everybody's favorite ... whatever it is Elijah was, at the moment. Babysitter. Jester. Confidant. Helper. Shah.*

"Is it spiked?" Julia asked, taking the glass cup and trying a sip. It wasn't.

"No, but we can fix that, if you'd like." He sat companionably beside her and set a flask between them. The long bench was fairly empty, except for a group of children, giggling, at one end. Almost everyone else was dancing. And those who weren't dancing were either drinking, talking, eating, or laughing.

Elijah liked it here. He sensed that Julia didn't.

She left the flask untouched. Julia shrugged, looking down at it, realizing that alcohol probably wasn't an answer for how she was feeling. "Maybe later," she replied.

"There's a ton of food. Have you eaten?" He was solicitous. And kind. And well-mannered. That was Elijah, in a nutshell. He had a charming personality, and could come off as both a gentleman and a scholar. Probably more the former, than the latter, though he had his talents.

It's not food I want. It's to leave the room, Julia thought, but didn't say. *It's too crowded in here. Too many people feeling... too much.*

"Not yet," she replied, in answer to his question. He felt... content. Julia realized he usually did. Perhaps that was the mark of Shah like him. Neither Protector nor Nomad, his mother had dubbed him a "Charismatic." It was an apt enough description of him.

They had been friends of a sort, since childhood. She had even approved, when he'd gotten a silver earring. He wore a small, lobe-hugging cuff tonight, along with dark slacks and a vest, and a white dress shirt. He looked handsome. She considered his offer for food. Concentrating on other things helped block the stray emotions she was getting strafed with.

"Not yet. Thanks. Again." She tacked the last on, realizing that the pauses in between her replies and the brief responses made her sound bitchy. He uncapped the flask and poured some in his cup. Then he poured a splash in hers, without asking. Julia sipped it. It was good whiskey.

"This isn't half bad," she complimented, taking a larger swallow.

"Dad's private stock. I think I was supposed to share it with the groom." Elijah grinned. "But he doesn't seem interested in drinking, tonight."

No, he doesn't. He seems interested in dancing with his wife.

"What a shame." Julia almost smiled into her cup.

"I know. I'm feeling terrible about it." He dead-panned, his good mood obvious.

Across the room, Adam nuzzled Diana's neck, and she laughed, a low, feminine sound, discernible even in the noise of the room. Julia's father planted a kiss on his wife's skin. Julia knew she was going to have to get used to seeing that.

Elijah's green eyes followed the path of Julia's gaze, as Diana cupped her husband's soft, darkly bearded cheek, with her palm. *Ah. Okay. I get it*, he thought.

"Now for *real* food, they would have to have had one of Celeste's apple cobblers," he ventured, naming Julia's deceased mother. "My mom still uses her recipe to this day. Nobody could cook like Celeste."

Oh lord. Tears suddenly sprang up, behind Julia's grey eyes. *I'm getting misty-eyed over the mention of apple cobbler. Really?*

"Th..thank you." She gripped the punch glass way too hard. "It's nice of you to say something kind about her, Elijah." *No wonder you're everyone's favorite. Do you know how special you are, for doing that? Do you know I've been sitting her feeling bad about my abilities coming in, when it's really other things I've been feeling bad about?*

"Is it hard, watching Adam with Diana?" Elijah asked, getting right to the point. He knew they'd only been married for a few months.

Julia considered the question. *In a way, yes. And in a way, no. And it shouldn't be, no matter what. She saved him, after all.*

She shook her dark-haired head in the negative, though she looked down into her punch, rather than up at her father, and the woman who was now technically her step-mother.

"No, not really," she answered, after a moment. "It's a wedding. I think everybody's entitled to be happy. I just think it's hard that everyone wants to pretend my mother didn't exist. Or worse, that they hated her, and they're glad she's gone."

Elijah knew that Celeste Blackmane had died about a year and a half ago. Julia had suffered through her long illness, her passing, and her Father's subsequent collapse. Then Diana had appeared, and seemed to make everything all right again, in the Blackmane household.

Except it's never that easy, is it? Elijah thought.

"I don't think anyone thinks that," he returned. "I think most people just understand they married too young, Julia. Even *they* understood that much." He took another sip from his own cup, stalling, so he could marshal his thoughts.

"But Celeste was an amazing mother," he continued. "What went on between her and Adam was their business, not anybody else's. And no one can argue that it produced three amazing people. You, your brother, and sister."

Julia tuned out the auras in the room, and most of the people in it, and concentrated on what he was saying. *Yes. Yes, they did.* The words were the balm that Julia needed. She touched the tears to her fingertips, trying to be rid of the moisture without ruining what little eye makeup she wore.

"Thank you, Elijah. I mean that. Deeply."

His voice was low, and intimate. It was the kind of voice that inspired confidences. "It's just the truth. And when it came to cooking?" Elijah continued, knowing that speaking well of Julia's mother was helping, "Lord. Zachariah and I have to *beg* Ramona to make Celeste's chicken and yellow rice recipe, every year," he said, naming his mother. "Of course, you know Zach. It's one pot for him, and the second for everybody else."

Elijah was purposely keeping things light. Julia had clearly carried enough heavy thoughts with her, this evening.

A sad sort of smile, one of remembrance, teased Julia's somber mouth. A mouth he knew he'd seen set in a stubborn line, more than once. "Yes. I remember the last time Ramona made it."

Elijah listened, as he took her in. Unlike many of the other women, this evening, she had opted not to wear a dress or fancy skirt. Black jeans and low boots encased a long pair of slender legs. A white blouse, worn untucked and with long tails, was clasped at her waist by a wide, black leather belt, one that made her waist look almost impossibly small. Her dark hair was down, clean, and brushed until it gleamed, in the copious candle light. Her grey eyes, well, those were unmistakable. Those were Adam's eyes, only a few shades darker, and sometimes mistaken for a unique shade of blue. They were more feline than Adam's, in shape, if that was possible, and just as darkly lashed.

Bewitching. Elijah thought. Sometime in the past couple of years, Julia had gone from a slightly gangly teenager to a strikingly lovely young woman. The youngest Hunter Shah was impressed.

"I spent too many summers at your place not to remember that your mom is the world's greatest chef," Julia complimented sincerely. *And*

she made almost everything else look easy, too. "My father says I have to go back up to the mining camp, and get lessons."

"Diana doesn't cook?" Elijah asked.

"Diana boils water," Julia replied.

It felt good to say that her mother had bested her step-mother, at something. It also felt slightly petty. *Stupid, even, all things considered,* Julia acknowledged internally. But still, it felt good.

Elijah said nothing to that, as they both sipped more punch and watched the assembled guests have a good time. Couples moved on and off the floor, as they either tired, or got the urge to dance. Some of the children were chasing each other, in between the whirling guests, while still others played the violin, or helped the adults. A portly man named William kept a keg of ale flowing, while several people brought a seemingly endless supply of food into the Great Hall, on trays.

"Check out Seth and Corey," Elijah nudged. Julia did.

"They look ridiculously happy," Julia replied.

Seth Night Hunter was feeding strawberries to his pregnant wife. Corinne was eating the ripe, red, – and out of season - fruit, and he held up another, waiting. An untouched glass of champagne sat at her elbow.

"They do," he agreed. *She can't drink alcohol. So he's feeding her,* Elijah thought. *Nice, brother.* Elijah smiled, and let his eyes find his other brother, to check on what he was doing.

Zachariah had just crossed the room to speak to a beautiful, auburn-haired woman seated near Father. *Brigit O'Donnell.* Elijah knew who

she was. She'd read from a children's book, at Vincent and Catherine's ceremony. She and Julia were even roommates, in the guest quarters.

"Looks like Zach is going to pay his respects," Elijah nodded in his general direction.

"So I see," Julia replied, glancing the big shah's way.

"Have you talked to Brigit, yet?" Elijah asked, watching as his older brother bent down slightly, to speak to her.

Julia shook her head. "I barely unpacked before she had to leave for rehearsal. She seems okay, though. If I have time, I want to show her some of my drawings, later. Maybe see if she can hook me up with a publisher, in New York?"

Elijah smiled at that. "You always loved to draw. You should speak with her."

"You don't think it's ... I don't know. Presumptuous? Lane?"

Elijah pretended to ponder the last of his drink. "I think you have a rare talent. And that sharing it with others is nothing but a kindness."

Julia was taken aback by the sweetness of his words. *Charismatic, indeed. Like Vincent, only different.* Even without using her gift, she knew that the handsome young Shah seated next to her was nothing but sincere. *Oh, Elijah. You really are a prince, you know that?*

They both watched Zachariah offer Brigit his hand, which she accepted.

"Well what do you know?" Elijah stared, as the Irishwoman rose, and began to dance with his very blonde, very large, older brother.

"I see it," Julia nodded. Brigit looked resplendent in red velvet. "She's really pretty. And a celebrity," Julia added, not sure if Brigit's fame

was a good or a bad thing, for Elijah's brother. Probably the latter, but who knew?

Zachariah had a ghost of a smile on his face, as he danced past. Which for Zachariah was like a full laugh, on a normal person.

"He seems to agree with you, about her being pretty," Elijah said.

Zachariah threw back his head and laughed at some comment Brigit made. Julia and Elijah stared at each other, exchanging stunned glances.

"Did you see that?" she asked, amazed. *Zachariah? Laughing? Nations were about to crumble.*

"Yes. Did you?" Elijah's eyes were wide. He needed confirmation.

"Should we prepare for the apocalypse?" she asked.

"Probably at least a small one," he answered. Zachariah turned his new dance partner in a small circle. She was clearly enjoying herself as much as he was.

"Oh, boy," Elijah said, not sure what else he could say, considering.

"It's important that he find someone, isn't it?" Julia asked, setting down her cup.

She took Elijah's punch out of his hand, lest he spill its scant remains.

"Yes. Yes it is. Very," he confirmed. "But it's not why we came here. And Ramona would probably like it if he chose someone closer to home. Mom is kind of keen, that way."

Zachariah whispered in his dance partner's ear. The famous Irish author smiled and replied, clearly fascinated by her huge, white-blond escort.

"Fate may have other plans," Julia concluded. The dance ended, and Zachariah didn't even seat Brigit back next to Father. Picking her book up from the table, she hooked her arm in his proffered one, and the two of them proceeded to thread their way toward the exit, together.

"You do see this," Julia stated.

"I absolutely do. You go, big brother." Elijah cheered softly.

"Do you think they'll bond?" Julia's eyes were as wide as Elijah's had been.

"After knowing her all of five minutes?" Elijah asked, denying it as possible, but hoping, just the same.

Julia's gaze followed the departing couple. It took no psychic to read their body language. Still, Julia picked up on their vibe. "He's interested. So is she," Julia stated. "In a... really good kind of way."

Elijah's green eyes narrowed slightly as he looked back at Julia, getting the feeling the comment was gleaned from more than just idle observation.

You're twenty one. It was as if he'd just realized it. *Twenty-one and... getting more sensitive? Does Adam know?* If he did, he hadn't mentioned anything, when they'd last talked.

What did you just do, Shahrenne? he wondered.

He knew she was at the age when many Shah daughters came into their empathic abilities, if they had any. Julia had spoken little of hers. *Perhaps she's gifted. Or, maybe it's barely there, and she caught a lucky guess.* It varied, from person to person.

Julia shrugged at his perusal. "Marry in haste," she stated.

"And repent at leisure," he finished for her. It was a topic about which she knew much, considering her parents' marital tsunami. He set his question about her abilities aside, for now.

He decided that perhaps Zachariah and Brigit weren't the only pair that could leave the room. "Speaking of repenting, have you seen the hot springs they have here?" Elijah asked. "They're a testament to sin. Better than the falls, back home, for temperature. Or the pond we all used to swim in, at your place."

Julia shook her head "no." *But if it's a way to leave here, I'm game. Too many people, here.*

"Come on. You have got to see this place. Seth showed me around when we got here," Elijah offered, rising. He put the flask away.

"Do you think it's all right if we just... leave?" Julia asked. The room was crammed with people. *Surely we could slip out?*

"If it isn't, we can always say we saw Zachariah do it, first." Elijah said, tugging on her hand.



Chapter Two

Token



The hot springs was devoid of other people. And why not? Everyone else was at the wedding reception. Julia stepped into the warm, humid room. Torches lit the walls. Baskets of fresh towels sat near the rim of the stone edge, ready for guests. Steps had been cut down into the water. Stone 'benches' ringed the edge. She put her hand in. "God. It's like bath water!"

"It's deep near the center. Shallow near the edge." Elijah was already stripping out of his wedding clothes. "Remember summers up near the falls? Swimming in the runoff, when we were kids?" he asked, setting a fitted coat on a nearby rock.

"You used to dare me to jump in." She grinned. She had been fourteen, perhaps. It had been one of the last summers before her mother had gotten sick. The last happy summer she remembered.

"I still dare you. Come on." He pulled off his boots, turning his back to her.

Julia smiled, though he didn't see it. *You were always such a rebel.*

It was such a renegade idea. Going swimming when they should have been sipping punch and making polite conversation with strangers. It was radical. Free. It was exactly what she wanted, right now.

Julia glanced around, aware that most of the tunnel inhabitants swam nude. Though the falls she had swum in with Elijah were near his home in Canada, she and Elijah had also jumped into water in various states of undress, when they were very small. Or at least when she was. The three year gap in their ages was a chasm, when she was five to his eight, or nine to his twelve, nearly thirteen. The last time they had swum, everyone had been clothed. He had been seventeen.

He yanked off his socks and she realized that if they were racing, she was falling behind. With a shrug, she concluded her underthings would do, for a bathing suit. They were old friends, after all.

Before he could see her hesitate, she unbuckled her belt. She knew he heard it clatter to the stone floor. She had to hurry to catch up to him. He was already out of his shirt, and unfastening his pants.

Elijah, unlike most of his brothers, wore briefs that clung to his thigh muscles, under his pants. Leaner than either of his Shah siblings, he felt the cold more keenly, and would not give up a stitch if he didn't have to. It was a fact for which Julia was immensely grateful, since it meant they were both decently covered. She wished she had worn something prettier than the plain white ensemble she sported, but her blouse was white, so...

Why would I want to look pretty, or anything at all, for Elijah? she chided herself. They were and always had been just friends. She gave him her back, as she unbuttoned her cuffs.

Then, she turned, and her impression of Elijah as “just a friend” underwent just a bit of revision.

Grey. His briefs are grey. Not unlike the charcoal color of his pants. The fabric was thin, and muscle-hugging. From this vantage point, Julia could state that his buttocks were, well, perfect. His legs were firm, and his thighs and calves were well-sculpted. His back was broad shouldered and well-muscled. He was a climber, and had the build to show for it. Auburn body hair matched the hair on his head.

Were you always this... gorgeous? She thought, unable to substitute any other word for it.

He dove in, not waiting for her. Powerful arms sliced through the warm water of the springs, propelling him like a great, red arrow. The same muscles that allowed him to scale rocks and trees with ease also made him an able swimmer. He'd always loved the water. Julia knew that he liked to dive from the highest rock, into the falls, back home. They were heights she would not dare; heights even his brother Seth, respected.

The dark red of his mane shimmered, in the water. Dry, he was very red, with shades of brown, mixed in. Wet, he was a dark, fiery color that looked like warm brandy.

He turned back to look at her, just as she stepped out of her jeans.

Whoa.

Julia was Julia. She was the little girl who came up to the logging camp, some summers, while her parents visited with his, or tried to patch together their disintegrating relationship.

Well, she's not a little girl any more, Elijah thought, as her bare foot cleared the black denim. Her dark hair fell forward, hiding her face as she bent down.

There had been no love lost between Celeste Blackmane and Corinne. In that, Julia had been at least partly correct. Adam's marital unhappiness was well known. But Ramona had been fond of Julia's mother, and attentive to her children. As such, they'd been guests at the North Edge logging camp, often. That being the case, Elijah knew he'd seen Julia scantily dressed, before.

Then why does this feel like the first time I've ever seen her? Elijah asked himself.

White skin gleamed in the torchlight, as Julia, still wearing her blouse, picked up her jeans and set them on a nearby boulder. Long legs stepped gracefully over the uneven stones. She was nimble, and coordinated. *How fair she is. How... impossibly fair,* Elijah realized.

Adam Blackmane was a totally different clan than the Hunters. Elijah's people had come to the Americas from Scandinavia, several hundred years ago, where the Blackmanes seemed to have always been in Montana, since before the Cheyenne and Sioux nations showed up at Little Bighorn. Alexander used to say that one of them had probably been in it.

But Julia was Julia. It was a sentence that was stuck in his head, as he watched her settle her boots near her discarded jeans. Her head was still down, watching her footing as she stepped carefully over the rugged stones.

Julia, Alexander, Chloe. Mentally, Elijah ticked them off, for no reason he could name. The three Blackmane children. Handsome, for the most part. Sad, to some degree. Connected to each other by their parentage, their triumphs, and their sorrows. Fair skinned. Dark haired. Grey eyes, except for Chloe. Chloe was more sandy-haired and hazel-eyed, much like Celeste had been. Alex and Julia had both

taken after Adam. The two eldest Blackmanes had been long-limbed, fast running teenagers, especially Alex. It seemed neither of them would ever grow into their coltish legs.

Julia seemed to have solved that problem, at least.

The legs that had stepped out of her black jeans were amazingly shapely, firm, and looked even longer as she adjusted her bikini briefs about her hips. They were plain underwear. Nothing flashy or come hither. White. Nylon. Unremarkable.

Except they slung up over her hips near her waist, making her legs look impossibly willowy, as she moved. She had unbuttoned her blouse, but still wore it, loose. Elijah watched as she kept her back to him and slid the white, filmy material down her arms. He swallowed, as she dropped the garment. Her dark fall of silky hair reminded him of an American Indian. Blue black. Straight. Soft. Even from here it looked soft. And like it could use a trim. A “tail” of it tickled the small of her back.

And all that’s best of dark and bright meets in her aspect, and her eyes. Elijah sucked in his breath, as Byron danced across his awareness. She turned around.

He turned away. He had to. Pretended he had not seen. It was the only way he could stay sane. *She’s absolutely beautiful.* And no longer fourteen years old. It was like having a photograph from an old album in your head or hand, when the current version of the person stepped off the train or plane. Jarring. Different. Utterly. He couldn’t get the picture of her out of his head.

The simple, white, underwire bra cupped her breasts like a pair of hands could only long to do. Straps strained against the soft swell, against the weight. There was a touch of lace over the cotton, and a

tiny bow, at the center. He closed his eyes, trying to hold the image, and banish it, at the same time. Her torso ... *an Italian Master should have carved her*. Give her an apple and she would have been a slender Venus. Or a willowy Eve.

He heard her step into the springs, and groan her delight. "Oh, you're right. This is glorious," she said, unaware of his impression of her. She wasn't trying to "read" him. There was no reason to.

She twisted her hair up, thinking this would be a brief sojourn, that they would go back after just a few minutes, pretending they had not been in here. She would have to leave her wet underwear wrapped in a towel, of course, along with her bra. *Oh well*. It didn't matter.

Elijah still had his back to her, swimming over near the far edge of the pool. It was decadently warm. Julia let her hair fall into the water, having no way to pin it up. She realized too late that she should have worn a barrette or something, to keep the long fall aloft, but hadn't. *Oh, well. Looks like we'll just have to own up to it. We both have wet hair*, she concluded.

She swam to the center of the pool, sure strokes taking her there, as Elijah turned around.

"My blow drier doesn't work down here. No place to plug it in," she said.

"Looks like we're in trouble, then," He clearly didn't care that they were. "Because I damn sure don't use one."

She chuckled at that. *God, you're beautiful when you smile*, he thought.

"Do you know how deep it goes?" she asked, treading water. It was working magic on her previously frayed nerves. Or maybe it was his good company doing that.

Deep. Way too deep. He felt his heart move, looking at her. "Not sure." he replied, his red hair looking like copper and new bronze, in the water. Eyes a different shade of green than Zachariah's stared at her, a moment.

"Let's find out then," she challenged, jack-knifing her body down into the water.

The sight of her bottom in wet underwear was going to keep him up tonight, Elijah realized. He felt the motion of the water as she swam beneath him, then dove down after her.

He was far stronger than she, but Julia was more aquadynamic. She was a slender javelin, diving toward the bottom, while he simply muscled his way down, pushing water out of his way with huge, cupped palms.

She touched bottom first, and passed him on the way back up.

Elijah saw the metal grate that someone had obviously set on the bottom, to make sure the children did not run afoul of the narrowing rocks, below it. *This Shah takes good care of his people*, he thought, knowing the metal grate served a purpose.

Pushing off the bottom of the pool, Elijah's far more powerful legs propelled him upward, quickly. They both broke the surface at the same time.

"Did you see the grate?" she panted.

"Yes. The source looks to be under it. There's a current in here, but it's gentle."

"I think I saw something near the edge of the metal. I'm going back down."

Before he could say something else, she'd already dove back beneath him, again. Drawing in a huge breath, he followed her back to the bottom.

The water was fairly cloudy, owing both to the depth and the amount of sand they had stirred up. She was holding on to the grate with one hand, to keep herself down, as she tried to pull something out of the stony bottom, with the other. After a moment of fruitless struggle, he knew she needed to go up for breath. He put his hand on the grate, and pointed up, indicating she should return to the surface. She pulled his other hand down in the water, showing him what she had been touching.

Something solid was wedged between the metal and the rock. Stuck. She pushed off the bottom, her dark sex apparent through the wet nylon of her panties. He expelled some air as she swam past. *Steady, boy.*

He gripped the thing she had spotted, wondering how she ever found it. It felt like a coin of some sort. Round. Metal. Wedged. Moving sand and silt aside with his hand, he finally got to the rock that held it fast. It was stuck to a heavy stone, and slick with moss or algae. He scooped the entire rock up in his hand, and headed for the surface, feeling the need to breathe burn his lungs.

He broke the surface to find Julia looking concerned. "You were down there way longer than I expected." Her voice was breathless. Was that concern, he detected?

"Let's see what you found." He held up the muddy rock for her inspection, and swam over to the edge with it. She swam behind him,

impressed that he'd managed to bring the heavy thing up. He was far stronger than she. Left to her own devices, she doubted if she could have ever retrieved it.

He set the stone on the edge, then pushed himself up to sit beside it. She was about to do the same, but stayed in the safety of the water, realizing that her briefs were now transparent, and indecent. *Oh, well.* As long as she stayed in the water, she would be okay. She'd just have to tell him he had to leave before she did. Or grab one of the handy towels, and make sure she was bundled up in it.

"What's this?" he wondered, inspecting her find. The coin was old, encrusted, and neither money nor jewelry. At least nothing he recognized. The rock held it fast, but only by its bottom edge. Elijah hit the stone against the tunnel floor until it broke, and the coin finally clattered free. There was a letter "Y" cut out of the middle.



"New York City ... Trans... Transit Authority," she read, brushing debris away from it. "I've seen these. It's a subway token," she realized.

"Money for the trains," she further explained. He nodded.

"Must have fallen in, somehow," he replied.

She held it in her hand, liking the feel of it, and the weight. She even liked the cut-out center.

"Where could you go, if you used it?" he asked, slipping back down into the warm water, beside her.

Her mind immediately turned to fancy. "Oh, anywhere, I suppose. All over the city. Right to the edge. Farther, maybe." Her arms folded on the edge of the stone rim, and her head laid on her arms, as she rolled the coin on the rocks. He copied her pose.

"Farther?" he prompted. Wet hair made his handsome face look more chiseled, and his earring gleamed.

She smiled, looking at her bit of brass treasure. "Sure. Take the subway to the airport, the airport to Paris." Her soft grey eyes were dreaming it.

"This could get you to Paris?" he teased.

"All the way there," she assured. "You just need a way to start." She floated her legs behind her, in the water, looking at him, yet not. She was lost, someplace, and dreaming about it. Someplace not real.

"Would it bring you back home again?" he asked. Her mouth looked...like he very much wanted to taste it.

She seemed to consider his question. "I don't think so. You'd need another token for that." She smiled at the thought.

He inched closer. "You should always take two of them, then."

He had brought his mouth very close to hers, and it seemed the most natural thing in the world that he reach over, pull her closer by the back of her neck, and kiss her. So he did.

It was not brotherly, and it was not sexual, though Julia sensed a little of each, there. It was the kiss between two people who were familiar with each other, yet just meeting; the kiss of a man who was tasting, yet unsure.

The response was of a woman who was answering, yet also unsure. Both were on very new ground, with the other.

They both felt something change, between them, as “friendship” shifted to a waking kind of passion. The kiss deepened. They knew when they both took their next breath, they would no longer just be childhood friends. For that reason alone, they both felt the need to let it continue.

A dozen thoughts thundered through Elijah’s sensitive mind, as he prolonged the kiss, and explored it. *Warm. She’s warm. Warm in her mouth, but cool in her eyes. Julia. Beautiful Julia. Kind, yet thorny.* The dichotomy was fascinating. He wondered if she opened her eyes now if they would be unfocussed, a little. He knew his would.

Sweet. How could I not know his kiss would be so sweet? Julia thought. This was Elijah, the rake, the flirt, the easy-going, handsome, youngest son. Unserious. Charming. Kind. *How did I not know he would kiss me with such ... curiosity? Tenderly, like he would never harm me? Never harm anyone?*

He kissed her just that way. Then, more seriously, like he had just discovered something important.

When they broke apart, her eyes were indeed unfocussed. She looked at him with wonder.

He let long seconds tick off, between them. She wasn't going to protest, and she wasn't making light of it, or pretending it didn't matter. *Good. We’re changed. And it’s all right that we are,* he thought.

She raised a dripping wet hand and touched his lower lip, in wonder. *Elijah?* In a way, she felt as if she were only just now meeting him.

He gave her questing finger a quick kiss. *We’ll figure it out.* He might as well have said it aloud.

This was a wedding, however, and Elijah had some familial obligations.

"I promised Corinne and Roberta I'd help watch the monsters for a while, so she and Seth could dance, or at least enjoy the party," he whispered regretfully. "I have to get back."

"So do I." She didn't want to move from the pool.

But she did. Eventually.

He went first. Grabbing a towel from the basket, he dried himself vigorously, then put his shirt back on. She gave him the privacy of her back as she heard his wet briefs hit the rock floor. After he dressed and left, she did the same, rolling her wet underthings in a towel.

Elijah. Handsome and devastating. She had never thought of him that way, before. Now she could think of nothing else. That, and the feel of his singular mouth, on hers.



Chapter Three

Departure

In the Great Hall, Vincent held Catherine aloft, looking like a leonine version of Rhett Butler. Safe in his massive, loving grasp, Catherine had one hand around his neck, the other open, palm up, to catch the bounty that floated down upon them. Julia watched as sparkling pieces of confetti drifted down from a soft net an odd boy named Mouse had rigged up, above them. The happy couple left amid well wishes, bits of rice, glitter, and colored tissue paper, torn into tiny bits by helpful hands.

Devin Wells had arranged for a van to take them wherever they wanted to go. He would follow behind in a sedan, until they reached the edge of the city. They would come back in about a week. There were loud cheers, amid the sparkling flutter-fall.

He loves her. He loves her so much, Julia thought, watching them depart for their honeymoon. It was a sensation, across her sensitive mind. One his bride clearly returned. *They're excited to go. They're not afraid. They're just... happy. So happy.*

Vincent left his wedding reception with his laughing bride. And for the rest of the evening the dancers tread amid stardust.

Zachariah and Bridget, Elijah noted, had yet to return to the room. Julia had re-entered the Great Hall looking much the same as she'd done when they left it, though her hair was damp. So was his.

Julia sat with a group of the younger children off to one side. She had scooped a good deal of the contents of the floor into one area, and was showing the tunnel children how to draw pictures in the mixture, with one finger. They squealed with delight and imitated her. A little girl named Nana drew a picture of a duck. A boy named Geoffrey added a pond, and a tree to it. They were all having a ball.

Elijah waltzed with Chloe, Seth's twins, and even little Daniel. And Julia, once, breathlessly.

Michael, a college student originally from the tunnels, danced with Julia, as well.

Elijah didn't care for the way Michael looked at her, but could do nothing about it. He had no claim to her, in spite of what had happened in the bathing pool. *At least, not yet.* And though Michael was giving her a certain look, she wasn't returning it, beyond what polite manners called for. Elijah took comfort in that.

Approaching midnight, the tunnel children were past sleepy. Julia “bunny hopped” them to their dorm rooms. She looked more relaxed and happy, not as tense as she had when Elijah had first seen her earlier this evening.

She danced and hopped with more than thirty young souls, behind her. *She’ll make an excellent mother, some day*, Elijah realized, *if she ever decides to try it.*

Elijah accompanied her as she piled the line of kids all in to their waiting bunks. Mary and Elizabeth helped, and made sure they were all tucked in.

Annabeth and Beatrice, Seth's twins, had asked to sleep with the tunnel children, and it was allowed. Elijah gave them a kiss goodnight. "Be good, demons," he told them. Annie made a fang face, and held her hands up like claws. Elijah returned the look, showing far more fang. Annie giggled. So did Bea. Uncle Elijah was their favorite. Uncle Elijah was everyone's favorite. His charismatic nature all but guaranteed it.

"I'll walk you to your room," Elijah told Julia, when she was ready to go. She did not protest.

"This place is amazing," she observed, as they walked. "Thank you for before."

The kiss, the swim, the coin, or something else?

"My pleasure." He meant it, whichever it was.

"You feel things right at the surface. But you don't always show them," she said, revealing how much of her gift was developing.

No, I don't. How sensitive are you becoming, Shahrenne? And how much of a problem is that going to be, for us? He knew the bond had

caused trouble, for her parents, once Celeste had realized she was unhappy.

"Why do you keep what you're thinking to yourself, so much?" she asked.

"People don't necessarily want to know what the youngest thinks," Elijah explained. "And you just read me, didn't you?"

She stopped in the middle of the hallway, embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. It's been... happening, lately. I haven't learned how to control it, yet." she was flustered, and her normally fair skin blushed a becoming shade of pink. "It's not all the time. I promise I don't pry," she hastened to add.

He wondered how much of his musings she'd just picked up on. If it was just impressions, or something more definite. Probably the former. "It's all right, Jules," he replied, using the nickname from their childhood. "You're First Shahrenne of Adam's line." He said it as if that explained everything. "Next time you see your aunt Cheryl, ask her how she managed."

"Already did. She said she could barely sense anything from Adam. And that was when they were in the same room. Nothing, from anybody else. That's just how it was."

"I take it that's not how it is with you," he ventured.

She hesitated, a moment. "I think I... I think I knew there was a Shah in these tunnels the minute I set foot in them. He was... almost broadcasting how happy he was. I mean... I *knew* he was here, sure. The wedding was why we came. But I ... felt him, too. Somehow."

Elijah cut her a glance. She wouldn't be the first one of her kind to be sensitive to his race. But she'd be a rare one, if she could do it at a distance, and having never met the Shah.

"Father told Seth that Vincent was empathic from a young age. And Vincent was... what he was feeling... It was very strong. Zachariah picked up on it, too." *But then, Zachariah is naturally sensitive to intense emotions. It's part of what makes him a good Protector. Stay strong, Shahrenne. What will be will be.*

They walked on through the stone hallways in an easy silence.

How much do I even tell you? she thought. Julia was discovering that she could successfully read almost every Shah in any given room, if she concentrated, and even sometimes if she didn't. People, too, though some of them were harder. She decided to approach Elijah with at least some of her newfound knowledge.

"Tonight... Vincent's happiness... I did feel it. Strongly. It was almost... overwhelming, Elijah."

"I think we were all picking up on that," Elijah soothed, smiling. *It's a Shah's wedding night. Why wouldn't he be happy?*

"Yeah. I guess so," Julia answered.

But she knew there was more. Seth's love for Corinne had also been coming through, in waves. She'd also sensed that father had felt out of his element, so far from home, but content to be there, for his wife's sake.

When it came to reading her step-mother, however, Julia had to admit that Diana was almost a blank. Some people were. Catherine, however, had thrown off sparks of joy. Jacob, her father-in-law, had been against the couple, at one time, and was now very pleased. He'd

spent at least some of the evening musing about it, and regretting it. And that wasn't just reading his "feelings." It was also understanding the reason "why."

"Still, it felt... I don't know. Kind of overwhelming. It, um, it was a crowded room. There was a lot of ... noise in it."

Elijah nodded, not sure if she meant the usual kind or the psychic kind. Probably the latter, considering.

"You learn to adjust to that," he replied. "Everyone does."

She would and she had been. Julia knew was developing the techniques that would help her to shut out the psychic "noise" in a room. But it was a learning process, like everything else.

"Can you still sense him? Sense them?" Elijah asked, knowing the bridal couple was growing more distant by the second.

"No, not at all," Julia shook her head. "But... I can still feel he was here, if that makes any sense. Kind of like hearing an echo."

Elijah knew what she meant. It was the sort of feeling most people picked up on, when they'd been to a joyous event. Just moreso, for those who were empathically sensitive.

"Aunt Cheryl said she was only receptive to Adam, at all, and only when he she held his hand, or something. She always said it was just kind of a vague impression about how he was feeling, but she couldn't even be sure of that. Since she knew him, and could see his expression, she just kind of figured that's what she was picking up on, anyway."

"Cheryl's a good woman. And not everyone has a gift. Or develops it," Elijah replied, indicating they were to turn left, at the next intersection.

Some gift, Julia thought wryly, following his unspoken direction. She lifted her shoulders in a shrug. "I think the first person I ever sensed was Adam, a couple months ago. I think that's who I'm most sensitive to, right now. The Shah in general. It kind of makes sense, considering how empathic you are, naturally. I'll get the hang of it."

Yes. Yes, you will. Don't be afraid of it, Julia. It's your birthright.

"Good." He smiled. "I guess that means it's not going to surprise you when I kiss you goodnight, then," he stated boldly.

"Considering you kissed me earlier, I don't think it would be a surprise, anyway." She smiled back at him. There was at least a little bit of invitation in her glance.

So, she'd liked his kiss. Good. That was very, very good.

He stopped their progress in the hall, and held her deftly, for a moment, not pulling her too close. Her eyes fascinated him. They were the color of a grey sky, right before a storm, rimmed in black. She'd lost her eye makeup back at the hot springs, and hadn't bothered to reapply it. She looked young. Interested. Wide open. Like she was with someone she knew very well, and trusted, yet someone she was also just meeting.

It was all right that she did. After all, those things were true, for them. *I've known you all your life. And in a way, I'm just meeting you*, he thought.

His kiss was gentle, yet thorough. She returned it in equal measure. They felt... *well matched*, was the phrase Julia's mind conjured for it. *Like we "fit" together, somehow, naturally.*

When the kiss broke, her eyes had that unfocussed look again. Like someone who'd just stepped into a dream. She shook her head to clear it, and let him walk her the rest of the way to her room.

He kissed her goodnight again at her doorway, wanting more, yet knowing it was far too soon. *Easy. Let her get used to the idea.* He let her go, then smiled to himself, wondering how many of his intentions she could already sense, empathically. Probably not many. Even he didn't know what he wanted from her, just yet. Not exactly.

Elijah was making his way back to his borrowed quarters, when he heard a familiar snarl. It was just ahead of him, and off to one side, in one of the smaller chambers. There was no mistaking that sound.

Zachariah. Something's caught his attention. Something that was about to be injured or dead, Elijah guessed.

He knew that growl. It didn't augur well, for whatever Zachariah was growling at. Elijah picked up his pace.

By the time Elijah reached him, Zachariah was standing in what looked to be a tool storage room, a smashed wall in front of him, a bloody metal pole in his hand. *Well, that took less than a day.* Seth was already with him. Brigit O'Donnell was holding the big Protector's cape, looking like an erstwhile Guinevere to his battle-born King Arthur.

According to Zachariah, something evil had been traversing a secret tunnel. *Something evil was going to wish it hadn't done that,* unless Elijah missed his guess. The pole was already bloody.

Elijah went to inspect his brother's handiwork, then caught a glimmer of something, inside in the wall. He bent down and retrieved an amazing half-mask that looked like it was made of gold. *They have strange monsters down here,* Elijah mused.

Once they had assessed that the wedding guests were in no immediate danger, Zachariah told Brigit he would escort her back to her room. Elijah wouldn't have time to speak to Julia, again, he

realized. Zachariah left with the famous writer, and unless Elijah missed his guess, his big brother was about to bestow a very courtly good night kiss on his new paramour. He'd stayed near her, in a protective stance. Elijah followed them out, but at a discreet distance. There was no doubt about the signs and sparks that flew between the couple. *Let it be what I think it is. Come on, Zach. You don't have all the time in the world.* Elijah thought.

He walked slowly behind, letting the distance between him and the pair increase, for the sake of giving them whatever privacy he could. *I wonder what Julia would make of the two of you?* he wondered. It took no psychic to see that Zachariah was taken with Brigit O'Donnell. Elijah turned toward his own room, while Zachariah took Brigit to her and Julia's. The young Shah sighed, figuring he would see Julia in the morning.

Good night, Jules. I hope I dream of you, he thought.

It had been quite the wedding reception.



Chapter Four

Drawing In



The next day, Elijah caught up with Julia in a huge area simply called "The Playroom." Most of the children were there. Toys, books, and board games lined the mismatched shelves of the wide space. A mock stage was at one end, and a large group of kids were playing Peter Pan. Some of the older ones were running lines from "The Taming of the Shrew" off to one side. Since their teacher, Vincent, was away, it was a day of play for all the tunnel inhabitants.

Elijah came in, trailing his nieces and nephews. A happy Daniel was riding on his hip, as they all chattered about how much fun they'd had at the wedding reception.

Julia was holding court, in her fashion.

She was seated on what could only have been a discarded bar stool, its mismatched twin sitting opposite her. Kipper, (at least Elijah thought that was his name) sat on the other stool, in profile, to Julia.

A box of well-used pastels in front of her, she was doing a rapid outline of his profile, then filling it in with color. A line of other children waited for their turn.

Elijah watched her, while she charmed them all. “Oh, you’re a pretty one,” Julia said to a little girl, as Kipper got down and she flipped her page.

“Thank you,” her next subject replied. “My name is Brooke.” Elijah studied Julia, as she worked. Her lithe hands flew across the blank page, and soft images sprang to life.

A girl named Ellie had lovely, sunny curls, and Julia caught them, with her brightest yellow shade, then toned it down some, with tan, making spiral circles, as she talked, all the while. A younger girl named Samantha had straight, serious brows, and just the ghost of a smile, around her mouth. Before she’d been sitting for two minutes, Julia had discovered that Samantha liked Jane Eyre. She drew Samantha with a sharply intelligent look, in her deep brown eyes.

She’s not just capturing their faces. She’s capturing their personalities, Elijah realized. *What a gift you have.*

It was an amazing hour. Julia, Elijah discovered, was either a big kid or a natural mother figure. Clad in a long, soft, tunic-style top and matching leggings in a grey-blue color that set off her eyes, she wore a silver hammered belt, silver hoop earrings, and a look of concentration, as her hands flew across the paper.

Clearly, she had been at it, a while. Several of her drawings were already hanging up on a clothesline that had been strung to hold student projects. Elijah recognized several of the faces that stared back at him. Including Julia’s siblings, Chloe and Alex. *Must have been in earlier,* he surmised.

More children came into the room as brunch ended, and while Elijah watched the little ones play, he never quite took his eyes off the brunette artist who so thoroughly captured his attention. Her arms

made broad, sweeping strokes, then rapid curving lines, then tiny details, with her beautiful hands. She blended the tones with the tip of her finger, then wiped it on an already-dirty rag. She studied each child carefully, capturing the soft line of a jaw, or a certain dimple, or set of brows, or tangle of chestnut hair. Stevie had a straight, serious expression, but kind blue eyes. Kipper was dark-eyed, with a riot of thick hair and a bump on his chin, from having fallen off a skateboard.

After more than a couple of minutes, the child hardly had to sit still, Elijah realized, watching Julia as she now looked at her page, more than she looked at her subject. *She's a natural.* Elijah thought.

He stepped up beside her as she put final touches on Kipper's smile. He had a dimple. "You have a gift. And you are using it to charm these children." He complimented her. She smiled her thanks and flipped the finished page. A lovely blonde girl with straight bangs and a pony tail took the stool.

"I only wish I had thought of it last night," Julia confided. "I'd have used it for a portrait of the bride and groom." Julia glanced up at him, then went back to sketching the feisty teenager, whose name was Jaimie. Jaimie's scowl at having to sit still was being perfectly captured. As was the daring look in her brown eyes.

"Can you sketch from memory?" Elijah asked.

"Only so much. Sometimes you really need to see the subject. Or you get parts that don't go together, well. Like a badly designed jig-saw-puzzle."

"You're very talented." He took in the sketches. "It would be a sin not to pursue this."

Her eyes shot to his, the piece of charcoal she was using stopping in the middle of the paper, for what was probably the first time all morning. "Thank you, Elijah. It means a lot to hear you say that."

Does it? You have to know I mean it, Jules. We've always said that about you.

"Story time!" A male voice called through the doorway. "Follow me! And bring a book if you want to share it!" Devin Wells motioned that he was to be followed.

Julia nodded that Jamie could go. The children stampeded out, leaving Julia to put a few finishing touches on her sketch, hang it up on the line with the others, then pack up her art supplies and flip her sketch book closed.

She clicked the latches on her pastel box shut. "They say in New Orleans, you can make a living doing portrait sketches on Bourbon Street."

Ah, so that's what this was. Practice.

"Wouldn't that be amazing?" she prompted.

Yes. Yes it would be. It would also be in New Orleans. Over a thousand miles from here.

"From what I've heard of Bourbon Street, living out the week sober would be almost as impressive a statistic." Elijah had a slight smile, though, at her fantasy. "Is that where you'll take your subway token? Bourbon Street?" He wanted to know.

"I don't know. Maybe. This summer, when I'm off. I've been thinking about it. There, or the Florida Keys. Someplace warm." *There.*

Message delivered. I'm not going to be around. She slid her hand in

his. "Thank you for not trying to talk me out of it." She sounded so sincere.

Should I say that I didn't try because I haven't thought up a good argument against it, yet? No. Probably best to let that one just slide.

"You'll have to send me a postcard." Message received. And if you think the subject is closed, you've got another one coming.

They trailed in at the end of a long line of people, who were all gathered in a large common room. Story time, as Julia discovered, was not one tale of adventure, or two, or even five. It was an event, where anyone who wanted to read - something they had written, something someone else had written - was invited to do so.

Brigit was there, in the audience. Elijah guessed Zachariah soon would be. The children ate, sat, listened, and wandered away, as did the adults, in groups generally in keeping with their ages. Some of the younger children mentioned a desire to go back to the big common playroom now dominated by Julia's artwork.

"Will you go back and draw, some more?" Elijah asked, after Kipper read a story about seafaring pirates.

"No," Julia answered. She flexed the fingers of her drawing hand.

"Cramps. I think that's enough, for today." Her fingers bore dark smudged from the charcoal pencils she used, and colors from the pastels. She had tried to wipe the stain off, with mixed results. There was a spot of green and peach on one grey-clad leg. She gathered her hair up into a pony tail as Lana read a poem about a mermaid.

Elijah subtly glanced over at Julia. She looked relaxed. She looked happy.

They both sat next to each other during story time, keeping an eye on the Hunter children, and Chloe. After an hour, half their party was falling asleep. *Looks like it's nap time*, Elijah concluded.

Elijah gently carried the twins, while Julia hefted a sleepy Daniel. They wove their way back to the big suite of rooms Seth was sharing with his family. Depositing their littlest charges on the beds, Elijah watched how gently Julia tucked them in, how softly she kissed Daniel's fuzzy cheek, then Annabeth, then Beatrice. "Sweet dreams, angels," she whispered.

Elijah smiled, remembering that he'd called the girls "demons," the night before.

If the fates do not see fit to make this woman a mother, the fates need new jobs. Elijah thought. They left the room on silent feet.

"How are things between Brigit and Zachariah?" Julia asked, as they walked together.

"Seems to be going well. He was gone before dawn, checking out something from last night." Elijah did not elaborate about the strange goings on from the time after he'd left her.

"I'm sure he's offered his services as Protector, while Vincent is away," Julia commented. "That should buy him some time." She did not need to elaborate "time for what." They both knew Zachariah was still unbonded. It was a problem. Elijah knew that it would become a fatal one, if it wasn't addressed. Soon.

"We've all been worried about him. No one wants to talk about it, but he's running out of time," Elijah admitted.

"I was little the last time, he went through the madness, but I remember Adam saying it was bad. Your dad needed stitches," Julia recalled.

"Jarrett still carries the scars. He rarely takes off his shirt around Zachariah, because of them." Elijah's eyes looked backward, into the past. He didn't like to remember that time. He had been nearly seventeen. Had broken Zachariah's shoulder with the butt of a tranquilizer gun, to keep Zach from killing Seth and Jarret.

"He's strong. If it comes again, he'll live through it again," Julia said, with conviction.

"No." Elijah's voice was soft. "Not this time, Julia. No matter how strong you are."

"What?" Her eyes grew large. "But he's already damn near forty years old, Elijah!" Julia was shocked, feeling fear radiate from Elijah, for the first time.

You don't know? But... oh. There are no Shah males in Adam's line, so... oh. Okay.

"I know he is. *He* knows. It's one of the reasons I've refused to court anyone from our area, seriously. I'm hoping one of them will... be right for him. For all the good that's done."

Elijah escorted her back to the Story Chamber, where the readings continued. They sat on a bench that was far from the "stage." Samantha was reading a chapter from Bronte.

"Ramona must be beside herself," Julia said.

"She is. But she... knows Zachariah. I think he's resigned to it, Jules."

Julia glanced to where Brigit sat. "Do you think this O'Donnell woman will be the answer for him?" Julia asked, filing away the information

that Elijah was not seriously involved with anyone else, for the moment. Not that such information should matter to her. She did not actually *want* a relationship with an empathic creature, at least not the level of empathy she knew he possessed. Such a union could be a disastrous thing for everyone, if it went wrong.

Elijah shrugged, in answer. "I don't know. Maybe. I hope so. Can you read anything from her?" The idea of asking just occurred to him.

Julia glanced Brigit's way, again. "That's cheating. And, only that she's very interested. But you could watch them together, and figure that out." Julia focused on Brigit, allowing a quick impression to come through. "She's had a terrifically difficult life. It's hard to leave your heart open, under those circumstances," Julia said.

Elijah simply nodded. "That it is," he agreed. *Of course, you could say that about a lot of people. Including yourself,* he added silently.

Julia's attention shifted from Brigit back to Elijah. "So, you're waiting on Zachariah?" Julia asked bluntly. "No future Mrs. Hunter all picked out, then?"

"After the way I kissed you last night, we both better hope not," he replied.

She blushed. *So they were going to acknowledge it. Not just that it happened, but the intensity of it.*

Julia dropped her gaze. "Yeah. Well. I mean, at least you have a lot of time left, before there's a reason to panic." She tried to sound reassuring.

"Oh, yes. That's what I love about being a Shah. The panic-stricken aspect." Elijah's voice, usually playful and sometimes even a touch

sarcastic, now contained no levity at all. Too late, Julia realized the insensitivity of her faux pas.

"I'm sorry, Elijah. I know it's no picnic. Fear of the madness was part of why my parents married so young. And we all know how well *that* ended." Her tone was wry.

Elijah was aware that she, too had had her share of the trials and tribulations of Shah life. Adam had borne most of the brunt of Celeste's feelings of entrapment. But the children had been around for what must have been some very difficult scenes.

She stayed next to him, on the bench. "They were good about not fighting in front of us, for the most part." Julia hastened to add. "It's just... well. You know how it is. You pick up on it when you're a kid, and something is wrong between your parents."

"Not so much a kid." Elijah stroked her cheek with the back of his red-haired fingers. "You'd have been old enough to understand how bad it was, when Celeste got sick."

She closed her eyes against the memory. "Yes," was all she replied. How had he managed to bring the day to such a low point, in just a matter of minutes? "I'd have made it better for you, if I could have. You have to know that."

She smiled in thanks. "I do," she whispered, in reply.

Before the declaration could lead to another kiss, she rose, and brushed at her tunic. "I want to ask Brigit about a few things. About art, and getting published. I'll let you know if she says anything about Zachariah, okay?"

He rose, as well. *Coward. And... thank you.* "Fine," he said smoothly. "I promised to show Ben and Roberta the Whispering Gallery. I'll catch up with you, later."

Julia nodded, thinking he looked good enough to eat. She shook herself, mentally. Sympathy and a few kisses did not mean they were about to have a raging affair. And he was dangerous, for her. In many ways.

But those thoughts would have to be dealt with, after a bit. For now, she had a famous woman to impress. Looking down at her stained clothing, she looked back up at Elijah in dismay.

"Elijah!" she snapped, as he was about to turn.

"Yes, Beauty?"

"You didn't tell me I looked like such a mess!" She eyed her leggings with distaste.

"Why, is there something wrong with your perfection, Highness?" he teased, as he departed.

She made a face at his retreating back, then all but danced away, over to where Brigit sat, watching Jamie read an adventure story of J. M. Barrie's.

Julia managed to speak with Brigit for a few minutes, before the latter took the reading stool, herself. They'd talk more, later. Brigit said she wanted to see some of her sketches, and told her briefly of an idea she had for a book.

Julia was pleased. *It's going well. Just stay steady, and see what happens,* she thought, hoping that the wedding trip wedding trip might be fortuitous, for her budding art career.

Just like with Vincent, Julia sensed Zachariah's entrance into the chamber before it actually happened. *He's looking for her.*

Zachariah entered the Story Chamber, and had eyes only for the Irish authoress. When she was done reading, he tugged her hand off the stool, and led her directly out of the room. Julia had the idea that they were going to Brigit and Julia's guest room. Zachariah's intention all but radiated from his tall, white-blond form.



Chapter Five

Carousel Capers



Evening came, and a large group of guests and tunnel dwellers were having supper, and making sure the children in attendance got fed.

Having done baby-sitting duties earlier, Elijah enjoyed sitting next to Julia in a more adult atmosphere. Most of his family was scattered around the room. Zachariah was talking to his now almost constant companion, Brigit. It had been a good day. Several of the ladies discussed having taken a trip to the hot springs. Julia hid a smile. Obviously, she had already been there, as had Elijah. Zachariah sported a love bite on his neck. It seemed that some Shah were enjoying the tunnel amenities more than others. Elijah hid a smile over his brother's newfound romance.

As dessert (bread pudding, loaded with raisins and sauce) dishes were cleared, Elijah and Julia both found themselves with an unfamiliar hand on each of their shoulders. "Hey," a masculine voice said, cordially. It was Devin Wells. He had stood as best man, for Vincent. Julia knew he was the groom's "brother."

"Hi," Julia replied. Elijah did the same.

Julia eyed the concentric scars on his cheek. *From Vincent? A long time ago?* Julia didn't mean to "check" him to find out, but couldn't resist the urge. The answer was probably "yes," but she couldn't be sure. He wasn't thinking about that, at the moment. *I have to stop doing that*, she chided herself.

"You. And you," Devin indicated the two of them. "I need two partners in crime. You up for some fun with the kids?" He knelt between them, pretending to pick up a dessert plate from the table.

"What kind of fun?" asked Elijah.

"What kind of crime?" asked Julia.

He smiled at the two of them. "You guys, me, and all the kids. A carousel ride in the park. Outside. Oh, and breaking and entering, to

the second question. Don't worry. I've done it before." He shot them a grin that had "Devil May Care" all over it.

"Outside... in the park?" Julia's eyes grew excited. Chloe would love it. Maybe even Alex would, too.

"Daniel. My cousin, who looks like me," Elijah explained. "Can we bring him along, as well?"

Devin's eyes absolutely sparkled, recalling a distant memory.

"It wouldn't be a party without him." Devin clapped Elijah on the back. His enthusiasm was contagious.

"Meet me at the Playroom in ten minutes," Devin whispered. "We'll round them up from there, and head to the Eastern tunnel entrance. It comes up right near the carousel."

"Do you have keys to this carousel?" Elijah asked.

"Not now, nor when I was fifteen years old. Don't worry, Elijah. I was a carny for eight months." – As if that explained everything.

Elijah chuckled. *Why did this news not surprise anyone?*

"Night watchman doesn't even pretend to come around until after ten-thirty, if he comes at all. Game?" Devin flashed the inside of his wrist, to reveal his watch. It was seven-thirty. They had plenty of time.

Julia's eyes absolutely danced with mischief. "I have to grab my sketch book. Meet me!" She raced out of the room, laughter in her eyes. Both Elijah and Devin watched her go, with approval.

Elijah subtly collected the children who remained in the dining room, including a curious Daniel. He knew they'd have to stop by to pick up a cape with a hood, for both of them.

"Would you like to have an adventure, Danny boy?" Elijah whispered/asked the nephew who looked so much like Seth, when he was a youngster.

"Yes, Uncle Elijah!" His favorite nephew held up his arms to be picked up. Elijah did so.

"Okay. But I have a feeling it's a secret. Can you keep a secret?" he whispered.

"Danny keeps secrets!" Daniel's small body wiggled.

"Okay." Elijah set him down. "We're going outside for a bit, to play. If anything goes wrong, I will get you and take you back to where it's safe. You understand?"

"You protect Danny. Like Daddy. And Uncle Zachariah."

"Yes. Just like that." Elijah smiled at Seth's mirror image. Danny's dark eyes were full of curiosity and pleasure. "Let's go get Annabeth and Beatrice. And Roberta and Ben. They can come too."

"And Danny! Danny gets to come!" He squealed with delight.

"Shhh! Secret, remember?"

"Danny gets to come. And it's a secret!" Daniel all but stage-whispered.

--

Devin Wells looked like the Pied Piper of Hamelin. In fifteen minutes, the Eastern Tunnel was full of over thirty children, of various ages and sizes, plus Elijah, Julia, and Alexander, rounding out the adults. Several of the older teenagers helped handle the littlest children. Elijah never let go of Daniel. Julia had a twin by each hand, and Chloe

close behind, who was being guided by Roberta Hunter, Seth and Corinne's oldest child.

"This way. This way, guys. It isn't very far," Devin said, to those with the disadvantage of shorter legs. He held open an iron grate. Everyone filed through. Elijah drew up his hood and kept a tight hold on his nephew.

"Ready for an adventure, Danny?"

"Ready!" Daniel enthused, and Elijah made sure his nephew's head was covered by his hood.

A soft run through the grass of a September night led to a fairly inconsequential chain-link fence. One that half of the children wanted to climb over, but Devin simply cut through, at the corner. Holding the section up, he motioned every child through. Devin was clearly on familiar ground.

"You really have done this before," Elijah complimented, as Devin set down a pair of wire cutters.

"Like riding a carousel horse. You never forget." The elder Wells brother flashed Elijah a conspiratorial smile.

It was a late Monday night in September. The park seemed utterly empty. The carousel was not out in the open, per se, but inside a huge storage shed, meant to protect the expensive figures from the elements.

In ten minutes, Devin had the lock on the door picked open, the motor running, the lights on, and every child had a seat on what would thereafter be called "Devin's Merry-Go-Round," by every person there.

The twins mounted a pair of palominos. The older Hunter children, Roberta and Ben, had their own elaborately painted ponies, helping some of the youngest children to sit on their laps. Not every figure on the carousel was a horse. Julia settled Chloe on a graceful giraffe, while Daniel sat astride a marvelous sea serpent. Devin flipped a switch and jumped on board the carousel, as it began to move.

"That wasn't here the first time I ever did this," Devin commented, as Danny held the reins of the serpent.

"Things change," Elijah commented, as Devin held the bar.

"Danny's riding! Danny's riding!" Daniel giddyapped the sea serpent, as Elijah discovered that unbridled glee made his nephew's cheeks pink. Seth's heir was overjoyed.

Roberta came down and kept watch at the storeroom door, occasionally checked up on by Devin. After a few minutes, Elijah took over the watch position, making sure Julia was near Daniel. Devin made his way around the ride, congratulating every child. Then he jumped down and came to stand by Elijah.

"How's it going?" Devin asked.

"All quiet, so far. So, not your first time for this particular rodeo. When you were a kid?" Elijah gestured back toward the whirling ride.

"Yeah. With Vincent. It didn't end that well, but it was important." Devin smiled into the New York night, thinking how far his brother had come. The smile increased the whiteness of the scars on his cheek.

"That from when you were a kid, too?" Elijah asked Devin, whom he immediately liked. The scar was clearly a Shah's mark, and it had

sliced his face, a long time ago. *Vincent, undoubtedly.* Unlike Julia, Elijah didn't need to "read" him, to verify what his eyes told him.

"Oh, yeah," Devin shrugged. "Father wanted to kill me then, too. Like he would if he knew we were here, now." He turned back to the carousel. He had a smile for every happy kid there.

The children squealed and chanted. The tinny music from the old ride was like an enchantment, being cast. Even the older children, who tried to pretend they were too grown up for this, were having fun. Julia's laughter reached his ears.

"You say you took Vincent to this?"

"Oh hell yes. You know little brothers. No way to leave them behind. That's half of why Father was so ticked at me. That, and, well, we nearly *did* get caught." The revelation didn't seem to dim Devin's enthusiasm in the least.

"Then Vincent gave you that?" Elijah asked, indicating the scars on Devin's face.

"Oh yeah. But not over this. Something else. Stupid fight. Childhood."

Elijah accepted the explanation. "You were kind to include us, Devin," Elijah inclined his head. "Daniel may not remember a great many things about being four years old. But I guarantee he will remember this." Daniel's squeal of delight punctuated the sentence.

"That's kind of what I was thinking," Devin confided. He stepped out of the doorway and looked back at the building. "If you can get up on that roof, you can warn us if someone is coming. Better vantage point," Devin advised.

Elijah looked up to the same place Devin was. "No problem."

Elijah went around the side of the building, set his foot on a storm pipe, and swung up like a monkey. Climbing had been a forte of his since before Corinne had been his babysitter, back when he'd been a little boy.

Some fifteen minutes later, Julia came outside and found him perched on the roof, outlined against a nearly full moon, squatting down in a half crouch. *You look like a Protector, sitting up there*, she thought. He did; like a lithe defender, shielding his charges from intruders.

Fortunately for all of them, on this night, there were none.

Julia went back inside and flipped her sketchbook open. Her fingers flew across page after page, as she took in Daniel and all the children, as the carousel continued to move in its great circle. She sketched quick outlines, furiously.

A half hour of riding later, the “raiding party” as Devin had dubbed them, made their way back out of the storage shed, through the fence, and back to the safety of the tunnels. The conspiratorial adults were nearly as breathless as the children, with excitement. Alexander hoisted Beatrice on his hip, as Chloe hefted a tiring Annabeth. They all reached the interior tunnels, safely. Every face was flushed with pleasure.

Except Julia's, which was flush with concentration, as they all walked back in, together. She lagged behind the group, her sketchbook still open, her hands still moving.

Flipping between page after page, Julia hastened to add details to the several drawings she had quickly begun: The twins, on their palominos. Daniel, on his sea serpent. Ben and Roberta and Chloe, as a group. Alex. Devin. Several of the tunnel children. Back and forth,

as she thought of something, before the memory if the images faded away.

It probably helps that she spent half the day drawing their faces, already, Elijah thought.

As most of the children filed into hallway that led to their dorm rooms behind Devin, and Elijah gave Daniel over to Roberta, Julia stopped in her tracks.

"I need to go back," she declared, turning back for the carousel.

"Back? Why?" Elijah asked.

"Some of the animals they were riding. I didn't have enough time." Her sketchbook was tucked firmly under her arm.

"Tomorrow is soon enough. And you can go in daylight. You can go Above, Julia. It's Daniel and I who..."

"It won't be open tomorrow, either. Sooner or later, they'll fix the fence. And there will be people around. Besides, it won't *feel* the same."

There was no use arguing with logic like that last.

Shrugging at Devin's parade, Elijah followed her back the way they'd just come. "Julia, This *is* just a bit dangerous, you know."

"Oh, pooh. Any real danger and you'd never have taken Daniel," she answered.

"I wouldn't bet on that," he replied. She did not quite understand, perhaps, how much little boys needed to take risks. Or at least feel like they were.

"I'm going back. I have to. Come with me, or don't," she said, lengthening her long-legged stride.

Well. With a come hither invitation like that....

Elijah hitched the hood of his brown cape back up, and jogged back down the Eastern tunnel. Just ahead of him, Julia's tunic swished across her derriere, as she half-ran.



Chapter Six

Night Riders



The carousel was dark, this time, but Julia declared she didn't need the full light. It was shape she was after, she told him, sitting in front of Daniel's sea monster.

"See the curve, how the tail flips back up and meets the body and just...flows together, front and back?"

He wondered if she was aware she sounded like she was describing something else. If she was, she didn't let on. Her pencil went to work.

"You have to look at it where two points meet."

Elijah smiled in the dark, at the intimate reference.

"The colors blend together so subtly." she told him, shining a small flashlight on the scale-covered body where blue melted into green and then to purple. "I want to remember it so I can catch it."

The late night air was turning chilly, but she had grabbed a leather jacket prior to their evening's adventure. She walked over to the giraffe, spending far less time there.

Not so many curves, he ventured.

One of the bent necks and flying manes of the Palominos also warranted her attention. Elijah sat on one of the bench seats, waiting for her, checking occasionally for any movement, outside.

After several long minutes, she began shaking the kinks out of her hands again, the long fingers flexing. He realized how much he wanted those same fingers doing that somewhere, anywhere, on his body.

Whoa, boy. That's a dangerous thing to hope for, this soon.

"Hand cramp, again?" he asked.

"Yep." She sat down beside him, flexing it out. "Two big sessions in a row, today. Plus some others, besides. I'm not used to working like this." She shook her ringless hand, again.

"Let me." He took her hand in his own, gently rubbing the delicate bones with his huge, strong fingers. He was very careful. His nails never even scraped her skin.

That feels so good, Julia thought. Like any good artist, she'd had a lot of hand cramps. No one had ever done this for her, before. She felt his thumbs move in slow circles, drawing the discomfort away.

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the bench. The "raid" had been exciting, but nerve wracking. Now, she felt her body

relaxing. The soft dark of the cold shed enveloped them. There were no lights or carny sounds from the carousel, this time. The atmosphere was one of peace, and privacy, and quiet. Deep quiet. Strikingly so, almost. It suddenly felt like a very intimate space.

It seemed to Julia as if she'd had children in her ears all day, and only just now realized it. *So good*, she thought again, feeling the tension in her hands fade, beneath his ministrations. *That feels so good, Elijah.*

She gave him a soft 'mmmmm' of approval. "You could charge for that." He took the massage from the back of her hand down the length of her slender fingers.

He made a decision. "Yes, I could. But then there would be a word for that, after I kissed you," he warned.

He gave her that much notice, right before he did it. Julia knew there wasn't an ounce of resistance in her.

Familiar now, his mouth sought hers and settled, disturbing the previously peaceful atmosphere. He felt electricity jump along her nerve endings, just as it did along his.

Well, well, he thought, liking it. Very much.

It felt as if the energy from the previously lit-up carousel, from the joyful children, from the attentive adults, was still here, lingering in the room, and had suddenly found a conduit, or an outlet. Them.

He shifted so that he was on his knees before her, as he drew her artist's hand around his waist. From here, he was the perfect height to continue their kiss. Her mouth explored his. She reached up to push his hood down, loving the feeling of her hands on his cheeks, on his throat, and even at the back of his neck. They broke apart, gasping.

Remembering how she'd looked in her wet bra and panties last night, Elijah planted a kiss into her sore palm, then settled his tongue onto the spot, for good measure. Reaction shot up her arm, to settle in her breast. Her breath came in, on a hiss.

She felt her body's reaction to him. So did he.

In an instant, he'd made her feel impatient.

Good, he thought. Impatient is how I want you. Impatient and... wanting me.

She tugged his head back up to hers, for another kiss. It was a thing he willingly gave.

Fire lanced through her. Her kiss deepened, right before it became a teasing thing. She was avid, and he got his wish, as her hands reached for the buttons of his white shirt.

Yes. Yes, angel. It's for you to choose. He held still while she slipped the pearl buttons through the cloth. Cool palms slid inside the crisp linen. *Oh, heaven.* They moved toward his nipples, and lingered. *Thank you. Thank you.* He broke the kiss, just for the need to breathe.

His mouth brushed her throat as he gasped a love-struck rhythm. He hastily undid her own tunic blouse, stopping only when he ran into the wide belt at her waist, and only then for a moment. In an instant, it was gone, the soft shirt open.

His eyes began to feast, not surreptitiously, as he had last night, but fully and openly. Her bra fit her like a perfect pair of demi-cups holding up a mounded dessert. His mouth watered. Her fingertips made circles, on his sensitive paps.

Julia. Now. I need to see you. Now.

Stopping only to kiss the tops of her shoulders, he slid the soft blue blouse down her arms, pushing her jacket off, as he went. It was chilly, tonight, but he could feel the heat coming off of her. His palms lifted her breasts, causing them to spill over from the top of her bra. He licked and kissed the white swells, open, now, to his view.

She writhed, clearly liking – more than liking – everything he was doing. "I guess I should be glad,"... she panted, "that it's dark."

"Not that dark." He nuzzled her. "There's moon enough." How could she forget they could see so well, in dim to no light? And there was a moon. The same one she'd drawn him against was now shining through the shed's only narrow window.

Julia struggled to control her breathing, opening up his shirt so she could run her hands across his massive chest. The same chest she'd seen in the water, last night. Red hair looked brown in the dim light. "I can't see you as well. No fair," she scolded, reaching for his nipple with her mouth.

Sweet mercy. And you see well enough. The shock of her warm mouth on his skin was spasm inducing. The knees that were holding him aloft nearly refused to continue doing that. He held her head possessively against his chest, while she feasted.

She slanted a cat-like look up at him, still thinking she was protected by the dark, before she went back to teasing his breast with her mouth. Inside his jeans, his erection hardened. *Yes. Oh, Julia. Yes.*

Reaching behind her back, he deftly unhooked the clasp that held her bra. Sliding it down her arms, he nearly had to shut his eyes, against her glory. *Julia. My beautiful Julia.* He was aware he'd just begun thinking of her with a possessive pronoun.

She was a vision.

Chill air and arousal had pebbled nipples that looked seductively dark, against her fair skin. They were high, peaked, and begging to be tasted. Elijah knew he would not disappointed them.

The hand at his chest reached up and grabbed at his neck as he took the left nipple delicately between the folds of his cleft lip, and his full bottom one. He was growing accustomed to her hand, there, right at the back of his neck. She did it often, when she wanted to hold him to her.

He opened his mouth wide, to take in more of her breast. Now it was her turn to spasm with reaction, and he pulled her against him as he thrust his hips forward, letting her feel his sex. Her legs came up, reflexively. *Lord*. What he wouldn't give to be in a more private room, right now. Any room, where the temperature wasn't dipping into the high forties.

He took off his cape, and drew it around her, not willing to give up the contact he had with her, or the glorious sight of her breast moonlight-painted breast. He bent his attention to her other one. She locked her legs firmly around his waist, rocking against him.

"Elijah." She breathed his name, desire in the word.

I know. He thought it, rather than said it, as her torso aligned itself with his.

The motions were ones of lovemaking, and he well knew their siren's call. But he couldn't remove her jeans to enter her without exposing her to the cold, so....

We have to stop this. Damn it.

He meant to disentangle them. Meant to quiet her, maybe take her someplace else, where they could begin again, more comfortably. But

her hand remained clamped to his neck, and she began to writhe her torso in a movement so sinuous and seductive, it seemed to Elijah that her entire body had become a serpent; like the sea serpent Daniel had ridden, only warm. Living. Wanting him.

"Julia." His hips were thrusting, reflexively, meeting hers. The ridge inside his jeans tingled. "You have to stop. Or I'm going to..."

"So am I." She said it with demand and desperation, using her legs to pull herself even more tightly to him. *I feel you. You're beautiful. Inside and out. Oh, Elijah. I feel you. All that you are.*

"Please, Elijah." The hand remained firmly at his neck. Her body rose higher, lifting her breast to his mouth, again. Offering.

His eyes went molten as he watched her strain to reach the place she needed, inside. Taking her breast back into his hands, he blew warm breath across the wet nipple. She whimpered with reaction, but not release. She pushed against him.

"Yes. Like that," he whispered against her skin, putting his other hand behind her, to pull her buttocks more firmly onto his agonizingly sensitive erection. He began thrusting slowly. Letting her anticipate when she would feel the head of him, the length, then the base.

More. Please, more! She might as well have been shouting it, as she opened her legs further, to allow his touch.

The thrusts became hard; what would have been deep, had he been inside her. Friction made even more heat between them. In the chill air, he was starting to sweat. They both were.

"I can smell you through your clothes." he said, wrapping both hands around her back to hold her hard against him. She let go of his neck

and dropped her arms to pull at the small of his back, trying to bring him even closer. They both knew what kind of smell he meant.

"Don't stop," she begged, keeping her long legs around him.

Oh Julia. He was right on top of her clitoris. He knew it. So did she. Feeling wicked, he slid his hands down to hold her knees gently apart, as he simply stroked, her up and down. She squirmed, with over-stimulation. He could see wetness through the leggings. Knew her panties must be utterly soaked. She could not come, this way. But she could build, could suffer. She did, until she all but begged him to end it. He wanted her to realize how much she wanted him. How much he had been wanting her, since last night.

"Please, Elijah. Please. It hurts." She nuzzled his neck, begging him to let her legs down. "It hurts," she cajoled, licking his neck, trying to get her hand between them.

No it doesn't. Not really. Silly kitten. Don't you know how much stronger I am?

Taking her hands so she could not manipulate his sex, he realized her ploy. If he had to hold on to her hands, he could no longer hold on to her knees. Scooting herself to the edge of the bench, she drew him back fully against her with her legs, writhing her body against his, so that the sensitive crown of his penis was moving against the apex of her heat.

Silly lion. Don't you know that for every king of beasts, there's a queen?

His head thrown back, he knew she found her release a scant few thrusts before he did. He hadn't come this way since he was a teenager. And even then, it had not been this explosive.

Aftershocks rode them. He felt them. Hers. His. Together. Staying together, he felt wave after wave of it, as they were both engulfed, completely. Soft moans filled the room. His. Hers.

Dazed. He was dazed, and stunned speechless. After several long minutes, the fact that the air was still cool penetrated his bare chested awareness. He kept her in his cloak. She pulled up her blouse, not able to bother with trying to fasten her bra. She couldn't speak. Neither could he.

In the distance, he heard a car park. She had not heard it.

Damn. And damn, again. "Car," he said regretfully. "Might be night watch, might not. A ways away, but close enough. We need to go, Julia." He buttoned up his shirt.

Nodding, she gave him back his cloak, tugged on her jacket, picked up her bag with her sketch book in it, and followed him out the door, across the night grass, through the cut in the fence, and back to the tunnels, on unsteady legs.

They hadn't gotten far inside when they both found that Seth was waiting to meet them.

"My children smell like the outdoors." he told them, taking in what they both smelled like, as well. "I take it there would be a reason for that? One their mother may not want to know about?" he asked.

"She probably wouldn't. Or, she would, just way after we get home. A carousel ride. Up in the park," Elijah admitted. Julia stayed behind him, trying to hide her dishabille, a little.

"Danny went, too?" Seth asked, his dark eyebrow raised. *And you two went back up, I take it.*

"Yeah. I took him," Elijah said. If there were reprisals to be had, Elijah wanted them on him. Julia clutched her sketchbook over her unencumbered breasts. Her bra was loose on her shoulders, and enough time had passed for her to feel embarrassed, a bit.

"Good," was all Seth said, before he turned back down the tunnels.

"Julia, Adam's looking for you," Seth added, ensuring they would break apart, if only so she would go and see what her father wanted.

Seth wasn't certain how he felt about a Blackmane as a match, for his little brother. But he knew enough to know that Elijah and Julia were both adults, and it was surely none of his business.

Elijah willed him to walk away. He did.

"I... I better go see what my father wants," Julia stammered.

Sure you should. And there's no way I'm letting you go without kissing you, one more time.

It was a fast, hard kiss and they both knew they needed to go change clothes, before they ran into anyone else.

"You were beautiful. Don't regret it, Julia," he said.

"I don't. At least... I don't think I do. You?" She seemed to need the confirmation.

"Not a chance."

It was late. He had possession in his eyes, as she had stardust, in hers.

"Good night, Elijah. Sweet dreams," she bid him.

"I think we both know what I'll be dreaming about. Good-night, lovely Julia."

A little embarrassed and a little off balance, they both separated, for the night.



Chapter Seven

Morning After

Elijah made himself wait before he went to look for her, the next morning. Like most Shah, he needed little sleep. Even less, when he was ... intense, about a woman. Like most courting males, his attention was becoming very fixed, on her.

He found her at breakfast, sitting by the college boy. Michael was showing her a textbook of his, and babbling something about comparative architecture. She was listening, and tracing her artist's fingers down the page in front of them. Her smile was morning-lovely.

After what had happened between them last night, Elijah would have thought....

She laughed. She actually laughed at some stupid, insipid comment uttered by a young man Elijah was sure was the village idiot. Elijah recognized the vibe, if not the scent, coming off Michael. *The interested male. Ah.*

Elijah's eyes narrowed. The only thing saving college boy's ass right now was that Julia did not smell like an interested female. She looked like one, though, as she glanced up at him, then hooked her dark hair behind one ear. And Elijah got the impression she was doing that, on purpose.

It didn't take a genius to understand she was trying to put distance between them. How much distance, only she knew.

So. I see you had a night to think about it, and woke up regretting it, after all, he thought.

He glared at her. Made sure she saw it. Then, he left. He would not play these games with her.

She watched him go. *Oh, Elijah, there's so much you don't understand,* she thought. She didn't need her empathic gifts to sense his displeasure.

"Tell me more about the Romans," she prompted, turning the page. She wasn't trying to use Michael. But Elijah was right that morning's light had brought her to a realization, or two.

--

By later that afternoon, she decided to take the bull by the horns. Or the lion by the mane, as it were. She found him alone in Seth and Corinne's chambers, picking up after Daniel.

"I'm not a virgin, Elijah," she announced to him. *Okay, that's not exactly how I meant to start this. I just overthought it.*

"Oh, goody," he said, still aching from their encounter the night before. "We get to have *this* talk. Neither am I. Next." He was in no mood. He threw Daniel's favorite teddy bear into the travel crate Corinne kept for his toys.

"I just wanted you to know you're not responsible for that, if it happens."

If it happens? If we'd have been in a bed rather than a carousel storeroom, last night, it already would have.

"Didn't think I was going to be. Not that it would have been a problem, if you had been." Was there a reason he felt like they were fighting?

"So we don't have to bond, over it, or anything," she concluded, a bit clumsily.

Aha. So that's what this is about. The almighty and ever present bond.

"Darlin,' if deflowering virgins caused bonds to form, that ship would have sailed a while ago." *Okay. Not called for. Bad idea, to say that.* Elijah regretted the comment almost instantly.

"Thanks for reminding me you could be an ass." She folded her arms.

"You started it," he replied.

"Oh, that's so high school."

"I never went to high school. Or to college," he pointed out. Pointedly.

"Don't be angry with me because I want that for myself, Elijah," Julia warned.

"I'm not angry with you for wanting to better yourself, Julia. I never would be."

"Then why?"

He didn't answer. Mostly. "It wasn't the college boy, was it? Because I already don't need much of a reason to want to beat the crap out of him." He set a picture book back on a bed.

"No. I didn't know Michael, then." She tried to hide the hint of a smile. He was jealous. In any one else it would have been disgusting, but in Elijah? He Who Could Pick And Choose? And over Michael? Who was

still somewhere between a crush on Catherine and Brooke's crush on him? It was just too rich.

He didn't even like the sound of Michael's name, in her mouth.

"You know you can make me jealous, with him." Elijah looked at her, hard. "Please don't do that. There's no sport in it. If you want him and not me, just say it. I won't fight you." *How could I?*

She approached him, carefully. It wasn't that she took last night lightly. It was that she didn't want him to think it meant something she might not be able to give.

"I'm still figuring out what I want, Elijah. That's what being twenty-one years old and in New York for the first time is about."

He gave a slow exhale. *Fair enough.*

"But I don't want Michael." There. She put out of his misery. Well, not quite.

"He wants you. Maybe. He's trying to make up his mind. Idiot."

"Him, or me?" she asked.

"Don't even push that question, Jules." But he was pleased. As much as he could be, considering.

"Okay. They're all going to a concert under the park tonight," Julia said. Elijah did not bother to ask who "they" were. "Will you take me?" she asked.

"If that's where you want to go, of course." He tossed another stuffed animal into the crate, then straightened, looking squarely at her.

"Say it."

"Say what?"

"The thing on your mind. The reason why you wanted to pick a fight with me today." His hands were on his hips. She was exasperating. Still.

She had the good grace to look down, knowing she'd been caught. "They say I'll become empathic, that is, more empathic, in a few months. That this is just the beginning of it."

Okay. "That they do." He eyed her carefully.

"I don't... want that, Elijah."

Offhand, he did not know a thing he could do about that. He told her as much. "I don't think you can stop that particular train from leaving the station, Shahrenne," he replied, using her official title. The one that meant she was all but destined for some sort of empathy, no matter what.

"Yeah. Well." She shrugged her expressive shoulders. Shoulders he'd had his mouth on, last night. "And you, well. You know what joining with you, what *really* joining with you, would be like."

"Yeah. I've seen the brochures." His voice was flat. Deadly so. She was too nervous to realize it. She only picked up on his usual glib words.

"Because I want this. Between us. An affair. I want it. But not ... well. Not for forever. Because I'm not staying, Elijah. I'm not. And it wouldn't be fair...fair to you, or me...." She let the sentence trail off.

His green eyes turned cool. "It's okay, Julia. I get you." He turned his back to her before he either screamed at her or dragged her into Seth and Corinne's bedroom, to remind her how very good they'd been, together, the night before. He made a show of folding a stack of children's clothes, and putting them into a pile.

He kept his broad back to her. Julia knew she'd just been dismissed. But also that they had a date, later. *Well. Okay then.*

"See you around seven thirty, then," she said to his back, not quite sure that the conversation had gone the way she expected. It sounded like it had. *Okay, then,* she repeated mentally. *Okay.*

She took his silence for the assent that it was.



Chapter Eight

In Concert



Seven thirty came. Julia looked amazing. Older, somehow. More sophisticated. Upswept hair. Chic, royal blue dress, with a gauzy wrap, to match. Pearls at her ears and one on a chain around her neck, which she kept fingering. Artful makeup. Red lips.

She couldn't have looked like she was trying to put more distance between them if she'd tried.

And Michael was there. Of course.

Oh, joy, Elijah thought.

Zachariah looked all but elated to have Brigit on his arm. They were already lovers, Elijah knew, judging by the smell in his and Zachariah's shared room, and the very content look on his brother's leonine face. Elijah was pleased for it, even if the sight of Michael annoyed him, a little.

Adam held Diana very close, and they looked happy to be in each other's company, here. A woman named Mary (who was clearly in love with an oblivious Father), was joined by the doctor they called Peter Alcott. Seth and Corinne rounded out the group.

They all settled themselves into an odd semicircle, beneath a moonlit storm grate. Julia sat next to Elijah, and across from Michael. She was not close enough for Elijah to touch and he did not try to close the distance. If she wanted to come sit closer to him, she had but to move over. He wasn't going to force the issue.

Julia found could not read him, for trying. *Maybe he's blocking me.* She didn't realize until that moment, he could do that.

So, you do have one or two tricks up your sleeve, don't you, youngest Shah? Julia wondered. *Is that just because you're a Charismatic, or is it because you're not sure if you're angry with me?*

She had taken extra care with her appearance, wanting to show him that she was not the inexperienced teenager he knew from years ago, and that there was more to her than the tunic/legging/denim wearing young woman of the last few days. He seemed to dislike her efforts. She could sense that much. By the time the orchestra started tuning up, Julia wished they had made other plans.

Father settled comfortably across from them, Mary, Peter and Michael clustered around him. Adam nuzzled Diana's neck during the music's introduction, until she smiled and playfully swatted him.

Julia was still not entirely comfortable with her father's new relationship, but it was because she realized she was so unused to seeing him happy. He seemed like a different person, in so many ways. She knew she would have to speak to him about it, but had no idea how to begin that particular conversation.

Elijah remained next to her, his body rigid.

Julia closed her eyes, trying to enjoy the music. *In the Halls of the Mountain King* began. It sounded as tense as Elijah felt.

What had she done to make him so moody? Julia wondered. What had happened between them last night was wonderful. And she'd already told him that Michael was not for her. And that she had plans for her life. *It was all the truth. That was enough. It had to be.*

One bit of Grieg led to another. And then, another. When the intermission came, Father decided to excuse himself, prompting the exodus of Mary, then Adam and Diana. Corinne pleaded a bit of a back ache, sitting against the stones, so Seth took her out. Peter Alcott indicated he also needed to leave, and since he was Michael's ride, Michael collected his coat and departed, nodding a farewell in Julia's direction, as he left.

That was about to leave Julia with Elijah, and Zachariah with Brigit. But the big Protector Shah indicated his evening was done here, as well, as he claimed a kiss from his love, then stole away with her.

Moonlight flooded through the open grate above Julia's head. Drifting snatches of conversation came to them, and a blast of cool air fell through the open-to-the-sky ceiling.

Their evening was all but done, and a failure, Julia realized. They were at some sort of impasse. On top of that, she hadn't really dressed for the cool night air, sacrificing comfort for the beautiful but light matching wrap that went with her dress. Stockings were all that kept her legs warm. The jersey fabric of the dress was beautifully draped, but not especially heavy. She even had decided to forgo her usual boots for high heels. *Oh, well.*

"You've been too far away from me, all night." Elijah's said. For a moment, she wondered if he wasn't going to simply leave, as well.

"I was right here," she replied.

"No. You were already gone. You don't even look like you, right now." His hand reached up for the long pin that held up her hair.

"Is that why you were so upset? Because I wasn't wearing jeans, or leggings?" she asked, exasperated. "I dressed this way for *you*, Elijah."

The long hairpin was half pulled out and he stopped.

"For me?" *I thought it was to try and show me how different we were. How much... someone else might be better suited to you.*

"Not for him. Not for anyone else. I don't know where we go, Elijah, from where we've been. But..." She finished pulling out the hair pin, and tossed it on the ground. A few more, and the long fall of her hair began to tumble down.

"If this is the way I have to be for you..."

He helped the falling hair tumble free. "Julia, I'm not trying to put you in some kind of box. I swear I'm not." *And don't ever pin your hair up, again. It isn't you. It never could be.*

"I know. At least, I think I do. Elijah, it's not just you. I keep looking at you and seeing everything I could want, on the one hand, and

everything I'm afraid of, on the other." *A Shah union.* She was terrified of the idea.

"I know." He drew them close, and put his head against hers.

"Could we just concentrate on the things you do want, for a few minutes?" he asked.

He had pulled her into the soft rectangle of light under the grate, near the center of the room. His kiss, when it came, seemed full of moonlight. Warm. Mysterious. She always felt like he was tasting her, whenever they kissed.

She sought the cleft of his upper lip, and heard him moan, when she caressed it, with her tongue. *Good. I want you moaning,* she discovered. *I want you impatient, the same way you wanted me, last night.*

Elijah was always so patient with her. She wanted that to stop, and didn't question why she wanted it that way.

Placing both hands at his neck, her thumbs just in front of his ears, she took control of the kiss. Coaxing. Teasing. Loving him with her mouth.

"Julia..." his voice warned. *Don't start something we can't finish.*

"Shhhh. See my stockings? They go to my thighs." she gave his earlobe a nip, and he groaned, burying his face at her neck.

"Know what else?" She paused, letting go of his neck so she could guide his hands to her hips, so he could feel her, there. "The only thing I'm wearing under this dress is... perfume."

Heat. It exploded between them as his fingertips confirmed what her voice was telling him. She wore no underwear, beneath the jersey dress. No feel of elastic or satin or anything impeded his caress of

her. That meant all he had to do was lift the hem of her dress and...
Oh, Julia.

He picked her up as she went up on point, settling her long legs around his hips. The orchestra had begun to play again, though he truly didn't care. Hard. He felt hard, everywhere. Like last night, but moreso. He was dying for her.

She knew he was strong. He kept her suspended, his hands easily supporting her weight as he cupped her buttocks through the blue dress. It had ridden much higher, up her legs. She fumbled with his belt, then the hook at his trousers. Her grey eyes looked like a soft blue sky, in the light of the late September moon. He kept her against his erection, and she wrapped herself around his body, lifting her weight, rubbing herself against him.

She moaned. Sighed. Her eyes closed, then opened, staring into his, bottomless with desire. Predatory. Adam Blackmane's eyes, when he was feeling territorial, Elijah knew. Adam's, yet not Adam's. Julia's.

Wild. She was wild heat in his arms, savaging his neck. *More. More, baby.* Yes. She rocked against his sex, impatiently. She wanted him tempted. She wanted him as wild as she was.

And... *she wants me temporarily.* It was the thing Elijah knew that he couldn't un-know. *That's what this is about.*

The dress, the makeup, the no underwear. She was luring him into a fling, now that he had promised not to bond with her.

Do it, his body screamed, as she rubbed his penis through his cords, tugging the zipper down. *She's wet, and she wants you. Don't be a fool.*

He walked out of the light with her entwined around him, and leaned her against the flattest part of the tunnel wall. She was pinned. Her breath was coming in short, soft pants. She growled at him, softly, liking the pressure she felt as he leaned against her. She gave up her grip on his neck long enough to pull her arms out of the shoulder straps of her blue dress, wanting her breasts free, for his mouth.

"Please. Elijah, please," she panted, feeling one high heel drop off her dangling foot. She reached down for his fly.

He took her hands away from the zipper of his cords, pinning them above her head with one hand, holding her buttocks with the other. Rocking against her. She whimpered. *Wet. She's so wet.* He knew he would just slide into her, once he cleared his pants.

"And if I decide I want more than a quick screw against the wall?" His voice was savage in her ear. And she wasn't the only one who was panting. "What then, Julia?"

Her eyes flew open. Furious. So were his. Aroused. Angry. Close to just giving in. Like he wanted her to.

"No!" she shouted, closing her eyes to cover tears of frustration.

"Damn you!"

He let her go, setting her down as carefully as he dared. He adjusted his clothing. His voice, when he found it, was not quite in control.

"I think either one of us can get that from just about anybody... don't you?"

"What is wrong with us just wanting each other!?" She put on the lost shoe, straightened her hem, as she tried to repair her dignity. She couldn't believe he was rejecting her. Neither could he.

"Nothing. Not a damn thing. But if you think I have my hands on you because all I want to get laid, lady love, you have another think coming." He readjusted his trouser belt, snatched up his cape, and stalked toward the exit. Before he left, he turned back to her, with one parting shot.

"And I am not fifteen years old. I'm Not Adam. And you are for *damn* sure not Celeste." He spat his last proclamation at her, before he disappeared, into the circular exit.

Julia watched him go, as the music hit a crescendo. *Oh, Lord. What am I going to do?* she thought.



Chapter Nine

Understanding



The next morning, Adam had braided Chloe's hair, and sent her off to play with her Seth's children and her other newfound tunnel friends. Brigit O'Donnell was going to be there for story time, this afternoon, and Chloe wanted to bring one of her favorite books along, to show the famous Irish author. It was one about a cat who finds a magic fiddle, and plays it until coins drop from the moon. The book's binding-crease was well-bent, the pages all dog eared. It had been a Brigit O'Donnell favorite, in their house, while Chloe had been younger.

Stragglers were having a simple pancake breakfast. Some were talking about packing up, and heading for home.

As they wandered out, Julia entered the room. She looked like she hadn't slept well. In days.

"Hi, baby." Adam embraced his oldest child. *Child. Hah.* She was twenty one years old. He had blinked, and the time had gone. "You look tired," he said honestly. They were alone, in the big room.

Diana had gone up to her apartment and would not be back down until after dinner. Alex was off learning pipe code from Pascal.

We have a chance to be alone. Good, she thought. She had a feeling they might need to.

"Daddy." She hugged him, breathed in his strength, and relaxed, against the huge breadth of him. "You know, one of the nicest things about having you for a Father, is that you're so big, I always feel like a little girl, in these arms." She sighed.

And that's always there for you. But it's never been a good sign, when you wanted to be little again.

"You always will be my little one," Adam assured her.

"I know." Her voice sounded wistful.

Okay, Adam thought. Somewhere, there's probably a boy I need to kill. Elijah? The college kid, Michael?

"Dad, can we talk?" she asked, with more than a touch of worry in her voice.

"Of course."

"It's going to be hard."

Broken hearts usually were. "Just tell me who Daddy needs to beat to death, baby, and it's done," he teased. Well, not really. He was kind of serious. She loved him for it.

"It's not that. Well. Not exactly. It's about you and ...Mom."

Adam froze, on reflex. Julia knew he would. It was why they never had this conversation, before. It was simply too painful for him.

"Please, Daddy. Elijah's got me all in knots, and I..."

Her grey eyes so much like his own, met his, and held. "After Mom died, and you were sick..." she hesitated. "Diana helped you. I know she did."

Adam nodded. "She did. I owe her my life, though she won't accept that as being true," Adam said carefully.

"Seth came, too. And Zachariah. Remember?" Adam remembered. He'd damn near killed Seth, accidentally, in his grief.

"They thought you were griefstruck. Fading. Zachariah called it wasting, but that it shouldn't be happening, with Chloe still around. I was so scared."

He pulled her to him, unmanned by her charge.

"I'm so sorry, honey. To put you through that. To put all of you through it. It's why I sent you to live with your aunt for a few months, while I worked things out." It wasn't entirely true. But she let him have it. It had turned out all right, in the end.

"I know." There were tears in her eyes. "But it wasn't exactly... grief. Was it Dad?"

Now Adam Blackmane's stormy eyes grew careful. He was never sure just how much his children knew of the nature of the problems between him and his wife. That Celeste had been angry with him, that, they knew. That, he could not keep from them. She had accused him tearfully, near the end, and often, of being responsible for her illness. That was bad enough, without piling on more.

"Grief, survivor's guilt. Whatever you want to call it," he said carefully. *Celeste is her mother. Do not run her down.*

"You didn't make her sick, Dad. I know you didn't." She put her hand in his, lifting it to her mouth for an affectionate kiss.

"I know you do. But she didn't. And that was a problem, for me, for a while." He returned the gesture. This was a difficult conversation.

Then, it became impossible. "She cheated on you, didn't she?" Julia asked.

Adam exploded out of the chair. "No." His voice was firm.

Julia's eyes teared. "Oh, Daddy, I'm so sorry. It must have been so ... horrible for you."

"Julia, no. This is not how I want you to remember your mother." His voice had a hard note of finality to it.

"I don't think Alex knows. And certainly not Chloe. I think it's just me. Two years is a lot older, when you're a kid, and I was old enough to

remember when she was carrying Chloe. You two had been fighting a lot, and..." she looked back toward a distant point. "I remember her coming home very late, some nights. In a dress. She never wore dresses, at home. You went outside, to fight."

No. Of all the things he had never wanted to touch his child. "Julia..." His low voice held a warning. But she would not be put off.

"One night I woke up and went into your bedroom," she continued. "I'd had a bad dream, or something. And the house was empty. Mom wasn't there. It was three in the morning. Your closet door was open, and you had gone down into the tunnels under the house. The trap door was open, and I looked down. I think I was about fourteen or fifteen, then. You were...getting sick."

Getting sick. What a polite euphemism for heaving his guts up while his wife opened her legs for another man. He turned his back to Julia, frozen with the memory. He simply couldn't face her.

He looked down and to the side. "You were never supposed to know, Julia. I never wanted that, for you. Do not tell you brother or sister. Please."

"Oh, Dad, I won't. I don't think I really did know, not until recently. You know how being a kid is. You're so self-centered. Then things started to add up, in my brain."

Then something else added up. Her baby sister. She was undoubtedly her mother's child, of course. But was Chloe even Adam's?

Oh, God. No. Oh, Daddy... She couldn't even bear to ask.

She inhaled deeply. "Elijah says he remembers us all in happier times. We did have those, didn't we? I didn't just... make that up, in my

head?" Julia was begging him to remember for her, as she processed the information that was entering her brain. She didn't dare read him, right now. Didn't dare.

Adam turned back around. "Your mother and I had several happy years, Julia. You, and Alex, and Chloe. You three were the apples of her eye. Her pride and joy. No matter what happened between she and I. You remember that."

"Dad...what... what did happen? Why?" she asked.

Adam sighed. It was a topic he had pursued mentally, over and over.

"No one thing. No big event. That's just it. If it had been because we had a fight, or she wanted a trip to Europe, or something, I could have given that to her. Could have fixed things, somehow." He shook his head.

"She just... We were too *young*, Julia. She hadn't really lived much of her life. Then I came along, and it was this whirlwind thing, and there we were. Married. With a beautiful baby girl. And then a boy." He inhaled, deeply, letting the memories carry him.

"After a few years, being as isolated as we had to be, and realizing all the living she had missed out on, things I couldn't be a part of....I think she just... wanted to be free, again, is all. Free of me. Not you. Never you kids."

Julia just sat, and listened.

"I don't think she realized all the things she was going to give up, in a marriage. Any marriage, not just a marriage to me, but a marriage to anybody. I couldn't warn her, because I didn't know, either."

"Do you remember what it was she wanted to do?" Chloe asked, curious.

He shook his head and held his hands open, palm up. "What didn't she want to do?" he asked, letting the hands drop. "Bike across Europe. Go to cooking school, in France. Watch a movie in a theater, before it came out on tape. Things you couldn't do, with me in tow." He kept his voice carefully neutral, not wanting to sound bitter.

"You'd have let her do those things, though, wouldn't you?"

"Yes. But it wasn't just about *doing* them, Jules. She didn't want to do them alone. She wanted to be part of a couple, doing those things. She had always been part of a couple. Since I met her. Before that, even."

His steady gaze held hers. This was not a conversation he ever wanted to have with her. But it looked like they were going to have to. "She wanted to be with someone. Someone who could be with her. All the time."

Julia blinked. *How hard that must have been. How hard, for you.* "You must have hated her. Sometimes."

The dark head shook, in the negative. "No. I despaired of her, many times, I admit that; knew we were a failure on every level but you three. But hate her? No. I loved her. I loved watching her make cupcakes with you, even when she was sick. Loved watching her be a mother. I loved her the day I met her, and I loved her the day I buried her."

"Because of the bond?" Julia asked. *Is that what held the two of you together? And blew you apart?*

Adam shrugged. "Because she gave me three amazing children and some of the best years of my life. Because we patched things up, and kept trying, even when things were bad. Because until she got sick,

and even then, I had to hope we could find our way back to each other, someday. Somehow. Because she was my wife."

"Daddy.... " Julia's eyes were luminous. "I never regretted what you are. Not for a moment. You know that, don't you?"

"I know, Jewel." It was his childhood nickname for her. "But?" He introduced the word, so she wouldn't have to.

"But I don't want to be empathic. I know it's happening. I dread it. I'm so sorry, Daddy. I don't want this. I don't think I want to be what I am. And that feels like I'm letting you down, somehow."

He swept her into his arms for a fierce embrace. "I'd say between the two of us, I'm the one that let you down. You were never supposed to know, Julia. Never. I thought I was so careful."

She shook her head against his shirt, tears on her face.

"You've never let me down. I think... I think I just needed to know. Needed to be clear."

"And are you?" he asked, separating them.

She raked a long-fingered hand through her dark hair. "I don't know. Maybe. I don't want to bond with Elijah, Dad. But I think I'm falling in love with him. As a matter of fact... I know I am." There was no sense not confessing it. She knew it was true.

"I see." Adam took in his beautiful daughter. She was slender. Both strong and frail, at the same time. "And your parents' screwed-up marriage has you terrified of being bonded to a Shah."

She nodded, not denying it. "I'm already a Shahrenne. I dread the level of empathy I'm getting, even from that. My only comfort there is, is that I can turn it off. Or at least I can't feel it unless I focus on it. Unless what the other person's feeling is very strong. I think... I think

I'm more sensitive to Shah." The thought clearly upset her all the more.

He nodded in understanding. Shahrenne abilities varied widely, from barely there to distinctly active, but they were not so ingrained as the bond. Not so "always on." But this was the first time she'd told him she was becoming empathic. In his sister Cheryl, the talent was barely there, and almost solely with him, when it was.

"You can read people? Human? And Shah?" he verified.

She nodded. "The other night... I was reading some of the people at the wedding. And I... I knew Vincent was in the tunnels before I ever saw him. He was... broadcasting. Joy." She met his gaze squarely.

Adam's grey eyes flickered. Shahrenne talents rarely ran that deep. *No wonder you're afraid*, he thought.

"If... If Elijah and I bond... if it goes badly, between us, I can't just get out of it by packing a suitcase. He'll still feel me, wherever I am. And I think I'll probably feel him, too."

Adam, better than anyone, knew how true that was. "In that case I'd say you need to let him go." His words felt like a hammer driving a nail into her heart.

"Fear about what might happen is a horrible companion, Julia. It will eat you alive, if you let it." *Celeste did*, he added silently.

"Daddy, I need you to tell me something honestly," she asked. Her voice was serious. He simply looked down at her. *The last fifteen minutes weren't serious enough? And... when had she become such a full grown adult?*

"You know I'll tell you the truth if I can, Jewel."

"Do you think I'm like her?"

Ah. Now there was the question she had really come to get answered.

"Oh, baby. No. Don't take on that load. Some of the best things about her, yes. Yes, you are. But the rest? The rest, no."

"I think because you're my dad, you're supposed to say that," she replied.

"I entirely agree." He planted a fatherly kiss on her forehead. "Doesn't mean it isn't true, though."

"I want things. Like she did. Sometimes I think I want even more," Julia confessed.

"Will Elijah stop you from having those things?" Adam asked, curious.

She thought about the question a moment, then shook her head. "I don't... I don't think so. I think maybe I'm afraid I'd stop myself from having them, just so I could be with him." *It's why I've been so... upset, lately. With Elijah. With myself.*

"Then that's what *you're* afraid of, baby. What you'd willingly give up to be with him. Not the bond, necessarily. The cost of loving someone... so much it hurts." He knew what that was. And considered himself a lucky man, to have known it twice, now.

"I won't tell you there's no risk, Julia. But I will tell you there are rewards, in that pain."

She took in the amazing man her father was. *I love you. And I think I love him. Oh, Dad.* "It does hurt. But it feels wonderful, too. Like flying. Oh, Daddy. What should I do?" she asked, her heart in her grey eyes.

He knew that no matter what he thought, he couldn't tell her. That this was Julia's life, and no advice here would be "correct." It was a decision she had to make for herself. "I wish I had words of wisdom to

give you on that score, Jewel. But I don't. You're a lot older than Celeste and I were, when we were at this juncture. But you're still awfully young, yet."

Young. She had not felt young since the day her mother got sick. More, sometimes.

"What does your heart tell you?" Adam asked, sounding very much like Vincent.

"That he's the most wonderful man in the world. But that the world, with all its wonders, is still out there, too."

Adam sighed. "Talk to him. Listen to him. Push comes to shove, A few years down the road this picture may look a whole lot different. I know you don't want to hear that. But it's true."

He gave her a firm hug, which she returned, pressure for pressure. "You were a good Father, Dad. Alex, Chloe, and I... we always knew we were loved. I don't think anyone could have handled Mom's illness any differently, any better."

"You had to drive her into town, to the doctor's, sometimes. You and Alex." Guilt was in his voice over all the things he could not do for his wife, because of what he was.

"Oh, dad, we wanted to! I know it doesn't seem like it, but those were not bad trips. She was sick, but she liked riding in the car with the window down, feeling the breeze, watching the mountains roll by. We'd sing with the radio or just talk. Talk about everybody, and the Hunter clan, and how she wanted to go up and visit the falls again, when she was strong enough to make the trip. How I should wear my hair for some dance or what color looked best on my nails. We'd stop for a milk shake at Wendy's. That woman loved a Frosty, after a treatment." Julia's eyes shone, with tears of memory.

Adam blinked back his own. His daughter. *What a marvel you are.* Not for the first time he realized Celeste's illness had been hard on all of them.

"Julia. You are amazing." He hugged her to him again, fiercely, and let the embrace linger until she drew back.

"Elijah is a good man," Adam said, squeezing her shoulder. "He'll wait for you, if you ask him to. He won't like it. But he'll do it. After all. You're worth it." And that was as much advice as he was going to give on the matter. Probably.

Julia shook her head. It was such a fatherly thing to say.

"I love you, Daddy. And I'm very happy for you and Diana. All this is... new. Sometimes, it ... jars me. But I'm happy for you. Just so you know."

"I know, baby. I know."

Julia left the room to go out into the tunnels. She had no idea what was about to happen, next. But she was happy she had finally talked to Adam. *In some ways I'm like her, and in some ways I'm not. That has to mean something. I'm just not sure what.*



Chapter Ten

Propositions and Partings



Julia sat in her borrowed room a long time, adjusting the mostly finished sketches of the carousel ride with her hands, while her brain worked through its own labyrinths. She added a little more color to two of the drawings, and shaded a third. She then took a bundle of them to the Playroom, and hung them next to the others already there.

Standing back, she admired the display. They were good. Really good. And they had captured a truly amazing night. She knew Brigit had already seen some of them. She'd been deeply complimentary.

Julia kept a few of the sketches for herself, and tucked them inside her portfolio. Then she opened her tablet and stared at a blank page of paper, wondering what she should do next, willing inspiration to come.

I could draw Elijah from memory, she thought, knowing she could, in spite of what she'd told him. His handsome face was locked in her mind's eye.

The feeling that she needed to see the young Shah would not leave her. She wasn't sure how he would receive her. He'd been angry, last night. So had she. They had much to say, between them.

She put the sketchbook away and went to look for him. *Nothing ventured, nothing gained.* After an hour of searching, she found him in the big room Cullen kept for woodworking on some of the larger projects. There were tools everywhere, and work benches. Elijah was taking out his frustrations on a hammer, saw, nails, and boards. It seemed to make him feel better to help fix a broken dresser.

"Elijah... I... I talked to Adam." she ventured to tell him, as he picked up a hand tool.

"You two clear the air?" he asked, not turning.

"Yes. About a lot of things. A lot of things I think you already knew, that I didn't."

He said nothing to that, one way or the other, as he set a plane to a piece of wood.

"If I asked you to wait for me, would you?" she asked. He turned his head toward her a little, then looked forward, again.

"Yes, if that's what you wanted." He continued working the plane over the oak, watching the curl of the wood against the blade.

"Even if it took two years? Art school is over next semester, but I want to really try my hand at working as an artist. Commercial, private, illustrations, advertising. Maybe even a one woman show, some day. I need time for that, Elijah."

He nodded. "Take what you need. You know where to find me." He eyed the board. It was still not right.

"What if it's five years?" He set the plane down, and changed the blade. This was easier with a battery operated one, like the one he had back home.

"Fine. Just don't make it much longer than that. I'm due to go crazy some time in my early thirties. That gives us about what you're asking for, give or take. Think you can make it back, by then?" He shot her a glance, then returned to his job.

"I'm in love with you." She whispered it, a tear falling down her cheek.

He dropped the hand tool so that it landed with a clatter. Gripped the edge of a huge wooden table that was half-sanded.

"I was so afraid you weren't going to be able to say it." He turned and crossed the room to her and absolutely seized her. She met him half way and threw herself into his arms.

"I love you." She said it again. "I'm so sorry about the other night. I was wrong."

"So was I. I just... say it again."

"I was wrong."

"Not that, you idiot." He claimed her mouth with his, so that for a moment, she couldn't say anything.

"I love you," she said, when he let her up for air. Picking her up in his arms, he began to make his way down the tunnel passageway. Her mouth nestled at his neck. She could feel the heat coming, from his skin. He was stalking back down the tunnel halls, heading for his room.

"I love you. I do, Elijah," she repeated. *Please believe me. I've been so screwed up. I wasn't trying to put you through hoops, I swear.*

"I love *you*, Julia. I think I've been falling in love with you since the night Vincent married Catherine." He kissed her fiercely, as they entered his bedroom.

She pulled down the tapestry covering the doorway. Zachariah's unmade bedding dominated the floor. Elijah, at six foot three, was at least able to sleep on a regular bed, though it was a tight fit.

"We don't have to wait?" She pulled at his clothes.

"I don't think I could." He threw his shirt into a corner, and reached for her belt.

"You won't hate me, when I leave for school?"

"I'll hate every minute of it. But I won't hate you. Not if it's making you happy."

"You believe I'll come back?" she asked, as she tugged off her boots.

He closed his eyes a moment, and let the feeling that had been buzzing around his heart settle. "I believe. I believe in us, Julia." He peeled back her blouse. She was a feast for his eyes.

"There isn't going to be anybody else, Elijah."

"I know that, Jules." He teased her breasts by drawing his thumb across the white fabric. Her nipples hardened, demanding his attention.

"I mean for you, either," she clarified.

"There isn't going to be anyone else." He looked into her eyes, intensely. Sitting backward on the bed, he held on to her hand as he toed out of his boots.

"Come here, Julia Blackmane. Show me how much you're going to miss me."

"What about the bond?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Not until we're married." He was firm about that. "But I want you so much it's killing me, Julia. Been killing me almost since we went swimming, together."

He tugged her forward, so that she sprawled across his gorgeous body. His chest was deep and broad, and covered with the same dark red hair that crowned him. His shoulders flowed seamlessly to a beautiful column of throat, then down to a muscular torso. He was a masterpiece. He was hers.

Her hands were on him, demanding. He kicked off his boots as she unfastened his pants. He wanted her naked. He nearly broke the zipper on her jeans to make sure she got that way.

Zachariah was gone hunting. They had hours. Elijah planned to make good use of every one of them.

He was erect to the point of pain when she straddled him, and bit his lip to keep from coming too fast, when she took him inside. *Julia. My beautiful Julia.*

She was liquid. Molten. Muscular. She was Julia, and he knew he adored her. The long legs that ate the ground when she walked were tucked against his thighs, as she rode him, while he sat, leaning up against the headboard of an old sleigh bed. She gripped the curled wood as she tormented him, and screamed in completion when he reminded her that he could torment her, too.

He climaxed, suckled at her breast, then laid her gently on her back, staying inside her, making sure she knew his strength, his length, and his desire for her. He never left her; simply stayed inside until he hardened again, feeling the bond lick out between them.

Good. It finds her suitable. More than. One more question, answered.

He batted it down before he set the rhythm that would bring them both to completion, again. *Dark apricot.* Her nipples were dark apricot. He'd never been able to see their true color, before.

They darkened and pebbled, hard, every time she came.

He made certain that happened, often.

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They had tried to dress, and had not made it, twice, before something tingled in Elijah's brain. Julia felt it, too. It was a claxon of distress.

"There's trouble," he told her. She reached for her jeans, and she was right with him. The extant bonds in the tunnels were roiled. Badly.

"Something with Zachariah. Something bad." Julia replied. She cast her mind out and sensed someone else. A woman. Brigit?

"Is it Brigit?" she asked as they both yanked shirts back on. Then she knew the answer at almost the same moment he did.

"I don't think so. I think it's Corey." Elijah's eyes looked worried. They could both feel Zachariah's panic.

"Hospital chamber. Go," Julia ordered, taking a moment to grab her boots. "I'm right behind you."

They found him there, Zachariah, a bleeding Corinne, Jacob, and Brigit, bringing in a terrified Seth. Corinne was terrified. They were all afraid she was losing the baby.

Corinne stayed with Jacob Wells, in the hospital chamber. In the next room, the rest of them were joined by others, and formed a loose and miserable prayer circle, of sorts, Zachariah held Seth by the shoulders

as the latter knelt on the floor, sensing his unborn child, and trying to send that child strength.

Brigit O'Donnell promised, along with all the others, to gift Seth's new baby with their love, and some other wonderful things, if only he would survive. But Elijah sensed that she and Zachariah did not feel... right with each other, anymore. Something bad had happened, between them. Something which had crushed their budding romance.

Elijah kept it all in. His green eyes did not tear. They went between the pulled drape, behind which Corinne struggled, and his brother, kneeling on the floor.

Julia did not need to read him to know what he was feeling. *Fear. Fear, kept in check. Strength, on a leash. Control, both for the worst case scenario, and the best.*

Julia knew that some part of Elijah was already making plans, already anticipating what he would do, no matter what happened. Though Zachariah was every inch the family Protector, Elijah was a step ahead, when it came to planning. She wondered if either of his brothers even realized the acuity of his mind, when it came to helping them.

As Seth knelt, everyone gathered around his bent form, touching him with their hands, letting him know they were there, trying to send strength and love, to both Seth, Corinne, and the unborn child Seth could still feel.

Julia's hand tingled as she touched him. *So many people sending so much empathy through Seth.* Julia felt it, as she felt all of them. He was a conduit for everyone, and trying to open himself up, so they could all reach into his child.

Julia knelt nearby, and helped him. *Where are you, little one? Where? We're here. We're here, for you.*

She felt the beautiful, tensile bond Seth had with his child. It was still alive. *It's a boy*, she thought, her empathy acting as a “widener” for all the feelings flowing through all of them.

Elijah felt her, and what she was doing. She was further opening the bond line Seth shared with his unborn child. A line they were all joining, to one degree or another.

Zachariah sent protection, a sheltering kind of love. Brigit sent as much bravery as she could. Seth was bitten with fear, but was trying to send calm both to the baby and Corinne. Chloe sent a young teenager's sweet, pure, simple love. Alexander sent a steady kind of determination.

Julia looked lovingly at Elijah. Elijah's gift was tenacity. The simple strength of never letting go. *Hold on, little one.* She could all but hear him think it, verbatim. *No matter what. You hold on. We will be here for you. I swear we will.*

Her eyes met his. *She knows what I'm thinking. She's making it so the baby feels it.*

He sent her an empathic message, confirming it. *You're making sure the baby feels all of us, aren't you?*

She nodded, inclining her head as they all clustered together.

Elijah knew at that moment that there was no other woman on the planet for him, but her. *Shahrenne. What a gift you are giving. What a gift, for this unborn baby.*

Julia closed her grey eyes, and let the feelings flow. *It will be all right. It will be all right*, she thought, praying it would be true.

Nearly thirty minutes later, Jacob Wells and Peter Alcott emerged from the curtained room. Mother and baby were fine. The bleeding had stopped. They wanted Corinne to rest. Seth wanted to hold her, to lay at her feet, if they'd let him.

Everyone else was told to disperse. The crisis, they hoped, was past. For the next few days Corinne would be confined to rest, and only to travel if she showed no ill effects. Peter Alcott seemed unworried, and put it down to a broken blood vessel, maybe caused by Corinne's trip to the hot springs.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief, even as they still worried. As they walked back through the tunnels, Elijah stayed close to his love.

"I felt you. I felt what you did," he told Julia, loving her.

"It's a boy," said Julia, as if he had asked it. "A Shah boy."

"I know," Elijah replied simply. He'd felt as much, but not on his own. He'd felt it through her. Somehow, they were already a perfect match for each other. His innate talents clearly augmented hers.

We're meant to be. I wasn't sure, before. Now, I am.

And she was going to leave him. Possibly, for years. Several of those. *This was going to be beyond hard.*

Julia wavered on her feet. What she'd done had been exhausting, for her.

"I'm going to go get the twins settled. You need to lay down," he said, sensing Julia's fatigue. Their beautiful eyes were shadowed.

She nodded, too tired to argue, or offer to volunteer more help.

"Talk to you later?" she asked.

"Of course," he replied, remembering how they'd been engaged, before the day had gone to hell.

He watched her walk away, knowing it was her connection to the Shah, and the Shah life, that had made her almost staggeringly tired.

That took a lot out of you. Maybe us being close isn't so good for you, after all. Maybe your life would be better if I just... Elijah blinked. Doubt crept in, and began to plague him.

He knew he had much to think about, as he helped Seth's children back to their rooms.

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Hours later, Elijah confirmed that things between Zachariah and Brigit had fallen apart. That was a shame, but it could not be helped. The big blonde Protector was not in the mood to answer questions, and as the week wound down, the Hunter clan gathered itself for the return trip to North Edge. Julia had to return to school, for her last semester. He left a note on her pillow. They'd said their good-byes the night before. Passionately.

They would be apart, henceforward. It could not be helped.

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September slid into October and then November, and that slid into preparations for a special occasion, for the Tunnel Folk. Winterfest was coming. It was a time of year when the tunnels glowed with candlelight, warm fires, and anticipation. Small gifts would be exchanged, and there was a feast to be had. Vincent himself would lift off the huge beam and open the tall doors to the Great Hall. It would be his first time doing that, as a married man. The Big Day was a week away. You could feel it in every child's smile.

Julia was not smiling. She had finished art school, which was to say she now had a degree in design from a trade school. She was unsatisfied with her diploma, every time she looked at it.

What had started out to be a huge undertaking now felt like a silly, shallow victory. Even being a featured artist in Brigit O'Donnell's latest book was not bringing her the joy she thought it would. The book itself was still a work in progress, and some of her drawings would definitely be published in it. Brigit's own rounded out the multiple illustrations. Julia had been told that she would be given a very nice check for her maiden efforts.

She should have been happy. She, and Brigit. But Brigit O'Donnell's voice sounded anything but, when they'd last talked on the phone. They'd discussed business, not their personal lives. Julia knew the Irishwoman had sounded hollow.

Brigit and Zachariah. Another romantic implosion.

Julia had come back to Manhattan with Adam and Diana, hoping against hope she would see Elijah in the tunnels. There was no reason he should be here. Maybe he would come if Adam did. Maybe she should just write him a letter, and say she wanted to come up to Canada. Maybe she should just get on a train and go. But maybe he was already on his way, here. Without an immediate way to contact him, there was no way to know.

He had left her a note, a single sentence written upon it, laying on her borrowed bed, the day she'd packed her bags to leave, after Vincent and Catherine had returned.

Come to me when you are ready to stay.

That was clear enough. He did not know when that would be, three weeks, three months, or three years from now. Or more. So far, Julia was aware that she had already passed the first two time spans.

Julia paced the cheerful tunnels, and chewed a carefully chosen thumbnail. Corinne's medical emergency had taught Julia something. She no longer wanted to be an artist. She wanted to be a nurse. Or a physician's assistant. Or something. Something where she could help people who needed it. Not be a bystander in a waiting room, crying into somebody's shirt. But a helper. A person who made a real difference. Maybe even a full-fledged doctor, one day, if she could stick it out that long. There was a small college not far from the hospital where she'd taken her mother. *I could do this. I could.*

It was something that had been gnawing on the edge of her consciousness since her mother had gotten sick, if she truly thought about it. She had drawn pictures to escape that reality. Escape its terrors and its hardness. But now she could see herself embracing those hard times. Maybe even getting a measure of control over them.

I could make a difference. A real difference, in the lives of other people. I could make a difference to others... And to myself. There. She said it. Or at least she'd admitted it, internally.

She thought about her newly minted diploma and sighed for it. *Two years, wasted.* She'd had a change of heart, and wanted to change her major. *Back to square one. More school. A lot more. And harder.*

She had yet to say it to Adam, or Diana, or Alexander, or anyone. She had yet to say it to Elijah, either; to break things off with him for good, and ask his forgiveness. She sat down at an empty spot in the Dining Chamber.

This might take a lot longer than either one of us thinks it will, she mourned. She felt so screwed up. What a mess.

"Somebody once told me that's what being twenty one, and in New York is all about." Devin sat beside her, as though he could hear her thoughts.

"How do you know what I'm thinking?" she asked. *You're not empathic too, are you?*

He settled in beside her, at the Dining Hall table. "I'm a carny. And a lawyer, sometimes. You gotta read people, either way," he explained, pouring himself a cup of tea from the pot on the table.

"I never realized how much those two professions aligned," she confessed.

"You'd be surprised. It helps with a lot of things." He winked at her, and added sugar to his cup.

"And so, how is my partner in crime?" Julia asked.

"Forbidden from taking anybody on any more late night carousel rides, that's for sure. You know what I say to that?"

"That next time, we'll start earlier, so we can stay longer?" Her smile was a ghost of one, but it was there.

"See, that's what I like about you, Legs. You know how I think."

She sat looking on as Mary hung garland around the room.

"So let me return the favor." He looked at her with a steady, brown-eyed gaze. "He's in love with you. Whatever it is, it can be fixed."

"How in God's name do you know that?" she asked him.

"I saw the picture you drew of him, before Father had us take them down. You have one hell of a talent, Julia."

Yes. I have one hell of a talent. And you don't know the half of it. Your brother hit you because you thought he told Father you had a pocket knife. You called him a name, and the two of you got into it. You take pride in being a good fraud. The months had only increased her abilities.

"One hell of a talent," he repeated.

"Thank you," she replied politely.

Devin's dark eyes were sincere. "Your drawing of him... well. If anybody ever loved me like that... ahh... Let's just say it would have been all but impossible to let them go."

Those are brave words, from a man who won't stay in one place long enough to fall in love.

"I didn't give him a choice, Devin. He had to let me go," she revealed. *And I might be about to push him away, further.*

"Then make him take you back again. It's what you want, isn't it?"

Julia poured tea into a cup and sipped from it, giving a shrug for an answer.

Yes, it's what I want. But I want other things, too. And I might just not be able to have them all. And he doesn't have forever for me to make up my mind about that. And if I string him along too long, then break it off... I might cost him any chance he has, of happiness. Or of living. But I do love him. But time isn't on his side, and I risk him, every month I spend apart. I can't say I love him, and do that.

And... pretending to be a... tour guide in Australia? Is that what you were? Well. Well, that's not going to fix this, she thought, reading him. Her abilities were still growing, but she was getting used to it.

She could still read some people better than others. Today, Devin was coming through loud and clear.

“He’s a good guy, Julia.” Devin was sincere, in his appraisal.

“I guess I’ll have to figure it out,” she gave, as a reply. He simply nodded, then drained his cup.

Her thoughts were heavy ones, as Devin left the room.

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Chapter Eleven

Reunions and Resistance



Julia occupied the same guest room she had taken when Brigit had been with her in September. Brigit was not in the tunnels other than to say “hello” however, and that had been three days ago.

Julia was half asleep the night she felt Elijah slip into the bed with her. For a moment, the dream of it was so compelling, she could not sort out the fantasy from the reality. The bed was narrow. Twin. He scooted in behind her and spooned her back, putting his muscled arm across her torso. His sigh was deep and heartfelt.

She nearly drifted back to her dream. Elijah's smell enveloped her. Woodsy. Spice. A hint of something like amber.

She turned around, or tried to, so quickly she nearly fell off the narrow bed. "Elijah!" she breathed.

"Hello, love. It's three a.m. Go back to sleep."

"No!" This time she did turn enough to face him, kissing him with all the longing in her heart.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he confided. "I just came in. I was going to just go to my chamber, but..."

"Don't you dare sleep so close to me and not come in here!" Julia scolded, in between kisses. "I missed you so much!" The sentence caught on her sorrow.

"Shhh. I know. It's all right, love. Everything is all right, for the moment."

For the moment. Yes.

For the moment, he was as close to her as her own heartbeat. For the moment, he was warm, and travel-tired and so glad to see her he wouldn't even put himself to his own borrowed bed, to ease his exhaustion. For the moment, it had only been about three months since the last time they had seen each other. Not eight months. Or three years.

Desperation suddenly overwhelmed her, and she began to kiss him in earnest. Any attempt he made to quiet or calm her was simply batted away. Her hands stripped open his shirt, so she could rub her face against his warm chest. She suckled his breasts, letting him feel her teeth scrape against his skin.

Okay, we're not going to sleep, he thought.

She kissed a path downward from his chest through his navel as she tugged the fly of his jeans open. At that point, Elijah simply gave over to the passion she was purposely trying to wring out of him.

He had thought to take things more slowly. Find out if “they” were what she really wanted, now that the realities of being separated while she pursued her life made themselves known. Clearly, she still wanted him.

I missed you too, Jules, he thought.

Keeping him on his back, she tugged his jeans down, slightly. He lifted to accommodate her, thinking she was going to undress him. But she yanked his pants only part way down his thighs, enough to free his sex, but no more. Then she laid back between his legs again, kissing his navel.

He realized what she was about, a moment before she took him into her mouth.

No. Staying hands dropped to her shoulders, lightly. He wanted to be inside her. Wanted to feel her orgasm, as she rode him, or as he rode her. He hadn't come here to....*aahhhhh!*

Her hands grasped his rigid flesh, stroking him with the long artist's fingers he adored. Her mouth on him was too much, simply too

much, to resist. It had been months since he had felt her. His brain shattered as his hips lifted, straining for deeper contact.

Juliaah.... Her tongue was a wet serpent, and Elijah knew it should be illegal to do what she was doing to him. Teasing, at the tip. Pleasing, down the length. Then, she changed it, so it was the other way around. He began to thrash, his hips making thrusting motions, instinctively. *Too much. It was too much. And in so many ways, not nearly enough.*

Knowing it was the worst kind of demand, he threaded his hand in the hair at the back of her head, and all but forced her head where he wanted it. *There. On him. Taking him in. Yes. Don't take your mouth away again. Give me the heat, there, the wet. Hold your tongue right there and...*

He nudged her head back, then pushed it forward, again, with his hand. He knew it was the worst kind of base animal instinct. He also knew that was what she was trying to bring out.

She moved as he bid her, and his pleasure increased.

Oh, yes. Like that. Making the motion with his hand that he wanted from her head, showing her what he wanted, he knew he was all but forcing her to do it, because there was no other way. He did not want to be teased. Did not need to be aroused. He wanted to use her mouth as if he was inside her, stroking.

She followed his demands, kneeling between his legs, trapping his thighs inside his jeans. The sounds they made were wanton. Sexual. Unmistakable. Her hand grasped the base of his penis firmly. When she turned her hand so that the tip of her middle finger caressed the sensitive vein on the underside of his sex as she went up and down on him, he exploded.

His hips drove up, too far. But she had her grip on him and rose with him, letting her tongue lave him, telling him how much she approved of his loss of control.

This was Elijah. And suddenly, there was no finesse, here, no playfulness, or sharing, or folly. This was need. His. And he was telling her of it in the most immediate way he knew how.

His orgasm was so hard as to be painful for him. His arching hips dropped, and his torso came up off the bed, curling over her. He still held her head. She sucked gently, while he spasmed into her mouth. She had no choice but to be where she was. He had given her no other option. He whimpered, both trying to stop, and not wanting to stop for the world. It felt so good. And so like a rape, somehow.

Never. He had never done that before. Which is to say he had done *that*, yes, he was a healthy male in his mid-twenties with a reasonable number of experienced sexual partners, but...not that way. Not by holding a woman's head against him, showing her how he wanted her to move.

His hand loosened in collapse, and he finally let her go, simply because no muscle in his body would obey a simple command. His hand fell limp, tangling, some, in the silk of her hair, before he could finally free his fingers.

"God, I'm sorry." he said, when he found his voice, pulling her up to him. "I'm so sorry, Julia. I have never done that to..."

"Shhhhhhhhhh." She put her fingers against his mouth. It was the hand she had gripped him with. It smelled like his ejaculate. She nipped at his lip.

"I wanted it." She moved her mouth away from his. *Most men did not like the smell or taste of -*

He grabbed her head from behind for the second time that night, draining her mouth with an open-mouthed kiss that was as unsubtle a caress as he could give her. He licked her clean, pulling her against his body only to discover she wore no underwear beneath her night shirt. Groaning, he stripped the garment off, settling her astride him. He was not ready for her, yet. But he could make her ready for him.

Easing himself down the bed, pulling her forward so that her knees were near his shoulders, he reclined between her legs then urged her up, on her knees. Her sex was near his mouth. Like him, she realized his intention a moment before the act commenced. Without so much as a passing thought for her breasts, he pushed her buttocks forward so that his tongue could ravish her labia, then envelop her clitoris. Now it was her hand in his hair, keeping the pressure where she wanted it.

Both his hands at her buttocks now, he began to set her into a rhythm, settling the cleft of his lip against her mount, sucking on her clitoris, hungrily.

“Elijah!” she gasped.

His lower lip massaged her nether lips as his tongue snaked out to all but fill her underside length. There was no part of her sex not being touched. She felt his fangs bracket her, holding her straight into his caresses. Felt him slide under her, slightly, changing the angle of his assault. He was laving the bundle of nerves, unrepentantly. Her breath came in short gasps as she began to work against him, hard, with her hips. She braced one hand against the wall. Kept the other in his hair. *Yes. Like that. There. Just...don't...stop...now!*

When she orgasmed, he lifted her, using his hand on her backside. Her knees no longer supported her weight. He was holding her

against his tongue and mouth, all along her length. Her hand against the wall braced her from falling forward. His neck muscles and arms held her weight as she drove against him, crying with release. He took it into his mouth as she had taken his, the remnants dripping down his cheeks, his chin, his neck.

Her back slumped and he finally let her down, sliding her all along his length, streaking himself with her juices. Arms wrapped around her back, he cradled her to him, settling her along the length of his torso.

Pulling the blanket up against the cold tunnel air, he nuzzled her against him, then drifted off to sleep, too tired to consider what the hasty encounter meant for them, or if it meant anything.

"Morning," he whispered, feeling her stir against him. He had been semi-awake for some time, bearing her sleeping weight. Had not wanted to stir, to disturb her slumber. But the small bed was uncomfortable, and he needed to relieve a cramp building in his bent leg. His jeans were still half down his thighs, and he could barely move.

"Mmmm. Morning," she whispered back, nestling into the soft pelt of his chest before she finally stirred, forcing herself to face the day. She let her brain recall the events of last night, or more precisely, earlier this morning.

He knew exactly the moment cognizance returned. She opened her eyes fully, blinking, and remembering. Sex between them last night...this morning, had not been exactly genteel. Satisfying, yes. But to a certain degree, out of character, for both of them.

Elijah was accustomed to thinking of himself as both a skilled and considerate lover. By nature, he gave more than he took, and had

never used his strength to hold a woman to him, or above him, before last night. His arms felt wonderful. So did his genitals. But the image of her silky mane entwined in his fingers as she pleased him would not leave him.

If she's angry this morning, she had a right to be. He waited for a rebuke of some kind, either a subtle or an overt one.

Julia's body hummed, as her brain felt confused. Was that her, demanding he undress, trapping him into stillness as she demanded a response? She was not completely unschooled, but her education to this point had been confined to something much more "tame," by comparison. Last night had been something utterly new.

She remembered being held utterly aloft, while he used her weight to drive her against himself. It was wanton. And she had a red tress of his hair wrapped around her index finger to prove she had been there, her hand buried in his hair, demanding it.

They were both wet, and sticky. *Would he now be ... repelled by her?*

Perhaps what she was about to do regarding school wasn't the thing she needed to be worried about.

"You okay?" he asked. If there were recriminations to face, he'd like his now, please.

"Yes." It was a whisper. "You?"

He wasn't sure what to say. The truth, which was that he felt amazing? Would that convey that he wanted to treat her rudely, again? *What part of the truth to tell, here?*

"Better, since I woke up next to you." *There. That should do.*

He was beneath her, actually. The bed was too narrow for both of them.

She sat up, suddenly. "What time is it?"

"Beats me. I can't make out that tapping on the pipes." She grabbed for her watch, holding the blanket to her chest.

"Oh, no. I promised William I'd be there to help with breakfast, ten minutes ago. Sorry." She jumped out of bed, ran a wet washcloth everywhere she could reach, shivered with the cold, and dove into a pair of jeans.

He watched her as she dressed, giving him her smooth white back, until she covered it with a shirt. When she turned, she did not meet his eyes, as she fished her boots out from under the bed. *So much for being okay*, he thought.

"I'm sorry I'm in a rush. I just wasn't expecting you." A quick peck on the cheek and she was headed out through the tapestry door at a half-trot.

It's going to be one of those days, Elijah thought, shouldering his way into his long-sleeved shirt.

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Gratefully, breakfast was the oatmeal and cereal variety, not the huge spread that had materialized for Vincent and Catherine's wedding. Elijah got to speak at length with the Shah of the tunnels, finally, and was terrifically impressed by his carriage. Clearly, those Below would do anything to protect the favorite member of their community. Vincent absolutely returned that devotion.

Elijah found that Vincent was intelligent, reserved, by nature, intuitive, strong, and focused. Also, utterly in love with his bond mate. As Zachariah had pronounced during their last stay, Vincent had chosen his bride wisely.

"We barely got to speak, the last time I was here. So much going on," Elijah told Vincent, as the latter took the former to see where the children did their learning.

"I believe other things were... distracting me," Vincent returned, "Though Winterfest hardly finds us quiet. But yes. Our wedding was... active," Vincent replied, giving Elijah a subtle smile.

Elijah answered back with a fuller one of his own. "Completely understandable. She's incredible. As is all of this," Elijah said, gesturing to the stone kingdom all around them. "Beautiful, too, in its way."

"That reminds me," Vincent replied, as they strolled through the tunnels. Vincent turned, taking him into the makeshift classroom. "I have some things in here that may belong to you."

Elijah could not imagine what Vincent meant. He had left nothing behind last time he travelled, of which he had been aware.

Going over to an artist's portfolio book, Vincent drew out roughly half a dozen large sketches. He held up a particular one. It was of Daniel. Daniel having the time of his life, clutching the pole of the merry-go-round. The fine hair on his face looked stirred, by the motion of the carousel. Hood down around his neck, eyes alight, the barest hint of the sea serpent's head, before him, he was clearly having the time of his life. It was a gorgeous rendering of him.

"These were hanging in the children's Playroom, after I returned. This is Seth's son, yes?" Vincent asked.

Elijah nodded. "My nephew Daniel. Yes." Elijah was too amazed to do more than whisper.

Julia had caught him, and done so perfectly. Not just his likeness, but the *feeling* he'd had, at the time. Daniel. Four years old. Smiling as broadly as Elijah had ever seen him. Riding a carousel for the first time. Outside. In New York City.

"This is... priceless," Elijah proclaimed.

Vincent kept his voice low, and admiring. "He's very handsome. May I venture a guess that my brother Devin, was somehow involved, here?"

Elijah did not remove his eyes from the sketch. *How had she done that? How had she taken a flat surface like a piece of paper and suffused it with such...childhood joy?*

"You could ah, say that." Elijah tried to be noncommittal.

Vincent inclined his head, smiling. "Devin included me in just such an escapade, many years ago. I'm glad he hasn't lost his touch. I think I rode the Arabian."

"Devin mentioned as much. Daniel likes sea monsters. What an... incredible look, she caught in his eyes." Elijah praised the amazing drawing, still unable to take his eyes off his prize. Though the carousel was indoors, Julia had taken artistic license with it. The moon rose behind Daniel's head, and was full, with a thin cloud, scudding across it. *This is why she wanted to go back. This is why she said she'd need to take time with the sketches. What imagination. What an incredible gift you have, Julia.*

"Do you know the artist? The work is exceptional." Vincent clearly agreed with him.

It was then that Elijah realized Julia had neglected to sign her work. Any of it. "Julia. She did this. Did all of them." He set the picture of

Daniel aside and his eyes scanned the other pages, briefly. Here was more treasure, and more proof of his love's talent. One was of several tunnel children. One of Seth's twins, Annie and Bea. Chloe and Alexander were together, him standing while she rode. Then another one of Daniel, this time from farther back, the curves and curls of his "mount" evident, in her artwork.

But it was the last picture that startled Elijah the most, and likely why Vincent had thought the sketches might belong to him. The last drawing was one of himself, on the roof of the storage shed, crouched, to guard them all. She had titled that one. "Vigilant."

"Julia Blackmane. She did all of these. Every one." Elijah added her surname.

"Adam Blackmane's daughter? Diana's step-daughter?" Vincent asked.

"Yes. May I keep these, Vincent? I know several people who would love to have them."



"Of course. You must ask the talented Julia if she would agree to draw some of the other adults and children for me, if you would. We do not keep cameras down here, as such."

Elijah knew they didn't, and that the reason for that stood before him. "There is much... joy in her work. And it would be nice to have a portrait of my class, as a group. May I keep this one?"

It was one of Devin, hoisting one of the tunnel children onto a thoroughbred's back. The scars on his face showed, subtly. So did his smile, and the mischief in his dark eyes.

"It is not mine to give you, but I have a feeling the artist wouldn't mind. Might want to keep it hidden from Father, however."

Vincent chuckled. "As you say." he agreed.

Vincent lifted his head, sensing something. "My wife," Vincent paused, still getting used to the magnificent feel of that word, "is returning earlier than I expected. Please excuse me, Elijah. I would like to meet her at the entrance. We have some plans to make. This will be her first Winterfest, as a bride." The almost constant half-smile deepened, on Vincent's face.

"I understand. I'm sure Julia would be happy to draw for you. As a return for your hospitality, if nothing else."

Vincent gave Elijah a nod, then departed, with a swirl of his dark cape. He moved quickly, for so big a man.

Now there goes a Shah in love with the world, right now, Elijah mused.

Elijah considered the lot of them: Zachariah was bigger, of course, but Zachariah was bigger than a mountain. Vincent was a little taller than either Seth or Adam, though not so broad as the latter. Nobody could beat Adam Blackmane for the breadth of his shoulders. Mining paid

dividends for him, that way. *And his new wife seems to approve.* Elijah added, silently.

Vincent clearly had an approving wife all his own, if his good mood was any indication. *Rushing to meet your wife. The woman you know who loves you. I think there must not be any better feeling, in the world,* he mused.

Elijah tucked the pictures away, wondering if he'd ever have a wife of his own. His love was obviously incredibly talented, and that talent might lead her to different places. Places far away from him. Time apart gave him no guarantee she would return to him.

He sighed at the knowledge, and slid "Vigilant" beneath the rest.

--

He finally pinned Julia down in her room, and returned the remaining sketches to her. She tucked them away in a long folder. And she would not quite meet his eyes, again.

"Thank you. I forgot I left these," she said, folding the flap over them, carefully. Her fingers worried at the string.

"Okay. Whatever it is, we've been dancing around it since this morning. Spill," he ordered.

Julia looked tentative. "Are you angry with me?" she asked.

"No," he replied.

"Disappointed?"

"No," he repeated.

She looked up, but couldn't hold his steady green gaze. "Elijah...I think you're going to be. I'm so sorry."

Elijah felt his guts clench. *Here it comes. She met someone else. Or decided she just doesn't want the two of us, as a couple, in spite of what happened last night. Or maybe even because of it. She's about to say we can still be friends. Last night was one for the road.*

"My biggest fear is that you're going to be so angry with me that you'll just ... give up. Find someone else. And I'm afraid I'm not being fair to you." She was literally wringing her hands. Her artist's hands.

"If this is about to be the 'I think we should see other people,' talk, you may want to get clear of this room, Julia. Because I promise I'm about to do something violent to it," Elijah warned.

"You're not listening." Julia was near tears. "I didn't say 'That's what I want.' I said 'That's what I'm afraid of.'"

He exhaled slowly. "Okay, then. Why don't you tell me what it is you *do* want."

She faced him squarely for the first time. Frightened grey eyes clashed with angry green.

"I want to be a nurse."

It took him a moment to process the sentence. Mostly because it was nowhere on his radar as something she was likely to say. *You want... what?* He sat down heavily, on a nearby stool. *Funny how having the weight of the world lifted off your shoulders suddenly made you feel like you can't stand.*

"Christ, is that all? You've got to stop doing this to me, Julia. I keep feeling like we're always this close to blowing apart." He held up his furred fingers to show a short distance.

"I never want to do that. Blow us apart. Never," she said, daring to step closer.

He ran both hands through his thick mane, pushing it back, at the temples. He was the picture of relief, after great frustration. "I just ... okay, I'm going to say it. I thought you were good and ticked. I've been getting a vibe off you I didn't like, and I... I thought you had one foot out the door, somehow. You want to be a nurse? Fine. Be a nurse." He blew out an unsteady stream of air.

She gave him a sympathetic look. "You might not still feel that way once I tell you the details."

He sat silently, bidding her to continue.

The worried look was back on her face. "This isn't a small decision, Elijah. I already put the enrollment paperwork in, and I'm going to be taking courses in physiology and microbiology, maybe ethics, and comparative anatomy. I've got chemistry to figure out, and a lab, too. If I bust my ass night, day, and summers, and don't have time to breathe, I'll be done in about two and a half years. For starters. Maybe. I have to be good enough to pass my nurse's boards. That's no picnic."

Elijah shrugged. "You told me it was going to be two years or more when you wanted to pursue your art. Two years is two years, to me."

Tears came to her eyes, making them shimmer like silver. "I am terrified you're going to get tired of waiting for me. Or that I'm going to cost you every chance you have, for happiness. That you'll wait for me, when you really should be looking for someone else."

"Julia. My Julia." He rose from the stool and held his arms out to her, and she crashed into them. "Don't. Don't make decisions in fear, Shahrenne. They're never good. You'll see. Come New Year's Eve a couple years from now, I'm still going to be standing here, loving you. I don't need a bond to tell me that."

"I told my father about the change in plans. I'm not being flighty. Adam thinks I am. But I'm not."

"So you decided against being a professional artist, I take it?" *You're talented, you know.*

"I didn't decide *against* it. I decided *for* something, more than I decided against something else." He could tell she was having the same conversation with him that she'd had with her father, earlier.

"I love my art, but I realized I was so good at it when I was in high school and college because it was... a way to escape the other things that were going on."

She shook her head, not believing the turns her life had taken, in the last few months.

"I was *good* at art, and God, *I'm even published already, or I will be.*" She stepped back and ran her fingers through her own dark mane, pushing it back from her fair face. She knew being published was far from a small thing.

"Offers have come my way from Brigit O'Donnell's publishing company." If he was going to know what she was giving up, he might as well know it all. "They say more will come, when her book comes out. I'm *insane* to walk away from this. I think I can almost pay for my schooling, with the money I might be able to get. I *know* this sounds crazy. But I don't think I can pursue art and this. It's too much. I'll fail at it. I need to stay focused."

"You must feel strongly about it, then. It's all right, Jules."

She blessed him for his acceptance, and hugged him to her, fiercely.

"Do you remember the day we all thought Corinne was losing the baby?"

Of course he did. "Yes. Not our best moment."

"But it was Jacob's. And Peter Alcott's. And Mary's. They all knew what to do, Elijah. While we all just stood there trying not to panic. Crying. Worrying. Sick with fear. They were making a difference for Corinne, and her child. I want to be that person, too. I want to be the one who helps, who knows what to do when everybody else is two steps away from terrified. I want to bring kids into the world, and assist in surgery, and maybe even be a doctor myself, some day, if I can go far enough."

She looked up at him. "But that's a long way off. For right now, a nurse. A *good* one. If I can achieve that, then I'll be happy."

"Okay." He planted a soft kiss in the center of her fair forehead.

"That's it? Just 'okay?'"

"Come here." He leaned back on the stool and pulled her in between the vee of his legs, letting her feel his strength.

"I don't think you're flighty. Like you said, I think that's a lot what being in your first years of schooling is about. Seeing other things. Changing your mind. Getting to try things out. I think you can do it. I'll be right here. Or in Canada. Okay?"

"I hate being away from you," she confessed.

"I hate how I behaved with you, last night." He gave confession for confession. *There. I said it.*

"How you...?" her grey eyes were sincerely confused.

"When I held your head. Forced you down on me." He was ashamed. She could see the tension in him, the blushing of his skin.

"And you thought that's why I was so..."

"Moody. Avoiding me. Yes."

"Oh, Elijah." She held her hand to his red-bearded cheek. "I thought it felt like you needed me. Like you loved me. Not like you were using me. There is a difference."

"I do need you." He hugged her fiercely.

"Besides. I wasn't exactly undemanding." She nuzzled his neck. At some point, she'd given him a love bite.

"You were glorious. Never doubt it. I'd bear your mark on my skin every day for the rest of my life, if I could." He nuzzled her back. They both knew where this was heading.

"Elijah..." She tugged at his shirt.

"Yes, love?"

"I have a very serious question to ask you."

"Yes, love?" he repeated.

"Does your room have a queen size bed?"



Chapter Twelve
Sunrise's Blessing



Shortly after Winterfest, Corinne was delivered of a Shah, Sean Peter Wind Hunter. Seth assured everyone the red-furred bundle of squalling joy would eventually grow into all his names. Julia had been allowed to help with the delivery, monitor vital signs, check blood pressure, and whatever else Peter Alcott, Jacob and Mary told her to do. Elijah could not have been more proud, though they could barely be together before she had to return back to school, for exams.

Spring came, though it was still very much winter-like in the high country of the far North. The valleys were almost free of snow, however, and Julia spent a week of spring break at the logging camp, though it was fair to say that Elijah barely let her set foot out of his small bungalow, much less allowed her to socialize.

Also, Brigit was well along in a pregnancy that was making Zachariah a proud peacock and a nervous wreck. He had never established a bond with Brigit. He had no idea what such a connection with her would be like, exactly. And the pregnancy was risky for her, so aside from being

able to do little more than rub her feet and suffer her wrath when he became too hovering, he could do little more than wait.

They had already decided that in another week or two, they would travel to the tunnels so she could settle in and deliver there, with Jacob Wells and Peter Alcott as her attending physicians. Brigit had already decided she wanted the two men near her, when her time came.

Julia's twenty-second birthday came and went. Her grades were good enough to pass muster, and the pile of books in her car never seemed to lessen. It was all hard work, and she was glad she was good in math, for some of it. Many nights, she fell asleep at her aunt's dining room table, or Adam's.

She knew she wanted to steal a few days away in summer, when this semester ended, but right before the summer one began.

Elijah. His beautiful name whispered across her consciousness. She missed him so much.

And then, there were the dreams. She had been having dreams about him, lately. Nothing encounters, where she watched him eat his breakfast, or work at the mill. Erotic dreams, where she saw him rouse, thinking of her, having to touch himself. Tender dreams, where he sat on a log with a faraway look on his face, and she knew, simply knew, he was thinking of her. Soft dreams. Too many of them. And coming increasingly close together.

One semester halfway down, and way too many to go, she thought, rubbing her eyes, tiredly, on April morning. Elijah's handsome face swam before her vision. I miss you, Shah. I miss you so much.

Zachariah and Brigit's twins arrived the same day Julia had a biology exam. One beautiful baby girl, Meghann Grace, named for the heroine in Tree Dancing. One amazing blue-eyed Shah boy, Geoffrey. According to a letter Julia had received from Diana, Geoffrey was already showing signs of being a big blonde Protector, like his Daddy.

Julia had not managed to steal away, either to the tunnels or to North Edge. Exams followed seemingly more exams. Then, no sooner had one spate of classes ended than another began. Her plans to go north for the summer were utterly foiled. It was like that with the summer course loads, she realized. They were condensed, and there was no time for a break, in between the spring term and the summer one.

Still, she was pleased with the number of credits she would amass. *I'm was getting there.*

She would show Elijah, if he came down to Montana to see her. *Don't give up on us. I haven't.* She tried to send him the thought, and knew it was impossible. The distance was too great. They were not a bonded couple. They just weren't.

Her night visions of him continued, and came even more regularly. She pulled the sketch she'd drawn of him back in New York out, and kept it propped nearby, when she worked. *I haven't drawn anything in months*, she thought, knowing the group portrait of Vincent's class had been her last effort. It felt strange to go for so long, without a stick of charcoal in her hand. *The price you pay*, she concluded.

Elijah remained the first thing she thought of in the morning, and the last at night. There were no phones at North Edge, and for some reason, trying to write a forlorn love letter just made her depressed. She knew Elijah felt much the same.

Her days remained full of work, while her nights often contained him, in her dreams. It was the best she could do.

The first time she had a waking dream of him, it was close to high summer. Elijah was walking through the New York tunnels, in Julia's mind. But this wasn't a night dream. It was a clear, daytime vision. He was walking with Diana, and Julia saw her step-mother through her love's eyes, as a little brunette girl, Samantha, chatted, avidly, beside them. Diana was facing Elijah, and listening to something he had to say.

It was a vivid image, and nothing Julia had tried to fantasize about, clearly.

Diana? Elijah?



In her vision, Elijah snapped his head around, suddenly, as if he was aware of her, watching him. *Julia?*

Julia's head jerked back, surprised. Before she could answer him, the image faded.

She knew that Diana was in New York. Adam and Diana had both gone there regarding a case Diana was working on. But Elijah? Elijah was supposed to be in Canada, working the timber, with his brothers.

For Julia's part, she knew she was stuck at home, taking two classes with a lab. What she'd just seen made no sense. She tried to get it back, but the vision had vanished into ether, as quickly as it had come. There was no calling it back.

What's happening to me? Why am I daydreaming things I haven't really thought about, that shouldn't even be true? I wasn't trying to "sense" Elijah. I just did it.

She shook her head again, and tried to command the image (or one like it) to reappear, once more. Nothing happened. Either then, or for the rest of the too-hot day.

Crazy with the heat, Julia concluded, tugging textbooks from a battered backpack.

Books on the dining room table, iced tea in the pitcher, Julia settled down for a long day of study. It was Saturday. If she kept at it, and burned the midnight oil, dividing two hours of study or so to each of her classes, she'd feel ready for the week, come Monday.

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Elijah found her asleep at the dining room table, her cheek resting on her hand, her back bent in the wooden chair, and looking unbelievably uncomfortable. Two text books, a medical dictionary, and a thick notebook, were sprawled on the table. He went to flip the notebook closed, intending to gently remove it from under her hand.

"Vigilant" stared up at him, from just above her right hand.

You went to sleep with me after all, he thought, touched.

Leaving the books, he lifted her gently, and felt her stir, slightly, as he carried her to her bed.

"Mmm," she moaned softly.

"Shhh. Sleep. I'm here." Elijah nuzzled her. She did remain asleep, but a smile caressed her face. It was a testament to her exhaustion that she didn't rouse.

Elijah knew the house, from prior visits. Three bedrooms, one back, a decent kitchen, and a wraparound front porch. Tunnel access, to the mines, and beyond the pond, if he needed it.

He tucked her into bed, pulling the sheet up lovingly, over her very still form. She was clearly exhausted, and her lovely eyes were shadowed.

Sleep, Angel. I love you. He tugged the door closed, wanting her to sleep.

He crept back into the living room. Through the moonlit window, he saw that a new outbuilding sat apart from the main house. *Diana's office*, he assumed.

Elijah collected his duffel bag from the porch, and dropped it in the living room. He would have to talk Seth and Zachariah into bringing down some of his things. He was not planning to leave here, again. Not without Julia. He rubbed his finger over his right temple. She was too exhausted to dream. He hoped.

We're going to have to have a talk, when you wake up, he thought. He only hoped what he had to say wouldn't terrify her. *We aren't bonded. But thanks to you, we might as well be.*

--

Julia woke up some time around five in the morning. Summer in the north meant the sky was already beginning to change from black to deep grey.

She knew he was here. Before she even opened the bedroom door, she knew.

He was on the couch, sitting. Not asleep. Rubbing saddle soap into the leather of his boots. He was wearing faded jeans and a white shirt. He looked comfortable. The duffle bag to his side was packed nearly full.

"Planning on staying a while, or did you bring me a present?" she asked him softly.

"Both," he answered, not reaching for anything, but glancing up at her. She needed more sleep. Her eyes had dark circles, and her svelte frame had obviously lost a few pounds it couldn't spare.

He was waiting for her to say it. *Go ahead, Shahrenne. You know the truth.*

She did. "Elijah? Did I... bond with you? Not you with me. But me?... With you?"

He stopped his hands from their chore and looked at her, waiting for the storm. *Yes. Yes, you did. We're bonded. Somehow, we are. In a way. The thing you feared, and we are. It's why I came.*

"I think so," he hedged. "I've felt you for the last few days." *Or months, if you count the dreams.* "Distinctly, since yesterday. You're right here." He massaged his right temple. "It's not as strong as it would be if I bonded with you, and not as constant, by a long shot, but yes. I feel you, Shahrenne." *Please don't be terrified, Julia. Please. I'll lie about it, if you need me to. Or at least, I would if I thought it would do any good. I have a feeling you'd know.*

She knelt in front of him.

"I... I've been having dreams about you almost since Winterfest."

"I know." He did.

"I think I did it when we were touching Seth, didn't I? When Corinne was scared she was losing Sean? After the wedding?"

Elijah nodded. "Yes. I think so. Maybe." *You're near me. You're a part of me. I feel you. I do. You're incredible, Julia. Please don't be afraid of this.*

"I've never felt more love and peace in my life," she replied, allowing the sensation of their love to flow through her. Her words sounded awestruck. There were tears in her eyes. "Is that what it would be like, between us? If we were... truly bonded? On your side, too?"

He closed his eyes, gratitude washing through him. *Thank you. Thank you for accepting it. Thank you for not being... afraid of it. Of me.* When he opened his incredible green eyes, she saw they were shining, with his love for her. "More. Even more. Maybe much more."

He continued to face her, steadily. "I know you're scared of it. You can stop this, right now, if you wish. Or you'll be able to, once it's not new, and you learn how. You can block me, if you want. It's just... you threw something like a bond line out to me, when we were communing with Seth. And I caught it. I'm not sure if I'm sending you the dreams, or you're sending them to me. But I know we aren't bonded, yet. Not as deeply as we could be."

"You mean... this... this isn't all there is?" She looked wonder-struck. "I do dream about you. But they're more than dreams. I see you, Elijah. We're walking together. Talking. Sometimes we're even..."

She blushed, unable to finish. He knew damn well what they'd been doing, in her dreams.

You're a Spirit Walker. A true psychic. The stuff of legend. My mother told stories about them. Not one Shahrenne in three hundred years has had this power. And now, here you are. And you didn't even want it.

"I see you," she repeated. "Sometimes... sometimes when I'm not even thinking about you."

He kept his voice soft. "You just don't know how to control it, yet. You'll learn. Like you were learning at the wedding, to turn your empathy off and on."

She nodded her head. "Yes. I remember. I just ... focused on blocking it out, focused on silence, and I could do it."

He regarded her soulfully. "You can stop this from continuing," he repeated. "Cut it off. Sever it. It's still yours to control." It killed him to say more, but he knew he had to. "This might be happening because... because I am what I am, Julia. My mother says Shah don't marry Shahrenne very often. Maybe there's a reason."

"Is that what you think?" she asked, suddenly afraid that he was about to put her from him.

"I think that if we stop it now, you'll still have the choice to," he replied honestly.

Would I have to give up you? Give up us? She wasn't about to ask him that out loud. It was a thing she couldn't bear to contemplate.

She focused on the feeling, the one that had been slowly growing between them since September. She focused on it not just with her head, or her heart, but with her soul.

Warmth surrounded her, and suffused her very being. Warmth, and a gentle kind of patience. Fierce loyalty, and deep passion. Humor,

mixed with charm. An unshakable kind of steadfastness. In a way, it almost felt familiar. It felt very close to the emotions she'd sensed from Vincent, the day he'd married his Catherine. *Love. This is love.*

Goodness, depth...charisma. Charismatic. Elijah. I'm sensing Elijah. All he is. All he... brings me. Why would I ever want to give this up?

Julia's head shook gently, as her eyes closed.

Love. This is love, her mind repeated. And not just any love. Love with a Shah. And such a special one, at that. My Shah. Oh my God, Elijah. Did you know about this? Did you know this is what we were?

She held tightly to the feeling she knew had been between them for many months. The feeling she knew would always be there for her, and for him, all the days of her life.

"Why in God's name would I ever want to stop it?" She put her hands on either side of his face, and trailed her fingertips up to brush the place on his temple. She rose on her knees, and touched it with her lips. He trembled.

"Shhhh," she soothed. "It's going to be all right." She began to undo the buttons on his shirt.

He stopped her hands, tugging them up around his neck and drew her forward so that their foreheads touched.

"Julia. It's like you're calling me. I... I knew you were at Winterfest the minute your boot hit the pavement. It's like we're bonded, even though we aren't. I can feel it. Feel you. You don't know what this is like, for me." He reached back and held her fingers.

"The bond between us..." His eyes were still closed, his face lined in concentration. "It would be....huge. More than Adam's ever had, or even Seth and Corinne's, and they've been married for years."

"Good. Good, Elijah. Love me," she replied, not afraid of anything.

"Marry me," he countered. "If I make love to you now, the bond will form. You know it will. I can *feel* it, Julia. It's like you're... pulling me to you."

She smiled an utterly feminine smile. "I know," she whispered. She did, now that she understood what was happening.

She tugged on his hands and touched them both to a spot right beneath her earlobes. "Right here. Either side. Maybe a little more on the one than the other. But mostly, even. I feel you, Elijah."

It cemented his decision. "I'm not going back to the mill. You have to stay here for school. So I will, too. We can build a place near here, if you want. Or anywhere," he declared.

"Fine."

"After you pass your nursing boards, we can see about staying part of the year in a bungalow, at North Edge. They need a doctor up there – a nurse," he amended. "And my family needs me."

"Yes, Elijah. I had planned as much." She was utterly sanguine.

"I can work with Adam in the mines, while you go to school. If that's okay with him."

"Considering I used the book money to pay him back some of what he put toward my art degree, I'd say that's okay with him. And he'd probably enjoy the company. What did you bring me?" she asked, holding her fingers over the buttons on his shirt, again.

He reached into the pocket of his jeans and produced a subway token.

"So that's why you were in New York." She smiled. "I knew I saw you."

"I had to get one. I told you you needed two. One to get there, one to come home again."

She held the solid brass coin in her palm. It was newer than hers, but still bitten with use, and age. The words "New York Transit Authority" lined the rim. There was a conspiratorial smile in her eyes, and a hint of one on her lovely lips.

"I remember. You told me I'd need one to get where I was going, and one to take you me home, again."

"No matter where you are, it will take you to wherever I am," he told her, closing her fingers over the metal. She reached into her own pocket, producing the one he'd brought to her from the bottom of the hot springs, back in September. She always carried it with her.

"Then you keep this one. I told you it would take me anywhere I wanted to go. I always want to go to you, Elijah. Always."

He held the brass piece of metal in his hand a moment, before he put it in his pocket and caressed her beautiful face.

"I'm so in love with you."

"I know," she confided. "I think I've been feeling it for a while, now. Not just what I feel. But what you feel. Cathy Chandler is a lucky woman."

He was utterly confused by her. "Cathy is?"

"Vincent. He loves her like this. So deeply."

Elijah had no doubt that he did.

"You've been very patient with me," she said. It was not a compliment. It was an accusation.

He shot her a sideways look. "I figured you were worth it."

"We have no idea what I'm worth. Even I'm still figuring that out," she replied.

Oh, don't I though? She was a natural empath. As gifted with that as she was with art. Give her a time to increase her skills, and she would probably be able to tell him what he was thinking, verbatim. Very few couples had anywhere near that depth of bond, especially not newlyweds. And she seemed more sensitive to the Shah than to others.

Maybe that's just because you're in love with one, he thought, knowing it was true.

He pushed back a stray tress of ebony with a long nail. "If you get tired of me ... of us ... it will kill me, Julia. I won't survive it. Not at this depth." It was a plea, and a warning. Both to her, and to himself.

"You know that is not going to happen." She kissed his cheek, gently.

"Yes. I do. But do you?" After all, it had been her fear they'd been fighting.

"Yes, I do. I really do. For the first time, I think I understand something very important that Adam was trying to tell me about my mother. It wasn't that he was trying to hold her back from doing adventurous things. It was that she wanted another man to do them with."

She kissed his other cheek, and allayed his fears. "I will never want another person to touch me, again. I haven't for a long time. And we both know I won't want that after this morning... don't we, my love?"

The sky was growing lighter. They could both see it, through the living room windows. "The altar," Elijah declared, naming the place where

Adam had married Diana. "We need to get to the altar. The sun is coming up," he said.

He knew he was about to bond with her. To marry her, without so much as a ring or a witness. They both had a New York subway token. That would have to do.

Grabbing a blanket off the back of the couch, they raced across the hilly ground to where a rise in the landscape indicated they were nearly there. Dark grey gave way to a lighter shade. The sun was coming up. Elijah could smell it.

He pulled her by the hand through a stand of close knit pine trees. Stars and a crescent moon still hung overhead, lightening, in the approaching dawn. A large bluff spread out before them, ringed with huge white stones; ones Adam himself had placed there.

"Hurry," she ordered.

She was already undressing while he spread the blanket. Nude before him, she fished his gift out of her pocket and picked out his, as she helped him get out of his clothes, planting sweet kisses down his backbone as he watched the shifting color of the sky.

I love you, Shah. I love you so much, Elijah.

He could almost hear her thinking it, as her lips moved down his back.

She laid down on the blanket and felt him cover her almost immediately, just for the pleasure of the skin-to-skin contact. His skin smelled like so much of him. Travel. Wakefulness. Desire. He was erect before she ever touched him, there. She was wet. They had been feeling each other's need since the house.

He lifted himself away as she and she laid on her back in the warming air, feeling her mind stretching out to his, the way her hand stretched

out to grasp his shoulder, as he stretched his long length out beside her.

"No," he told her, tugging her up into a sitting position. "Sunrise is about to happen. This is our day. Our wedding day. We both need to see it."

"Yes." She scrambled to accommodate him.

"Turn East. On your knees. Face the sun, love." He leaned close, to whisper huskily, in her ear. "Watch the sun rise, when you become my wife, Julia." Ceremony or no, they both knew that bonding would make them as close as two people could possibly be. Closer.

Her head turned toward the direction where the sky seemed lightest. Vague blue shades were piercing the black. The curtain of the night was about to be pushed back by the rising sun.

This was a holy place. The white rocks rimming the space began to change color, as the sky did.

"Stay close," she said, loving the feel of her back against his front, as he positioned himself behind her.

"Always," he replied.

She faced the dawn on her knees, a suppliant at prayer. He pulled her body against his, kissing her shoulder, mostly tenderly, but sometimes with more force. He held her arm out so he could kiss the length of it, from shoulder to wrist. The tokens were still in her palm, and he planted a kiss there, as well. The bond tickled, between them. They both felt it.

"Elijah..." She whispered a warning.

"I know," he replied. *I feel it, too.*

He let her feel the heaviness of his sex as he slid himself between her legs, not inside, but outside of her, rousing her sex. She wet him. Then she reached between them so she could rub the head of his sex, while he thrust against her, tormenting her clitoris.

His head went back, and his breathing grew harsh. He moved her hand away, a moment, needing to enter her. He set, then paused.

"It's for you to say." The words were ragged adoration.

She turned her head, in no mood to wait. She reached up and clutched his neck, as she always did. "I will be your wife. Forever. Will you be my husband? My Shah husband, Elijah?"

"I will. To the end of my days, I will, Julia."

"Then... now. Right now."

He did as his love - his Shahnna, in a few moments - bid him. An entrance he tried to take slowly was achieved more quickly than he meant to. Blood rang in his ears. Or bond song did. He wasn't sure which.

She was velvet and heat. Warm, like the approaching sun, and just as insistent. He felt her softness against his hardness, and knew he was undone. *I take you to be my wedded wife.*

He drove harder than he intended, and tried to call the urge back. This was like the time in her room in the tunnels, again. Something needy held both of them in its grip. Something not quite civilized. Harsh, even, yet adoring, and with the rewards from such a complex set of emotions.

"Slow us down," he begged, knowing her link to him was at least partly responsible for this.

"I don't want to," she answered breathlessly. "And neither do you. Not really."

He thrust deeply, and the force of it brought her down on her hands. For a moment he had a long back to admire. He bent over and reached his hand down to massage her, while he moved inside. She lifted herself as much as she could, trying to take him deeper. His hand warming her clitoris was about to make her...

"Squeeze me." He commanded, rising, forcing her back up with him/ Her back plastered itself against his front, her arms raised to entwine around his neck, again. He kept one hand on her sex, and cradled her breast with the other. He never stopped moving, inside her. She dropped one hand from his neck and placed it over his, slowing his movements.

"Slower. Now slower," she requested, rubbing his hand in a circle. "Don't let me fall." She turned her head to taste his mouth, as she tightened her feminine muscles around his sex.

The sun began to throw purple, and peach, and pink into the sky. The lip of the brightest star in the solar system burned over the horizon, in front of them.

"Don't let me fall," she repeated.

"Never. Wife." He ground out the word, feeling their joined hands massage him through her sex. Inside, her muscles took on his length, pulsing against him. Milking him. She felt her juices running down her legs. So did he. It was an offering to the earth, from the both of them.

I take you to be my wedded husband. 'Til death do us part.

The rising ball of light was painting them both in sunrise tones. Her white skin was blushing pink, while the red hair on his chest caught fire.

He was not going to last. She reached her hand down further, to cup his scrotum. They were already tight.

"Husband," she answered, "Hard." She was already moving against him, commanding his completion. "Deep." It was a siren's order. The one she had been making, one way or another, since she'd met him in New York.

He obeyed. Obeyed until he could feel the orgasm bristling along his length. Obeyed until he was afraid he would hurt her, yet knew he wouldn't. Obeyed until he felt her moan, saw her head loll back on his shoulder, and he knew it wasn't pain, but sheer pleasure she was feeling. They both tensed at the same time, letting the sun paint their entwined torsos in shades of early morning light. Her mind was reaching for his just as his was reaching for hers and...

There. He burst into her consciousness at almost exactly the same time the sun burst free of its constraints of the horizon. Rising fast. Pushing back the dark, relentlessly. Looking like a fireball in the sky. Huge. Intrusive. Powerful. Forever.

She reached back her hand and grabbed for his neck, and screamed the same moment he did, bucking her hips back against him, as he emptied into her quivering flesh. Her bond, when she came for his, was like her hand, when she held him. Strong. Definite. Purposeful. There.

"Julia. My Julia. Always."

The love and depth of passion he felt pouring along the bond between them caused him to wrap his arms around her, bearing her into a

crouch, as he sat back on his heels, cradling her... Her shoulders bent down, while he covered her with his massive body, still trembling, still holding her, still ejaculating into her, fiercely.

The new sun kissed the sheen of sweat on his red-gold back. *I'm a married man.* He felt it as surely as if there was a priest present.

His consciousness flowed around her, as it enveloped her. The back of her ears tingled, and she smiled from it. He rubbed his temple against the crown of her head, against her hair, feeling her fully. Her bond path was wide. His was all-encompassing.

"I love you so much. So much, my Julia. My bondmate. Wife."

"Elijah. This is glorious. Husband."

He stayed over her and simply held her, as their bond filled them, and settled. Sweat cooled their skin even as the new sun warmed it.

She moved her hand from his neck and showed her what she held there. Two subway tokens gleamed, in the morning light.

"I'll always find my way to you," she promised.

--

They had an official ceremony at The Altar, that August, a month shy of Vincent and Catherine's first anniversary. Jarrett, Ramona, and family, insisted.

Elijah's entire family descended on the mining camp, and built them a fine little house, one with a huge bedroom window that faced the direction of the sunrise. More often than not, Elijah could be found making love to Julia there, nearly every morning. *Vigilant* was the first thing they hung on the wall.

Classes were demanding, but Julia found it all so much easier, knowing Elijah was waiting for her at the end of the day. He split his day between working the main tunnel with Adam, and working on a connecting tunnel beneath their cabin by the lake.

It wasn't what most people would call an ideal honeymoon. But for Elijah and Julia, it was perfect.

The bond between them continued to amaze and delight them both. She found he could sense every whim she had, when they were making love, and she could sense him, more than any newlywed usually could.

There were nights when she had to banish him to the spare bedroom, just so they could both get some sleep.

He went back to the logging camp to help with the autumn labors, but found the time away from her entirely too miserable.

Promising to stay longer once her classes were complete (or at least when she could get away as well), Elijah returned to Montana, and devoured his wife, once she got home from school, dinner all but forgotten as they used the dining room table for a different sort of meal.

Julia went to visit her mother's grave, and made peace with all that had passed between her parents. She cried the day Alexander joined the Army, swearing she'd never forgive him if he got hurt. He was a man, now. Too old to stay in Big Sky Country, anymore.

In September, they all attended Vincent and Catherine's first wedding anniversary in New York, feeling increasingly at home, in the tunnels. Elijah captured her in their room, and then again, in the hot springs.

"In a way, it's our anniversary too," he whispered, loving her.

Julia could only agree.

Many of the tunnel inhabitants gathered together for this very important occasion. Though the bride and groom insisted they wanted no special celebration, it couldn't be helped. Those from Above and Below, (And Canada, and Montana) all wanted to be part of the good wishes.

After Elijah and Julia had joined the others for cake, Narcissa laid her hand on Julia's trim stomach.

"Not yet. Not yet, chile! But one day. One day you make old Kristopher paint you a picture. Paint you a prince with fire in his hair, and ice in his eyes." The black woman smiled. "That will be a good day. A year or two. Maybe. Or the year after."

Neither of them had any idea who "Kristopher" was. It didn't matter.

"Are you ready for that?" Elijah asked her, as they strolled back to their room, later.

Julia considered the prospect of becoming a mother. "I...yes. I'm ready, Elijah. I want to hold our baby in my arms. Someday. Want to love him or her, with you. Fire and ice, hmmm?" She raised a suggestive eyebrow.

"Oh, Jules. Don't even get me started," he chided her.

"A baby. Do you think it will be a Shah?" she asked.

"I think it will be our son or daughter, my Shahnna." He shook his handsome head. "That's all I need to know. That, and I will hate losing the bond with you, while you're pregnant." Still, the thought of her carrying his child thrilled him.

"Think how much stronger it will be after I deliver." She smiled at him, gorgeously. He kissed her, hard. Torchlight glimmered, and the brass

token she wore suspended on a chain around her neck, gleamed. It was her only wedding jewelry.

"Have I told you how much I love you, today?" she asked.

"I heard you think it loudly, several times. But not when I stole your dessert," he replied.

"You know it's a full moon, yes?" she prompted.

"Mmm." He did. *What are you up to now?* he wondered.

"Want to take all the kids for a midnight ride on the carousel?" she invited.

Elijah threw back his head, in laughter.

"Sure. But only if I can sneak back there with my wife, later."

"Oh you can. You definitely can."

"Do we need money, for this carousel ride of yours?" he teased.

She produced the subway token he'd brought to her in Montana. "I have a magic coin here that says I can go anywhere in the world, then back to you," she declared.

He reached inside his blue shirt and tugged out the one he'd brought up from the bottom of the bathing pools, for her. It was warm, from having been over his heart. "I have one to match it," he replied, all the love in the world in his deep green eyes.

"Then we should both go," she proposed.

She sent him the image of her memory from the last time they had visited the carousel. His knees nearly buckled.

And much, much later that night, as the two tokens gleamed against bare skin beneath the light of a New York moon, Elijah's knees did that again.



No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love. ~ Cindy