

Arc of the Shah: The Bright and Boundless Path

Book 5

Longspear

By Cindy Rae



Author's note: If you've stayed with me this long, bless you. I know I veered off the canon path in Book 4, by making a story about Elijah and Julia, two characters who never appeared in the show. This whole series is just kind of taking me where it will.

We're back in the Tunnels, now. Vincent and Catherine are here, along with so many of our other old friends. And I decided that Rebecca was a lovely character, who deserved to have her own 'Vincent,' in her life.

*So, without further ado, Book 5 in 'The Bright and Boundless Path' Universe:
Longspear.*

Blessings to you all, Cindy

Chapter One

Nathaniel

The stranger who entered the tunnels at the Central Park drainage culvert, and then stood at the gate, was very much unknown, and truth to tell, he looked marvelously out of place there, even considering that he was a creature like Vincent. A large, Native American patterned blanket was slung across his shoulders. Buckskin fringe swished at the top of his boots. He had a long stick in one hand, and a small bundle slung diagonally across his body. Even for New York, he was different.

Jamie was on sentry duty the moment he appeared. And even as she'd tapped out a message on the pipes, she'd bid Mouse to run - as if his feet could carry him faster than tunnel sound could deliver the news: *Stranger in the Central Park culvert. Like Vincent. Waiting.*

"Mouse, go and get Father. Go and get Vincent. Run. *Hurry.*" Jamie's tone had been urgent, so Mouse had sprinted away. Jamie was his friend. And she never said anything that didn't need saying. Especially not in that tone.

Jamie continued to look through the sentry hole at the unexpected arrival. He was big. Big like Vincent, though it was a little hard to tell, for sure. He was wearing the heavy, woven blanket the same way Vincent wore his own dark cape. Open at the front, the unseamed shape obscured the breadth of his shoulders, some.

Beneath that, a brown, fringed leather jacket was keeping him warm, as was a darker leather vest. The calf-hugging boots and a pair of patched

blue jeans that had seen better days covered him further. Jamie got the impression that the heavy clothes he was wearing were built for winters harsher than even New York's own.

He'd lowered his makeshift hood from almost the moment he'd entered the culvert, as if he *wanted* to be seen, which he clearly did. Jamie studied the short, feline nose, and riven upper lip, features which also marked Vincent's unique visage. She marveled that on this man, the nose looked slightly longer, the lower lip just a touch thinner. It gave his deep-set brown eyes a more severe aspect, yet also a noble one. *He's like Vincent, yet not*, Jamie concluded, studying him some more.

The stranger's long, dark hair was scraped straight back from his broad forehead, and tamed into a thick braid. The dark, straight facial hair that hugged his jawline was thin and short, and his copper-tanned cheeks sported only the barest trace of the trim beard Vincent and the other Shah normally wore. His cheekbones were high, and his skin had reddish tones.

Like if Vincent was an Indian, Jamie thought. Judging from the blue and orange pattern on the blanket that was serving him as a cape, she knew she wasn't far wrong, in her assessment.

The long, slim pole he was carrying wasn't much good as a walking stick and was probably too slender to serve as an effective cudgel. Jamie caught the notching, on one end.

It's the shaft of a spear, she realized. *One without the head*. There were banded stripes down it, and a long feather dangled from the top. A brief line from Lewis Carroll entered Jamie's nimble mind: *Curiouser and curiouser*.

The stranger adjusted the blanket on his shoulders, and the new arrival's dark brown eyes took in his surroundings. A beaded leather belt cinched his narrow waist. Everything about him declared him to be of Native American ancestry.

He's an Indian, all right, Jamie thought, not sure if that was the proper word, but able to think of no other.

The stranger scooped up a decent-sized rock from the ground, rapped on the metal gate, then dropped it into the dirt. He then stood, waiting patiently. He leaned on the pole, the picture of Native American stoicism. Jamie could have sworn he barely blinked.

The pipe near her rattled a reply. *Message received. On my way. V.*

Jamie knew that no man of Vincent's race had ever done her people any harm, and she doubted if this one was going to be the exception. Still, a sentry had an obligation to keep the perimeter secure. Still, she had to admit a deep curiosity about this strange man, one who had clearly come here, seeking them.

She left the heavy outer gate closed, even as she hit the lever which slid the inner door back. The locked, gated entryway stood between them.

The dark, almost inscrutable eyes took in her slight form. Jamie knew she was being assessed. She lifted her chin, just the barest hint of challenge in the posture. He didn't smile, but he nodded to her, in recognition.

I see you, little warrior, he thought.

"I am come to see your Shah Vincent," the stranger intoned. His voice was exceptionally deep, his form, still unmoving.

Jamie looked over her shoulder, reflexively indicating the space beyond. "I... he's coming. I just sent for him. You have to wait," she replied, not

standing too close to the bars. She didn't think this man would hurt her. But she wanted him to know she was no fool.

He nodded, and continued to stand where he was, looking past her to the torchlit passageway, beyond. *It's a fortress in there, he thought. Only so many ways in. Only so many ways out. So much the better.*

He adjusted his hold on the shaft, and endured Jamie's obviously interested perusal.

Even after spending much of last September in the company of other creatures like Vincent, Jamie had to admit this one was unique.

His chestnut brown hair gave him the look of a dark lion, especially against his red-hued skin. His brows were slightly thicker, and straighter than Vincent's own. His long braid, thick with the dark tones of his hair, was threaded with silver grey, and slung over one shoulder. It was tied off with a piece of leather. The long spear shaft reminded Jamie of Father's walking stick, but the pole was too straight

The large blanket-cape he wore looked hand-made, with a picture of stylized men holding spears. *Figures*, Jamie thought. It had clearly taken many months to create it. Like Vincent's own cloak, the now-down hood was designed to hide his face, just as his tan leather gloves were meant to conceal his hands. His boots were well-worn, and lightly decorated with fringe and beadwork. His jeans were comfortable to the point of being washed to a light blue color, and the collar of his shirt under the vest looked like an oft-laundered plaid work shirt.

It was November, cold in the drainage culvert, and icy air filled the space. If he was bothered by it, he didn't show it. He clearly knew how to dress for harsh weather.

"Vincent said you might come," Jamie said, filling in the silence.

The stranger seemed to consider his reply, carefully. "Zachariah Shadow Hunter is an old woman who likes to gossip, then," he replied.

Jamie didn't think anyone had ever called the huge blonde Shah who was now Brigit O'Donnell's husband an "old woman."

They both heard Father's cane, as it tapped into the entryway. Jacob's unique son was at his elbow, Mouse right behind them.

Vincent took in the scene before him, and wondered if their unexpected guest ever wore an eagle feather tucked into his braid, then chided himself for the stereotype.

I wasn't sure you'd come, given what Zachariah told me. Now that you're here, I'm not sure why you have, Vincent wondered, scanning his guest's appearance. The copper tones of his skin gleamed, even in the dim light. Something about him seemed like it belonged up in the burning sun, rather than down here, among the shadows, and the deep places of the earth.

You're definitely not one of the Hunter clan. Vincent assumed he'd met most of them, the week he'd married Catherine. This dark-eyed creature bore little to no resemblance to the Canadian logging family, especially to Zachariah, who was Nordic fair.

Mouse spoke up. "See? See, told you! Jamie said run! Mouse runs. Jamie says bring Father, bring Vincent? Okay, fine!"

"Yes, yes, Mouse, you did very well," Jacob commended his young charge, also taking in their newest guest. To say that their visitor was probably not from New York was stating the obvious. *Of course, since he was Shah, saying that he was from the human race probably wasn't precisely correct either, technically,* Father thought.

To say he wasn't from the twentieth century looked like it wasn't far wrong as well, all things considered, he mused.

The man pulled the blanket open, revealing his torso, further. Vincent's gaze fell to the man's belt. He actually had an axe tucked through a belt loop on his jeans. Though Vincent wondered in his case, if it wasn't simply referred to as a "tomahawk."

Even though it was full dark outside, and autumn cold to boot, Vincent wasn't certain how this man had gone undetected by the city at large. Zachariah had sent Vincent a letter, advising of the Shah's possible arrival. But he'd also indicated that this very troubled man might just as well decide to not come. There was no telling, with Nathaniel Longspear. He had been somewhat unpredictable even before the death of his wife, a few years back. His Shahnna's passing had made him more so.

Vincent opened the gate and let it swing outward, forcing the other man to step back. The great stranger did so, then stood calmly, before him.

"Shah Vincent, I presume."

"I am," Vincent replied.

The newcomer reached for the axe at his side.

Vincent tensed. *Are we about to fight? Why?*

The other man withdrew it from its loop, and offered it to Vincent, the handle toward Vincent's hand.

"I seek permission to enter your territory. I am Nathaniel Longspear, of the Longspear Clan, of the area you call the Dakotas. I offer you my weapon as a sign I mean you no harm. I wish only your... hospitality," Nathaniel explained, stumbling a little, over the last word.

You say the word, but you mean something more, Vincent perceived, his sense of empathy aroused. He sensed no danger from this man. But he

couldn't define exactly what he did sense. *Sadness. Purpose. You want something. And it is not just to say 'hello,'* he concluded.

They would find out nothing, standing in the culvert.

"Enter, then," Vincent said, accepting the offering. "And know that you are welcome. Your journey must have left you... fatigued." Vincent was pleased to meet yet another person like himself

The dark head inclined in agreement. "Three days in the back of a fruit truck will have that effect. Zachariah told me about this place." He followed Vincent inside, and looked at the amazing cavern in which he now found his feet. "I called him a liar to his big, hairy face. Looks like I'll have to take that back."

As he bypassed Jamie, he stepped closer to her, and placed a large hand on her shoulder. "Some of the fiercest creatures on the planet are women. You held your post well," he complimented. Then he retracted it. "You stood five feet back from the gate. I have a six foot pole. Have a care, little sister. I didn't even have to throw it, to hit you."

"What?! Of all the..., " Jamie sputtered.

Mouse put a consoling hand on her other shoulder. "Jamie's okay. Mouse makes sure. Okay? Fine!"

Jamie's cheeks were pink, as she realized her error. Father smoothed over the moment.

"Jamie, please go and ask Mary to prepare a chamber for our guest," he intervened, extending his own hand. "I'm Doctor Jacob Wells. Most here call me –"

"Father. Ramona Star Hunter wrote to my family, as well. She says you saved her son's life. Knowing Seth, I'm sure he made that difficult." Nathaniel accepted the proffered hand, as Jamie left with Mouse.

“He had his challenges,” Father agreed, liking this big Shah, instantly. “Shall we go?” He nodded the way that led further into his world.

Nathaniel inclined his head in assent, then strode through the tunnels with Vincent, Father trailing along behind them. Jacob noted that Nathaniel was nearly Vincent’s same build and height, though upon closer inspection, the other man seemed leaner. Slighter. But still, he was possessed of a leonine grace and charisma similar to Vincent’s own. *Maybe they all have it*, Jacob surmised.

Once they reached Father’s Chambers, Vincent offered Nathaniel a bit of warmed over stew, and gestured toward a seat at the table.

Nathaniel set his the pole aside, removed the heavy blanket-cape, folded it very carefully, and set it on an empty chair, nearby. There was precision in the movements, as if the cape was precious to him, and was a thing he would never simply toss aside, casually.

When he sat, Vincent and Father sat at the table with him. “Please, eat. You came a long way, if you came from the Dakotas,” Jacob began. “North, or South?”

“Both,” he replied. “And more, besides. My family has been in that land since before your westward expansion, as far as I know.” He picked up the spoon, but idly poked at his food.

“As far as you know?” Vincent urged.

The leather clad shoulders shrugged. “We don’t keep written records. Like the Lakota, our history is mostly oral. My father spoke of his father, and his father before him. We don’t... write very much,” he said, as if that explained things.

Vincent was surprised. He’d been keeping a journal since boyhood. “It must be... very beautiful there,” he ventured, setting Nathaniel’s axe on the table.

Again, the shrug. "It is a great and wild country. Even now, much of it is untamed."

"Yet, there is a community, there? One that knows about you?" Father pressed.

Nathaniel nodded. "My father raised me around Broad Mountain. We consider ourselves part of the Lakota Nation. My wife was Ogala Sioux. We have... Helpers, as you do."

He knew he was being interviewed. He didn't seem to mind.

"Astonishing. So you live... openly?" Father asked.

Nathaniel gave a grimace. "More openly than you do. Not as openly as the Hunter Clan does," he qualified. "Reservation lands are poor, for the most part. Few come there who don't have to. Fewer, on my side of the mountain, where the roads are narrower and the terrain more... rugged. But, yes. I am known, among my... community."

He tried the stew. Swallowing seemed to make the big Shah uncomfortable, and he picked a little more, at his dinner. Vincent sensed his visitor had a question, or a favor to ask. But also sensed the man was not one to be rushed.

Watching him push the food around in the bowl, Vincent realized that Nathaniel had accepted the offering of something to eat in order to commit no offense, but not because he was hungry. Vincent poured them each a cup of tea.

"I'm sorry. We did not mean to force food upon you. Had you already eaten?" *He mentioned being in a fruit truck.*

"No," Nathaniel answered shortly, pushing the bowl away. It was as if the smell of it bothered him. "Please tell your cook I mean no offense. Food is not... appetizing, to me."

Jacob took in his face, and noted that his cheeks seemed hollow, even for a person of Vincent's race. Without knowing him from before, it was impossible to say if he'd lost weight recently, but Jacob guessed he had. There was just something about him.

Nathaniel scanned the cluttered room, and sat with a perfect kind of stillness even Vincent would have been hard-pressed to emulate. He took in the book-filled chamber with the barest movement of his deep, dark eyes, rather than by turning his head. He even sipped from the proffered cup of tea with a certain economy of movement, when he even bothered to attempt that.

He glanced up at the pipes, as the news of the evening tapped along them, and spread. A series of staccato taps garnered Father's attention.

Guest chamber ready. M.

"Morse code? Is that what I just heard?" Nathaniel asked, grateful to have a reason to talk about something besides food.

"Not exactly, but some of it is, yes." Vincent answered. "Our pipe master, Pascal, took a code developed long ago and... modified it, for our use. I will teach it to you, if you like, though it may take a while to learn."

Nathaniel sipped again from the cup, then wiped his mouth on the napkin near his elbow, and set it down.

"I'm afraid I won't be here long enough to learn it, if things go as I hope."

Vincent and Jacob exchanged looks. *Ah. Now we're getting to it,* Vincent thought.

"As you hope?" Father nudged.

Nathaniel looked Vincent squarely in the eyes. He reached inside his heavy coat pocket and removed a chamois cloth, wrapped around a long, slender object. Standing, he unfolded the cloth to reveal a dark stone spearhead, tied off with an eagle feather. He affixed it to the head of his staff.

Oh. I see. Not a staff. It's a spear. Longspear. I understand, Jacob realized, wondering what his guest was about.

"This is not to be used as a weapon. It is ceremonial. I must take it with me to where I am going," Nathaniel explained, carefully adjusting the spear head. Long strands of leather trailed down.

"What is it you hope to do here, Shah Nathaniel?" Vincent asked.

He looked straight at Vincent, again. "Die," came the terse reply. "And I would like you to help me."

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Chapter Two

Bargain



Vincent was both stunned and not. Zachariah had warned him of this, too. Nathaniel was in the grip of something Zachariah had called "the

wasting.” It was more than psychological, and less than a pathology. It wasn’t a “disease.” There was no bacteria, no infection that could be treated with medicines, or rest. But it was real, and not imagined. There were stories of Shah widowers who had succumbed to its effects, completely. Diana Bennett had journeyed to Montana to save Adam Blackmane from just such a fate. Vincent knew as much.

Nathaniel took in the expression of his hosts, then continued. "Of all the things most difficult to bear, widowhood is the hardest, for our kind. Perhaps even harder than the madness that drives us to take a mate." Nathaniel nearly perfectly echoed Zachariah's explanation of it.

“Grief is an emotion which certainly has physical components,” Jacob replied. Vincent silently blessed him for his even, logical tone. *Thank you, Father. Thank you for being here. I may have need of your wisdom, and of your guidance.*

“It does,” Nathaniel agreed. He faced Jacob. “And whatever it is for you, I only ask that you imagine it as being very much worse, and for a long, and relentless time, for us. That is what it is, for me; for any Shah. Can you do that?”

“We understand about the wasting, if that is what you are asking, Nathaniel,” Vincent replied.

The dark gaze swung back to Vincent’s lighter one. “Then you know what holds me in its grip,” Nathaniel said.

Vincent and Father merely nodded.

Nathaniel sighed. "My Shahnna and I were married for nearly twelve years." The low voice held nothing but sorrow. "We have no children, so I leave no orphans, behind me. That, too, was a sorrow to bear, for a while. Now, I am almost glad of it, considering."

Jacob spoke up. "Nathaniel, widowhood is indeed a terrible sorrow for any man or woman. But there are ways to help..."

"I am not a man or a woman, Elder." Nathaniel used the title as a sign of deep honor. "I am Shah. And with respect, you cannot know the depth of loneliness, in my heart. Even Vincent can only guess at it." Nathaniel nodded to Vincent.

Vincent considered Nathaniel's words. *To forever lose Catherine... It would destroy the most vital and necessary part of me. Whatever was left of me after that...* He gave Father a look, and it was full of understanding.

Nathaniel caught the brief glance, and pressed his advantage. "My body aches with a pain that will not stop, completely. Food sours in my stomach. My chest is tight, when I breathe. Sleep is restless, and gives no ease. And the worst..." He touched his fingers to his right temple. "Where my bond once existed, where Jessamyn once was... it is now... an empty place, a deep cavern, desolate, inside me. A place where once there was the heart, the very *soul* of another, it is ... empty."

To have the bond gone. To have Catherine... gone... Vincent thought.

"Feeling that void only reminds me how... how completely she is gone. I would... I would like this to cease. Please," Nathaniel said.

Father and Vincent exchanged another look. "How is it you intend this be done?" Vincent asked. "I will not kill you, Nathaniel." He eyed the axe on the table, and the spear.

"Not with that, no." Nathaniel commented. "Not with anything done by your hands, my brother."

"Vincent..." Father's voice held a warning.

Vincent raised his hand, asking for Jacob's silence, then nodded, allowing Nathaniel to continue.

"I cannot... openly harm myself," Nathaniel said. "Such a thing... it almost... defies what we are. Nor would I ask you to do so, by any direct action," he clarified. "We are Shah. We simply... waste. I am already much diminished."

Father eyed the big man before him. If this was his reduced state, he must have been most impressive indeed, when healthy.

"I have tried to let the world take me. I find simply that I cannot complete this process, at my home. The land, the deep stands of pine, the scent on the wind, the night sky, the rocks and boulders, the narrow streams..." He described his home. There was a certain wistfulness in his voice.

"It all... nourishes me in a way that is not just physical. But to have no bond, no link to another, to not feel that for so long... Well." He let the sentence drop.

Again, of the two tunnel natives in the room, Vincent understood. He reached out, mentally, and felt Catherine. He could sense her right now, if he but barely concentrated. He knew she was attending a play with the Aronsons. He knew she was happy, and well. He knew he had felt her every day since their bond had started, and for a fraction of the years Nathaniel had had, with his wife. Catherine was a peaceful and a delightful presence, in Vincent's brain. He felt a small tickle of her behind his ear, the same ear on her that bore a scar.

For a moment, Vincent held her, in his mind. She was happy. Missing him, but... happy.

For his part, he knew that her presence nourished him, and that was an actual result, not simply a vague "sensation." The presence of a Shahnna, a wife, kept her mate healthy, and enabled him to heal more quickly, if he was injured. Vincent had seen it, with Seth Night Hunter,

when he had nearly died from a motorcycle crash. He'd even experienced it for himself, when Catherine had brought him out of the grip of a drug-induced madness, and then later, when he'd collapsed, in a cave.

Vincent caressed her for a moment, in his mind, reflexively, since they were speaking of her and of the bond. She was safe. She was content. Glowing a bit, still, from last night. His wife was enjoying her evening among friends.

His *wife*. The word still had the power strike a joyful chord, inside Vincent's mighty heart.

To not have that. To have it be empty, inside of me. Day in and day out, forever...

Vincent glimpsed a hell he wanted no part of.

Nathaniel saw him realize it. "Adam and Diana tell me the tunnels here go well below the surface, and are all but measureless. I would ask only that you let me explore them." Nathaniel's voice brought Vincent back to present concerns.

"With no intention of coming back, I take it?" Jacob asked. *Walkabout. A journey with no clear destination, just a foregone end. I see.*

"It is true that I have no intention of returning to you. I merely need to be where the land itself will not sustain me. This is not my home. It will... deprive me of my strength, until I fall," Nathaniel answered. "If my body is found, it will be wrapped in this." He indicated the blanket-cape that he had worn in to the tunnels. Vincent knew without asking that it had been made by Nathaniel's wife.

"You may dispose of me in whatever way is common to your people," Nathaniel continued. "I only ask permission to die in your Shahdom, Vincent, if death will have me, here." He rose from the table and

disassembled the spear, placing the head carefully back inside its chamois wrapping.

Vincent gave Jacob a considering glance. There were many ways for death to have a man, in the tunnels. Accidents, rockslides, drowning, becoming hopelessly lost, below the pipes, getting caught in a cave-in... to say nothing of the Abyss, or simply setting one's self adrift on the Nameless River.

"If I accept, what will you do?" Vincent asked.

Jacob shot Vincent a warning look. *You can't be considering this.*

"Leave for the deep places in your earth. Tonight, if that is all right. There is no need for delay." He remained standing, the wrapped spearhead in one hand.

"And if I refuse?" Vincent asked.

Nathaniel pursed his lower lip. "Then I will leave as I came," he vowed.

Vincent glanced at Father, then asked, "Where will you go? Home?"

The dark head shook in the negative. "No. I cannot die there. Not peacefully. I have tried, for a long time."

Vincent sat back in the chair a moment, considering the other Shah, silently. He could feel the waves of desolation coming from this creature before him. Widowhood did indeed seem to be a particular bane to his species. Adam Blackmane had been as Nathaniel was, when Diana had found him. And he'd had children to consider.

Yet, Adam had fallen in love with Diana, and recovered. Perhaps there is some hope?

"This is a question I must consider. It cannot be answered immediately," Vincent replied, rising.

Father exhaled a gusty sigh of relief.

"But I am keenly aware of your needs," Vincent continued. "Give me some time to confer with my ... elders." Vincent nodded in Jacob's direction, indicating that others in the community might have a voice. "I will give you an answer. But you must know, Nathaniel, that these tunnels do not belong to me, but to all those who live here."

Nathaniel inclined his head at that. If he was disappointed, he showed no sign of it. His face was a mask.

"But you should also know that if you wished to simply choose a path and do as you intend, there would be little I, or anyone else, could do to stop you," Vincent added.

Nathaniel appreciated the other man's honesty. "This is your Shahdom, Vincent. I am bound to your will, while I am here." He tucked the spearhead back inside his coat pocket. "I am as you would be, were you on my lands. I am a warrior of my word. I will break no vow I make, here." Nathaniel held himself erect, honor evident in every line of his frame.

"I believe you." Vincent inclined his head, accepting this singular man at his word.

Nathaniel took in the stone room, again. "This delay does present me with a debt, however." Nathaniel intoned. Clearly, he did not like that idea. "I must work for whatever is wasted on me, here. I did not come here to burden you. And I will not die owing you the fuel for the fire that warms me, or what little bread will be in my stomach. It would be best if your decision was a rapid one." His meaning was clear.

"There are always things that need doing, here. And in spite of your... weakness, I think you are equal to the task. For the time being, we will settle you into one of our guest chambers. And... despite the circumstances of your coming... You are most welcome here, Nathaniel.

Truly." Vincent returned the axe. Nathaniel might need it for something, and Vincent certainly didn't.

"I thank you for your hospitality." Nathaniel ran the axe back down the loop meant for carrying it. He was not at entirely at peace with Vincent's reply, but he was now bound by his oath.

Jacob noticed their guest swayed on his feet, slightly.

Malnutrition and fatigue. It's a wonder he's not out cold on the floor, Jacob thought. "Let us take you to a decent place to sleep, at least," Jacob said, nodding to Vincent.

"Rest, if you can," Vincent urged. "I will find you in the morning. We will speak, then," Vincent promised. Nathaniel accepted the gently given command.

Vincent tapped out a message for Mouse and asked him to show Nathaniel the guest chamber which had been prepared for him. Upon the tinker's arrival, the big, dark-haired man followed the smaller blonde one out of the room. The space felt considerably diminished, after Nathaniel's departure.

Vincent waited to speak until he was quite certain they were out of earshot, then he turned to Father.

"He's in pain," Vincent stated.

"I understand that," Jacob sighed. He reached for the teapot, and warmed their cups. "Well. This was not something we were expecting when we all woke up this morning," he said.

"Indeed," Vincent replied.

"You are considering... granting his request?" Jacob asked. *You, with the soul of a doctor?*

Vincent considered how to frame his reply so that Jacob would understand. "A part of me can sense his grief, and his ... frustration, for lack of a better word. He eats because he cannot force himself to starve. But eating is... painful, for him. It hurts to swallow, and his stomach cramps, afterwards."

"You sensed that, from him?"

Vincent nodded. "I did. He *is* in pain, Father. Physical... mental... He carries her with him, yet misses her, at the same time."

"That is almost the definition of 'mourning,' Vincent," Jacob replied, stirring sugar into the bowl.

"It is more than that," Vincent answered. "There is an emptiness inside him. One he carries, and it makes him weak. I have the sensation that he used to have great stamina, that his endurance was all but... endless. I sense that he was once stronger, though I cannot say how much. There is a ... a thread that is stretched tight between him and his home. - as there would be for me, and the Tunnels, if I ever were to travel far from them," Vincent clarified.

"Nathaniel is trying to snap that thread," he said, sitting.

Father turned his cup by the handle, and considered. "Many men and women feel such a thread," he mused. "'Homesickness' is a real feeling, as is grief. As is the sensation of returning to a beloved place. Do we help him to destroy himself, Vincent?" Father asked. As a physician, Jacob was obviously against such an event.

"I would rather help him to see such a course of action is not necessary. But I do understand his need. He bears it well, but he is in great pain. It is the kind of sorrow you have carried." Vincent said it gently.

Jacob closed his eyes, remembering the loss of Margaret, a woman he had loved far longer than he'd had her. Yes, he too, understood the

pain of loss, of widowhood. And he knew how different his recovery might have been, without the support of those around him.

"Do you think Nathaniel has no... support in his community?" Father asked. "Zachariah and his family seemed to make much of that."

"Indeed," Vincent replied. "We know Adam Blackmane's ties to a community were far... less than my own. And he was felled by this ... illness. Nathaniel did not say how close he was to the people he knows. Only that he knows them."

"The part of the country he is from is sparsely populated. Even less so for him, considering his... unique appearance." Father said it carefully.

"And the Native American tribes there are very independent, with their own sense of hierarchy, of leadership. Who knows how all that plays into this?"

Vincent shook his head, unable to pierce a riddle for which he didn't have all the clues. "I cannot speak to things I know nothing of," he replied, not wanting the drink in the cup, before him. He knew what he did want. Catherine. The thought of losing her had left him feeling insecure in a way he didn't want to examine too closely. That she was staying overnight with the Aronsons was now a thing that vexed him.

"Do you even know what it is you wish to do about this, Vincent?" Jacob finally asked.

His son shook his head. "I do not wish to see him depart this world," Vincent admitted, "even while I understand his desire to. I was hoping your vision here would be clearer, and more helpful than mine," he replied honestly. "I would speak with Catherine, first, of course, and perhaps Peter, for whatever guidance he might provide. Can you see a compromise this man would accept, Father?"

Father shrugged his sweater-clad shoulders. "I have to admit I'm as ... stumped as you are, when it comes to that."

Vincent nodded. "On the one hand, it grieves me to tell Nathaniel 'yes.'"

"That would be a tragic loss. For everyone," Jacob agreed.

"On the other, to tell him 'no,' that this is a thing he cannot do here... that accomplishes nothing other than to set him adrift."

Jacob nodded his understanding.

"It relieves *us* of the problem, but it does nothing to help *him*," Vincent concluded.

Father agreed. "You're not wrong. 'Adrift' is clearly the better alternative, however. At least there is a *chance* that he would recover, somehow..." Jacob rubbed his chin, thoughtfully. "Adam did."

Vincent considered Father's statement. "Zachariah says that as far as he knows, Adam's story is almost unique."

"You're all unique, as far as I'm concerned," Jacob replied cannily. "And too separated and few of you to really know some things." He turned the teacup by its handle some more, thinking.

"Hmm." The elder Wells let go of the cup and scratched his whiskered chin. "'Adrift' is often where you are when you find something you need. Do you think we could set Nathaniel...' adrift,' here, in the tunnels?"

Ah. Father has an idea. Vincent adored the older man's wisdom.

"How do you mean?"

Jacob shrugged, as he turned the idea over, in his mind. "An extension of the path we're already on. Let him be here. Stay, for as long as we can coax him to. Connect with our friends, if he will. Ask him what he's

good at, put him on a duty roster, if he's willing. He mentioned wanting to pay for his board. Let him... speak with us, work with us. Learn from us, if he will."

Vincent could see the plan coming together, as Jacob envisioned it. "Invite him to... be as one of us?" Vincent prompted.

Jacob shrugged. "People have a much more difficult time letting go when they have something to hang on to, Vincent. Tell him you have decided to grant his request, but that the... er... timing, for us, is off. That he must wait, oh, say a month and more, before taking any action. November is a month for giving thanks, and after that, well... For him to do as he proposes would ruin the Winterfest holiday, and would pain us here, too much. I don't think we dare try to delay him longer than that, but..."

"Perhaps it would be enough?" Vincent replied.

"Perhaps. You never know," Jacob returned. "We can but try."

You're a clever old fox. Vincent liked the idea, immediately.

"It's not a solution, of course," Father cautioned. "Unless it becomes one." He sipped from his cup.

"And... if at the end of this time his heart has not changed?" Vincent asked.

"Well, then, as you said. The situation is unchanged. There really isn't so much we can do to stop him, in the long run, if he's determined, is there?" Jacob concluded.

"No. But in the meantime, perhaps some good can be realized."

"That is my fervent hope." Jacob smiled, just a bit.

Vincent smiled back. "You are a very wise man, Father. I begin to see why I got away with so little, growing up," he complimented.

"You got away with enough," Jacob returned. "Speak with him, Vincent. Connect with him, if there is a way to do it. Perhaps... well. Perhaps this is a thing that can work itself out, given time."

"I will do all I can," Vincent promised.

Jacob's small smile continued, as he took in the contents of his cup. "I thought no less."

Vincent nodded, sweeping out of Jacob's chambers. There was much to arrange, starting first thing in the morning.



Chapter Three

Oath



"Your Shahnna. She is not here, now?" Nathaniel asked, the next morning. His guest chamber was furnished with battered cast-offs, but comfortable. Soft candlelight glowed on the nightstand, table, and from the low, mismatched dresser. The bed was made with an assortment of patched blankets and quilts, and warmed further by a small brazier.

Vincent glanced around the room. The shaft of Nathaniel's spear leaned against the wall. His cloak was folded, and set atop the dresser. He was wearing a different shirt, an off-white plain one, cuffed at the sleeves. Aside from a spare pair of jeans sitting near the blanket, he had no other clothing Vincent could see. Vincent realized he'd come in almost entirely without luggage. *He traveled lightly, planning to not be here, long*, Vincent concluded.

"She does not share the mornings with you?" Nathaniel prompted, drying his hands on a soft, ragged towel. He'd washed up in the basin on the nightstand.

"Catherine works Above, but stays here with me Below, in the evenings, or in her home. She is spending the weekend with friends. But our first wedding anniversary was not too long ago," Vincent explained.

"I wish you many fine children." Nathaniel inclined his head in a gesture that would look very familiar to anyone who knew Vincent. He set the towel down. "You have... considered my request?" he prompted.

Vincent inclined his head, in return. "Walk with me a bit, Nathaniel."

Damn, Nathaniel thought.

"Yes" was a simply spoken word. "No" required a walk. Nathaniel started making plans. He would have to leave at nightfall, or as soon as it could be arranged, depending. He wasn't sure what he would do, if Vincent refused him. He had made no arrangements, farther than the ones that had got him here.

Vincent eyed the blanket and the small pack of Nathaniel's belongings. *Very small, considering.* Vincent bet it held no more than a day's provisions, and some few personal items.

Considering what Nathaniel had meant to do, that was understandable.

"I will show you the path you might take to accomplish what you seek, if that is a temptation for you." Vincent held the heavy doorway curtain back, indicating the tunnels that lay beyond.

Nathaniel was clearly relieved, at his words. The animal that gripped his intestines would soon be laid to rest. *Maybe it isn't 'no' after all*, he mused.

"No one will bother your possessions, Nathaniel." Vincent added.

"Though if you are missing something, the first person we will ask is Mouse."

"That strange youth who brought me to this room?" Nathaniel marveled that the young man was still alive, in a city with New York's violent reputation. "He brought me candles, soap and a towel, this morning. He seems simple, yet sharp at the same time. Was he born here?"

Ah. You're curious. Good, Vincent thought. "He was cast off, from the world Above. As are many who find their way here, one way or another." He indicated that Nathaniel was to precede him.

They began walking the wide corridor together, past several open doorways. The tunnel branched, ahead of them. Vincent took the right fork.

"You have only to keep your feet moving in a downward direction, to find what you seek," Vincent explained, taking a torch from the wall.

"Does that mean you have decided to accept my request? If so, I should return for my shroud and spear."

Vincent shook his head. "Yes. And no, Nathaniel."

Well. What to do with that bit of information?

Vincent explained the parameters of the arrangement to Nathaniel, who listened respectfully, even if he was not pleased.

"These are days of celebration, for us. Time when we remember to be grateful for each other," Vincent concluded. "November and December... they are special times. Not just for the world Above, but for us, as well."

The darker man did not care for the terms Vincent outlined, but he accepted them as graciously as he was able. It was either that, or travel, some more. He had no desire to do that.

A month and more. Damn.

Nathaniel considered his options. He knew Zachariah Shadow Hunter took his role as "Protector" too much to heart, and would not grant him permission to do what he wanted to do in North Edge. That left Adam Blackmane, and a mine in Montana. Or simply striking out on his own.

But the latter was no option, not really. Nathaniel was keenly aware that his dead body could be discovered by anyone, if he were not careful where he departed this world. There was more at stake here than simply his passing. There were other Shah to consider.

"If the last few years of misery did not change my mind, a few more weeks will not matter," he reasoned aloud. "I seek only to have this torment end, Vincent. You cannot know what it is like."

Vincent entered the Whispering Gallery, the long bridge, before him. He didn't reply to Nathaniel's comment, directly.

"In this place, you can hear pieces of what happens, Above. There is despair there, too. And joy. And anger, and ... activity, and strife, and music. All of what there is, above us. You can hear pieces of it, here. Careful of the edge." He walked out.

Vincent and Nathaniel moved to the center of the bridge, then sat down on it, hearing the sounds of life above them, even as each man took in the swirling maelstrom, below. Vincent watched Nathaniel absorb the sounds, disinterestedly. For the Abyss, he had more curiosity.

“How deep does it go?” Nathaniel asked.

“No one knows. We cannot plumb that far.” Blue eyes met brown, and an understanding passed, between them.

As a burial place it would do. As a suicide leap, it would certainly suffice, though if Nathaniel could have done that back home, he would have. The Dakota terrain was mountainous enough.

He looked down, again. *Perhaps here, I can do it. Perhaps here I can jump. Or just stand, until my legs give out, and I... fall forward,* Nathaniel mused. *But only once I am free of my promise.*

The swirling mist beneath him looked soft, and comforting. Terrible, in its way, as well. *Ah, the lie of passage,* he mused. *I wonder if it will hurt?*

“You show me this when you did not have to. Thank you, Brother,” Nathaniel accepted Vincent’s gesture of good faith.

Vincent nodded. “You must understand... this is not a thing I would wish for you. But I... I sense the pain that grips you. How... hard it is.”

Nathaniel nodded as well. *Yes, this being did understand.*

“This ... holiday. This... Winterfest. It is truly important to you? To your people?”

“It is. It is a time of gathering, and giving thanks. It is our most... revered holiday,” Vincent assured him. “There is much to make ready.”

"If I stay, I will work for my keep, while the clock ticks." Nathaniel insisted, considering Vincent's terms.

And if it doesn't work out, for some reason? Nathaniel mused. *Perhaps I'll just go north, to the Hunters, anyway.* Though he knew Zachariah would be no more accommodating to him than Vincent had been.

Perhaps Ramona Star Hunter can be made to see reason. She was wiser than her sons, and her counsel was religiously heeded. Perhaps she would intercede for him.

Nathaniel considered, then rejected that plan. If he but stayed put, Vincent had given him an answer in the affirmative, just attached to a time limit. Six or seven weeks was not so long to wait, considering.

And at least now, the end is in sight. "I agree to your terms," Nathaniel replied. "There is now an oath, between us."

"I will welcome your assistance, here, however you choose to give it," Vincent replied, exhaling a breath he wasn't aware he'd been holding. The two unique men shook hands.

Nathaniel looked out across the bridge to several others that crisscrossed the divide.

"Is she beautiful, your Shahnna?" he asked, almost wistfully. A baby cried, in the sound above them, then was soothed. *That's something else I never got to do,* Nathaniel mourned.

"I could not breathe without her, so beautiful," Vincent answered. "I should see her tomorrow afternoon. I do understand why you are asking for this, Nathaniel. I know I would be lost, without Catherine."

Nathaniel dropped his noble head, and closed his eyes. "I miss the bond. That feeling of ... belonging with someone." He looked into the emptiness below him, again. *It looks like how I feel, inside. How fitting.* It would be so easy to just push himself forward and--

"There are other places for what you're contemplating," Vincent interrupted, knowing. "A river that goes on forever, in the deep reaches. A maze, where dampness owns the walls, and is prone to cave-ins. Though yes, this would do just as well," Vincent stated.

Nathaniel realized his grief had made him transparent. Especially to another Shah.

"Perhaps I will explore some of them. But I have given my word," Nathaniel replied. Vincent could see the deep sorrow in the lines of his face.

"There is no family left to you?" Vincent asked.

Nathaniel shrugged. "None that I know of. My mother passed when I was young, my father... well. It's been years since anyone saw him. He is likely no more. Let's just say I believe I will share his fate, if all goes as planned."

"Your life sounds... solitary." Vincent tried to pull more information from him.

Nathaniel shook his head. "In some ways, yes. In some, no. There are those who set great store by the Shah, by knowing we are still among them, in some way. But I had no siblings, and Jessamyn's family, though they are good, are not enough, not mine, not really. They are tribal, and have a chief and a council."

Vincent inclined his head, in understanding.

"Not unlike you and Father, and some of the other elders here, I imagine," Nathaniel said.

Vincent nodded at this, and felt sorry for his guest. It seemed that there was simply no place for him, in his world, any longer. Especially without a mate, to keep him centered. Work for its own sake was little motivation. He needed the bond to underpin his sense of purpose, and

to keep him strong. He needed a family of his own; one he no longer had a link to, even by extension.

Not for the first time in his life, Vincent blessed Father, and his love. And his ability to cobble and hold together their community. Though some of the times between them had not been perfect, there had been love in them, even in the strife.

He knew that the other Shah marveled that he'd survived his abandonment, in infancy. *Nathaniel said his home nourishes him. Perhaps this place has more to do with my survival than anyone knows,* he mused. He'd always felt that his tunnel home contained just a little bit of magic. He was starting to wonder if that wasn't just idle fancy, after all.

Vincent could sense fatigue in his companion, even though the day was young.

"You are still tired. Let me take you back to your room," Vincent offered. "Tomorrow, I will show you how we arrange a duty roster, and ask you to take your place in it... for whatever you feel you can do, and however long you wish it."

"I work best with animals. I don't suppose you have any horses, here," his companion said.

Vincent smiled slightly. "No. But we have a raccoon that is forever getting Mouse into trouble."

"Raccoons *are* trouble," Nathaniel stated. "Their minds are quick, and full of mischief. You don't own them. They own you. You can feel them think it."

What an amazing person you are. Vincent thought.

"So experience assures me. And the rest of us," Vincent said, as they strolled.

“I’ve worked as a smith, and a carpenter. I can swing a hammer, or an axe. I can lift and carry. Whatever you need,” Nathaniel offered.

“I’m sure your skills will be most welcome,” Vincent replied. “There is always much to do, here.”

“As you will, Shah.” Nathaniel conceded.



Chapter Four

Gratitude



Catherine felt two strong hands around her waist as she descended the ladder to the tunnels. Not for the first time, she was lifted and spun around, before her foot could claim the bottom rung. She was terribly curious about Nathaniel. Diana had already called, wanting to know what was happening. News on the Shah grapevine travelled fast.

Judging by the kiss Vincent gave her, Diana was going to have to wait a good bit longer, to find out anything.

"Vincent? Is Nathaniel..." she didn't want to say the word "dead." Diana had told her Nathaniel's most likely reason for coming.

"He's working in the tunnels," Vincent answered. "I left him carting supplies to William. Father has delayed any decisions until after Winterfest. A little more than a month." He held her. Tightly.

Father is a smart man. "Will that be enough time to work a change, do you think?" she asked, barely able to get the words out before his mouth came down on hers, again. She knew him in this mood. This was the feeling where the need bordered on desperation, for him.

"We can only hope." He tugged on her hand. "Please, come to our chambers with me, Catherine. I know you are hungry for dinner, but..." the look in his eyes was... uncomfortable - for both of them.

"Vincent... whatever it is... it's all right." She placed a loving hand on his cheek.

Vincent wasn't entirely sure she was correct. "I have spent too long today being with a man who lost his wife. His Shahnna. And I have had much time to contemplate how I would feel if such a thing were to happen to me." He drew her in for a long hug. "I find I cannot feel you close enough," he whispered near her ear.

Catherine understood. Through no particular act of her own, she was about to be very, very appreciated.

"I am here. Here and well," she reassured him, moving the hand to his chest. His heartbeat thumped reassuringly, beneath her palm.

"I know. I just... need you, right now. My Catherine," he told her, scooping her up and carrying her through the tunnels. He didn't want her to walk. He craved the feel of her body against his. So he carried her

all the way, and still chafed at the lightness he felt, in his arms. He wanted a more substantial touch. Far more.

“What you’re feeling... It’s normal. Understandable, even,” she said, once he’d set her down, in his – their - chambers. She reached for his hand, and held it. “You don’t have to be afraid. We’re together. Look at how much we’ve already overcome.”

And how far we have to go, in some ways, he thought. I love you. Only you. Always.

The tapestry door to their chambers was barely dropped before he began helping her out of her coat. It was unlikely they would be present for dinner, that evening.

Perhaps they would be seen at breakfast. Or maybe lunch.

--

Nathaniel, for his part, was indeed settling in. In the days that followed, though others knew of his request, they gave only so much indication of it. Some tried openly to dissuade him. Others simply left him to whatever peace he could find, and hoped for the best. Though all were friendly, each in their own way, he avoided forming attachments, here. It simply wasn’t a thing his heart was built for, any longer.

He met Arthur, and thought it odd that Mouse would keep such a bandit for a pet. His natural gift for animal empathy told him that the roguish raccoon had his eye on a batch of fresh made dinner rolls. He cadged one off the baker’s rack in William’s kitchen and gave it to the raccoon, figuring he’d not eat the one they offered him at dinner, anyway.

He met Cullen, and sensed another widower in the Tunnels, though neither man spoke much about their loss. The woodworker was taciturn, as a rule, and not inclined to speak of his loss.

He sensed Mary's strong sense of purpose, especially when it came to the various children, there. He sensed Winslow's stubborn streak, and his pride. Lift, carry, build, mend... He found that the work varied almost as much as the tunnel population did.

There was indeed a community, here, and it thrived, in its way: Children were taught valuable lessons. Artists made art, either in paint, pencil, or in woodwork, or with needle and thread. Chambers were built, pipes repaired, food carted in, and a host of cast-offs were divided among the residents. A woman he didn't know mended a tear in his plaid shirt, then returned it to him, laundered. A man offered him more clothes, but he politely refused. He didn't need a wardrobe, and taking what another might have use for was not in his nature.

Mouse seemed always in motion, while Pascal seemed to almost never leave the one room he dominated. Father had no title other than "Father," though he seemed to rule, here, in his way. After just a few days, Nathaniel realized he was getting more of a feel for this unique place.

None of it swayed him from his purpose, though it did give him more to think about. *This is a good place, a building place. I do not know how it came to be, but Zachariah was right. It truly is... amazing.*

It seemed as if everywhere he looked, someone was making something: A new chamber, a false wall, a figurine carved in wood, a water filtration system, a loaf of fresh bread, or a safer way to travel between the main tunnels and Chinatown, or somewhere else, if that was what was needed.

The children were well-schooled, often by Vincent. Their medical needs were looked after by Father, or sometimes, Mary. As a group, they read, often, and gathered in small clusters for quiet conversation, regularly. They mended old clothes or resoled worn shoes, as they

talked. They played music, and the children rehearsed for what they called “The Winter Concert.”

This was a giving place, and a steady one. Nathaniel realized that Zachariah, for all his fine descriptions of it, had actually failed to do it justice.

A hundred hands, and not an idle one among them, yet few complain of the load, Nathaniel mused. They are impoverished, yet feel it not. Unlike others, who feel it to their soul. Extraordinary.

After only a few days there, Nathaniel knew that William was a gruff chef who kept everyone fed, tolerated no interruptions in his kitchen, and managed to stretch leftovers out for three days. Mary was a midwife, who was keeping an eye on a Helper, Above, almost as much as those she was assisting, Below. Kipper loved his skateboard, while Jamie was fond of a handmade crossbow. The “Helpers” Vincent spoke so fondly of here were volunteers, sometimes former tunnel residents themselves, who, through a series of donations and generosity, managed to provide for the community anything it could not provide for itself.

Extraordinary, Nathaniel thought, again. And it was a word he thought, often.

He realized how much symbiosis was in the relationships, that the people Below supported those Helpers who needed it, in turn. The nature of that was not lost on Nathaniel, who recognized a strong community when he saw one.

And it was not without its exceptional members. Mouse was an inventor, of sorts, one Vincent had taught to speak, though the latter took no credit for how he did that. He was a savant, in his way, but couldn’t live in the world Above. Laura was a deaf woman. A girl named

Ella walked with a heavy crutch. All needed special care, and no one seemed to begrudge them that.

Pascal, the loner who rarely spoke to others in person, was a master of communication, and seemed to know where every pipe ran, and when every message got delivered. It was a dichotomy Nathaniel didn't miss. Many who lived Below were thus. Yet, everyone had a purpose, often more than one of those.

So, it was an interesting place, for Nathaniel. It didn't swerve him from his intentions, but he realized that the tunnel world was... unique, for its makeup, and distinct, among Shahdoms, for that. To the north, the Hunter clan was the center of a community filled with mostly loggers. In his own home to the west, ranching and reservation life ruled the day. Adam Blackmane was a miner, and worked all but alone, on a large piece of land in Montana. None of them were like this... hive of varied activity.

Since the people in Nathaniel's part of the country often also struggled financially, he also recognized "making do," when he saw it. The furniture in the world Below was clearly second-hand. Bookshelves were mostly cobbled together from scrap lumber, and the clothing was often patched, and worn. None of this activity was going to make any of them wealthy. But it certainly seemed to make most of them happy, or at least fairly content.

Regardless of age or station, everyone was expected to help, and to pitch in. But other than the difficulty re-routing a pipe section on the lower level, Nathaniel had heard very few complaints, and most of those were good natured ones.

Most here seemed to accept whatever life had tossed at them, to one degree or another. *It's a world. A world, down here, beneath the city streets. And almost no one knows of it.* Despite the dark turn of his

thoughts of late, he couldn't help but admire the place he now found himself in. *You are fortunate, here*, he mused. *More fortunate than you know, perhaps.*

And at the center of all of them stood Vincent. He was part of what Nathaniel would call "The Tribal Council" here, but not its Chief, or its Senior Elder. That position belonged to Father, if it belonged to anyone. They were a fairly large, sometimes loose community, and somehow, it all seemed to run - if not perfectly - at least fairly well. There was a duty roster posted each day. One most adhered to, including himself.

Nathaniel worked with Winslow for the whole of one long day, breaking rock to connect one set of passageways to another. It was heavy work, man's work, and the two made progress, companionably. If Winslow had an opinion on why Nathaniel was visiting the tunnels, he didn't express it. He simply worked, shared a meal, kept conversation to a minimum, and wiped a copious amount of sweat from his balding forehead.

Nathaniel had accepted the assignment immediately, and swung a pickaxe, familiar work from the days when he'd visited Adam Blackmane, at his mine. He was no good at teaching children how to read, and he knew they didn't want him cooking a meal. He had no gift for medicine, and there were no horses to break, down here, nor deer to track. So, physical labor it was. He did what he knew how to do.

The muscles in his shoulders were unused to the work, and they protested, but he labored on. It felt good to give something back to these people, in exchange for their hospitality.

"You've done this before," Winslow complimented, as they both let fly with alternating swings.

“Once or twice,” Nathaniel allowed. The black man was built like a bull, and gave the rock wall a mighty blow.

“Ha! That’s done it.” The wall gave way enough for a good two foot hole to show through. Winslow wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

“That’s enough for today. Tomorrow, we’ll get a larger work crew in. Hammers and shovels, plenty of buckets to clear away the rubble. Should have this done by the end of next week.”

Nathaniel nodded, and set down the heavy tool.

“Thought you said you were weak,” Winslow observed. He chugged from a thermos of cold water, then passed it to Nathaniel.

“The strength of my arm is less, but still there. It is my stamina which fades.” He took a long swallow, then felt the expected cramp hit. He was thirsty. There was nothing to be done for it. He wiped his brow with his sleeve. “There was a time I could have run with my horses, across the length of my land, or... taken down that wall alone, and not felt tired.”

He sat down on a convenient boulder, clearly winded from their mutual efforts. He passed the thermos back. “Now, the effort makes me weary, yet I cannot sleep well.” He mopped his sweating neck with an old scrap of towel.

“Sorry to hear it,” Winslow replied, not knowing what else to say.

“As am I,” Nathaniel returned, no trace of self-pity in his voice.

As they began packing up their gear, Nathaniel ventured a compliment:

“This is a fine Shahdom. Your people have a sense of purpose, and often work with one mind. Yet, each is to themselves, as they wish. Your Vincent clearly does well, here.”

Winslow shrugged. “He does. We do. All the same, near as I can see.” He removed his heavy work gloves and tossed them into the bag.

“There’s not a person in these tunnels Vincent wouldn’t help, if he could. That’s one of our rules. One of the big ones, in case they didn’t tell you.” The black man placed a heavy mallet into a gear bag.

“There are rules?” Nathaniel gathered up the heavy metal spikes they’d used to help break apart the wall.

The other man nodded. “Give help, when it’s asked of you. Accept help, when you need it. You’d be surprised at how good most people are at the one, but not the other,” Winslow hefted the canvas sack.

I really wouldn’t, Nathaniel thought, watching the other man adjust the strap.

“Thanks for today. With the others tied up with a pipe leak, it made a lot of difference, having you here,” Winslow said.

Nathaniel inclined his head. “You are welcome. I told Vincent I would earn my keep, for as long as I’m here. Food, wood, the drawing of clean water, the work of hands... it is all precious. Not to be wasted.”

The big man’s grin split his face wide. “I keep tellin’ William that same thing, about dessert. Come by later. I hear he’s making apple cobbler.”

Nathaniel wrapped a cable tie around the spikes, then handed them to his companion. The dark Shah simply shook his head, in reply. The thin soup they’d had for lunch had been tolerable. The sandwich, he’d left all but untouched. The thought of a sweet, syrupy, baked dessert made his stomach lurch.

“No? More for me, then. See you around, Nathaniel.” He tucked the bundle away inside the bag.

“A good day to you,” Nathaniel returned, making his way out of passageway, some of which had been cut by him. It was a good job well done. It would provide an important shortcut, between the hospital

chamber and the area to the east, where Peter Alcott was setting up a community clinic.

“Might save a life one day, with this,” Winslow nodded to the work, before he took the right fork, back for William’s kitchen.

Nathaniel took the left one. He had no interest in food. *Will it? Well. Then my last days went for some bit of good. That, at least, is a small blessing.*

It was a thought he carried all the way back to his borrowed chamber.

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Chapter 5

The Lady Rebecca



Some three days later, Nathaniel was asked to carry a large block of wax into a room he had never visited before. He followed the directions Cullen had given him, until he wandered into a large chamber he hadn't known existed. *It's hot in here*, he realized. Or at least, it was a good bit warmer than it was in the other rooms.

Long work tables ringed a decent-sized area. One full of low fires, vats and containers of varying sizes, and warming stones.

And candles. Candles were everywhere. Drying racks held tapers, overhead. The big pillar candles tunnel residents used to mark the day were sitting on a table, to dry. Rows of votives sat hardening, in little aluminum cups. A huge spool of heavy string sat on a spindle, a pair of sturdy scissors laying on top of it.

Nathaniel's dark eyes swept over the contents of the room. *Candles. A crafting room. This is a chandlery. The room where they get their light.*

Nathaniel realized for the first time the amount of work that must go into keeping the tunnels well lit. Lanterns were used often, and sometimes torches, or even flashlights, but most ambient light came from the candles. A box outside his room held the day's supply, each morning. As he scanned the room, he now understood where it had all came from.

The votives, tapers, sturdy pillars, and whatever lay in between those, were scattered everywhere. Mirror glass sat in a pile, a way to reflect the light and cast it further around a room. Globes of clear glass were stacked on a set of shelves, a way to keep the errant winds away from the flames.

Nathaniel had seen it, all of it, in the rooms he'd visited. He now knew where it had originated.

On a set of tall shelves, the white color of the usual candles was replaced by something different. Here, color met his wondering eyes. A batch of bright red tapers tipped with a hint of green looked Christmassy, while orange tipped with brown and tan looked autumnal. A carved pink one looked fit for a little girl's room. A simple peach pillar looked like it was waiting for something to happen to it.

Who does all this? Nathaniel wondered, realizing he'd not met anyone who claimed to work with wax. *Surely it must take several people to run so large a thing?*

As if on command, a woman carrying a stack of boxes stepped out from behind an alcove, which was to say that Nathaniel saw her olive drab work apron before he saw the rest of her. He continued to hold the block of wax as she turned away from him to set the boxes on a nearby table. She opened up the top one, looked down inside, and took something out of it. Scraps of ribbon. He had no idea what she was planning on using them for. Apparently, neither did she, as she stuffed them back in the first box, and proceeded to check the contents of the second one.

She had blonde, curly hair, and the soft-looking tresses gleamed, in the candlelight. Her hair seemed sun-kissed, and a bit inclined to misbehave. Thick, and a bit unruly, it was scraped back by a simple hairpin, one that wasn't quite working, as sun-colored tendrils escaped it. She didn't realize he was there.

Nathaniel watched, as the woman moved over to a row of vats and, with her back to him, turned a crank, one which hoisted a set of umber taper candles out of the dripping wax. She looked up at them and put her hands on her hips and shook her head at them, everything about her indicating her displeasure. Since she was looking up, it made her

slight form seem that much taller, as she remained with her back to him, staring at her work.

More hair escaped its confines, and it left a curling trail of silk, one that that moved as she did. She turned a bit, revealing that she was busty, as she blew an errant curl upward, and gathered it back into the confines. She clucked her tongue, clearly unhappy with her efforts.

Nathaniel stayed perfectly still as she glanced to her left and fetched a long dowel rod from its place. Hooked on one end, he wondered what she was about to use it for.

She huffed a dissatisfied sigh as she reached up for the candles, then turned her body toward his, still looking up, as she hooked a pair of conjoined candles by the wick. She was winter fair, and had a strong chin and a long neck, which was almost all he could see of her upturned face.

Even concealed under a work apron, he could tell she had feminine curves, and distinct ones, at that. She huffed another dissatisfied sigh. When she turned her head, he found that her curls hid much of her profile, though a strong nose was evident. He wondered what color her eyes were, the eyes which were fixed so singularly on their task. From where he stood, he was too far away to tell.

Nathaniel found that for the first time in a long time, he wanted to hear the sound of another's voice. Just to see what she sounded like. He subtly cleared his throat, announcing his presence. Still intent on pulling down the candles, she didn't look his way.

"Thank you, Cullen," she said, settling the pair of candles on the overhead drying rack. It was a soft voice, and just a touch on the low side. "I wanted to make something for the Thanksgiving centerpiece, but these are too dark. Oh, well. Back to the drawing board."

Soft. She had a soft voice. And she knew he was there, but misidentified him, as her attention remained fixed on her task. She used the hooked rod to lift another pair of candles away from the rod they hung on. He made no reply, as he watched her work.

She set the umber tapers to dry, and moved to where something that looked like a huge ship's wheel was suspended from the ceiling. Sets of candles were hung on pegs, jutting from the center, all of them looking ready for service. A hundred white tapers dangled by their wicks, none of them lit, all of them waiting to be cut down and used.

Nathaniel now knew what they needed the heavy block of wax for. *She'll make candles with this. Make light. For everyone.*

Her back was to him, again, as she put down the hook she'd been using.

"Just set it on the big table, please. I'll move it later, when I'm ready for it."

Soft. The impression came to him, again, and it seemed to describe much of her. This was a quiet place. It felt peaceful, in here. Peaceful and warm.

Nathaniel set the wax down and simply stood, and soaked in the feeling of the room. There was something about the ambience of this place. Something that radiated from her.

Peace. Gentleness. Warmth. A quiet stillness... The low fires accounted for the 'warm' feeling, but Nathaniel knew it was more than that. This was her. The whole room was "her." The creativity of it, the work of it, the organization of it, and the art. Her personality seemed to pervade the space.

He eyed the big block of white wax. *It must take an army to do all this, he mused. Surely it's not just... this one, small woman?*

That didn't seem right. For every job he'd had or seen, more than one person had been required. As a rule, the men labored in groups of two or more, owing to the sometimes dangerous work they all did. Children brought back supplies in pairs, usually, as women and men both tended the youngest among them, and crafted the things that kept them all clothed. Big William ruled over the kitchen, but a small cadre of young helpers fetched him the supplies he needed, scrubbed down the counters, and helped to maintain his inventory. No job seemed as if it were done "alone."

Yet, here she was. He sensed no other.

"If you see Elizabeth, please tell her I'm thinking I need to borrow one of her paintbrushes. Maybe a small one." She stepped back into the alcove and fetched another box, setting this one in a shadowy corner.

Nathaniel had no idea who "Elizabeth" was. *Someone else who lives apart?*

Facing away from him again, the object of his attention left the box where it was, then took down the huge scissors and began cutting off lengths of twine. They were all the same size, a thing she seemed able to do without measuring.

There was no accent on her that he could detect. No way to tell where she was originally from. *Turn around*, he thought. *Turn around and face me*. He wanted her to face him squarely, and raise her eyes to his. He felt peace from her. *Turn around, and step back into the light*.

How old was this woman with sun in her hair? Was she middle-aged? Older? Older women often radiated peace.

She turned, and looked at him, and for the first time, she realized he wasn't Cullen. And Nathaniel realized she wasn't old. *Blue grey*, he

thought. Her eyes were the color of the ocean, during winter, all the clearer thanks to her face being devoid of any makeup.

And she was not old. No longer in her twenties, maybe, but not too far past them. She was fair as an English tea rose. He realized he had not seen her face at meals, as he watched her take in his unusual features.



If she found them off-putting, she didn't miss a beat.

"Oh! I'm sorry!" She apologized, with a smile. "Cullen usually brings that in. I see they pressed you into service." She looked back at the waxed twine in front of her, and continued cutting lengths with the huge scissors; slightly longer ones, this time.

"I am Nathaniel." He inclined his head, his feet making no particular move to either enter further, or depart. The feeling of peace persisted. He didn't remember the last time he'd felt anything like it.

"Rebecca Sharper." She set down her scissors and came over to where he stood, extending her hand, a gesture he returned. Her fingers were ringless, though she wore a wedding band on a chain around her neck. Her nails were trimmed short, but her grip was firm, and the skin was soft, likely the result of working so much with wax.

He found he liked the feel of her hand in his, and again, that was a sensation he had not expected. *Rebecca*, he repeated her name, mentally. He liked the way it sounded.

"I've heard of you," Rebecca said, releasing him, then going back to her work.

Had she? Considering he'd not seen her before, he had no idea how. She seemed... contained, in this room. Though of course everyone seemed to get information from the rattling on the pipes.

Whatever she was, she was busy. Walking over to an odd looking contraption, she turned another hand crank, advanced six candle wicks down a wire line, then lowered the dowel that held the tied-off wicks, so that they could be dipped into the containers of warm, waiting, blue wax.

"Indeed. I cannot say the same," he admitted.

She lowered the wicks slowly, seeming to concentrate on her task.

"It's rough when they die." Rebecca's voice was matter of fact and without preamble, as she dipped the wicks further down. "Other people don't understand, not really." Her eyes remained on the wax. "No one does, unless they've lived through it."

She turned a small wheel to bring the candles up. "Damn," she swore mildly. "Not blue enough." She sighed, knowing she would have to start over. Slowly, she lowered this batch back down into the vats. *Maybe it would help if they sat a while longer, with some more green?*

Nathaniel watched her as she sighed, again. She fingered the ring on the chain. *Ah. Widow*, he thought.

"How long has your man been --"

"Three years. Six months." Her eyes looked up as if checking a date on an invisible calendar. "Seven, on the eighteenth." She raised and lowered the candles again, then left them to go fiddle with scattered objects on a huge work table. She seemed constantly in motion.

Nathaniel, by contrast, remained right where he was. "So you do know what this is like," he prompted.

"Yep." She toyed with a bottle of dye, on the table. "Maybe if I add a little more green." She lifted her hand away from the bottle and returned the focus of her blue grey eyes to him. There was compassion in them.

"Yes. I do know what it feels like. To love them so much, then... it's all gone." She picked up a bottle of brown dye. "No. No, that won't do."

She seemed very comfortable with having two conversations at once, one with herself, and one with him.

"And you know why I'm here?" he asked.

"Not just to bring me wax, that's for sure," she replied, taking up her scissors again, and cutting more wicks. "Somebody made mention of it yesterday, as they picked up what they needed. Hope you don't mind being gossiped about. "

She moved over to a dowel rod and tied the wicks off quickly, with hands that clearly knew their chore. Then she picked up the bottle of green dye again, held it up to the light, and frowned at it.

"Maybe a different shade. Truth is, we thought Vincent was the only one like you all in the world."

She tipped the bottle in her hands, and rubbed some dye on her finger. "I'm still thinking green. I want ocean colors, but the blue ones are coming up too light. What do you think?" she asked, turning to face the newest rack of candles that had displeased her.

He really didn't care, as he wondered at her conversational ping-pong. Green was as good a color as any other. He shrugged. "The ocean is more grey, than blue. At least the Atlantic is." *Like your eyes*, he thought.

Grey. She had not thought of that. *Grey, to deepen it down. Hmm.*

"You live closer to the Pacific, don't you?" she asked

"Depends on which corner of the state I'm standing in, I suppose. But I've seen it, yes. But it's grey there, too. It reflects the sky."

"Hmm, the storm-tossed, Pacific Northwest sky." Rebecca realized his point of reference. "Daniel used to speak of it. His people were from Seattle."

Daniel. So that was his name. She spoke it like the love word it still was, for her.

"Jessamyn's people were Sioux," was all he said in reply. It was as if that explained everything.

To him, it probably does, Rebecca realized.

"Ah, all that dark hair and high cheek bones. She must have been a beauty."

Rebecca took two small bottles off a shelf and began mixing colors together. *Black and white make Grey. Dark, like deepest evening, or light, like silver?* Her imagination began to work, as her unexpected guest continued to stand there.

"She was." Nathaniel felt the familiar twist of the knife in his heart. For a second, watching this blonde woman, he had almost not felt his grief, so keenly. But only for a second.

Rebecca shook the mixed bottle of dye. "I'm making special candles. Thanksgiving first, and then I'll have to work on the ones for Winterfest.

I want to honor a little girl who died. Her name was Ellie. She has a little brother. And she used to draw mermaids."

Nathaniel watched her as she worked. After three days of sometimes listening to others tell him why he should not consider what he was considering, she was a breath of fresh air.

"You're not going to try and talk me out of it." It was a statement, not a question. She lowered the bottle of color, in her hands.

"No." She shook her head, still eyeing the bottle. "I'm not."

That would make her almost unique, among the tunnel dwellers who had decided to express an opinion on it. Not everyone gave him their point of view. But those who had, had come down firmly against his choice. Nathaniel knew that all of them had an opinion. So did this woman, apparently. It surprised him to find someone so... liberal, on the subject, down here.

She set the cork-stoppered bottle down.

"The pain doesn't go away. They tell you it will, but it doesn't. It just hurts in a different way. That's not the same thing." She was not giving him comfort. She was giving him honesty. It was refreshing, considering.

His respect for her candor rose, a notch. She didn't look like a woman in mourning. But clearly, some part of her still was.

"People think it goes away because of us. We let them. We act normally. We look okay. We're polite about it, near others. It's the nice way to be. No one wants to hear that you're sad." She turned the small bottle around, with hands that seemed to always be busy.

"But she's the first thing you think of in the morning, and the last at night," she continued. "It hurts to breathe, and it hurts to eat. So you sleep, but the dreams are either a torment of memories, or ...

something else. Something where you never seem to really rest." She took a breath. She was not done, yet.

"Every birthday, holiday, anniversary... Every Monday, because it's the start of another week you don't want to face without him... or her. Sometimes, you cope okay. And sometimes... all the memories of what you lost... they all cut you to ribbons."

He could see she carried her pain as he carried his.

"And regular days- my. They're even harder, aren't they?" She cocked her head to one side.

"I'm not sure what you mean," he answered, fascinated by her.

"If something happens that makes you smile, makes you forget for a moment, well. That's the worst kind of betrayal, isn't it? Like they were never there at all."

She unstopped the bottle, then mixed more black with white, and shook the color. Frowned. "If we'd had children, it might have been different. I'd have had some kind of reason to go on, but..." She shook her head, then studied the new color in the bottle closely. "Light grey? Or dark grey. I wonder..."

Nathaniel remained still, admiring her calm and acceptance, as she spoke of insurmountable grief and the color "grey" in the same sentence, as if the two were somehow related. She clearly wasn't on the same path he was. But she also clearly understood it, and understood it well.

She looked back at him, as if realizing he was studying her. His deep gaze was fathomless. "I'm sorry, Nathaniel," Rebecca apologized. "I'm being no help to you at all. Vincent and Father will not thank me." She poured the grey dye into something that looked like a test tube.

"No, but I will, Rebecca." Nathaniel replied. She had just expressed very eloquently the things that had been eating at his soul for so long.

"Thank you for bringing me that." She glanced toward the huge block of white wax on the table. "It will give me something more to work on."

"You're welcome. Surely you do not do all of this... alone?" he asked, gesturing to the huge room.

"Alone is best. You don't... burden anyone with how you feel, do you?"

Ah. So that was why—

"I'm looking to train one of the children, as my assistant. Sometime. This shade of grey?" she asked, holding up the test tube.

He looked at the mixture of black and white she'd created. "Lighter. But only a little. And it's not true grey. There is blue in it."

She brightened, at that. "Oh. Well, back to the drawing board, then. And don't tell anyone. Please. The Winterfest candles are always a surprise."

"I'll keep your secret."

She smiled, again, and it reached her lovely eyes. And for the first time, Nathaniel felt something inside him lift.

"We're conspirators, then. Thank you, again. I appreciate it." She went back to her myriad chores. "I'll melt the umber back down, and maybe lighten it with yellow. Or orange? I only need enough for the tables, but I need to settle on the color..." She stirred the small fire underneath one of the vats, and put a small bellows to it. He still couldn't believe she handled all this by herself, even as he knew she did.

This close to the heat, perspiration gathered at the tendrils of hair at her temples. She set the bellows down, and lifted the damp hair away. The straight nose and firm chin made her face more plain than pretty.

Still, there was something about her that absolutely drew him. He eyed the heavy block of white wax he'd brought in, then her.

"Rebecca, do not lift the wax without cutting it, first. You'll hurt your back. Call for me if you need it moved, and I will do it. I would not see you injured," he instructed, knowing it was past time he departed. He did so.

And though he was unaware of it, those were the first words of wanting to tend to another human being Nathaniel Longspear had uttered in more than two years.

Inside the Chandlery, Rebecca looked up at his retreating back, then smiled. *How can I call for you when you don't know tunnel code?* She mused, knowing she'd have to tap out a message so that Mouse or one of the other tunnel dwellers could go and fetch him.

She eyed the bottle of dye on the table. *Grey. Definitely grey. Grey, with just a touch of silver blue...*



Chapter Six

Candlemaker



In the coming days, Nathaniel would find out more about the Tunnels' premier candle maker. He discovered that she rose much earlier than most of the other tunnel residents, and that she usually drank only tea for breakfast, a thing which explained her absence from the morning meal. Though people spoke well of her, she seemed as solitary as the agoraphobic Pascal.

Whatever she was, she did not use meals to socialize. Nathaniel dropped by the Chandlery sometimes, just to look inside. She was always moving, always busy. He admitted that he was curious about her. He admitted little more.

She kept no food in the work chamber, obviously not wanting anything to get into the wax. Yet, she experimented with orange and apple rinds, in some of her "special projects." Her work table was like the laboratory of a mad scientist. She had several "experiments" brewing on this or that shelf, or on the various tables. Jars of ingredients, scents, and dyes lined the top of what used to be an old dresser, one with three drawers gone.

Nathaniel knew that most of the 'daily' candles she made were a soft white. But special ones were almost always being made by her, for weddings, christenings (called "Naming Day" here), or other holidays. Or the most important one to her, Winterfest.

He realized that Rebecca got up early to fill a box near the shop entrance with white tapers and votives for the day, and the twenty-four hour pillars nearly every resident used. All tunnel dwellers were invited to get what they needed on their way to breakfast, and drop off any unused wax from their old candles in a bin set nearby, for that purpose. The scraps would be melted down and used again.

Nathaniel now realized that Mouse had been doing the chore for him, as they treated him like something of a guest. Telling the tinker that

he'd now do it for himself gave him a reason to see Rebecca, more. He didn't question why he did that. Nor did he question that in his way, he was tracking her through her day, curious about her movements.

Having risen early, Rebecca took lunch around ten thirty or so. Nathaniel caught her leaving just as he and the other men entered, a time or two.

That was the first time he realized he had been looking for her, among the others, rather than just looking for her in the Chandlery.

Hmm. He acknowledged it, but thought nothing more than that, as he picked up what he'd come for. He shrugged the realization away. She was an outlier among them, nothing more. Someone who understood his pain, by virtue of having faced it herself.

He also did not question that his stomach seemed better able to tolerate food, the last couple of days. He shrugged that away, as well. Like any ailment, it had its good days and his bad ones.

He went to her shop after lunch, using the excuse that he would drop off the leftover wax from his chamber. It was a good enough reason to see her, again.

He found her using an odd scraping tool to pull a line of wax down a freshly dipped pillar candle, twist it, and reattach it at the bottom. The result was something that looked like twisted leaves around the base of the wax.

She worked quickly. He realized the need for her haste: If the wax hardened too much, it would break as she bent it.

He watched her quietly, before he picked up their conversation almost where they'd left it, the day he'd first met her.

"So, you thought about ending it." He said it outright, rather than asked it as a question.

She glanced his way and seemed to consider that a minute, then she simply shrugged, turning the aubergine and white candle on a round wooden plate so she could get to the other side. *I'll put seed pearls in you*, she thought. It was a gift for Mary's birthday.

"Mm." The sound was utterly noncommittal, one way or the other. "I think I approached it from the other direction." She eyed her project, then continued: "If I could think of a reason to get out of bed in the morning, I did. I do. When I run out of those, well... they'll have an extra chamber to give to one of the newcomers. And my shop."

She finished cutting and twisting. Reached for a dish of small, brightly colored stones and pearls, she began setting them in, pushing with a pointed knife.

"Today, I got up to make this, for Mary. Tomorrow, who knows?"

She was amazingly frank about a subject most others simply avoided. Nathaniel nodded, relieved to finally hear someone who understood.

"How did she die? If you don't mind my asking," Rebecca asked, setting down the tool a minute and reaching to her left for a scrap of silver ribbon. Whatever conversation they might have, she was not about to stop moving for it.

He came farther into the room. The contents of one of her tables told him that she'd been flipping through books on sea life, and had others on poetry, nearby. A children's book caught his eye. Hilda Boswell's Treasury of Poetry. A picture of a mermaid combing her hair on an undersea throne looked back at him. Fanciful. Unreal. *Real was so hard, sometimes.*



"Accident. Car," Nathaniel said simply. "Him?"

"Accident. Cave in. It's hard when you kiss them goodbye in the morning, then they're gone by lunch." She glanced toward a set of drying tapers. She liked the grey color she had dipped. She thought it had just the right amount of shimmer, on the grey.

"Thank you for your suggestion. I'm using it, by the way," she said, dropping fragranced oil on top of Mary's candle. The smell of vanilla mixed with something else hit his sensitive nose.

"You are welcome. I'm... sorry to be here." He realized his presence might be unwelcome, to her. "It seems I'm only causing you to relive your sorrow."

She looked up to see that he'd inclined his head in a gesture that reminded her of Vincent. He would go, if she wished it. She put down the scent bottle and set some more pearls at the base of the candle she had been working on.

"I relive that day whether you are here or not. And it is nicer to have someone to say it to who understands, rather than someone who wishes I'd stop talking about it, because it makes them uncomfortable to talk about death." She shrugged.

You must have been a force to be reckoned with, as a wife, he thought. Quiet strength all but radiated from her. *You're kind. Yet... without illusion. You know how hard the world can be, and you face that, yet, you surround yourself with... this.* He looked toward the beautiful mermaid.

Do you know how rare that is, and how... odd?

"There's no sense pretending something isn't real, just because it makes people uncomfortable to confront it," she added. She got up and added finishing touches to six centerpieces that sat proudly at the end of the table. Judging by the golden-brown color of the candles and the pinecones around them, he guessed they were for what William deemed would be "a modest Thanksgiving feast."

"Besides, knowing someone else understands how you feel makes it that much easier." She sprinkled cinnamon on the pinecones of one of them.

He realized anew that she was one of those people who regularly multi-tasked. While one thing was happening, so was another. She confirmed that suspicion by leaving her project to remove several metal pillar sized molds from a warmer to a cooling table. She would unbind the candles once the wax cooled enough.

"It is. It is easier," he replied, watching her as she began cutting wicks, again.

“‘Easier’ helps. Sometimes,” she said. “If I put the Thanksgiving centerpieces in a box, will you take them to William? He’ll be wanting them, for day after tomorrow.”

“I will,” he replied, watching each length come off the spool and get snipped. She set the scissors down and fetched a tattered cardboard box. One he helped her load. “Tell him the cinnamon-scented one is for the dessert table. The rest are plain.”

“I will,” he repeated.

“Thank you.” She smiled as she said it, a thing he realized she almost always did, when she gave thanks for something.

His dark eyes met her blue ones, and held. “You are welcome,” he replied. *It is me who owes you something, I’m thinking. Not the other way around.*

“That’s the last of them. Careful. The tapers are extra long.” They were. Six beautiful candles stuck up over the lip of the box.

“I see you found the color you wanted.”

She nodded her head. “It took a couple of tries, but yes. You don’t always get what you want, the first time around.”

She said it in a way that conveyed a deeper meaning. He nodded that that was true. “No. You don’t. But you do get something,” he replied.

“William will be glad to have these.”

I have work to do. As do you. She began tying off the wicks on the dowel rod. He viewed her rapid progress. She never faltered in her chores. Her delicate hands were always in motion.

He realized he wanted to see her at the evening meal. He then also realized he had not looked forward to a meal in a very, very, very, long time. For any reason.

He figured she probably wouldn't be there. But he allowed the feeling of anticipation to wash over him, just the same. It seemed like forever ago that he'd felt such a thing.

He watched her a few moments longer, before he left to deliver the box to William.

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Aside from the gathered feast of Thanksgiving, (a gathering Nathaniel instinctively avoided) he realized that Rebecca did not appear at the evening meal, no matter how early he came in, or how long he waited. Nathaniel questioned Eric, the boy he had seen leave the Chandlery at least once, the boy who'd been related to Ellie.

"Does the lady Rebecca not take supper with the others?" Nathaniel asked, as the bespectacled boy ate a bowl of minestrone.

Eric had little understanding of the big Shah. And no idea what he intended. "I dunno." Eric said, shrugging his narrow shoulders.

"Sometimes she's here, sometimes not," he replied, after thinking about it. He dipped some bread into the bowl, and ate it. Then, he waved at Kipper.

"Thank you Eric." Nathaniel said dryly. "You are a font of information."

He left the room in search of what he now admitted was his quarry. She wasn't in the Chandlery. He found her near one of the tunnel entrances, putting bric-a-brac into a cardboard box, from a large crate of donated items brought down from the world Above. Buttons, ribbon, twine, pine cones, Christmas garland, gears from a broken music box, and more, cluttered the box of mismatched cast-offs, garnered from who-knew-where. She was happy and smiling, as she picked through and over what anyone else would certainly deem "junk."

He knew without asking that they were the bits and pieces of things she'd decorate her finest creations with, when she meant to make a gift for someone. He had a feeling that the gears and wheels would end up in something for Mouse.

She spied him standing near the stone wall, watching her sort through a tin of buttons. "Can you carry this for me to my chambers?" she asked, indicating "her" box. She took out some more buttons, then captured a bag of cast off ribbon.

He lifted the box. *What do you have in the bottom? Concrete?* It was fairly heavy, and he followed her to her rooms, curious to see where she lived.

She walked steadily, and he realized that was the same speed she used while she worked. That while she seemed to "bounce" from here to there, that she actually never rushed, or seemed exasperated, with all she had to do. She simply applied herself, and kept a steady pace.

They walked in silence. She seemed to have no need to use idle chatter to fill that in. It was another thing he liked about her, even as he found it unusual.

Peace. Contentment. Capability. She still radiated those things, even outside her Chandlery.

She wound away from several smaller rooms, to a more private area. Nathaniel entered the space she called her own just a few steps behind her, curious.

"Just... set it down on the dresser, would you please?" she asked, as she took a long taper from its holder and went around the room, providing light.

Her chambers, once lit, were lovely. While most tunnel candles were placed in metal candleholders or clear glass bowls, she had several

colored glass ones, including a large section of what had once been a stained glass lamp shade. The large pillar behind it gave off gentle flickers of light, while small, strategically placed mirrors reflected more light around the room.

It looks like a ... a wonderland in here, Nathaniel thought, admiring the ambience. Crystals hung and danced from overhead, splashing prisms around what was clearly her bedroom, and a separate area that held a patched corduroy sofa. A throw made up of a dozen shades of leftover yarn was folded across the back. It all looked comfortable. It all looked ... beautiful, in its way.

Beautiful, he mulled the word over, in his mind. How long had it been since he'd used that word to describe... anything?

"Just keep it away from the edge. Careful of the bottom. I found pieces of a lamp shade, and some broken chandelier crystals I think I can use." She indicated a sturdy wooden dresser with room on top. He moved over to where she indicated.

A framed pencil sketch of a plain man with deep-set eyes, a receding hairline, and a bent nose looked out at Nathaniel, a varnished wooden box of belongings right beside it. It held a curly, blonde lock of hair that was undoubtedly hers. That sat next to a pocket knife, an old watch, and a pill bottle.

These were Daniel's things, he knew. Nathaniel felt the presence of the deceased man strongly, here. Kind, dark eyes stared out at him from the oval sketch. He was not handsome, nor particularly young. But clearly, Rebecca had not needed him to be.

"Here?" he asked her, indicating the space.

"Yes. Thank you, Nathaniel. I'd have had to make two trips."

She picked up an ivory-colored shawl from the foot of her bed, wrapped it around her shoulders and sailed by him out the doorway to the tunnel, beyond. "I hope I'm not too late. William said there would be stroganoff."

Finally, I'll get to have a meal with you. All he had to do was find her outside her Chandlery, apparently.

Nathaniel looked again at the small shrine to Daniel Sharper, knowing that Jessamyn's was simple, as well. In a drawer on her side of the bed, he had kept an article about the accident, and a piece of wood, carved with her name and dates of birth and death. There was the scrap of leather she often used to tie her hair with, and the bridle from her favorite horse, tucked among some other few belongings.

We even mourn the same, to a certain extent, he realized.

He followed her out the doorway and back to the dining hall, content, for the moment, that he would be in her company.

He even managed to eat half a plate, without stomach cramps.



Chapter Seven

Looking at the Pictures



Stringing the wicks was Rebecca's least favorite part of candlemaking, and the job she would most like to give to a full time apprentice, if she had one. She realized how much she had hoped Ellie would become that helper, and how far away Eric was, from that job. Truth to tell, Rebecca knew the young boy might never take up Rebecca's solitary trade. He seemed to have no inclination toward it, though he was young.

One of the other boys or girls will have to be tapped to intern as my apprentice, preferably a teenager. But Jaimie was too impatient, too full of energy, to stay confined into one room. So was Samantha.

Brooke perhaps, Rebecca mused as she tugged the wooden dowel rods over. *She's older, and quieter. She might be able to be schooled. In time.*

Rebecca pulled out a length of waxed twine. It would become the wick, in the center of any candle. Tying a metal washer to one end so it hung straight, she tied the other end to a pole that had been marked for this purpose, and had seen many usings. After the candle had been dipped a goodly number of times, then dried, she would simply cut the wick from the pole, and have a usable taper.

The twenty-four hour pillars were thick, and took several dippings, then a pouring into a mold, so that the coating was thick. The votives, simple though they were, took work, as well. Every wick had to be tied, and kept straight, while the liquid wax cooled.

All the candle stubs were simply melted back down into wax, and used again. It was a familiar routine; one where nothing was wasted.

She tied the wicks to the poles, getting them ready for tomorrow, as she thought about the newest Shah in the Tunnels. *He's a strange one, this Nathaniel. Sad, yet... almost... almost vital, in his way.*

Winslow had had nothing but praise for how hard he worked, and how steady he was, and Winslow was noticeably difficult to impress.

Rebecca, too, had seen that about Nathaniel. In spite of the sorrow that marked his days, he never lost his temper, or seemed self-pitying. He did whatever was asked of him, worked hard, spoke little, and asked next to nothing, of anyone.

"Singular." She said the word aloud, to no one. One of the habits Rebecca had always had was a tendency to talk to herself, while she worked. And why not? There were no other voices in the room, so she figured she might as well hear her own. "Very singular," she said, liking the sound of the word. She shrugged at her own conclusion, picked up her big scissors, and cut more wicks. When she was done, it was time to dip them into the waiting wax.

She breathed in, deeply, content with her chore. Overall, she very much liked the warm, peaceful atmosphere of the Chandlery. She loved the quiet refuge of this place, loved how it let her create and explore her art, while she served a very necessary function to those Below. It had been her refuge, both before Daniel had died, then afterwards.

She dipped the tapers some more, tied a fresh set of wicks to a new dowel rod, then made her way over to what she called her "crafting table." It was probably her favorite place in the large room.

Years ago, at fairs and carnivals, she had been a crafter herself, an artisan of sorts, dipping candles, and carving them, while an audience watched. Surrounded by people, she'd often felt "on display." It was a feeling she hadn't much cared for, even though it had helped her earn a meager living. This was better. Here, she could create without critical eyes upon her.

In this room, by contrast to the world Above, she was necessary to the functioning of the tunnels. It was a good feeling, to be needed. And her

art was something she could fuss with until either a deadline loomed, or she decided she was ready to share it.

Winterfest was drawing closer. And she hadn't even settled on a design yet. This wasn't the first year for that. But she knew it was important that she choose something, soon.

"I'm gonna be up all night dippin' the Winterfest candles the night before deliveries, if I don't settle on a design," Rebecca chided herself. *Blue and grey. Ocean colors.* That much was decided. Now, she just needed to settle on the pattern. *Stripes, like the ones I made a few years ago? Three colors? More? Less? Something else, entirely?* She took off her apron and set it aside.

"I am needing another trip to the library. Maybe some more books will help," she declared.

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The library was another sanctuary, of sorts. It was quiet there, and still, in a lovely way that bespoke rows upon rows of old stories and fables, interspersed with "How to" books and other non-fiction. It was cooler than the other rooms, having no need for a fireplace stronger than a small brazier, in the center of the room.

It was there Nathaniel found her (after asking Kipper if he'd seen her go by), pouring over another stack of books, on a table with three good legs, the fourth one being held steady by an old Farmer's Almanac no one apparently wanted, anymore. Three of her candles were clustered together for light. He eyed the covers of the books. Sea creatures, again.

"It's going to just come to me. It will be inspiration, and suddenly, it will just work out. If I could get my hands on some sea shells, maybe I could set them into the wax..."

She was talking to herself, as she flipped the pages. "Or the other way... make a little shell mold, pour the wax, and then set some on each candle? Hmmmm. What color for that?" She flipped a page. "Oh,... what are you?" she asked a picture of a narwhal as she poured over the books. *Spiral. Something about that twisted shape...*

Nathaniel stood there silently, watching her. It occurred to him that with her natural affection for the children, and her creative flair, she would have been an excellent art teacher. Or even a mother. He told her so, seeing no reason to hold the words back.

"You should have a fine daughter in your lap, or a son. Showing him – or her, these... treasures," he opined aloud.

Rebecca looked up, somewhat startled to see him framed in the Library doorway. She hadn't heard him come in. *Must be the soft soles on his shoes*, she realized.

"Thank you," she returned, though he could tell by the sound of her voice, she wasn't sure. She set down her book and answered him with an observation of her own.

"And from what I gathered from when Vincent and Catherine were married, the Shah are amazing fathers. It must have grieved you both to never have had children." *It also makes it easier to just... slip away, from life.* She knew it was true.

"As it must have grieved you," he replied, watching her face, as the soft candlelight warmed her fair features. She tilted her head to the side a bit, a look of thoughtfulness, there.

"Daniel and I... well. I could barely take care of myself when we first met. I wasn't considering motherhood, then. It wouldn't have been fair. Afterwards, well... " She shrugged. "You know how it all turned out." She pushed the closest book aside and picked up another.

He nodded. *Yes. I know how it all turned out. For both of us.*

"Jess wanted children desperately," he told her. "It began to color everything we did." His dark eyes remembered distant days.

She gave up trying to look at the narwhal. "I understand it's like that, when you're trying to conceive," she said noncommittally. "We didn't go through that."

So she and Daniel had never wanted children? That did not ... feel right, for her. It must have been his choice, then.

She closed the cover of the book, indicating she was giving him her full attention. "I've known couples who were trying to have children, and not succeed. It's difficult to have 'failure' with you, as a constant."

She put it so perfectly. That was just how it was, for him and Jessamyn. The harshness of that ate at his marriage, from time to time. But there seemed nothing they could do.

He sat down across from her, simply because it was comfortable to do so. For no reason he could name, he told her his side of things.

"We had been married five years, and she never held a child inside her. Every month, we waited. And every month, she wept from it. It did not make me love her less. It just made my heart... break for her, more." He shook his head.

Rebecca's lovely eyes held pure sympathy. "I'm sorry. That must have been so... hard for you. For both of you."

Then, a confession, from him. Something he'd never told anyone, not even those closest to him. "At one point, she told me I should just go. Find another. It was the first time I realized... she had no idea just how much I loved her; how bound to her I was."

Rebecca's eyes were blue-grey pools of compassion. She truly did understand what he was describing, somehow.

His mouth tightened, with memory. "We remained together for years, more. There are no stories in our world, of divorce, or of barrenness causing a lessening of our bond. We seem fated to mate for life - when that is possible."

Rebecca nodded. She looked down, and traced a picture of a lionfish on the cover of a book, with a slender forefinger. "My situation was... different. Daniel was a little older than me, and ... well, he couldn't have children. That's just how it was. I loved him too much for it to matter. Besides, there are dozens of children here in the tunnels who need love. I was content."

So, they differed in this.

"I wish... I wish your wife could have had something like that," she said kindly.

There's so much heart in you, he thought. He was glad she understood.

"Where I live, there is no place like this," Nathaniel replied. "The lands held by the Sioux are far flung, and thinly populated, in spots. There are places where adults are needed, to help with the children and the elderly. But families are extended, and they tend to all they can. My Shahdom is far... looser a place, than this one, in some ways. But we *were* needed, and she was my Shahnna."

Rebecca turned over a word, in her head. "Shahdom. Like 'kingdom.' I heard Zachariah use that word. It's the first time we ever heard it. Vincent still denies it describes this place."

"His home is... unique. As is much about him," Nathaniel allowed.

Her smile was its sunny self. "We agree on that, for certain."

"So Daniel did not mind being childless?" Nathaniel pressed, just a bit. Most men had an ego about such things, though not all did.

A shadow dimmed her smile, and Nathaniel saw it cross her eyes. "He always knew it couldn't happen for him, so there was nothing to mourn, I suppose," she replied. "Or if he did, it was done long before we met each other." She let the sorrow go. It was not a thing she carried.

"Jess was different. It was only as time passed and all her friends and several sisters became mothers that she began to feel... less. Perhaps the fault is with me," he admitted. "We didn't ever know. Not really. There was no way to find out."

It's not like they can just give you a test, is there? Rebecca thought.

"Jess didn't go? For herself?" Rebecca asked.

"She said they'd require both of us." He shook his head. "Obviously, that's not possible, for me."

"That must have been very hard on both of you, then," she replied.

It had been. *The misery we shared. What if it was all my fault? What if I was the one who should have released her? Somehow?* And until this moment, he had shared that disappointment with exactly no one.

For a reason he couldn't explain, talking about it helped. He had no idea why, it just did. He breathed in, deeply. For the first time in the last few years, the motion didn't pain him, in the chest. The realization startled him a little, even as it pleased him. It felt good to breathe deeply, again.

What is it about you, candlemaker? he thought. *You bring light to more places than you know, I think.*

"What are you reading about?" he asked. "Dolphins?" He wanted to lighten the mood, between them.

“Mm-hm.” She indicated the books scattered across the table.

“Dolphins, porpoises, killer whales. Did you know a group of them is called a pod?” She opened the book to a picture she had marked. A family of dolphins were swimming together, their silvery grey dorsal fins cutting the surface of the dark blue water. Sunlight glinted on the wavetips.

“So you’re trying to learn about the ocean?” he asked.

She made a confession of her own. “Just looking at the pictures, mostly. I wasn’t raised to read. Not like Vincent and the others do. I mean, I can. I just don’t do it, much.”

Don’t, or can’t? he wondered. There were people on his own lands who were similarly afflicted. They *could* read. Just not very well.

“You have many books here, for someone who is not interested in reading them,” he observed.

She shook her head and rubbed her neck, tiredly. “I wish I had more. These aren’t really working. I think I’m just looking for inspiration.”

I very much hope you find it, gentle one, he thought. “Inspiration can be a ... challenging thing,” he replied.

She stacked the books, re-shelved them, and gathered her crocheted shawl around her shoulders, making to leave. “I’ll just keep working on it. Well, I’d best be getting to bed. The candles aren’t going to dip themselves, tomorrow.” She blew out the candles and collected her lantern.

He rose to leave with her.

“There’s poetry on the shelves over there.” She pointed, fluidly changing the subject. “Vincent likes to read poetry. Do you?”

He shook his head, and the subtle motion sent his thick braid to moving, down his back. “No. I read histories, when I read at all. Of the old west, mostly. Or books about horses. That’s what my people are. On my land, we are horse lords.”

She stopped moving toward the doorway, and her smile deepened, and he realized how lovely it made her seem. “Horse lords. Sounds like something out of Tolkien.”

“Who?” He frowned, not understanding her reference.

“The Hobbit? Lord of the Rings?”

He shook his head, having no idea what she was talking about. Fantasy wasn’t a thing he’d ever been raised with.

“Most of the stories we are raised with are oral,” he explained. “Passed down from our elders. That one wasn’t among them, I’m afraid.”

“It’s a fiction book. Under ‘T,’” she replied. “But only if Pascal hasn’t borrowed it, again. It has stories of dwarves living in mines, underground. I think it’s his favorite.”

“Is it also your favorite, Rebecca?” he asked, not sure why, yet also aware, on some level. He knew he was asking what pleased her. In some part of him, he also knew what that meant. He didn’t resist it.

“No. It’s long. I don’t read as well as they do,” she admitted. “It tires me out. I just mostly like the pictures.” She tugged her wrap tighter, then headed for the exit.

“Good-night, Nathaniel. Sleep well.”

“And you,” he replied to her retreating back. *Sleep well, lovely lady. I hope you dream of dolphins. Or something else that inspires you.*



Chapter Eight

First Kiss



Rebecca worked hard, and using the inspiration from a dream she'd had that night, she was finally getting more colors and even some certain shapes that she liked. She didn't think of Nathaniel as she experimented with a certain shade of aquamarine, even as she wondered if he'd ever seen it. And she definitely didn't think about him (or his braid), when she toyed with the idea of twisting the tops of the candles into a spiral. And she truly definitely didn't think about him when she realized she wouldn't see him, even by chance, for several days.

Winslow and Pascal had wanted a third for a mapping expedition. Vincent indicated to Nathaniel it would be a way for the other man to explore Vincent's tunnel home, some more. Nathaniel had agreed to go. And that was that.

Rebecca stayed in her Chandlery, creating the colors she wanted, but frowning, still. The work was going well. But somehow, it felt like nothing else quite was.

She invited Brooke in to learn how to dip the candles. The younger girl was able enough, but talked, often. Robert, Michael, Sean, some of the other boys. It was tiring conversation, for an older woman who had no interest in it. She let Brooke go, promising herself she'd invite her back when she was in a better mood.

She looked up toward the doorway, often, aware that Nathaniel was a quiet man, and that he often stood silently, before he made his presence known. Though he wasn't there, she was aware that she was looking for him, on some level.

It's okay. Plenty to keep me busy.

She went back to the set of tapers she was working on, willing herself to keep her gaze downward. *He's not here. He's still away. It's all right. Lots to do.*

But she felt his absence. She couldn't say she didn't.

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Nathaniel made his way back to the home tunnels, the other two men in at his side. He had not seen Rebecca for nearly a week, having been gone to a deep passageway for most of that. His companions had been good, if occasionally bickering company. It had been an amazing trip. He was learning this place. It held wonders.

When he returned to the commons, they were all well greeted by those assembled. Nathaniel's help had been invaluable, Pascal insisted. Winslow and Cullen hailed each other warmly, while William clapped Pascal on the back, heartily. Everyone wanted to see the new maps they'd drawn. How to get from one place to another, and safely, was paramount, down here.

Vincent thanked Nathaniel for his aid. It had kept the newlywed closer to topside, where he could stay in closer contact with his almost ethereally beautiful wife.

“You enjoyed the journey?” Vincent asked.

Nathaniel glanced over Vincent’s shoulder, not finding the one face he sought. Still, he answered his host. “The caves were exceptional. There was one full of crystal, and another one with a wall painted white, from a calcium flow. Pascal showed me the lowest level of the labyrinth, and bemoaned that he could find no faster way around it. Still. There does seem to be a safer way to skirt the area near the river, however.”

“New maps are Pascal’s lifeblood. He says your help was much needed on the journey.”

Nathaniel couldn’t help but smile at the compliment. “The mountains of my home are rich in minerals. It takes no great feat of geology to know a seam of copper usually follows water.”

Vincent realized the smile was genuine, and it had been a rarely seen thing, on his guest. *It’s working. Father was right. Or at least, I think it’s working.*

“Well. It has long been Pascal’s ambition to take a set of pipes below where we currently have them. For that, we will definitely need to know the terrain. Thank you, Nathaniel. Your help was much appreciated.” *And you look better. Like you’ve been eating more, and sleeping better. That’s good.* Vincent kept his thoughts to himself.

As fine as Vincent's greeting was, Nathaniel knew whose gaze and voice he sought. He scanned the room once more. She was not here, among those assembled.

When a decent amount of time had passed, and he knew she was not going to make an appearance this far before supper, Nathaniel simply

set out for her workshop. *If the mountain was not going to come to Mohammed...*

Reflexively, he softened his step as he approached her Chandlery. The warm air from the room greeted him even before he peeked inside.

Hanging overhead, two dozen vivid blue candles gleamed, in a shade he had no name for. They were silvery in tone, and gradient in hue, and the tips were lightly twisted. A note card sat against a flask of blue dye, her small, sharp writing on the card. It was a recipe for color. *I see you found what you wanted*, he thought. He approved of her choice.

She was wiping sweat away from her temples, pushing back the stray tresses that framed her face but refused to stay held by a white hair ribbon, as she worked. One hand was bandaged, across the palm.

"You hurt yourself?" It was the first thing he'd said to her in a week, and like his other entrances, he tended to start conversations without preamble.

Her gaze flew up to his. Her heart skipped a beat. Still, he was frowning at her. Or more precisely, he was frowning at the bandage that bisected her hand.

"Just a burn. Some of the wax tipped while it was still liquid. It will be fine in a few days."

He extended his palm toward her as he came further into the room.

"Let me see," he demanded. *You should be more careful*. He didn't like that she'd been hurt, no matter how minor it was. Had she been Jessamyn, he'd have known the moment it happened.

She held out her hand obediently, raising an eyebrow at his imperious tone. *Welcome back*, she thought, but didn't say it aloud.

He unwrapped her hand, inspected the blistered skin, which clearly had already been tended to, then re-wrapped it, gently. He spoke, as he re-tied the bandage.

"We returned from the lower tunnels. Pascal has his maps. I saw the deeper part of the falls, and the lower places, places I could barely imagine. We came back to the commons. Then... I sought *your* face in the dining area, when we returned. You should be more careful." He strung random sentences together, as if it all made sense.

"It will heal. Nothing I haven't done before. I heard on the pipes that the three of you were back, but... I couldn't leave now." She indicated the large vat. "I would have had to leave the fire, untended."

"Strange you should say that. It's the image I have carried in my head of you, lately."

A fire, untended. Warm, yet solitary. Creative, and shining, but alone, most of the day.

"You've been thinking of me?" It was not a coy inquiry. More like one that asked for understanding.

"Yes. Often." He said it frankly, comfortable with the fact that it was fact. He let her hand go.

"I've... I've been thinking of you, too," she admitted. "Sometimes. Okay, more than sometimes." She inclined her head at the last word. And she blushed, just a little.

"You have." He didn't say it like a question. The deep voice stayed low.

"I tried to get to the dining chamber," She confessed it, and the confession gladdened his heart. "But Brooke likes to chat too much, and I... I fell behind, this morning. So the fire was..."

"Untended." He finished the word for her, stepping very close.

"Y-Yes. Untended," she answered, her blue grey eyes touching him like a caress.

He'd thought of her for the entire week. Brooded over her for much of that. They had too much in common that was sorrowful. But he could not stop thinking about her.

Part of him knew that meant his original intention in coming here was null. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. He just accepted that it was, like any other fact he knew.

Food had begun to taste good again. Water slaked thirst. Sleep even felt restful, more often than not. Feeling "alive" again felt strange, not unlike feeling oneself coming awake, after a long sleep. It was an unexpected happenstance that quickened his blood, even as he'd journeyed through deep caverns, with the other men.

By Wednesday, he chided himself for wondering what she was doing, in that moment. By Thursday, he began to wonder what kissing her would feel like.

He'd had two more days, to wonder. And "two" seemed to be his limit, on such things.

He tipped her chin up for his kiss, bringing his face down to hers steadily, yet slowly enough so that she still had a moment to turn her head, or refuse, if she wanted to.

She didn't. At least, not until the kiss went from the tentative, to the exploratory, to the passionate, a rapid progression that seemed to surprise both of them.

He felt fire lick through her, as he felt it lick through them both. *God. To feel desire, again. It's been so long.*

She broke the kiss, then placed her fingertips to her lips. Her breathing was faster than normal. Guilt for her dead husband was in her eyes. He could see it, clearly.

Guilt made her feel confused, and feeling confused made her feel defensive. He watched the progression, as the emotions crossed her face.

"Do you think I... want this?" She challenged him.

He kept his deep voice steady. "Tell me you do not and I will say it is the first lie you ever told me, gentle Rebecca. The first lie you ever told anyone, as far as I know," he replied, stepping back, to give her room.

He had not *planned* to kiss her, when he entered the room. But to be fair, he hadn't planned on *not* kissing her, either. Given that he actually felt his heart beating again, inside his chest, he was supremely glad that he had done so. Like so much else, it had been such a long time.

She would not hold his gaze. She lowered her lashes and shook her head. *We're both a mess, in our ways. It wouldn't work. It couldn't.*

She remained looking downward. "This does no credit to the people we loved," she said. Her voice was a little ragged. Much like how she was feeling, at the moment.

"This isn't about how we feel about them." He said it surely, because he knew it was true. "It's about how we feel about each other." He rubbed his mouth, where he had kissed her, liking the lingering sensation of her, on his skin. He dropped his hand.

"We both know I did not come to your tunnels for this, Rebecca. Just the opposite. But for the first time since Jess died I feel like I can breathe, again. Damndest thing about breathing. Turns out it leads to other things."

She stepped back from him, farther. She needed the distance. "I'm in my mid-thirties, Nathaniel. I'm not young."

He scoffed at her. He actually snorted. But she would not be put off.

"It's important, all things considered," she insisted.

"I'm past forty. And I have the grey in my hair to prove it," he replied. *Widowhood made me feel like a failure. It made you feel old. I wonder if the others know?* he mused.

She finally raised her eyes to his, so he could see she was serious. "You should have a young wife. Very young."

"Yes. Because that worked out so well, before." He wondered if she was aware she had said "wife." Not "lover" or "mistress." *Good.* At least they were on the same page, in that one. Shah rarely had casual relationships, and he did not mean to begin one with her, now.

He'd had a week Below, working with Vincent's men, to hear their stories about this place, to hear how much they respected Vincent, and Father, and Mary, and her. He could not say which day, exactly, he completely abandoned the idea of dying. But he knew he had.

"What happened before... how your marriage went... that can't make your decisions for you," she said.

He raised an interested eyebrow. "I could say the same to you." *And I just did.*

Deciding to live required even more decisions, whereas deciding to die required few to none. He did not lie when he said he'd been thinking about her, often. He now had to decide just what that meant for him, and part of him already knew. *Slow. Take this slow. Don't overwhelm her.*

“Nathaniel...” She let his name trail away, helpless to know what to say next.

The corners of his mouth lifted, and his eyes warmed. *I like it when you say my name. And I even like it when you're flustered.*

“Rebecca,” he returned, conviction in the word. He liked the feel of her name on his tongue; liked how much it encapsulated what she was.

He decided that she was pretty, in a plain sort of way. The way women had when they had never been stunning, but had never been exactly nondescript, either. She'd have had her share of suitors, in her youth. Could probably have them, now, if she presented herself as more open to the idea, which she clearly didn't.

“We can have what we want. And we don't have to have what we don't want. It's that simple,” he stated.

He knew from talking to Winslow and Pascal that everyone Below saw her in a certain way. To the males of the tunnel world, she was Daniel Sharper's widow. That title was by her preference, as much as by their description. She wore his ring on a chain, kept a small shrine to him in her chambers, and kept mostly to herself, as she did her work. Everyone knew that much. Even he knew that much, and he'd known her far shorter a time than her other friends and family had.

I'm a lucky man, that they don't see you the way I do, he realized. “It will be all right, Rebecca. At least, I think it will.”

“Nathaniel, I'm glad you changed your mind about why you came here. I truly am. It's just that...”

That you're not ready for this. I understand, little one. Well, neither was I. But here we are.

“This is new ground, and you're unsure of it. We'll measure the steps together. You'll see,” he replied.

It struck him how much everyone knew her, but few took meals with her. Everyone used the candles she made daily, and stopped in to give thanks, but while she could tell you when everyone's birthday was, because she made a special candle for them to mark the day, no one save Father, Vincent, and Mary likely knew hers. She rarely socialized, being up before almost everyone, and abed the same. Like Pascal, she was something of a solitary figure, in a society known for its close-knit unity. And like Pascal, that seemed to be the way she liked things.

"You're a confusion for me. I don't think I like being confused," she confessed.

"Because the candles don't confuse you." He indicated the ones hanging over her head. "They don't talk, and they don't need things from you. It's safe in here. I do understand, Rebecca."

Did he?

You're beautiful, in your way, she mused. And your heart is the most open, forthright, honest, bruised-yet-strong thing I think I have ever encountered. Oh, Nathaniel. I don't know what to do if you're right. And I don't know what to do if you're wrong, either.

"I guess that's right," she admitted. It hurt nothing to acknowledge that his description wasn't far wrong. "I have control, in here. What color. How much grey. What size. I won't say that's nothing."

"Then it isn't nothing," he agreed. "But it also might not be all there is."

I have designs on you, little candlemaker, he thought, already forming a plan. He would continue to see her. Continue to watch her work, help her if he could, and be a part of her day. He would see where that led. He suddenly found that he had vast amounts of time, at his disposal. A thing he'd thought he had so little of, before.

Time. I have time. What an amazing thing to have. We can have it together, Rebecca, if you're willing.

He knew he was far ahead of her in his thinking, and that the thoughts were just forming. But then, he'd had several days without her to consider his growing instincts, where she was concerned.

"I don't... I don't know how I feel about you," she said honestly.

He tried not smile. *Don't you? Your kiss tells me otherwise,* he thought.

Working with horses gave him certain gifts, where instinct was concerned, and right now he realized he'd better retreat, rather than advance. If he cornered her, emotionally, she'd dig her heels in and resist. He'd rather bring her to him willing, like a skittish mare.

She needed time to stew about the kiss, and what it might mean for them. And he had plans to make.

"Mind your hand. I will see you later." He inclined his head in a gesture that looked so Vincent-like, Rebecca swore they could have been brothers.

And with that, he left her.



Chapter Nine

The Simmering of an Untended Fire



Rebecca didn't see Nathaniel the next day, though her nerves were strung tight, thinking she might. She glanced up at the entryway to the Chandlery, often. He was never there. Once, when Randolph brought in a large spool of waxed twine for the wicks, she thought it was Nathaniel, she heard coming. She tried not to act disappointed, when it wasn't.

And she tried not to look at the fact that she had been disappointed – and also relieved – too closely.

She made extra votives and burned off some steam, toying with a design for Vincent's birthday candle. Since they were now in December, it was only a little premature to start thinking about it. – At least that's what she told herself.

When she went to bed that night, she was anxious, and didn't know quite why. Was it that she didn't want to see him, again, after his kiss? Or that she did? Even Rebecca wasn't sure, and until she could answer that question honestly, she had no idea what to do.

She slept badly and awoke even earlier than usual, an hour that would have been considered ungodly by most tunnel dwellers. She reasoned that there was no sense just lying in bed and fretting, when there was so much work to do, and rest would not come.

She dressed as quickly as she could, considering she wore a corset under her tunnel dress, to support her back as she stood on the stone floor all day. It helped. Putting on a tan tunnel gown and brushing her bright blonde hair, she looked in the barber's mirror she used as a vanity. She eyed herself critically, and tried to see herself as others must, and as Nathaniel surely did.

She was firmly in her thirties, and her face looked neither young nor old. Her hair was thick and wavy, too frizzy for a shorter style, and annoying in a long one. She pulled it back and held it with hairpins, to keep it out of the wax. She wore no cosmetics, and didn't own a bottle of perfume, even a second-hand one. Any fragrances she had went into the gift candles she made, though some scent usually got on her at some point, while she worked.

She sighed, and put on the chain that held Daniel's ring. *I love you*, she thought, kissing it for luck. It was a comfort to be Daniel Sharper's widow. It had been, for three years. It was a sorrow, yes. But like the candles, it demanded nothing of her she couldn't give.

Touching the ring brought her injured hand up to the reflection in the mirror. Her palm needed to be re-bandaged sometime today, but she didn't feel like stopping to do it right now. She tucked the roll of gauze Father had given her into the pocket of her apron and went to the

sanctuary of her work room. At least there, she could do something useful.

The Winterfest candles. I have to think about them. Them, and nothing else, she swore silently.

Nathaniel was having his own restless time of it. He'd wanted to rise early as it was, hoping to spend time with Rebecca as she started her day. He found he had gone from thinking about her "often" to thinking about her almost exclusively. He was no fool, and no teenager. He knew what that meant.

In his mind, he changed from being fascinated by her to "courting" her. He knew the distinction should have surprised him. It didn't. Where that would lead was anyone's guess, at this point. She was tied to this place. Tied in a way that he wasn't.

That might be a problem, he thought. Then again, they were both so new to this idea, either everything was a problem, or nothing was. He decided to go with the latter attitude, and see how far it took him.

He rose earlier than usual and shouldered into his leather jacket, knowing right where he was going before he even questioned it. His soft-booted feet took him down the tunnel to her Chandlery.

She's awake early, he realized, as he approached her work chamber, seeing the flicker of light within. The warming fires were already started, and judging by the temperature just outside the doorway, they had been going for a while.

He looked inside. There was a frown line between her brows. She was hacking off pieces of wax from the great center block, and placing them in the warming vats. The metal containers would hold the heat for a long time, while she worked.

Her pinned back hair was already escaping its confines, airily framing her temples. More blue tapers gleamed overhead. A wealth of white ones were drying on the huge wheel, waiting for their wicks to be cut. A cup of tea sat on a table, cooling, and all but untouched.

He lounged silently in the doorway, watching her move. Her day seemed to have a certain routine she found soothing: Tie the wicks. Get the first batch going. Clear out the scraps in the box of leftovers and get those to melting. Prepare the large molds. Set heating votives beneath the vats, to keep them warm. She never once looked up toward the door, since there was no need to. She kept her gaze down, and focused on what she was doing.

Rebecca took comfort in the routine of her “morning,” even though this one had started extra early. Once she got things good and going, she would sit and drink her first cup of tea, and boil more water in the kettle, for a second cup.

Breakfast was an hour away, for most in the tunnels, but that clearly didn’t deter her. From the look of things, she clearly didn’t eat much, especially in the mornings. Nathaniel noticed the frown line between her brows. *You couldn’t sleep either, could you?* He asked silently. He glanced back at the cup of tea. *And you haven’t even had a cup of tea, this morning.*

Her waist was tiny, though just how small was difficult to discern, beneath her work apron.

I’ll need to see that you eat, more, he concluded, not yet making his presence known. It gave him a certain pleasure to watch her work.

She tipped warm wax into waiting molds, being careful not to re-injure herself, yet also in a hurry. Warm air came up from the larger molds,

and it pinked her pale cheeks. It made him wonder when the last time was she'd been in the sun.

She was very fair, naturally. He wondered if she enjoyed being outdoors, or if she disliked it, the way Pascal seemed to. *Do you like wintertime, and the snow?* Nathaniel wondered. *Or is it summer you love?*

He had no answer for his musings. *You should eat more, and enjoy some time in the sun,* he mused. There was no reason for her to limit her life to this stone kingdom. Even Vincent went outdoors, regularly, though everyone knew he roamed exclusively at night.

Nathaniel wondered if he'd ask her to take a nighttime stroll with him, in the park. He wondered if she'd say "yes," if he did.

Rebecca finally noticed him standing there, as she set the pitcher of liquid wax down. He looked ridiculously handsome in a dark brown leather belt and his familiar, patched jeans, and the fringed, dark jacket hugging his chest and shoulders.

The work he'd been doing showed, on him, she realized. His shoulders were looking broader, his arms, larger. She dropped her eyes, and they fell on the waxed twine she needed.

There's work to be done. Thank God.

He watched her tie off a fresh batch of wicks, and set the large dowel on the lowering rack. Her fingers were deft, and sure. And her bandage was not fresh.

Damn. His eyes narrowed, at yesterday's bandage.

He knew she was ignoring him, to a certain extent. She had not even bid him "good morning." It was all right. That, too, was not unexpected.

She is flustered. He could see it in the renewed coloring of her cheeks as she worked.

He pulled up one of her work benches, letting it drop with a thud. The noise was startlingly loud, in this normally quiet space.

He was making more decisions, as he watched her startle. Rapid ones.

"Good morning. If it is your intention to test me, to see if I will wait, I think I should warn you. I am a very, very patient man, Rebecca." He sat down.

Her eyes lifted, full of questions. Mostly the ones she could not answer, herself. Not yet, anyway.

"Nathaniel. I'm not sure if I'm ready to... wake up that much." She could not believe she was putting it in those terms. But that's what this felt like. Waking up after a long sleep she couldn't quite shake. Maybe she'd needed that feeling, that half-asleep feeling, while she worked through her grief. She didn't know.

"Then I will care for you without touching you. Until you are ready," he told her simply, his arms folded across his chest.

"And if I never am?" She did test him now. She knew she was.

"Then I will still care for you without touching you." He remained on long trestle bench, looking utterly intractable. Like he would still be sitting there five, ten years from now, arms folded across his chest, waiting.

She came to stand before him. "You're not the type." She sounded sure of her claim.

"Neither one of us know what type I am, when it comes to you," he replied, gently reaching into her pocket to take the roll of gauze. He

rose, picked up the scissors she'd been using to trim the wicks, and carefully cut yesterday's bandage off her hand.

"You have to go back home." She was reaching, and they both knew it. Even to her, it sounded like an excuse.

He let the old bandage fall away. The skin on her palm was pink, and fresh. And a little raw looking. She'd need one more day under the bandages, at least.

"Astonishingly, I don't," he replied, beginning to wrap fresh gauze around her palm. He snipped the end in half so he could tie it. He'd been a vet long enough to know how to tend a wound.

"Your people are there. They know you. They need you." *Don't they?*

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. When I left them, I intended never to return. They know that. If I come back, some day, I come back. The time is my own..." He let the sentence trail off, as he dropped what was left of the gauze back into her apron.

Rebecca shook her head at him. "These tunnels. They are not for you. Not forever. There are no horses, here, Nathaniel. No great open sky." She stepped behind a work table. She was trying to put furniture, as well as arguments, between them.

"One step at a time, Rebecca. One step at a time." He'd raised too many horses to know there was any other way.

That has nothing to do with anything I just said. He was being illogical. Intractable. She could not argue successfully with that.

"You confuse me," she repeated the charge of the other day. "It was easier, before you came," she admitted.

His low voice was remarkably gentle. "Now that, we agree on," he said simply.

He walked around to where she stood, then just stood near her, letting her absorb his presence. He wanted her to see she had nothing to fear from him. Cupping her cheek, he set a gentle kiss on the other one, then stepped well back from her, giving her room.

"You are beautiful, and my heart lifts, and skips a beat, when you enter the room, or I enter to find you in it. You please me, Rebecca. Simply by existing, you please me. If that is all we can have, so be it. But I think we both know we can have more."

His words stirred something in her. Something she didn't want stirred. It hurt.

"We would only be united by our grief." She was grasping at straws.

"At first, perhaps. I do not believe that would be the way of it, for long."

He moved over to her kettle, and warmed her cup of tea for her. And then, he turned to leave. Just like that, like he so often did.

He paused in her doorway. "You needn't be afraid that I'll interrupt your day. Vincent tells me we must go to Chinatown, that we're to haul back groceries," he said, tugging at the sides of his jacket. Fringe swung, from beneath his arms.

"You're... you're not an interruption," she called out. "Well, that is... that is you are, but... you're not." She knew the sentence made no sense.

He turned, inclined his head at her comment, then turned away again, leaving as silently as he always did.

I don't know what to make of you, she thought, watching his broad back, as he retreated.

He walked through the tunnels, wondering if he could find an early breakfast, somehow. Her parting words warmed him.

Work to be done. Time to earn my keep, he mused. It was going to be a long day.



Chapter Ten

Fever Dreams



Nathaniel did work hard. The load from Mr. Long was a generous one, as Winterfest drew closer. Heavy sacks of flour, salt, sugar, rice and bags of winter squash rumbled down on the cart. Nathaniel didn't mind the labor. If anything, he welcomed the realization that his stamina, like much of the rest of his strength, was returning.

He saw Rebecca briefly at what would normally be his lunch and her dinner. She asked him how his day was going, and he told her. Their conversation was no more in depth than that. The room was crowded with other tunnel dwellers coming in for a meal of ham sandwiches and leftover pasta salad. He enjoyed being near her. It didn't matter what they were (or weren't) doing. That she was "Rebecca" was enough.

Nathaniel made sure Rebecca got a large helping of the salad, then bid her a good day, as they parted company.

He then helped William stow the contents of the cart, bathed, washed his shirt and jeans with a bar of soap and a basin of water, hung everything up to dry, and went to bed early. It had been a long, productive day.

Jessamyn came to him that night, or more precisely, he came that night, because he saw Jessamyn.

He wasn't ready to do that. Didn't think it would happen. But it did.

And astonishingly, his memory of her in the dreams was nearly perfect. They weren't the vague, nonsensical bits of flotsam that sometimes invaded his mental nighttime wanderings. These dreams were memories, more than fantasies. Reality had an edge, and it was having an effect.

He shifted uncomfortably in his bed, aware of his erection, while he slept. Also aware that he felt vaguely unfaithful. But unfaithful to Rebecca, not to Jess.

The day was sweltering, and the sun cast an orange-yellow glow around everything. They were kicking up the dust, behind them. Jess had ridden Ghost up into the high country with him, and being on the back of a horse always lit a fire in her. By the time they had found a decent copse of trees, she was moaning in the saddle at him, sending him noises she knew made him hard. She had her jeans unbuttoned before her feet hit the ground, and she was pulling him into a stand of alder. They had no blanket, and the ground was rough. He took off his denim jacket and sat on it, while she pulled him free from his jeans and he took hers down. While he sat on the jacket, she squatted over him, gyrating her hips, seductively.

"Come hard. Come deep, my Shah."

He was inside her, years of familiarity, between them. Her hands were wrapped around his neck, her dark hair silky straight, and wind wild. He remembered this time. Remembered a thorn was being half driven into his palm, and he didn't care. His wife was mad for him. He was wild about her. There had never been much in the way of foreplay, between them. She was quick to rouse, and was usually impatient, by the time she had her clothes off. She wanted to be penetrated, and ridden hard. Wanted to be impregnated.

She wanted often, to make him impatient, make him come, whether she did, or not. He realized as time went on that orgasm was not always her goal, at least not a goal she had for herself.

She had wanted to become pregnant. And as time went on, it became her only objective.

Tempting him became her sole preoccupation. She had once worn only a short vest as a top, as she rode Ghost. She rode double, in front of him, in the saddle, a short denim skirt with no underwear between them. They had never even gotten off the horse's back. He had barely been able to get inside her before he ejaculated, that day.

She never minded, or complained. He often thought her purpose was to get him to come, quickly, so she could then repeat the experience, later that day.

Nathaniel's back arched. He felt himself orgasm, back in his bed, in the tunnels. It did not satisfy. But neither was it unwelcome.

The original dream reclaimed him.

He was back on the ground, under the alder, with Jess. She couldn't get on her knees astride him, this time, so she'd had to keep to her feet, or her legs would share the fate his hand was bearing. She had literally bobbed up and down on his penis until he drove upward, into her,

orgasming hard. She smiled her approval. When she rose, she clamped her legs together, trying to hold in his seed. She was greedy, where he was concerned.

"Thank you, Nathaniel."

She always kissed him afterward, but only sometimes, before. She did love him. He knew that much, their bond told him that. But she needed something else.

The dream faded, and changed to something else.

His mind switched to a harder, less pleasant time, for them. She could orgasm, with him, and had done so many times, in their married life, even as she'd also lain with him wanting no particular pleasure, for herself.

But there had been one or two nights, here and there, where she couldn't, simply couldn't reach completion, and thanks to the bond, he knew it. He had stayed a long time inside her, fast and slow. Lingering. Touching. Driving her. But nothing he did brought her over the edge. She made frustrated sounds against his neck as he labored, as they both did. For whatever reason, it simply wasn't there, that night. He doubted if he could come, considering, and it was only her insistent hands driving him forward into her again and again that eventually achieved any results for him, though they were meager.

To a certain extent, some of their encounters had become joyless.

He remembered that night, as he relived it. It was after they had been disappointed many times, by her period, and just before she began to say that it was the fault of The People that she could not conceive; as if she was beginning to understand that while sex between them might always be recreational, it would never be procreative.

“We will be cursed until the People give you your due. You should hold a seat on the Tribal Council. You should be revered. As your ancestors were.”

“The Tribal Council is a public thing. Newspapers cover it. I have respect enough.” He remembered kissing her, briefly, as he said it. He also remembered her refusing his kiss, as she repeated her charge, in the months to come.

She needed a reason for her bareness. She refused to see a doctor, refused to lay blame at either of their feet. That much she understood. They were in this misery together, one way or the other.

Nathaniel had decided long ago that if, for whatever reason, they would remain childless, it did not bother him, over much. He considered it his duty to survive, and help his people do so. Those duties did not necessarily extend to procreation, for him.

A Shah was not vital to the Broad Mountain Reservation community, as far as that went. They were their own people, with their own struggles, when it came to living in the modern world. His kind was a link to their past. A past they were proud of, and sometimes struggled with. He knew it as well as they did.

Nathaniel tossed in the narrow bed he now occupied. It was smaller than the one he’d left behind.

He saw the homeland he’d left. Vast countryside. Reservation signs. Ramshackle buildings sitting side by side, government built, and cheaply. Skinny dogs sniffed through sparse grass, and sometimes into overturned garbage cans. Like Rebecca's people, there were always pockets of the community where need or privation bit hard. There was always someone to care for, and one did not have to look hard to find them.

He saw Jess, marching away from the general store. She'd argued with someone inside about something. He didn't remember what. But he knew he could sense that her monthly cycle had come.

He saw his house, weathered grey and in need of a fresh coat of paint. Jess had gone into town to buy some, and come back empty. In more ways than one.

Jess's barrenness was a sorrow, but the fault could just as easily lie with him as with her. He was bound to her. That was all he knew for certain, so that was what he'd built his life on.

"It will get better." He'd tried to console her.

And sometimes, it did.

And sometimes, it didn't.

The memory of the long night of no fulfillment, and the morning after repeated itself, then faded.

Then, the scene changed again, to some of the fruitless days that had followed.

He and Jess had existed somewhat nomadically, after that. Each move had her hoping that "this" or "that" place would be "good" for them.

He had tried to soothe her. And he had failed. She'd tried crystals, chanting, "old ways" and new ones. She prayed to the sun. She prayed for a son.

"You are Shah. You are a king. In anyplace but this one." She was bitter, as she spat the words.

"They are the free Sioux Nation and have always been. They have chiefs, not kings. My ancestors fought by their side, and bled with them. Killed with them and mourned with them. But we never ruled them, Jess."

It was an old argument. And it was a useless one.

He relived it all, again, in a bed thousands of miles away from where it had all originally happened.

Then, after a while, his dreams drifted away, blessedly.

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Morning found him feeling unrested. He remembered the dreams, of course. But whereas they had once had the power to utterly devastate him, now they just made him sad.

I'm sorry Jess. For whatever blame belongs to me for it all, I'm sorry. He looked at the beautiful blanket she'd made; the one it had taken months to complete. I thought this was my shroud. Turns out it isn't. I don't know what's next. I only know that something is.

He had not passed that restless a night in a while. If what little of the tunnel code he was picking up was right, the tapping on the pipes told him it was mid-morning. But there was no real light, here, and he had a keen desire to see it. At home, there would have been no problem with that. *But here...*

His empty stomach growled, as unfamiliar a sound as any other. It had been a long time since he'd heard it do that, felt it make a demand for food.

He dismissed the restless night as a thing that was probably past due and bound to happen, all things considered. He tugged on his clean jeans and washed up in the basin beside the bed. His empty stomach complained, again. He found he was actually looking forward to eating a breakfast. He hoped William had made eggs.

He thought of Rebecca, and what she was probably doing, right now. She'd be in her Chandlery. She'd be hard at work, with a cup of tea cooling near her elbow. She'd be concentrating on her work, in the huge, quiet room. She'd be delicate and fair, hair a mass of springy

curls. In many ways, ways that were more than physical, she seemed like Jessamyn's opposite.

Pulling on the rest of his clothes, he headed to the bathing chamber, again. He needed to clean himself properly, before he began his day. And wonder at how different the one woman seemed, from the other.



Chapter Eleven

Work and Other Pleasurable Pursuits



Nathaniel split scrap wood into firewood with an axe, the feel of the handle good, in his hands. He'd borrowed it from Cullen, only to discover that Cullen was a master woodworker. He had tools for carving and shaping at his disposal. Many were things of finesse.

But an axe was a straightforward thing. Like the one he'd presented to Vincent, It was a useful object. It was meant for hewing things. Enemies, as a weapon. Or wood, as a tool. It was a simple, uncomplicated thing. Nathaniel liked it for that.

A pile of now-usable firewood wood and some few logs lay before him, the larger pieces having been brought down by a helper who had lost a tree to lightning. The fuel would keep the tunnel inhabitants warm during the rest of the winter. Nathaniel liked this kind work. It left his mind free, to think.

He realized that for all the time they had spent together, all the time he had talked to Rebecca, he knew very little of how she came to be here, among these people. *How deeply are you tied to this place, Rebecca?*

He knew from time spent with Winslow and Pascal that most here had a tale to tell. As he did. As Mouse did, and Vincent. Some were more obvious than others. He knew Lena for what she'd been, the moment they'd first met. He made no judgment on her for it, he simply knew.

Olivia, on the other hand, had been born here, and emanated it, as she cared for her son. Nathaniel doubted she'd ever leave. Nor would Father. Nor would William, or Pascal.

But Rebecca was harder to place. She seemed like a fixture here, yet something about her seemed inquisitive, as well. He remembered her delight as she'd explored the books, the boxes of cast offs, the colors of the dye, and pretty much everything else, around her, and hoped that meant she had a bit of an adventurer's spirit. He knew the track his thinking was taking: He wondered if she would agree to go away with him, if he offered.

He watched the pile of usable firewood grow tall. She was so different from Jessamyn, and Jess was the only other woman with whom he'd ever formed a serious attachment.

Rebecca was kind, and she was creative. She embodied hard work, yet never complained. She didn't seem to mind the solitary nature of her job, yet she was relaxed and easy, around others. She was kind to him,

as she'd openly shared her sorrow over losing her husband. She was a widow, with no children. She was dear to Vincent. She seemed dear to everyone.

Nathaniel felt like he knew her, yet he didn't.

He swung the axe, again. He liked the give and pull of his muscles, as he rotated his arm. It was good to feel his strength returning, in spite of the night he had spent. He had a moment to wonder: If Rebecca refused him, would his strength begin to diminish, again? Or would he continue to recover, perhaps return home, one way or the other?

They were questions he had no answer to. He simply didn't know. There was no way to know, without returning to Broad Mountain, and leaving her here. That, he did not want to do.

He returned the axe to its place, in the middle of a chopping block. *Enough of this, for now.* Whatever answers he needed, they were not here.

One step at a time, he reminded himself. *One step at a time.*

There was a children's story hour in the tunnels that evening, and Vincent's youngest students performed "Jack and the Beanstalk" for those assembled. Kipper was a convincing Jack. Eric and a boy named Geoffrey made two halves of a convincing "cow." Nana was Jack's mother, and an excellent scold. Samantha's giant was having death throes that were legendary.

Rebecca stayed up past what was late, for her, and enjoyed the show. Nathaniel found he liked watching her smile almost as much as he liked watching the kids. The little play reminded him of some of the festival days back home, where the children danced in costume, and the old men told stories.

His memories drew him backward, but a different way than last night's dreams had. *I have a life, back there. And it's still waiting for me.* He had to consider when to return to the Dakotas. He had his small house there, and a barn with a sagging loft. It was time to tend to both. It was time to tend to many things. He knew that as much as he liked it here, this was not his home

He glanced Rebecca's way, as she watched the children perform. She was smiling at something Mary had whispered to her.

One thing at a time, he repeated, internally. There was a woman to be won, here. And he was increasingly feeling like that was possible. She was normally all but asleep by this time. Yet, she'd stayed up "late" for the children's performance.

He didn't wonder. Her tender heart was built for loving the little ones, even if she'd never had any of her own.

While the children continued with the play, Nathaniel had eyes only for the candlemaker. *Where are your people? Not these tunnel folk, but yours? Your parents, and siblings, if you have any? How was it that you came to be here?*

And the most important question, of course: *You say I confuse you. But will your gentle heart open enough to let consideration for me, in? You said I had a life waiting for me, back home. You weren't entirely wrong. But can I have that, and you? Or must I choose?*

His wonderings were interrupted by a scattering of applause. Catherine rose from her seat beside Vincent and called "Bravo!" The young cast took a bow – not an easy thing to do, in cow costume.

After "Story Hour" William served punch and cookies on a long trestle table. The room was full of tunnel dwellers. Nathaniel even officially

met the lovely Catherine, Vincent's Shahnna. She was almost ethereally beautiful.

"Vincent tells me you've been a great help to everyone," she said, as her husband went to collect her a cup of punch.

She was glowing, in a tan sheath dress, with a wide belt cinching her tiny waist. Sharp-eyed and intelligent, Nathaniel wondered at the nuances of her love story with Vincent.

"I promise, they helped me more," he said, his dark eyes scanning the room.

Catherine felt she knew exactly what he meant. "This place is like that. I think there is magic in these halls, sometimes," she replied, accepting her drink as her husband returned.

"More when you are in them than not," her husband assured her gallantly, having caught her last comment.

"I didn't think attorneys believed in magic," Nathaniel toasted them with a cup full of fruit punch, then took a sip.

Catherine didn't miss a beat. "To tell you the truth, I'm not sure I did... until I met Vincent." Vincent's arm subtly slipped around her waist. Nathaniel caught the quiet gesture.

You keep her close. Smart man. She loves you. Very much. As you love her. He could sense it without even trying, from them.

"You are the miracle of my days," Vincent told her, content that she was near.

Nathaniel was very aware he was a third wheel. He smiled slightly and nodded, slipping back into the milling crowd, leaving Vincent to the pleasure of his wife's lovely company.

While Catherine Chandler seemed like a beautiful and fascinating woman, made more so by being a blissfully happy wife, it was a *widowed* wife Nathaniel's gaze was searching for.

Her bright blonde hair made her easy to find. He saw her slip two cookies on a plate and bring them to Luke, who took one in each chubby fist. She talked to Olivia for a moment, then settled down at a trestle table with another plate of cookies and a glass of punch, before her.

As her eyes scanned the room for him, he slipped right up beside her and sat down.

"How did you meet Daniel?" he asked, watching others eat, drink, and converse, as each child was praised some more. Most of the other adults milled around the punch bowl, chatting with each other, or with the children. Samantha was reprising her role.

"Do you know you start conversations without preamble?" she asked. "It's very direct."

"Good direct or bad direct?" he asked.

She lifted her shawled shoulders in a shrug. "Just direct."

He considered that. "Good evening, Rebecca. The play was ... clever. So. How did you meet Daniel?" *There. Is that better?* He knew he was prodding her, some.

She smiled slightly at him, then shook her head. "Daniel was here before I came," she answered. "I was a carny. So were my parents, before they retired. I had lived a vagabond life: craft fairs and state fairs and church carnivals and re-enactment festivals, and such."

"It sounds ... interesting. And like you travelled, often." *Perhaps that's a good thing.*

She broke a cookie in two. “We did. We were always on the road. We split up when I was twenty-one, just to cover more ground.”

And yet here you are, all but immobile, he mused, watching her fuss with the treat.

“New Orleans to San Francisco to Gatlinburg.” She set the pieces down and drew a triangle in the air, with a delicate finger. “You had to go where the festivals were, if you didn't have a permanent shop, or a home to work out of. I lived and slept in the trailer that hauled my supplies. Most carnies do.”

“It sounds like a... vagabond life, as you say,” he said carefully.

She shrugged again at the description, and sipped her punch, before she replied. “I guess it was. I would meet up with my parents, sometimes, for the bigger gigs. Usually not. My dad passed of a stroke. My mom, not long after. I... I didn't even know, for a while. We were... separated by the road.”

He nodded at that. “It must have been hard for you.”

Her blue-grey eyes looked backward. “I'm not even sure that it was. By then, I was used to being on my own. I was having an adventure, I guess.”

She turned the cup, considering what part of her story to tell next. “By the time I was twenty two or three, I was used to being on my own. Hand-to-mouth.” She broke another cookie apart, and looked like she was considering its contents. “You never realize just what that means... until the day you do.”

People milled by where they sat, and many gave them – or at least her – a warm nod or greeting. Nathaniel realized that apart from the few times they'd managed to eat together, that it was odd for them to be

together, outside of her work room. That it was odd for *her* to be outside her work room, as a rule, especially at this time of evening.

"How do you mean?" he prompted, returning her to the conversation.

She set the broken pieces of cookie down on the plate, as if they reminded her of something else that had been "broken." Something unpleasant. Her next words confirmed it.

"I broke down in New Jersey, with a transmission that would no longer go and a trailer of candle-making supplies I couldn't drag to the next place. In hindsight, it was just a matter of time." She brushed her fingers off on her napkin, and shook her head. "I was broke. And I was stuck. And I was... afraid. Really afraid. Maybe for the first time."

Nathaniel sat patiently. She clearly didn't like remembering this part of her story.

"Daniel's brother drove the wrecker they sent to get me off the interstate. I was devastated. No credit card, no way to get set up at the next stop, no way to... anything." She remembered what was, for her, one of the most frightening nights of her life.

"I didn't know what I was going to do."

He waited for her to continue.

"Daniel's brother told Daniel, and before morning, he told Father about me, and I... changed my life." She lifted her hands to indicate the bustling room, as if it had been nothing, to have abandoned her life Above for one Below.

"I came down. They unloaded whatever I had that we could use. Daniel was helping to widen the music chamber, and came to set the big vat up in the Chandlery. We just.... happened, from there." She folded her napkin over the destroyed food. It gave her hands something to do.

"What about you and Jessamyn?" she asked, raising her eyes to his. It was time she took that bull by the horns, so they could move past it. She had thought about his kiss, and his words. Had thought about little else, actually.

He gathered his thoughts. He was more used to living his life than thinking about it, or having to explain it to anyone else.

"Jess came from a big family. Too many mouths to feed, and not a one of them quiet." He shook his head. "She was near the bottom of seven, all girls. Poor, like all the rest of them, though her family was considered wealthy, at one time."

"Really? How so?" Rebecca's pretty eyes were alight, with interest.

"Horses used to mean wealth, to her people. But they're a liability now, more than an asset," he explained. "Anything that has to be fed, is."

Rebecca simply nodded at that.

"One of her sisters hung tough, and became a teacher. But Jess had no patience for books. She was more of an artist. A bit like you, that way," he conceded. "Though I think you like books more, even if it's just for the pictures."

Rebecca had no comment for that. She didn't know Jessamyn, so she couldn't speak to her habits.

"Most of her sisters work at the casinos, or the shopping centers, even now. In the next big city over. They're a mixed bag of personalities, but I liked them." He drew in a deep breath.

"They... supported you? They knew what you were?"

He nodded. "My father has been on those lands for a long time. Thanks to our affinity for horses, it used to be considered a sign of good

fortune to have us around. One of my ancestors was rumored to be at Little Big Horn. In war paint, of course."

"Of course," she said, fascinated by his story.

"The Sioux Nation, maybe all the People, actually... they often feel ... 'trapped' between the old ways and the new. Like they can't deny the one, but they feel the call of the other. Jess was like that, to some degree."

Rebecca simply nodded her understanding. As a woman who practiced an old world craft, she knew more than a little about that.

"She never liked the bigger cities, or the casinos. She liked some modern things. But she loved weaving, and horses, and snow, and the mountains, the pastures. The high country. Places I had to stay, anyway. We seemed well suited." He let the old memories go, and found they didn't hurt, the way they once had.

Rebecca nodded again, taking in his words. Like she and Daniel, their courtship had much to do with the place each of them had found themselves in. She looked at the very happy Shah couple across the room.

"Vincent adores his Catherine." Rebecca continued to look over at them, as they congratulated Kipper, who was demonstrating a sword thrust. "You could see it from the first, how he felt about her. They say he bonded with her before either of them even understood what that was." She studied Nathaniel's face as he too, watched the couple.

"I had never heard of such a thing happening, but I can see how it could, if he were unaware," Nathaniel said.

"You mean you can... choose it?" she asked, clearly interested. She knew that hadn't been the case, with Vincent and his Catherine.

He winced at that description. "Some, yes. It's probably more accurate to say it chooses for you, and even sometimes refuses your choice. That usually happens with teenagers, though of course Adam Blackmane was the exception to that rule, when he married his first wife, young."

"He and Diana Bennett were here, last Winterfest. They seemed very happy."

"He deserves happiness, after Celeste." Nathaniel said it succinctly. Rebecca knew there had been problems with Adam Blackmane's first marriage. Considerable ones.

"We never knew about you all. Are there so many more?" Rebecca asked, glad the subject had drifted away from their spouses. She wasn't sure she liked discussing how he felt about Jessamyn, and it didn't take a genius to figure out why. Like Vincent, she imagined he loved deeply, and that such an attachment helped to form who he was.

"Maybe," he answered deftly. "Depends on where you look. Adam, in Montana. Me, in the Dakotas. The whole Hunter clan, in Canada, though according to Jarrett, they're originally from Alaska. Now Vincent, in New York. Rumors of one in Ojibwe territory, though I've never been able to find him. He may have either died out, or the legend of him started, and it was my father, back when he roamed there, from time to time."

"Do you think it was your father? That he could still be alive?" she asked.

Nathaniel shrugged. "No way to know. Maybe. Maybe not. My mother was descended of French trappers, later merchants, up in Canada. He ran ponies between there and the Dakotas. After she died, he took her back home, to bury her."

"How old were you?"

"Thirteen, fourteen. Almost a man, by some standards."

"Did you see him, after? Did he come back?"

Nathaniel nodded. "He came back for a while, but his heart wasn't there, anymore, and the memories burned. I'd see him off and on."

"When was the last time?" she asked.

"He went up into the Yukon territory, far as I know. That was a couple years before Jess died. None of us have seen him, since. Not that I expected to." He sipped from his cup, then put it down. "You could see the sorrow in him. The wasting probably took him."

Rebecca was sad for his loss, and wondered if his conclusion was a tad premature. After all, both Adam and now he seem to have worked their way through the worst of it.

"Could you find him, if you tried? If he were still alive, I mean?"

Nathaniel shook his head in the negative. "There's just no way to. The bond is for our mates, mostly. It had faded between him and I long before my Mother passed. Zachariah might be able to sense him, if they are close by each other. But that's from his natural abilities as a Protector. There's at least one born to each generation, the stories say."

"It must be... difficult to think he's still out there, somewhere. Maybe."

Nathaniel shrugged his buckskin covered shoulders, again. "I went to search for him a while ago. Found the cairn that covers my mother's bones, near the place she used to call 'home.' He wasn't there. And there is no one there who knows me that I can ask. I don't know of those in the area who are aware of the Shah, and who are not. I only know that he was no longer there; that I could find no trace or scent of him."

Rebecca wrapped her shawl more tightly around her, and then reached over to squeeze his unusual hand.

"I hope you find him again," she said simply. "Before my mom passed, my own family either saw each other or they didn't. We were just... wanderers. My parents were never anything but carnies."

She used that word again, and it was one with which he was unfamiliar, but could guess. *Carnival people. Travelers. A wandering life, and often an unstable one. No roots. No mountains, to call your own.* Foreign to him, by virtue of having no place to tie oneself to.

No wonder you came down here. No wonder. She'd found this place and made a home of it. One she hadn't left, since, as far as he knew.

By contrast, Jessamyn and he had travelled all over the Dakotas and into Wyoming, being with this or that group of Sioux, mostly relatives of hers. But even though their area of travel was large, he still felt bound to it. It was his "place" in the world. It was his territory, his Shahdom. The tenacity of that bond had made it impossible for his strength to leave him, entirely, during the wasting.

"What did they do? Did they make candles, like you?" he asked.

"Carnies never do just one thing," she replied easily. "You do what makes you money, depending on where you are. Fortune telling, portraits, put up and tear down, the games... sometimes less... legal things, depending on who you are, or where you are. My parents were legitimate, though," she hastened to add. "Maybe that's why we were always broke." She smiled ruefully.

"What sort of things would they do?" he asked, honestly curious.

"They both worked hard, wherever they were. Roustabout, set up the Ferris wheel, do card tricks, guess your weight, make candles, run a game of chance..." She sighed. "Town to town. Hand-to-mouth." She

raised an eyebrow at the repeated description, then glanced over his shoulder and took in the bustling scene before her.

"It was always busy. Like here, but different."

Her eyes came back to him. "You needed gas money to make it to the next town. That, and enough food to get you by. It wasn't a bad life. But it wasn't a... secure one. We'd swap postcards, once or twice a year. I have an aunt, somewhere. I think. My father's sister. But she used to move around, too. I couldn't tell you where she was right now, if my life depended on it."

She confirmed his guess that her life had often had a good deal of instability to it. *Daniel Sharper must have represented an odd kind of security, to you.*

She stopped to call Kipper over, and congratulate him on the strength of his performance. When she ruffled his thick, curly hair, he smiled. "Catherine says it was our best play, yet. Do you think so?" he asked.

"And who would I be to argue with Catherine, of all people?" Rebecca's smile was full, and her pretty eyes twinkled merrily, as she spoke to the young boy.

Nathaniel liked the sound of her voice, and wanted her to keep talking. But Kipper bounded away, and it seemed she was done with her story, for the moment. When Kipper left, she rose, and seemed ready to go, as well. He accompanied her.

"Your Shah says there is work to be done in the Eastern area, near the river. That flooding is a concern, and must be monitored. I promised to help him, tomorrow."

Rebecca's brow furrowed, as if she'd just heard something she didn't like. She brushed it aside.

"My Shah." Rebecca shook her head at the word. "That's what Zachariah called him." She smiled. "Down here, we've only ever called him 'Vincent.'"

"And 'Vincent' he is." Nathaniel walked her to where the tunnel intersected, knowing she would go one way, while he went another. "I must turn in early, this night. We leave before breakfast in the morning. Not that I would see you there," he chided.

Olivia sidled by them, a sticky-fingered Luke in tow. "'Night Rebecca! 'Night Nathaniel!" Olivia greeted, as they went down the corridor. Luke waved at them, as he ambled past.

"I wouldn't be able to leave. That's when I'm getting things good and going. The warming fires can't be left—"

"Untended," he finished for her. "Sweet dreams, Rebecca."

He would liked to have kissed her again, but this was a public area, and he got the feeling that such a thing would be unwelcome, at this point. To those here, she was still largely and simply known as Daniel's widow, or the Tunnel world's candlemaker. She had almost no identity, other than that.

Her next words surprised him. "Nathaniel... be careful. Really careful." A concern she had been trying to hide since he mentioned working in the tunnels came forward. He had sensed it the moment he said the word "Eastern."

"That area can be... unpredictable." The good humor was gone from her gaze. Her pupils looked huge. And worried.

"Vincent knows the area. We will be cautious," he answered simply.

"I know. Good-night." She hugged the wrap tightly around her shoulders and separated from him. Mary joined her for the walk to their chambers.

Nathaniel watched her go. She looked back, once. Her eyes were twin pools of worry.

He then knew without asking that it was that area where her husband had died.

--

Nathaniel held a pipe full of water as level as he could, while Winslow replaced old rivets with newer ones. Vincent faced him, using his great shoulders to also bear the weight of the pipe. It took both of them to keep this particular section of metal aloft, and steady. Nathaniel braced his feet, and simply held the cylinder in a hard grip.

He is strong, Vincent realized, even in what he insisted was a reduced state.

The repair took a good while, and by the time they were done, both Vincent and Nathaniel were holding sore shoulders, their muscles nearly cracking, under the weight of water inside the metal. Winslow patted the patch job, once they were through.

"This will hold a long while. Thanks, you two. We'd have had to build braces for the pipe before we fixed it, the other way."

"It is little enough for the hospitality you have shown me," Nathaniel replied, working the tension in his shoulder by rotating it. In his prime he could have held it aloft by himself. *Maybe*. Memory was often better than reality.

"It is a good job well done. With the leak repaired, the lower area can dry out; perhaps be safer to traverse," Vincent said.

The men broke into companionable groups for the afternoon meal. With luck, they would labor only another hour or so, before returning to the main chambers.

"We were glad for your help." Vincent extended the compliment again.

"You would have done much the same for me," Nathaniel returned.

"I do not think you would have asked me to hold up a horse." Vincent quipped.

Nathaniel almost smiled. "Only part of one, and only then if we're shoeing it." Nathaniel rather enjoyed the image of Vincent trying to hold up a horse, as Vincent made no reply.

"I had a grey gelding I let go." Nathaniel's dark eyes saw the animal in his mind's eye. "Ghost. Smart as a whip, and not too stubborn. I miss taking him up into the high country. He knew enough to be quiet when you fished."

The two strange beings enjoyed a companionable moment, as Nathaniel reflected. Vincent could feel his new friend softening. Something inside him had definitely changed, since he'd entered the tunnels. Vincent no longer feared, as he once did, that Nathaniel would simply disappear into the lower caverns.

"So. Rebecca." Nathaniel raised the name so Vincent wouldn't have to.

"Yes. I've noticed your... interest." Vincent replied tactfully. "She is a good woman."

"If it breaks no confidences, can you speak of her?"

Vincent merely nodded. "She has a fine heart, though it has not belonged to another since she lost her husband, Daniel, a few years ago. She makes most of the candles we use, and all the candles for Winterfest, which will happen in only a few weeks. I understand she is particularly vexed about that, this year."

"Something about a child you lost last spring. Ellie."

Vincent nodded. "Ellie was fond of Rebecca. She and her brother Eric were orphans, and prone to wandering here and there, Ellie mostly caring for her brother. She spent time with Rebecca in the Chandlery, sometimes."

"I understand she passed. I'm sorry for it."

Vincent nodded again. "A... pestilence swept through the tunnels, and we lost her. It seems Eric recently showed Rebecca a book of drawings Ellie had done. Rebecca says it was mostly full of fish, and mermaids, and she wanted to honor Ellie's memory by using colors inspired by that."

Nathaniel absorbed his words. Being Shah here had its challenges, just as it did everywhere.

"Rebecca says she thought of ending her life, after her man passed."

Nathaniel said the words as he cut into an apple with a pocket knife.

Vincent took that in. He remembered her sorrow. He had not known it was that bad, but he had known it was bad. She had been devoted to Daniel.

"Daniel was a good man. Very good. I think Rebecca was afraid that once he passed... that he was of the tunnels, but she was here by her marriage to him. That once he was gone, she would somehow... be no longer welcome." He shook his head. "That is not true, of course. Rebecca will always have a home, here, if she wants it."

"A hard thing for a vagabond to accept." Nathaniel chewed thoughtfully. Both men were thinking of a time when Rebecca might leave, if she chose to.

"She mentioned an aunt," Nathaniel prompted.

Vincent shrugged, and unscrewed a thermos of cold water. "She has no family that is known to us. From what I gather, Rebecca was simply

set... adrift once she became an adult. When her luck ran out, a helper brought her down."

Vincent was repeating the story Rebecca had told him, last night.

"She told me about how she came down," Nathaniel replied.



"Daniel and she were married shortly thereafter. I'm not sure how much Rebecca's family even knows of her life, anymore. Nomads are a strange group for me to understand," Vincent admitted.

They would be. He was as bound to this place as the rocks over their heads.

"My people *are* nomads, to some degree," Nathaniel stated. "Seth Night Hunter would have loved them."

Vincent shook his head. "It is not a life I ever even thought to contemplate," he replied.

"I suppose not," Nathaniel returned. He remembered distant days.

Jessamyn's people, and even his own, had always been at least somewhat nomadic. Reservation life had settled the Sioux, to a good degree, but their area was still broad, still wild.

But he and Jess had always travelled between one place and another. From hilltop to valley, from mountain cabin to the small house in the lowlands, with the barn.

"There's freedom in it. But there's also impermanence," Nathaniel replied. "One summer, Jessamyn and I spent it almost exclusively in a teepee-styled tent, travelling with the horses."

It was a thing he had not minded. She had hoped the summer spent living near the land would find her pregnant, at the end. Like other things they had tried, it hadn't worked.

"Seth mentioned such things, such... travel. To me... that seems impossible."

Nathaniel shrugged. "Nomads have to move. It's just part of their nature. Longspears... well. We've almost always been tied to the horses. It's just our way."

Vincent couldn't imagine keeping something so large as a horse, down here. The only kind he'd ever ridden came attached to a carousel.

"We travel," Nathaniel said. "But only in wild country, and even then, there are places we dare not go. Night travel is safer than daytime. Cities are too dangerous. That you've survived here... It's a marvel, to us. All of us," Nathaniel said.

Vincent smiled. "I had help."

"And as you thrive, so will they," Nathaniel replied, repeating what was for him, an old saw.

"The work we've done here today will help to serve that purpose, then," Vincent said, rotating his own shoulder.

"Vincent... Daniel was killed in this area. Wasn't he?" Nathaniel ventured.

Vincent nodded solemnly. "It was a dark day for us. It was not in these passageways, exactly, but closer to the river, past the labyrinth." He nodded in that direction. "Spring rains had brought moisture to the area. We didn't know how unstable it was. A wall simply... collapsed on him." He shook his head. "Rebecca was... devastated."

"She's been... instrumental in bringing me back. That she understood my grief was no small part of it," Nathaniel said.

Vincent finished his light lunch and rose. "Then we will pray that the two of you continue to be good for each other," he replied.

Nathaniel picked up his tools with the other men, and went back to work, checking the other pipes in the area for signs of wear and tear. Winslow pointed out which rivets he wanted to see replaced. It felt good to be fixing things, again.

Nathaniel realized that if and when he went home again, he had a barn roof that needed tending.

--

"You hurt your shoulder." Rebecca said, watching him wince as he set down the heavy block of wax he carried over to her.

"I'll live." He managed. It did hurt. But he didn't need her worrying about him, when he worked. Especially in the location she feared.

"Ah yes. Be tough. That will take the pain away," she chided. One of the benefits of working in her shop that it was always warm, when she was melting wax. She dipped a clean washcloth in a large bowl full of warm

water. He noticed her bandage was gone, her palm finally healed, though it still looked a little red to him.

"Sit." She indicated her stool. "And open the collar of your shirt." She approached him with the wet cloth. He tried loosening a few buttons, but found he was still getting his shirt wet, as she tried to place the damp cloth over the sore muscle.

"Look, just unbutton it. I promise not to stare. Or even look." She demonstrated looking off to the side, then moved back behind him entirely, accommodating his modesty.

If he was as modest as Vincent... She shrugged. Nobody was as modest as Vincent.

He made a snorting sound at her attempt to preserve anything that looked like modesty, about him. There was very little about his body he considered worth the effort it would take to see it. Widowhood had affected him that way - as it does many.

On the one hand, he was aware of the attraction his strength generated. On the other hand, he was both unaware of it, and still considered himself weak, from the wasting. Much about him felt better. Much more would, in time.

After he unbuttoned his shirt, she pulled the fabric back from the shoulder, and settled the warm cloth against his aching skin. He sighed immediately, and felt the muscle relax, from the heat.

"God, that feels good."

She pulled it up higher against his neck seeming to know without being told where it hurt. "I'm surprised Winslow didn't suggest you all go to the hot springs, considering."

"He may have mentioned it. I didn't realize I had actually pulled something, until now." Nathaniel rotated the shoulder, carefully.

"Well. The water's nice and warm and the minerals in it are good for aches and pains, according to most."

"Do you ever go there?" he asked.

"Me? Bathe nude in a hot springs?" Her voice dripped with ridicule. "Oh yes. Because what the world needs is another middle-aged woman jumping into a puddle of hot water. *That's* what the world needs." She made fun of herself.

"You are still young, Rebecca. And very beautiful."

"I'm old as dirt, and that ship has sailed."

So, she felt that way, too, thanks to her spouse's passing. The widow feeling. The feeling that the best was past, and that she was somehow... used up, or had used up her time.

Still, she liked his compliment, and smiled at it, as she came around him. He realized that you had to watch her face, rather than just listen to her words, to see what she was truly feeling.

"No. I'm old as dirt," he chided. "You still have time."

"By my reckoning, there's five or six years between us, Nathaniel." She removed the cooled rag and warmed it again, re-applying it to his shoulder.

"So, there's only six years between 'young' and 'old as dirt?'" she teased. "What's middle age and elderly? Thirty seven and thirty eight?"

"They're fleeting years. Best make good use of them." He teased her back.

I teased you back. I actually did. Oh, lord. He really was changing, since he'd been here. He'd almost never teased a woman, before. Jess was too intense, and light-hearted banter was not one of their long suits. And just... that he could do this with anyone, amazed him.

"Ah. Well then. For middle age I'll dye my hair blonde and... Oh, wait." she fingered a light-colored tress. "Too late."

"Don't dye it. Or change anything about it. Please." He spoke the words before he could call them back, before he could disguise the look in his dark eyes, as he reached for the curl that lay over her shoulder. Her hair was pretty, and full, and had a natural wave. One she sometimes tried to tame, with hairpins and combs.

"It looks like the sun is caught in it. The morning sun. Bright, and full of life."

He'd thought about what it would look like, as they made love. He dared not say as much, but he had wondered it. He could picture her curls wrapped around his fingers, as she sat astride him. He itched for the sensation. Both on his palm, and... elsewhere.

"Thank you." She took the curl back from him, moving to lower the heat under the wax. "That's one of the things I miss down here, sometimes. The sunrise, and sunsets."

"Why don't you go up and see it? There's no rule against that, is there?" His mouth said the right things. But his mind was still elsewhere, a little.

"No, but we still have to be careful. Don't want the world at large finding out about the Park entrance. Some of the others come up in people's shops, or basements." She dipped the cloth again, and brought it back over. "Can't be mucking around there, just because you have a whim." She continued to smile at him, while she rubbed the washcloth in a circular motion, on his shoulder.

He's beautiful, she thought, admiring the copper tint of his skin and the thin pattern of hair on his arm.

"You should go to the Springs. It will help," she said.

"So should you."

"I'll go with Mary, next time she wants."

"Mary is thirty years older than you."

"And she's very nice. Who did you think I should go with? Winslow?" she scoffed.

Nathaniel did not like that suggestion at all. *Me. I think you should go with me. And let me see you, as you swim nude, in the water.*

"I'd rather you stick with Mary," he replied tellingly, as he set the cloth aside, buttoned up his shirt, and left the room. He'd promised Vincent to help him check the duty roster, before tomorrow. He had to go.

And he needed to, before he grabbed her and threatened to make love to her on one of the tables. *So much for take it slow*, he mused.

On the way back to his chambers, he began to realize just how few women of her age or circumstance lived below. There was Mary, obviously spinsterish and the quiet matriarch of the tunnels, and Sarah, similar to Mary in age and disposition. And then there were the much younger teenage girls and children. Olivia, and Catherine, both married, the Shahnna still working in the land Above. Lena was single, and in her twenties, but she had spent her life as a prostitute, and kept to herself, for the most part, as she raised her child.

For a community bustling with life, Nathaniel was starting to realize part of why Rebecca spent so many hours alone.

She should have suitors, in an environment where the men clearly outnumbered the women. But they had all known her in her marriage, and to them, she would always be "Daniel's widow." For that matter, even now, that's even what she was, to herself.

Perhaps it was time someone did something about that.

And perhaps he was someone who could do it.

Perhaps.



Chapter Twelve

Family Ties

--

A rectangular image with a soft, out-of-focus background of a sunset or sunrise over a field of tall grass. The sky is a mix of warm orange, yellow, and soft blue tones. The quote is centered in white text.

“Life is what happens to you while
you're busy making other plans.”

— Allen Saunders

“So, what do you think of it?” Vincent asked, helping his wife into the tailored brown blazer she’d wear to work that morning.

“I think it’s Rebecca’s business, and none of ours,” Catherine replied, turning. She planted a kiss on her husband’s blonde cheek. “You don’t approve?” she asked. She shot her cuffs.

“I don’t disapprove. I don’t know. He came here for something... entirely different, Catherine. It’s been only a month.”

“I seem to remember healing in these tunnels in only ten days,” she replied, checking her collar. “Wasn’t getting him to change his mind Father’s whole plan?”

“It was. But Rebecca... do you think she’s ready for such a step? And with someone like Nathaniel?”

“If ‘like Nathaniel’ you mean someone like you, I can only recommend the experience.” She patted his chest. The chest that had been her pillow, only an hour before.

“I mean that his grief was overwhelming him,” Vincent reminded her. “And for a very long time.”

“Maybe Rebecca’s was overwhelming her, too, in a way,” Catherine replied, stepping over to the dresser to put in earrings.

“Do you think it’s so?” he asked.

“Vincent, I don’t really know. I think only they know. I’m just glad they’ll have it easier than we did, considering. Rebecca has known you for years. In a way, she knows what she’s getting.”

He stepped toward her, and took her into his arms. “And did you know what you were getting?” he asked softly, a sweet night of loving, between them.

Her smile gentled. “How could I? How could I know that the most wonderful, most amazing man I’d ever meet in my life lived right beneath my apartment building?” she asked, loving him with her grey-green eyes. “They say life is what happens when you’re making other plans.”

“John Lennon.”

“Allen Saunders, actually, but we’ll give Lennon credit for popularizing it. Vincent... if Rebecca feels half for Nathaniel what I feel for you...” She disengaged them and picked up her brief case.

“Yes?”

"Then you might want to tell Father he's going to need to train someone else to run that Chandlery." She gave him a parting smile, and with a soft swish of her long beige skirt, she was gone.

--

He waited several days, before being alone with her, again. Several days for her to become accustomed to his presence at meals, as he aligned his schedule for waking and sleeping more closely with hers. Time to see him in the commons with the men, or dripping wet, hair slicked back, from the hot springs.

He had brought very few clothes, and did his own washing. Like other things, the simple chore of keeping himself clean and presentable began to feel like a good thing, a positive thing, and he took some pleasure from it. He began to eat with more relish, and complimented William on his skill. He swam in the pools beneath the falls for pleasure, and helped Cullen carve a fine box, for Winterfest.

He was clearly used to working with things like leather and wood, less familiar with things like books and music, though he enjoyed them.

He noted more about Rebecca's comings and goings, who she sat with, what she liked to eat, and how much. Noted with satisfaction that her eyes scanned the room until they found him, a time or two. *Good*. He wanted her to find him, in a room. That was good.

When he decided to pay another visit to her in her shop, he picked up the conversation as if it had never been left off. Which for him, it hadn't.

"You're alone in here, often," he told her as she cut cubes of wax into smaller pieces for votive molds.

"It suits me." She said it simply.

"Even I had my horses."

She scowled, as she worked. "Good for you. And the horses." She was dipping the next set of wicks into the wax. A batch of silvery grey down to dark blue ones were filling a box. The Winterfest candles, he knew. There were bits of seashell in the bottoms of them.

And something was bothering her. Her eyes looked tired. Her temper seemed thorny. Had she dreamed of Daniel, last night, as he had dreamed of Jess, more than a week ago? It would explain her mood.

"Rebecca." He said her name. Said it in a way that made her look up.

"Don't," she warned him as his hand came up to her cheek. "Don't be sweet to me. You're going to leave. Or you'll get sick again. Or have some accident and die, Nathaniel."

So. She'd dreamt of Daniel's death. He knew it, without asking.

"Aren't we all going to do that, one day, Rebecca?" He stepped close. His words said one thing, his body was saying the opposite. By loosening her fear of his death, he was inviting her to live, with him. He grasped her elbows, gently. Then he slowly lowered his head. His kiss, when it came, was thorough.

The kiss was everything she expected and nothing she ever dared dream about. *Strange.* His riven lip felt odd, against hers. His mouth far warmer than a man's. His teeth, well, where to begin to describe the kiss of a man who had fangs? She had no idea. So she didn't pretend to. She had not felt them, the first time. Then again, this kiss was much more intense than that one had been. After a few moments, the kiss broke simply so they could both draw breath.

"I'm not a substitute for Jessamyn." She said it to hurt him. Or at least to test him. She wasn't sure. And she said it so that he would free her. He didn't.

"And I am damn sure not Daniel." He kissed her again and she knew that was the truth. He was nothing like Daniel, either in temperament or in personality. *And that was the tip of the iceberg, so to speak.*

His mouth felt wonderful, on hers. Wonderful and warm and she realized she had daydreamed often of the other kiss he had given her.

This was leading to dangerous places. Places she wasn't sure she should go, with him. *He's so... virile, compared to--*

Kipper entered the room, barely aware of what he had just interrupted.

"There's a visitor in the main chamber, she says she has to see you."

Kipper nodded to Nathaniel as he drew apart from Rebecca. Kipper was panting, clearly having run the distance.

"Who needs to see me?" Rebecca asked, thinking the message was for her. Who would come down here asking to see Nathaniel?

"Not you, Rebecca. Him," Kipper answered, this time clearly indicating Nathaniel, with a pointing finger.

The two adults exchanged confused looks.

"She says it's important."

She? They both thought the word at the same time.

Rebecca came with them, as Kipper led the way, with an extremely puzzled Nathaniel in tow.

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"Nathaniel Longspear. He is here, then?" Sabrina Tallchief was asking Father. Vincent stood at his elbow, while Catherine stood behind their new guest.

"Yes, my dear, though... he did not tell us he was expecting company." Jacob motioned Sabrina to be seated.

"He's still alive? You're sure?" Sabrina was obviously concerned for that fact.

"Very." Jacob reassured her.

"Oh, thank God. I thought when he left, that..." She wasn't quite sure how to complete the sentence, considering.

"I understand your concern." Father held up a staying hand. "No, it seems that for the moment, at least, that decision has been forestalled. It is my hope that he will return home, when he feels able to do so."

She pulled the ends of a long scarf tighter. She was clearly anxious about something. "I'm... I'm sorry to impose, but I really must see him. I'm his sister-in-law. Or at least, I used to be. I suppose I still am."

Catherine stood behind Sabrina, nodding to Father. She told him what little she knew.

"Diana called me this morning, saying she had given Sabrina my phone number. It seemed the easiest way to get her into the tunnels."

"And Adam and Diana understand this is not a thing we normally do?" Father did not like that the tunnels were exposed to risk, even well-meaning risk. He didn't know this beautiful stranger, her Native American blood as obvious as her tailored suit.

"Our people have protected the Shah for generations. It is the sorrow of those who keep their secret that we have not done as well by them as we should. But we still consider Nathaniel and his father to be sacred, to our kind." Sabrina defended herself.

"It's all right, Miss Tallchief." Catherine soothed. "Father's just unsettled by all the... attention we've been getting, lately. "Can I offer you some tea?" She crossed to the pot, shooting Jacob a look.

"Yes. Forgive me, Miss Tallchief. Please," Jacob Wells amended. "It's likely just the doctor in me, being overly cautious. Last spring we had an epidemic, down here, and it's made me worry quite needlessly, I'm afraid, when it comes to meeting strangers."

Sabrina nodded, setting a briefcase down beside her, looking at the amazing chamber in which she sat. Her immaculately-tailored skirt and suit jacket looked far more suited to Catherine's world, than this one.

Kipper bounded in, then Rebecca entered the room, just ahead of Nathaniel. *This must be the teacher*, Rebecca realized. She couldn't hide her look of curiosity.

"Please, I need to speak with Nathaniel. It's very important," Sabrina was saying to Father.

"Then you have found him," came Nathaniel's voice, from the doorway. "Sabrina. You've come far." He came to greet her warmly, but quizzically. Clearly, Nathaniel's acceptance of Jessamyn had extended to her whole family. Rebecca watched the embrace through lowered lashes.

Nathaniel hugged the beautiful woman familiarly. "You are most welcome here. I will vouch for this lady's character and behavior, Shah Vincent," Nathaniel stated formally.

"No such assurances are necessary," Vincent assured him. He faced Sabrina. "If Diana trusted you to come to us, that is all the assurance needed." Vincent placed great store by Diana Bennett's intuition. Without it, they would have never saved Catherine, from the madman called Gabriel.

Rebecca continued to take in the visitor, surreptitiously. She was beautiful. *Beyond beautiful*, Rebecca thought. *Stunning*. If Jessamyn Longspear had looked anything like her sister Sabrina, she'd been a gorgeous woman. Sabrina had hair the color of India ink, and it was center-parted and allowed to drift long, down her back. Her lips were full, her nose, straight. Her skin was the color of warm copper. Rebecca thought she carried herself like a princess, but like one wearing an immaculate navy suit, and heels.

"May we speak... privately?" Sabrina said to Nathaniel. She was clearly anxious. Rebecca's heart sank.

There were very few reasons such a beautiful woman sought a man, cross country. *The most obvious reason was usually the correct one. Occam's razor*. Rebecca thought. *After Jessamyn died, did Sabrina try to ... comfort him? Did they grow closer?* Rebecca knew that in Native American lore, a man sometimes had more than one wife, and it wasn't uncommon that sisters came in, together. What was taboo in some

cultures was more accepted, in others. And Nathaniel had said his wife wanted to follow “old ways.” Rebecca was as curious as everyone else in the room.

“This way.” Nathaniel extended an arm, pointing the way to his guest chamber.

He took the lead and Sabrina followed, her briefcase slung over her shoulder, her strappy heels making a clicking sound on the uneven stone floor.

Vincent's eyes sought Catherine's. She merely shrugged. *I have no idea*, her expression said. Rebecca caught the look. She had nothing to say.

Everyone wandered back to their business, there being nothing more to see. Rebecca, worrying her lower lip – the one Nathaniel had kissed, so thoroughly- returned to the Chandlery.

What is this about? And will it... will it cost me Nathaniel? The man I all but told I didn't want? she asked herself.

Whatever it was Sabrina had come to say, it clearly took a while. Rebecca worried in her work shop, hating the new coral shade she had created. She bit her nails. The comfort of the bad habit felt good.

Fully aware that she was curious, Rebecca left the Chandlery and made her way back to her own rooms. *And if I just happen to walk by the guest chambers? So what? They're not that much out of my way...* Her feet took her down the hallway before her head could call her back from the action.

She'd not gone more than a few feet in her intended direction when the quiet of the tunnels was shattered. Once, back when she had watched TV, she had been on the nature channel when a mountain lion

had roared, as it sprang for and missed its prey. It was that kind of sound. It was also, obviously, Nathaniel.

If Sabrina had come to declare her love for Nathaniel, it had either been rejected soundly, or embraced with a certain... fervor. It galled Rebecca to realize she did not know which one was true, now.

She and Nathaniel had exchanged kisses, yet she had not known he was capable of making that sound. On reflex, she turned around and went back to the Chandlery, as quickly as she was able.

The clatter of heels in the hallway outside the Chandlery entrance told Rebecca that Sabrina was leaving, quickly. *Good*. Rebecca did not stop to examine why she thought this was a favorable thing. She had told Nathaniel that they were unlikely to the point of impossible, even as she acknowledged her feelings in the matter were not quite so cooperative.

Motion. Sounds of motion. People always went places, when something happened. Rebecca had learned long ago to relax and let the commotion come to her, if it was inclined to.

Apparently, it wasn't, this time. Her doorway remained empty.



Chapter Thirteen

Revelations



Nathaniel had invited Sabrina into his guest chamber, utterly unsure of what this was about. He respected Sabrina, always. But they had not been especially close. Which was to say that Jessamyn had not been especially close with Sabrina. The two women had chosen very different paths, in life.

"We failed you," Sabrina began, when she reached the stone room Nathaniel had led her to. "I'm so sorry, Nathaniel. It was so unfair. I never knew."

Nathaniel shook his head. "The Lakota people are a free one. They have always had a chief. I never felt ... displaced, Sister. It's an old argument. Jessamyn's argument. I never believed it." *But why was she here to discuss Jessamyn's pet peeve, that the people had never 'followed' me?* He craved no leadership role, not that way.

Sabrina's beautiful brown eyes grew huge. "Oh, Nathaniel. That makes it so much worse." Sabrina had heard of Jessamyn's "theory" that she had never been pregnant because the People did not give Nathaniel his

due. It was so unfair of her little sister, so desperate a thing to say, knowing what Sabrina knew now.

Tears. The sister-in-law that he always considered simply his sister was in tears. He had never seen her cry. Not for the poverty of her students or the hardness of her own life, or anything else, save the tears they had both shed when they'd buried Jess.

"Sabrina, what is it? Is it news of my father?"

"No. No, it isn't that. I know no more of him than I ever did. It's Jess, Nathaniel."

Nathaniel studied her closely. She had travelled across country to tell him something of Jessamyn? Dead Jessamyn? *What could it be?*

She sat in the room's only chair, perched on its edge. "I have fought with myself all night about whether or not I should even come here. But I contacted Adam and Diana, and I had to call. Once Catherine told me you were here, I just..." She looked down, fighting some internal struggle he could see, but not understand. "But if I say nothing I am no better than Jessie, and I... I know she loved you very much, Nathaniel, even if she wasn't perfect."

"I know that, too, 'Brina." He used the nickname Jess had always used for the beautiful woman. Though there had been some jealousy between the two women, Nathaniel had always liked Sabrina. She was strong, smart, and devoted to her people. Under completely different circumstances, she would have made a fine Shahnna, though not for him. It was Jessamyn and her wildness which had always captured his heart.

Sabrina set her mind to the task before her, and inhaled, deeply.

"Nathaniel. You know how Jess used to say maybe she couldn't get pregnant because the people weren't giving you your due..."

Nathaniel nodded. "It was one of several disagreements we simply learned to live with. It meant nothing to me. You know I have no desire for authority over the People. Jess was desperate to conceive. It made her... needy, in a way. And she did not wish to lay the blame for it with me, where it might well have belonged."

Sabrina shook her head. "That's a virtue, at least. Please, Nathaniel. You have to hold on to something. I would like it to be that she loved you. Really loved you. Deeply. Completely. And she never blamed you. Whatever mistakes she made were made out of desperation, not malice."

Of course. Jess was wild, at times, but she wasn't malicious. Everyone knew that. "Jess wasn't perfect. She was stubborn to a fault, and she was... erratic, sometimes. But also spontaneous, and surprising. I know that, Sabrina. I always did. Why are you here? Some gossip of some sort? You haven't been listening to idle tongues, I hope. The old women of the tribe... they carry tall tales worse than Zachariah, sometimes."

Sabrina swallowed, her beautiful throat working the spit down. She was having trouble knowing what to say. It worried Nathaniel. *Whatever this is about, clearly, it was bad.*

"Brina?" he questioned. Her deep brown eyes looked huge.

"Oh, Nathaniel." It was all she could say, for a minute. Whatever this was, it was going to be hard.

Why all this talk, this reassurance that Jess had loved me?

"She was never unfaithful to me, Sabrina, if that's what got said. I would have known, immediately. *Have you been listening to gossip?*" He asked again. Something was upsetting his sister-in-law. For the life of him, Nathaniel could only think of so many sources of this concern.

"No. It's not that. Not exactly, anyway." Sabrina told him. With nerveless fingers, she withdrew a file folder from her briefcase. It was bright blue, bore a medical logo, and marked with the word "Confidential" on the front.

"James BrightEagle gave me this." She named a well-respected member of the Police tribal council. "No one else in the family knows. I would like to keep it secret, if you will allow it. If you do not, well, I understand."

She set it on the small table within her reach. "It all... it happened before you were married. Well before. Before you were even a couple. If that helps at all. It's just... I'm just not sure if it does." She drew her hand back and kept them folded in her lap. Tightly. Like she wanted nothing to do with whatever she'd just offered to him.

"What does it say?" He avoided it like a snake on the table. Like if he reached for it, it would suddenly sprout rattler fangs, and sink itself into his arm.

She stared at the closed file, because she couldn't stare at him. "It's a medical file. The kind they give to everybody. They raided a quack doctor's office. One of the ones who used to come to the reservation, travelling. Dispensing antibiotics, and valium, and stuff like that. Turns out the only reason we ever even saw him was his license had been suspended, several other states. You know how it was."

Nathaniel nodded. Life on poverty's edge taught hard lessons in things like education, health care, convalescent facilities, and so forth. He knew the people in remote places like Broad Mountain never had the best. Of anything.

"Sounds like what we usually get," he allowed.

"Yeah. Yeah, it does."

The wild land he'd come from was a collection of hardscrabble mountains, some forest, old buildings, severely used and outdated textbooks, substandard materials, and government relief checks.

Often, doctors or professionals who had burned their bridges elsewhere, were the only ones who came by. They often dispensed medicines approaching expiration dates, or none at all, when bad went to worse. The latter necessitated a long trip into the nearest town. It was a fact of life for many who lived a poverty line existence.

"The doctors we'd get... never the same ones... always some with... issues," she said.

"I don't use a regular doctor, 'Brina. Whatever it was you all had, for medical care, I'm probably lucky that I had less," he replied, still not reaching for the file.

"James gave it to me because it had my name on it. But the information inside... it is Jessie's."

Nathaniel's eyes flickered to the typed name on the tab. The folder did indeed say "Sabrina Tallchief," on the label. Sensing that Nathaniel wanted little to do with it, Sabrina reached for it, picked it up, flipped it open and turned it toward him. A very grainy, very old picture of Jessamyn stared back at him, stapled to something that looked like a faded medical record.

Nathaniel took the folder, feeling more confused than ever. "Why is your name attached to Jess's picture?"

"Because... she used my ID. She needed to be eighteen. And I was. At the time."

He looked at the cover page of what was obviously a medical file. The height and weight readings were clearly Jessamyn's. Sabrina was taller.

And Jess had checked off that she had a shellfish allergy, something Sabrina didn't have.

Sabrina's voice held a tremor. "I-It's funny h-how you remember things from a long time ago, once things a-add up." She pursed her lips, and willed the stammer gone.

"I remember my tribal ID card missing out of my wallet, one summer, when Jess was about fifteen and I was eighteen. I didn't take it out, or anything, but one day, it was gone."

Nathaniel glanced up at her, noting that she'd gone pale, under her copper skin.

"I found it about a week later on my dresser, where I hadn't set it, and knew I had looked. Jessie had been acting strange for weeks on end, and we were always fighting..." She remembered the past. Then she inhaled, deeply.

"Then, things got back to normal, after a while. I put her moodiness down to her period, and let it pass."

Jess lied? To go to the doctor? Why?

Sabrina took a deep breath. "Lift the page, Nathaniel. It will say what they did to her."

He picked up the cover page and looked at the medical record. Then, he looked back at Sabrina. He couldn't believe the words that leaped off the page. "No. It didn't happen."

A brilliant tear fell from Sabrina's dark eye. "I'm so sorry. She had an abortion, Nathaniel. I don't know where she got the money, or who the boy was. It was before she ever knew you. Before she ever knew anything." Sabrina's dark eyes were stricken, as she shook her head, wiping away the tear. "I never knew. Our parents didn't, either. She

swiped my ID and passed herself off as an adult, and..." She shook her head.

"Fifteen? She did this when she was fifteen?" Nathaniel was incredulous. Jessamyn had been adventurous, and a poor student, in school. *But this?* He would never have guessed.

Nathaniel's mind picked back through pieces of long ago conversations, with Jessamyn. "She said to me once before we were married that she was sure she could get pregnant. But never said how she knew."

Nathaniel could barely take it in. Certain things were adding up, for him. In his mind's eye and on the yellowed page, he looked at the face of his dead wife, so young, so determined, and resourceful.

This was the sorrow she had carried from her youth. The "something" she had kept from him. From everyone. Even with the bond, he had not been able to discern this.

"Jess never told me she was a virgin, 'Brina." He was rocked by the news, but not shattered. He breathed in deeply, and sighed. "This is a thing... I know it happens. It's all right. I am... grieved that she ever found herself in such a situation, and that she felt this was her only choice. She was barely more than a child. But it does not make me love her less."

Quiet tears continued to fall down Sabrina's coppery cheeks. Sabrina had a gift for that. Nathaniel had never known how to grieve, silently.

"She could never bear children, after that, Nathaniel." Sabrina almost whispered it. "I'm so sorry. There was an infection. It's... not uncommon with this... with this kind of procedure. Especially when you don't have the right follow-up care."

Nathaniel pinned her with his gaze. Then felt his world fall apart, around him. Shattered. *There it was.* The thing Sabrina Tallchief had come all this way to tell him.

"Are you telling me... she knew she was... incapable of conceiving a child?"

"I don't know." Sabrina shook her head, miserable. "You know Jess. It's like with school. She just... didn't deal with what she couldn't face. Lived in denial with it, probably. But I spoke to a doctor before I came. She said considering the time elapsed between the surgery and when the infection was bad enough to show up, a lot of scarring was done to her, inside. Antibiotics cleared it up, but... there was damage done. Jess probably hoped that you two would have a child, anyway, some day. I *know* she hoped that. She told me that."

"But she knew she couldn't." He was insistent on this point. He flipped more pages back and forth, not sure what any of the medical jargon said. *Fibroids. Fallopian scarring.*

Sabrina simply nodded. "She knew she had an infection that made it... difficult, yes. Impossible? I don't know, Nathaniel. I just don't. I don't know what the doctor told her, the one that treated her."

He stepped back from the table. "Why did you even tell me this? Why come here?" He felt like he was speaking on a time delay, as he tried to process it all. His stomach muscles tightened, hard, to the point where he could barely breathe. The pain felt almost familiar. *An abortion. Scarring. Infertile. My God.* "Why... come here... when it's all too late?" His dark eyes looked away from the words on the page, and squarely at her.

"Because part of me knew you wanted children, and perhaps you thought it was you, not her. Because they say if the community fails the

Shah, the community will suffer, and whatever other sin Jessie did or didn't commit, she definitely blamed others for not giving you your due, and said that might be part of why she couldn't conceive. If I keep it as a secret, I'm honoring Jessie, but I'm not honoring you. I'm as guilty as she was."

She rubbed her broad, beautiful forehead with tired fingertips. "You know Jess. Prayer beads and crystals, and herbal this and Great Spirit that, and back to nature mumbo-jumbo. Tarot cards and prayers to the sun, and ... just anything she could grab, to help her get pregnant." The tears on Sabrina's face flowed freely.

"No." He was still trying to process, to mentally catch up with something Sabrina had had days to understand.

"Please, Nathaniel. I can't believe she was evil about this. Just... horribly desperate. I think she hoped she could conceive with you, that if there was any chance at all, you could give her that chance, to be a mother." Sabrina shrugged. "It just wasn't meant to be."

Yes. Nathaniel had been well aware that his wife had explored spirituality with something of a vengeance, and that to her, his existence was more mythical than actual, at times. She had traced Shah history down with grim fervor, once spending an entire autumn with Ramona Hunter and her clan, learning all she could from the continent's only known resident Shahranna - Mother of more than two Shah.

Jessamyn had come back insisting that their misfortune was because of how his "community" had been treating him. When Nathaniel pointed out that their "community" was as loose and thriving or struggling as it had ever been, she had become angry with him. It had been a night for shouting, and tears, and makeup sex. They'd had had several of those, over the years. More at the end, than the beginning.

He set the damning file down. "Sabrina. She couldn't have known. Couldn't have understood... could she?" He turned from her and gripped the dresser.

The bond. The bond should have saved him from this... But no. It was not a medical barometer, and cared little for reproductive abilities. It was an emotional conduit, more than anything else. It had kept them tied together, through everything. It told him when she was happy or sad. It did not tell him she was infertile.

He had embraced Jessamyn because he had loved her wild, creative spirit, loved watching her make art. Loved the ferocity with which she gave herself to him. *All for naught.* He picked through his memories of them, feeling them all become tainted. *She didn't know. She didn't understand. She didn't... accept it?* He tried to sort his way through the right words.

He had always known she was anxious about becoming pregnant. But never sensed a deception from her, as such. Perhaps because for her, there wasn't one. Denial was a hard thing to pierce, since it wasn't a knowing lie.

She must have really believed she could conceive, that there was a chance. He'd felt her despair, from time to time, and chalked it up to her period, or the fact that she had not become pregnant, so far. He'd been so swept up in the other aspects of their lives, he had failed to recognize how over-arching this had become for her, until it was too late.

He swept up the blanket-cape from the foot of the bed. He had slept with it. Planned to use it as his burial shroud. Suddenly, so much felt like a lie, and Nathaniel knew that that, too, was unfair. Jessamyn had truly loved him. Deeply. *I know that. I know she did.* The bond had told him so. His instincts as a man had told him so. *And yet...*

He was having trouble sorting out the deceptions from the truths, right now.

He turned his head to the side. "Perhaps she was just afraid." Mentally, he scrambled for purchase. "I could tell she was afraid of something, and as time went on, of course it was that she couldn't become pregnant. She wasn't hiding that, from me. She was truly sad over it."

He sorted his life, trying to track backward to exactly when he began to feel her sorrow and nervousness over her inability to conceive. They had been married a few years, at least. The first one she had spent on the pill, just to allow them time to get used to each other, before babies started arriving. They never did.

Had she honestly known? Or had she simply processed all those events like a child, and never faced them as an adult, fully?

He turned so that he was facing a rock wall. Somehow, it seemed appropriate, as a symbol. "I would have loved her, anyway. I told her I did," Nathaniel stated to the wall, Sabrina was at his back.

"I know, Nathaniel. She must have felt so guilty."

"Sometimes," Nathaniel remembered. "She offered me a divorce, once, though that was impossible for us, of course." He paused. "After that, being angry with Marcus Red Cloud, or your grandfather Edward, or someone else... seemed to help with whatever she was going through. Maybe she talked herself into believing what she was saying. I don't know."

His world refused to tip back on its right axis. *Abortion. Infection. Sterile.* All they had been through, and she had known. Or at least, she had suspected.

"I didn't want to tell you." Sabrina left the file on the table. "But then I realized, sadly, that if I didn't, no one else probably would, and you

might think you could never have children... I know you were hoping, too."

Nathaniel's eyes were still fixed on a distant point. "She never accused me. Said it was the people, or the wrong time, or the wrong herbs in the tea, or bad luck, and maybe her, but never, *never once*, me." He dropped his head. "Now we know why." Tears wouldn't come. It was like burying her, again. They hadn't come then, either, not really. Not until much later, when the sobs had wracked his long frame so hard, he swore he'd broken something, internally.

Sabrina's voice was full of pain. "I'm so sorry, Nathaniel. Jess was right about one thing. We really didn't care for you the way we were supposed to. If we did, you would have at least known, before you married her."

Maybe that's why she never told me. Maybe she was afraid I'd refuse. No. That's not fair. We were in love with each other. We were. I couldn't wait to make her mine.

"I wonder if... any decision I'd have ever made... would have been any different?" Nathaniel felt rage and sorrow build up inside him.

"I don't know. I don't have any answers for those questions, Nathaniel. Maybe you will... someday."

His dark eyes grew cold. "Go home, Sabrina. Take that with you." He indicated the medical record with a jerk of his head. "And this." He handed her the patterned cape.

"When you visit her grave, tell her I forgive her. Even if I'm not sure that I do."

Sabrina did sob, then, aloud, and retrieved the file and the cape he'd intended to use as a burial shroud, leaving the chamber to its occupant,

as she clattered down the tunnels in her heels. She heard his roar of sorrow fill his room, behind her.

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Chapter Fourteen

Simple and White



"He says he will speak to no one but you." Vincent stood immovably in Rebecca's workshop, two hours later. "He is near the Whispering Gallery. I do not like it, but I do not think he is of a mind to harm himself, Rebecca. Will you go?"

"Of course." Rebecca replied, removing her apron. "I will do all I can."

As always, if you waited long enough, someone would tell you what was going on. Rebecca simply wished it had been Nathaniel doing the talking, rather than Vincent.

She wound her way through her tunnel home, and found him sitting, just sitting, on one of the bridges in the Whispering Gallery. Distant sounds were faint. The air swirled around them. The cavern dropped away, beneath their feet. She wondered what caused his sorrow. She could feel it coming off him, in waves.

"Jess might have lied to me." He remained sitting on the bridge.

Rebecca approached him carefully. "Imagine that. A woman lied to a man. Well. You almost never hear about *that* kind of thing happening." She settled down beside him, gripping the rail above her head.

Beside her, his face was stone. Rebecca swore he didn't blink. He also didn't look at her. She waited several moments for him to say something more. He didn't. The only thing that built between them was tension.

"Did you come down here to jump? Because if you're going to jump, I'd like to know."

He barely looked like he was breathing, he was so still. *Come on, Nathaniel. Talk to me. You always talk to me. Always.*

"William's making bread pudding for dessert this evening, and if you're late to dinner, you don't get much. Mouse eats it all." She was babbling some, to mask her nervousness.

Nathaniel didn't flinch, to acknowledge her sarcasm. "No. I just need... room, right now. My chamber is too small. The tunnels are too small. But if that's what you're worried about, you can leave."

"Ouch," she said, chastened. "I'm sorry. I didn't... I didn't mean anything by it. I wasn't trying to make light of what you're going through, Nathaniel. But I don't know what that is, and I really don't like you sitting here. It makes me nervous, even if you aren't planning to ... to do what you were planning to do when you first came."

She put her hand on his arm. Her eyes were full of comfort. He wanted to drown in them, and he didn't trust that feeling.

"What could happen in so short a visit?" she asked.

What indeed? Nathaniel inhaled deeply, then let the air go. "She was probably barren. From a long-ago abortion done in the office of a quack, when she was probably all of fifteen years old. None of which I ever knew a damn thing about."

Rebecca didn't have to ask who 'she' was. The candlemaker let several beats go by, before she could decide what to say.

"Women can be very good at keeping secrets, when they are trying to protect themselves," she said simply.

It was an odd, if obvious thing to say. "Would you ever lie that way?" he asked.

"I'm not a child, Nathaniel. She was. When it happened."

"Not afterward. Not for years." His sorrow was bone deep.

"Maybe she didn't lie," Rebecca deflected. "Maybe she just found the truth too hard to accept. It's tough to make such a... a huge mistake, when you're fifteen. You just have no way to... to cope with it, then. And the results can... well. They can change your life a bit, can't they?"

Here was Rebecca, defending his dead wife to him. Or at least, explaining her to him.

"I feel like... so much of my life with her must have been... a lie."

I bet you do. I'm sorry, Nathaniel. Marriage isn't... it's not what you think it is, sometimes.

"We...ell. I'm sure Daniel didn't tell me everything, either," Rebecca commiserated. "Par for the course, probably."

"He loved you." Nathaniel stated it as if he knew it had to be the truth, even though he'd never met Daniel Sharper a day in his life.

"And Jessamyn loved you," Rebecca returned. "You know that, Nathaniel. You do."

"So... did you? Lie to him about anything important?"

She shook her head, and looked out over the Abyss. "I didn't have to. My life was very boring, and very broken. There just wasn't anything in it worth lying about," she replied, remembering the time.

"I was a mess. Broke down on the interstate, a buck fifty in my pocket. I remember it was a buck fifty, because it used to be three dollars, and I put half of it in the gas tank, trying to get to the next town to set up, and if I'd made it, I was going to buy myself a coke." She pursed her lower lip, with the memory.

He studied her in profile, as she looked out into the empty space in front of her. "What lie was I going to tell him?" she asked. "That I was the queen of England?" She turned to him, questioning. He saw the past and the future in her eyes, and heard it, in her mouth. Her beautiful, beautiful mouth, with the bottom lip she loved to worry between her teeth, when she was concentrating.

"There's nothing about me worth lying about, Nathaniel."

He grabbed her. He didn't quite mean to do that as roughly as he did. But he did grab her, and pulled her mouth to his with a ferocity he wasn't aware he felt.

She returned it. Whatever was inside him, whatever he was feeling, he wasn't feeling it alone. She accepted the rage that was in him. Gave him a place to let it go. He felt her tears against his cheek.

"Rebecca."

"This isn't love, Nathaniel. It's just grief. Rage. And sorrow." her blue-grey eyes looked at him, full of understanding.

"Fine." He answered her without elaboration, then rose from the bridge and reached for her hand, helping her to stand, as well. By the time they'd walked to the end of the bridge and were back on solid ground, he had her in his arms, and there was no mistaking his intentions. There was his room or her room. His was closer. And it wasn't full of Daniel Sharper. He kissed her again, more gently this time, but just as urgently, and again, he felt her reaction. Her blood sang. She didn't quite want it to.

This was not control. This wasn't something she *could* control. The comfort of her art was that while there was always a little mystery in the creative process, there was also a good bit of control. She had been able to make beautiful things, utilitarian things, things that remained beneath her hands until she let them go.

This was not going to be one of those things. And she knew it as he scooped her up off her feet and carried her to his chamber. Knew it as he stepped inside the room, and dropped the tapestry over the doorway.

"This isn't because of how you feel about me. This is because you are hurting." She held his face.

He didn't deny it. He didn't agree with it, either. "Say 'no.' and I'll stop," he said, as he unlaced the front of her tunnel gown.

"That's not fair." She shook her head as he stopped undressing her long enough to yank his own shirt up over his head and throw it across the room.

"Don't I know it." He picked up her hand and put it against the middle of his chest, just for the pleasure of having her touch him, intimately. "It also isn't 'no.'"

She felt his heartbeat. It was pounding. She thought she could even hear it, it was so loud, in the small space. She closed her eyes against the sound. The welcome, welcome sound.

"Please don't push me away, Rebecca. Please." He set his own hand in the middle of her still-covered chest. "I can feel your heartbeat."

He tried to calm his breathing, letting the sound and feel of her triphammer heartbeat soothe him. *Strong. She was so strong.* So tough, this little thing that worked with wax as if it were precious art, knowing it would be devoured by flame, no matter how hard she labored.

"I can feel yours, too." She looked at her nerve-bitten fingers, as they laid against his bare, coppery chest. She should not have bit her nails. They looked ugly.

"You want me. You've been honest with me since the minute you met me. Say it. Say you want me. You want this. Say it, 'Becca." He used the short form of her name as if only he knew it.

There was no sense denying what they both knew to be true. He needed no bond to gauge her reaction to him.

"I want you," she said. She soothed him, running her hands over his shoulders, down his arms across his chest. She bent to kiss his male nipple, softly. He groaned.

"But gentle, and sweet." She licked the skin, then gave identical attention to the other side. "It will hurt, if you're angry."

She stopped to fasten her mouth to his skin, suckling the male nipple there, gently. Fascinated, he watched the pink of her tongue lave his skin. Jessamyn had often been an impatient lover. She had not been

one for long bouts of foreplay. Nathaniel had a feeling his world was about to shift. Again.

He had to pull her head up. He had to. His erection was driving him crazy. If this had been Jessamyn, he would have been inside her, by now. Uselessly.

"For as long as we are lovers, I will never hurt you," he vowed, nudging her mouth open with a kiss that was far tamer than some of the blistering ones he had treated her to, earlier.

Layers. They all dressed in layers, down here, but her not as much, thanks to the heat of her workshop. Still, he had to lift both her dress and a long undershirt over her head, to get to her underthings. White. Simple. Cotton.

Except, of course, for the fact she wore a corset, rather than a bra.

What's this? he thought, running his hands up and down across the staying fabric. He looked. It was simple, rather than vulgar, or intentionally sexy. He found it was a thing that made it – and her, all the more attractive.

"It's... I stand up all day," she said, by way of explanation. It took his passion addled brain a moment to understand her.

You stand up all day. Oh...

She wore corset style underthings because she spent most of the day standing on the hard, uneven ground, and she found it supported her back.

But now, she found she liked it for the look in his eyes, as they wandered over the stays and simple crisscrosses of white ribbon. He looked wonderingly. And hungrily. The last part worried her, at least a little.

The front was a dozen and a half hook and eye clasps. It fascinated him how her skin came increasingly into his view, as he undid them. The corset also minimized her bust, which was saying something, considering that she was naturally bountiful, there.

Her skin was cream. Her breasts high, and tipped with coral.

"Dear God, you are lovely." He breathed in her scent. "But you hide it."

"We're all hiding something, down here." She tilted her head to the side. "It's why we're here in the first place, Nathaniel."

He put his hands to her breasts, and lifted, kneading the flesh, there, tempting her to take his mouth, nuzzling, nipping, and provoking her to kiss him more deeply. If she wanted gentle, he would give it to her. He had all the time in the world, right now.

Her own hands went to his chest, her cool, strong fingers trailing through the thin, dark hair that covered his body. Like the hair on his head, there was silver, there, and deep shades of ebony. "Is there.... am I allowed to touch you? Is there a place I can't touch?" She realized she was out of her depth, here. Far out.

He shook his head. "Touch me anywhere. Touch me everywhere, 'Becca. Because that's where I plan on touching you."

Her eyes went soft as she locked her hands around the back of his neck a moment, while he lifted her breasts for a kiss. She sighed and leaned into him, standing on her toes to make herself taller for him. He lifted her and set her against him, against his sex. It felt wonderful. She felt firm and strong and ready for him. He brushed the rest of her clothes aside, as she kissed him.

She nipped and nuzzled his neck, and he gave a low growl of approval. *Yes. Want me, lady. Want me.*

Her fingers tugged inexpertly at the button fly of his pants. He smiled his pleasure as he brushed her fingers aside, freed his sex, and kicked the pants down his legs. He stepped out of his soft boots, stepping free of any encumbrance.

Her eyes followed the fabric down, and he gave her a moment to become accustomed to the sight of his nude body. Unless she had managed to catch a glimpse of Vincent, unlikely considering his modesty, he was the first Shah she had ever seen, nude.

Now, it was her turn to stare.

He was broad-framed and tall, like Vincent. But he had a horseman's muscles; heavier thighs, a tight stomach, and evenly muscled arms, both bicep and tricep, from pulling reins against a much heavier animal than himself. The body hair that covered him was much thinner than Vincent's own, owing to his Native American ancestry. It lay mostly on a diagonal, and bisected his strong torso.

"You are gorgeous." She whispered it, and he swept her back into his embrace.

Gentle. He had promised her gentle. And lord, he was trying. But the smell of her was intoxicating, and the way she moaned when he suckled her breasts was too tempting. The coral-colored nipples darkened, thanks to his attentions, and if he were in his right mind, he would tell her that this was the sea shell shade she needed for her latest project. But he couldn't stop to tell her that. Not while he was feasting. He laid her on his bed, and settled his weight between her legs.

His erection throbbed at him, impatiently. Settling his fingers to her sex, he transferred her wetness to his member, making his impatience grow. He was glad she was ready for him, her body moist, and smooth. She

lifted against him, instinctively, when he thrust against her, right before he entered her.

She froze. Went rigid. A small cry of pain escaped her lips.

He smelled her want, her desire, and something else. *Blood? Just a little?* His passion-fogged brain scrambled. *Dear God. What just happened?* She was not menstruating. He knew that smell. Intimately, thanks to his marriage.

"Don't stop. Please. Don't stop, yet," she told him, her body still strung tight, with discomfort.

Nathaniel panted, hard. *I hurt you.* He tried to regain control. Pull out of her. Every instinct he had, plus her, urged him not to do that.

He moaned, dropping his head, trying to process what was happening. She fit him like a glove. Whatever Daniel Sharper had ever been, "endowed" was not on the list.

"Slow," she told him, trying to adjust herself to his size. "I just need you to go slow, Nathaniel."

Slow? If he moved like a glacier, he would still hurt her. She was more than just unused to sex. She was all but untried.

"Don't," she begged him, knowing what he was thinking, that he was considering ending this, now. "Please?" There was a world of entreaty in her word. *Don't leave my body. Don't pull away.*

"All right," he soothed her, stroking her forehead with his work roughened hands. He eased back, then forward, not so far. Backed out again, farther. More. He remained inside, all but not moving against her, giving her time to adjust to him. His return was glacially slow.

There. Better. Better for her. He felt her begin to relax.

When he began to move, he was careful not to drive forward too far, nor too hard. Surprise flashed in her eyes as she felt her body responding to him.

"Becca?" he breathed, feeling her hips start to move against him. *No*. He had to tell her to stop. She would tempt him too much, tempt him to push forward. It had been a very long time for him, too.

"Please," she begged raggedly, taking his buttocks in her hands, squeezing with her fingers. She wanted him back inside her, back where he was, before. She was drawing her legs up, around his back, then set them back down, so she could push against him, using her feet. He couldn't help but follow her.

Dear God, the rhythm of her. She began to match him, rise for thrust, and she did so, perfectly. He found he couldn't begin to hold on to his control, and barely got her over the edge before he climaxed, himself.

He quieted, confusion swirling through him, contentment swirling through her. His orgasm had been poignantly sweet, a first for him, of that variety. He had a feeling it was not far from a first time for her, either.

"Becca? What was that?" He asked, when full consciousness returned.

"I think they call it having sex. Or making love, if you prefer."

"I know what it's called." His dark gaze pinned hers. "You're damn near a virgin. How?"

Damn. She had not meant her level of inexperience to show, that badly.

"You're just big," she tried.

"I'm really not." He knew it was the truth. Average, fine, and perhaps just a little larger than that. "Big" was stretching it. And he knew an inexperienced woman, when he bedded one. She had fit him, literally, like a glove. He had torn her, when he'd entered her. Placing his hand

between them, he showed her the drops of blood he'd been smelling since he'd pierced her.

"How, Rebecca? Tell me how."

She did not like the look he was giving her, as if it was she who had been lying, now. Well, she hadn't lied. She'd been married to Daniel Sharper for several years, and they had been wonderful.

"There is nothing I can say without ... betraying things I swore not to." She reached for the corset, and put it on, barely hooked. She shouldered her way into the blouse and dress. She took his wash cloth, and he watched her adjust her skirts and settle it between her legs.

She cleaned herself, then set the rag aside. "I need to go."

He didn't try to stop her. Didn't even know if he had the right to. *What in the hell?*

So fast he barely believed she had been there, she was gone.

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Chapter Fifteen

Morning After



Nathaniel sat up most of the night. Some of the hours were spent pondering the riddle that had been Jessamyn. But most of it was spent pondering the riddle that was Rebecca.

So Rebecca and Daniel hadn't had children. Well. Considering they hadn't had sex either, that was hardly a surprise. Nathaniel rubbed his short beard with a thoughtful hand.

What about Daniel Sharper had been so appealing that an amazingly artistic, creative, and loving woman like Rebecca had been content to marry him?

Nathaniel wanted to ask Vincent, but he already felt that he had endangered his friendship with the big man. Rebecca was under Vincent's protection, and unwittingly, Nathaniel knew he had violated

her safety, and in so doing, violated Vincent's trust. Had she been more experienced, it would hardly have mattered. As is was...

Oh well, there was no help for it. Honor demanded he confess his impulsive lack of judgment, and submit himself to Vincent's choice. He may well need to find a way to leave the tunnels, by nightfall. He'd have to figure out what that meant for him and Rebecca, if it was the case.

Nathaniel bathed and dressed, hating washing the smell of Rebecca off his skin. He did not think he had hurt her badly. The bleeding had been minor, barely more than spotting. But he hadn't liked that it had happened at all.

But her orgasm on him had been a scent he would have liked to keep, a while. He remembered the surprised look on her face, when it had happened. Again, he had the odd thought. *What the hell?*

As soon as the hour was decent, he entered Vincent's chambers. Nathaniel bowed his head, gravely.

"I have transgressed in your territory, Shah. I am here to submit myself to your judgment."

"Really?" Vincent was curious. And suddenly wished he had Catherine here, that she was not Above, getting ready for a day of work. Between the two of them, she was the lawyer. Whatever this was about, and he had a feeling it involved Rebecca, Catherine would be able to sort it out better than he would, more than likely.

Nathaniel looked uncomfortable. "I have... taken Rebecca to my chambers, and to my heart." Nathaniel told him. "I should have spoken with you first, to ask your counsel, if not seek your permission. I do not know how these things are done, in your Shahdom."

To your heart and to your... chambers? That must have been quite the talk, on the bridge. Vincent tugged on his cape against the December chill of the tunnels.

"You did not need my permission. Rebecca is an adult, and knows her own mind." He knew he would be glad to end this uncomfortable conversation.

"Be that as it may, I did not realize that she was... near an innocent. She said nothing, I swear," Nathaniel countered.

"An innocent?" Vincent was confused, by the description. "You are mistaken. Rebecca's marriage lasted many years."

So whatever it was, Vincent didn't know about it, either.

"I am certain. There were... signs," Nathaniel said, looking even more uncomfortable, as he did so.

"Are you certain you were not... rough?" Vincent's radar came up.

Nathaniel shook his head, embarrassed for both of them. "I swear to you I was not, Shah."

Vincent *really* wished Catherine was here. He came around the table where a cup of morning tea now sat, cooling.

"I have no judgment to make in these matters," Vincent stated.

"Rebecca's personal life is her province, as yours is."

Nathaniel gave a slow exhale of relief, grateful that he would be allowed to stay. "Thank you."

"You are welcome, Nathaniel."

The other man had one more thing to ask. "When you say Rebecca knows her own mind, conducts her own affairs... that too, is done of her own free will? She needs no... permission, to come and go?"

"No," Vincent said carefully, not quite sure what Nathaniel was driving at.

"You would not be averse to my ... asking her to come with me when I leave, then?" He decided to push his luck, just a little.

"As your... companion?" Vincent asked, even though he knew it was none of his business. He was uncomfortable with using words like "lover," or "mistress." Especially when they applied to Rebecca.

"As my mate. My Shahnna. My wife... If she will consent to be so."

Vincent's blonde eyebrow rose. "You would bond with Rebecca?"

"If I can, yes. It is not a thing I have considered, before now."

"This is a far cry from where you were from, when you came to us, Nathaniel." *What a difference a few weeks make.*

"Adam Blackmane's Shahnna told everyone that this was a good place, and indeed, that there was perhaps even some magic in it. I can only concur," Nathaniel replied. He held Vincent's steady blue gaze. "Much has changed in the intervening time, Shah. But I wear out my welcome here, I am afraid."

"You do no such thing, and are more than welcome, here," Vincent assured him. Rebecca was like a sister to him. If she was happy, so was he.

The dark head inclined, in obvious gratitude. "You are a gracious prince. Someday, perhaps we should arrange to meet with the others. Perhaps in Canada, at the Hunter logging camp, or at Adam Blackmane's.

Corinne Hunter could take us in the back of the semi-truck she drives. We would have a wonderful time there, some summer. Then all come here, perhaps, for your Winterfest." Nathaniel told him, daring a small, yet grateful smile.

"It is a thing to think on," Vincent replied. "Good morning, Nathaniel." Vincent inclined his head, in a gesture of dismissal. *Lord, the day has not begun and I'm wishing it over. Come home soon, Catherine. It seems I have much to tell you.*

"Good morning, Shah Vincent." Nathaniel replied, then exited the chambers.

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Rebecca was, uncharacteristically, not in her Chandlery, that morning, and of course Vincent felt fairly sure he knew why.

He checked in on Rebecca, at breakfast, while trying to not look like he was checking on Rebecca, at breakfast.

She was quiet, and sipping tea. She had no bruises, nor any marks that he could see, though of course her modest tunnel clothing could account for much of that. Still...

She had showered, shampooed her hair, and wore it in a loose pony tail, today. In that, she looked not unlike her suitor, in style.

Vincent glanced her way as he scooped scrambled eggs onto a plate. She was picking at her food, but biting her thumb nail, a sure sign she was pensive, or thinking. *Winterfest is drawing closer. There is much to be done. Perhaps that is the source of her disquiet*, Vincent thought, not truly believing it for a minute.

She made polite conversation with Samantha, and then with Pascal. *Nothing out of the ordinary, there.*

Vincent also noticed that Nathaniel was not in attendance. Vincent wasn't sure if Rebecca was relieved at that, or disappointed by it. She finished her tea, gathered her shawl around her, and went off in the general direction of the Chandlery. Nothing about her indicated she

was hurt, though the very break in her routine made it obvious that she was ... struggling, with something.

Vincent collected some toast, then went to visit Father, in his chambers. Slow to get the day moving, Father usually preferred tea and toast in his rooms, rather than a larger meal, in the commons.

"Vincent? To what do I owe this pleasure?" Father asked, seeing his son standing in the doorway. *His son. His married son.* Jacob couldn't help but marvel over the words. Vincent was a good man with a beautiful wife. One day, Jacob hoped to bounce little Vincents, on his knee. He knew that was an amazing departure from his previous position.

"Catherine has an early day in court," Vincent deflected, setting the food on the table.

"Ah. Well, no matter the reason, I'm always glad to see you," Jacob replied, sensing tension in his son's frame. *Something on your mind, son?* Jacob wondered.

Vincent pulled back a chair and sat across from the only person he'd ever considered his parent. Jacob tugged the toast over and began putting jam on the bread.

Eyes opened to Vincent's unusual situation, Jacob, like others, had swung the pendulum from being very fearful that Vincent and Catherine would have children with his unique differences, to praying that they would, some day. *No luck from that quarter, yet, Jacob knew. Perhaps next year. Or the year after. Unless that's what you're here to discuss?*

"There is indeed a matter I would discuss with you. Though I surely need no excuse to come and bid you good morning." Vincent spoke affably, as he watched Jacob prepare his meal.

"Mmm. Spoken like a married man whose wife is...." Jacob checked his pocket watch..."about to get her day going in earnest, at the moment. What can I do for you? Is it about Catherine?" He hoped for good news.

Vincent shook his head. "No, Catherine is well, and working to help Luz Corrales with her efforts to open a Community Center. Actually, I was thinking about... Rebecca."

Jacob's hopes were temporarily put aside. "Rebecca?" The older man's eyebrow raised. "What is it? Is she ill?"

"No. But our new friend Nathaniel may be nursing an affection for her. A very... deep one." He toyed with an empty cup and saucer, on the table.

The eyebrow lifted a bit higher. "Is that so?" Father's rubbed his chin, and his expression grew thoughtful.

Vincent, always sensitive, knew the words meant more than they conveyed. "Is there a reason this should be discouraged, Father?" Vincent tried to pin Father down.

"Other than the circumstances under which Nathaniel came to us, you mean?" Jacob replied, seeming a bit cagey.

"It is my understanding that Nathaniel has had a change of heart. Several of them, perhaps." Vincent inclined his head. "It seems your recommendation that he stay with us, and work through his grief, was apt."

Jacob rose from the table and crossed to where his teapot sat. He poured steaming tea into a pair of cups. "When you first met with him, I could all but see him wearing his sorrow. And yes, I too have noticed the change in him, over the last few weeks. His appetite has improved. He's working hard, but not showing signs of any real fatigue. I asked, and he told me he's sleeping better... but...Rebecca? Hm. That may

prove an... an interesting choice." Father stirred sugar into his drink, thoughtfully.

"How so? I may as well tell you they have already crossed some certain... bridges, between them," Vincent stated, as tactfully as he could.

Jacob's eyes flew to Vincent, and the spoon stopped its motion.

"Rebecca seemed unhurt?"

So there is something, Vincent thought.

"She seemed fine, yes. Why would you be concerned?"

Jacob grew uncomfortable. "Well, if you are any indication, your race of people are not...small, and, um, well, Rebecca may not be... may not be...."

"May not be... what? Father?" Vincent prompted, sensing that whatever this was about, he might need to know of it.

Father looked down into the dark brew. "Well. She may not have a great deal of practical experience in these matters, Vincent." Jacob raised a gloved hand. "I can say no more without breaking a great deal of confidentiality, not the least of which is with Rebecca."

Vincent's brow furrowed, as he puzzled through Jacob's words. But he knew that when Father said a thing was confidential, that he kept it as just that. The privacy afforded between the doctor and his patients was a thing Jacob took quite seriously.

"So, ah... how is the work detail near the hub going? Anything giving you trouble?" Father asked, setting the spoon aside as he changed the subject. Clearly, the topic was closed.

"There is nothing more you can tell me, then?" Vincent pressed.

Father sipped his tea, then set the cup down, carefully. "I don't feel I can, no. Rebecca, if she wishes, well. Then that is another matter."

Vincent stayed to chat a few minutes longer, then left for time with his students. *Whatever this is about, Nathaniel and Rebecca will have to face it together, without my intervention*, he thought.

Nathaniel knew that Rebecca was not in her shop, nor her chambers. Nor the commons. Though she'd sat for a short while in the dining area, she was now no longer there, either.

He realized if she wanted to hide from him, she could. This was her home, and they were not bonded to each other. Perhaps she needed the time alone to adjust to what had happened. He would speak with her again, eventually. *She can't stay gone, forever*, he thought. Still, he didn't like the idea of her either trying to avoid him or feeling like she needed to.

He decided there were two likely places to wait for her; her Chandlery and her Chambers. He simply chose the more comfortable one. As he settled in to wait, the picture of Daniel Sharper stared back at him.

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"You made him very happy, you know."



Father's voice came from just over Rebecca's shoulder. Age and experience gave him the wisdom to know where she'd likely retreated to. The sound of the tumbling water gave Rebecca no clue of Father's approach, even as he used his walking stick. It was only when he spoke that she knew he was there, and for that fact, standing almost directly behind her.

"Who?" she asked, barely bothering to turn. She'd always come here, to the falls, when her emotions were roiled. It was a thing only those who knew her best knew about her.

Father settled himself on a boulder beside her, his bad knee not loving the uneven quality of the ground.

"People seem to come here when they need to think," he replied, not answering, immediately. "Somehow, the flow of the water always seems to help that," the old physician said, as he eyed the cataract, before them.

Rebecca made no immediate reply.

"I thought that perhaps you came here to speak with Daniel," Father elaborated. "You made him happy. He was very lonely, before you, Rebecca. Lonely in a way he couldn't even express, not to anyone."

She inclined her head.

"No happier than he made me, Father."

"Who else did you think I might be referring to, if you don't mind my asking, my dear?"

Sharp old fox.

"I thought... Nathaniel. Maybe." She did not face him, and had the modesty to blush, a little.

"Are you... all right, my daughter?" He asked it as a concerned parent would. And yes, like many of the tunnel dwellers, Jacob Wells had been more of a father to her than her own flesh and blood, one way or another.

"Yes, I'm... fine." She stumbled a little, at the word. "Just a little discomfort. It... it wasn't his fault." She was embarrassed at having to discuss it, but not horribly so.

Jacob let that pass, content that she was uninjured. "Rebecca. He seems a good man. Though a deeply troubled one, when he arrived. Are you... certain this is a path you want to pursue?"

She turned away from the water. "I'm not so steady about anything, right now." Her pretty eyes met his, with more than a little bit of insecurity, in them. "I think I've held on to Daniel a long time. Longer than..." She didn't know how to finish the sentence. She looked back at the water.

Longer than?... Jacob knew to simply wait.

Rebecca stared out at the tumbling water. It was icy cold, in this room that was open to the grey December sky. "I came here to ask him if he was disappointed in me. But wherever he is, I don't think I feel him here, anymore." A tear slid down her pale cheek, and she leaned toward Jacob a bit. He put a comforting arm around her shoulder.

"I think we all carry him, here." Father indicated his chest with his free hand. "And considering that's where we carry you, and each other, it's as good a place as any. And ... I see no reason why he would ever be disappointed in you."

"I wonder sometimes... if the cave-in hadn't happened..." She tilted her head to the side, clearly wanting Jacob's opinion on that.

Jacob's mouth thinned in a grim line. Of all the people who lived both Above and Below, at the time, Daniel Sharper's condition had worried him the most.

"His... prognosis was not very good, Rebecca, to be honest. No one can say for sure how long he had, how long any of us have. But... Well. You know the way it was. Better than anyone."

She nodded at that, but made no comment about it. *Yes. I knew how it was. Better than anybody.*

Jacob's voice remained steady. "The strongest medicines we could give him and that stubborn streak of his kept him going. But his condition was deteriorating, bit by bit. I worried that we were getting close to dialysis, with him. With no equipment for it. It was a thing I'd talked about, with Peter. We both decided to wait and see."

Rebecca nodded. "He was such a good man, Father. He was... just right for me. Back then."

"He *was* good," Jacob agreed. "I don't think I've met a ... kinder man, anywhere."

Rebecca's head dropped a fraction, and she looked down at her white hands. Hands that were silky smooth, thanks to her work. Hands that had helped her husband, as he'd... struggled, sometimes.

"I think I might be falling in love with Nathaniel." She said it softly. So softly the words were almost swallowed up, by the sound of the falling water. But Jacob heard her, just as he was supposed to.

Father took in her lowered head. *She's afraid. Of course she is. More of fate than of Nathaniel.*

"Does he know?" Father asked.

She lifted her shoulders in a shrug, and Father took his hand away. "I don't know. I haven't told him. Don't they read minds, or something?"

Father chuckled. "The abilities Vincent has rather amaze me, too. But I don't think it's *quite* that ... impressive."

Rebecca rubbed her smooth hands together, and tried to pick her way through her concerns. "Maybe it's not real, what I'm feeling. It could be just because we've shared our grief with each other."

Are you asking if I believe that? Or checking to see if you do? Jacob thought. *Either way...* Father kept his tone gentle. "Does it seem that way, to you?"

She shook her blonde head. "No. I shared my grief with others. Olivia, and Cullen and Pascal. Probably him, most of all. And Vincent. I love all of them. But I never thought I might be falling *in* love with any of them." She tugged her simple shawl closer around her shoulders. "But I hate to leave here. I don't even have an apprentice, yet. I couldn't just... leave you all. You're my family. And it's not like he's even asked me."

My. She was thinking fast. And far ahead. And building roadblocks, as she went. Not a good sign, Father thought.

"You will always be my daughter, Rebecca Sharper." Jacob told her.

"But if there's one thing I learned with Vincent, it's that knowing when and how to let go of your children is at least as important as knowing how and when to hold them close." He turned his body slightly toward hers and opened his arms for a deep hug, which she immediately accepted. They didn't draw apart, and his next words were spoken over her golden curls.

"I believe Vincent would tell you that you must follow your heart, in this. That if fate has given you this... incredible opportunity... that you

must not shrink from it. If you truly think you cannot leave here, then... don't. But if you think you possibly should..." He let the sentence trail.

She drew back and looked into his compassionate blue eyes. "You're amazing, you know that?" she asked, giving him a squeeze. *You're saying just what I need to hear. How do you know to do that? How do you know, with all of us? Even Vincent.* "Really amazing," she repeated.

"So I keep telling Mary." He accepted her offer to help him rise. Then, they walked back toward the Chandlery, together.

Rebecca still frowned. "I can't say anything about how Daniel... well, you know. To Nathaniel. It would be against everything Daniel wanted." Rebecca shook her head, sending her sunny curls to bouncing.

"That will be something you have to work out, then. You know I will say nothing." Jacob inclined his head.

"I've been... avoiding Nathaniel, this morning. It's why I'm not in the Chandlery. I just needed some time to ... collect my thoughts," she said, as they wandered back.

"Are they collected, now?" Jacob asked her.

Were they? It doesn't feel like it. Permission to go isn't the same as a decision to leave. "More scattered than ever, I'm afraid. But I love you. And that helps, Father. It always has."

"You have to promise that no matter what happens, you'll come back to help with the candles at Winterfest, if you can." He stopped in front of the Chandlery doorway and kissed her forehead.

He thinks I'm going to go. I'm not sure I am. I wonder which one of us will turn out to be right? she mused.

"No matter what I decide, wild horses couldn't keep me from that. And I think Nathaniel actually has some of those."

Father couldn't help but smile. "I imagine he does."

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Chapter Sixteen
A Gentle Accord



She didn't like the sight of him sitting in her quarters as if he had a right to be there. A pair of her best white pillars gleamed on the table, giving him light. She didn't like that, either. He was being invasive, if not downright rude. And just a bit presumptive. But she was fair enough to say that she had given him little other choice, if he wanted to speak with her.

She'd not stayed in the Chandlery, after Father had left her there. She had spent the day hiding between the Mirror Pool, the Hub, and the dye shop in Chinatown where she got her colors. She'd even traversed some of the lesser-used passages, on the way back.

It looked like being able to avoid Nathaniel was about to come to an abrupt end. Or at least, it was if she wanted to sleep in her own chamber, tonight.

There he stood, right in what amounted to her living room. *Time to pay the piper*, she thought.

He did as he usually did, beginning conversations where he had left them off.

"You are angry with me?" he asked, as she entered. "Because I hurt you?" He was ready for recriminations.

"No. I am angry with myself." She took off her fingerless gloves and placed them in a drawer. "You're very handsome. I wanted something, and I took it. It has been a long time since I did that."

"Obviously," he stated, referring to her tender state. She had no reply for that.

"I would have liked to take you to the Springs," he told her. "Bathe the soreness from your skin." He paused, letting her take in that image.

"You are precious to me, Rebecca. Regardless of how it came to be so, I regret that I injured you, in my ... enthusiasm."

She shook her head. "It was a thing bound to happen, and it's past. I'm not sore, now." She settled her wrap on the back of a chair.

"You lost a day's work, avoiding me."

So I did. You've lost more than that.

"Will you return to North Dakota, soon?" she asked.

Is she asking because she hopes I will leave, or because she hopes I'll stay? he wondered.

"Perhaps," he answered. "That decision has not yet been made." Her body language told him he was free to go.

She turned her back to him. Poured water into a basin. Unbuttoned her cuffs and washed her hands. His feet did not move from the spot they

occupied on her floor. She could strip and wash her whole body, if she wanted to. He was not going to leave.

"Knowing what I know, I cannot believe it was because you did not care for the touch of a man." He stated it out loud. He knew what he knew, and he wasn't going to pretend otherwise. His implication was clear. Whatever fault there was, he assumed it was with Daniel.

His orientation, perhaps? Is that what you're thinking? Rebecca wondered.

"He wasn't homosexual, if that's what you're asking." She dried her hands. Vigorously.

"I do not believe that any man married to you could be contrary," Nathaniel stated, using the word some of his people used for gay. "The world sometimes treats those who are different unkindly. He would not be the first to seek a way to hide it."

She slapped the hand towel down. "Daniel was a good man. I will not hear a word spoken against him, Nathaniel. Not a *word*. He *wasn't* gay, not that that's anybody's business. We *both* agreed to our marriage."

She was defensive. It came off her in waves. And that, too, was her right. But it was confusing to Nathaniel, for whom life and relationships had always been much more... primal.

"You would want a life with a man who would not touch you?" He was beyond confused.

"Sex isn't everything."

He sighed. "You would be justifiably dismayed at how long it took me to learn that particular lesson, but yes, I agree with your wisdom, on that score. That doesn't mean it's nothing, Rebecca."

"I take it you and Jessamyn had sex from every possible position," she goaded. There was no way he was stepping into the trap of dissecting her marriage for him. Still, she knew the remark was a crude one, and her cheeks flamed scarlet.

Nathaniel knew that the comment was meant to push him away, to create distance, between them. It wasn't going to work. Especially not now. Not now that he'd... tasted her.

"You would be amazed at how much those memories are tainted, knowing what I now know." He closed the door on that particular line of conversation. Firmly.

She made no reply to him. She simply heated a kettle and poured tea into a cup for one. Not offering him any, she let the silence speak for her, as she sat down at the small table. *I don't know what to do. I think I want you to go. I really do.* She might as well have been shouting it.

But Rebecca didn't shout. Near as Nathaniel could recall, she never had.

He sighed. "My life before has nothing to do with...'Becca. I'm not trying to pry." He struggled to reassure her of it. "I just wish... I could have made it so much *better* for you, if I had known. Now all you know is that I hurt you, and you have spent the day avoiding me, avoiding my touch."

The pretty eyes rose to meet his dark ones. She couldn't deny his claim. She *had* been avoiding him.

His voice dropped low, and he reached over to caress a gleaming tress of her hair. "I am a better lover than the one who laid with you in haste. I only hope you will one day give me a chance to prove it." He moved his hand away, and simply held her gaze.

So, he wasn't going to press her about Daniel. He was just asking her forgiveness for hurting her, an unavoidable thing, no matter what.

Thank you. Thank you for this. Her cheeks cooled. "You fixing to be patient with me, again?" She referred to their earlier conversation, about how long he would wait for her.

Yes. Oh, yes. "If I need to be," he replied.

Her gaze grew storm-tossed. She wanted him to know that nothing was his fault. There was no way he could have known. "I ... I wanted to say something, to let you know," she confessed. "I knew I should have, I just... I couldn't, really, not without getting into it, betraying a promise I made."

A promise she had made to a dead man. Her sense of honor in this regard clearly ran deep.

"And for the record, you are kind of ... um, big," she tacked on, blushing, again.

She stood from the table as he crossed to her, and she let him enfold her lightly, in his arms. Arms that were growing more muscular by the day. He kissed the crown of her head, feeling the tension in her.

"If I promise not to ask about Daniel, will you give me a second chance, to show you I can be more... considerate?" He asked it softly, terrified he had ruined his chances with her.

Relief flooded her face, and then every other part of her. He felt her relax, within the circle of his arms.

"In every fantasy I've had today, those are exactly the words you said to me." She closed her eyes against the emotions flooding through her.

Nathaniel felt triumphant. He had given up very little to nothing, and regained her trust. He was exultant, and feeling very, very protective of her. "Not tonight. It is still too soon, after the first time, and you must heal." He gave her a soft kiss.

"Nathaniel?" she asked, breathlessly.

"Yes, 'Becca?"

"Could I... would you let me make love to you, too? Be patient while I learned how? Learned about you?"

His knees nearly buckled. "I am positive that would bring me no end of pleasure, my angel. And in a fantasy I dared have, today, that is exactly what *you* said."

Now. He wished he could make love with her, now. He knew they couldn't. He disentangled them gently, then raised her hand to plant a kiss at its back. A courting gesture. One he'd never given to another woman, but it seemed right, with her.

"Sleep. Sleep well. Tomorrow morning, we will have breakfast together. If that is not asking too much."

Breakfast. I think we can manage that. "Oh, Nathaniel, I'd like that." She smiled. "I'd like that so much."



Chapter Seventeen

A Deeper Kind of Love

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Over the next couple of days, Nathaniel stayed near Rebecca, and remained attentive to her. She adjusted her morning schedule to allow for time to have breakfast with him, and sometimes asked for him when she wanted something carried to the Chandlery. Others in the

tunnel community picked up on that fact, and allowed the unusual pair their space.

He still wanted to take her to the Hot Springs so he could soak with her, tease her, and make sure under no circumstances did he cause her pain, if they decided to make love there. But it was a public area, and blocking its access for the purpose of one couple's privacy was universally frowned upon. When he told her of his intentions one afternoon after work was done, she simply smiled.

"Come with me." She took his hand, winding their way downward, through a long passageway. When they passed the chamber of the winds, he knew he was very far away from the hub, indeed.

"There's a place the falls empty into," she told him, walking down a path that nearly spiraled.

The passageway narrowed, and he heard the sound of rushing water. She had to turn sideways to fit through, and for him the squeeze was tighter, but possible. *What is this?* She entered into a place he'd never seen before, and lit a pair of torches on the wall, there.

They were below the falls, in a small anteroom. The water had to flow somewhere, and this was one of the places that held some of its bounty. A small pond of sorts rippled out, in front of him, before it gently spilled over into another, larger one. It looked like a large fountain, for lack of a better description, and the water made a happy sound.

Some of the ambient light filtered down here, but torchlight helped push back the remaining gloom. There was even sand around the bottom of the bigger pool, swept there by the tons of pounding water, above, against the rocks. It wasn't white sand, but it was soft. A silvery grey. He ran his hands over it.

"This feels soft. Like something you'd find on a beach," he said.

"I found this place the first year I lived here," she said. "I'm going to use some of the sand for the Winterfest candles. At least a little of it." She began scooping some into a pail she had brought for this purpose.

"I thought those were done," he stated, stooping down to help her.

"They're dipped. But I don't think they're quite finished," Rebecca smiled. "What says 'ocean' more than shells and sand?" she asked rhetorically, clearly very pleased with her own sense of inspiration.

It was warmer in here. Nathaniel did not know why that would be. The water from the Great Falls was cool. After a moment, he shrugged out of his fringed jacket.

"The same thermal vent that warms the water in the bathing pools comes through here, though not as close. Still. It's warmer than the falls," she answered his unasked question, as she took off her shoes to soak her feet in the water.

It was a shame it wasn't deep. Nathaniel realized he could see the bottom all around the pool and even into the center. *No more than knee deep, at the lowest*, he guessed. He rinsed his hands clean of the sand. The water felt remarkable. It felt soft, as if it contained at least some minerals in the hot springs. He joined her at the water's edge, removing his soft boots and putting his feet in, next to hers.

The dark hair on the top of his feet floated, then settled, in the non-existent current.

She took off her shawl, and unfolded it from the triangle shape it had sported into a square. He realized it was fairly large. Still, he wished he had brought a blanket, as she trickled some more sand into her pail.

"Rebecca?" he asked, watching her put more sand into the bucket until it was full.

"Mm?" It was a soft question. And she was avoiding looking at him, again.

"Would you... like to touch me, now?" He asked it gently. Hopefully.

Her hand stilled, in its chore. "I know it's ridiculous that a woman my age has so little experience with this." She blushed, as she said it.

Nathaniel realized he had a lump in his throat, at her embarrassment. "You cannot think that means I find you less dear. If anything, more so," he replied, setting the pail away from her, then helping her draw the fabric of her shawl wide. He could see her nervousness. She was still blushing, and she still would not meet his eyes.

"Shhhhhhhh." He tended her, opening the front of his shirt so he could bring her hand to his chest. "The fault before was mine, not yours. I didn't know. You were too... arousing, before. Just the sight of you," he flattered.

Her eyes blinked up at him. "Really?" she breathed.

"I swear it." He pressed her other hand to his chest in the gesture she had used before. She could feel his heart pounding, beneath both her palms.

He half-closed his eyes, and she moved her hands along his skin, tracing him with her paraffin softened fingertips. Through lowered lids, he never took his gaze from her raptly attentive face. She was fascinated.

Yes, that's it. Learn me. Learn me, Rebecca. For I certainly intend to learn you.

Though her nails were always a mess, Nathaniel realized her fingertips were amazingly sensitive. Like any artist, she worked by sight and touch, all day. He remembered her deftness at pulling and bending the wax, for Mary's candle. He realized in that instant how tactile she was,

that while others might learn by sight, or by words, his Rebecca learned by touch. Her fingertips skimmed his solar plexus.

Yes. Do it. Touch your fill.

She traced the outline of his male nipple with the tip of her index finger. He drew in breath, and tightened the muscles of his chest. He loved the exploration, in her touch. So did she.

He's... sensitive, here. Sensitive like I am, she realized watching the deep apricot pap lift, and pucker. She stored the information away, like someone who had located treasure.

He groaned, as she brushed her fingertips across his nipples, again.

That's it. Learn me. Learn, and know the power you have. She was patient and generous. He knew she was going to be an amazing lover.

He shrugged out of his shirt, and used it to increase the size of their “blanket” on the sand. Drawing her down, he leaned back and braced on his elbows, letting her continue where she had left off.

Rebecca let her fingers explore: his shoulders, his collar bone, the shape of the underside of his pectoral muscles, the outline of his nipples, and all through the dark silk of his fine, masculine body hair. Her fingertips glided along the muscles in his arm, from shoulder to elbow, then back up again. She was tracing him, lightly, with her fingertips, her eyes taking in the information her fingers were sending her. He stayed still, and watched her, as she watched him.

He took in the wonder on her face. She had never touched a Shah before, of course. Nathaniel realized she had also touched very few men. Her husband, perhaps, least of all.

He said nothing of it; had promised he wouldn't. In a way, it didn't matter. She was here with him, now, and she was stroking three fingertips down the skin of his forearm, from his wrist to his elbow,

turning his arm over with her other hand so she could explore the delicate, almost hairless underside of his arm. He shivered, when she reached the sensitive crease of his elbow. She wondered at that, then dropped to place a kiss where her fingertips had just been.

When her tongue came out to touch the sensitive skin there, he shuddered. She was going to kill him before she even took off a stitch.

"Can two play?" he asked, gently pushing the loose sleeve of her blouse up her arm until the crease of her elbow showed. He dropped his head, bestowing the same kiss he was receiving. When she felt the soft rasp of his tongue, she moaned, and embraced his head, holding him to her.

Tingling. He felt it on her skin. Felt it on his. He brushed his mouth up her arm to barely caress the curve of her breast, through the cloth of her blouse. It swelled at his proximity, expectant.

He did not disappoint it. Unbuttoning her soft chemise, he pulled the fabric from one shoulder, unhooking the long corset enough to free her bosom.

Lord, her breasts are so lovely. This time, he paid court to both of them, until he felt her squirm beneath his hands. Her skin began to blush pink. She panted. When he rasped the part of his tongue across her nipple that was both rough and smooth, scent rose, from between her legs.

Aaaahhhh. She was growing impatient. Good. He planned on making her wait a while longer, just to be sure.

Removing his jeans, he took down her skirt and underthings. They were wet, already. She was wet. She unhooked her corset completely and set it aside, drawing his hand back to the fullness of her breasts. He kept it there, as she stroked his belly. The sensation was exquisite.

He began to kiss his way down her body to her stomach, showing her an abdomen could be kissed, as well as petted. Hers was rounded and

feminine, and her waist beautifully curved. The shape of her hips was an invitation to dine. She whimpered as he teased, trying to reach his sex so she could beg him to enter her.

He shook his head, positioning himself between her legs, his deep brown eyes molten. "Not yet, lover," he told her, needing the peace of being away from her questing fingertips. He was already erect. It felt good to lay belly down, in the fabric-covered sand. He placed a blistering kiss into her navel, and nudged her legs apart.

Spasm. He felt it the second he touched his mouth to her sex. Her back bowed and her hips came up. Her breathing went deep, and she pushed her pelvis down, on the exhale. *She was made for loving, made for this*, he realized.

Do the others know how passionate you are? he wondered, then dismissed the thought.

Her hands were full of fabric and sand, and his tongue teased a pattern, along her nether flesh. He kissed her deeply there, tasting no blood, or lingering wound. Only arousal, slick and sure. He could take her now, and there would be no pain. Or he could....

With excruciating slowness, he brought his tongue up her cleft, waiting to feel the place that shuddered her most. *Ah. There.*

She moaned, as feeling ripped through her. Her head thrashed. One hand threaded into his hair, begging. He fought not to smile, as he felt her so clearly, under his lips. He felt the orgasm she was on the brink of, just on the tip of his tongue. *It's all right, Rebecca. This is what you were made for. What you were made for, with me.*

He brought up his hand to cup her sex warmly, to increase her pleasure. He flicked his tongue softly over the straining knot of nerve-jangled flesh. Once. Twice. Thrice.

She cried out, and filled his palm, and he held his mouth against her, feeling the trembling of her climax. *Lord, you are beautiful. And mine. You are mine.* He felt the bond try to wind its way to her, and batted it down. *Not yet. Too soon. Oh, Lord. Too sweet. This was going to be too sweet.*

Lifting his head, he kept his palm against her, watching her flushed face, and half-closed eyes. There was tension, between her brows.

"Again?" he asked her, and she barely nodded. He pushed the heel of his palm against her sex. Another climax rode her, and she slammed her heel into the soft sand. It was like pleasuring a goddess, it was so easy, and so complete.

Shaking away the afterglow, she looked at him, her fingers reaching. "This isn't teaching me about you," she whispered it.

Oh, but wasn't it? Had he ever been this kind of lover, before?

"I wouldn't be so sure of that. And it's teaching me about you," was all he replied.

"Can I touch you the way you just touched me?" she asked.

He closed his eyes, hard and tight, against that vision. "Yes." He said it hoarsely. "Only if you truly wish to. But not this time. Please, Angel. There's only so much a man can take."

The look of disappointment on her face almost made him chuckle. Then he realized that to her, this was no laughing matter.

"Please?" she said it seductively, tracing his mouth with her tongue. She lapped at him, aware she was taking in her own taste.

His reaction was immediate, and obvious. "Oh, 'Becca," he moaned, laying down at her urging. "You'll make it be over too fast."

There was devilry in her eyes. "We'll just have to start again, then, won't we?" she asked, all innocence and guile. Her hand snaked down over his abdomen, resting just beneath his navel. She bent to kiss him as he had done her. Slowly, tasting the salt on his skin, the scent of him, she realized she had been aware of his smell almost from the moment he'd set foot in her work chamber, this morning. It was subtle, but distinct. Musk. Her lover smelled like sex, in her presence. She followed her nose to its greatest source. *Aahhh*.

Rebecca was inexperienced by the literal definition of that word, but not through fear or incuriosity. Just circumstance. Each touch of him brought her the knowledge she sought. He moaned, as she kissed her way across his taut abdomen, and bucked his hips when she threatened to go lower.

"Becca." It was a strangled sound, and she smiled at it. His sex jumped, when she cradled it, and the warm, smooth skin filled her palm.

"You don't have to," he rasped.

She looked up at him, and the smile grew. There was knowledge in her eyes, even though it was new. "Oh. I really think I do," she replied, dipping her head to resume her exploration of him.

When she brushed the head of him, or ran her tongue along the underside vein. His taut abdomen hardened to rock-like proportions, and his hips bucked, subtly, as she tried to take him in. Her fingertips learned how to tease and cajole, then please, and satisfy.

"Stop. You have to stop," he pleaded, reaching for her shoulders.

"Rebecca." His voice was low, and urgent. "You're going to make me..."

"Do what you made me do?" She gently pushed his hands away, and would not move up.

"Please." he begged, her slave, at that moment. "You don't know what you're asking. A lot of women don't like the taste." He tried to warn her. She lifted her head, and her eyes were full of both innocence and her newfound experience. Nathaniel had no idea how both could be there at the same time, but they were.

"Oh, Nathaniel. I am so not like a lot of women." She kept her palm planted on his belly, enjoying the waves of desire, of desperation even, she felt coming off him. He wanted her. Badly. He needed to climax, just as badly. She felt control of it in her hands, under her tongue. As he had felt. Power. She was drunk with it, this unique feeling of pleasing a man. This man.

Her hands were making art, as they always did.

She teased until he could literally stand it no more, then drove down on him hard. He growled an orgasm into her as he desperately tried not to pump with his hips, then realized that battle was utterly lost. She took in his seed, keeping her tongue against the vein that it poured through. His mind was star shot. For a moment, he wasn't certain he was even conscious.

When he finished, she simply swallowed, and covering his sex with her hand, lovingly.

"It was like that for me, too," she said, coming up to lie beside him.

His eyes opened slowly, to see her lying next to him, looking soft as a dream. *Never*. Never had that been done for him. Not like that.

He took his clawed fingertip, and touched her swollen lower lip, in wonder. Touched what he'd left there, what he knew was part her and part him. Without even knowing what he did, he traced his finger in a line between her breasts, marking her center. Marking her, with what she had brought forth. He watched the line form, wet, and scented. His

brow furrowed in a kind of concentration. She was watching, but he was totally unaware of it. He leaned forward on one elbow to kiss the line. It, like everything else that had just happened, seemed totally right.

You're marking me, Rebecca realized. Like we just made something together, and you're signing your name to it.

Soft kisses. Sighs. He turned her on her stomach and kissed the gorgeous line of her back, setting her soft hair to the side, as he planted gentle kisses of adoration on the back of her neck. He raked his claws ever so lightly down her back, and down, then back up the backs of her thighs. He felt her shiver as he traced the same area with his mouth.

Woman. Skin white as snow. Hair like sunrise. Her eyes were closed now, but he had seen them in their passion. *You're mine.*

He turned her back over, not wanting to take her from behind. He'd just wanted to touch her, everywhere.

"Tell me. You have to tell me if it hurts." He was aroused again, and afraid of what that might mean for her.

She shook her head. "No."

"Damn it, Rebecca. Give me that much," he ordered.

"I plan on giving you so much more than that," she simply answered, pulling him down to her.

This time he was slow, no matter how much she urged. To keep her from pulling him into her, he found he had to anchor her hands over her head, taking her wrists beneath his palm. The motion brought her breasts up for another kiss. He moaned.

He paused at her entrance. She was so wet, and so fine, here. Still so new to it, yet clearly learning. The soft curls of hair that covered her sex

were a darker shade of blonde than the hair on her head, with touches of milk brown. He set himself at her opening, then barely thrust, but not until she was whimpering for him, and he was sure.

She was quivering inside, making demands before he was even fully sheathed. *Mercy*. He felt her along every inch of his sex. Along every inch of his body.

Just like last time, when he began to push, so did she. They were in concert. The barely tried muscles of her flesh were learning his.

"Nathaniel," she whispered, as he closed his eyes against the soft ecstasy of her. "Let my hands go. Let me touch you. Lover." She tugged at the hands he forgot he still held, so dazzled was he by the sensation of being inside her. She set her palms at his back, and squeezed him, inside. firmly. He groaned, in answer.

The novice in her realized what could be done, here. He responded with a hard thrust, deeper than he'd meant to.

"Rebecca." It was a warning and a love word. He could feel only her pleasure. Her nails softly raked his skin, in encouragement.

"Yes. Like that. I won't break, Nathaniel." She purred to him, loving the feel of his skin against hers.

I might, he thought.

He had to have her mouth. He had to. Buried inside her, he brought her chin up, and covered her soft, kiss-stung lips with his. Beautiful.

Forbidden. The taste of him was still in her mouth, as was the taste of her, still on his. He worried her lips until he felt her insistence, against his sex. Though his position was dominant, it was her making love to him, at the moment. He felt her move. Squeeze. She began to pant, and strain, as she bore down. He felt her reach, and he knew what for.

"Don't stop. Get it. I'm right here." He knew what she was about to achieve for before she did. He moved back only slightly, to help her. To give her more to work against, as she rocked her hips forward. Her arms held the small of his back tightly to her. She had no particular rhythm past a few strokes. The burst of wetness, when it came, surprised only her. He'd been feeling it build against him since the kiss.

She strained up against his weight, curling her nails into his the small of his back. She mewled, into his skin.

Sweet. Dear God, she was sweet.

She cried out into his neck, and then nuzzled it, appreciatively. Absent friction, he had not orgasmed with her. Had not wanted to. Wanted her to understand how much of him could be for her pleasure, hers alone, if that was what she needed.

She whimpered softly against his neck, and continued to nuzzle him, there. Feminine sounds. Loving ones. Apology and thanks and pleasure and fatigue.

It's all right. We have all the time in the world.

He was strong. So strong, and he held her, impaled, on the sandy ground. She was dazed from her climax, but as all women were, was quick to recover. She now worried about him, fretting that she had gone too fast, and it would now be, somehow, not as good for him. He made slow, almost leisurely motions inside her. She wasn't aware he was holding back until she felt the tension in his buttocks, under her hands.

"Becca?" He all but breathed her name

"Can you squeeze me? Inside... Like you just did?... When I come?" he was asking, not ordering. Not sure of her capabilities, or of her limits. Just knowing the feel of her was... exquisite.

He felt her nod against his cheek. He was going to die. "Tell me when," she whispered, kneading his buttocks.

"I don't... think I'll have to." He shook his head, feeling the amazing slip and slide of her. *Ah. There. Muscles. Delicate ones, yet strong.* She was working against him, again.

Feeling as though she had reached inside him and pulled, he cried out again, as he felt his orgasm jet deep inside her. She squeezed him as well as she could, then released into his orgasm. He felt the world slipping away from him, again. *Not sex. Making love.* There was a difference, and it was a huge one. The universe was starshot, again.

Starshot. Making love. His mind repeated the phrase, as he fell through a previously unknown cosmos.

She was tired, and needed to sleep. He'd have taken her back to his chambers, but he knew if he did, he'd be too tempted by her to let her rest. With a kiss and a set of his forehead against hers, he dropped her at her chamber entrance.

He went to his room, marveling at the day, marveling at the changes in himself.

Alone, and not next to her, he could make the obvious comparisons. Not of the two women in his life, but in him, and how he was different with one, over the other.

Jessamyn had been a frequent, if strangely selfish lover, he realized, though for them, that was normal. She wanted his orgasm, but inside her womb, more than any other way. Oral sex had been infrequent, and used to arouse. Exclusively, by the time they had been married more than a handful of years. She liked variety of location, and position. He

could never say it had been boring. But he now realized that to a certain extent, she needed that, to feel in control of their relationship.

He had often shrugged at her dislike of foreplay, and of her indifference to afterplay. She would never have touched and traced his body as Rebecca had done. Never have pushed him onto his back for his pleasure, and not hers. The sight of Rebecca's neck as she swallowed him was going to haunt his dreams, as was the sight of her kissing the bend of his arm.

He was in love with her, and he knew it. Deeply. More than he'd thought possible. He had suspected it, for a while. Now, he was sure. The reaching of the bond was more confirmation.

He sighed, as he struggled with all that meant, for both of them. He would have to leave, here, eventually. He would have to court her some more, get her used to the idea of going with him. This place was her only home, and she held a vital, almost indispensable role, here. She would not leave this place lightly. *And if she doesn't fall in love with me, she might not leave it, at all.*

Could he stay here? Live below the ground? Already, not seeing the sunlight anywhere but the falls was chafing him. And his few forays out into the New York night had been furtive, at best. He found that he longed for home, and for the mountainous, wide open spaces.

And then there was Vincent. He was a good man, and a generous Shah. But two adult males of their type rarely occupied the same territory, for long. Nathaniel was not accustomed to asking permission, or taking orders, or having to report something he did or did not do, to another. It was simply not his way.

He also realized he had a responsibility to his people, back home. He had let that slide, for far too long. He needed to repair any damage his

griefstruck state had caused. Try to help his community to a better life, the way Vincent had done, and continued to do.

He realized that though his marriage to Jessamyn had been long, and he had been devoted to it, that life with Rebecca was going to be quite different. Her heart was far gentler, her dealings more honest. Though there was some secret about her marriage she still carried, she was a steadfast woman, a glorious lover, and would make an amazing Shahnna. He felt content, just to be near her. It was not a thing he'd had, before. Whatever else Jessamyn had been, "content" was nowhere on her list. It wasn't a thing she'd ever radiated.

The opposite was true, with Rebecca.

He looked in the chamber mirror and saw the changes in him, already. His arms were feeling stronger, not just from the work, but from his general well-being. He was eating, again, the knot in his stomach having disappeared. The tight feeling that had been in his chest so long he didn't remember not feeling it, was gone, at last. He could breathe, and deeply, and it didn't hurt. His stomach no longer tightened when thought of food. He had an appetite, again, and felt thirst, felt whole. He slept mostly through the night, and awoke full of energy. All things he had lacked, for so long, as part of the wasting.

He wanted to go outside, and run, again, race the sun cross country, either on foot or the back of a half-wild horse. He wanted more. And he was beginning to feel like he just might be able to have it.

Rebecca. He was beginning to feel reborn, with her. He knew that as his strength returned, that he could be a wonderful lover to her. Tender, and fierce, and all the other things he knew she wanted to explore, that way. He could be a husband, again. Feel the strength and pull of the bond again, if she would allow it.

Rebecca. I'm in love with you. Will you help me to this? Help me to be a ... true Shah, again? Bring me out of the shadow I've lived in, for so long? Will you?

He knew he had no answer for the question. Not yet.

He cleaned up in the basin next to his bed, longing to see her, again, already.



Chapter Eighteen

Matthew

--

"The bond. Can you... read my mind with it? I've seen Vincent with Catherine..." Rebecca asked Nathaniel, after dinner, the next day.

You're beautiful and I'm in love with you, he thought. *And you're asking about me, and about the bond. That is a good sign.*

"No. It's empathy, not ... not telepathy," he said, hunting for the right words. "I can tell how you're feeling, especially if the feeling is a strong one. Over time it becomes more refined, and from what I understand some women are more receptive than others, just naturally, but is it invasive?" He sipped from a chipped China cup. "I don't think Catherine would describe it as such," he concluded.

He watched her digest the information, a range of emotions playing across her face.

"I would not be able to discern whatever it is you are protecting, regarding Daniel, for instance. Rebecca." He reached across the table and held her hand in his. She relaxed, visibly.

"Everyone has things they wish protected. It is not necessary you tell me the details of your marriage. As long as they pose no threat to us, I see no need to pry. No need for you to break faith with Daniel."

She kissed his long fingers, blessing him for understanding. She had plans to make. She wanted them to be lovers, a while, so he could be sure. She already was.

--

Another day passed. And then, the tunnel world had a very unexpected guest.

"You have to leave. With me. Now." It was Corinne Hunter's voice, and she was anxious. Corinne had a redhead's temper. And was justifiably famous for it. But anxious? Not unless Seth was injured, or one of her children were.

She was standing in the dock entrance like she owned the place, truck keys in her hand. Like she expected Nathaniel to step right in to her semi, the one North Edge Logging used to haul lumber. Vincent stood behind her, one arm around his wife. Catherine had guided Corinne down from where her truck now sat, in the warehouse district.

Nathaniel barely had time to respond to her. "Corinne? What has happened? Is it Seth? One of the others?"

"We need your blood. Somebody's hurt, and you're the match."

Nathaniel's straight brows furrowed, his confusion obvious. "I am a match for none of your children, Corinne, though I am a donor, if that's what you need." He began rolling up his sleeve. If she wanted blood, she could take his with her. Jacob would know what to do.

"My children are fine." Corinne Hunter tugged at him. "Nathaniel. I'm so sorry. It's your father. It's Matthew. Please. We have to go." The look in her caramel eyes told Nathaniel all it needed to.

"Matthew? It's been... years..." He was rocked. Clearly.

"And he's still alive. But he might not be, for long. Nathaniel, there's no *time*. Not even to pack. Seconds might count."

I have to leave. But... I was supposed to meet Rebecca. She won't know. Would barely understand. He wasn't sure he could get a message to her, from where Corinne was taking him. Not one that would get here in less than a week or two, considering.

Still, he knew he had to leave. And since Corinne never exaggerated, he knew he had to leave right now.

"Rebecca." Nathaniel said the name to Vincent.

"We will tell her. Go, Nathaniel. She will be here when you return."

Mouse came on the run and put the small bundle of Nathaniel's belongings into his hands.

"Catherine said bring Nathaniel's stuff. You okay, Nathaniel? Going away?"

"Yes, Mouse. Nathaniel is going away. It cannot be helped," Vincent replied.

Nathaniel took back his meager possessions. *This was happening so fast. Too fast.* Again, Corinne tugged at his hand. "Nathaniel. We have to go. We *really* have to go."

He knew she wasn't wrong.

"Who found him?" Nathaniel asked, as they walked/half ran to her waiting truck. He tried to remember how long it had been since he'd last seen his father. *Five years? Six? More?*

"Zachariah. Of course," she said, as they raced.

They drove deep into the night, and Corinne was exhausted from it. Nathaniel took over the wheel from her, once they were far outside the major cities and deep into Canada. That, and when it was clear that if she did not sleep, she was going to simply drop unconscious behind the wheel of the big rig and kill them both.

Not for the first time did Nathaniel realize that the Hunter clan was a lynchpin, in their community. And that Corinne was one of its feistiest human advocates.

Seth Night Hunter had found himself a magnificent Shahnna. When Nathaniel returned to Rebecca, he hoped the two women had time to meet, and become friends. *If only I'm in time to save my father,* Nathaniel thought as he drove. North Edge was wild country. There were many ways for a man to be brought low.

Nathaniel knew very little about his father's current condition. Only that even among the Shah, his blood type was cursedly impossible to match, and that only his like kind could donate to him. In human terms, (or the closest they could come to that) Nathaniel knew he and his father were both O negative. The two had been each other's blood donors when the need had arisen, during Nathaniel's teenage years. And there had been a few of those.

Corinne only knew that Zachariah, the family Protector, had located Matthew, and that the elder Shah was in bad shape, and needed blood to survive. Whether it was due to an animal attack, an accident, a suicide attempt, or some other misadventure, Corinne didn't know. She'd been on the road when they'd contacted her, and the coded message could only say so much, without attracting undue attention.

According to Corinne, she had been over the road delivering lumber to the Blackmanes, when Ramona had relayed a message to her on the CB and told her the news. Considering the communication was public,

there was only so much information to be had. But she knew that the need was both dire and immediate.

After nine hours of hard driving, they were approaching major towns again, and Nathaniel had to ride in the box, while a refreshed Corinne Hunter drove. They had four hours to go, give or take. Nathaniel counted every minute of them. *Hang on, Father. Please. No matter what happened, just hang on.*

Nathaniel sat in the back of the hard moving vehicle and thought of Rebecca. *This is not right. I should have said goodbye to her. Should have looked into her eyes and explained I would be back as soon as I could. Should have told her to wait for me, to ... what? Prepare to leave the only home she knows so I can drag her to the back of nowhere, by most reckonings?*

And how is that going to work, exactly? The tunnel community had been so important to her she had been willing to accept and stay in a sham of a marriage, to keep it.

Now, away from her, and feeling the distance grow, did he really think she would leave her home for him? Her home, those she loved, and all she knew? He had a long time to think, and no way to speak to her about his fears. *There's so much I should have said. I never even told her how I felt. Not really. Never said 'I love you.' What if she thinks... something else? That we were just a passing thing?*

He hung his head as the box swayed on the road. The tightness in his chest was returning. They had not bonded. And he was already very far from her, physically. Nathaniel suspected his other symptoms might start to return as well, as time went on. He didn't know. There was no way for him to. But he knew the feeling of sickness, in the pit of his stomach. The motion of the semi over rutted roads wasn't helping that, any.

He braced his booted feet against the floor of the vibrating back of the truck, his knees bent, his head down on his folded arms. His sigh was bone deep. *Rebecca... I miss you already. So much.*

--

Matthew Longspear. Shah. Father. Sometimes present, sometimes absent, yet always “there” in some way, on Broad Mountain, South Dakota. All of Nathaniel's life, Matthew had loomed as an almost larger-than-life figure. Darker than Nathaniel, on a normal day, he would give Seth Night Hunter a run for his money, on coloring.

This was not a normal day.

Hair much greyer than Nathaniel remembered, and strapped to a table with an intravenous drip, he looked nearly the color of the sheet that draped him. He was fighting for his life – or at the very least, clinging to it.

It pained Nathaniel to see him look so... diminished.

Julia Blackmane Hunter all but tackled Nathaniel for a pint of blood, the minute he'd jumped down from the back of the semi. Matthew had lost too much of his, and his normally coppery complexion was startlingly pale. They'd already lost him on the table, twice, having to shock his heart back in to beating. She'd shaved his chest, for the paddles, if there was another round of that on deck.

If Nathaniel hadn't known better, he'd have sworn his father was dead already. Thanks to the blood loss, his normally warm skin was cool to the touch. His lips were nearly grey, in color.

Father. It was the only word Nathaniel could think, for a moment.

Nathaniel stood near the bed while Julia worked, Ramona Hunter changed Matthew's IV bag as Nathaniel's deep-colored blood siphoned itself into another one.

"What happened?" Nathaniel could not believe he was staring down at the unconscious face of the man who had sired him.

"Animal attack. Bear, from the looks of it." Ramona answered him, adjusting the tape on the needle that went into his father's arm.

"That's not possible." Nathaniel stated, shaking his head while he pumped his fist. *Faster. This needs to be happening faster.* "My father has an affinity for animals. Wolves, bears, lynx... He could cower a mountain lion, if he had to. Saddle break a stallion in an afternoon." Nathaniel was sure of it. He had inherited the gift. Longspears were known for their abilities with many kinds of animals, not just horses.

Ramona could only shrug, as the dark blood Nathaniel called his own began to flow. "Zachariah says it was actually lucky he was out in the cold when it happened. If he'd been warm, he'd likely have bled out."

Nathaniel squeezed his fist several more times, trying to fill the bag. He now understood Corinne's need for speed, in getting him here. Nothing had been an exaggeration.

Don't die, Father. Don't. There is hope for us. Hope for you. Don't die. He watched the blood drip slowly in. Couldn't it go faster?

Julia pushed a chair under him, and shoved a glass of orange juice into his hand.

"Drink it. We're going to take another pint. You'll likely feel dizzy and weak from it. It's not advised, in normal practice," she told him.

"Fine. Do it anyway." He continued pumping his hand.

"Drink it all. It might keep you from passing out. Your blood pressure is about to drop hard, Nathaniel," she cautioned him.

He nodded his head. He understood.

"I'm going to move you to a gurney, so you don't fall out of the chair. Okay?" She was all business and all ability. Nathaniel remembered when she was a child in pigtails. Elijah Hunter had chosen well. He downed the glass. Ramona poured him another.

He stared at his father's drawn face. White hair covered his temples, and was shot through much of the rest of his formerly dark mane. There were deep lines in his face, near his muzzle and eyes. Torn claws. Blood on his hands. Matthew Longspear had given as good as he got, apparently.

This makes no sense. You are Shah.

But in a way, of course, he wasn't. The wasting was taking him. He was either losing his natural gifts or something else had happened. Perhaps they'd never know the whole story.

They hung up one bag and started on another. "I'm sorry, Nathaniel," Julia apologized, attaching another bag to the needle.

"Save him, Julia. Do everything you can."

For a minute, Nathaniel thought he could manage the blood loss without giving up consciousness. Then, the world went grey. Ramona took the tipping glass of juice out of his hand. He fought to remain awake, but knew it was going to be a losing battle.

"Rebecca," he whispered, as the room tilted on its axis.

"Easy." Ramona and Julia tugged him over to the gurney, as the world began to slip away.

"I love you," he said, to someone who wasn't there.

--

He dreamed of Rebecca. Dreamed they fought. Dreamed that the choice he was forcing her to make caused her nothing but tears.

Dreamed she would not leave with him, and that for some reason, he could not stay there. She would come and make love to him from time to time, but always leave the bed even though he begged her to stay.

His feelings became confused, and for a while it was Jess in the bed and they were just... screwing, like they had done before. It was brief, and though there was love in it, for him, he realized that for her there was desperation; the thing that he had taken for desire, before he had understood the reasons for her appetites.

He did not like his dreams. He struggled up from them, and blessed the moment his eyes truly opened, and stayed that way.

Awake, but drowsy, Nathaniel understood the warning Julia Hunter had tried to give him. He felt like he'd been hit by a truck. And he had a pounding headache. Even with the blanket over him, he felt cool. There was a soft light on, in the clinic. A heart monitor beeped, reassuringly.

Nathaniel scanned the sterile-looking room. It all felt foreign. He wanted Rebecca. Wanted irregular walls, and uneven floors. Wanted the sensation of 'home' that came with her. He wanted to go back to New York. He knew he was in no shape to travel. He had lost too much blood in too short a time, trying to save Matthew.

He groaned, his head utterly hammering in his skull. When he looked around, he realized they'd kept him and Matthew into the same room, divided by a curtain that had been mostly pulled back. Matthew's complexion looked better. He wasn't sure if the rest of him was.

"Headache?" Julia came in, hearing his groan.

"Bad," he told her. His mouth felt like the Sahara desert.

"Blood loss causes dehydration, for obvious reasons," she explained.

"We'd like to save the IV bags for your dad, also for obvious reasons.

Here." She handed him a cup with pills in it, and a bottle of water. "Try to drink all of it. More, if you can."

"Julia. How is he?"

"More stable," she said, hope in her tone. "Your blood did him good, Nathaniel. Ramona had most of his wounds closed before I even got here. Now we just have to make sure there's no damage we don't know about, and that there's nothing internal we didn't catch. And we have to take care of you, of course," she stated.

Nathaniel took the pills and started in on the water bottle. When he tipped it back up, he told her: "There's a woman. Back in the tunnels. Rebecca. I need to get a message to her, Julia."

Julia raised an interested eyebrow. *A message back to the tunnels. Well, sure, except it was difficult at best.* It required a letter driven to the closest town, one addressed to Catherine or Peter Alcott, who would then carry it Below to its recipient. It could be done, but considering mail times this far north, it would likely take a week or two. Unless he wanted to use a radio, and try to leapfrog something down. And even Elijah instinctively avoided that, when possible. Too many ears were listening, for one thing.

"Rebecca huh? Isn't she the one that makes all those beautiful candles?" Julia asked.

Nathaniel nodded. Then realized why he should never do that again, as pain shot through his temples. He drank some more.

"I'm in love with her," he said.

"Lucky lady." Julia smiled, as he finished the water and laid back.

He struggled to remember something. Something he had wanted to ask Julia. Couldn't. It was the meaning of a word, and it was typed on a pill bottle. He closed his eyes. *Maybe tomorrow.*

Maybe tomorrow, when I can think.

Consciousness left him, and the grey veil of sleep closed around him, once more.

--

Tomorrow came, Matthew seemed better, which was to say that Julia declared him “even more stable” and liked what she saw, when she looked at the machines monitoring his vital signs.

Nathaniel’s headache had subsided, and the word Nathaniel had been chasing through his skull allowed itself to be captured.

"Julia," Nathaniel asked her, " What is... angio... angiotense something."

"Angiotensin?"

"Yes. What is it? What is it for?"

She gave him an odd look, clearly not expecting such a question from him. "Medicine. For diabetics with high blood pressure. Why?"

"Rebecca's husband used to take it before he died. I saw the pill bottle in a box of his things."

"Oh." She shrugged the news away, as she tugged his blanket higher up.

“Most diabetics develop hypertension, over time. High blood pressure.

A lot of the medicines for high blood pressure can't be taken by diabetics, so angiotensin is a class of drugs that get prescribed.

Usually."

She left his side and hung up an IV bag, for Matthew. His color continued to improve. Nathaniel watched her move around the room, looking very competent. *Your father would be proud, if he could see you right now*, he thought.

“So... it’s for high blood pressure?” he asked.

"Sure. It's a drug that will at least treat the one thing without interfering with the other." She checked to make sure the closest IV tube was clear, and to her liking, it was. "Diabetics are very tough patients, that way. You can't just give them anything."

Nathaniel shrugged at that. He had no idea what it took to treat someone with diabetes, other than insulin. One of the older women he knew back home had to self-administer her shots.

"If they could clear up the impotence issues for those folks, there'd be a lot of happy people on the planet," Julia commented, noting something on Matthew's chart, while Nathaniel's world tipped on its side, again. It seemed to be doing that a lot, lately.

"Say that again?" He willed her to look up at him.

Julia shrugged while she worked. "Diabetics have a notoriously hard time with ... um, circulation issues, if you get me. It's part of why they don't heal worth a damn. Blood doesn't... flow well. People with blood pressure trouble, well, same thing, for different reasons. Put the two of them together and you're pretty much guaranteed to have, well, no sex life, at least not the traditional kind."

She shrugged again, writing down something from Matthew's display, in the chart. She didn't think she was saying anything startling. All this was common knowledge, to a medical student. "Maybe they'll figure it out, some day," she concluded.

Idiot. Idiot, idiot, idiot. It had been right in front of him, all the time.

"She never said anything," Nathaniel said, more to himself than her.

"Yeah, well, it's kind of personal, isn't it?" Julia flipped the chart closed. She noted his bemused expression.

"I hear most men are kind of touchy on the subject." She picked up his wrist, and counted the beats.

"Speaking of blood pressure, yours is a little elevated, for somebody who's a pint and a half low," she told him, returning his arm to under the white sheet. "You cold? I can get you another blanket."

"No. I mean yes. ... Yes. I think so."

"Hm." She opened the cabinet next to the wall and took out a soft, white blanket.

"I need to go refill some of the things we've been running through, and send Corinne to fill some prescriptions. Holler if he wakes up." Julia was all business, her dark braid looking like it could stand to be repinned to the back of her head. She had probably been on her feet since long before he'd ever arrived.

"Julia?"

"Yes, Nathaniel?"

"Thank you. For more than you know."

"You're welcome, Shah," she replied, smiling.

--

Zachariah came in, a silver bracelet jangling on his wrist, a nine month old girl riding high in his arms. She was clearly the apple of her Daddy's eye.

"Meghann, this is Nathaniel." Zachariah introduced them.

"She's gorgeous. I heard you had twins?" Nathaniel admired the latest Shahrenne in North Edge Logging Camp. She was a dark-haired pixie.

"Her brother is probably giving Brigit hell, right now. Geoff hates it when they're separated. But we needed a little time outside, didn't we?" He looked down at his daughter with more love in his eyes than Nathaniel thought possible. If she held up her little finger, Zachariah would have been wrapped around it. She cooed, and reached up for her

father's muzzle. They played a moment, then he gave her his clawed finger to grasp. She giggled, a little, then settled down in his arms for a nap, clutching him.

"So. How you feeling?" Zachariah asked. He was a giant, holding a princess, in his arms.

"Like something Corinne ran over, in the truck. She broke a few land speed records to get us here, by the way."

Zachariah nodded. "We'd have sent Seth, but we kind of wanted you to get here in one piece." Seth Night Hunter's penchant for being a speed demon was well known, among the Hunter clan.

"Zach. How in god's name did you find him?"

The big blonde Shah shrugged. "Honestly, it was luck, more than anything else, Nathaniel. I... sensed something, when I was out checking the border fence a couple days ago. Something. Something that didn't feel right, for lack of a better description. The same way you and he sense animals, sometimes, I sense when somebody's hurt." He shook his head.

"By then, the fight had been over a long time. There were bear tracks all around him, I just assume it was that. Seth, Elijah and I plan to track it, as soon as Seth gets back from picking up Corinne's sister outside Toronto." He was rocking his infant daughter, as she napped happily in her father's arms. "From the looks of things, they both drew blood," Zachariah added.

"I should be there, when you hunt it. I could help with that."

"Next time," the big Protector informed him. "Julia says you should start feeling like a human being, in a day or two. A Shah in three." His humor was wry.

"Zachariah, there's a woman back in the tunnels. Rebecca Sharper."

His vivid green eyes moved upward, as he searched his memory.

"Rebecca? Ah, yes, the pretty blonde woman. She made the candles for Vincent and Catherine's wedding. I remember her."

"I might need you to marry us."

Surprise was evident, on the other man's face. "Marry you. You are... bonded?"

Nathaniel shook his head, subtly. "Not yet. But I felt it."

Zachariah nodded. The trip to the tunnels seemed to have done a world of good for his friend. As it had done for him.

"She is of Vincent's Shahdom. He may wish to perform the ceremony," Zachariah demurred.

"If he doesn't."

"Then it would be an honor, my friend. Come on, little one," he addressed the pearl of his world. "Your brother is probably chewing your mother's arm off, right about now." He was content that Nathaniel was on the mend. It was a thing he could not have said a couple of days ago. Or for that matter, months ago.

Wait until Brigit hears about this. Before Nathaniel's trip to New York, he had been gripped by the wasting. He had clearly improved, drastically.

"I'm starting to think there's an enchantment on those tunnels. That everyone who goes there gets... cured of something," Zachariah said, knowing it was true for him, as well. He'd been cured of a lifetime of loneliness, thanks to meeting Brigit O'Donnell at Vincent and Catherine's wedding. And Brigit had relayed as much as she knew of Catherine's story: that being brought down into the tunnels had saved her life, then changed it, as well.

"I may have to agree with you," Nathaniel replied, anxious to see Rebecca again.

--

By that evening, the event most of them had been waiting for, happened. Matthew Longspear moaned, moved his head, and carefully opened his eyes. He looked to his left, instinctively.

"Nathaniel?" His expression was incredulous. "Have I died?"

Nathaniel smiled. "Twice. But, no, Father. Our Protector found you in time. You are in a clinic, on Hunter land."

"Nathaniel?" Matthew repeated. His arm reached out, grasping his son. Even at nearly seventy years of age, Matthew had a mighty grip.

"I went to look for you a few years ago. Near Mother's grave," Nathaniel said.

"I didn't want to be found. Not then." Matthew said it simply. Nathaniel understood. One of the keenest desires of wasting was a need for isolation.

"You were attacked. Do you remember?" Nathaniel asked.

Matthew nodded, then clearly wished he hadn't done that. "Bear. Something wrong with it. I couldn't reach it, Nathaniel. Couldn't... talk to it. Sickness, maybe. Maybe rabies. Some kind of... madness." His eyes drifted closed, then back open. He willed himself awake. "Keep it away. Away from the children."

"The Hunters will track it. Have no fear, Father. They will deal with it. Zachariah will save it, if he can."

"Been a long time since I tried to handle something as crafty as a bear," the elder Longspear said. "I should have started out with something smaller. Like... squirrel." They both chuckled, and the motion clearly

pained Matthew, thanks to the stitches along his abdomen and shoulder.

A welcome voice called in from the doorway. "Matthew? You need to eat something," Ramona Hunter ordered, bringing in soup. Her white hair had once been Nordic blonde, but was now threaded with grey. It was tamed into a long pony tail, which hung down her back. Ramona's green eyes pinned Matthew, as she set down her tray.

"Ramona Star Hunter. As I live and breathe. Still," Matthew rasped.

She arched a sardonic eyebrow in his general direction. He sat up tiredly, while she spooned broth into his mouth. He made a face.

"That's dead plain. You used to be a better cook," he insulted.

"You used to be better looking," she volleyed.

"So did you," he retorted.

Nathaniel watched the exchange. They'd known each other for many years, though as far as Nathaniel knew, Matthew's visits to North Edge had been sporadic, at best.

"That I did," she returned deftly. "But dealing with idiots has aged me, since." She smiled, as she said it.

The two of them clearly had some history. Which was understandable, given the proximity of their ages.

Matthew tried to push the bowl aside.

"Finish it, Matt," she scolded. "My new grandson wants Grandma time, and he's got a temper as snarly as yours, when he's riled."

Matthew swallowed another couple of spoonfuls, then relaxed back into the pillows. "You have a beautiful family, Ramona. Exceptional," Matthew complimented her.

"I do, don't I?" she said smugly, driving the spoon into Matthew's mouth, again. But she smiled sweetly, as she did so.

"Geoffrey will be the next Protector. You wait and see." She said it with no modesty whatsoever, and full of grandmotherly pride. "He adores Meghann. And Meg? Oh, lord. She has her Daddy wrapped, does my little angel. One more. There."

Ramona finished shoving in the last spoonful.

"You get better, Matthew Longspear. I will not have you dying on my land." Her words were harsher than the look she gave him, which was gentle.

He returned her gentle tone. "Thank you, Ramona. Jarrett is a lucky man," Matthew stated.

"It's me who's lucky." Her voice gentled even more. "Sleep. Shahs don't die near Shahnnas. Even if I wasn't yours, I won't have it. From either of you," she admonished Nathaniel as well. Then, she swept from the room, her long vest trailing, the silver and blonde ponytail swishing from side to side.

"Now there goes one of god's more magnificent creatures." Matthew Longspear declared.

Nathaniel had a feeling he was right.

--

Julia was right, also. Nathaniel did indeed feel better, in a day or two more. But it was a far cry from saying he felt like his old self. The blood loss had been severe, and he found it was most all he could do to eat, sleep, then eat some more. More days slipped past.

Matthew seemed to improve, steadily. They moved into Ramona's spacious home, and talked long into the night about the hard years

each had endured. Matthew begged forgiveness for his part in making Nathaniel's life more difficult.

"There is nothing to forgive, Father. After I lost Jessamyn, I understood the wasting myself. It is... the opposite of what we were meant for."

"That it is. But you were my son. I should have been stronger," Matthew said.

"I was grown. Adam Blackmane has three children, and he fared little better. It took his new wife, Diana, to make him see the light."

"Now there's another woman on the list of people I'd like to meet," Matthew declared.

Nathaniel could only smile, at that. "You've been so out of touch, you don't even know what's been happening. There's a Shah in New York, Father. Vincent. His Shahnna is named Catherine. Wait until you meet them."

"Whose clan?" Matthew asked, puzzled.

"His own, near as anyone can tell. He's not a Blackmane, that's for sure. Blue eyes. Blonde hair."

"What does his mother have to say?"

"That's just it. There isn't one. He was a foundling."

"A solo?" Matthew shook his head. "Nathaniel, you know our history. There is no such thing."

Nathaniel shrugged. "It was one for Ramona's books, that's for certain. But it's true."

"Where in New York? Upstate? The mountains?" He named the most likely place a being like them could exist, reasonably.

"No, I mean New York, New York. Manhattan."

The older Shah's jaw dropped. "You've got to be kidding."

"I swear. Right underneath it. He found Seth by sheer chance. Ramona means to invite him up, for summer. Maybe he'll come."

"Sounds like quite the story. I'd love to hear it."

"Get Seth to tell it to you. Or Zachariah. There's a lot you don't know, Father."

Matthew knew it was true. He felt a stab of guilt for it.

"Nathaniel... Will you go back to our lands?" His father asked. *One of us should.*

Nathaniel nodded. "Yes. But I must return to New York, first."

"New York? Let this Vincent come to see you. What in God's name is there for you, but danger?"

Nathaniel almost smiled. It was the first time since their reunion that Matthew had seen him do that. "My Shahnna. If she will have me."

A Shahnna in New York? One who would be content to live out west?

Matthew couldn't hide his amazement. "You will be careful? There are animals in New York much harder to put down than a bear, Nathaniel."

"I was there when Corinne came for me." Nathaniel didn't elaborate on the "why" of that. "Will I see you, back home?"

Matthew pondered the question. "It isn't good that both of us are away from the mountain. It's bad luck, for one thing." He sighed. *Time to go home. Time to make amends. Be a father. And a father-in-law, apparently.* The world did indeed begin to look very different.

"Look for me in the high country, come spring. At the line shack where we used to love to fish," Matthew promised. They put their heads together.

"I still miss her, you know." Matthew said quietly, talking about his deceased wife.

"I know you do," Nathaniel replied. "Find happiness, if you can, Father. Or at least, find peace. I love you."

"And I love you, my son. The thing that happened to Jessamyn. It's the kind of thing I should have stopped. I was her Shah, at the time."

Nathaniel had told him all about Sabrina Tallchief's startling revelation.

"Father. Even the Tribal Police didn't know. You are not responsible for every evil thing that ever happened on those lands."

"No. But I am responsible to its people, to keep evil back."

"I thought that was Zachariah's description," Nathaniel observed.

"It is every man and Shah's description, Nathaniel," Matthew stated firmly.

"We've both been... in the grip of something. Perhaps when we return, things will get better," Nathaniel replied.

The two men went to bed in Ramona's guest room, a kind of peace, between them.

Nathaniel laid in his borrowed bed and stared at the ceiling. Several members of the Hunter/Blackmane clan were going to go to New York, for Winterfest. It was a week away, and still felt too long. But it was the soonest way to hitch a ride to New York. He sighed, and sent a silent prayer into the night.

I'm coming, Rebecca. Wait for me. Just... hold on. A little while longer.



Chapter Nineteen

Winterfest



--

"Nathaniel, load up!" Elijah's voice called. "Winterfest waits for no man nor Shah!" A van with darkened windows was pulled up to the front door, an excited Julia in the driver's seat. Chloe Blackmane rode shotgun and an enormous Yule log was in the back, picked especially for the celebration.

"Guess who gets to carry that in." Elijah looked at Nathaniel.

"You feeling weak, youngster?" Nathaniel quipped.

"I figured you'd be too old." Elijah Hunter returned.

"Oh. You are so going to die for that."

"Threaten each other on the road, will you? I'd like to put some miles behind us before dawn!" Julia called.

--

Two weeks. He'd been gone two solid weeks. Fifteen days, actually.

The candles were beautiful. Everyone said so. Blue and coral and grey and a touch of white for sea foam. Sea shells were embedded in the middle. Sand coated the bottom. A 'wave' of wax surrounded them just above that, to act as a wax catcher, if they dripped. Beautiful. As Father always said, her best work, yet. There was even a gorgeous wooden Winterfest box to hold them in, made by Cullen and Nathaniel. The words "Inspired by Ellie" sat lettered on a sign, on the front.

Fifteen days, six hours, and forty one minutes.

For Rebecca, the day Nathaniel had left her was very hard to take. It was vaguely reminiscent of the day Daniel had died, in feeling. She saw him one minute, then a few hours later, Vincent was telling her he was gone, and she hadn't seen him, since. It almost hurt that way, too.

She had put away the box with Daniel's things, taken down his picture from her dresser, and tucked it into the drawer that still held some of his clothes, in their room. It felt right, whether Nathaniel ever returned or not.

It was time.

Catherine had brought her a letter, written by Nathaniel. It was brief, and told her only that he was sorry he had not been able to say a proper goodbye, but that he was needed here, and would see her as soon as he could.

That was all. Whatever else Nathaniel was, it was not a man accustomed to writing letters.

Rebecca had few illusions where men were concerned, and likely none at all, where Nathaniel was concerned.

He's gone. There was something he had to do. When he's done... well. He has his lands. He has his people, and they need him. There are still things he needs to do, half a country away. Nobody made any promises, either ones they could keep, or ones they couldn't.

Rebecca had had time to replay every conversation they'd ever had, to realize that that was true. That they'd both hinted of a possible future with each other, but that they hadn't made any promises, on the subject.

Adam and Diana had arrived for Winterfest a few days ago. Diana had taken her aside specifically, to tell her that as of last word, Matthew Longspear was recovering, and Nathaniel had indeed reached him in time to save him. Father and son were re-uniting, and expected to return to the Dakotas in the spring, some time.

All but the last part Rebecca pretty much knew from his letter.

And so, that was that.

She had wept, some, bitter tears for a loss that should have been sad, yes, but not this sad. She even had an awful wish that she was pregnant, that she could bring him to her that way. But she realized that was a terrible thing to want, even before her period came and told her no. Her life was as it had been, before.

Except, of course, that it wasn't.

She was forever changed, she thought at first. But then when day slid into day without him, she realized that much of her life truly was slipping back into the sameness of her widowhood. Her days were long, and began early. More guests arriving meant more tapers needed to be dipped, for those who stayed over. The Winterfest candles were done a

week ago, so that they could be delivered. So, that project was ended. But there were always others to consider. Vincent's birthday was in January, and after that Mouse's, or at least the day Mouse had picked for that.

Rebecca's life began to develop a familiar rhythm, again. She just couldn't decide if it was a welcome one.

Thanks to Catherine Chandler and Margaret Chase's estate, William was busy. The feast for Winterfest would be bountiful. Rebecca had woken up early, dipped the day's tapers, filled the box, and set about her other chores, in the Chandlery. The sound of running feet kept going by her door, as William directed where everything went.

Rebecca listened, every time chiding herself, that she was. *When did I ever hear his footsteps?* she scolded, internally.

Vincent's birthday was the next one she had to make a special gift for. She already had an idea for the pattern on the candle. Something with pressed leaves, tied off with a circle of twigs. Something reminiscent of the park. It wouldn't take long to make.

She loosened the pillar candles from their molds, and fanned herself, at the warmth of the room. Plain white wax stood ready for use, as she trimmed the wicks, carefully. *Another chore done.* Everything felt the same. The votives were next.

She knew she was restless, but no handsome, chestnut-haired Shah of a man with huge dark eyes to beguile her into a walk through the commons, or down to the hidden pool, interrupted her solitude.

Sigh. She was just Rebecca, again. Everyone's friend. Daniel's widow. Candle maker.

She eyed the large block of white wax, remembering how Matthew had warned her to be careful about moving it. She found she wasn't in the

mood to make any special pillars, for the Winterfest tables. *What's the point? They'll only get burned, and the room already has plenty of light.*



How was it that something that used to please her now left her feeling bereft? She left the Chandlery, deciding that she'd probably be of more use in the commons. She helped William carry baskets of food down to an antechamber near the tunnel of the winds. It took up much of her day.

As early evening came, the mood all around her was a happy one, as everyone looked forward to the night's festivities. Catherine positively glowed, in a soft yellow silk gown, her mother's pearls at her ears. Vincent, in his long coat, looked forward to escorting his wife in the first dance. Everyone seemed excited. Even Mouse had cleaned up respectably.

Rebecca found she was simply not in the mood for dancing and celebration. She knew she would rather sit in her room eating hot cross buns, than join in with the revelers. But for the fact that she would be praised for the candles, and expected to make an appearance on behalf of Ellie and Eric, she realized that would have skipped the thing, entirely.

Oh, well. Only an hour to go before sundown. A bit after that, and they'd all started making their way down the winding staircase. Might as well go lay out a clean dress, Rebecca thought, dispiritedly.

--

Commotion in the tunnels. There always was, at Winterfest. Dressed in a simple grey gown with a white ruffled blouse underneath, Rebecca sat in her chamber, trying to work up some enthusiasm for styling her hair. She wished it was glossy, and dark, like Sabrina's. Or at least that it was straight, and able to be woven into a lovely braid.

Spring. Maybe she would see him in spring.

Then again, maybe she wouldn't do that, either.

They had shared a couple rounds as lovers, together, the first one not even that good, for him, though she had been fine with it. He'd never said anything about love, and neither had she.

Oh well. Life would go on.

A lone tear trailed down her pale cheek.

Life, as it turned out, walked in to her room as if they'd never stopped talking.

"I swear woman, you are always in the last place I look. The whole community is getting ready to go to something called the Great Hall, and here you sit."

He barely had time to get the last word out before she launched herself at him. He could see she had been crying.

"What's this?" he asked, tipping up her chin.

"I just missed you. I thought I wouldn't see you again until spring, maybe. Maybe not at all." She hugged him tight.

"Didn't you get my letter?" he asked.

"Yes, but. It only said you'd be back as soon as you could."

"And in what world does that mean I will be away from your side for a whole season, much less more?" He was clearly amazed that they could both read the same message, and come away with completely different answers.

She shook her head. None of it mattered, now that he was here.

"You don't look well." She fussed at his paler than normal skin.

"My father is a vampire," he answered, as she disengaged from him and wiped her eyes.

"Becca?" he was still concerned. If anything, she looked worse than he did. He didn't like the shadows underneath her eyes.

"Just kiss me. Please, Nathaniel?"

He did, and the longing and fear she had been holding since the day she could no longer find him in the tunnels communicated itself to him.

"What's this about?" He was truly puzzled. "Becca. You can't have thought I just meant to leave. Not after all that had passed between us."

"Well," she sniffed. "The first time was kind of... not great, for you. And I know the second time was okay, but..."

He picked her up and set her down on the edge of her long table. Firmly.

"If you ever imply our first time was not amazing, I will throw something. And the idea that what happened after was just 'okay?' Really, Rebecca?"

Clearly, she'd had enough time to become very insecure, here. Hadn't he written her? Didn't she know how much she meant to him, even without the letter?

"Then Diana came and said something about you going back to the Dakotas in the spring. And Jess's sister is very beautiful," she added.

Jess's sister was... Oh. That was just the icing on the cake, that was.

"Rebecca. I don't know what kind of man you're used to, but... no. I'm not that kind. I'm not playing with you."

She closed her eyes. "Okay. Maybe. But we... well. I don't know if we fit very well together, and I thought, maybe."

"No, you didn't think. You were just scared." He wrapped his arms around her. *Scared. Scared because you lost Daniel, and you were afraid you'd lost me.*

"Do you have to stay here? Because if you have to stay here, we will stay here, Rebecca."

"I can make candles anywhere I go, Nathaniel. And other people were running that chandlery before I ever showed up. Brooke's been doing well. That's not the point."

He breathed a sigh of relief. *Good. Because I have a fairly large group of people waiting for me, back home.* "What is the point, then?"

"Back where you're from. That woman. Sabrina. She would be waiting for you."

She was jealous? Of Sabrina?

"Others, too," she qualified. "Beautiful women. Dark hair and huge eyes and ... Like Jessamyn. And a good bit younger than me."

Oh lord. She really had had time to let her imagination work overtime. Not that he hadn't done a little worrying of his own, but nothing like this.

This is going to stop. Now.

"My wife had a thing for quantity, not for quality. We... were together... often. I don't apologize for it. But it wasn't what we have, Rebecca. Not by a long, long, *long* way."

"You don't need to tell me this," she flustered, scooting off the edge of the table.

"I think I do. I think something made you all but... paranoid about the effect you have on a man."

She looked down. He finally said told her the secret he'd been carrying since Julia had told him about angiotensin.

"I know about Daniel, Rebecca. That he was impote..."

Her head snapped up. "Stop!" she shouted the word at him, her hand raised.

"He hated that word. Do you hear me? *Hated it*. He was the sweetest, kindest, nicest, *shyest* man I ever knew. And he was sick. So? And I needed someone, and he was just the loneliest thing. So awkward, with new people... and it was me talking him in to getting married, not the other way around. So, *don't*."

He stepped back from her, letting her tears fall.

"I'm sure he loved you very much. How could he not?" Nathaniel said gently, meaning every word. For whatever love and comfort Daniel Sharper had ever provided a lost Rebecca, Nathaniel silently blessed him.

Rebecca wept. "I thought no one knew. Who would spread such ugly gossip about such a lovely man? He was so afraid that others would know. So painfully shy, and it was so personal. I thought Father was the only one who knew. Surely, he didn't tell you?"

Nathaniel wanted to kick himself for bringing up this pain. "The medicine bottle in the box you kept with his picture and some other things. I saw the label. I asked Julia Hunter about it." He looked around, realizing the shrine to Daniel Sharper was no longer in sight.

"How could Julia know?" Rebecca demanded.

"She's a nurse, 'Becca. She knows what the medicine is for. What those patients have to deal with."

Rebecca nodded. "You will please ask her not to say anything, to anyone? Please Nathaniel. For me. I know it seems stupid to protect the pride of a dead man, but... well. It's all I have left of him, isn't it? And I promised him. I gave him my solemn vow."

"You kept your word, angel. I only figured it out because of how we were together... that first time. And the prescription label on the bottle."

She wiped her eyes. As good as it felt to have him back, she realized there was so very much between them that was still... roiled.

Rebecca sighed, as she listened to the rattling on the pipes. "It's nearly time to start. I need to finish getting ready so I can go, Nathaniel," she told him. "You'll give me a few minutes? Then come with me?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world, Rebecca."



--

Chapter Twenty

Bonding



Winterfest. Nathaniel had rarely seen the like. Shah Vincent pulled a great beam from a huge pair of double doors, taking everyone into a gigantic room. They sat at a huge table, passing light from one of Rebecca's/Ellie's candles to the next. They spoke of early times, when enemies learned to become friends. Each member of the community was there, residents, helpers, friends, all.

Elijah stood for the Hunter clan, Adam for the Blackmanes. Vincent was his own house, named 'Wells' for his adopted Father. Nathaniel held himself erect as a Longspear. His line might pass from the earth, but his people had been in the United States and Canada since before those territories were known by those names. He was proud of his lineage; proud as any man there.

Outside of North Edge, Nathaniel had never seen the Shah so well represented, at one gathering. He wondered if there were more, and if they could find them. Light was passed from one candle to the other,

until the room glowed, with soft flame. Then, the party began in earnest.

Many of those gathered began to dance. Music came from soft violins, and Vincent led his lady in a gorgeous waltz. Nathaniel didn't know how to waltz. It was not a thing he had learned, either on the back of a horse, around a camp fire, or in the mountains of his home, so he simply stood and watched.

Elijah escorted Julia onto the floor, as Kanin Evans took Olivia. Nathaniel helped himself to a mug of William's ale, then looked for Rebecca, having lost sight of her, as the crowd began to shift and move. He realized after only a short time that she had slipped out of the room, unnoticed.

He set down his mug and left the boisterous room, beginning to search for her in the most likely places. But she was not in the commons, the dining chamber, kitchens, the Chandlery, or her chamber.

He went back to the Great Hall again, making sure he had not missed her. No. The soft grey dress and white blouse she had worn were still nowhere to be found. He retraced his steps, back through the Chamber of the Winds.

He had no idea where to look when she nearly collided with him, coming from the direction of the Mirror Pool.

"The Mirror Pool. I did not think to look for you there," he told her.

"I had to speak to Ellie and say goodbye," she replied. "Also to Daniel. And Margaret." She walked by him, but did not turn in the direction of the Great Hall.

"Where are you going, now?" he asked. Her footsteps were rapid, as she made her way back to her chamber. She picked up a bundle she had

packed near her doorway. It looked like she was about to go on a journey.

"Going somewhere?" he asked. *Where? To the tunnels below?*

"I imagine so," she replied, taking a fat pillar from her table. "I may need light," she explained.

"Will you be gone long?" he asked.

"I don't know. Maybe. I could stand to come and go a bit," she answered. She went down the hallway, then took the north branch. That could lead anywhere.

He hadn't meant to leave her without saying goodbye, and given her history, he could readily see how that would hurt. But all things being equal, he knew of no other course of action he could have taken. *Surely she must know that?*

"Are you punishing me?" he asked softly.

"Only by the most liberal interpretation would you call it that," she replied cryptically. They were passing through the library area, and... *into the bathing pools...?* No. She went left. Through the guest area. To his room.

She stepped right into his bedroom and placed the pillar on his dresser, before she sat down on the floor near the foot of his bed, placing her packed bag next to his. She folded her hands in her lap, waiting.

He stood over her. "You're in my room, Rebecca."

She brushed at her skirt. "That I am."

"Sitting on the floor."

She checked around her. "Seems that way."

"You don't want to go to the party?" he asked, confused. Neither did this seem like an invitation to make love.

"Not really. You go ahead, though. I'll be right here, when you get back."

He knelt down, so they were close to equal height. She looked very... determined, he realized.

"Rebecca?"

"Yes, Nathaniel?"

"Why will you be right here when I get back?"

"Because the *last* time I let you out of my sight for longer than five minutes, you left me behind, and you were gone for fifteen days. And a lot of hours. I was counting. I'm just not taking any chances."

She pulled a small notebook and pencil from her pack, and began making sketches for her next candle. He stooped, covered the items with his great hands, and gently set them aside.

"I hurt you, by leaving."

She struggled with that sentence. He could see it in her lovely blue eyes. But she didn't deny it. "You had to go," she replied.

"Still. This was like Daniel. Kiss them good-bye in the morning and they're gone by lunch. I do remember."

"I understood that you had to go. Vincent explained it to me."

"That doesn't mean it didn't hurt. It just means I would have avoided it, if I could have."

Tears she was not aware she was holding threatened to fall.

"I know this is forward. And I know we only made love twice, and the first time wasn't even very good...."

He was not about to have that argument, again. "It was exquisite, in its own way. Marry me, Rebecca."

"And I have a lot to learn about things, and I'm very behind about, well, about what men like, and--"

"I said 'marry me,'" he interrupted. "Please. Rebecca, please?"

She blinked. "I was in the middle of talking you in to that."

"It was a very convincing argument. I agreed."

"You didn't even hear all of it."

"Okay." He shifted over so that he was sitting beside her, on the stone floor. "You have a lot to learn, and you're way behind. Marry me."

"But I'm a quick study, and I'm a fast learner," she pointed out.

"Very quick. Very Fast. Marry me."

"And I work hard. And you said yourself I'm not bad looking."

"You were the most beautiful woman in the room, tonight, for the ten minutes you were there. And there is no one lovelier than you on the planet. Marry me?"

"And I take a vow of honor very seriously."

"That I can absolutely vouch for. We're going to get married, Rebecca." His voice was firm.

"And I could teach the people in the Dakotas about candle making. Maybe open a small business and sell to boutiques, or at the casinos? Give demonstrations."

"Rebecca!" He was growing exasperated with her, even as she was outlining their future, together.

"And we'd have to be married, of course," she soothed. "My Shah doesn't like the idea of me living in sin with one of you love 'em and leave 'em types."

"I am not a 'love 'em and leave 'em type. As you so grotesquely put it."

"If the moccasin fits..."

"Becca." He used the soft form of her name. "Do you mean it? You would bond with me? Be the only mate I will ever have, the rest of my days?"

"That's awfully permanent," she whispered. *More even, than marriage.* "Are you sure?"

"It is everything I have craved, for years. Will you do it?" He nuzzled her face with his, entreating.

She nodded. "What ... how do we..."

"Like this." He kissed her, softly at first, and then masterfully, feeling her questions and arguments melt away, in her mouth.

"I'll always be with you," he whispered, tracing the column of her neck as he removed her dress. "You'll feel me inside of you, inside your heart, and your mind. And I will feel you. Always." He removed his shirt, boots, and jeans. Finished undressing her, so that they were naked, in the glow of her beautiful candle.

"When you're scared. When you're lonely. I will be right there." He kissed the skin his hands had revealed. "I'll feel your pleasure, my Shahnna." he dipped his fingers into her cleft, pleased at the sounds she made.

"Even if we're... apart, for some reason?" She was growing breathless.

"We won't be. But if we are, yes. Distance doesn't matter, to a Shah." He massaged her sex, feeling the tension build in her, hearing her groan.

"And I will love only you, Rebecca. I swear on my life."

Her mouth found his, hot, and strong and full of desire.

"Say yes, 'Becca." He seduced her, rubbing his sex with her wetness.

"Make me complete, make me whole. What I was meant to be, was born to be." He laid her back on the bed and positioned himself, over her.

"I wanted to be pregnant, when you left," she confessed. "I know it was wrong, but..."

"Oh, my love." He moved himself deeply inside her. "I have no right to pray that prayer again." *If only it could happen.*

She drew her legs up, holding him.

"Say you'll marry me, again," he insisted. He had to have the word. Had to have it before... what came next, before he bonded with her, before he united them for always.

"Yes," she said simply.

He was deep inside her and gloriously aroused. This time, when he felt the bond reach out, he let it go to her. *Mine. Be mine. I love you.*

He kissed her deeply, holding her mouth in his, propped on his elbows and cradling her head in his huge, unique hands. The bond stretched out, and he felt a tingling sensation on his forehead, just above the bridge of his nose. *There. There you are. Come to me. Come to me, love.* Anticipation rushed through him. It felt like unbridled joy.

He was buried deep inside her, all but unmoving, when he felt the change happen, when he felt all that she was feeling, as it flowed back

to him. *Love*. She was in love with him. And there was no doubt about that in her mind, at all.

Her eyes flew open.

"Nathan...iel?" she asked him, her eyes, searching, finding. She felt the bond, happening.

"Yes. It's me," he told her, smiling. "If you want it. Now."

"What do I...?"

"Nothing." His voice was a hoarse whisper. *God. To feel this happening, again. To feel yourself becoming a part of someone. Someone you love. Always.* "Just let it happen, love. It will open to you. Like you opened to me, every time I've ever been with you."

He brushed his forehead against hers, and she felt a tingle, where they touched, a frisson of awareness that had both nothing to do with sex and yet everything to do with it.

She lifted her hips, reflexively, then began to pant. "I feel you. You're... with me. Trying to... go deeper."

"Yes." It was the perfect description.

"You would... share this gift with me?" she asked, wonderingly.

"I would give my life for yours," he swore. He remained still, inside her, while she adjusted to everything that was happening, between them.

She closed her eyes, focusing on the part of him she thought she felt in her brain, in the place she thought she felt it. Her temples. There he was. Right at her temples. Brushing against her, lovingly.

She thought of all the times she had wisps of hair, there, that had escaped from her hair pins. Now she would have another reason to feel a tickling sensation on each side of her forehead. She smiled, beatifically, then squeezed him.

Nathaniel. I love you. His big body trembled, and she knew he'd heard her. Or at least that he'd felt what she was feeling.

Her climax was soft, this time. So was his. Sweet moans and soft shudders, as a tying thread slung between them like an anchoring line. Two of them. A larger one from him, a smaller one from her. He purred as he felt her find him. Rubbed his face against hers. Her tie to him was blue grey, and tensile. His was silver grey, and strong.

"They're both grey," she whispered, in the aftermath.

"Yours is like your eyes," he told her, shimmering.

"You're in love with me." She felt it.

"I told you I was." He nuzzled her.

"Always?" She smiled.

"Always," he answered.

--

A long hour later, the practical considerations of their union began to rear their ugly head.

"I have to train a replacement," she declared, as they laid together amid a tangle of sheets.

"Can it be done by spring? I'm supposed to meet my father in the high country."

"It can be done sooner than that. A few weeks, at most. And I have to leave my equipment behind. I mean, I know it was technically mine, but they need it, here. I'll have to figure out a way to get more."

"We have some money. Don't worry about it."

"Nathaniel. I'm not sure if I even have that buck-fifty left, someplace."

"We have land with timber on it. There's even a little oil, to the west. I never spend whatever it brings. It just sits in the bank."

She shook her head at him. "You're kidding me. You've been wearing the same two shirts since I met you!"

"I only need two. The clean one and the other one." He yawned.

"Speaking of which, I'm getting cold." He reached over for his shirt.

"Will Vincent marry us?" Nathaniel asked, shrugging into it.

"I think he will."

"If he doesn't, Zachariah will."

"Either one." She smiled.

"Soon," he insisted. "This is not a thing I want left undone."

"Soon," she agreed, still smiling.

And with that settled, he pulled the quilt over them and wrapped himself around her. Before long, they both fell into a deep, blissful sleep.

--

She nuzzled him during the night, and he turned to her and made love to her again, slowly. He awoke with bright curls of blonde hair caught silkily around the dark fur of his fingers. He felt marvelous.

"Morning, my Shahnna," he whispered to her, kissing the top of her head. Bonding with her last night had been amazing, and so fulfilling. Beyond fulfilling. Her love flowed through to him like.... like.... *like*...?

Like something he couldn't feel, any more, inside his brain.

Oh no. Something was wrong. She had been rejected, by the bond?

"Sonofabitch." He swore succinctly, as she opened her eyes.

"Nathaniel?"

"Stay right there. I'm going to get Elijah and Adam. Maybe even Vincent. It will be all right." He all but jumped into his jeans.

"What will be all right?"

"Never mind. Put something on. It will be all right, Rebecca."

"Of course it will. What will?" She looked confused.

He half ran out of the room, his jeans barely buttoned.

She dressed hurriedly, as she heard his voice coming back down the corridor, a few minutes later.

"...and then when we woke up this morning, it was gone." He was dragging Elijah and Adam into their room, Julia trailing behind.

Gratefully, Rebecca had had time to dress. Barely. Judging from the looks of things, Elijah and Julia had barely had time to put anything on, either. Julia was still buttoning the top button on her blouse, and Elijah's shirt was completely untucked.

"Bonds don't disappear, Nathaniel. You know that." A sleepy Adam Blackmane regarded the future Mrs. Longspear.

Elijah looked at Rebecca, thoughtfully. She looked back at him, questions in her eyes.

"Well?" Nathaniel demanded.

"Well what? What do you want me to do, Nathaniel? Wave a magic wand over her, or something?" Elijah demanded.

"You're sure you established it?" Adam asked. Vincent entered the room, apparently summoned by Nathaniel, and aware of the commotion.

"Something has happened?" Vincent asked carefully. Catherine was still asleep, warm and in their bed. They had literally danced all night.

"It's Rebecca," Nathaniel explained. "Last night I bonded with her, and this morning, it's gone. Don't worry." He held his palms up, and out to her. "We'll figure this out, 'Becca."

Rebecca's brow furrowed. *The bond was gone?* Had she done something wrong?

"Maybe there are too many Shah in one area," Adam guessed.

"If that was true, North Edge would be a dead zone." Elijah scoffed.

"Perhaps it did not... set correctly?" Vincent guessed. He had no idea. His own connection with Catherine had been made entirely without his being aware it was about to happen.

A feminine voice pierced the masculine conversation. "Or just perhaps this room is full of four idiots." Julia, the only non Shah in the room, crossed to Rebecca.

"Honey," Julia took her hand gently, "I'm a Shahrenne, a Shah's daughter, and a Shahnna, though it pains me to admit it, at this point." She eyed the four confused males in the room. "But I don't need empathy to tell me what's going on here, I don't think."

Rebecca looked at her calm face, and into her perfectly grey eyes. She knew her own eyes betrayed nothing but confusion. "It... it didn't work? We're not... together, anymore?" Her eyes darted between Julia and Nathaniel. She was trying not to cry.

"Rebecca, did you and Nathaniel, well, you know... last night?" Julia asked.

"Of course we did," snapped Nathaniel. "I told you I set the bond. We make love when we do that. No offense, Vincent."

"None taken." Vincent had no idea why he should be offended.

"Lord, you give them eyes, yet they do not see." Julia rolled her own eyes, looking ceilingward.

"Julia? Do you know what's wrong with me?" Rebecca's look was still one of confusion, yet judging by Julia's humor, nothing serious was wrong. *Maybe Julia could give me a shot, or something?*



"Not a thing." Julia picked up a rumpled lap blanket from the foot of the bed and wrapped it around Rebecca's shoulders.

Julia winked at Elijah, who suddenly understood. He covered his mouth against a grin.

"I take it Nathaniel didn't explain to you *all* about the bond. Like, the one and only time he can't feel it?" Julia asked, turning to the most agitated male in the room.

"Julia, what in the hell are you..." Nathaniel threw his hands wide and looked around the room.

"In five, four, three, two,..." she counted down on her fingers.

Nathaniel's head whipped back around and his eyes fixed on Rebecca. Realization, when it dawned, came rapidly.

"Out." He commanded the word. "Everybody, out!"

"One." Julia finished. By now, even Adam was grinning. "Nice shooting, Ace." he congratulated Nathaniel.

Even Vincent couldn't hide a smile. "I will go look for my book of ceremonies," he commented.

"Out!" Nathaniel thundered. Even Rebecca started to walk toward the doorway. He had not stopped staring at her since Julia finished counting down, on her fingers. "Not you!" he ordered. She froze.

"Get back in bed." He pulled back the rumpled sheets.

"We're all going back to bed," Julia told him drily. "Try to handle this part on your own, won't you?"

The group of extraordinary people left. Rebecca noted they were all smiling, as she allowed herself to be tucked back in.

"Are you warm enough?" Nathaniel covered her again with the blankets, pulling another one out of a chest near the foot of the bed.

"I'm fine. You're the one standing there without a shirt, Nathaniel."

He ignored her. "I'm fine," he stated, and covered her with a quilt.

"Am I sick? Is that why the bond didn't work?" she asked.

"Oh, it worked. It worked, all right."

"Then why....?" As hard as she concentrated, she could no longer feel that delightful sensation against her temples. Though of course she understood she was new to this...

He sat down beside her on the bed, pulling her hand into his, planting a kiss fervently on its back. He brushed her hair back from her temples, and searched her face, looking for changes. *I love you. I will love you forever, for this.*

"The only time a Shah can't feel the bond... is when his Shanna is expecting a baby. You're pregnant, love."

"Pregnant? Right now? The bond does that?" She was amazed.

"No, my angel. Sex does that. The bond just happened to be there, when, well, when everything else was, too." He kissed the backs of her hands, again.

"Nathaniel? Are you saying... we're going to be parents? Of a baby? Our own baby?" It was a dream she'd given up on, long ago. Though she'd loved Daniel Sharper, she knew he'd never make her a mother.

But now...

Nathaniel's brown eyes held hers. "This... it wasn't something either of us planned, but... I'll be able to feel the baby's heartbeat after a while, Rebecca. Oh my God. A baby." He leaned over and kissed her gently rounded stomach, through her clothes.

"Your Father is an imbecile," he told her abdomen. "Hopefully, you'll take after your mother."

"This was awfully fast, wasn't it?" she asked.

"I know. It's too soon, isn't it? But I can't feel sorry about it, 'Becca. I can't."

"What do you have to be sorry for? It's not like I didn't know this could happen, and God knows neither one of us was even thinking about protection... A baby?" Her shining eyes were delighted. "A baby, conceived on Winterfest?"

"On the same night the bond was being set. I love you." He held her sweet face between his palms. "I love you, love you, love you, love you." He kissed her again and again. "And I already miss not being able

to feel you, here." He brushed a fingertip from the center of his forehead down his muzzle.

"Then everything's all right?" she smiled.

"Better than all right. Better than better, to quote your friend, Mouse."

He left her side and began to dig through his bag, looking for his other clean shirt. "We need to find Vincent, again. We have to get married!"

--

The wedding was attended by many yawning, smiling guests, as Nathaniel Thunder Longspear and Rebecca Shawn Sharper were made Shah and wife. The other Shah in the room could not stop smiling. The bride was a vision in blue grey silk, wearing the veil of traditional tunnel brides.

The groom carried her to the ceremony, to the dining table, and back to his rooms, insisting her feet could no longer touch the floor, apparently.



Chapter Twenty-One

Longspears



A few months later, Nathaniel stopped hammering the nails onto the roof of the barn, near the house. His father was cleaning the fish they'd caught. Ghost was wandering in the paddock, and a springtime breeze tugged at his braid. In that moment, a tiny heartbeat grasped onto Nathaniel's consciousness.

"It's a girl," he whispered, transported with joy. He didn't know how he knew. But he did.

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Up in the mountains of North Dakota, Almost six months to the day after Winterfest, Eleanor Catherine Longspear howled her way into the world, Ramona Hunter doing the honors of making the announcement, while Julia cut the cord. They would call her Ellie Kate, from her first day forward. Her grandfather, Matthew, liked the name. She had her father's dark hair, and her mother's gorgeously blue-grey eyes.

"She's perfect," An exhausted and overjoyed Rebecca declared.

No one disagreed.

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"Becca." Nathaniel sat with his child in their bed, a few days later, his wife having just fed their daughter.

"Mm?" she asked, keeping her voice low. The baby was drowsing.

"I didn't know I could feel this much," he whispered to her, kissing Ellie Kate's soft head.

"I know," Rebecca smiled, petting her little love. And her big one.

"I'm holding her in my arms, so full of love for her I don't know how I can still breathe. And I can feel you, again." He rubbed his nose against the crown of her head as he pulled her close, settling the baby against his bent legs.

"It's like a dream." Rebecca smiled.

"Better. Let's don't wake up." he replied, pulling the comforter up so that it covered the Longspear Shahnna.

"Tell that to your daughter. Around two a.m."

"I'll get her. You sleep." He kissed his wife, whom he adored more than anything in the world.

"You got her last night. It's my turn." Rebecca yawned.

"But you're tired. And I don't mind." He stroked Ellie Kate's cheek. "It gives us time to make plans and play, doesn't it, Ellie Kate?"

Ellie Kate smiled her secret smile. Yes. Make plans. Well of course. How else was she going to convince him to take her to Canada, to see the others? She already felt Geoffrey calling to her, though she didn't know that was his name.

“Do you miss New York?” he asked his wife. There was vulnerability in the question.

“I love the people there. But I love you and Ellie Kate, more,” she replied. “Don’t worry, Nathaniel. We’ll go for a visit. Sometime.”

“You know I’d never keep you from them. That any time you want to go...”

She kissed his cheek, and radiated peace, as she always did. “We’ll arrange to go for her naming day. But I think we have plenty to occupy us right here, for now, don’t you?” She put his fears to rest.

Ellie Kate stretched and yawned, settling between her parents, on the big bed.

“I think we do,” he replied.

And Nathaniel, Rebecca and Ellie Kate lived in the most perfect of all worlds. The one where they had each other, always.



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No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love.~

Cindy



