

# *Arc of the Shah*



## *The Bright and Boundless Path*

*By Cindy Rae*



## *Book One: Nomad*



### *Chapter One*

#### *Wreckage*

At almost three-thirty a.m., New York's city streets and Central Park lanes were fairly deserted. Unable to sleep for reasons that had entirely to do with Catherine, Vincent walked alone along the latter, trying to shake off the disquieting effects of their latest strained conversation about their future.

He'd healed from his collapse, months ago. But then...

After three years, it felt, astonishingly, like he and Catherine were failing. Breaking apart. Shattering. Spending their strength, like swimmers caught in a rip tide. Vincent knew it, yet had no cure.

It wasn't that there was some new pressure upon them, not really. It was that the same old pressures had no resolution.

*And then of course, I lost my mind...*

Vincent knew neither what to do about any of those, nor how to proceed with her. The new peace he'd been granted did nothing to absolve him of the old hell he'd put them all through; or for that matter, had gone through himself.

*Catherine...*

The list of what he could not give her seemed endless, and the feelings that engendered in both of them were reaching critical mass.

Booted feet tread softly down familiar paths, as he turned over their troubles, in his keen mind. *I love you. I love you so much. And yet...*

Vincent knew he'd give his life for her. That he loved her beyond all meaning of that word. *But... has that ever been what this is about? Really?*

It was a testament to sorrow and desperation that he was even asking the question, internally.

The madness that had overcome him a few months ago had given him a fresh perspective on their prospects, for a future together. And that perspective was not a good one.

*I lost all sense of balance. I lost all reason. I lost my memory... my... self. I was dangerous. To everyone.*

He had no idea what to do about that, as he turned toward the open area of greensward near where he'd found her, originally. His thoughts remained dark. *I went mad. I lost my control. I... let something loose that should never have seen the light of day. I ... lost everything I was.*

He knew now that they could never be wed. That he could not risk children, with anyone. That he could not give her a life she could share with her friends, in the world she called her home.

Though the latter sorrow was old, the others ranged in his awareness, the first being brand new. *Until now, I'd always hoped there might be a way. But really... is there?*

Moisture dripped from laden branches, as a late spring mist rose from the ground. Acorns crunched underfoot, but Vincent barely heard the sound.

*Mad. Mad until I stank of it. What... hope is there for us, with that as my truth, Catherine? We can't both pretend it didn't happen, that I am well, simply because I look like I am. Is that a solution? Was it... ever?*

The event that had claimed him had happened once before, in adolescence. He'd had to be restrained.

*I was younger, then. Weaker. This time... it was so much worse.*

He'd awoken from a nightmare state, not knowing who his Catherine was; indeed, barely knowing who he was. Holes in his memory persisted, for a time; but his resolve was clear. Whatever he was, he dared not pass it to another being. If Catherine was going to bid for motherhood at some point in her life, it was a thing she would have to do with someone else. If she was ever going to have a life in the sun, that too, would have to happen with someone who was... not him.

*But... we love each other...*

And that was a thing he knew could both join and obliterate them, with its complexities.

*Can you be a mother, and love me? Can you? It's one thing if all that I am ... stops, the day I go to my grave. I'm prepared for that, for myself.*

*But do I gift that sad legacy to you?*

Adoption denied her a chance to have children of her own. A surrogate pregnancy seemed soulless, and the notion that he would father her children was a thing he refused to discuss, utterly.

*She would have to give up all she knew, at best, and remake all she was, at worst, to stay with me, children or no.* In a way, it was the same problem they'd always faced.

*If I begin to... slip, again... where do I go? What do I do? Do I beg them to put me in chains, and pray they are strong enough? Or do I just...*

It was all wearing on him. On them.

He adored her. She was part of his soul. And the thought of letting her go was killing him. But... not letting her go was killing them both, he realized. And though that math should be simple enough -- '*Let her go,*' his mind whispered, -- he still found he could not bring himself to be the one to finally sever their relationship.

But he was trying to find his way clear to it. He couldn't bring himself to do that, not yet, but only he knew how doomed they were, that he was trying to work his way to the ugly patch of ground they both dreaded and feared.



*Help me, Catherine. Help me know what is right. What is right, for you.*

He tugged his cape more firmly about his shoulders, as the damp air grew cooler. The wet felt like it was trying to seep into his bones. Street lamps struggled to illuminate the somber night. It seemed as if the very light was struggling to make it to ground.

*Even if I never go mad again... I'll deny you a family. I'll deny you a legacy. I'll deny you... everything. Is that what I was put in your life to achieve? That? God, what a barren gift I bring you, Catherine. Literally.*

He could not make love to her, could not make a mother of her to make them a family, nor offer her any kind of real life. The frustration of it was beating both of them. Hard. He had no idea what to do, anymore.

*Never had the hard path seemed more clear. She should separate her life from mine, either by degrees or in one, severing cut. The only alternative is a life full of hiding in shadows, keeping secrets, and full of sacrifices. For her.*

To some degree, it was the same problem they'd always faced, but he knew that Catherine was now three years older, than she had been. The biological alarm clock they both knew she had was ringing hard, and it was a klaxon sound. And in that klaxon, there was a warning. They both heard it.

*We are, somehow, running out of time.*

The frustration of it all was beating both of them. Relentlessly. Vincent had no idea what to do, anymore. And it was wearing on him. On them.

*Would we have saved three years, if we'd just listened to Father's warnings, in the beginning?* His heart refused to believe it. But his head told him that that terrible conclusion was not so far wrong as he'd once believed.

Catherine had disagreed vehemently with him, again, over whether she should find a different life, and a different love. And this time, the disagreement had been loud.

Then, from out of the still night, a shrill, mechanical sound came to Vincent's ears. A very urgent one. The blonde head snapped up, inside his hood. And though he and Catherine had become loud with each other, he knew one thing for certain: *Not as loud as the crash is about to be*, he thought, stepping closer to a sheltering oak. If what Vincent thought was about to happen was indeed about to, someone else had also just run out of time.

The whine of the engine was high. Very high. *A motorcycle*. It had to be. No car, no matter how small, ever made that sound.

It was the sound of someone about to die.

While it may be true that his relationship with Catherine was teetering on a knife's edge, and it may be true that they were all but through...

From the sound of things, they were fixing to have immediate company.

Vincent's sharp eyes looked up toward road, tracking the weaving direction of the sound. *Why doesn't he slow down? Something is wrong. Something is very, very wrong.*

Wet or dry, the oft-deserted curve was hard to hold at high speeds. Vincent had found Catherine's mutilated body not too far from it, three years ago. For good or ill, it had never had a guard rail, and it occasionally had makeshift memorials to show for it.

*Slow down. You have to*, he thought, still listening, as the high sound pierced the otherwise quiet night.

A downhill swatch of grass led to a patchy greensward. It collected water from the road, and remained verdant - sometimes to the point of unruliness - thanks to the extra moisture. Weeds sprouted among daisies, small bushes, and the usual pines. It was hard to keep clear,

owing to the terrain, and the fact that it was off the walking paths. No one wanted to walk near the road.

Driving on it was another thing, however.

Vincent continued to stare, keeping his eyes fixed at the spot he knew he needed. After another moment, he saw it: A headlamp split the night, a single one, confirming Vincent's original suspicion. A black motorcycle and its equally ebony-clad rider crossed the yellow line, as they flew toward disaster.

The high whine of the engine was a shrill, steady scream, as the classic bike and its helmeted rider launched off the asphalt and arced over the damp grass. The bike landed hard, on the soft ground, and then just kept going. The back tire tore up everything it touched, then found purchase, on the slick grass.

For a moment, it looked to Vincent almost as if he was under attack. But the bike was trying to veer away from the thicker stand of oak, as its leather-jacketed rider tried desperately to slow it down with the brush and bracken, if not the brakes. He couldn't stop. He simply couldn't.

No effort the rider made was of any use. The momentum of man and machine could not be reduced by a patch of scrub and a prayer to a higher power. The grass muffled the sound he made, but had no real impact on the speed of the bike. He was headed toward a stand of pine trees, with no time left to correct his course.

Having to know that death was certain, the man yanked with impossible strength on the handlebars, forcing the sportster into a slide across the Central Park lawn. His speed was near ninety. The impact, when it came, was going to kill him.

The bike slid drunkenly, but then began to tumble, end over end, as the forward momentum was simply too great to be contained. Metal, leather, plastic, and rider all soared, seeming weightless, for a moment, before they came back down to earth with a sickening thud.

The impact stuttered the engine, as the bike's own forward motion threw everything forward some more. The rider was tossed like a rag doll as he gave up the handlebars, then hurtled across the grass, tumbling a few feet away from the Harley. The dark vehicle was throwing off pieces of itself, as it flew on. Machine and man spun, in an ugly, turning dance of mutual destruction.

The soft grass absorbed more of the harsh sounds of the shattered dark. The engine finally cut, as the gas tank and what was left bolted to the frame finally hit a pine tree, yet did not explode.

The man hit the tree next to it, at almost the same time. He fell to the side and laid prone. A bent, knobby wheel spun not far from his helmeted head. He was broad-shouldered, and a dark visor hid his features. A cracked visor, now.

Vincent hoped the man could have somehow survived the impact, though it seemed impossible. His body would have been literally smashed from the force. He was bleeding, especially on his side, his denim pants and jacket were ripped, everywhere. He had impacted a fairly sturdy pine with enough force to shake its length, while the bike impact had shattered the trunk of the other one, near its base.

Vincent ran to the scene, knowing he was probably too late to do anything but say a prayer over the dying.

He ripped the dying man's split helmet off his head, just trying to help him to breathe.

What he saw nearly stopped his own lungs from working.

*What?! What in the world...!*

A face nearly identical to his own looked back up at him. Dark brown eyes met blue. The muzzle was bloody, the fangs exposed, as he was trying to breathe, open-mouthed, against the pain.

"You are ... Shah." The last word was said on a groan.

The surprised words came to him from a mouth that looked almost exactly like Vincent's own, riven upper lip and all.

"Shah," the injured man repeated. "Where is... your mate? Near? Of ...course." The being in front of him gasped, with the labor of breathing, of speaking. He spit. Blood.

*You're... like me. Like me!* Vincent's stunned brain grappled with that fact.

It was a miracle the man was still alive; more of a miracle that he could speak, coherently. Vincent did not even *want* to calculate the miracle that he himself was, right now, looking at a severely injured, darker-haired version of his own face.

"I have no idea what you are saying." Vincent literally could not believe his eyes. Blood was showing through every tear of the rider's clothing.

*Don't die. You can't die.*

"Your she. Your ... wife," the struggling man repeated. The injured being held his sides together, with his arms tucked tight against his abdomen. "Your... home. Your lair." He tried again, and groaned. "We need...shelter."

*Yes. Yes, of course we do.* That much, Vincent understood.

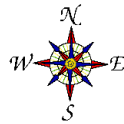
The man fell unconscious, blood from his side soaking the ground.

*No. No, no, no, no, no!* Vincent's mind screamed. *Like me. A man like me.* Known all of ninety seconds, and he was about to die.

Vincent could not carry him in a fireman's carry. Given the nature of his injuries, it could kill him. But he was heavy, Vincent realized, hefting him in a way that would have looked downright romantic, were it not for the biker leathers and the blood.

The twisted motorcycle lay where it was.

Vincent raced for the tunnels as if the very devil was on his tail. *Father has to save this man. He has to!*



## Chapter Two

### *Dark Kindred*

Father, if anything, was more shocked than Vincent was.

Though this creature wore his otherwise longish hair cut close to his neck, his hands, once clear of the thick motorcycle gloves, were the same as Jacob's astonished son's. Dark, thin hair lined his fingers. Familiar-looking nails tipped each one.

Nose, fangs, feet... all of it. It was Vincent, with straight, darker brown hair, brown eyes, slightly lighter skin tones, and a six-inch gash, along his left side.

The ribs were broken. Father needed no special education to ascertain that. Two badly so, where the handle bars had dug in on him, and the tree trunk had simply... shattered him.

"How in God's name did you—" Jacob began.

"Motorcycle crash. Tell me he'll live." Vincent was applying pressure to the worst of his wounds as Jacob readied silk, for stitching. Mary, summoned by Jamie, was assisting.

"Vincent, send Jamie to wake Peter," Father ordered. "Tell him to bring anything he needs for internal injuries, and a portable ventilator, in case we need to re-inflate his lung. You'll need to go with her. *Go!*" he commanded, taking over on applying pressure to the wound, while a startled Mary entered the room.

Vincent shook his head. "I want to be here—"

"Vincent!" Jacob's voice was sharp. "What I need, I need *now*. And I'll need you to carry at least some of the equipment, to get it here in time. Move!"

Vincent's anguish at leaving this man was a palpable thing. *Please. Please don't let him die. I beg you. I'll give anything.*

"Perhaps I could give him blood." Vincent clearly wanted to remain where he was.

"We've no idea if you're a match," Jacob replied, not liking anything he was seeing. Just the fact that his patient was unconscious was not a good sign.

"But I'm—"

"We can both see that you look alike. But even human beings have different blood types. I won't take that chance until there's no other option, and you're wasting *time* he doesn't *have*."

Vincent moved toward the door, doing as he was bid. "Father—," he began.

"You know I'll do everything possible," Jacob reassured, as a stunned Mary hastily brought over Jacob's surgical tray. They were both in "professional" mode. Vincent blessed them for it.

"Someone... like you..." She couldn't help but say it out loud.

Jacob's look wouldn't permit Vincent to stay. And he knew Father was right. No one could move faster than he could, laden. He looked back at the bleeding man on the table, and the two people he trusted more than any others, with his care.

*You have to save his life.* Vincent's eyes were a plea. *You have to save his life. Please!*

"Hurry." Jacob was cutting up the pants leg with razor-sharp scissors. He no longer spared Vincent a look, as a muscular thigh came into view. One with a deep cut, right above the knee. Blood soaked the dark hair. "Please hurry," Jacob implored, still working. "We've got to get this bleeding stopped," he said to Mary, who nodded.

Vincent left the room, running ... again ... like the devil was on his tail, barely able to stop long enough to tap the message to Jamie, on the pipes. He hurtled through the narrow passageways of his home, damning the distance, and praying for aid.

*Peter. You have to come. You have to help. I beg you,* he thought. *Someone like me. Someone like me!*

He sprinted through the tunnels as if his very life depended on it. Or, if not his, at least someone he valued just as much, at that moment.

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The operation itself was not actually long, between the two surgeons, the midwife, and the one Beast with the "soul of a doctor." Several bones were broken, not the least of which were his ribs, but his

helmet, his motorcycle jacket, a thickly banded leather vest, and the solid torso Father recognized as very much like Vincent's, had likely saved the man's life.

His lungs weren't punctured, though, along with his ribs, Jacob suspected that he had a cracked pelvis and collarbone, not to mention a dislocated shoulder and damage to the knee.

The soft grass and the leather gear had (mostly) saved his skin, though it could not save him from the impact fractures. A crack in the helmet indicated that his hardware had surely saved his skull, and certainly his life.

All in all, while the injuries were serious, they were not life-threatening, at this point, or at least neither attending physician thought they were. He had indeed lost some blood. Vincent was probably a perfect match for that, according to an amazed Peter Alcott. They held off on performing any kind of donation, however, in case Peter was wrong.

It was one of the many things they were unsure about, regarding their new patient.



"The two of you look close to the same age, don't you think?" Mary asked, wrapping a bandage around his knee. Stitches held the gash closed, just as they did on his forearm, and across his heavily bandaged ribs.

"Perhaps," Vincent answered, having no more of an idea of how he was going to age than he had about anything else. What if he looked very much as he did now at age 50, or for that matter, at 70? He had no idea, one way or the other.

"Nothing in his pockets but change. And not much of that," Father commented.

"Why would he have money at all? It's not like he can just go into a store," Mary asked.

"Some of the roads have tolls, where you throw change in. Or there's always a payphone," Peter guessed, having no other explanation for such a thing.

"What in the world was he even... *doing* on a motorcycle?" Mary wondered.

"Travelling," was all Vincent could answer. It was the only answer that made sense.

"Vincent?" Zack called from the doorway. "Mouse said you'd want this. It was taped inside the saddle bags."

Zack brought in a yellow piece of official looking paper, and handed to Peter, who was closest.

"The registration. It's a woman's name," he commented, eyes scanning the page. "Not that I thought he'd actually register a vehicle in his own." He passed the document to Jacob, as he finished setting up an IV.

The mysterious rider had no identification on him, anywhere. But the bike was indeed registered. Vincent could hardly believe it.

"Celeste Anne Blackmane of Billings, Montana. It's a PO box, on the address." Father read, handing it to Vincent.

Peter glanced at Zack. "You say Mouse found this?" he asked.

Zack nodded. "Inside the lid of one of the bags. Does it mean anything?" he asked, not quite able to stop staring.

"I have no idea," Vincent replied, returning it to Peter.

"We carried all the pieces of his motorcycle Below, just like you said," Zack informed. "Mouse is having a field day."

"It means the bike was bought someplace, and registered, just like any other vehicle," Peter replied, taking back the paper.

"Mouse says it all looks like a jigsaw puzzle, in his hallway," Zack said. "One with metal parts."

"Yes, well, tell him to be careful. And thank God this happened in the middle of the night, and away from any of the paths," Jacob replied.

"The license plate and registration are current. They were renewed some six months ago." Peter observed.

"Does *that* mean anything?" Mary asked, rubbing a tired hand across the back of her slender neck.

"Just that whoever he is, he's clearly had help, to survive," Jacob replied, massaging a spot on his forehead. He was getting a headache. And this was the first clue they had to the stranger's identity. "Zack, if Mouse... discovers anything else... you'll tell him to make sure he lets us know... immediately?"

"Sure thing, Father. Sure." Zack left the room.

Mouse had led the brigade of tunnel dwellers who had brought the broken bike and its attendant pieces down. The saddlebags had carried little more than a change of clothes, non-perishable food, and a bedroll. All of it had been gone through already.

"This gives us a place to start," Peter said, wondering at the registration. "Not that the license plate didn't do that," he added.

"I think this may be at least as interesting as any of that," Mary observed, pointing to their patient's right wrist.

He wore a silver bracelet, there. It had been hidden beneath his thick gloves, but once those had been removed, they'd all seen it. While it was definitely jewelry, bearing an entwined pattern that looked like knotted leaves, it had no clasp, and couldn't be removed. If there was any "identification" about him, that was it.

Vincent related the word he had used. "Shah. He said it. He... identified me with it."

"'King,' in Ancient Persian," Father said.

Translation was unnecessary. Vincent knew the origin of the word.

He watched the rise and fall of their patient's chest, intently. "Tell me he'll live; that you're certain." Vincent couldn't tear his eyes away from their charge. The unique, dark head all but covered the white pillowcase.

Peter sighed, his initial shock having worn off enough to allow him to give a clinical diagnosis. "If his ability to heal is like yours, he should, Vincent."

Jacob moved a stethoscope across a bruised chest, then put his hand on the man's head.

“Unless we’ve missed something,” Peter allowed. “This isn’t a hospital and I won’t lie to you. I’d love to be able to run a full series of x-rays, not to mention an MRI on him. But his pulse is steady and his breathing seems clear. And he’s young, like you. At least I think he is. Strong like you, from the looks of him.”

Vincent’s eyes couldn’t leave the unconscious form. “How can this be, Peter?” Vincent asked, as Peter reached into his medical bag and took out a vial of antibiotics.

“Considering we never even knew the answer to that question when you came to us, I have no idea how to answer you, now.

“Fever?” Peter asked Jacob, who was standing on the other side of the bed, checking their patient’s temperature. Jacob shook his head.

“There’s blood in his urine, but that’s probably from the impact, and not any real damage to the kidneys. We’ll monitor it,” Jacob replied.

“Trace amounts, or more?” Peter asked.

“Enough,” was Jacob’s noncommittal reply.

Vincent listened to the exchange. “Whatever he needs. Please.” He knew his voice sounded desperate. He was.

“We will, Vincent,” Jacob soothed. “We *are*. For now we’ll just... keep him warm. Keep an eye on him.”

*Keep an eye on him?* It was taking any eye off of him that proved to be a challenge, for Vincent. “What if... what if that isn’t enough?” Vincent asked.

“Then we’ll risk giving him blood, and pray it’s the right thing to do,” Peter replied. “His vitals are steady. It’s a good sign.”

Peter knew how important this was, to Vincent. They all did. Word had travelled fast, on the pipes, along with instructions to the tunnel dwellers to not to crowd into Father's surgery, gawking.

"You're sure he said nothing else? Nothing other than what you've told us?" Jacob asked, checking the bruised area on the collarbone.

Vincent shook his head. "He knew we needed to hide. He assumed Catherine was near, but he didn't say her name. He called her... my mate."

Father shook his greying head, having no idea what to make of it all.

"I wish I felt comfortable giving him more than just antibiotics," Peter said, administering those. They both knew how sensitive Vincent was to different drugs.

"If there's something we've missed, his temperature will likely rise. I want him watched for signs of fever. I don't suppose I need to even ask if that will be you," Father said to his nervous son.

"I will stay near." None of them thought anything else, on that score. The dark form still lay unmoving, on the table. "What if he doesn't wake up? What if I don't get to ask him..."

"Easy, Vincent," Peter's hand covered Vincent's shoulder, giving him a reassuring squeeze. "He's banged up, and badly. I won't lie to you. He's going to hate breathing deeply, for a while. But as severe as the injuries are, broken bones heal. If he has your physiology, well... that's a plus."

Vincent nodded, straightening an already straight blanket, over the man's feet.

Peter stepped back and stretched, tiredly. "Getting up in the middle of the night for an emergency used to mean I had a C-section to

perform,” he told Jacob. “What an incredible night. And I owe you five dollars. Vincent isn’t the only one. Now, we know.”

Jacob nodded. “Of all the things I thought this night would bring us, I’m certain this wasn’t on my list. Thank you, Peter.”

Jacob checked the IV needle, to the man’s furred skin. The IV stand was a refurbished coat rack. Vincent watched the contents of the bag drip.

“The antibiotics will fight any infection. As to the rest... it’s just something to help him stay hydrated, Vincent. If he’s like you, he’s sensitive to drugs,” Jacob explained.

Vincent nodded, keeping close, watching the reassuring rise and fall of the stranger’s chest some more.

“Catherine,” he realized. *Catherine doesn’t know*. “Someone should go and tell Catherine.”

Peter checked his watch. “I talked to her on the phone last night. She’s due in court this morning, I believe. I’ll have someone get a note to her. I don’t want to say too much in it, just in case. And I don’t want to alarm her.”

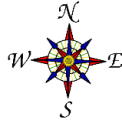
Vincent nodded at that.

“Perhaps she can find out more about the registration on the motorcycle,” Mary commented.

Father agreed that the idea was a good one. “It would at least be a place to start.”

“How can he be here?” Vincent wondered aloud. “How? And who is he?”

No one on the room had an answer for him.



### Chapter Three

#### *Shah*

Vincent sat near his astonishing guest's bedside for the next hour, as Jacob, Peter, and occasionally Mary, came in and out. Other tunnel residents peeked in, from time to time, but obeyed Jacob's strictures. Vincent could sometimes hear them whispering, in the hall.

Vincent willed the man's eyes to open, yet knew they wouldn't for a while, yet.

Peter added another round of antibiotics to the IV bag. But just as with Vincent's unique physiology, they could do little more to help him. Painkillers were ill-advised, given what they knew about Vincent's sensitivity to them. The surgery had closed the open wounds. They'd firmly taped the man's ribs, and wrapped his knee. A swelling wrist also got a swatch of bandaging. The minor cuts had been treated along with the major ones. They watched his ears and nose for more signs of blood, looking for concussive injuries.

So far, there were none.

Vincent templed his fingers and rested his elbows on his knees, waiting. Mary swore he barely blinked, as he stared.

Peter left, and wrote a note for Benny to deliver to Catherine. When he re-entered the room, he checked their patient's temperature, again, and inside his ears.

"Still no sign of fever. I think the blood around his nose and mouth was from the impact, not from anything... internal." They both knew that was good.

"He's... very still," Vincent said.

"As are you, when you're recovering from something," Peter replied, trying to give Vincent hope. *Hang on, Vincent. Just... hang on.*

"I just came down from where Mouse has the wreckage of his bike, laying in pieces." Peter shook his greying head. "He's lucky his lung didn't need to be re-inflated," he said, staring at their unique patient.

"Vincent? I know this is a strange question, but do you have any... empathic sense of this ... person?"

Vincent shook his head. "No. I was in the park, near the heavier stand of pine trees, not far from where the road bends. I did not... sense him, if that's what you're asking. I heard the motorcycle, before I saw him," Vincent replied, repeating the story yet again. "I could tell he was in trouble, going too fast, yet couldn't slow, for some reason."

"Sounds like the throttle stuck, or something similar. You're certain no one else saw you?"

"There was no one nearby. It's a miracle that no one else heard the crash."

*Seems to be a night for miracles,* Peter thought.

"Some people may have heard something, but this is New York," Peter offered. "People learn to ignore a lot of things, as long as they don't relate directly to them, figuring someone else will take care of it."

Jamie came in, bearing a breakfast tray for Vincent, which they both knew he would ignore.

Father entered behind her, fussed over his patient, some more, then took the stranger's pulse, again. "He's holding steady." The words were to ease Vincent's mind, as much as anything else.

"No change, I take it."

Peter shook his head.

Jacob made notes on a chart. "Jamie, the sun is up. Make sure Mouse got all the pieces of that motorcycle," Jacob instructed, setting it back down. There was much to consider, here. They were now actively trying to hide that the accident had happened, as they sheltered this injured man.

"Cullen, Kipper, Zach and Brooke are all up there, now, combing for anything we missed. I think we got it all."

Jamie had been on sentry duty when everything had occurred. They didn't want anyone finding pieces of the accident if they could help it. The broken trees were bad enough.

"It's been such an... incredible night," Vincent said, still staring at their patient.

Jamie nodded and put a steadying hand on Vincent's shoulder.

"It will be all right, Vincent. You know we'll all do everything we can. We're all praying for him."

He squeezed her fingers, grateful for her support, knowing it was shared, by many.

"I know you are. That you all are. Please... thank Mouse and the others for me. I don't think I've ever... needed all of you more than I do, now." Vincent blessed her for being the strong, brave woman she was. From the moment she'd seen him enter the culvert with the

injured stranger in his arms, she'd done nothing but help. They all had.

The beautiful young woman couldn't help but stare at the bed, and its unconscious occupant. "Someone like you. Who would have thought?"

"Indeed. Surely not me," Vincent said, admitting what they had all come to assume: that he was the only being in the world like himself.

Jamie gave him a quick hug, cast another curious look back toward the stranger, then left to do as Father had instructed. As she went out, Mary came in.

"Any change?" she asked. Jacob shook his head.

"Even as I stare at him... still... I can hardly believe it." Vincent shook his head in wonderment.

Peter went through their guest's shredded clothing, not for the first time, though this time, not searching for what was in the pockets. He held up the jacket, showing the label.

"His jeans, his jacket, the bike... They're all from a store, somewhere. Like you, he's had... help, to survive." He picked up a pair of black leather gloves. "Italian leather. These are expensive." He showed the inside tag.

"Do you think Catherine could find out who he is, somehow, using them?" Jacob asked.

Peter shrugged. "If they were bought with cash, maybe not. They're pricey, not 'rare.' Two different things."

"I don't know anything about this." Peter indicated the arm that held the bracelet. "It might be engraved, on the inside. Though we've no way to know, as it is."

Mary sorted through the stack of clothes, most of them cut away from their patient.

"His socks were knitted by hand. And by someone who knows how," she declared, pulling the yarn to show the tight, even stitching.

"There's an extra row on the toe for Vincent's nails. Just like I do." She showed the row of padding she indicated, earning a nod from the men in the room.

"So, someone's definitely helping him," Peter reasoned.

"I'd say that's a given, considering," Mary agreed.

"His boots have seen some wear." Jacob was as curious as anyone else. "But then, I could say that about everything he was wearing. It was of good quality. But none of it seemed ... new."

Vincent rose from the chair, frustration in the movement. "When will he wake *up*, Father?" Vincent asked, needing to know. Badly. He was beyond agitated, and the passing time was doing nothing to restore his sense of calm.

Jacob's reply was a considered one. "Anyone else, and I'd say the better part of a day, at least. But... who knows, really? A few more hours, I should think, if he is like you." Jacob reasoned.

"He's been very still."

"As are you, when you're hurt," Jacob echoed Peter's observation.

"We couldn't give him any sedatives, considering what we know about how you respond to those. Try to be patient, Vincent. He may heal quickly, and the damage may not be what we originally feared, but... go easy. He'll be in pain, when he awakens."

*Go easy. Easy to say, when you were Father.*

Vincent nodded, however, and rubbed his hands over his tired eyes. Though none of them had had a full night's sleep, he'd been up all night. Vincent knew that right now, his fatigue was fighting with his adrenaline. It would be all right. He'd get a second wind, soon.

He eyed the silver bracelet that cuffed the man's wrist, wondering if it was significant, in some way, to him.

*I'd give anything for the chance to speak with you. Anything.*

Vincent stood at the foot of the bed, willing the brown eyes to open, again.

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When they finally did, a few hours later, they took in their surroundings cautiously. Vincent's patient tested his ability to breathe - also cautiously. He winced, if he tried to do that with any depth.



"You called me a Shah," Vincent began without preamble. He had no will for niceties. "I have never heard that word, outside of a reference to a king, in the Middle East," Vincent said, to his injured guest.

The dark being so like himself, yet not, looked at him. He spoke with slow care, but he spoke. "You are... Shah. As am I. Some... few others," the slightly raspy voice replied. Brown eyes met blue ones, questioning.

"Others. There are... others?" Vincent was stunned, as he pounced on the word.

The man on the bed looked very unsure of his situation all of a sudden. Understandably.

"Some... few," the man repeated guardedly, suddenly not wanting to reveal too much to this stranger. *He did not know what he was? How was that even possible?* he thought.

"We... are Shah," he repeated, carefully indicating both Vincent and himself, with a slight movement of his free hand. His shoulder was sore, and he cringed as he moved it.

"Where is... your woman?" he asked, looking carefully around the now-empty room. Jacob was grabbing forty winks, Peter had gone to the clinic, for more medicines, and Mary was... Vincent admitted he wasn't sure where Mary was.

"You asked of her before. Why?" Now it was Vincent who felt cautious, and protective of what he knew.

The injured man tried to shrug, then thought the better of that gesture. It was excruciating. "Who else... provides your home, your... lair?" he asked simply, looking confused, as he did so.

Vincent did not begin to know how to explain his tunnel life, and how it related to Catherine, to this stranger.

"My... family... is here, Below," Vincent said, hoping that was enough of an explanation.

Vincent's unexpected patient nodded. Gingerly. *Family. Yes.* That word they both clearly understood.

The injured man glanced up at stone roof over his head, and didn't seem overly surprised by it. "We're... still in... New York?" he asked. Vincent realized that from beneath the ground, he would have no way to know. A distant train rumbled past, confirming their proximity to those.

"Yes. Beneath the city. Beneath where I found you. There is a system of ... tunnels, all around us."

The man took this in, and cautiously scanned the room, clearly expecting to see someone else there. "Your woman should have... sensed your alarm... Come to your side."

The man on the bed looked... confused by what he saw and heard from Vincent. That was the only word for it. He looked a bit as though he had fallen down the rabbit hole, and come up in something dreamed by Lewis Carroll. Like he was forcing himself to stay awake so he could understand the situation in which he'd suddenly found himself.

"She does not live with me," Vincent explained.

The deep brown eyes looked around again, now clearly puzzled. His glance fell to the water pitcher, by the bed. Vincent saw him try to reach for it.

*If I'm not careful, I'll end up killing him anyway,* he thought, getting there first.

"Water? You want water?" Vincent poured the cool water into a mug. He had to bolster the injured man up carefully, so he could drink. The injured man grunted with pain, then settled, a pillow behind his head, for elevation.

He drank a mug full, then half another. It seemed to help with his wakefulness. He laid his head back on the pillow, and took Vincent's measure. then he spoke, his voice was less strained than it had been.

"What is your... age, stranger? If you... don't mind my asking. I am Seth, by the way." He held out his hand as best he could.

Vincent took it. The grip was strong, for a man who'd left a motorcycle half strewn across Central Park. Vincent remembered the sight of him wrestling the bike down into a slide. The hand that gripped his held power, and had seen work. There were callouses on his palm, and a decent scar half-hidden by the fur on the back. Vincent felt an almost primal instinct to trust this dark being, who looked so like himself.

"I am Vincent. Thirty-three years old, in January."

"Thank you... for saving me." Seth eyed his unexpected savior. He had seen only a few other Shah in his life to whom he was not directly related. This fair, golden being with piercing blue eyes before him looked like none of them.

In spite of Seth's discomfort, he roused. They'd patched his wounds. He was grateful.

"Hell, it hurts to breathe," he complained.

"Your ribs were broken, on one side," Vincent said. "And your shoulder dislocated. My father says your collar bone is likely fractured. Along with a few... other places."

"Feels like it." He laid his head back on the pillowcase a moment, breathing shallowly, but more steadily. He eyed the IV bag.

"There are antibiotics in there. But nothing for pain," Vincent explained.

"Wise of you." Seth looked at the stitches holding a gash in his arm closed.

"Did you... do all this?"

Vincent shook his head. "I only helped. It is a miracle you are alive, considering."

Seth agreed silently with that. "How long... was I out?"

Vincent eyed the pillar candle. "Five hours. Close to six."

His eyelids closed, over the knowledge. "My woman... Corinne. She will be sensing something bad has happened. Be... coming here." He said it with grim certainty. He reached for Vincent's arm, and held it fast. "She must be... allowed to enter, must be brought to my side." On this point, he sounded insistent. "Vincent... let her come. She will... fight her way in, if she must."

He gasped at the effort of speech. Awareness of his injuries was making him less comfortable. "Please... you must... allow her safe passage." He was forcing himself to stay awake, to receive Vincent's assurance.

"We are nearly impossible to locate, without help," Vincent replied.

Seth looked confused, again. "Could you not ... find your woman, she find you, if you needed to?"

Vincent considered the question, and nodded, after a moment. "Yes, I could find her." He doubted, however, that Catherine could find him. Though she had a certain sense of him, she'd not been able to locate him by their bond when he'd had his ordeals with either the Silks or the scientists who'd captured him. But finding her? That was easy.

"We will make Corinne welcome when she arrives." Vincent couldn't believe they were having this odd conversation.

Content with that answer, Seth seemed to relax, and then to drowse.

Vincent had to have more, before the man fell asleep, again. It was selfish, he knew. But he had waited all his life, and never thought to have this moment, or any other like it.

"There are others? Like me? Like us? Please. I have no wish to hurt you, or them. It's just that... I thought myself all alone, in this world." Vincent's voice betrayed his desperation. Years of it.

The dark head lolled on the pillowcase.

"Others. Yes. The ... others..." his voice began to drift.

"Seth." Vincent said his name firmly. "Please. I do not want to tire you. But I *must* know."

Seth's brow wrinkled again, perplexed. *Ow*. That made his head hurt. And that roused him, again. "Where are your ... parents, Vincent?" He tried to sit up, a little. *Something is... not right, here*, he thought. Vincent could see the question, in his brown eyes.

Vincent shook his head. "Dead, perhaps. Or gone. I don't know. I was found as a newborn, wrapped in rags, outside St. Vincent's Hospital,

here in New York. Taken Below, by kind people. I have been raised here."

Eyes that wanted to close looked around the chamber again. *Raised? Under the ground?* He heard the noises of the pipes, and took in the very large, unexpected benefactor before him.

"Orphan. No... You can't be." He clearly marveled at that news. Enough to try and sit up a little more, in spite of the pain.

"Don't move so much. Your injuries..."

"An orphan?" He stared at the huge, golden being before him. "Such a thing is not ... not possible for us, Vincent." Seth stared, yet sensed no lie in him. "Our children... they will die, without... without the milk of the Shahnna, our... sworn mate."

*Children? His kind could sire children?* Vincent was stunned to the point of stillness. After a moment, he managed to ask the obvious question: "Are there... females like us?" He barely dared to give voice to it.

At this, Seth almost tried to chuckle, and clearly thought the better of it. "Females?... Like us? Oh, lord... wouldn't that be a... sight." He pressed his upper arm against his ribcage. "No. All Shah are ... males. Our mates are women. Human... women."

Vincent could tell Seth was both confused and astonished by what Vincent didn't know about himself, and trying to both help, and process both their situations.

For Seth's part, again, it felt like Lewis Carroll had again just stepped into his life, bent on writing his oddest chapter, yet. The man before him, his savior and benefactor, and clearly a noble prince in this

Shahdom... He really had no idea what he was? It was beyond amazing.

"Your home. Down here? Always?" Seth asked. Vincent nodded his reply.

He wanted to ask about Seth's home, but even from a half-sitting position, the brown eyes started to close, and the head drooped. Vincent knew he'd pushed too far, and helped him ease back down.

"Lie back, Seth. You're badly hurt."

"Tired. I must... sleep," he admitted. "Corinne..."

"We will welcome her, when she comes. Vincent pulled up the sheet to cover this beyond exhausted man. "Rest, Seth. Please rest. I'm sorry I tired you." He carefully adjusted the pillow.

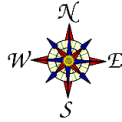
"S'okay," Seth replied, his eyelids drifting closed, once more.

Vincent sat on the stool, praying Seth wouldn't sleep for long.

*Women. "Our mates are human women." Our children die without their milk.*

Vincent was stunned to the point of speechlessness and stillness.

*I want to know more. And already I know so much more than I ever did,* he thought.



## Chapter Four

### *All Our Homes and Habitats*

Mouse sat among the shattered pieces of the motorcycle, taking a mental inventory of the parts. There was little sense in trying to repair anything, until he'd straightened the bent frame as much as he could. It was a job accomplished with pulleys and raw muscle, with Cullen on one end of a rope, while he and Jamie were on the other.

"You've picked quite the job, my friend," Cullen said to Mouse, as he brought over a bent tailpipe. "You sure you want to take this on?"

Mouse eyed the metal. "Something's broken, something's fixed. Just a puzzle. Not too hard for Mouse."

"I still can't believe it," Jamie said. "Another person like Vincent! Isn't it amazing?"

"I'll say," Cullen replied, laying the pipe roughly where it would go.

"Who'd have thought—"

"Not so strange," Mouse said, putting a screwdriver to the gas gauge. The glass cover was cracked, but it was otherwise salvageable.

"You don't think so?" Jamie asked.

Mouse shrugged. "Got Vincent. Why not more?" he asked, setting it next to a brake cable.

"Why not more? Because he's the only one we've ever seen!" Cullen replied.

Mouse shrugged again. "Never saw an elephant. Doesn't mean there aren't any."

Cullen rolled his eyes at Jamie, and indicated where the gauge attached to the bike. "I'd say Vincent is a bit more rare than an elephant, Mouse," the older man replied.

Mouse frowned. "Still... only one Vincent. Like one Cullen."

Jamie smiled at that. "And one Mouse," she added. "Do you really think you can fix this thing?"

Mouse reconnected the gauge to where it had torn away.

"Easy."

"Do you think Vincent will go see where this man lives?" Jamie asked Cullen. She didn't catch the dark look that crossed Mouse's face.

"Maybe," Cullen allowed, bending over to put the tail light assembly near the rear wheel. "You gotta admit, he must be curious."

"I know I would be," Jamie said. "Is this part of the tail light?" she asked, holding up a part.

"Nope. That's the housing for the headlamp. Goes on the front," Cullen replied.

"There's nothing to attach it to."

"Must have sheared off."

"Vincent won't... leave Mouse," Mouse spoke up, taking the headlamp from Jamie. "Vincent is my friend." His scowl spoke volumes. Too late, Jamie realized her error in bringing it up.

"I... I'm sure he won't. I was just... just thinking maybe for a visit. You know. Like... go there, come back here," she comforted her friend.

Cullen eyed the exchange. "You're going to need a bracket to screw that on with. Might have to wire it up. Rig something."

"Got wire. Got Vincent. Friends." Mouse said, rifling through his tool box.

"Vincent's going to be okay with this," Cullen said. "No problem, Mouse." He put his hand on the blonde tinker's shoulder. "He wouldn't leave us. Not for real." Cullen gave the shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"Okay, good. Okay, fine," Mouse replied, reaching for the wire cutters. His face still wore a frown.

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Two hours later, Jacob's newest patient took as deep a breath as he was able, feeling every one of his injuries, as he called on his considerable strength. Vincent had not left his side since they'd brought him down.

Seth drank broth, and noticed that the IV bag had been changed. This one was newly full.

"Your... mate. Corinne. She has not yet arrived," Vincent told him, as Seth looked around.

"It's a long drive. She'll have to come in at the border. And if she gets pulled over for speeding, it will take longer," he said, realizing that was a possibility, considering.

"You've... known her long?" Vincent ventured the question.

"Long enough," he replied ruefully. "I knew her when we were both kids."

*What an incredible story that must be, Vincent thought. Did you always know she was the one?*

"I don't even... begin to know what to ask," Vincent said.

"Let me ask one," Seth said, speaking with less fatigue. "I told you our mates are human women. But you say yours does not live with you?" He looked around the hospital room, and Vincent shook his head.

"No. Her home is... near. But she does not live with me."

"In our society... that is... unheard of, for the most part ... though it does happen." He sipped the broth, and a subway train rattled past. He set the mug down, carefully.

"And you are in New York! Good lord... are you *trying* to get caught?"

It was asked with an almost sardonic kind of humor. One Vincent appreciated, considering.

"Not intentionally. Though it... has happened, a time or two," Vincent said companionably, a touch of wry humor in his own voice.

"And they call *me* reckless, for travelling," Seth marveled.

Vincent had to smile at the statement. He'd never really considered himself the reckless type, though he knew Father might disagree.

"Where do you live?" Vincent asked. "Clearly not New York. If you do not object to my knowing."

His voice held a touch of pride. "Canada, of course," Seth answered him, as if no other place, or at least few other places, were possible.

"North Edge... Logging Camp. In a cabin... tucked near the Triple... Falls... not far from the ... Great Mountains." The pauses in his voice were catches of discomfort. It hurt to breathe in, too much.

*Father would have my head for all of this.* Vincent knew he'd only just left the room, and would be back, shortly.

"I'm... pushing you. I'm sorry," Vincent said.

Seth looked at him squarely. "I promise... you're not more curious than I am."

"You said there were no foundlings, of our kind."

Seth shook his head as much as he dared. "There aren't. You're... unique, in that. It's unheard of. You must be... very... tenacious, of life."

Vincent had no idea what to say about that.

"It must be... beautiful, where you're from." *To live above the ground, near a waterfall.* Vincent could hardly imagine seeing his own falls, glimmering in full sunlight.

"The winters are long, but... yes. It's beautiful. My father ... founded it." Seth said, again, with no small amount of pride. The dark head laid back against the white pillow. The burst of conversation had been better than their prior one. But he was tiring, again.

*As my father did, here.* Vincent realized the two of them might have at least a little in common.

Seth's eyelids began to droop, and his voice started to fade. He was clearly exhausted. "Not that I have anything against... caves." He was sliding down as he eyed the stones over his head. "My mate simply wanted... better ... once the children came along."

*Children. Plural.* The word and its implications still rocked Vincent's understanding.

Seth's fatigue was obvious, now, and his heavy eyelids shut. Vincent knew he had pushed too hard, again, for all he wanted to know.

*Stop this. He's going to recover. There will be time. There will be.*

"Rest, Seth." Vincent apologized for his need to keep the man awake.

"We are caring for you. My Father is a fine doctor, and so is a family friend."

Jacob entered the room bearing a tray and some more medical supplies.

The eyes half-opened. Apparently, Seth wasn't the only one who could say something surprising. "You have a doctor... a real doctor ... here?" He forced himself back to awareness as he slightly turned his head toward Jacob, who set down the tray and took his pulse. "My God. A real doctor."



Jacob nodded, and examined Seth's eyes.

"You're... a real physician?" Seth wanted to be clear.

Jacob nodded. "So they tell me. And you are very lucky to be alive, young man." He could see his patient's fatigue. "Sleep. Try not to... overtax yourself. You're healing. But you've been badly injured."

Brown eyes took in both Vincent and Jacob, before the eyelids drifted down. He tried to stay awake, but couldn't. "A doctor... You have no idea. You are... so... fortuna..." The word fell away as Seth stumbled back into the land of sleep, dreams, and healing.

Vincent simply stared, dumbstruck.

*A family. Seth had a wife. And children of his own. He was a father. He had a home, somewhere. He had... everything. Everything except a real doctor, apparently.*

"He was coherent?" Jacob asked Vincent.

"Very," his son replied. The knowledge of Seth's family still shook him.

"Awake for how long, this time?" Jacob picked up the clipboard, preparing to make making notes.

"Fifteen minutes or so. I think." Vincent had honestly not timed it. He'd been too anxious to speak with Seth. "He drank broth. A cup and a half," Vincent indicated the mug still on the side table.

Jacob wrote it down, nodding. He knew it would do no good to ask Vincent not to question their patient. No part of him could resist the urge. In the last eight hours, his son's life had shifted on its axis, as the world Above was just hitting its noon stride.

*Catherine. Now there was even more to tell her. She would want to know, obviously.*

"Father." The word came out in a whisper. "He has a family." It was an awestruck revelation.

Jacob looked up and saw the deep sense of amazement in his son's still frame. Vincent's eyes did not leave Seth. Jacob knew without asking that Vincent did not mean a surrogate father and half-adopted siblings and a patchwork collection of cast-off children. Those were things Vincent had. And they would not cause this look of... astonishment on his face.

When Jacob spoke, his voice was soft, and perhaps a little apologetic. "I think that, whoever this man is, he has had a ... great many things you have not had, my son."



## Chapter Five

### *A Rare and Ancient Race*

Seth slept for another three hours, aware of subtle noises and soft-footed movements, all around him. A tapping sound on the pipes that ran along the walls quieted, but never seemed to entirely cease. Voices drifted in and out of his awareness, most speaking in hushed whispers. An older woman sponged his forehead, her fingers competent, and cool. Seth continued to sense Vincent's presence, close by. An older man they called "Peter" checked his pulse and injected antibiotics into his IV.

*Doctor. They have a doctor.* Seth tried to rouse himself once more, but gave up. Oblivion beckoned, and he followed it down. Another hour passed.

Consciousness came and went, but each journey back up to awareness bore more fruit, for everyone. He was increasingly aware that his ribs hurt, and there was no real way to get comfortable, from that. He couldn't avoid breathing, after all. His shoulder ached abominably, the collar bone much less so. His knee was stiff. It was probably the injured part of him that hurt the least.

When he awoke fully the next time, he was not astonished to see the big blonde Shah sitting right where he had been. Vincent helped Seth drink some more broth, then eased him upright, just a bit. The soreness was worse. His muscles had had time to realize the torture he had put them through.

"You were amazed to hear that my father was a doctor," Vincent said.

"Your... adoptive father. Yes."

"Why?" Vincent asked.

"Where I live... those are... non-existent. We're loggers. Remote. It's a distant encampment, thanks to... us."

Vincent nodded his understanding at the need for secrecy. The fact that this man lived his life above the ground did not mean he did it outside certain confines.

"Most there can set a broken bone or deliver a baby. But to have a real doctor... that is rare. My mother would give half our land for one."

It made sense. Living remotely, medical professionals would be hard to come by. Vincent appreciated anew just how much – and how often, he owed his life to Jacob.

"You mentioned Corinne. A family." Vincent sat, raptly attentive.

"You... have a... family? Children of your own?" His voice was clearly

amazed. And he was bent on taking up the conversation right where they'd left it.

"Vincent," Seth pushed away a proffered cup. *Enough of this, whatever this was. This Shah has saved my life.* And he seemed as lost as a babe in the woods Seth called home.

"Yes. I have a family. And children. A Shah *needs* his family." He stressed the word against his growing aches. "Needs his ... his tribe, or his helpers, his people ... those who support him, whom he supports, in turn. Needs them like he needs air, if he is to survive." He checked Vincent for signs of understanding, and was pleased to see that at least this time, there was some.

Vincent clearly had that in his own life. Seth wasn't certain if he realized the significance of that relationship, though he probably did.

"Your woman, she... grounds you, she centers you. Your people... you protect them. They protect you. It is... a trade," Seth explained.

*Your woman grounds you.* Vincent remembered the times when Catherine had done just that, for him. Back when he'd been owned by Paracelsus' narcotics, or even by sheer rage. Catherine had always helped to bring him back to himself.

Seth stretched out his good leg, experimentally. Sore, but unbroken. Of course, it was easy to say that when you weren't putting weight on your knee...

"You... have such an arrangement, then? In your home? In Canada? You have... Helpers?" Vincent emphasized the word, giving it weight.

"Yes. Your family, your... people... nothing is more important."

Vincent nodded at that.

If your people fail to keep you safe..." Seth gathered his thoughts. "If a tribe fails the Shah... the tribe scatters; the society... dies. At least, that's how the story is told to us. My mother says it's happened, more than once. That some of the lost... tribes, or settlements... that's why." He let the words sink in.

"There are stories? About us?" Vincent clearly wanted those.

Seth gave a bare nod. "If there are any written records, like diaries, they stay within the families that own them."

*Like my journals. Which will stay here.* Vincent couldn't help but make the parallel.

"My mother has ours, but that was only started a generation or so ago; many of my ancestors kept near the Aleuts, in Alaska. They don't write in English."

Vincent bet there were some interesting totems, where he was from.

Seth adjusted the sore shoulder. *There. That was better.* "I thought you... knew all this... simply by virtue of your age... when I first saw you," Seth stated.

Vincent shook his head, in response. "I know nothing. I was found. Raised here. You are the first person like myself I have ever seen. *Ever.*" Vincent emphasized the last point, even as he realized it was a thing he would never be able to say, again.

Wonderment filled the brown eyes. "I can't... imagine what that must have been like." Seth let the sentence stand, let it have its weight. He knew he was about to change Vincent's entire view of the world.

"For me, it was the opposite. I have brothers. I'm one of three Shah, the middle one. My life has always had... people like us in it. Too many, sometimes."

Vincent could not imagine such a thing; such a... luxury.

"Of course, every Nomad probably says that," he qualified.

"Nomad? Why a..."

"My father says every family needs one. We're scouts, basically. Love to travel. Not happy for too long, with the same view. It keeps me out of Zachariah's way. My older brother is more a Protector. He can smell an evil intention a mile back. The youngest, Joshua, is more a Charismatic. He's got a touch of everything, but nothing dominates."

*There are... types of us? And you have names for them? Or are you just describing how different you are, in personality?* Vincent shook his head, in wonder.

"My brothers and I don't necessarily see eye to eye on everything," Seth continued. "My mother says it's just because we're territorial, by nature. I'm not so sure, sometimes."

Vincent nodded, understanding that there were indeed intricacies to be had, in sibling relationships. "I had no one like me. But I did have a brother, growing up. We were close. Sometimes."

Seth nodded his understanding. "Growing up... I got along better with other boys than I did my oldest brother. We... fought."

Vincent remembered the times he and Devin had done the same thing.

"I'm sorry to hear it."

Seth shrugged, before he remembered he wasn't supposed to do that. "Ow... When we are... old enough, we pray that the bond will help us to find our life mate, likely among those we already know, or encounter."

Seth felt as if he was having to “parent” this uninformed creature, who was barely younger than he was. “And you don’t know... any of this ... do you?”

Vincent took in his words, and the sympathy that accompanied them. “I ... not like you mean. I know I have a ... life mate.” Vincent stated. Seth inclined his head, careful not to nod, thanks to a headache that was coming on.

“That is good. We... take care of our people. They take care of us.”

Vincent well understood the symbiotic nature of such a relationship. He’d been living one all his life.

“It is my... duty to provide my community with the... the Shah that will succeed me,” Seth explained.

*You feel you have a duty to...*

Seth smiled, even though his jaw was uncomfortable. Fangs showed. “His name is Daniel. He gives his mother hell.” Seth said it proudly. “I don’t carry pictures of them, for obvious reasons,” the darker man concluded.

*No. No, of course he wouldn’t.* But Vincent would have dearly loved to see one. “Seth... what are we?” Vincent barely dared ask the question. Jacob and Peter both entered the room, quietly.

Seth tipped his head to one side. *Ow. again.* Given the soreness of his collarbone and the increased discomfort of his headache, he wasn’t sure if he shouldn’t just lie immobile. *Between nearly killing myself on the back of the bike, and meeting you, this is turning into one hell of a day. How to even answer such a question?*

“What are we? That’s like asking a man ‘what is a man,’ isn’t it?” Seth returned, answering Vincent as best he could. “We are Shah.” Again,

he had to stop himself from lifting his shoulders in a negligible shrug. "An ancient race. Here since the aborigines of this land. Earlier, perhaps. Who can say?"

*The answer I've longed for, all my life. And such a simple one.* Vincent thought. *Such a... we sound like we belong to this world, not a mistake, but... part of it. We sound like we ... fit, somehow. Secretly, but... here.*

"They even see us, from time to time," Seth added. He raked his good hand through his dark hair, keeping it pushed back.

Suddenly, stories of Sasquatch seemed all too believable, to the three men.

"Are all the Shah in Canada?" Vincent felt more off balance than he'd ever been, even as his world view changed, and expanded. *Was I simply in the wrong place all my life?*

"God, no. But we like unpopulated... or at least lightly populated... places. For obvious reasons."

"That would make sense," Peter said, taking a pen light from his pocket. "I'd like to examine you, please. How's the headache?"

"Comes and goes. Mostly comes."

Peter checked his patient's pupils. "How bad?"

"Not bad if I keep my head still."

Peter and Jacob exchanged a glance. "I want you to tell me if you have a nosebleed."

Jacob checked his ears. "They're clear. Let us know if the pain increases, Seth."

"Two doctors in the same room with me. Hmph. More than I've seen in a lifetime, and here you are. I will," he promised.

"Your color looks better," Jacob stated.

"My strength comes and goes, too," Seth complained.

"Considering what you just went through, I'm not surprised about that. So... do all the... er... Shah live in Canada?" Jacob asked.

"No. And don't say 'All the Shah' like there are hundreds of us, or even dozens. We are few. We are rare. Obviously."

*Yes. Obviously.*

His low voice took on a somber edge. "Sometimes... I think... the breed will die altogether. When that happens, some of the Indians think it will mean the end of the world." Seth paused to let the significance of that remark take hold.

"We'll just have to make sure that doesn't happen any time soon, then," Peter replied, adjusting the blankets.

Seth was tiring again, but struggling to continue. Clearly, he realized Vincent was speaking to the first man he'd ever seen, like himself. Seth knew that his own upbringing had been downright crowded, by comparison.

"Where are... the others?" Vincent dared to ask it.

"Anywhere they want to be. It is a free country, even for us."

Peter and Jacob listened, as they made notes on his chart.

"Most keep to near where they were born, but not all. We tolerate the cold, and the places others don't go as much. Let's see," he began ticking off places on his heavily nailed fingertips. "South Dakota,

Montana caves, Alaska, used to be Minnesota, but they may all be gone.”

Vincent was stunned by each new revelation. Four different places in the world where a man like him might be living, might be raising his family. It seemed like a multitude, after a life spent in a unique kind of isolation.

“Then there’s my family in Canada. Perhaps ... one or two others I know of here and there, that have fallen into legend...”

He was making a list. A list of people like Vincent. “Amazed” didn't begin to cover Vincent's reaction. He scrambled, mentally. *How to get to those places? How to see those people?*

"We tend to stay separated, for the most part, though we raise our families close by. We are... territorial, for lack of a better word. My mother is right about that. We like to explore. Like to... claim territory. Or at least to understand it.”

Vincent’s need to do just that now made a very different kind of sense to him. Going Above, into the park, and even into certain parts of the city, as dangerous as it was, had always filled a deep-seated need, inside him. As had going into the deep places of his home. Vincent now looked at those forays in a new light. *I’m... territorial*. He tested out the word, mentally, and realized how well it fit.

“So we are explorers, yet... rare.” Vincent now wondered why there weren’t more people like him, after spending a lifetime wondering if he was the only one. “How rare?”

Seth sighed, then thought the better of a deeply indrawn breath.

“Only our sons look like us, Vincent. And... not all of them.”

*So my children might look like me. Or they might not.* It was information he knew he'd consider at length, later. And the fact that he'd just used the words 'my children' in a mental sentence was not lost on him.

"Daughters take after their mothers, though some of them experience the bond very deeply."

Seth tried to lift his arm to rotate his shoulder. He winced, then thought the better of the motion.

"I do want you to sleep, some more," Jacob cautioned.

"I only sleep a few hours a night, normally," Seth replied. At less than half a day, it felt like he'd been in the hospital bed for forever.

He addressed Vincent. "Chances are, if you've met a true empath, or a psychic, someone other people thought of as a witch ... you've met a woman with a Shah on her family tree, somewhere."

It was like being hit with a baseball bat. Then hit again. Repeatedly. Each new fact slammed into Vincent, looking for a place to settle. He got up, and paced the wide room.

"I knew none of this. None," he repeated.

Seth now understood that, even as part of him still felt that was impossible.

*As rare as we are... you are rarer still,* he thought.

"Some Shah... die with no heir at all. It is a great loss to our race, when that happens." Seth looked very concerned, his eyes fixed on a distant point. Vincent realized that he was thinking of someone he knew. The dark Shah pinned Vincent, with his nearly obsidian gaze.

"I do not know the story of how you came to be, Vincent. But I can tell you that you were wanted very much ... prized for what you are. Above all else ... I can tell you that."

Jacob and Peter took that in, just as Vincent did.

The dark eyes remained fixed on Vincent, then the head dropped back, on the pillow. Seth's strength suddenly seemed to fail him. Again. Vincent realized that he seemed capable of short bursts of conversation, then... nothing.

"I owe you my life ... Brother." Seth's hand came off the quilt that was covering him. Vincent could see that his strength was spent, again.

"It was nothing... Brother," Vincent replied. The word had only ever been applied to Devin.

He held Seth's hand in his, and felt the grip loosen, as Seth began to drift. *It was all right.* This was the sleep of healing, not the desperate unconsciousness of fatal injury. He knew that this man, this... Shah, so like himself, was going to recover, was going to be all right.

*We'll have time for more. I'll have time.* He closed his blue eyes over the instinct, over the comfort of it. *Brother,* his mind whispered the word, again.

*Is this what everyone else feels like? What they've always felt like? Like they are... one of many? Or at least one of several?* Vincent's mind grappled to absorb a feeling he'd never had for so much as one day, in all his life.

*What... incredible luxury this is. What bliss.* The thought stayed with him as he watched Seth settle back into sleep. A minute later, Vincent knew he was dreaming.

Peter's hand was on his shoulder. "It's all right, Vincent. Everything you're feeling. It's all right."

Jacob clasped the other one.

"I hardly know what to feel. The emotions are all... coming so fast. I knew none of this. I never even... sensed it. That there were... others, out there."

"To be fair, they are a good distance away," Jacob observed, knowing how much Vincent's life had changed, today.

"Catherine. Catherine knows?" he asked. His mental state had been too roiled to trust anything he could feel inside the bond.

"She should, by now. Benny said he tried to deliver the note, but that she was in court all day. He's staying near her office building, waiting for her."

Vincent nodded. He pulled his chair closer to the bed as he watched Seth settle into a deeper sleep.

Then, the sound of running footsteps in the hall broke his train of thought, as Catherine came rushing into the room. It was as if speaking of her had all but summoned her.

She was gasping. The look on her face was one of stunned speechlessness.

For several long moments, to look at Seth was all she could do. She crossed to the bed, as if she was not certain he would still be there when she reached his bedside. It was as if Seth was too fantastic to be real. Vincent knew the feeling.

Catherine stared openly. *It's Vincent. But it isn't.* Hair longer, on the top, and finger combed straight backwards. At the neck, it was cut a good bit shorter, to fit under a motorcycle helmet. Said helmet was

now cracked down the middle, its black visor damaged, and sitting on a chair in the chamber.

“Vincent...” She swallowed, unable to get out more words than that. Her green eyes were huge.

Vincent rose. “I know,” he replied, feeling how... overwhelmed she was, through their bond. *I do know.*

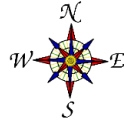
He should have felt her approach. In a way, he had. But he was just too flooded with emotions of his own to process it.

She kept Seth in her sight, as she looked over at his belongings. She even picked up his tattered clothes, as if they might help her with this revelation. They didn't. The jeans were cut up, and bloody at the knee, and in a few other places. Other than that, they were just a pair of indigo Levis. Her gesture of going through the pockets reminded Vincent of Peter, just hours before.

“His name is Seth. Peter says our blood types match. I don't know if that means anything,” Vincent told her.

Catherine shook her head slowly, her green eyes, huge. “I don't know if it does, either,” she whispered back.

\*\*



## Chapter Six

### *Shahinna*

An hour later, Catherine still marveled, and wondered at Seth's survival. A bandage on Vincent's forearm where his blood had been tested to ascertain that their types matched, could not speak to all that had happened, that day.

She wondered at the toughness of the man before her. The injuries were clearly severe. The damage to his clothes was telling.

And she couldn't stop staring, at him. The pattern of facial hair on him looked identical to Vincent's, though it was so dark brown it was nearly black. *Give him an earring, and he'd look like a pirate,* Catherine thought, watching the rise and fall of his huge chest.

They both winced when he tried to move his torso, him with pain, and her in sympathy. The ribs. He would not be comfortable for several days yet, and Peter and Jacob both agreed that painkillers were out of the question. Vincent had a remarkably negative reaction to anything that behaved like an opiate, Catherine knew.

What she didn't know was legion.

"What was he even doing in New York in the first place?" Catherine asked, as the two doctors, Vincent and Catherine all stood inside the hospital chamber, while Seth slept.

Vincent shook his head. "I only know he was riding a motorcycle as it went out of control. Much too fast. The throttle stuck, and he pulled it

onto its side and crashed. Not too far from where I found you," he tacked on.

*He was riding a motorcycle?* Catherine's brain struggled to process the words. *I thought the helmet was just to hide his face.* Vincent might as well have said he was riding a unicorn. She couldn't picture Vincent ever riding either one.

Peter was at Catherine's elbow. "Winslow and Mouse brought it down below, in pieces. Mouse swears he can fix it, but I don't see how. Right now, it looks like sculpture." He pressed the motorcycle's registration paperwork into her hand.

"Perhaps you could run this down?" Peter asked. Catherine nodded. "The minute I go back up." She now knew she had a chore to do, and that it needed doing. But she also knew she didn't want to leave this room. Not until she had some answers of her own.

"This Seth, he says there are more of you? More like you, I mean?" Catherine asked Vincent, wide-eyed.

"'Some few' were his exact words. He mentioned perhaps some six or seven, scattered across the northern United States and Canada."

"I'm still utterly amazed," said Father, sitting down on a stool by the bed, checking Seth's temperature, again. He too, had much to process. "And now it's me who owes you five dollars," he told Peter. "Vincent was neither some sort of experiment nor a birth defect. Whatever he is, it is natural to what we now know is a very rare species."

They all took it in between them. All with tears in their eyes.

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Several hours later, Seth woke up, groggy, but aware. A beautiful blonde woman sat near his bed, reading. Someone had removed the intravenous needle from the back of his hand. *Finally*. As glad as Seth was to be done with that, his focus never left the woman sitting near him. Vincent had finally left the room, to catch a bit of sleep.

"You are his Shahnna. His smell is all over you." The voice drifted to Catherine from the bed. Liquid brown eyes took her measure.

"I'm Catherine Chandler." She extended her hand. His deep brown eyes looked nearly obsidian, in the soft candlelight.

"Seth Night Hunter," he replied, looking her up and down. Though he took her hand with his good one, Catherine got the impression she had been measured, and somehow, found wanting.

His voice, though still somewhat weak, held censure. "You did not come when your mate called, and you live apart. We are too few for these games, Catherine." Seth was blunt.

Catherine's face could not contain her surprise at being scolded.

His harsh words continued. "You must know he cannot release you from your bond and go seek another. Where are your children? Have you none? No Shah? No Shahazad nor Shahrenne, between you?"



*Whoa. Okay, first, a lot of this was none of his business, and in the second place, it was really none of his business. And in the third place, ...* Catherine wasn't sure of what the third place was, but she knew there was one. And she had no idea what the words he used meant, but she could figure them out. Children. Sons and daughters.

Before Catherine could even respond, Seth's eyes looked well past her shoulder. He stared toward the doorway. "It's been hours. I knew it." He struggled to sit up, a little. Catherine helped him.

"Oh, Lord. She's coming." He pushed back the covers, and astonishing Catherine, he swung his feet down. Seth groaned with the pain of that, while holding his ribs. His hospital gown did little to cover his hirsute legs. The deep brown of his facial hair extended to his body hair, as well.

*A dark cat in the tunnels.* It was all Catherine could think.

The noise of a woman's voice and rapid heels against the stones made Catherine's head turn toward the entrance to the chamber. Mary opened the curtain and held it aside.

Into the hospital chamber swept one of the most amazing looking women Catherine had ever seen.

Red hair. Bright copper and gold. A wide swath of it ran down her long back, and it flowed like a cape around her, as she moved. Catherine thought she was close to her own age, perhaps, perhaps older. She was on the tall side, and owed at least two extra inches of her height to the heels of her very impressive black leather boots. Those came up to just above the knee. Catherine saw a knife tucked deep inside the left one as she stalked into the room.

*Pirate, again,* Catherine thought. A pair of jeans the woman wore like a second skin hugged her long legs, and a black blouse was topped by a blue brocade vest. She wore a wide belt, slung low, and that had a back sheath for a second blade.

*Clearly, you were ready for a fight,* Catherine thought.

Gold hoops swung in the woman's ears. A silver bracelet, like his, jangled on her wrist. Fury lit her caramel-colored eyes.

"You son of a *bitch!*" she swore vividly, crossing to him. She took in his injuries, worry mixing with the anger, in her expressive, beautiful eyes.

"I missed you, too, wife," Seth answered, grabbing the nape of her neck in a gesture that was clearly familiar to both of them. He drew her forward for a hard, open-mouthed kiss; one that Corinne clearly returned eagerly. When he was through kissing her, he let her draw breath. Her hands rested at his shoulders.

"*Damn it, Seth!*" she swore again. "You can't *do* that to me." There were bright tears in her eyes. "I felt you hit." Her hand went to her own body, touching the same side that, on him, was now covered by thick bandages. "Don't you know how scared I was?"

He kept his hand at the back of her head, an obvious gesture of affection for both of them. Their foreheads drew together, and his eyes closed. He breathed her in. The sense of peace in the chamber was suddenly palpable.

Her hand found the nape of his neck as well, the figural silver bracelet shifting up her arm, as she held him to her. They kissed again, several times, Corinne clearly needing the contact, to assure herself that her husband was all right.

*Her husband.* Catherine could barely wrap her mind around the word. The amazing, red-headed amazon settled said husband back in his bed, adjusting his pillows.

"It's all right, Red."

Corinne grimaced, as she covered him. Clearly she did not favor her nickname, and he used it to help her feel annoyance rather than fear. "I'm okay, thanks to Vincent, over there," he told her.

Vincent, roused from his nap, had just come in, with Jacob right behind him.

"It seems we have a brother in New York," Seth introduced.

Corinne would have been surprised, had she not been so concerned for her husband's welfare, instead. Her caramel eyes took Vincent in. She stepped only an inch or two away from Seth to extend her hand.

"Greetings, Brother," she said formally. "I am Corinne."

Her voice was regal. Catherine marveled she could pull that off in jeans. Clearly, she was a force to be reckoned with, in her world.

"Hello, Corinne." Vincent took her hand briefly then released it. "As your husband says, I am Vincent."

Corinne inclined her head, and held it that way a moment, in an obvious gesture of deep respect.

Catherine guessed she didn't bow, often. She simply didn't look the type. *What a life she must be leading*, Catherine thought.

"I am pleased to meet you, Shah Vincent." Corinne kept her head inclined until Vincent dropped her hand. She then looked back toward her husband. His eyes had never left her, and they were full of love. She took in a deep breath, and took hold of Seth's outreaching, clawed hand. Their bracelets now sat close together, looking like they belonged that way.

"He saved my life, Red. No two ways about it." A silent message passed, between them.

Corinne glanced at her husband, then tore her eyes away from him to look at Vincent, again. She then kept her eyes downcast, the gesture one of humility.

She inhaled, deeply. "The debt I owe you is greater than I can repay. Those bound to me are now yours to call on, should you ever need their help. And my son will owe your son a service."

Vincent had the feeling that an oath had just been given, and it was one Corinne did not take lightly. He nodded, accepting, neither knowing what else to do, nor feeling the need to explain that he had no sons. Or anything else Seth seemed to have, for that matter.

Corinne stepped closer to her husband, clearly craving proximity. Seth squeezed her hand, and brought it to his lips.

"Ever my queen," he told her, the gesture indicating he would respect any oath she gave on their family's behalf; this was the way between them, apparently.

Catherine had not blinked throughout the entire exchange. She felt she couldn't. *Corinne offered an oath. Seth kissed her hand, and called her a queen.* He gazed at her with love, still. Respect. Awe, even. Catherine was trying to take it all in, much as Vincent had done, when he'd first seen Seth. *They're... amazing,* she thought.

Corinne kept hold of her husband's hand and inspected him, silently. She brushed back a stray lock of black hair with her free hand. "Seth." It was the only word she said. It was the only one she needed to say. All her love and sympathy were in the word.

Seth responded by brushing the back of her hand with a soft kiss. "I'm fine." He mouthed it, more than said it.

Catherine watched the exchange between husband and wife with more interest than was probably polite. She knew she simply couldn't help herself. *She made a vow. A... promise, on her family's behalf.*

Catherine had the impression that this was one of the roles of a wife in their world. Corinne chose the promises that bound her family, and her husband respected them. Catherine could not quite get her mouth to close, even as Seth brushed his unusual one across the back of his wife's hand, again.

Catherine now felt she understood why Seth had taken her measure and seen so much... less. Catherine suddenly *did* feel inadequate, compared to this regal, authoritative, and powerful woman. *This well-loved woman. She had a son? God. She had borne this man a son. At*

*least one. Perhaps more.* Catherine was amazed. She could not shake the feeling.

Corinne's eyes followed Vincent, then fell to Catherine. "I am pleased to meet you." She nodded toward Catherine. "Obviously, I am a Shahnna. Wife to this idiot on the bed."

In spite of the name she called Seth, she did not step away from him again, did not cross to offer her hand to Catherine. She wasn't being rude. She simply did not want to put an inch of space between them, at the moment.

Catherine could sense the closeness between this married couple. Sense it? She could see it, plainly. It was right in front of her, on display for the benefit of anyone who cared to look. Seth played with her long hair in his clawed fingers, as the two women spoke.

"And you are Vincent's wife?" Corinne asked, politely.

"No," Catherine shook her head. "My name is Catherine Chandler. And... no." Catherine shook her head. There was no real word to explain their relationship. Words like "boyfriend" and "girlfriend" clearly trivialized it, somehow, but there was nothing better. Catherine had given up trying.

Father came into the room, summoned by Jamie. Corinne's arrival had sent the pipes to rattling.

Corinne's confused eyes ran over Vincent again. "Not married? But... at your age?" She left the question hanging.

Vincent simply shrugged.

"Give it up, Red," Seth advised. "I'll tell you all I know, later. It's like he was raised by wolves."

Everyone in the chamber raised an eyebrow at that description.

Vincent actually smiled at it, considering Seth's Canadian roots, where wolves were commonplace. Not for the first time did Vincent feel somewhat like Mowgli, raised by a group of loving people who were not necessarily like himself. Not *exactly* "wolves," but...

Father was clearly all but insulted. He harrumphed. Loudly. *Raised by wolves, indeed!* The disdain on Father's face was beyond evident.

"He's a Solo?" Corinne asked Seth. Her expression betrayed her confusion.

"Completely. Since birth, according to him," Seth replied.

"That's not possible." Corinne shook her head.

"Yet, there he stands," Seth rejoined. His meaning was clear. *It's no sense saying he's impossible when he's standing there.*

They were speaking as if there was no one else in the room. Which for them, Catherine realized, there wasn't.

Seth yawned, tired. "You always wear me out, Red," he complained.

"Tell the family I'm all right and go get something to eat. You brought the truck, I take it?"

"No. I came on my broom." She dripped sarcasm.

"That's my red witch." He smiled, relaxing against the white pillow.

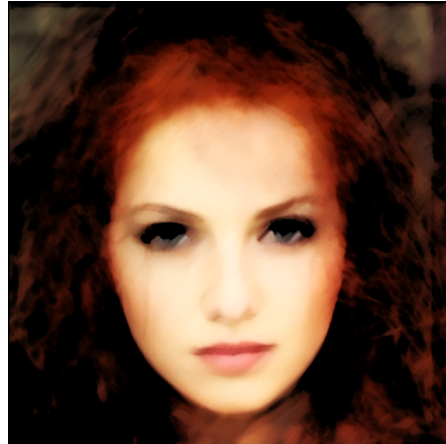
Clearly, his world was complete. "The children are...?" he asked.

"With your mother, of course. She'll need the whole town to keep track of them."

*Children. More than one. More than two or three, from the sound of it, Catherine thought. And a town.*

Corinne was beautiful. Catherine all but couldn't look at her anymore, so beautiful she was. A mother. A wife. A woman so well loved, her

husband clearly could not be near her enough, could not touch her often enough. He'd sat up to greet her, though the gesture had caused him pain. Kept his hand on her since. *Lord.*



He twined a lock of her hair around his fingers, clearly an old gesture, between them. Corinne touched the bandage on his shoulder lightly. He shook his head a little, as if it were nothing. Which it was, now that she was near.

"You drove half the night and all day. You must be tired." His voice was full of love.

"Nothing was going to keep me from you," she replied, with a tear in her eyes, and a kiss for his knuckles. His hair-covered knuckles.

"Eat," he told her, cupping her cheek. "Sleep. I'll be miserably sore in the morning," he assured his wife.

"It's no less than you deserve." Her tone was loving, and did not match the words. "I would stay in the truck... but I want to be near you." She looked toward Vincent, asking, with her doe-colored eyes.

"You are more than welcome to stay here. We have more than enough room. There are guest chambers," Father offered, at Vincent's nod of assent.

"A blanket for the floor next to his bed will be enough." Corinne never took her eyes from her husband's face, as he began to drift back to sleep. The love between them was a palpable thing. As his dark eyes closed, she adjusted the blanket, upward.

"Thank you," she said, clearly moved by Seth's care.

It was Vincent who had to coax her away. Clearly, she would listen to no one else in the room, but the being that Vincent was garnered her immediate respect.

"While you share a meal with us... we can do better than a blanket on the floor," Vincent told her. "I understand that your heart bids you to stay near. We will help you to it. We'll set up a cot next to him... if you'll give us just a few moments to do so," Vincent promised.

Corrinne nodded, grateful for his understanding. She had dark shadows of fatigue under her lovely eyes, from driving all day and into the evening. She brushed away a stray tear of relief, now that Seth couldn't see it.

*He doesn't need to see it. He's bonded to her. Completely.* Catherine could all but see the invisible thread, between them. She wondered how much he could feel from her, as he slept.

"Your strength will fail you if you do not at least take some nourishment," Vincent prompted. "We will ... arrange things here, while you eat. I promise you that all we can do for him has been done. From here, he will heal ... Sister." He extended his arm to her, in a courtly gesture.

Corinne looked toward her now-sleeping husband, then nodded, accepting Vincent's proffered arm.

Catherine was amazed. *Sister? Yes. Like an in-law. Someone of note and position, in a family he just realized he has.* Catherine knew joy for him, in spite of the troubles they'd been having. *He deserves this. And so much more.*

"Let us feed you," Vincent invited the beautiful woman.

Vincent escorted her out of the chamber, offering his free hand to Catherine. His fingers gave hers a squeeze, telegraphing a message: We have much to discuss. Later.

*I suppose we do,* Catherine mused. *I just... have no idea where to begin.*

\*\*

Gratefully, the dining hall was not very far from the hospital chamber. Corinne looked in the direction of her husband often, and Catherine got the impression she was "sensing" him. Checking on him, through their bond.

Bowls of thick soup fed all of them, along with William's sourdough bread. While they were eating, Corinne pulled out as much of Vincent's story as she could, stopping from time to time to be amazed by this tidbit or that.

"My mother-in-law would kill to know if you'd taken first milk from your mother, before they found you. Or the formula they used to sustain you, as an infant," Corinne told him.

"You would need to consult my father for that," Vincent replied. At her raised eyebrow, Vincent explained the word. "Jacob Wells. The doctor who saved your husband's life. And mine. He helped... foster me, as an infant," Vincent said, realizing he'd never used that definition regarding Jacob, before. "I do not know the answer to your

first question. As to the second... perhaps he has it, written in one of his notebooks somewhere."

Corinne nodded at that, unaccustomed to the idea that when Vincent said "Father," he meant someone human, not someone who looked like him.

"Seth is dark haired, like his own father. But his older brother is as fair as his mother, and the youngest is as auburn-haired as they come. Then there are two human brothers in the batch, just to keep things interesting," Corinne relayed.

"I still can't wrap my head around the notion that there are others like Vincent, living in Canada," Catherine said.

"There are places there... wild, and open. Places where you can drive for over an hour and not see a sign of civilization. The farther north you go... the more there are," she said, tearing apart a bread roll. "His parents, Jared and Ramona, founded the town, along with a pair of friends."

"It seems so... strange to imagine such a thing," Catherine replied.

Corinne shrugged. "It was nothing more than a couple of shacks, at first. I think they... carved it all out of the forest. Built it up from nothing."

"Seth says it is a logging camp?" Vincent inquired.

Corinne nodded. "We're distant from civilization, but out where the land is beyond good." She set down her napkin. "What started out as just a few outcasts became... more, in time," she explained.

Vincent nodded. "My home here has a similar story. It began as a very small society, but then... grew. Many here are... outcasts, as you say."

“And they protect you, and you them,” Corinne concluded. It was Catherine who nodded at that assessment.

When she was through eating, Corinne cleared away not only her place, but carried Vincent's empty bowl to the waiting washbasin, where Robert accepted them for a scrubbing. It seemed an intimate gesture, to Catherine. Clearly, Corinne held both a passive and a dominant role in her marriage. *She looks so... secure*, Catherine marveled.

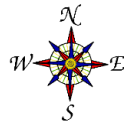
After the brief dinner, Corinne went immediately to the hospital chamber, again thanking Vincent, Catherine, and this time, Father and Peter, for their hospitality and care of her husband. She pulled the cot over as close to the bed as she could get it, and settled down to sleep, turned toward Seth.

Facing in his direction, she slid her hand under his resting one.

Catherine had no doubt they would find her that way, in the morning.

Vincent walked his love back to her exit. “I have... so much to tell you,” he said.

“I want to hear every word,” Catherine replied.



## Chapter Seven

### *“The Shahnna Is The Strength of the Shah”*

Seth slept hard, off and on, for the next two days. When he woke, he talked, ate, stood briefly, and followed his wife with his eyes. Then his strength failed him again, and he slept some more. Each time he awoke, he clearly felt both better and terrifically sore. Like Vincent, Seth healed more rapidly than most.

Yet, there was more to it than that. And it was a thing Vincent seemed to realize before anyone else did. Perhaps, because in his way, he’d experienced it, to some degree, for himself.

Seth was healing at a rate that astonished both his doctors and his host. It did not seem to astonish either Seth or Corinne, however. Peter would have given his eyeteeth to run x-rays on the man. It wasn't that the broken bones were no longer broken. Seth still winced with pain when he tried to breathe deeply or move. But he *could* move, and with an increasing range of motion. And after the third day, his breathing was clearly easier, and when he rotated his shoulder, it was no longer sore.

*Is he... healing because she is near? How is that... possible?* Vincent wondered it, even as he recalled times when Catherine's touch had seemed to "heal" him; like the time she had helped him clear his mind of Paracelsus' drugs.

Vincent watched, and wondered.

Corinne stayed near her husband, and touched him, often. And the big, dark man continued to heal at a rate which astonished everyone. This, like other things between Seth and his wife, seemed like a part of their relationship; an accepted part. He was mending quickly, clearly improving, and Corinne's presence seemed like the determining factor in that.

"The Shahnna is the strength of the Shah," Seth told them all, surely more relaxed in her presence than not.

*What does that mean, exactly?* Vincent wondered, noting that Seth seemed like he was in less pain, as well.

It was not that Corinne nursed him, specifically, though she tended his more minor wounds, hovering anxiously while Father inspected the major ones; it was that having her near seemed beneficial to Seth.

When Vincent asked him about it, Seth said simply, "We are parents together. And have been married for several years." In Seth's mind, that clearly explained everything.

Vincent recalled Catherine helping him make his way back down the tunnels, after the Silks had injured him, and wondered. *Didn't my knee feel just a little better, as she helped me?* He'd put it off to simply having her to lean on, at the time. Now, he wasn't so sure that was all there was to it.

Catherine tried to check the registration on Seth's motorcycle, but found out only what she already knew. The registration was current, the address was a Post Office Box in Billings, Montana. She could find out no more without risking questions as to "why." She didn't dare ask Edie to try to find out more, for that very reason. She returned the paperwork to Mouse, who tucked it back inside the battered saddlebags. That, for all practical purposes, was that.

Corinne, for her part, did not explore the tunnels, very much. She stayed near Seth, and left only to check on a semi-truck she had parked at a truck stop off the interstate, and to use the CB radio she had there.

Her family knew all was well, she assured everyone. Not unlike the tunnels, they had a loose way of communicating that would seem nonsensical to the outside world. Pascal, obviously, approved.

Seth ate, slept, and ate some more. His wife did much the same, and slept nowhere but the folding cot.

\*\*

The next day was Saturday, and Catherine came down to find the tunnels' newest patient actually able to stand and take a several steps, before the soreness in his side drove him back to his bed.

Father was still amazed. Less than five days after sustaining injuries that might have killed a normal man, Seth was obviously feeling, if not “good,” at least ambulatory, to some extent.

"Corinne's here." He said it simply, as if that explained why he was recovering so rapidly. The lady herself simply accepted the compliment as her due. Whatever it was, it wasn't idle praise. It was true.

As quickly as Vincent recovered from injury, Seth put him to shame. By the end of the fourth evening, Seth was even breathing deeper, and walking with less discomfort. The bandage that he'd had around his knee was gone.

"Your Shahnna is your strength," Seth told Vincent. "It's why we must choose wisely."

"Her presence... it heals you?" Jacob asked, astonished. Vincent, curious, had been wondering the same thing.

"Such is the nature of the bond," Seth explained with a shrug, clearly able to do that, now. *'The Shahnna is the strength of the Shah.'* My mother has that written down in a book, somewhere. It's a saying, among our kind; it goes back generations."

Corinne seemed none the worse for wear for her proximity. Whatever this was, there was no... vampiric quality to it.

"Surely you've noticed the same thing, for yourself?" Seth asked Vincent.

Blue eyes flickered, as Vincent dredged up every memory that might help, with this. The overdose. The beating by the Silks. The feeling of fading, while he'd been held in a cage by scientists, yet able to recover

enough to fight, and make his way home, once Catherine had walked into the room. Other times, both minor and major.

Vincent realized that he always felt better when Catherine nursed him, and she seemed to feel no ill effects. Of course, he thought he felt better with Catherine near simply because he loved her. He wondered if she had been making him feel “healthier” all along, when he'd suffered an injury. It was a peculiar idea. And he didn't answer Seth's question, directly.



"I take it you feel Corinne was a ... 'wise' choice?" Vincent asked Seth, as the latter wolfed down his second solid meal. Ham. He had an appetite for meat, as well as one for sweets. Corinne was on the citizen's band radio, in her truck, sending a message that would mean Seth was healing well, when it was relayed and translated, half way across the continent.

"Oh, like we ever *really* have a choice." Seth chuckled. "First time I saw that red hair, I knew she was going to give me hell and make me like it." He was clearly remembering the awakening of his own bond. "She punched me in the mouth the first time I kissed her. God, I loved dating." He grinned.

Seth's voice sobered. "I am sorry there is trouble between you and your Shahnna," Seth commiserated. "Being married to us... well. It's not easy for any of them. But in New York? I can't imagine."

"Catherine is... not my wife," Vincent reminded him.

Seth now looked deeply confused, and pushed away his plate. "You said that before. But...she is bound to you, is she not? I can see it in your eyes. In hers, even."

"Bound." *The bond*. "Yes." That word, that sensation, Vincent understood. "We feel the bond between us. Or at least I do. She can only sense it, barely. We are... platonic."

Brown eyes widened, considerably. "You're... *what?!*" Seth was clearly stunned by this revelation. He leaned forward so fast his ribs hurt, in spite of the healing.

Vincent merely shrugged, scarcely able to explain. "I am in love with her. And she with me. That has been all there is, between us."

If Seth could have gotten up and shaken him, he would have. Vincent got that impression distinctly.

"Are you out of your mind?" The question burst forth without any nod to decorum. Vincent's inclined head was all the answer Seth received, for a moment.

"I am what I am," was Vincent's careful reply.

Seth shook his head, clearly able to do that, now, as well. "Vincent, you must know we are not a celibate species. Not by a long, *long* way."

Clearly, this was wrong on so many levels, Seth hardly knew where to begin. "Hell, if I get too busy for Corinne more than a week, two at the outside, she cuts up my jeans so I can't leave the bedroom."

Vincent tried not to smile at that image.

"I mean, a man's favorite pair of Levi's ought to be sacred, you know what I mean? But... you..." He sputtered, clearly trying to maintain some sense of composure, before he failed. He inhaled as deeply as he dared, then tried to explain again, aware that Vincent knew nothing about his own nature, thanks to how he'd been raised.

"'Platonic' isn't even a *choice* with us." Seth elaborated. "It invites the madness!"

Realization struck. "Madness. Yes. I've experienced it. Twice."

Relief crossed Seth's features. *You do know what I'm talking about. Yes.*

"At your age, I'm surprised you survived, the last time," he replied. "Some don't."

It had been close, Vincent knew that. *Without Catherine here, I wouldn't have...*

"We're wired like..." Seth searched for a metaphor, "... some of the birds, and other mammals, that way. Not *that* bad, but... bad."

"Badly enough so that... our life is threatened?"

Seth nodded. "Like any other mammal, hell, any other living thing, we need to find a mate. Our... nature won't be denied, on this. And if it is, and for too long... the results can be... disastrous."

*Yes. Disastrous. Like going mad. Becoming violent.* Vincent well remembered the feeling of losing his hold on his darker side. With what Seth was now trying to tell him, he felt a new understanding dawn, about that time.

"It's annoying, even dangerous. But there it is," Seth said, watching Vincent process his own memories.

*Do you mean I could have avoided all that happened to me simply by...*

Vincent considered what to say, but lost the question in his own musings. *Failure to mate meant madness, and perhaps even death? Surely not. Surely two of the most terrifying episodes of his life could not be explained away so easily. Or so startlingly.*

Yet, suddenly, his two bouts with madness made a terrible kind of sense. The dark, petulantly primal being inside him also made an horrific kind of sense. He'd wanted to keep Catherine from that side of him, knowing the carnality of it, and fearing it. Vincent rubbed his own forehead, remembering.

"I nearly didn't survive it," Vincent told him. "Were it not for Catherine bringing me back, I wouldn't have."

Seth nodded, understanding. "'A Shah never dies in the presence of his Shahna.' It's not strictly true, of course, but it's another old saying, among the people."

Vincent paced, clearly agitated, and thinking things through.

Seth continued trying to sort this out. *What in God's name is going on here? That things were strained between the two of them, yes. But ... platonic?*

"Your bond played a cruel trick on you to bind you to someone who will not allow your touch," he said. The dark-haired Shah tried to be sympathetic, feeling there was something here he simply didn't understand. He had seen the fair woman's eyes follow her mate around the chamber. Whatever was going on between them, he was puzzled by it. Though he knew Vincent had had no guidance, he clearly had a love, and one he was tied to by the bond. Seth just naturally assumed...

Vincent spoke, hesitantly. "I...my strength is great, and my size. The things I feel, the lack of control, sometimes... The part of me that ... urges me to her, most strongly... I think I might hurt her, Seth. Kill her, even." He confessed it, sadly.

Seth shook his head, vehemently, in denial. Fortunately, that didn't hurt as much as it had a couple of days ago. *Oh, Lord.* There was clearly so much this giant stranger who had saved his life did not understand.

Seth tried to picture how his life would have been, without his parents, brothers, and very close family members, for support. He just couldn't do it. Vincent was a foundling, with a foundling's understanding of what he was. Clearly, he had thrived here, in his way. But also, he'd clearly struggled. Badly.

Seth tried to keep the disdain out of his voice. "A Shah hurt his Shahnna? Never. Not once, not in all our history. I don't care how you were raised. It would never, never happen. Even in your deepest fury, you would not harm her. Your heart would seize, on the stroke of it."

Vincent's eyes widened at this information. *It had. It had seized.* He remembered the awful feeling of it. He'd dropped where he'd stood.

"I have not hurt Catherine. But... I have... killed others," Vincent said. "I even injured a girl, once. When I was young."

"Did you ever kill in anything but in the defense of yourself, your woman, or your realm?" Seth asked the question as if it were rhetorical, which for him, it was.

"No," Vincent admitted.

"This girl that you hurt. You were bound to her?"

Vincent knew he hadn't been. Though what he and Lisa Campbell had shared had been intense, he'd never had a bond with her. It was one of the things that had made his connection to Catherine both startling and unique.

"No." Vincent shook his head. "But I thought I was in love with her, at the time."

"She was not a wise choice." Seth shrugged, and again, that didn't hurt as it had before, though the discomfort was there. "Your bond knew what you did not; it did not link you to her. We all have crushes, when we're young."

*It did not link me to her. Lisa was vain, and talented, and destined for another life. Somehow... the bond knew?*

Seth was diffident. He had not said Vincent could not kill. Simply that he could not kill his... what term had Seth used? His "bond mate." His Shahnna.

"Corinne will be back, soon," Seth said. "Perhaps she can explain it better." He swallowed two pills and chased it with water.

“Did you know? From the first minute?”

Seth shrugged. “We... had to work a few things out, first. But... after a while, I knew.”

Vincent realized they may have had some more similarities between each other.

Seth set the cup down. “Catherine is... whom your body, mind and heart *chose*. Your bond knew. Proximity strengthens what flows between you. Corinne is healing me, just by being here. Just as your woman has healed you sometimes, I assume.”

Vincent nodded at this, understanding. No matter what the injury he suffered, he felt less pain, felt... just ... better when Catherine was near. He'd thought it an emotional reaction to her, however, not a physical one. Sometimes, he simply assumed he'd not injured himself as badly as he'd originally supposed.

Seth's expression grew solemn. “In the very beginning, it *may* be possible to undo a bonding, but I don't think so,” he said sympathetically. “And certainly not after time has passed. Once it is established... well.” The dark man shrugged. “‘*Choose wisely*.’ That, too, is a saying with us. A Shah can never hurt his Shahnna. She could come at you with a baseball bat, and all you would do is knock it away.”

Vincent marveled at this information, and how much of it made “sense,” now that it was incorporated into other things he knew.

During his teens, he had been deeply infatuated with Lisa. But he realized the empathy he sometimes felt with others had not extended to her, as much. And the bond had never started, never been felt, until Catherine.

"I felt it... almost from the moment I saw Catherine," Vincent confessed.

Seth nodded at that. "Sometimes it's like that. Sometimes it takes a while. You can feel it, when it's happening to you. It's... amazing." He said it with remembered awe. "There is no feeling like that. None."

Vincent nodded again, remembering the ephemeral sensation of being able to "feel" Catherine through their bond, for the first time.

"I could often sense others in my family. But... nothing like this," Vincent confided.

"There *is* nothing like this, Vincent. Not in all the world. Nothing that I know of, at least."

Seth watched Vincent begin to understand more of what he was, what he shared, with his woman.

"I have always been afraid my ... dark side would harm her," Vincent tried to explain his struggling situation.

"You couldn't hurt her if she begged you to," Seth assured him, watching Vincent's eyes. He was processing something.

"I have injured others. Not all were enemies." He remembered striking Father, striking Devin. "When I'm enraged..."

Seth raised his good arm before Vincent could continue. "Hell, I broke my father-in-law's arm, accidentally, when we were having an argument about my marrying Corrinne. Needless to say, it made things a little awkward, at the wedding. And my older brother... he injured our father, once. It's a thing we don't like to speak of."

Vincent struggled with the memories that had plagued him, some since youth. Memories that insisted he was a creature of violence.

"My brother... a boy raised with me in the tunnels... I slashed his face. We were children. An argument. He struck me."

"He hit you? Lucky he still has a head on his shoulders. It may not seem like it at the time, but our instincts to protect ourselves and the ones we love run hard, Vincent."

*So you know your strengths, but you don't know your passions, Seth mused. The people here respect you; they even love you. But... there's so much you don't know. So much you haven't been able to divine for yourself, thanks to the circumstances which surround you.*

No wonder this creature was reticent, Seth realized. He'd discovered his strength at an early age, more than likely. And among others who had no idea what a strong and agile creature he would one day become.

Seth wished they had months together, not just days. He would like to hear all of this erudite Shah's story.

"I met a man Catherine... knew," Vincent said. Clearly "knew" was a euphemism. "Someone she knew ... before we met. He did not fare well at my hands, though he didn't die." The image of a bloodied Stephen Bass shifted across Vincent's consciousness.

Seth almost chuckled at that one. "Corrinne's exes knew to leave the province after we got married. That's just the way it is with us, Vincent. We're not jealous in a petty, teenage way. We simply know what belongs to us, and we protect that. The way you do, here. It's instinct. If this community protects you, you will protect it, and it will thrive. If you fail, it is at risk."

Hadn't Father intimated as much to him, from time to time? That for whatever reason, Vincent represented "hope" to the people of his world? That he must continue, so that it could continue?

"For years, I have thought... Catherine deserves a life not... limited by the things I cannot offer her." It was the thing Vincent was most sure of. He stepped close to hear Seth's response. He needn't have bothered.

Seth all but snorted at Vincent, as if he'd just said something ridiculous. "A Shah loves one woman all his life. He will die for her. Kill for her, if he must. Protect her kin and all she holds dear. Be bound by her oaths. Hold her as his Queen. Feel her pain, as she feels his." He listed their virtues firmly. "Only men who love like that can stand with us, Vincent," Seth assured him. "The rest are just... less."

Again, Vincent was all but awestruck by the broadened scope of his understanding. To think himself among the best of men, rather than a horrible mistake made by nature... it was almost more than he could take in, in one sitting, or for that matter, a few days.

Seth picked up a mug of William's tea, and held the warm crockery in his furred hands. "Vincent, I don't know exactly what to tell you," he sighed. "If you have not yet mated with her, there is a chance you can establish a bond with someone else, though I honestly don't know. A bond is a damn near impossible thing to break. And once you are mated, she will feel it, too. Stronger than she does now, at least."

"Catherine? Catherine will feel our bond more fully?" Vincent asked.

"Not the way you do, not yet; but more than she does now, yes. It's why I was confused that she was not here when we arrived. I judged her harshly, I'm afraid. I didn't realize the two of you had never--"

"The responsibility for that is more my doing than Catherine's," Vincent replied.

Seth nodded. At least some things were starting to make sense.

"She won't feel the bond the way you do, not as much, but it will definitely be there. Stronger, as the years go on," Seth informed him. "You'll miss it when she's pregnant."

The image made Vincent's knees weak, even as he tried to follow Seth's words.

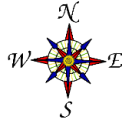
"It goes away then, for a while; links you to the baby for a time, until after it's born. Then back to her. It's awful when you can't feel it." Seth drank from the mug. It was loaded with sugar. "And I've not felt it four times." He drained the mug.

"You and Corinne have four children?" Vincent marveled.

Seth's voice was proud. "Five. Daniel, who is one of us; another boy, Ben, who is the spitting image of Red; and three gorgeous daughters, Roberta, my eldest, and my twins, Annabeth and Beatrice, who all have me wrapped around their little fingers." Seth's deep brown eyes simmered with paternal pride.

"Daniel is my fifth child. There are no guarantees for us, when it comes to what kind of children we will make. It's why our people seem to be dying out, slowly but surely." Seth looked sad. "It's why I was afraid I was hard on your Catherine the other day. I thought your separation was something of her doing. Please tell her I did not mean anything by it. Corinne will tell you I am often an ass."

"I am sure you meant no harm, and Catherine is not the type to bear a grudge," Vincent assured him.



## Chapter Eight

### *Night Hour*

A grudge, no. But Catherine was bearing much else, during the amazing days that now held her in a deadlocked grip

Night's cool balm brought no relief to her. The images of the week would not let her rest, and the words were even more insomnia-inducing.

Catherine sat in the middle of her wide bed, both waiting for Vincent to come to her, and knowing that he wouldn't. Before Seth Night Hunter had crashed into their lives, she'd been angry. In a very real way, she still was.

There were images from the week she simply could not shake.

Seth was in pain, the moment he'd sat up to greet Corinne. Real pain, and he'd masked it well, for his wife's sake. Catherine recalled watching him in the bed, cringing as he did little more than move his shoulder. Yet, he'd swung his legs down, cracked pelvis and all, and sat up, to greet her.

And thought nothing of it.

He'd wanted to be close to her. He'd wanted her to not be frightened, at his injuries. So he'd sat up, and held himself against his pain, to hold her near.

And how they'd kissed. Hard. Open mouthed. Hands full of hair and mouth full of ... each other. If there was an ounce of reticence between them, Catherine couldn't find it.

It hurt to want that so badly, for herself. It hurt to want it for Vincent.

*Perhaps I do want it. That doesn't mean he wants it. And even if he does... not like that.* The thought made her sad, and the sorrow made her angry, all over again. Anger was easier to bear than despair.

So many of the things Vincent did, he did with deep conviction. He was fearless in so many ways. He taught like a man born to it, and fought like a demon's own. He loved Jacob and everyone else in the World Below with a kind of unswerving steadiness. He still loved Rolley, in spite of his flaws. Loved Laura, as she struggled with each new challenge. Devin, Cullen, Mouse. No matter what their flaws or virtues, he loved each of them, and with his whole heart.

Did he love her that way? Of course he did. It was foolish even to ask the question. Knowing the answer had kept her sane, when things between them felt like a rubber band, stretched to its breaking point. *He loved her. He did. Deeply.*

But she couldn't imagine him grabbing her for an open mouthed kiss, or calling her a name so she would be more angry than frightened, or...

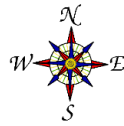
Or making love to her, fearlessly.

*"Go with courage. Go with care."*

Those were fine words, when crossing a busy intersection.

Were they really so marvelous, for what lay before them? For what had always lain before them?

Catherine knew Vincent's sense of courage. Also his sense of caution. He held both, in strong measure. And with her, he'd held both with a kind of steadfast ferocity. Unwilling to bend. Unable to attempt it. Catherine laid her head on her knees a while and thought, long into the night.



## Chapter Nine

### *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*



*The Mouse and the Motorcycle.* It was all Catherine could think, as she watched Mouse hammer and bend the severely damaged bike back into some odd semblance of shape.

Seth had chased Corinne out of his sick room, telling her to go stretch her legs. (Her “hot legs” he'd actually called them.) Not wanting to argue, Corinne had accompanied Catherine to where the wrecked bike lay, in pieces. Many of them.

Corinne squatted near where Mouse worked. “Think you can get it back together?” she asked, handing him a socket wrench.

Mouse shrugged. “Get back together... easy. Make so it works? We’ll find out.” He gave the wrench a judicious turn. “Get a thing... get another thing... Can’t do it without Mouse.” He selected a screwdriver from the pile and tightened two wires to a post.

“Looks that way.” The beautiful redhead gave him a smile.

"You know, I never did find out. Why was Seth in New York to begin with?" Catherine asked her.

"I don't think he meant to be," Corinne said. "At least, not this part of it." She passed Mouse a wire stripper. "I think that by the time he realized the bike was acting up, he tried to get off the road so he could lay it down someplace away from people. When it started going fast, he knew he needed a long stretch of open road, with no lights, so... the interstate." She shook her red head. "He'd never hurt anyone, Catherine. Even at a risk to himself," Corinne explained, unnecessarily.

“Vincent helps, too,” Mouse chimed in, glancing between both women. “Helps everyone. Always.”

“Yes. Yes, he does,” Catherine agreed. Corinne gave him another smile. “Need a 3/8ths socket wrench, for that bolt,” she said, going to fetch it for him.

Corinne was adept with tools. And though her casual mode of dress did not vary much, the belt with the back sheath was no longer part of

her ensemble, Catherine noted. The boot knife she kept, out of either habit or caution. She seemed to think nothing of it, and neither did Seth.

"Get a thing, get some wire..." Mouse was reconstructing part of the spark plug harness. "Bother. Gotta hook a thing, then another thing... to that part..."

Corinne was indulgent about his differences, and fascinated by his talent. He obviously had found a place down here, and one where he was both welcomed and valued.

"You're quite the mechanic," she complimented.

"And an inventor," Catherine praised. Mouse nearly blushed. "Not so hard. Vincent come by?"

"Maybe later. For right now, I think he wanted to talk to Seth, some more," Catherine said. Mouse went back to his chore.

Vincent clearly wanted to speak with Seth some more. Corinne checked the bond, to see when Seth wanted her to re-enter the room. *Not yet.* And her husband was feeling... adamant about something. *It must be quite the talk,* Corinne mused, even as she passed Mouse a different screwdriver.

Catherine watched the odd pair, curiously. Corinne helped Mouse for a few minutes longer, then stepped away as he "tinkered" some more. As she eyed the damage, Catherine could tell what Corinne was thinking: *It's a miracle he survived.* They both knew that without Vincent's help, he likely wouldn't have.

"He's very special, you know?" Corinne whispered, indicating Mouse.

"He is. Very," Catherine replied. Her eyes warmed as she looked at him, and Corinne caught the glance. *You mean that. You really do. Good for you. And... good for him.*

The two women moved a bit away from Mouse, and sat on a pair of nearby boulders, to talk. Catherine had the feeling she was going to get lectured, again. Maybe.

As it turned out, she was wrong about that one. But that didn't mean Corinne wasn't going to have something to say.

"He loves you," Corinne said simply. "Like only one of them can love." They both knew she wasn't talking about Mouse.

Catherine inclined her head, in both agreement and in understanding. "I love him so much... he changed my life. Meeting him ... helped me change who I was, back when I needed it. He saved my life. Brought me here, to do it. Kind of like Seth, but... different, in some way."

Corinne reached for Catherine's hand, and squeezed it. "Yet... things are not well, between you?" she asked.

Catherine shook her fair head in the negative. "We didn't know what it was we didn't know. I... I needed him to take a leap of faith, and... it just wasn't going to happen. I love him so much... I think it is going to kill me sometimes, Corinne." The confession was a softly whispered one.

It all hurt, and it was all the truth. Or it hurt precisely because it was the truth. Astonishing them both, Catherine began to cry, unexpectedly, as huge tears spontaneously began to roll down her cheeks.

The red-headed woman took Catherine against her breast and stroked her sandy hair, while Catherine wept, a little. *It's been so hard lately.* Every line in Catherine's slight form screamed it.

"I'm sorry," Catherine apologized, trying to steady herself. "I'm really not normally this... on the edge."

"It's not easy belonging to one of them, is it?" Corinne commiserated.

*Not censure then. Support.* Corinne was offering her support, if she wanted it. Catherine found she very much did.

Catherine shook her head, however, at Corinne's assertion. "It isn't that. Loving him is easy. I don't think I could stop it if I tried. It's everything *else* that feels hard, some days." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Now *that*, I know what *that* feels like." Corinne held her lightly, since they were strangers, but held her steadily, just the same. They were sisters, of a sort.

"You've had so little time; and there is so much to know," Corinne confided. *What Seth is to Vincent, I am to you. How hard it must have been, having no guide,* she realized.

Catherine could all but feel the truth in the other woman's words.

The blonde head dipped low, searching for a way to explain. "We were... I don't even know how to explain it, now." Green eyes met caramel ones. "Now that it all seems so ridiculous. We were... falling apart. Blowing apart. Everything that didn't work seemed tenfold, while everything that did seemed like it wasn't enough." Her lovely eyes were huge, with misery.

The two women had been spending an increasing amount of time together during Catherine's visits Below. Corinne had already told

Catherine a good deal about how Seth had come to be travelling. And that there really was a Celeste Blackmane, or there had been. She was deceased, and her husband, Adam, was a Shah in Montana. It was the friend Seth had gone to visit. The bike was Adam's. He would clearly not be happy with its present condition, but there was only so much that could be done for that.

"I know what that feels like, too," Corinne replied. "Not every day between Seth and I has been an easy one."

She smiled as she said it, and they both managed to laugh, just a bit. But there was a hint of a sob in Catherine's humor, and Mouse heard her, this time.

"Catherine okay?" Mouse asked, seeing her distress. He left the bike to come to her side.

Catherine sniffed a little, trying to hide how overwhelming everything had been, lately, knowing that if it had all felt like it was too much for her to take in, it must be that much harder, for Vincent.

"I'm fine, Mouse." She left Corinne's embrace and gave him a brief hug, which he awkwardly returned. She squeezed his shoulder.

"Catherine's okay? Catherine's my friend."

"I am. I'm okay, Mouse. Um... It looks like you're making good progress, over there." She indicated the motorcycle, obviously trying to distract him, while she collected herself.

"Better than good. Better than better! Just wait. You'll see!" he proclaimed, as he went back to the bike.

*For two cents, Corinne thought, I'll leave the bike here, rather than load it back up in the truck. It might be interesting to see what this boy*

*can do with it.* But what interested her more was the relationship this woman had with him.

*What use did this obviously wealthy, polished woman have for this odd, probably autistic savant of a boy?* Corinne mused, not for the first time. None, that she could see. Yet, Mouse clearly liked her, and felt at ease in her presence. A reaction many of the tunnel dwellers shared, to one degree or another, Corinne observed.

"It still amazes me that Seth travels," Catherine confided, wiping her eyes.

Corinne inclined her head. "Seth is a Nomad by nature. He *has* to travel sometimes, or he gets... impossible," she answered.

"It's just... for Vincent... he pushes the limits of where he can go, what he can do; but, the idea that he can venture far from this place... that's what's impossible," Catherine said. "He travels in books. Everywhere."

Corinne shook her head. "The fact that you're living with millions of people over your head might have something to do with that." The red-haired woman was clearly still amazed by that fact.

"We... the Shah, that is, live in remote places, for the most part. Very. Restricted areas, tribal lands, settlements hundreds of miles past the last town... We have to. That's how Seth usually travels. Not just the roads less taken. The boundless paths. The bright and boundless paths, as Seth usually says, when he's about to go off on one." She shook her bright red head.

"He's so fearless about going off on his own," Catherine said.

"And right now, he's got broken ribs to show for it," Corinne returned. "Still, I know what you mean. To you, it must seem odd that we

journey as much as we do. But we have helpers, and friends who live where we go. You can travel safely enough, if you know how. At least, that is what Seth has always insisted to his mother." Corinne grinned.

"Of course, our population is fractional compared to this. Any population would be." She looked up, to indicate the city above their heads.

"How will you cross back into Canada, with Seth with you?" Catherine asked.

"We'll come through the border where our helpers will see to it that we're unmolested. Either that, or use the false back wall in the semi." Seth's wife shrugged.

"If you can drive your truck to the dock area, there's a place where we can load you up, no problem. It has tunnel access."

Corinne gave a nod. "Much appreciated, sister."

Catherine warmed, at being so included. "Don't tell Mouse you have a metal false wall," Catherine begged, keeping her voice low. "He'll likely want to see it. Then build one here. And... possibly... detonate it, somehow," she confided.

Corinne smiled. She had watched the singular youth, with admiration for his tenacity. This odd teenager had a gift, and they sheltered him here, that he might be safe, and loved. They had done the same for Vincent. *These are good people. Not so unlike mine, at heart.*

But for all that, her mind wandered to the trip back. The back of the semi's false wall rolled up and back down, and had a bottom hatch for escape, just in case. If they drove at night and stayed off the main roads as much as possible, they would be safe enough.

The urge to get back to her children was growing stronger. Daniel could be a terror if Annabeth and Bea teased him, and they teased him regularly.

"I miss my children," Corinne confided. "They are not used to both of us being gone at the same time."

"I can't imagine what your life is like," Catherine said, envy in her tone.

*But that's exactly the problem. I can imagine it.* She'd done little else, since this incredible pair had crashed into her life. Well, Vincent's life, actually.

Catherine did not want to discuss all her private concerns with this woman, however, at least not in great depth, and perhaps not before she'd had some sort of conversation with Vincent, first. But she liked that the two of them were forming a friendship, of sorts, and that there was someone else who understood what it was to have a relationship with someone like Vincent. It was a comforting fact.

Catherine steered the conversation to neutral ground. "Father is still amazed by how fast Seth is healing, given his injuries."

"Seth is a Nomad, not a Protector or a Charismatic," Corinne repeated. "That's not just a casual description. Nomads always seem to heal faster, according to my father-in-law. It helps them survive, on the road."

*Seth's Father.* That would be a creature like Seth, if Catherine understood things right. Her lawyer's brain was having trouble keeping up with the notion that Seth had been raised among family, and that the family had members in it that looked like him.

"That would be a great advantage, for a traveler." Catherine was trying to pick her way through how natural selection seemed to favor Vincent's race.

"It is. As soon as he's fit to ride, we'll leave. A day or so more, perhaps. He will not be fully healed for a couple weeks, yet, but the drive home should not be too hard on him."

*Weeks?* Such injuries would take months to heal, normally. But Catherine, like Vincent, was putting together certain facts she'd barely guessed at. For instance, she knew Vincent healed quickly. She was not aware before this, that his ability to do that was likely heightened, now, by her presence.

"The logging community I live in always had a Shah either in it or near it," Corinne recounted, still amazed at the scope and beauty of the home in which she now found herself. "North Edge was founded by Seth's father, literally carved out of the wilderness. It's kind of like this place, only much further north, above ground, for the most part, a lot colder come winter, and more isolated," she elaborated.

"Which is to say, it's nothing like this place." Catherine actually managed a smile.

Corinne returned it. "No, it is. It's a good place. A safe place for Seth and our children. Good people help hold it together. People who want to raise their families according to older traditions. People who don't... necessarily do well in the cities." Corinne inclined her head, aware that while the tunnels sat under a city, the community here was a much smaller, more intimate thing. And not so dissimilar from her own.

Catherine could not imagine the notion of a family of people like Vincent living above the ground. Could not see Vincent visiting them,

and walking among the pines, and spruce, and maples. But there it was. It felt like the world was opening for him. For them.

"You grew up there? Always knew Seth? Knew them?" Catherine asked.

"God, no." Corinne shook her head. "I came up from Toronto, with my mother and sister. I didn't grow up knowing about them. It was something I came to understand when I was about eleven or twelve, when my mother married someone from their community. She was ... 'vetted,' first. I suppose the people down here do the same?"

Catherine nodded.

Corinne locked their arms together, and they began to stroll. Seth was near done. She could feel it.

"It's amazing," Corinne continued. "We protect him. Them. Seth has two brothers like him. And two who are not. His mother is very proud. Three Shah in our community. That is very rare," she stated.

"You said it was impossible for Vincent to have survived? Why?" Catherine asked.

Corinne lifted her shoulders in an almost Gallic gesture. "None of them ever has, according to my mother-in-law. It's terrible, I even saw it once, in Minnesota. A woman died in childbirth, bearing a Shah. Not because of what he was, mind you, just that she developed a huge fever, and of course she could not bring him forth in a regular hospital." Her expression was touched with remembered sadness.

"Vincent told me that Seth was amazed, that this place has a doctor, much less access to two of those."

Corinne nodded. "If only there'd been one, then," she said sadly.

"When she died, the baby could not feed. He wouldn't take any other

kind of milk. He died, too." She shook her head at the image. "There was no way to soothe him, no substitute would work. His father buried them both, together. The husband is... no more, as far as we know. Taken, by his grief."

"That is so sad." Catherine shed a tear for the lives lost.

"You are a good woman," Corinne told her as they walked, "and these are sad stories. We have many happier ones. My community is small, but Seth's brothers are an absolute mess. You should see them. Zachariah, the eldest, is First Shah. Protector. Big, like your Vincent. Bigger. No mate has called to him yet, and his mother worries. Brendan, the next, well, he's human and gives none of us peace. Always a new adventure, a new thing."

Catherine thought of Devin, at that.

"Then there's Seth, and then Connor," Corinne continued. "He hates it when you call him 'Con man.' Mostly because he's a Mountie. And then Elijah, the baby, in his early twenties, and last Shah. He's also not bonded yet, but he's young. We're beginning to worry about Zachariah. We don't want the madness to take hold." Her eyes betrayed her concern. "They will both choose before it does, of course." But something in her voice indicated she was not so sure this was true.

"So you knew Seth since you were young?" Catherine asked, helping her change the subject.

"I knew of him. I actually knew his little brother, Elijah, better. I was his baby sitter. Seth was the hell-raiser."

"Imagine that." Catherine smiled, remembering the motorcycle leathers.

"If you knew the fights his mother has gotten into with him over riding motorcycles." She shook her head. "He was travelling to check on Adam, in Montana, when he decided to take the bike back. They usually travel by freight train when it's necessary. And of course, it has to be arranged ahead of time with our Helpers first. But he was in a hurry, and, well... we had a full plate before this happened."

Corrinne's face betrayed her other worries.

Catherine was revising her original opinion of Corinne's life. Though she still wanted it, and wanted it badly, she was beginning to recognize that this family, like others, had their own concerns.

"As for Adam ... Seth may need to see him again, or perhaps we will send one of the others. Grief can be fatal to their kind. As it is with us, only much worse." Corinne's lovely brow knit with concern.

"It would be terrible if that were to happen," Catherine commiserated. They're so ... special," she said.

Corinne nodded. "The loss is greater than you know. They had three children before cancer claimed Celeste. Two daughters and a son. But the boy is human, and not one of the Shah. We do not value one kind of life over another. It is disrespectful to life. But Adam's Shah line will die with him. And in his grief, well... it's unlikely that he will ever marry another."

The weight of the loss seemed insurmountable. *Such a pity, to lose so...much.* Catherine gave voice to the thought. "It would be a true shame to lose... so much," she said.

"It is." She cut Catherine a glance, then changed the subject as tactfully as she knew how.

"I know you and Vincent are not yet mated, Catherine. Seth told me."

*Ah. Here it comes.* Catherine realized. A variation on the lecture Seth had given her when they first met. No matter how Corinne knew, she knew.

"I think you are a kind woman. I don't want you hurt. But... if this is not a responsibility you would bear, I beg you to let Vincent find another, while there is time. If that is even possible." They were frank words, and frankly spoken. All things considered, Corinne didn't feel that she had the time to be delicate.

"I love him," Catherine repeated, surely. And she was a bit tired of people judging her as shallow, somehow. She had not been a flighty person in a very long time, now. And never with Vincent. "I would have his children tomorrow if he would let me." Catherine's green eyes were certain.

"Then you will work things out, Catherine. Of that I am sure." The red head inclined, agreeably.

Corinne did not say it to placate her. Catherine got the feeling Corinne never said anything to placate anyone. But she wasn't entirely sure her companion was correct, either.

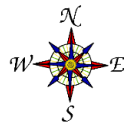
Corinne's caramel eyes looked up and to the right. Apologizing, she veered for the hospital chamber. "Please, excuse me. My husband is hungry. When his stomach growls, I get sympathy pains."

Catherine could not believe that this woman ate more than sparingly. She was downright svelte. And after five children!

*Five children,* Catherine thought, realizing how much her life would have to change if she approached even a fraction of that number.

Corinne took her leave, and made her way back through the tunnels, the red cape of her hair shimmering like burnished copper in the torchlight, as she went.

"Five." Catherine simply repeated, the number, knowing she and Vincent had beaten themselves into a near-stupor, over the number "one." Or for that matter, "zero."



## Chapter Ten

### *Healing and Homeward Bound*

"You are starving, I take it?" Corinne's gaze went from the table to her husband. He was eyeing the doorway expectantly. He had cleared two plates of dinner. And yes, he had summoned her, but not for food.

"Famished," he assured her, the look in his eyes compelling her forward. Hungry, yes. But not for something you could put on a plate. Not that he was averse to trying to have her that way.

"Your ribs," she cautioned.

"Have nothing to do with what I want from you, my beautiful love."

"Oh, so I'm 'Red' all week long, and now I'm your 'beautiful love'?"

Her voice was teasing as she walked over to him - very, very slowly. He had scared her to death. He deserved to wait.

"You are always my beautiful love." Seth reached out for her vest, impatient that she still had it buttoned. It had been weeks since he'd left her to travel to Montana. He was indeed starving.

She stayed out of his reach, barely; she mollified him by unbuttoning the vest herself. Again, slowly.

"This place amazes me, Seth. There should be fat children running through these tunnels. Children who look like him."

The second button came open. The third one. *You're too slow sometimes*, he thought.

"I know. But he's had a tough road, and while this is his family, he's had no guidance. He thought he would hurt her. Like I'm going to beat you, if you don't get over here," Seth threatened.

She laughed at him. It was a husky sound, and it warmed her eyes.

"Oh, like you could ever so much as make a serious threat against me."

He reached forward far further than she thought he would be able to, in his condition. *Playing possum*.

Grabbing her about the waist, he pulled her to him, as she squealed.

"I know," he said, working impatiently at the rest of her clothing.

"Have pity on a love-sick fool, Red." His eyes were fathomless, as he pulled aside her blouse and ripped the front of her bra with his claw.

"Now you owe me another new bra," she stated.

"It's been so long. Too long, since I've seen you." He breathed in her scent through his wide, flat nostrils. *Heaven*. Every tense line in his body said it.

He peeled the ruined bra off her left breast, and lowered his head hungrily. Her dark peach nipple, the one that had nursed his children and fed his soul, hardened in his mouth. He moaned in contentment; then his motions became more demanding.

She surged against him, her hand seeking his erection. The shock of contact brought his head up, hard.

"Oh, yes. God, yes. Corey." He softly nipped her shoulder, holding her firmly against him while she stroked him under the ridiculous hospital gown.

She felt his tears on her shoulder. *Tears? What's this?*

Reaching between them, he slowed her hand. Her eyes met his, quizzically. His face was lined in pain, but not from his injuries. He pulled her hand out from under the sheet and gown. Held it close to his heart.

"Adam is dying, Corey." His voice was heavy with sorrow. "He's going to follow Celeste into the ground. He sleeps next to her grave. He's already sent the children to stay with his sister. He's just ... dying. You can see it on his face."

Corinne blinked back tears. "We will send Zachariah to speak with him. He's wise.... If Adam can be reached, he can. If not..." Her pause was long. "If the worst happens, we will bring his children to live with us," she vowed, not knowing what else she could say to help.

He left her hand where it was, and locked his into the fire-lit fall of her hair. "It would be me. If something happened to you, it would be me." His voice was harsh. Desperate.

*There it is. The fear I sensed in you since before the accident.* She knew he would tell her. He always did, eventually.

"I couldn't bear it, Corinne. You have to promise me." He raked his mouth across hers. "Promise me." There were shining tears in his dark eyes, and he wasn't even certain what it was he was asking for.

Now her hand locked in his hair, again, a familiar gesture of love and desire, between them. "Seth Night Hunter." Caramel eyes so unlike the deep brown of his brooked no argument. "We have five children between us. If something happens to me, you will God damn live and take care of them... or I will *haunt* you!" Her voice was adamant.

He thrust both his hands into the silk of her hair now, wanting control of her face, utterly. "Haunt me, then, damn you." His voice was ice and fiery need. "Swear you will." Umber eyes bored into hers. "Every night, you haunt me, love." His open mouth claimed hers and then released it. "Just...", he kissed her, hard and fast, again, "so long...", again, "as you swear... *you swear...* you will ...never...", each word was punctuated by a desperate kiss, "leave... me ... alone!"

Tears fell down her cheeks as she pulled his face back to her breast, an offering of supplication to his suffering. She stripped out of her jeans and boots, not ever doubting she was giving him what he needed.

Straddling him where he sat, he suckled her again as she took him inside her fully, and brought him to rapid completion. He held her back, supporting her. Her wetness slicked him, mingling with his own. His cry of completion was a muffled sound, against the skin of her shoulder.

She kept her arms wrapped around his head, holding him close until his breathing returned to normal. His tears were on her skin. His semen was inside her. She felt him shudder, in an aftershock wave.

Then, she felt him calm. All was right, again, in his world, on some level.

"Love you," he said, kissing her freckles.

"I know," she answered, stroking his thick hair.

Vincent and Catherine walked in on them, getting an eyeful, as they were cuddled on the bed. Corrinne's jeans were on the floor, her shirttail all that covered her bare backside as Seth stroked and caressed his wife's back.

Catherine and Vincent backed out as quickly as they had come in. Vincent dropped the tapestry to the hospital chamber, behind them.

On the other side, Seth laughed into his wife's neck.

"God. It's like your Uncle Frank and Aunt Jean walking in on us all over again, in the trailer," he chuckled. Corinne kissed his cheek.

"Husband," Corrinne spoke the word, all her love in her voice, "we have children to tend to, and a community that needs us." She looked back toward the doorway. "I do not know what we can do for these people. But it's time we made plans to return home."

Seth nodded. "Gas up the rig, and tell them we're coming." He looked back to the now-closed tapestry.

"Are you sure you're okay to travel?" She was mindful of his ribs.

"I'll be uncomfortable, but I'll be okay. Just go easy on the potholes," he teased her.

She gave him a look. He was by far the hellion, when it came to driving.

"Do you think he chose badly?" Seth asked his lovely wife. Of the two of them, she had spent more time getting to know the new Shahnna.

She laid against his chest lightly, feeling the warmth diffuse between them. He drew up the sheet to cover her.

"No." Corrinne Blade Hunter shook her head and considered. "She's ... impressive, Seth. She's smart, and rich, but she's kind. She's had to fight his... confusion for a long time. She loves him. Deeply. But she's hurt, too. I think they'll figure it out. I hope they will." She kissed his muzzle of a nose, and smiled at him. "Love you."

"Ever my Queen." He kissed her palms, in turn, and settled them contentedly against his chest.

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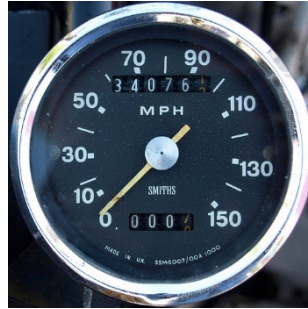
The day had been long, as they all were, now. Vincent wasn't certain if he had enough patience for Mouse right now, though as with most things "Mouse," it was the tinker who called the tune. Mouse sat in Vincent's chambers, clearly wanting to have a word. Catherine had excused herself shortly after the two of them had walked in on Seth and Corinne, in a private moment.

"Mouse? Did you... need something?" Vincent asked.

"No. Not Mouse. Mouse good. Mouse fine." He was fiddling with a piece of the motorcycle. "What's this do?" the young boy asked Vincent.

Vincent was confused. Mouse knew full well what a speedometer was. "That's the speedometer, Mouse. It tells you how fast you're going."

"Not that part. This part." Mouse indicated the area under the plastic lens. The odometer.



“That is the... odometer. It measures distance.” Vincent watched his young friend closely. He was scowling at the device, and was clearly bothered by something. He’d been biting his nails. Hard. Usually, his hands were too full of the tools he held to accomplish that.

“Distance. Like... go there? And how far?”

Vincent nodded. “Yes. Like go there, and how far. That’s what this device can tell you,” Vincent answered, keeping an eye on his clearly troubled friend. Mouse set the part on Vincent’s writing table, where it rattled, as it settled. Vincent had no idea what Mouse wanted it for, or why he’d brought it to him.

“Go there and... come back?” Mouse asked.

*Ah. So that’s what this is about.* Mouse was suddenly afraid Vincent might leave when Seth and Corinne did. He wondered how many other tunnel dwellers were reaching the same conclusion.

“Mouse, I don’t need this.” Vincent handed it back to his young friend.

“I am not going anywhere. Not right now, at least. You should put it back on Seth’s motorcycle. He will have a use for it.”

“Because Vincent doesn’t need it?” Mouse was clearly worried.

“No, I don’t need it.” Vincent sat on the edge of his writing desk, his hands folded on his lap. “This is my home, Mouse. Nothing that has happened in the last week has changed that.”

The servant of a boy heaved an obvious sigh of relief.

“Good. Because Mouse doesn’t want to go to Canada.”

*Of course, he’d simply assumed he would, if it came to that.* Vincent tried to hide a smile, at the notion.

“Vincent can’t go without Mouse. Be lost. Would have to use the... odometer, to come back.”

Vincent wondered if his young friend had any idea just how big Canada was, and what going there would entail. Yes, Seth and Corinne had already invited Vincent to come visit. And no. He had no intention of taking them up on their kind offer. Not for a while, at least. Too much in his own life still needed tending, right here.

Vincent shook his head. “I couldn’t possibly go. Not now. This is my home. You are my family. I am not leaving, Mouse,” he repeated.

Mouse was all smiles. “Corinne said I can keep the bike for a while. Fix it up, some more. Get some wire. Get a thing. Get another thing...”

Mouse was making motions with his hands, clearly ‘fixing’ something only he could see, inside his head. He was already distracted by the bike again, now that the question of Vincent’s leaving was settled.

Vincent said carefully, “If I do go to Canada... would you like to go with me? It would be quite an adventure.”

Mouse shook his blonde head. “Too cold. Seth said.” Mouse turned over the odometer, in his palm.

“Yes, Canada is rather famous, for that,” Vincent responded drily.

“Famous... Like Mouse!” He tapped the scratched lens.

“Yes. Doubtlessly famous like Mouse,” he agreed.

“Catherine go?” Mouse asked.

"I don't know. We will have to see. For right now, Seth needs to go home, where he can heal, and be near his family."

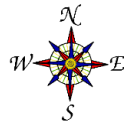
"Good to have a home. Family. Mouse has a home. Vincent has a home."

Vincent inclined his head. "Yes, we do." *An amazing one. All the more precious to me because you are here.* He stood up and drew the young boy in for a quick embrace.

"Do you think you can get it working again?" Vincent asked about the broken machine that had brought all their lives together. His expression said he was doubtful of it.

"Piece of cake!" Mouse enthused.

Vincent watched the young boy go, wondering if putting his own life together would be as simple as Mouse seemed to think fixing the motorcycle was.



## Chapter Eleven

### *The Weight of Enlightenment*

"Well, that was certainly an enlightening week," Catherine said to no one in particular, as she entered her apartment.

Catherine's briefcase was beyond full. Her apartment had been all but abandoned this last week, and she'd given her work short shrift.

Seth's convalescence was to blame. *Or more precisely, his very existence was to blame*, Catherine thought, hefting the loaded briefcase onto the table. It seemed that just as suddenly as the amazing couple had blown into all their lives, they'd left.

Catherine left her work where it was, and went into her kitchen. She crossed to the refrigerator and tossed out a half gallon of spoiled milk. Some of the food was looking dicey, as well.

Between needing to be focused on a huge case that had gone to trial, one she'd worked six months on, and needing to go Below as soon as she could possibly manage it, her apartment was falling apart, and the dry cleaning she'd forgotten to take in was currently riding in the trunk of her car.

Some eight days after having discovered the existence of Seth Night Hunter, Catherine still couldn't quite believe all she'd come to know. *There are more of them. Not many, but... more.*

Now that Seth and Corinne were gone, however, there were some hard truths for Catherine to sort through.

*Seth Night Hunter. Shah.* Catherine's head wrapped itself around the word.

Seth: The man who could have been Vincent's brother. The man who knew more about Vincent than Vincent seemed to know about himself, for whatever any of it was worth. And at this point, Catherine wasn't entirely sure just what that was.

Before the future could beckon, the past had to be dealt with. And it was their immediate past which still concerned her, for some reason.

*We were imploding. Blowing apart. Hurting each other, just by... being. And then...*

And then, there it all had come, from out of nowhere. A malfunctioning piece of hardware on a Harley had possibly saved them both. Vincent was not the only one like him. He was not an experiment; not an “accident.” He was his own unique type of being. Rare. Ancient. They were struggling to hold their numbers. But there were more of them, in Canada. Seth had brothers. But more to the amazing point, Seth not only had brothers; Seth had sons.

*Seth had sons, and daughters, and a wife, and a home.* And four broken ribs on the mend, somewhere between here and the northern border of the United States, but Seth had, dare she think it again, *a family.*

He had the kind of life Vincent could only dream of. He had an adored wife, Corinne, who was now questionably fond of products sold by Harley-Davidson, but passionate about her husband. He was bound by her promises. He was bound by his love and desire for her, desire Catherine had seen fully on display.

And he was even now on his way back home in the back of a tractor-trailer rig, being driven by a red-headed wife who was the most... *secure* woman Catherine had ever met.

Corinne adored Seth. He knew it. He adored her. She knew it. They kissed, publicly, and both swore at and teased each other. They were in love. *It all looked so easy, when it was right in front of everyone,* Catherine mused.

*Is that what we needed? For it to look easy?*

Catherine stalked to the bathroom, as she considered the word.

“Well, if there’s one thing we never have been, it’s that.” She said it aloud, even though no one else was in the room. “They say talking to yourself is a sure sign you’re going crazy,” she tacked on, grabbing a

load of towels out of the hamper and tossing it into the machine in the kitchen.

She added soap – probably too much – and spun the dial. The metal lid slammed down, just a touch too hard.

*Oh, and Corinne of course, is human. Utterly and completely.* It seemed that was the only kind of “wife” a Shah ever had.

*Well, how about that?* Catherine attacked the refrigerator again, and threw out some gone over lunch meat, and couldn’t help the internal sarcasm that refused to stop ringing in her ears.

For Vincent, the week had been one revelation after another. For Catherine, it had been a series of raking blows.

Vincent had felt as if each new fact he learned took a ball bat to his understanding.

For Catherine, it had felt more like a knife.

It took saying good-bye to the unique (*and married*) pair for Catherine to even begin to process it all, really.

They hadn't liked her. At least, not initially. They'd blamed her for “playing games” with Vincent, for rejecting him, for not living with him... The list of her failures was endless, in their eyes, until they understood that it was he, as much or more than she, who often kept their lives separate.

Very separate. Never more so than after his terrible illness, in a way.

In this, they seemed at cross-purposes. The urge to combine their lives in more ways than they had, had snuck up on Catherine, after she'd nearly lost him. At first, she knew it was her fear talking, and so did Vincent. But after a while, she knew it was more.

He, on the other hand, seemed to have the opposite idea.

But her resolve (which felt like so much more than that), became firm.

*"It's time. We have to try..."*

*"Some things are worth the trying. While others... are folly."*

What began with subtle hints turned into open conversation. And neither one was getting them anywhere. If anything, it was damaging their relationship; Catherine feared, irrevocably.

*Had he really needed a pair of complete and total strangers to tell him what she had been all but screaming at him for weeks, now? Longer?*

That they should be together, that their lives were meant to be lived together, that somehow, some way, she was meant to be his, and he was meant to be hers?

Well, apparently he did. *Damn it.* And he hadn't actually "needed" the pair of them. *One would have done it. Either one. He'd have accepted it sooner from Seth, but Corinne would have done, in a pinch.*

It galled Catherine to know she was talking about a woman he had never seen, before last Tuesday. She'd have sailed in, told him everything he needed to know, patted his blonde, stubborn head, and left, and he'd have been content, in the bargain.

Catherine knew he'd have taken Corinne's word over hers. For that matter, he'd probably have taken the word of anybody who lived at North Edge Logging Camp; anyone who knew of the existence of other people like him.

But he wouldn't take hers. No matter how often, or how emphatically she'd tried to tell him.

*"You can't know the limits of what we are—"*

*"I can. And so can you. There is no sin in that, Catherine."*

She could find no clear way to refute him.

Understandably, Vincent had wanted to spend every moment he could talking to Seth, this week. They'd spoken, but not for very long. Now, Seth was gone. Back to his home.

*Oh, excuse me, his "Shahdom."* There was a whole lingo here.

Catherine supposed she and Vincent should be making wedding plans, right now. Getting together a guest list, and her picking out lingerie.

*Well, to hell with him. To hell with all of them. I'm hurt, and I'm angry, and I don't care who knows it.*

Catherine knew it was an utterly unreasonable reaction. That she should be feeling joy beyond imagining. Every secret dream she'd ever had could now be realized.

*Good thing we stopped to get permission from total strangers on that, huh?* She stopped throwing out the contents of her refrigerator. It was just something for her hands to do, anyway. She shut the door with so much force she heard the condiment jars rattle.

*Were we really all but through? Were we?* Catherine's head (and heart) couldn't shake clear of that last question, that last fact, no matter how many other facts presented themselves.

It did not help things that before Seth's entrance, (well, crash, technically) that she and Vincent had had another (in a long string of) conversations on the subject of their future. And that, for whatever reason, this had become more strident, more frustrating than the others.

*No. It wasn't a conversation. It was a fight. We were fighting. Did we ever do that, before? I know we disagreed sometimes, but did we ever*

*feel like we were... fighting? Each other? The world, yes. But... each other?*

For the most part, it was a rehash of almost every talk they'd ever had on the subject. It was so *much* a repeat of the others, she could all but recite the tenor of it by heart.

She would ask if they could have more.

He would say he had given all he could, and held back due to regards for her safety, or his lack of experience, or the cost to her, and an over-arching fear that a dark part of him would emerge and possibly injure or even kill her.

She would protest.

He would stand firm.

She would try to find compromise, anywhere.

He'd tell her she was giving up too much.

She would try reason.

Which wouldn't work.

She would try appealing to faith, that he should just have a little. In fate. In them. In a higher power. In purple unicorns and dragons with pink noses. Anything, *anything* to move him past this place in which they were now mired.

He wouldn't budge.

The place they were supposed to get to by "facing their fears and moving through them," (His words after her father's passing) had seemed impossibly distant, after his collapse and recovery.

What hurt all the more was, during his convalescence, there'd been a time when she'd thought they were drawing even closer.

*Didn't you say we were blessed? I swear I heard it.*

But then, the question in Catherine's mind became, increasingly "Blessed with what?" Peace? Just that, and nothing more?

Peace was easy, in its way. It's what you got if you pushed no boundaries. You got peace. The contentment of being happy with what you had, no matter what that was.

It was peaceful. But was it... right?

Catherine couldn't answer that question now, any more than she could before, and it was one she'd struggled with. She knew she was upsetting theirs. So she'd reined herself in, and tried to ask, rather than "push." And that had worked, for a while.

Until it hadn't.

Then he'd tell her it was for her own good, and she'd give in to tears. He'd either apologize to her and hold her while she cried, - but still not soften his stance one iota - or go off to the tunnels below, to ... well, do whatever it was he did when he could no longer bear to be with her.

She knew it wasn't fair of her to ask for more than he could give, and that would make her despise not just herself, but what they were becoming. Since she'd known him, Her 29th birthday had come and gone. Her 30th. Her 31st. Thirty two was coming, along with every other age. Some internal pressure she could feel like a time bomb was ticking inside her, ready to blow them apart. Literally.

She'd force herself to calm, to see reason. To see her love, and know she loved him, utterly. To accept what they had until...

Until that felt like everything was too little, again, and the pressure once more began to build, inside of her.

It was a pattern they'd established, and it was dividing them as surely as Elliot Burch, John Pater, Stephen Bass and Mitch Denton ever could have dreamed of doing. Worse. Those things, those people could all be overcome, and had been, by the two of them.

But this couldn't be.

It had been the elephant in the room, every time they were together.

*Well. Now the elephant had little baby elephants. And the boy baby elephants might be born Shah, and the girl ones would likely be empathically sensitive, to one degree or another, as they cleared their teens.*

Catherine rubbed her eyes. It was too much. After eight straight days of it, it was too much. She didn't want to talk to anybody right now. Didn't want to face the looks of the tunnel dwellers, and didn't want to hear Vincent's new take on what their life might hold.

If he'd wanted her, he should have taken her. Taken her on faith, on the strength of her love for him, and his for her.

*Was I asking so much? Was I?*

But he didn't want her that way, and he hadn't done anything about it, one way or the other, and Catherine had no doubt she'd still be licking her wounds from her latest dust-up with Vincent, had Seth Night Hunter not laid down his bike in Central Park and unceremoniously hit a pine tree, doing close to ninety.

*Bad luck for the tree, and for Seth, good luck for them?*

*God, how I hate that.*

Yanking her suitcase out of the closet, she threw it open on the bed, and began to pack.

*I can't talk to him right now. I'll say something ugly. Something I shouldn't.*

Had she ever been afraid to talk to him, before? Vincent, of all people?

She couldn't remember a time when she had.

*I think I know why you go away, now.*

This time, she was the one who needed a journey to someplace else. Anyplace else.

\*\*

"Catherine?" His voice was soft. He almost sounded afraid of her. He certainly could feel her anger. It rolled off her in hard waves. She had a large bag open on the bed. She seemed to be putting in it whatever her hand hit.

"You are leaving?" He asked the obvious.

She did not respond other than a bare nod. And she did not slow down in her packing. The balcony doorway to her bedroom sat open. All of a sudden, Vincent thought he might not be able to count on that being the case, for much longer.

She tossed in some shoes.

It almost surprised him when she spoke.

"Yes. For a few days. Longer. No, not longer.... I don't know how long. I just need to get away."

He didn't know what to do. She was furious. Hurt. Confused.

"Did I... do something?" he asked. Something about Seth and Corinne? He'd thought she would be pleased, considering all the last week might mean, for them.

"No. God forbid you do something." She bit down on the sarcasm and tossed a hairbrush from the dresser to the open case.

"Catherine." His voice was more firm. "Tell me why you are doing this."

"You do it when you're upset, don't you?" She shot the words at him, no small amount of pain in their depths. "Take off? Disappear? Go on some... walkabout with no word of how long you'll be gone, or when you'll be back?" Her hand waved in the air to indicate distance, before she threw a travel alarm clock into the mix. "Well, welcome to the club. The view stinks and the seats are uncomfortable."

She went into the bathroom to fetch a bottle of shampoo.

"I thought you would be... happy." His voice was sincerely confused.

"Why? Because somebody else told you it was okay if we're together? Yes, I'm overjoyed."

"Catherine, I..."

She stopped moving and faced him, three years of hurt and wishing in her eyes. "I know we had our rough times. But I *begged* you for the life they had. For a *fraction* of it." She held up her thumb and forefinger a small distance apart, indicating 'fraction'. "For a *taste*. I *begged* you, Vincent." Her pride had been stripped bare. Her heart, too. "Do you know how many nights I cried my eyes out on that damn sofa?"

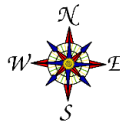
*Stop talking. This is the fight you were trying to avoid.* But the horse was leaving the barn.

"Yes," he told her, his gaze level with hers. He had shared her pain. He wanted her to know that as she had felt her sorrows, he had felt them, too.

"You did, didn't you?" She flipped the suitcase shut. "Right now, I swear, I don't know whether or not that makes it better or worse." She gave the zipper an angry yank as she sealed the case closed. "Worse, I think, at the moment," she concluded.

She picked the case off the bed and left the apartment, fully aware he could not follow her into the hallway.

The door slammed so hard the pictures rattled.



### Chapter Thirteen

#### *Truths Beyond Knowledge*

Vincent truly did not know what to make of her, especially considering all he now knew. Seth had told him that marriage (or at least having a true mate) was not only common among his people, it was all but required. That bonding held the madness at bay; or at least that it should have.

He and Catherine had gotten turned around somehow. They had never consummated their relationship, so apparently the bond they had was "incomplete" in some way. But it was there, and a sure sign they were a "couple" in the eyes of his society.

*His society.* Not the people below, but the Shah society. One he had not been aware of, before last week. The facts Seth left behind sat like breadcrumbs on a trail.

*Seth Night Hunter: Nomad.* Vincent obviously couldn't stop thinking about him.

*A married man. Married Shah. A son, a brother. A father.* He was a father of five, and counted twin girls, a Shah child named Daniel, among his progeny. Vincent was literally staggered by all he had learned. Even after Seth's departure, the facts swirled and hammered, inside his too-full brain.

*All my fears for myself and Catherine have been baseless. Groundless.* Or at least, most of them had been.

*A Shah never injures his mate, at least, not intentionally.*

And never in madness. The madness itself seemed to work on something of a time line. Once in the teens, as kind of a marker for puberty, once in the early thirties, as either a warning or a doom, as it was sometimes fatal, and then, as the story was told, once any time after the age of forty, which was always fatal. Seth had been very specific.

*We're all animals, after all,* Vincent mused, not terribly put off by that fact. He included human beings in that idea, along with everything else.

Some internal mechanism, some drive, some salmon-like instinct, drove his kind to find a mate, (and fulfill that) or die. The bond was part of it.

But he and Catherine had never consummated their relationship. Vincent still remembered Seth's astonishment, at that. *"It's like he's*

*been raised by wolves,”* Vincent shook his head at what Seth had told his wife.

Vincent sat near the mirror pool, trying to clear his mind after his argument with Catherine. He'd felt her ire; was still feeling some of it, now. The peace of the room helped with that, some. This was a quiet place. Vincent felt he needed it, right now.



*She's... upset. Over what we failed to become. It isn't her fault. She couldn't know what she was asking of me, was all he could surmise.*

*She could think she did, but she didn't.* And for the utter shame of it, he'd never been able to bring himself to explain it to her, not really. He'd encapsulated all of it into one simple word: *No*.

To be sure, other words had followed it, as well. *The risk is too great. The cost is too high.* While inside, a different list of problems raged, at least, mentally. *The Dark Part. The Other. The Madness.* Whatever

euphemism Vincent could come up with to describe it, it failed in the reality of what it actually felt like: *The Rape*.

She had no clue, none of them did. Even Father, who'd sat with him through it before, hadn't known, not on this level of awareness.

To be ridden by an animal. An in the end, constantly. Not some terrible moment that would be over in a matter of minutes, not some brutal but blessedly brief disaster, but to be owned, subjugated... *forced* to do the bidding of a darker self. Until no other act of will mattered.

He had howled and screamed and raged at that, first in sanity, and then in the madness, and everybody saw it as a kind of "something wild breaking free" inside him.

Had anyone ever stopped to think the opposite? Not free. Not ever free. Caged.

That a part of him, sane and reasonable him, had been inside, the entire time, and aware? Begging this insanity to stop? *And it ... simply... wouldn't? Couldn't, even?*

He remembered, as he was owned, the urge to destroy, the urge to smash glass, to toss his books helter-skelter, to clear off the top of a table with the sweep of his arm. Remembered fighting to call that arm back, lest it injure someone he loved. He couldn't.

He remembered his groin responding to the violence, the tingle, the sensation, the desire to dominate. More than sex; less (far less) than love. As a teenager, after Lisa, the madness had shattered his innocent image of himself. Vincent despised remembering that he'd squatted in a corner, grunting as he'd masturbated, not caring if anyone saw. He'd wanted to stop. He just couldn't.

That was the first time the madness had owned him, and owned him fully. Father had cleaned it up, after, and told Mary to remain outside the chamber. Later... they'd called for the restraints. There was a reason Jacob, more than anyone else, preached extreme caution. There was a reason Vincent listened, and took it to heart. Neither of them spoke of those days. But they both knew about them.

The second time, the madness had been worse, and it wasn't his hand he'd wanted, or a furtive place to orgasm. He'd wanted *her*.

*Catherine.*

And in the way predators had, he understood his Dark Self was stalking her, even as it goaded him; playing cat-and-mouse. Waiting. Enjoying the buildup. It was a sick and twisted kind of foreplay, rising in his midsection. Vincent had wrestled the urge unto exhaustion.

Then, finally, he'd simply run from it. From all of them.

The smashed doors, scattered books, his destroyed room... and finally, the headlong run through the tunnels... He remembered it all, and remembered it differently, than they did.

In what he felt like was his last sane moment, no one understood that it was Vincent's last act of control, over his rising Beast. If he could get it far enough away from them, maybe they would have a chance to survive. The Beast liked to run. A creature of dark places and dark intentions, he liked the shadow-drenched areas of the tunnels and the deadly challenge of throwing himself headlong through that dark. This was a different kind of violence, and for a while, it was satisfactory.

*And if he got far enough away so that he couldn't smell her... he remembered thinking it.*

And so, it had been time to run. Night vision acute, he'd gone slamming through the darkness, knowing he was no longer controlling himself in any real way.

Jumping off the sides of the walls, making nearly impossible leaps, he'd pelted through his home as if the very devil was on his tail, and in a way, there was one. Part of him was praying, praying that his Dark Self would miss one of the jumps, and fall, or try to throw himself across the Abyss and fail, plunging to his own death, like Jason Walker had. This agony would finally be over, then. This horrid sensation of watching yourself enjoy and commit destruction, any kind of destruction, would finally, mercifully, cease.

The Black part of him grew stronger, and owned his muscles, as it owned his soul. He ran because he could; threw himself across the chasm, because he could. Did everything... because he could.

This dark, familiar joy was there when he killed, sometimes, too. Only less. Much less, than this. But still. He knew that adrenaline slam of domination was a familiar one. Vincent knew he'd felt it any time he'd subdued an opponent. He had known it the moment he'd killed the only Father he'd ever known, even though it wasn't Jacob in the end. It was John.

*Die, old man! Die!* He remembered thinking it, inside.

Had part of him known? He tried to convince himself he had. Tried to convince himself that somehow, as he'd committed his goriest evisceration, that he'd known it was Paracelsus, and not Jacob, he was killing.

*Did I? Did I know? Did I even... care, if it was, at the time?* He had no answer for the question, and even hated that it existed.

But he'd loved it, at the time. *Loved*. In the filthiest, most degrading and perverse form of that word. He'd loved it. He always had.

He'd loved the power of throwing Micah, the leader of the Outsiders, against the stones. Adored that he'd killed more than half a dozen of Micah's followers with an almost surgical precision.

It had taken less than three minutes to commit wholesale slaughter. Speechless, yet screaming, he'd gotten them all.

It took less than a minute to kill John Pater. He was very skilled. And as bad as it had felt when he'd done it, he knew he was in for so much worse. Violence fed the thing inside him, he knew. But he also knew that it was about to break free, completely.

And so it had. Until it had nearly killed him. Had killed him. Only Catherine and a needle from Father, jammed into his lifeless heart, had brought him back.

*With holes in my memory. Because there was... so much that I wanted to forget. I even forgot your name, though I swear I didn't mean to. There's a part of me that feels... evil. I just wanted to not remember it. Not own it, like I have to.*

And Catherine had wanted him to tempt... that. To tempt it into her bed, when she was near him...alone... half-naked and vulnerable.

*Was she utterly, utterly mad? Or just that insensitive?*

He knew she was neither. And she never had been. Knew that there was no more loving, caring woman on the planet than his Catherine. He'd bet his life on it. He'd bet the whole community's lives on it. He had done just that, when he'd brought her below for the very first time, back when she was savaged.

*But she did not understand this. She simply didn't.*

Somewhere in Canada, there was a Shah named Zachariah who would allow himself to die before he endured the madness a third time. He was Seth's older brother, and they worried for him.

Vincent understood exactly how he felt. Vincent himself had vowed that the next time he felt the madness truly stir within him, he would send himself off the edge of the Abyss. Beg Cullen to help him, if he had to, in a sane moment. That he would not, would NOT go through the utter loss of self, the rape of all he was, one more time.

It would be like asking a woman to voluntarily step into a room with her attacker, and stay there, indefinitely, with no means of protection.

*Would anyone do that?*

Did anyone but Jacob, perhaps, understand that's what Catherine had been asking?

Or he thought she had.

But now, Seth and Corinne had cleared it up for him. The sexual component of the madness was the imperative that he mate, wreaking havoc with his system. That he had ultimately failed to heed that call *was* the manifestation of his madness. Not the opposite. Had they made love before this, it never would have happened.

The irony was not lost on him that now that he was free to be with Catherine, she perhaps wanted nothing to do with him.

*She was angry. Disappointed. In some small part of her, bitterly so.*

Love had not conquered all. An accident had. No fairy tale for them. No "we persevered through our struggles, and came out on the other side." The thing that had helped them come so far seemed to be failing them, here.

Dumb luck had saved them, if they were, indeed, to be saved. Chance had thrown them the most unexpected of life lines. Had Seth managed to crash his borrowed bike ten miles distant, or even two, he'd be dead, the coroner's office would have one for the books, and Vincent would be none the wiser, about anything.

He tried to tell himself that he would eventually have succumbed, and found his way to her. But he honestly didn't know that was true. He truly did love her too much to risk her. And every nerve in his body screamed against being overtaken by the Beast in him, again.

If he did a rational extrapolation of their previous course, only a few options were open to them, and none of them were good.

They'd have continued to fight until Catherine finally gave up, defeated. Because he knew full well he was not going to give in, on this.

Or, he'd have driven her away to the point where his prediction about her finally turning to someone else and having a normal life Above came true. His heart would have shattered. Hers, maybe, as well. But it would have happened, given enough time and enough tension, between them. He knew Elliot Burch loved her. It wasn't so hard to picture them together.

Or, lastly, they'd have continued on this stalemate until the madness came again, and finally took him. The general consensus was that no one survived it a third time. Damn few survived it even a second one. In the end, the heart simply stopped beating. His had.

Vincent rubbed his temples with his fingers. *Wrong about everything. Almost completely.* Never had overwhelming evidence been viewed and calculated so incorrectly, by him.

*The madness was caused by his desires,* he'd reasoned.

*No, the madness was caused by frustrated desire, came the fact.*

Had he but stopped to look, he'd have seen that pattern both times, in adolescence and adulthood.

*The madness was beyond his control.* He'd have sworn it was true.

*No, the madness was stopped by bonding with a woman, as you took her to wife. Nature had no desire to endanger a breeding pair, or their offspring. It was counter to nature to do that.*

He'd been so terrified he'd lose control with her, he'd almost... refused to see what the facts were telling him.

*He could never love Catherine physically. It would cause her death.* He'd been so terrified of that possibility.

*No, as it turns out. He couldn't raise a hand to her, even if she attacked him. Even in the madness, his Beast had not struck at her. Jacob, yes. Catherine, no. Seth told him the mantra of searching for a mate was "choose wisely" among his people. There were reasons for that. The bond mate was the one person you could not stop from hurting you. Physically or emotionally. The bond forbade endangering the female.*

Seth had been rather quick to point out that not being able to hurt Corinne hadn't kept him from occasionally marking her skin as they made love; but that the intention to hurt her was utterly foreign to their kind.

*She could come at you with a baseball bat, and all you would do is knock it away,* Seth had explained. It was hard to shift his position, mentally, from being afraid of hurting her to understanding just how much it was she who held the control, where they were concerned.

*"It hurts when she's mad at me."*

It did. Seth had also confessed to not liking the power that gave his wife, sometimes, but he'd accepted it. Like everything else, it was part of their love.

Vincent understood the feeling of pain. His stomach was sour, and his chest was tight. Catherine was angry with him. He could feel it. Deeply.

He wondered if normal males felt this way, too, when their loves were upset. Judging by the look on Kanin's face sometimes, when Olivia had been clearly irritated, it was likely.

Vincent stared at the pool, unseeing. Wishing she would come back. Wishing she could understand. Wishing she would just ... set it all aside, and let them start fresh. He loved her so much, and had erred, so badly.

*I love you. I was so wrong about... everything else. But I've never been wrong about that.*

With the best of intentions, he'd hurt her. He knew it.

\*\*

Catherine stared into water of a completely different kind. Rather than a still mirror pool, the steel-colored Atlantic surf moved, and lapped lazily, at the grey sand.



*It looks so different, from California,* Catherine thought, remembering their first time a huge distance had kept them apart. She'd sent Vincent a shell, and felt him near, even though he'd been far away.

*And now he's been far away, even when he's been near,* she mused, shifting a book across her lap, as she sat in a beach chair.

Catherine wasn't sure if Vincent understood the incredible toll his near-constant rejection had taken on her.

That in spite of every verbal assurance he could give, and lately he'd not even given many of those, Catherine felt like the least lovely, least desirable of women.

The man she'd loved and desired had not desired her back, at least not enough. For years.

It was as simple as that. *For years.*

And somehow, in a way she couldn't explain, she'd felt totally unable to do anything about that: Couldn't even leave him and give up.

Whether that was because of the bond, or that was just her heart, she didn't know.

But did Vincent honestly think she would want the touch of another man, after having known him? Think she would want to kiss a mouth that was not cleft, accompany a man who could not lift a twelve-foot beam off a door, be embraced by arms that were in any way... less than his?

It was an odd thing, and a thing she'd never spoken of, to him, but she knew she no longer looked at other men and saw "men" any more. There was no attraction for her. It had been over two years since she'd felt even a spark of it. Elliot and she had shared a kiss. And she had stood there, sincerely wishing it was Vincent.

It seemed now like she'd been doing that for a while. Longer than even she truly cared to admit. Until it felt like she always stood there, wishing it was Vincent. Wishing Vincent would touch her, would help them become something more than they were. Even when Vincent was in the room. *Especially when Vincent was in the room*, she amended mentally, turning a barely-read page.

Surely there was somehow, some way, she could get him to take the chance? It was an inner dialogue that was almost always going, the last few months.

She'd tried everything from gentle coaxing, to outrageous seduction, to openly discussing it as if it was a dinner menu they had to go over. Nothing helped, nothing worked, nothing swayed him.

*You're stubborn. So am I. Was that... bad, for this?* She wasn't sure, one way or the other. Nothing moved him from where he'd firmly set himself.

Not a little black dress (she'd tried it; she actually did, excusing the look on a dinner she'd had to attend), a prolonged absence (hers... his... it never mattered), not candlelight and roses, or their

anniversary, or Valentine's Day, Winterfest, her birthday or his, a new perfume, wearing her hair up, evening gowns or summer shorts... nothing. Not being near death, not being far from it. Not begging him to let her come Below, again.

Before his illness, it had all been difficult enough. But after it? He'd grown adamant.

The result of all of that was a grand total of two kisses, one more spiritual than physical, the other given as a consolation for grief. (And initiated by her.)

*What a pathetic total.* She winced, inwardly, at the realization. She knew it was a sad sum, for three years of loving him so much her heart was breaking with it.

And her heart had been breaking with it. Daily, it seemed, by the time Seth Night Hunter and his bride careened unexpectedly into their lives.

The lawyer in Catherine had attacked the problem like a case she had to prosecute. The woman in her had approached it like a campaign.

A failed one, by any measure.

Catherine knew that Vincent couldn't understand how hard it was to feel that somehow, some way, she was missing something, some tiny detail, some bit of knowledge that might help. Missing something that would finally either help him to take that step, or push him to it. It was hard to feel that "attractive" was nice, but at the end of the day, she simply wasn't "sexy" enough for him.

There was a difference between the kind of loveliness that made a man say, "Yes, that's pretty," and the kind that made a man think of long weekends and satin sheets.

The first inspired a platonic kind of friendship that never strayed over the line.

The second inspired so much more. It obliterated lines, and never cared if it saw those again. It was brave, and daring, and took risks.

Catherine thought they had the second kind, at first.

And realized they had the first kind, at second glance.

She wanted him to be obsessed and consumed by her, on some level. Unable to stay away for days, or weeks on end. Love her with passion, and not just grace.

But he hadn't. He'd given her reasons aplenty, and she didn't doubt that those were valid. But in the end, he just... hadn't.

*Because in the end, he didn't, she'd concluded.*

The view from the seashore was nice. Lovely. And inconsequential. She'd been sunning herself on the Atlantic beach for three days. For her trouble, she'd gotten a phone lecture from Joe Maxwell, a bit of a tan, all the way through the latest Janet Evanovich novel, and part way started on Stephen King.

And she missed Vincent. In a hard, deep place, she missed him.

She knew that if she went back, they would make love. Probably.

Not because passion drove him to it, or because desire overrode every other bit of good sense either one of them had.

But because it was okay now. He knew he wouldn't kill her.

She brushed a tear away.

It felt like, rather than having gained something, that they'd lost something, to her. And in a way she couldn't quite define, it felt like they'd lost so much.

*No chance, now, that the depth of his love would override the depth of his fear.* Seth and Corinne had given them the knowledge that they could be together.

And removed forever the chance that they would prove that to each other on their own.

Catherine sighed. There was no help for it. As Narcissa always said, "Once you see a thing, you cannot un-see it."

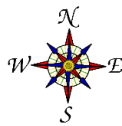
*No, you can't. Time to go home. Whatever that means.*

She knew she'd check out of the hotel tomorrow morning.

Then she'd drive back and try to begin to live a life with him that, while it should be more, seemed like so much... less.

*"Love didn't conquer all. Grow up, Catherine,"* she scolded herself, returning to the heavy book in her lap.

But it still hurt, that it hadn't.



## *Chapter Fourteen*

### *Homecoming*

She was back.

She was tired from the drive, he could sense, but she was back.

For Catherine's part, the journey home had been an uneventful one, the miles giving her little but wear and tear on her car and more time to think, as she drove. She'd pulled her car into the garage, gone up in the elevator, and unpacked her bag. Now she had little more than a bundle of dirty clothes, with sand in much of them, to show for her time away. She was tired; feeling like she wanted a shower, and maybe something to eat, then bed. She'd have to call Joe, and apologize. Square things up with him. Too tired for words, she hit the shower, and fell into bed.

Vincent did not go up to her.

He knew that even trying to speak to her now would lead to nothing but... what? Another fight? *What did they have to fight about, now?*

*About how disappointed she was, in him. In them?* Disappointment and fatigue felt so close to the same thing, he knew he couldn't chance it.

*But at least she was back.* The knot in his stomach loosened, a little.

Perhaps he would be able to force down a bit of dinner this evening, as long as it was no more than soup. It usually was.

\*\*

He didn't try to come into her apartment, or draw her attention, in any way. But as she rolled over in bed at nearly four in the morning, she saw his distinctive shadow. Sitting. Just sitting, on her terrace.

Rising, she knew he felt her move. He took himself over to the living room side of the balcony, and waited to see if she would open the doors. His tall shadow stood outlined, against the curtains. He still didn't knock. As if he would simply stay there, one way or the other, no matter what she decided to do.

She crossed the living room then paused, considering.

*This is ridiculous. Open the doors. Both of you know he's there, and he knows you know.*

She pushed the doors open, seeing him standing on the cold stones, standing back, away from the entrance. His eyes were slightly wary of her. Slightly... injured. He turned his back on her, for a moment, and leaned his hands on the stones.



"You are... still angry." He said it. He felt it.

"I'm mostly just tired, I think." She tried to brush her disquiet away. She'd been trying to do that for a while. *Years, now, possibly.* It was a sad thought, for both of them.

"Do you want me to go?" he asked.

"No." A pause. "I don't know." Confusion again. "Do what you want, Vincent. Ultimately, that's what you'll do, anyway." She re-entered the apartment, leaving the doors open. What he did next was up to him.

"Catherine, that is unfair," he said, as he followed her into the room.  
"I have endeavored to please you every way that I could. I still..."

"No. No, you didn't, actually. Saying it doesn't make it true."

They both knew what she was talking about. He had refused to make love to her, even though she had tried to raise the subject, and then flat out begged him to at least consider it, on different occasions.

"Catherine..."

She crossed her arms in a defensive posture. "So. Now that we know we've got the 'all clear,' how do you want to go about this? Do I just... strip, and we get on with it?"

Bitterness. Hers. It was a hard thing, between them. And it was a flavor, under his tongue.

"How in God's name should I know the answer to that?" he snapped. Temper. He was starting to feel his, now.

"Sooo, not a big urge, then. Pretty much the same as before. Oh, well. I am still tired, Vincent. You can go, if you want." She turned from him, and headed for the bedroom.

He wanted to scream.

She wanted to take back everything she'd just said, aware of how utterly bitchy it sounded. She was handling this all wrong, and she knew it. The sorrow in her just wouldn't let her handle it any other way.

His tone was unmistakably frustrated. "You think, all this time, this has been because I had no... desire for you?" His voice was incredulous, his look no less so, as she turned back around, feeling challenged.

"No. I just think it's because you didn't want me enough." *There. I said it.*

"Damn you!" He exploded at her.

*Well. This was different. Did you really just curse at me?* Normally, he didn't bring her his temper. Usually, he just left, when she frustrated him.

"If you had *any* idea what I've been through, for your sake!" He hurled the sentence at her.

"Can't be more than I've been through for yours. You think there's a divide between us based on how you look. Well, at least you had somebody making pass after pass at you. I think there's a divide between us because no matter *what* I did, I couldn't get you to respond to me. Congratulations. We're both unattractive."

The venom from her bitterness was deep. He tasted bile. Spat it back at her.

"Unattractive? You are beautiful. You can go anywhere, have any man... panting after you."

There were bright tears in her eyes, but they weren't ones of sorrow. They were ones of frustration, and anger. "Except you, apparently," she retorted.

"Elliot Burch wants you every time he's in the room with you. I can smell it on him, if I'm near. Every intention. Do you think that is pleasant, for me?" Vincent asked.

"I'm not responsible for Elliot's reaction to me." *Why are we even discussing this?*

"No. Are you responsible for mine?" he asked her, pointedly.

"You didn't *have* a reaction," she shot back.

"No, I didn't." But the look he gave her belied his words. "I didn't... throw you over the couch and make love to you from every conceivable...." He sliced his hand through the air, not finishing the sentence. "I just went back Below, and thought of it, all the rest of the night. And suffered."

"Vincent. I..."

"Sitting. Standing. Leaned over the back. Laying on it. Sitting on the arm."

His eyes had just a bit of an unholy light to them, and she knew he was seeing some of what he described now, in his mind's eye.

"Me, sitting there while you straddled my lap. You, sitting on the edge while I was on my knees, in front of you. Dressed. Undressed. Half-dressed. Any way. Every way. In that black, short dress you wore out that door, one night."

*You remembered my little black dress? Oh, Vincent.*

"And that's just some of the fantasies, and those are just the ones about the couch, Catherine. Do not even tempt me to start listing the ones in your bedroom. Or mine."

He turned from her, raking his hands through his mane. Fighting to settle his breathing. "I'm sorry. That was... crude. Not worthy of you. Of us."

"You... told me, once, that... that you'd thought of it." Her voice was a little stunned. "I... I guess I never realized you thought of it... in so much detail," she confessed. She remembered his words, on the subject, back when they'd nearly quarreled about it, before.

*"I do think of being with you, that way, Catherine. But it is impossible. You must believe me."*

How many times had he said it and, unable to accept the latter sentences, she'd ignored the former one?

"I guess... you tried to tell me," she concluded, part of her wanting to step close to him, to touch his shoulder, the other part not daring to. He all but radiated aggravation.

He dropped his hands. "Of course, I did. What else could I do?" He half turned. His indrawn breath was a deep one, and she could see him reaching for his patience, his equanimity.

"Vincent... these last few weeks, months... I've felt like we're... pushing each other. Pushing for what we want, but... but also pushing each other away. I know you've felt it, too," she admitted.

He stepped closer to her sofa. "Catherine, you do not understand. I can't express in words what it is like to be... consumed by the madness. Just please know that... that it is so *bad*, so deeply, terrifyingly *bad*... that it is the *only* thing that could have kept me from... kept me from your side, all this time," he said, regaining his composure.

She closed her own eyes, confessing her fears. "I just kept thinking that if I were somehow... more...."

"If you would have been 'somehow more,' I'd have... thrown myself off the edge of your balcony," he stated, not realizing she hadn't completed the sentence. Not needing her to.

*Humor? Now?* She struggled to believe it. Then again, there was always the very real chance that he wasn't kidding.

He stepped away, looking out the gauzily-curtained doors at the space he'd just told her thought of throwing himself off of.

"Vincent, I'm so sorry," she apologized.

He shook his head. "No, I am. You needed to know, and I couldn't say it. Not then. Couldn't talk about it. Not... sex," he still whispered the word, out of reflex. "Not with you. And discussing it with anyone else would hardly be ... productive."

"I can see how Father might have been less than helpful," Catherine conceded.

"Devin's advice to 'just go for it' was well-intentioned, but no more constructive," Vincent said wryly.

"You talked to Devin about us?"

"The last time he visited, with Charles. And no, I didn't bring it up. He did."

She sat on the sofa, the one he'd just described in half a dozen fantasies, and took one of his hands, pulling him down to sit next to her.

"Do you know why you couldn't say anything? The things you needed to? It's okay, now. Can you tell me now?"

He dropped his head and leaned in toward her. "Because discussing ... it... makes me think of it. And I..." He shook his head, realizing his sentences were fragmenting again, and that he was still scrambling for euphemisms, out of habit.

*It's time to say it. Past it. Long past it. But it's time.*

"The madness. When it hold me in its grip... It's like... rape, Catherine."  
He finally said the word, and didn't dare to elaborate. Couldn't.  
Begged her not to ask him to.

The word was all she needed. The word, she understood. She had been assaulted. She knew the helpless fear of what it was to know someone else held everything about you under their control. She remembered the terror of the van, the horror of the knife, as it cut, over and over, into her skin. The fear of a man she didn't know, cutting her gown to expose her breast. Though they hadn't raped her, technically, they had done so. Yes, this was a word she understood.

She was amazed at her own stupidity, that she'd never connected that word to his experience with madness.

They'd all just looked at it as a loss of control, a kind of schizophrenia. But it wasn't, in the truest sense. He had never been mentally "ill." He'd been obeying part of his physiology. Aware of what it needed. Aware of ... everything, apparently.

"I feel it when it's happening. It's like being driven. Being... ridden."  
*This is not what I'm supposed to be, before you. This isn't who we are.*  
His shame was a pit in hell.

She leaned in to touch his cheek, petting his skin rhythmically, keeping him close.

"I was stupid, to not realize. I love you."

"There's no way you could know. I never... wanted anyone to."

Whatever her next words were, she knew she had to diffuse the weight he carried. Scatter the tension between them. They had both erred with the other, yes. But the errors had been borne of a mutual ignorance, not malice.

"The um... couch, huh?" She deflected his attention back to her upholstery. It was the best she could do. It was enough. She felt the tension begin to ebb. He couldn't think of a witty response. She didn't need him to. He simply nodded.

"Just so you know. I've had a couple thoughts about this couch, myself." She smiled, nuzzling his muzzle with her nose. "Mine involve feeding you strawberries dipped in chocolate. Which is completely ridiculous... since it's light fabric," she teased him.

He exhaled, long and slowly. Tension bled out of him. *Very well then. The couch.* "There is... white chocolate... isn't there?" he asked softly.

She loved him so much for what he'd just done; he'd let her move them past this; let her take them forward.

"You know, I think there is." She brushed her mouth against his, in a gentle, forgiving kiss. One that asked for it, as much as gave it.

And he brushed hers, in a firmer one.

Subtly, the sky outside her French doors began to shift, in color. Vincent could smell the dawn, within the hour.

"Father has need of me. Something about Seth's motorcycle, and Mouse. But... I will see you later... this evening?" he asked.

"Of course. Where? Here?"

That was too tempting, considering the conversation they'd just had. But he had something else in mind. Another place: A secret one he'd considered his, for their first time.

He rose, and took her with him, through her balcony doors. They both knew he had to go.

"Meet me near the Falls? After work? You don't need to wait for sunset," he invited her, anxious.

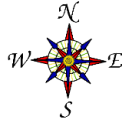
The way she was feeling at the moment, she wasn't sure she even wanted to wait for breakfast.

"Do you want me to bring anything?

"Just you. Bring whatever you want, but bring... you." He closed his eyes and loved her, holding her close.



"All right. Just me. After work, near the Falls." She kissed him gently and then let him go, into the greying dark.



## Chapter Fifteen

### *Riddles Hard and Easy*

Catherine dressed in tunnel-appropriate attire, realizing his request that she meet him dictated as much. In a way, she was grateful. It kept her from second- and third (and fifth) -guessing her clothing choice. Other than a gorgeous blush-colored camisole, bra, and panty set, she put on slacks and a blouse he'd seen before. Others in the tunnels would greet her, she knew. She wanted nothing that would... embarrass him.

This was all so new for them.

Pascal greeted her at her basement entrance, a thing that surprised her. She'd half thought he would be there to escort her down. But she knew where to find him - the Falls. Pascal confirmed that after lunch, he'd said he was headed there. The Pipemaster bid her good evening, as she made her way to him.

He was there. *He's had time to prepare for this evening, she thought. And from the looks of things, he's had time to second guess himself.*

Indeed he had, and more than twice. Never had they been to this place, before, with each other. The familiar ground of his home felt alien under his own feet, so unfamiliar was this territory.

He anticipated her early arrival, and had had just enough time to let other worries take hold. She did not disappoint with her entrance time. *She must have raced here after her work, he thought.*



She found him sitting near the Great Falls, as he'd said he would be. It was where he went to think, sometimes, when he did not want to travel all the way to the deeper tunnels, or to the Nameless River. She entered, knowing he sensed her. She sat beside him, not needing words.

*What a week, and more, it had been.* Those words were so paltry, compared to all that had happened.

She thought he would be happy with all he had learned, and after their... understanding, of last night. But the tense line of his body spoke of ... anxiety. Sorrow, even. *What is this?*

"Vincent?" she asked after a long pause. "Tell me?" It was not the same tone he used, but they were the same words.

His voice was low, but steady. "While you were ... away on your trip, I went to the Mirror Pool, to think. It is... difficult to process just how...rong... I was, about absolutely everything," he stated, keeping his profile to her. Water tumbled into a pool that had no hope of looking as blue as his eyes. It sounded as if he, like she, had made time for regret.

She placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Vincent. How were you supposed to know anything about it? That there were... people like Seth, like you?" Now it was her turn to be understanding.

"Not that. Things about myself. About us. Things... so obvious I should have thought of them myself, long ago."

He looked at her, and brushed back the soft fall of her hair, hooking it behind her ear, so he could see her scar.

"I was wrong almost every time I ever implied that there could ever be anyone else, for you, any other life. No wonder you fought me so hard. I was wrong in not realizing that the bond was an extension of me calling out for a... mate. A love of my own. It's so obvious..." he sighed, then continued: "That I could ever hurt you was wrong. Had I not been so... stubborn, so self-pitying, so... caught up in my own fears... I would have easily figured out most of it."

She shook her head, and the hair he'd tucked behind her ear fell forward, veiling her profile, a little. "Vincent. If there is one thing I am positive you have never been, it is 'self-pitying,'" she insisted firmly.

"But I didn't *know*," he insisted. "And a lot of it, I should have." *I felt you healing me. I felt you... falling in love with me.* "I should have, Catherine. No one felt... all of it, more keenly than I did. I should have known."

Now it was Catherine's turn to look out over the water, and at all it concealed, beneath. "Now, that's like someone being told the answers to all the hard riddles, and saying 'now they're easy.'" Catherine tried to put her arm around his shoulder, not sure if he wanted it there. He didn't move away from her.

"You tried to *tell me* the answers," he replied. "You said we had to stay together, that the rest would come. Did I listen?" He tossed a stone into the pool. Ripples spun out from the center.

"No, but to be fair, you thought you were protecting me. From what I now think I understand of our bond, that's its first priority."

He shook his head at that. Another thing he'd known, yet somehow... hadn't understood. "Seth and Corinne think this place is *my* community. That *I* am its leader." He shook his head, again. "That isn't even close to the truth. Father is."

Catherine considered his words, and tossed a small stone in, next to where his had gone. The ripples mingled with his, then faded. "Yes, that's so, but in a way, you are, too. I think they're right when they say that without you, this place might fail. Think about it." She tossed in another stone, then another, making a double ripple effect. Like Jacob and Vincent, they were two separate entities, with their own influence. Yet, they overlapped, in many ways.

Vincent shrugged. The tunnel community was all the family he had in the world. Of course he would protect them. Who held what rank here mattered to him not at all. He was a teacher. That role satisfied him, deeply. But yes, even Father had told him he was special, to the community; that he represented hope, and so much more, to those Below.

"Seth invited you for a visit. Do you think you might go?" Catherine asked, curious.

"Mouse asked me that. Perhaps. Someday. Not for a while, though."

Catherine wasn't sure she understood his reticence. *Surely the chance to be out in the open air was...* nothing compared to being next to her, right now, she realized. Not for him.

He drew up one knee and rested his arm on it. His hand held a stone, but he didn't toss it in.

"I... when we were ... early. I said something I shouldn't have. Please ... forgive me for telling you to find another life, another... love. I knew of our bond. I simply didn't... realize what it meant."

"You had no way to know." It was an honest statement.

"I put distance between us."

To some extent, that had been true. There was no sense saying it wasn't. "I know. And part of me understood, at the time. And the other part was... confused by you, for it." That too, was honest. But her arm slid firmly around his neck, to show him that this error, like their others, was forgivable.

"But you're not talking about when we were early, when things were new. You're talking about more recently. You were... close to saying it again... Weren't you?"

The stone dropped from his hand, making an ungainly "plop" in the water. He didn't have to admit it out loud.

"It's all I could think of... the night I found Seth. Please don't be... angry with me." It was a simple plea, but a heartfelt one.

"I'm not. Not anymore." She knew she wasn't. That she'd needed the distance so she could blow off some of her anger away from him, so she, too, could have some time to process all the week had meant. But she wasn't angry with him. She realized she almost couldn't be, not anymore. He wasn't the only one who'd developed a different view about who they were, thanks to the revelations of the past several days.

"They say ... that because we are unconsummated... there is still a chance for you, Catherine." He had to say it. In case she didn't know. "A way out, if all this has been ... too much. If you decide that..."

"I thought you just apologized for trying to shove me away. Now you're doing it, again."

He closed his eyes over his error.

"That is not ... what I want to do."

She leaned her forehead against his. It was the gesture she'd seen Seth and Corinne use, and it felt good. "To tell you the truth, I think I've been sick with envy, watching them with each other. It seems so easy for them. So uncomplicated. They clearly love each other so much. It just all looks... so... simple."

"Seth says Corinne cuts up his blue jeans if he ignores her for too long. To keep him trapped, naked, in their bedroom."

Catherine's green eyes grew wide, and she threw back her head with laughter, at the image. "Seth told you that?"

Vincent nodded, not bothering to hide a small smile.

"Okay. Maybe their relationship isn't really that simple," Catherine concluded. "Or maybe it is. That really is a very direct way of asking for what you want," amended Catherine.

Vincent chuckled, at that.

They were laughing together. It had been ages. Or at least, it had felt like it.

The week of strain they'd experienced, and the months of strain before that, fell away, between them.

"If I were to ask you what *you* want, could you tell me?" Catherine asked him.

"For you to accept me as the... fool that I am, even though I nearly destroyed us." Vincent's tone was rueful.

"That's what you regret. That's not what you want," Catherine countered, kissing his cheek, chastely.

His blue eyes stared at hers. He stood, and offered his hand. "Perhaps not. I have no... eloquence, when it comes to this. But I think I could show you."



## Chapter Sixteen

### *Veil Of Water, Thread of Amber*

He led her away from the view of the falls.

Or so she thought, at first.

He wound her near the east wall, ducking low so she could squeeze through several narrow openings. He took a torch from a wall sconce, as she dipped her head under a tight overhang. The next time she

stood erect, she was in a chamber roughly thirty feet in diameter. A half-dozen blankets and pillows were strewn on the ground. Several feet in front of her, the right fork of the waterfall cast its bounty into the pool. They were behind the falls, and just above the pool. The air felt like mist.

She looked at this place in wonder. "You brought me behind the Great Falls." Her voice was awestruck, as she stared at the veil of water.

Vincent took her hand. "They both wear a bracelet. Like your crystal and my rose. Courting gifts, each to the other. A betrothal, of sorts. At least I did some things, correctly." He brought her hand up, and planted a kiss on its back. He released her, then carefully fingered her crystal. She watched him, as he toyed with the chain, then let it drop.

He bent his head low, and his voice went even lower. "I want... you. To accept me. As I am. As you always have, Catherine." He finally answered her question.



He looked down at his vest and began to disrobe. Slowly, so she could stop him, if she wanted. Once they did this, there truly would be no turning back, for either of them.

He unfastened his vest. "You." He said the word deep and low. "You want to know what I want, what I always wanted, what I was terrified to want? You."

He began working the buttons of his shirt. "You. From the first minute, almost. You."

He pulled the tails of the shirt free of his waistband, and never stopped talking to her. "You. You when I wake up. You when I go to sleep. You, heavy with my...", his huge body almost bent at the waist with the overwhelming nature of the thought then came back up, "child. Someday."

The vest and shirt hit the floor. The thermal shirt he always wore joined them, peeled over his head in a smooth motion.

He stood, magnificent, allowing her to see his exposed chest, the ripple of his muscles, the pattern of blonde hair, as it covered his torso and arched down, to his waistband.

"You, looking at me without disgust or fear." He toed out of his boots and unbuckled his belt. He raised his head.

*Your eyes are so blue. And there is absolutely nothing disgusting about you. You're glorious.*

"You... looking at me like you are, right now." He reached to remove the pouch that held her rose, as if he'd take that off, as well. Then, thinking better of it, he simply shifted it so that it would hang down his back, rather than down his front. "I want to keep it on," he said, unnecessarily.

"Me, too," she whispered the word.

He let the open belt hang, and went to help her with her clothes, as she pulled off her sweater and unzipped her slacks.

So long. It had taken them so long to get to this point. And now it seemed like a runaway train, between them.

The Vincent so shy of his form was now standing half-nude before her, helping her slide her slacks off her legs. She reached for the zipper of his pants, her fingers fumbling with it. She blushed.

His fingers stilled hers, momentarily. "Last chance," he warned, as his hand remained over hers.

"I never want the chance to be away from you again," Catherine swore. "Not ever."

He crushed her against his chest, for a breathless, exploring kiss.

He stepped out of his jeans, letting the denim fabric fall away to reveal all he was. Muscular. Aroused. Dominant. Long, firm thighs melded into a runner's calves. Broad feet were planted in sand, dusted with the same hair that traced his fingers. His back to the falls, he looked like some wild, primal god, come to claim tribute.

Catherine could only hope she had something worthy to offer.

Dropping her slacks and kicking them away, her fingers touched her lips. *I want to kiss every inch of you.* Her eyes grew large, and admiring. And they'd both had the thought nearly simultaneously.

His breathing grew shallow, at the half-nude sight of her. Her crystal nestled between blush-cupped breasts.

*Do you have any idea how lovely you are? Any idea at all?*

"I'm nervous," she admitted.

"You shouldn't be." He knew he would take care of her.

"I'm... I didn't mean I was afraid. It's not the—"

"I know you aren't," he replied, watching her breathe, fascinated. The pulse at her throat was jumping. Her eyes were huge.

She removed first her camisole then her bra, then last, her underwear.

Then it was Vincent who went to his knees. His Queen. His beautiful Catherine. Could she possibly know how special, how perfect, she was?

Tenderness mixed with his desire, and he realized that Seth had been utterly correct, that he had the desire to please her, and be pleased by her, but no need to dominate, or demand, or control. He was her servant. He would be her slave, if she willed it. When she died, hopefully many decades from now, he knew he would lie on her grave, as a man named Adam was doing, waiting for death to re-unite them.

From his knees, while she stood, they were nearly the same height. She stepped forward into his waiting embrace, willing him to take her. Not to be slow. Not to find a reason to stop this.

As if he could.

He nuzzled her neck. She nipped his. He found he liked it, and returned the favor, being careful of his fangs. She pulled his buttocks forward, making his sex nestle against hers. *Yes. Good. Sweet Lord, that was good.*

She was already wet. She rubbed herself against him, and the oldest, most feminine invitation known to mankind, was clear, in the gesture.

He bent her backward and inhaled her right breast into his open mouth, suckling her right nipple, his free hand massaging the left one. The mist of the falls was pearling on her skin. Her hands were in his hair, increasing the pressure he gave her, demanding more. She made

an impatient sound, but the falls engulfed it. It didn't matter. He heard. Both with his ears and with their bond.

He began moving himself back and forth, between her legs, not yet inside, arousing her. Arousing them both. Wetting them both. She moaned with it, and squeezed her legs together, gently, trying to keep him from tormenting her. He was big. And for the first time, proud of that fact, rather than fearful. He sensed her growing desire, and knew she wanted that particular part of his anatomy somewhere else, rather than stroking the outside of her labia, bringing his body up against her clitoris, taunting it.

He kept her near him with a hand to the small of her back, keeping her astride his hard center. A part of her was calling to him, along the bond. A part that felt neglected. Keeping her back, he reached his fingers between their bodies. His sharp nails no longer mattered. He knew he was not about to hurt her. He bent his first finger at the knuckle, and set it against the front of her cleft, working his finger and thumb in slow circles, as she moved. He felt the bond shiver, felt *her* shiver, with delight. *Ah. There it was.*

Reaction. Scintillation, under her skin. She rocked back and forth, and the green eyes slitted to cat-like intensity. Passion was slowing her reflexes, and the eyes grew unfocussed, and hazy. So did everything else, about her.

Vincent had a moment to realize: *This is just what I can feel from you along our bond.* Once she learned to read him, as well....

She reached her own hand between them and he realized she perhaps needed no help from any ethereal bond to give him pleasure. As he pleased her with his right hand, she reached her left between them, making a channel for his engorged manhood. As he moved, she

stroked him, and brought him more strongly against her sex. Her wetness covered him. *Ecstasy.*

Her body began to shift, and stiffen, and at one point she stopped stroking him, and had to grab onto his arms for support. He didn't stop, nor change anything he was doing. His woman was seeking her pleasure. He would see her to it. *You're my life.*

He felt her tense as he rocked his sex along hers, kept caressing her in slow circles with his hand. She trembled, drawing close, bringing herself against him hard, her legs suddenly losing the strength to hold herself up.

His great arm slid lower, holding her across the small of her back. *You don't need your legs to work. Do you not have my strength, after all?* Instinct guided him, and it told him all he needed. *You're close. That's it, Catherine. I love you.*

She whimpered against his neck seeking her pleasure, this sound louder, than the first one. There was a plea in it, a plea to not stop. He cradled her, in love and joy.

She was both incredibly tense and ragdoll limp, as his arm held her up across her back, still stroking her as he had been. Her arms twined around his neck as she nuzzled the skin at his throat. He felt her breath against his neck; a short, shallow panting that matched his rhythm against her sex. She shuddered and cried out, pulling against the back of his neck as she arched.

*There. Better. His Queen was pleased.* It was amazing how easy it was to think of her in those terms. The scent of her orgasm enveloped them. Payment for his steadfastness.

The water from the falls misted his back.

Gently, as if he were handling a babe, he bore her to the ground, her legs still open, his sex keeping contact with hers. He was drenched from her. Ready.

Her green eyes were dilated, and unfocussed. Aftershocks shimmered through her delicate frame. "Oh, my love," she told him, guiding the head of his sex down to where it belonged.

*Ahhh.* He could feel it. Her opening. The angle of their lovemaking hadn't allowed that, before. Now it did.

Slow. So slow. There would be wild times, other times, but he must not injure her, here. So possessed by her pleasure was he, that he truly had no time or inclination to consider his own. And he had thought he would hurt her? He could barely stand the thought of asking her to shift to the left, if she wanted to shift right.

Lying above her, yet using his knees and elbows to keep his weight off her tender body, he brought his hands up to brush her hair back from her face, embracing her forehead on either side. *So lovely. So his.* He touched his forehead to hers. Instinct. Like a kiss. But something unique to them. He didn't question it. He simply felt it.

He kissed her forehead with his singular mouth, now that her hair was pushed back, kissed her across her tear-wet eyelids, and the bridge of her nose... He spared one special kiss for the scar at her cheek, once an ugly reminder, now a treasured souvenir for both of them, of how they came to be. She held his mane in her hands, then locked her fingers behind his neck.

"I need you," he whispered, raw honesty in his voice. Her. Not just sex. Not just someone. Her. Only her. His Catherine. *Forever.*

"I know," she answered, drawing her legs up, knees open. She planted her feet on either side of his thighs, brushing the back of the left thigh with her foot.

"Tell me to stop if I hurt you," he whispered, slowly entering her. She was wet. Hot. But tight, from having taken no man to her bed since before he'd come to her terrace bearing a worn copy of Charles Dickens. *Great Expectations*. *How appropriate a title, for us.*

Tightness. Tension, in her nether skin. Then...pening. Her hips shifted, her body relaxed. He eased in just a little further, rocking back and forth.

"Tell me to stop if I..."

"No," she answered him, simply.

Blue eyes widened with shock. He pulled hard on the reins of his control. "Catherine, you must..."

Her patience with any delay, for any reason, any at all, was at a complete and utter end. Green eyes spit fire at him.

His body was a line of tension. She could feel his hesitation.

*No. Just... no.*

"I'm not afraid." She said it surely. It didn't matter. He was.

"And you're never going to be, again," she said, near his tufted ear.

She raised her legs, and locked them around his taut back. Drew her hands up, so that they locked with his, in her hair.

Slowly, she began to lift herself; forcing his entrance.

"Catherine..." If he moved, she'd simply go with him. He'd have to force her back down with his hands, and those were love locked, with hers, near her head.

"Shhhhh." *More. A little more.* He could all but hear her ask it.

"I'm going to hurt you." He feared it. There was a reason he'd wanted their foreplay to end in a climax, for her. He was aware of his size.

"I know. Only a little. And I'm going to bear it. And then... we are never going to hurt each other, again."

He wanted to pull away. She could feel it. But she held him fast with legs that had spent hours in Isaac's gym, on tennis courts, and gripping the backs of pedigreed horses, in her youth. She did not stop her advance.

"You are mine. My Shah. And I am your Shahnna. Whatever path this is, I'm not going to take it in fear. And I'm not going to see its limits."

Before he could protest, she turned her head to the side, and simply thrust, upward. Her pain was poignant, and sharp. Vincent gasped, and dropped his head to her shoulder, in apology. She would not let him go. He wasn't sure he could stop, now, even if she could.

Her warmth enveloped him, and the slickly dark channel sent tremors, through his long body. The tension along his sex eased, as she held him close.

*It's like being a virgin, again.* The thought came all but unbidden, to her mind, and it echoed, in his.

*Now, neither of us are that.*

He felt the moment the pain turned to discomfort, and the discomfort turned into something else. She rocked her legs, wanting him to move. She exhaled a deep breath neither one of them had been aware she'd been holding.

"Love me," she whispered.

The words were a hiss both soft and hard, in his ear, and she was setting him a rhythm that demanded following. Strong. Sure. A testament to power, and to promise. The unbridled way. The boundless path. He could all but feel it, stretching out before him.

Aching, demanding. *Losing virginity. Yes, he thought, feeling himself do the same. Because... something else waits for us.*

She shifted, slightly, and her movements became a touch more demanding. His testes tightened with anticipation, as her dampness clung to his nether hair, wetting him. If this was not pure pleasure, for her, it was not pain. If this was not simply "love," neither was it sex.

*This is claiming*, he realized. He was being owned. And for all his inexperience, he knew it.

He didn't know which moment his body changed from answering her demand to making one of his own. But he knew the change came, and with it, came the claiming she'd been demanding, since her first upward thrust. *Mine. Yours. We belong to each other. United. Inseparable. Tied. And... bonded.*

They were bonded and bound, bartered and bargained for. She was insistent, and as uncompromising as any ruling monarch. *Here I am. Take me, or leave me to another. Accept my terms. It is the only bargain with you, I will ever make.*

A wager made in pain, meant for pleasure. An oath sworn in sweat, if not a little blood. She smelled like salt, and the earth, and effort. Her fingers gripped his, tighter, with approval, the first time she heard him groan.

"You have to be mine," she told him.

*Oh, like any of us ever really has a choice.*

He was hers. If she made it sound like he had a choice in the matter, that was a nicety. He was bonded and owned. She could shatter him with a wish, or elevate him with a smile.

He felt her smile now, against his neck.

He shuddered. Shook with the shock of what she had done, of what she was now making him feel. He was encased in her. Whole.

"I am your Shahnna." She discovered the power of a word as she whispered it into his ear, forcing him into a rhythm, with her hips.

"Your body called to me, and mine answered." She was panting. He was obeying her. He had no choice. "Choose... your path."

*The Bright and Boundless Path.* He felt it... leading him. Over hills. Through green grass. To a place he'd never been, before.

Imperious. Powerful. He felt something unhinge in the back of his skull, answering to her dare, to her call. Strength. He had curbed his for what felt like a thousand years.

He thrust into her vigorously, feeling the Beast in him, the Other in him, run free as it never had before, as the evening collapsed into night. *Yes, free!* his mind sang. *Free to be with her. Free to feel her. Free to love her. Free to put children in her belly and feel her come against me.. now.* She did, and he exulted.

For the first time, Vincent reconciled that he was not two different people inside. But one man, capable of both gentleness and ruthlessness. Softness and savagery. And he had called to a mate capable of accepting that. And she was here, and she was loving him. He knew he wasn't hurting her. He knew... everything.

*We are Blessed.*

Burying himself inside her, he felt the two sides of his personality merge, and knew he would never feel divided again. That whatever the madness was, they had just banished it, absolutely.

He could not prolong making love to her, either for her pleasure or his, so he didn't try. Suddenly, "restraint" was a word he didn't care if he ever used, again.

"Draw your knees... up," he ordered, the boldness in him making it a command. He was racing for the edge.

"Like this?" she asked him, doing it perfectly, setting her hands at his back, pulling him in deeper.

His answer was to throw his head back and scream his orgasm into the chamber behind the falls. The thundering water caught his primal cry, and bore the wild sound away, into the peace of the pool. He collapsed on top of her, chest heaving, as his scrotum emptied into her in one, impossibly huge burst. Deep. Long. *All the better for making babies.*

It hurt. Him, not her. It really did feel so good it hurt. Long years of denial, smashed away in a flood of ejaculate, answered by her echoing spasm. *God, I love you. How did I ever think I could even... breathe, without you near?*

The bond. He felt it broaden, open, and spill through him, as he was spilling into her. He felt a tenuous response, beneath it. A line of sweet, thin, amber tenderness, reached for him.

*Catherine?*

Yes. It was her line. Smaller than his, so much more slender, but reaching up through their bond, from her essence to his.

"Vincent?" Her voice held wonder. He knew what she was feeling. He'd always known what she was feeling. It was the thing that had united them, from the first. Now, he knew she felt this.

"Vincent?" she repeated.

"I know," he whispered hoarsely. He kept his eyes closed. "I feel it, too."

She wrapped her hands again around his neck, feeling it as the connection between them was forged more deeply. She tugged on his hair, needing it to not stop. She thrashed a little beneath him, adjusting, trying frantically to hold this sweet and tender thread against her soul.

*I can feel you.* Not his body, which was gorgeously heavy against her, but him. Him. *Him*, inside her mind; he was a bare whisper, among her other thoughts.

"Shhhhhh," he quieted her, sensing her straining. "It's not going to go away. Let it happen, Catherine."

Her eyes were huge. His now flaccid sex was still inside her. She locked her legs, to hold him there.

"Is this how you felt? How you felt us, at first?" She could not believe the sensation that was settling, now, somewhere in the center of her brain. The same sensation that had owned her heart, now, for three years. *Love. This feels like love. I love you.*

"Yes. Much like this. Small, at first. More, with time."

"I don't want to leave this place." Her pupils were enormous.

He smiled. His love was worried. That would not do. "Distance won't matter." He knew it. So did she. "You'll see. You will carry it with you, no matter where you are. Concentrate on it, and you will feel me."

He slid out of her, regretfully, cradling her in his arms as she adjusted to their strengthened bond, and got used to it. He relaxed, and sent her waves of his contentment, of his fulfillment, through their shared connection. It was like kissing, but without touch.

"You always... brushed a kiss across the top of my head. Now... that's where I feel you." *Perhaps it's another thing we always knew.*

"Shhhh. I know. Let it happen. Let it happen... love."

She gentled, then settled. Drew herself as close to his skin as she could get. Her sigh was soul deep. Long minutes passed. Ones where she couldn't quite stop planting quick kisses on him. Not that he wanted her to stop.

"I should feed you, my Shahnna," he told her, his voice gently coaxing. Lambent eyes locked with his. "I'm not sure we're allowed to call me that until after we're married," she admitted. "But I like it. Especially right now." She smiled at him.

She could not carry on a conversation and check the bond at the same time. He watched her eyes shift, making sure it was still there. It was. She looked back up at him with adoration.

"You will, won't you? Marry me?" he asked her. He felt her thread in the bond shimmer with happiness.

"Of course," she replied. "As Seth is wont to say, do we really have any choice?"

"The world Above won't recognize it." His voice was regretful.

"No, but the world Below will rejoice. And we can't have our children thinking their mother was just trifling with their father." She framed his face. "I love you so much," she breathed out her happiness.

Suddenly, thoughts about where she would live or whether or not she should keep her job seemed like trivial things. He was here. She was here. They were here, together.

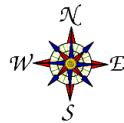
The bright and boundless path of possibilities shimmered before them.

*And they would never, ever be apart.*

---Fin---

*No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love. ~*

*Cindy*



*\*Author's note.\**

*To any of you who have ever tried to tackle an 'origins' story of any kind, for Vincent, I salute you, sincerely. I've read at least a few, and they're regularly wonderful, and terrifically varied. I'm not sure if this is one of those, so much as it's something else, (An SND re-imagined piece of S3, perhaps,) but I thank authors like Barbara Handshy Anderson, Judith Nolan, CL, CB McWhorter, Angie, Janet, and Magellan's Wife, among others, for wading into those waters, and showing some of the ways it could be done, and played with. Like everything I discovered about fandom, I didn't know these stories, too, were waiting to be told.*

*When Vincent 'went mad' in the show, it always bothered me. That this sane, steady, erudite character should suddenly be no longer in control of himself seemed... off, for whatever reason. So, writing this was a little bit about 'fixing' that.*

*To some extent, "The Bright and Boundless Path, Book One, Nomad" came out of the question "What if Vincent was always meant to be a husband and father? What if his nature is an intrinsically passionate one, and the madness he experienced is because that nature has been thwarted, all this time? What if his first breakdown (referenced by Father) was the equivalent of a 'warning shot across the bow?'"*

*Other things played into this idea, of course, most of them from the show: Catherine's 'ability' to 'heal' him, or draw him back to himself. His natural sense of empathy; the very Bond itself, and how it was lost, or consciously blocked, sometimes.*

*And... what if someone who knew all about what it meant to be whatever it is Vincent is, showed up, one fine day? (Or night), and finally explained some of this to him? How does it change him? How does he stay the same?*

*To those who cry “No, no, there is only one Vincent!” I hear you. I even agree. The uniqueness of his character is absolutely central to his charm. But I think he can maintain that ‘uniqueness,’ even among others who are similar to him, in features. (At least I desperately hope I convey that. Failure to do so is literally “my bad.” As we all know, “Only Vincent is Vincent.”)*

*This garden was so much fun for me to play in, however, that at least some of the other characters it mentions begged for their own story, and they all seemed to want to interact (somehow) with our tunnel family. People like Brigit, Rebecca and Diana all have (romantic) stories to tell, with these amazing people I randomly dubbed “The Shah.”*

*To that end, “Arc of the Shah” is just that, a story arc that begins here, and leads elsewhere. I hope you enjoyed meeting Seth and Corinne, and will enjoy meeting them again, (and their family) in the future. I know they’ll enjoy meeting you. Every story in the arc should be able to stand alone, yet be part of the larger whole.*

*Vincent and Catherine have more to see and do with them, of course. (After all, we’ve still got to get Vincent and Cathy married, and taking a trip to Canada, and there’s someone named Adam we’ve got to save...)*

*All of which will have to happen in future stories.*

*Be well, gentle reader,*

*Cindy*

