

# *A State of Grace*

*By Cindy Rae*

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*Author's note: The story of Grace and Jacob is always one that tugged at me. We know so very little, yet we know a great deal. We know Jacob was in his first year ("the year I lost everything," he tells Vincent,) and we know that Grace was a little older than Jacob was, and possessed of her own kind of wisdom. We know her sad end, and we know that the two of them are Devin's parents.*

*All that led me to wondering about Devin's mother, the kind of woman she was, and what it was about her that drew Jacob to her. How she, as an early tunnel dweller, might have helped shape what they became, in her own way. As her story became clear to me, I realized that it was Grace who helped Jacob in his transformation from just "Jacob" into "Father." Not just by making him one, but in other ways, as well.*

*There aren't very many stories that try to "meet Grace" in depth, as a fully realized person. This is mine, and I give thanks to the editors who helped with it, most of whom give of their talents freely, and labor tirelessly behind the scenes.*

*It first appeared in the 2015 conzine, "Somewhere I Have Never Travelled."*

*This is its first time appearing in a digital format, anywhere.*

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Jacob Wells was a beaten man, and he knew it.

Which was to say, Doctor Jacob Wells was a doctor no more, not in the world Above.

After living in little more than a cave in the earth this past year, he wasn't sure just how much of his former self remained. Or if much of that remained entirely sane. Or if it would stay sane for much longer. He called it "the year I lost everything," and depression loomed large for him. Very large.

Yes, in the world Above, he was a beaten man.

In the world Below, he had very few tools with which to practice his art. So in a way, he was beaten there, too.

One might call oneself a painter, but with no paint...

He had his medical bag, such as it was, and the clothes he'd brought with him, which were now meticulously put away. He had the cast-off articles of clothing he now wore.

And every regret the human heart could carry.

The list of what he did not have was a lot longer:

He no longer had an office, a house, a car, a lab, a job at a research institute, a valid license to practice his profession, a competent nurse, a secretary, a table at a fine restaurant, a telephone, a closet full of suits, a hospital's diagnostic tools and medicines at his disposal, a list of waiting patients, a television, a way to listen to a Yankees game, season tickets to the Metropolitan Opera, and oh, yes - a wife.

Doctor Jacob Wells no longer had a wife.

"Well, at least we can't say there's no indoor plumbing." Grace's voice interrupted his brooding as she eyed the copious pipes that lined the walls. He'd lived this way, down among the pipes, for nearly eleven months. She'd shared every day of that with him, being the one who'd introduced him to this place, to begin with.

Grace tapped on the metal conduit above her, and Pascal the Elder tapped back an answer. They'd been working on using the pipes as a means of communication. It was John Pater's idea, but Pascal's passion. Grace was getting very good at it. Jacob wasn't sure if he ever would be.

"And it has a telephone of sorts." She tapped again, telling Pascal senior "good morning." The tunnels' first pipe master returned her salutation, the tinny, staccato sound starting to become a familiar thing, down here. She grinned at her own accomplishment and flipped a thick, brown braid of hair behind her, as she sat down.

"Brooding again?" she asked Jacob, settling herself at the common table near him, bearing a cup of tea. It would be a meager breakfast for all of them, as a loaf of bread was split seven ways. Toast. Toast and tea, for breakfast.



William was working scraps into lunch, which would be soup again, heavy with mushrooms. Jacob's stomach clenched a bit, at the thought.

"Just a little," he replied, trying not to sound short with her. "Woke up on the wrong side of the ... cave, apparently." He stirred what little sugar there was around in the bowl of the cup, trying to make it sweeter, knowing it was little use. There just wasn't much sugar left. William had needed it for something, and that was that. For that matter, there wasn't much tea. The bag he was currently using had been dunked already, at least thrice.

"Go sleep up in the park, and that cave seems right friendly," the dark-haired woman across from him opined. She knew. She'd done it, more than once. And it had cost her much, the fourth time she'd tried it. That was part of why she was here.

Jacob inclined his head, justifiably rebuked, as usual. "That it does," he agreed.

He acknowledged the truth of her words as he acknowledged the dark wisdom in her brown eyes. She was a little older than he was, and from a different world than his. Well, at least a different world prior to their being stuck in this one, together.

*Poverty and starvation have a way of equalizing the masses,* Jacob mused unhappily.

"Have you seen John this morning?" Jacob asked, just for the sake of making conversation.

"Up and about early, checking the east tunnels. He seems to think there might be something useful in that direction. I think Anna went with him."

Jacob nodded at that, having little else to say.

"Peter is supposed to drop by later," she offered. "He said he'd bring some food." She buttered a slice of toast with what little spread there was left in the crock. She was careful to leave some for him.

"There has to be a better way than this. Have the children all been fed, at least?" he asked her.

She nodded. "You know we wouldn't be eating, if they hadn't."

Grace. Practical to the point of wisdom, and plain in a way that had been lovely, perhaps some ten or twelve years ago. Nearly his height, her forehead was broad, and her hands were large and capable. The brown in her eyes could pierce you, sometimes a bit uncomfortably, but usually not unkindly. Her dark hair was nearly always tamed into a thick braid. She'd been a housemaid for one of the big hotel chains, among other fairly menial jobs.

She was learning how to be his nurse, a bit at a time. And William's assistant cook. And Mary's partner in sewing and mending the clothes they all needed to stay warm and alive. Jacob had no idea what she was to John, or to Pascal, if she was anything. She seemed to prefer his company to the other men's, though she harbored no dislike for any of them. With the possible exception of John.

"Will you go Above for a while, do you think?" Jacob asked.

"If I don't, some of the broody ones might freeze a bit," she chided him, rising. "We're burning through the wood."

They were, and he needed warmer socks. Alternatively, another pair of thin ones to go over the darned pair he currently sported.

He was properly chastised for his mood, and he knew it. His hip had been bothering him more than a little, once the weather had turned from chilly to cold. It was useless for him to forage when it was like this. He couldn't run fast enough to reach safety if there was trouble. And God knew how much of that he'd be in if he were spotted by the police.

"I'm sorry, Grace. I know I'm not much help right now," he admitted.

Her work-roughened hand covered his for a moment. The fingerless gloves he wore were all that kept his hands warm. Grace never wore regular gloves unless the weather was downright frigid.

*She's a tactile person*, he realized. She often traced the rim of her teacup with a calloused middle finger before she drank.

"You don't need to apologize, Jacob." She gave his hand a sympathetic squeeze. "It's been a hard few weeks for everyone."

*A hard few weeks. On top of a hard few months, on top of a hard few years*, he mused. But regarding the last few weeks - they'd had to turn down three people, last month, for entrance. There simply wasn't enough food for the numbers they had.

"Thank you." He squeezed her hand back, knowing she was trying to offer comfort. "Good luck, Above."

She nodded and drained her cup of the weak tea, settling the mismatched china cup back down on a chipped saucer. Time to go to work. Every line in her body said it. She produced a cleaning cloth from her apron pocket, and wiped off the table, a bit. As a matter of routine, she resettled the crock of butter, the empty sugar bowl and a set of salt and pepper shakers near the center of the table, readying the space for its next occupant. Waitress' habit.

"You want me to keep an eye out for anything particular?" she asked him, readying herself to go as she buttoned her patched coat.

*A new life*, he thought.

"Just bring yourself back safely," he answered.

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By late afternoon, the food shortage had eased, mostly thanks to Peter Alcott and the two other helpers they had.

Grace remained busy with trying to see to it that they stayed warm, having spent most of the day making trips back and forth to a construction site that was shutting down. There was a pile of scrap lumber, for the taking. She reasoned that it would burn, rightly enough. She'd also managed to cadge a few hand tools that had been left behind in the sand. Pascal Senior was pleased, as she travelled back and forth.

Jacob had helped her haul most of the wood from the street entrance to the commons. Some of the larger pieces would need to be split with a hand axe.



That he could do, at least. He had spent some of the day tending a small group of children with runny noses. It was nothing serious.

But now, he leaned against a wall, waiting for Grace to come down with the last of the wood.

Life in the tunnels had broadened his shoulders and made them firmer, from labor. Were it not for the lameness caused by his hip, he'd have been a fine specimen of a man.

Intelligent, inquiring, otherwise healthy, Jacob was a man in his prime, though not at its beginning. His hair was wavy, and longer than he'd worn it back when he'd had frequent access to a barbershop. Hands which still tended the sick and injured now did their share of manual labor, as well.

He kept his fingerless gloves over those hands for warmth, but also to hide the third finger of his left hand, so he didn't have to see the place where his wedding band had once sat. The ring now rested in the pocket of the suit coat he no longer wore, tucked inside a silk handkerchief he knew he'd never unfold.

He figured he'd never use either, again.

His hazel eyes were often sad, though never hard. He had used a cane even before the scourge of McCarthyism had caused him to come Below. That was nothing new to him, though the unevenness of the tunnel ground had taken some getting used to.

On good days, he barely needed the cane. On bad days...well. On bad days, it took a hot compress to get him moving out of his thin-mattressed bed. He knew the hip would worsen with age, and that a steady stream of anti-inflammatories he didn't have would make it tolerable. Arthritis was settling there, sometimes, with a vengeance.

But medicines were precious down here, and saved for either the children, the sick or the injured. He was none of those. And he'd learned a long time ago that no one wanted to hear you complain incessantly about your ills.

The manhole cover over his head moved to one side. The air was cold, behind Grace, as she made her last trip down through the circular opening, her arms full of scrap lumber. She gave him half.

"That's the last of it. Should keep us warm a good long while, if we aren't careless with it." She slid the cover back into place.

"And that we never are," he answered, sharing her load. They made their way back together, through the western passageway.

Grace had grown up poor. A wood fire was not "new" to her, and neither was making do with what you had. One of nine siblings, she'd buried two sisters to the privation of the Great Depression.

Jacob's situation had been very different.

And now, their situations were the same.

"I worked in a big house once," she said companionably, as they walked. "Downstairs maid. Three fireplaces in this big old house, and the master liked every one of them going, even if he wasn't in the room. Always struck me as something of a waste, at the time. But it was his money," she said, setting her burden down a moment, so she could catch her breath and adjust the shifting load. She'd made this trip more than ten times, today.

Jacob leaned against the wall again, resting with her, glad to give her a break. She'd worked hard. They would all benefit from it tonight, when they were warm.

"Funny how we all remember the waste from up there," he told her. "Trash cans full of food. Clothes. Blankets."

"And most of them know better. Most, like me, came up through the Depression. It's boom times up there, Jacob. The boys are back from the war and they all want houses. Every time they put a building up, I just keep thinking, 'What are they going to use it for? Don't they have enough of those?' But they build them anyway. From the park entrance, you can see a whole bunch of high rises going up." New York was thriving.

*Well, good for New York,* Jacob thought, a little bitterly.

Boom times. The economic revival of the 1950's. World War II over. The bomb dropped; the world changed. Korea near done. The great economic expansion under way. Eisenhower and rockets and talks of space flight. There was no television or radio below, but the newspapers were full of the news. Brave new world. Brave new bombs. The paranoia that came with those, simmering like a stew on a low boil.

Speaking of stew...

"William says there will be carrots in the stew tonight," he told her. *Really? This is what I'm reduced to for conversation? Talking about carrots as if they were interesting?*

"Not a favorite of mine, carrots. Though, as mama used to say, they're good for your eyes, since you never saw a rabbit wearing glasses." She picked up her bundle, ready to go again.

"You mention your mother and father often. Did you never marry, Grace?" he asked, realizing she never mentioned a husband, and he knew she had no children. He, on the other hand, still swore he could discern a tan line from his wedding ring when he washed his hands to handle a patient.

She shook her head at him, causing her long brown braid to swing.

"Jacob, the downstairs maid doesn't get a husband," she chided him.

For a lone moment, she let a bit of sorrow creep into her voice.

"The downstairs maid gets... something else."

She hefted the wood and walked ahead of him, as he absorbed her words. Young. Poor. Alone in a house with its wealthy master, a man born before the turn of the century. *Of course. The downstairs maid got something else. If she wanted to keep her job, at least, and keep food in her mouth.*

Jacob was not ignorant of the fact that, while the world could be hard on a poor man, it ate its poor women. - and sometimes their children.

"It's one of the reasons I went to work for one of the big hotel chains," she said conversationally. "It's a lot more beds to make, on the one hand, but a lot less foolishness to put up with, for the most part, as long as you don't get cornered by one of the guests."

She looked back to make sure he was coming with her. There was no self-pity in her voice. Just practical strength to go with her practical build. *Her voice is much like the rest of her,* he thought.

He walked the rest of the way a little behind her, kicking himself mentally for the brooding self-pity he'd indulged in lately. He'd bemoaned the loss of his country-club lifestyle. His elegant home. Not just a "warm bed to sleep in," but a huge four-poster, gleaming with polish, and covered with heirloom quality quilts.

Whatever it was she missed, it surely wasn't being pawed by whatever male happened to be near her at the time. This place was a kind of sanctuary for her. Missing a few meals or having to go to bed under extra blankets to keep out the cold wasn't going to stop it from being that, to Grace.

They dropped the wood near where it would be split. There was a makeshift chopping block and a decent hatchet in the chamber nearby. He would split this last load so it

would stretch farther. Make sure the box beside her brazier stayed full. And try to sneak her the bowl of stew with the least carrots.

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"Little Pascal is learning to walk, finally," Mary commented as most of the adults sat around the table, a few weeks later.

"Indeed. One might have despaired of it," John Pater said, in a rather deprecating voice.

Grace defended the motherless child. "Perhaps he's just going to be a late bloomer," she replied, working one end of a quilt while Mary worked the other.

"Or perhaps he is going to be a rather squat, clumsy little man, like his father," John said dismissively. John did that with increasing frequency these days, Jacob realized. Anna sat quietly, more quietly than ever, darning a pair of socks.

"There are places where such a child might not even be allowed to live," John intoned, his voice giving nothing away as to whether or not he thought that might be a good or bad idea.

"Makes one wonder if any were ever killed for their personality." Grace let the sarcastic barb slide, but was wise enough to keep her eyes down, as she worked. Her expression gave nothing away.

John cut her a glance, and then dismissed her again. The table was absent Pascal the Elder, who was already putting his son to bed. William would leave the table soon, they all knew. He usually turned in early, since he'd rise to get breakfast going.

"Jacob." John directed his piercing brown gaze at the table's other degreed professional. "I do not think it wise to abandon the idea of spreading into the lower tunnels." He ignored the women at the table, two of whom exchanged a subtle look.

"We have room up here. And there is little down there but water, John. What are you thinking of?" Jacob asked.

"That the paths there were cut by people, like us. If we can find a way to drain the water, there may be things down there we can use. Usable places that are still dry. Ingredients for some... things I've been working on. Perhaps supplies, of one kind or another," John reasoned. His mind was sharp. Sharp as the dark look in his eyes.

Jacob wondered about how those eyes were almost exactly the same shade as Grace's, yet so different. In John, the deep brown had an obsidian edge, and could be cutting. In Grace, it often invited confidences.

The two men had already begun to wrestle a bit, with how their community should govern itself. Some of John's ideas were... undemocratic, to say the least. *No matter*, Jacob had reasoned. At this point, they were all in this together.



"If you find a way to do it, let me know," was all Jacob would say. John seemed content with that, at the moment.

"You know, I think I miss electricity the most, on days like this." Mary rubbed her eyes, which were growing tired. "An electric light would make this chore so much easier." They'd been piecing the quilt together, and the small stitches needed to incorporate the bits of flannel were clearly weighing on her.

"I think I miss a good glass of brandy after dinner," Jacob said, sitting back.

He knew the turn the conversation was fixing to take, and it was a therapeutic one. There was no sense pretending that the world Above, with all its comforts, wasn't sitting right over their heads. They all had reasons for being here. But that didn't mean they didn't miss at least parts of their old lives.

"An electric oven would take the guesswork out of baking that bread." William recalled the huge stove he'd used at a restaurant, fondly.

"Hot water from the tap. Save you from carrying," Anna reminisced.

"A Singer sewing machine sure would make this job faster." Grace pulled needle and thread through the cloth. Jacob realized she literally never stopped working all day. Her hands were always busy with something.

John, interestingly enough, said nothing. Either he was perfectly happy where he was, or too private to share his sorrows. Either way...

"Well. Tomorrow will be another day," Jacob concluded, once he realized John had nothing more to add to the conversation. "Let me know if you have any more ideas about the lower tunnels, John. And William, if I haven't said it enough, your bread is better than any I ever tasted. Ladies." Jacob rose and inclined his head, then ambled slowly toward his chamber. His cane made a tapping sound, as he left.

*I sound a bit like Pascal's code*, he realized.

Jacob's chamber was a smallish affair yet, and not as broadly carved out as it would one day be. Stacks of books were already beginning to form against one wall. He did not think of it as "home," not yet. Something in him couldn't quite do that, wasn't quite ready for it. But it was his, and he was making it increasingly comfortable, in its way.

Grace's voice came up behind him as he reached the doorway. "Oh, Jacob. I forgot. I found you something when I was foraging, today."

Before he even asked, he knew what she was about to draw out of wide pocket of the apron she usually wore over her clothes. A book. She knew his appetite for them. She regularly brought them down for him, if they looked either in decent shape or interesting. If they were neither, they could serve as firewood, or to hold a table level.

She produced a hardbound blue tome from the deep well of her apron pocket.



"I think I saw a copy of it in the big house. Who's Faust?" she asked him, handing over Goethe's masterpiece.

"Ah, this is a classic." Jacob appreciated it. "Faust sells his soul to the devil for knowledge, material pleasures, and love," Jacob answered, caressing the slightly battered volume. There was a little water damage to the back cover, but a red ribbon served as a bookmark. It had once been an expensive treasure.

"Well. If you're going to sell your soul, at least get something worthwhile, I suppose." She smiled at him, pleased.

She did not read much, herself. Jacob realized her education in such things as classical literature was utterly lacking. But her mind was sharp, and she had a wicked sense of humor. He remembered the sarcasm she'd directed at John, all the while never missing a stitch. She was a singular person.

"Have you ever been in love, Grace?" he asked her, hoping he wasn't prying, yet curious.

"Two dozen times, between the ages of thirteen and fifteen." Grace grinned at him, again. She had a lovely smile, and when she used it, she looked a bit younger.

Then her expression softened, and became more contemplative. "But not like you. Not that kind of love. Not the kind where it left a hole." She was forthright about it. "I'm sorry, Jacob, for whatever happened." Her voice was sincere.

Jacob accepted her gift of compassion, gratefully. "So am I," he answered softly. What he'd found out at the Chittenden Institute had appalled him. Then it had destroyed him. Some days, he thought he might recover. Some days.

Reflexively, his fingers picked up her long braid off her shoulder, and moved it aside so that it would fall in its customary position, down her back.

"You should have half a dozen children, and a husband who adores you." He stated it impulsively, unable to call back the personal remark once it was gone. He knew he would not, could not, be that man. They both did. But that didn't mean he didn't wish it, for her.

"Ah, Jacob. Good boys don't marry girls who aren't virgins." Her language was as plain as her broad forehead. "And the kind of boys who do marry them... well. Let's just say that, for all I've had to put up with, it was probably better than getting beat regular by some man who was trying to drown his demons."

Jacob, too, was capable of compassion. "I know that happens to women. It shouldn't." He was amazed they could speak so frankly with each other. She had a gift for that, for drawing that part out of him.

She tilted her head to one side. "Some people sell their soul for love, others for drink. If I have a virtue, it's probably that mine is still intact. Good night, Jacob. I'll see you in the morning." She turned, and headed down the path to her own chamber.

He nodded and watched her go, his eyes automatically falling to the sway of her hips beneath her long dress. *No. None of that.*

Cradling the book in his hands, he set it amongst his other scavenged possessions, and settled in for the night.

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The day Grace brought the burned woman down, John was livid.

"She's lost everything," Grace said. "Her husband. Her children. She needs us, Jacob." Grace indicated the barely conscious woman who now lay across the table Jacob regularly used as an examining table. Elizabeth Patton was 50, badly scarred by burns, mostly healed from the worst of that, and frail. Oh, yes. And she was an artist. A useless skill for them.

"A painter? Can you tell me what good a painter will be to us, Grace?" John demanded, arms folded across his rapier-thin body.

"It isn't about her use. It's about her need. She's dying up there, Jacob." Grace did not address John directly.

"We barely have enough to feed ourselves," John persisted.

"She can have my share. I'll scrounge from garbage cans," Grace shot back, not missing a beat. "Please, Jacob. Please. I see her in the park. She can barely stand, from grief. She's lost her family. She has no one. She passed out from hunger, and she isn't well yet, from the burns."

Mary, behind Grace, stayed silent, but the look in her gentle eyes told Jacob which way she was leaning. She knew the pain of losing a child.

"Burns can be difficult to treat, Grace," Jacob warned. "They have a terrible tendency to get infected. We have no antibiotics, if that happens," he reasoned, even though he wanted to help this woman.

Elizabeth lay in and out of consciousness on the examining table in the hospital chamber. Which was to say she lay on a makeshift dining room table with a mismatched, splintered leaf set in. The room had a set of shelves that served as the repository for every bandage and bit of medical supplies they had. Mostly, it was empty.

Elizabeth wore a long skirt, far out of the current style. It covered the extensive burns on her legs that Jacob knew full well extended up to the torso of her slight, willowy frame. Her face and hands had been mostly spared, but her abdomen was clearly wrapped with gauze to keep the waistband of her clothes from chafing the marred skin. *Poor thing.*

"If she gets infected, she can go back to a hospital for treatment," Grace reasoned.

"And pay them with what? A portrait?" John sneered.

"It might be worth more than the nothing you contribute," Grace snapped.

Jacob gasped.

"The firewood that kept you warm last night was carried by *me*, and split by *him*, while you were off trying to figure out how to get *water* to flow *down*. So piss off, John." Her temper was as sharp as her tongue.

John's voice and demeanor both became threatening. "*You* are a low-born shrew, little better than a whore, fit for nothing but menial labor, you uneducated..."

"Grace! John! Please!" Jacob raised his hands for peace before more words were exchanged.

Grace held her tongue, but only because she was aware that she wanted something, for Elizabeth. She knew she needed Jacob on her side for this. Mary was already with her. If they put it to a vote, she felt sure she knew she would win, though she knew Anna would always vote as John told her to.

But this place was not a pure democracy. They did not know quite what they were, yet. But she knew that right now, with this woman on the table, Jacob was going to have to decide whether or not they were ruled by John, and his principles. Whether they were guided by 'use' or 'need'.

"We will offer this woman shelter for the time being," Jacob decided. "When she wakes, we'll speak to her. There's nothing more to be gained by arguing right now, unless one of us plans to carry her barely conscious body up to the park and dump it there."

Grace exhaled slowly with relief. And did not miss the look of hate in John's eyes. Jacob did miss it, as he checked Elizabeth's pulse.

"I consider the matter tabled for the moment," Jacob said. "Grace, would you kindly bring me some fresh water? It will need to be boiled, to make sure it's sanitary. I'd like to clean and re-dress her wounds, at least."

Grace left the chambers for the other room to do as she was bid. She knew when she needed to make a strategic retreat. Mary went with her to help.

"You'll need to apologize to her, John. And she to you," Jacob indicated.

"I will do no such thing. Honestly, Jacob. There was a time such a woman would have been beneath your notice for anything other than to pick up your dirty clothes. And maybe something else." John's meaning was clear.

"No one person is beneath another," Jacob insisted.

"That attitude, Jacob, is part of why you are here," John returned. He then left the chamber, making it clear that whatever obligation this was, he wanted no part of it.

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"I'm sorry," Grace said later, as she returned with the roll of gauze and a bucket of sanitized water. "I should not have said that to John. I will... try very hard to work up the courage to apologize, later." She handed the gauze to him, and went around the other side of the table. She stroked Elizabeth's hair. It was already very grey. Its once reddish-brown color was being lost to the march of time.

"John does not make it easy to like him sometimes. But I promise you he is a brilliant man, Grace," Jacob offered.

"And I promise you his soul is farther gone than... Faust's," Grace answered him. Of the two of them, she was by far the better and more rapid judge of character. In her world, that was a necessary survival skill. The fact that she was still alive was proof that her instincts were sharp, as far as she was concerned.

Jacob did not reply to her assessment as he turned his attention to the task at hand.

"You did a good thing," Grace said simply, realizing that, though she wasn't in love with Jacob, she could admire his virtues. Between Jacob and John, Jacob was by far the better man. God help them all if John got his way.

*Poor Anna*, Grace thought.

But Anna was not Grace's problem right now. Elizabeth was. *One challenge at a time*, Grace mused. She'd made it this far on that very philosophy.

Covering Elizabeth with a thin blanket, Grace crossed to the foot of the table, helping pull the older woman's cheap shoes off her feet. Her heel was seeping from blisters. It looked painful. And like she'd been in the shoddy loafers a long time. They'd need to get a meal down her when they were done treating her. Then they'd need to find her a place to sleep.

They had work to do.

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Days later, Elizabeth gratefully accepted the offer to stay in the tunnels as a place of refuge. Grace was wise enough not to lord her victory over John. They'd had a vote. Grace, William, Pascal, Jacob and Mary voted that she stay. John had voted against it, and Anna had abstained. Carefully.

Peter sent down extra medical supplies for Elizabeth's condition, once he knew of it and could safely divert them. As a resident intern, he had an easier time getting them things like bandages and gauze, rather than controlled substances or prescription medications. Helping Elizabeth was a thing they could do. Jacob was content that the decision to offer her shelter had been the right one.

Elizabeth was shy, battered by her circumstances, and very, very grateful. She took up a small chamber near Mary, and the two women began Elizabeth's journey of healing.

Grace had a feeling that, though others among them might come and go, Elizabeth might be one that would stay. Maybe.

John was annoyed, but simply told them, "When you save a person's life, you then get to become responsible for them. Enjoy your new toy, children." He dismissed them all with an autocratic wave of his thin hand. If he was angry at the outcome, he was smart enough not to show it.

At any rate, John had been spending more and more time in the lower tunnels lately, once he'd devised a pump and pipe system that drained most of the water into the falls. Jacob realized he saw increasingly less of the acerbic, sharp-featured man. And to a certain extent, the tunnel's physician was relieved at that. He saw less of Anna, as well. *Oh, well.* That could not be helped, more than likely.

Winterfest came with some twenty or so people in attendance, counting the children and helpers. It was a happy, if understated, affair.

Elizabeth was fascinated with the tapestries. William spent the day baking cookies, and the children and adults had danced to a wind up music box and Pascal the Elder, as he sawed folk tunes on a handmade violin.

When it was all over, Grace stayed behind in the Great Hall, helping to clean up. Jacob stayed as well, to help her.

"You didn't dance," Jacob told her as she wiped down a table. He'd sensed a kind of restlessness in her, the last few days.

"I have two left feet. Thank you for my present," she told him, having tucked the small book of poetry into her apron pocket. Walt Whitman. So far, she liked it.

"Thank you for mine," he replied, eyeing the nearly full bottle of brandy she'd scavenged for him. It was a decent vintage.



"Somebody must have decided to take the pledge," she told him, moving a chair back. "And you didn't dance, either."

"I have two left hips. And one of them is bothering me," he replied, shoving a small side table back into place, anyway.

"You didn't say. You don't tell people when you're in pain very much, do you?" She knew it was true.

"I'm a doctor. Physician, heal thyself." He pushed a chair back in, holding his breath against a twinge, as he did so. It wasn't bad tonight. He'd known it to be worse.

"Not just that kind of pain. The other," she told him, gathering things into a basket. It had been a long night. He would need his cane to get back to his chambers from here, hip or no. They both knew the havoc "distance" played with his injury.

"Not much sense in complaining, either way," he said, making sure nothing was left behind.

As always, she was the practical one. "You go first. I'll carry. William is coming back later with some of the others, to get his long table back. They'll close it up, after."

She lifted the basket containing his presents. Jacob accepted her kind offer of help. He'd be hard pressed to manage the basket and his walking stick as he struggled through the Tunnel of the Winds. Learning to accept help when it was offered had been a large change for him. He was rapidly concluding it should become a tenet of their life down here. To offer what help you could, and accept help when it was offered to you.

Grace settled the light burden on her arm and left the tidied Hall with him. She looked inside his basket. Mary had knitted him a scarf. William had baked him cranberry bread. She'd given him the brandy, and John had... well. Grace wasn't sure what John had given him. *Probably something nasty. Or nothing, which was more likely.*

Not for the first time, Grace wondered how a sweet and gentle woman like Anna could stand to be married to the tunnels' resident alchemist.

"I think I saw Elizabeth smile, once or twice," Jacob told her, taking the scarf out of the basket and wrapping it around his neck against the stiff wind. Once they got past the blustery areas the walk wasn't so bad. And conversation could be had, at least.

"She did smile," Grace agreed, as they continued on. "She danced with some of the children, and drew their portraits. She looked wistful, for the most part, and she cried once, when she thought no one was looking. But she smiled, too."

Not for the first time, Jacob marveled at her keen powers of observation. Grace did not miss much.

They wound their way through the hallways of stone, getting closer to "home." "But yes. She had a good time," Grace continued. "Thank you for standing up for her, Jacob." Grace said it, and not for the first time. She wanted him to understand the good that had been done there was his doing. And to see the power a kind gesture could bring.

"Lately, I've been thinking about the people we had to turn away, before, realizing that perhaps I was hasty," Jacob confided. "Perhaps they should have been given a chance to be here, to try, before we decided. Their need was certainly great. And I'm sure they would have done all they could to contribute to the community," Jacob mused.

*Ah, so possible mistakes stayed with him, did they? Well. Good for him.* Grace liked that this dark, polished man had a conscience, and that it pricked him when it should. Whatever life had beaten out of him, it hadn't beaten that.

"I remember them, too," she told him. "They might still be near. Foraging." They reached his chamber, and she went inside to set his basket on the table.

"That's very reasonable," he agreed. "Do you think they can be found? Be contacted?"

"I think at least one of them can. The other two may have moved on."

She unpacked the basket, and surprised him by uncapping the bottle of brandy, and pouring a little into two disparate glasses he had sitting on top of a battered dresser. She handed him one.

"Speaking of moving on, that's something I've meant to discuss with you, Jacob." She raised her glass to him. He touched his to hers. He both knew it was coming, and wished it wasn't.

"You're leaving, then?" he asked. She'd lived there a little more than a year, but not much more.

"I think it's time." She took a sip of the brandy. So did he.

She traced the rim of the glass with her fingertip. "John and I obviously don't see eye to eye, and, well, I've always had a bit of wanderlust in my bones. I thought I'd wait



until spring, maybe. Maybe not. I don't know." She shrugged her shoulders and took another sip. "The year I've spent here is almost a record, for me, for staying in one place. I've a bit of a yen to see the mountains. They have fine hotels all along the Appalachians. Vacation places for rich folk, like you." She smiled, as she said it.

Even down here, without a dime to spend between them, she still considered him a "rich man." The irony that she was still aware of the separations "class" could bring was not lost on him.

He nodded at her revelation that she was going. And, truth to tell, he was a little relieved. John had Anna, and Pascal was older, widowed, and had his hands full with his little son. William seemed to keep Mary company, though Mary could just as easily be found helping Jacob. Mary had "matron" in her blood. It was part of why being here suited her. She could mother the children without the complications of marriage.

But then that left the obvious pairing of him and Grace. And Grace did not have "matron" in her blood.

He'd grown to think of her as more attractive as the days had gone by, and he'd had at least one vivid dream of her. When the needs of his body became ... un-ignorable, he tried not to fantasize about her, knowing such games would be suicide.

Overall, it was probably a good thing she was thinking of moving on. She wouldn't be the first to do so.

That didn't mean he wouldn't miss her, however. As the thought crossed his mind, it crossed his eyes. That, and something more. Something warmer, like the brandy. He wasn't drunk. But he desperately wanted the feeling that he was, or at least that he could be, all of a sudden. His gaze filled with a gentle kind of longing, and he didn't try to hide it.

Grace saw the look, and was far too canny and too honest to pretend she hadn't caught it, and didn't know what it meant. She set down her glass, and so did he.

"I'm not her. That woman you miss. She isn't me, and I ain't her, Jacob." Grace let the contraction stand, to make her point. Grace knew that Margaret had never used the word "ain't" in her life.

"No, you aren't." He said it softly and, surprisingly, without the pain he'd once felt at the thought of Margaret. "And I am not any of the men you used to work for. Or who used to think you were beneath them, somehow."

And there it was. A bargain, or at least a proposal, between them.

"Fair enough, then." She stepped closer to him and gave him her mouth, and he tasted the brandy, and something spicy beneath. They were nearly the same height, and her breasts nestled temptingly against his chest.

*So long. It has been so long,* Jacob's mind whispered, his body taking over on instinct with what his senses told him was before him.

She had never been a prostitute, yet was no virgin, both by choice and by circumstance. She was worldlier than he was in some ways, and a good bit smarter in others. She already knew that things between him and John would end badly. Already knew he needed Peter Alcott more than he thought he did. And none of that mattered right now.

His arousal was not a slow thing. Neither was hers.

She felt warm. Her mouth opened fully beneath his. She either walked backward toward his bed, or he nudged her there. He was never sure which was more true, only that both were. They both felt the back of her legs hit the mattress as it perched on the makeshift brass frame. Her arms dropped from his neck as they both felt her bump the bed.

The kiss broke, and she untied the apron and then pulled it and her tunnel dress up and over her head, in one motion. She was unselfconscious about standing before him braless, in her underthings. She kicked her way clear of her slippers, and reached down for her thick stockings.

"May I?" he asked, fascinated by the length of her legs, the obvious strength in her thighs.

"Of course." She smiled at him, sitting. She offered him her foot, clad in a long grey woolen sock that should have been anything but sexy, and suddenly was just that. She leaned back a little, interested that he was not fascinated, as most men were, by her rose-tipped breasts.

Almost reverently, Jacob knelt at her feet. He reached up for the top of her right stocking, and softly began brushing it down. Grace tipped her head to the side, feeling his physician's hands stroke her legs. She regarded him through warm, half-closed eyes, as he softly pushed her hosiery down her legs, and then finished undressing her. He kissed her left knee, and then rose to disrobe.

He was not unaware of the effect tunnel life had wrought on his thirty-three-year-old form. Barring his hip, he was a good specimen of masculine health, if not strength.

His shoulders were broad, his torso the compact, muscular form of a man who had taken wrestling in college and swam for therapy. The body hair on his barrel chest was brown, springy, and somewhat thick at the top, thinner down his torso. His legs were stronger than they ever had been, the result of walking everywhere, rather than riding in a car. His arms were stronger, as well, from the result of his labors. He was not a tall man, but his abdomen was well formed yet, and leaner from his current diet. He had no illusions about the effect the hip would have on his later life. But this was not that life, not yet. This was "now," and a lovely, healthy woman with no illusions was willing, in his chambers.

His hands stroked her thighs as he felt his own arousal at her response. She had beautiful legs. Legs he realized he'd never really seen, until this moment.

She walked everywhere, and stood regularly. Jacob was a leg man, and even as the name "Margaret" whispered across his consciousness, he had to admit that Grace's longer, firmer legs were enticing. Toned. Shapely. They flowed into hips that were deep-seated and wide. Her waist was not waspish, but it was there. Jacob leaned over her and pulled her head up for a hungry kiss.

He would have taken her on his knees, but for the effect that would have had on his hip. It pulled, and set him off balance. Sensing his need, Grace simply moved herself backward on the bed, and locked her legs around him to draw him with her.

It was not brief, nor was it long. Neither had made love to another human being in a very long time, and simple length of abstinence had certain... effects on both of them. He liked the strength in her thighs as she held him. She liked the rasp of his beard. Neither pretended the other was someone else, even if they both wished it could be so. Neither pretended they were in love. But Jacob was a considerate lover, and he knew it. If he could give her nothing else, he could give her that.

Afterward, she covered his sleeping form and shrugged her way back into her tunnel gown. She slipped her shoes on her feet, simply carrying her stockings. There was no sense staying until morning. Not now. She had no desire to see the look of guilt on his face, a look she knew would be there. It was time to go. She had already decided that, anyway.

Picking up her belongings in her chamber, she changed into the plain black dress, tights, and soft soled shoes she'd worn the day she'd come to the tunnels, and she went back to the world Above.

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"You do know he's yours," she told him over eight months later, as she held her swollen belly. She was in his examining room. The shelves were a little better stocked. The table was the same.

"I never thought to imply otherwise, Grace. You should have come back to us much sooner." He did not like the swelling of her ankles, or the anemic look of her skin. And he was stunned at the realization that he was about to become a father.

She closed her eyes, relieved. He wouldn't deny it. And she knew something was wrong with her. Right now, the former seemed far more important than the latter.

She took off a brass ring that she'd used as a wedding band. The old trick, to keep her from censure as she carried his child. This was New York. It was easy to become anonymous in a city with millions of people in it. Above, she was Grace the cleaning lady. Her "husband" was in the military and, like so many other brides, she was bearing her child alone. It was a common ruse for the unwed and pregnant. It had

scored her a semi-decent apartment and a waitress job on weekends, until she began to show too much for comfort, either hers or those of her patrons.

She never did make it to the mountains. At least not the ones in the Appalachians.

Though she felt like she'd been climbing one, the last eight months.

Her finger was green from the cheap ring. *Brass ring. Carousel.* Free association. She'd never understand what that word would mean to her son, one day.

"You don't have to tell John it's yours. You don't have to tell anyone. Just let them think what they will."

"Grace. I am not ashamed of you. Surprised, yes, but you can hardly blame me for that," Jacob told her, in the privacy of the examination room.

Grace nodded. "Jacob, I don't feel well. I haven't for several weeks. I didn't intend on coming back until after the baby came, if at all. But I had a terrible dream last week, and that kind of decided it for me." Her brown eyes met his. "If I die when this baby is born, I don't want her given up to an orphanage. Not when her father is still alive," she told him.

"Her?" Jacob checked her pulse. It was rapid.

"Her, today. Him, tomorrow. Some days I think I know."

Jacob noted the deep shadows under her eyes. She was exhausted. He prayed that's all it was.

"Your old chambers are still empty. You may tell the others anything you wish. I will corroborate whatever you want to say. I think we both agree that I owe you that much, considering," Jacob replied kindly.

Grace nodded, aware that he was being more gracious than he had to be. He could have shouted at her, or asked "why." Could have simply denied that it was his. Could have done any number of things, both forgivable and not.

But he had done none of those, and it was then that Grace became truly afraid. He hadn't denied she was in rough shape either. He was willing to let her have any truth, any lie, just to get her to lie down a bit. She made peace with that.

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To most of the world Below, she stuck to the same story she'd told to the world Above. She'd "got caught up with" a man in the military. She didn't look as far along as she was, though there was no doubt she was pregnant. The gift of her wider frame and sturdy build. She looked closer to six months along than eight.

John sneered, but truly paid the situation little attention. He was busy with his own concerns, and one more lowborn female, more or less, was hardly a thing he cared about, one way or the other. His attitude was characteristically dismissive. Anna,

however, was supportive, though her dark eyes struggled to hide their envy at Grace's form.

Mary, interestingly, knew. She knew before Grace even began to tell the lie, and raised her hand one time, when the two women were alone together, begging her not to continue to tell it. When Grace asked, "How do you know?" Mary simply replied, "After you left. I was the one who did his laundry. And saw the rather lost look on his face, the morning after."

It was the last time Grace ever tried to lie to Mary.

Grace died on a Thursday, bearing a Thursday child. A son. Thursday's child has far to go. Eclampsia took her, shortly after Devin Wells howled his way into the world. She loved him all of twenty minutes before she drew her last breath.

"Take care of him, Jacob. I'm glad it's a boy. If you can...make sure he sees... mountains..." were the only coherent words she said before delirium and seizures took her.

Jacob wept as he held her still form, not knowing what to do or where to begin.

He looked at Mary as she cradled the infant.

"Mary, would you please find out if we have any condensed milk to feed my son?" He would not deny who Devin was. Not today, at least.

Mary nodded sadly. Her face covered with tears, she took the little boy into the maze of the tunnels. A maze that would not hold him, ultimately.

His brown hair and broad forehead were like Jacob's. But they were like Grace's, too, so nothing about the wee, crying spirit in her arms gave up his parentage. His eyes were blue, but would later turn to brown, like most infants.

"There, there," Mary comforted the infant. "Devin. That's your name. Devin. Your mother loved you very much, Devin. And she was very brave. I don't know if I could have been that brave. I'm your Aunt Mary. And I'm going to take care of you."

The slender woman who had never been a wife became a mother, yet another time. Pascal the Elder was there to greet her as she walked into the kitchen chambers.

"Grace is gone?" he asked. Mary had already tapped out that message, and she nodded. "He's ours now, Pascal. He belongs to all of us. He and your son can grow up together, perhaps."

"That would be good," the elder Pascal told her. "There's a young couple coming down next week. Perhaps there will be more children, in time."

"Wouldn't that be a blessing?" Mary said, cradling the baby in her arms while William pulled down a can of milk, listening to the exchange.

"Jacob is devastated. He's with her now. Peter is coming down to... take care of things," Mary said, referring to Grace's body.

"May I hold him?" Anna's voice, came from the doorway.

"Of course, Anna. He'll need all the mothers we can rally for him," Mary told her while William heated milk in a saucepan.

"I know John and Grace did not always... share the same views," Anna said as she cradled the baby boy. "My, but he's a handsome one, isn't he? Such thick brown hair. His eyes are blue, but they'll probably turn brown, don't you think?" Anna asked.

"I do, Mary answered simply.

"You know, I always thought there was something very courageous about Grace," Anna remembered, thinking of all the times she'd stood up to John.

"So did I," Mary said. The men agreed, silently. There were times when it was simply best to let the women set the tone. This was obviously one of them.

"We should have a service for her. By the Mirror Pool?" Mary asked it. Anna nodded at that. "There are things I would like to say to her," Mary said. "Maybe I'll write a letter. Send it, there." Pascal approved, solemnly. Grace had stood up for his son when John had been ... less than kind. The older man, too, had a few things he wanted to say to their fallen friend.

The baby's bottle was made, and Devin returned to Mary's arms. She took her seat on a stool and fed him while the other adults gathered around her.

"He's ours now," Mary told them all, no compromise in her voice. "Ours and Jacob's, too." They thought she said that since she was including the name of the man who was not there.

Later, of course, they would find out more. But for this moment, a newborn boy drank thirstily in Mary's arms, surrounded by the warmth of William's kitchen and the companionship of a group of people he would come to know as family.

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In a chamber not far away, a tired, all but broken man said goodbye to the only woman who would ever bear him a child. He sat near her on the same stool he'd used when he'd brought their son into the world. Her face was peaceful in the sleep of death, and he'd wiped the sweat of labor from her face, and adjusted her braid so that it lay neatly down her form.

"It should have been me, somehow, and not you," he told her, feeling deeply in his heart that it was true.

"Of the two of us, you were the better one. The stronger one, Grace." He kissed her forehead, aware it was a gesture he'd never made to her while she lived.

"I will do all I can for him," Jacob vowed. "Help him to fit in here. Make him a leader, if I can. If he has your spirit, he'll be apt to go his own way, some. I'll have to make sure he knows he always has a home here. Such as it is."

He held her hand, which was now cold. "I will miss you, Grace. And so will he. More than either of us will ever know."

"Jacob?" Peter's voice came from the doorway of the chamber. "Pascal told me, on the pipes. I came as soon as I could."

"She's gone, Peter," Jacob said sadly. "And I have a son to raise."

"Then we all have a son to raise, Jacob." Peter did not intentionally misunderstand about Devin's parentage. Though he and Jacob had never spoken of Grace, it took no math giant to count backwards from this day to deduce Grace's child was likely Jacob's. Peter squeezed his friend's shoulder.

"Do you want me to take him above? If he's healthy, he'll be adopted before the end of the week, more than likely. One less burden for you to bear."

Jacob shook his head. "No, Peter, no. Grace didn't want that, for her child, and neither do I. He'll be a challenge, but he isn't a burden. He's mine. I will make sure he knows it, someday." Jacob rose, about to leave Grace in Peter's care.

Peter nodded. "She was a good woman, Jacob. Whatever part of her still lives, it lives on in her son, in her boy."

"He's also my boy," Jacob said. "And I am his father, though I don't think she ever wanted anyone to know it. I pray I can be better as 'Father' than I ever was as 'Jacob'."

Jacob felt the almost transformative change of that title, as he picked up his cane. *Father*. It rang in his psyche like a bell, and it rang true. For all he'd ever been in the world above, he'd never been 'Father' to anyone.

Perhaps it was time for that to change. *No. It was definitely time for that to change. Not just for Devin, but for all the rest of the children Below.*

Margaret and his life before had made him a 'husband'. But Grace had made him a 'father'. It was time he made the change from his old life to this one. Time he stopped regretting his losses. Time he acknowledged who he was, now, at last. Time he stopped longing for what had been, and finally, finally embraced what he now was, and more - what he could become.

"I need to go check on my son," he told Peter, leaving the sorrows of the chamber behind.

He could all but feel Grace chiding him out the doorway. "*Why are you sittin' here with the dead, you fool, when it's the living that need you? Now go tend my son. Father.*"

"I need to see what he needs. Make sure he's healthy." Jacob steadied himself on his cane. "And love him, until the day I die."

Peter watched his old friend hobble out the narrow doorway, the cane helping steady his gait. Peter had worried for a long time that Jacob would never find peace here, never find himself. He had a feeling that the departed woman on the bed and the sleeping baby in the kitchen might just prove his fears groundless.

"Goodbye, Grace," Peter told her, drawing the sheet up, slowly. Her braid had been placed gently over her shoulder. Her face looked peaceful, in sleep. He would take her to the catacombs so she could rest. Perhaps Elizabeth would paint a headstone for her, or perhaps carve one. *Something simple. Just her name, perhaps. Grace hated it when people "put on airs."* He would have to find her a marker she would have approved of had she been able to choose for herself. He owed her that much. He wrapped her body with care.

"You might have just saved Jacob's life," Peter whispered to her, a world of regret in his voice.

Beside him, a candle shimmered and seemed to grow brighter. The flame wavered a little, then burned stronger. It shouldn't have. There was no breeze in here to move the fire. Peter acknowledged it, and let his understanding go.



"I know. I'm going. I'll examine him," Peter said it aloud, as if Grace had just chided him, too. "Two doctors are better than one. When I come back, we'll take you to the catacombs."

And Peter left to join Jacob, Mary, Devin and the others, all in William's kitchen. A kitchen where Thursday's Child now slept peacefully, on the first day of his life's journey.

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*No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love. ~ Cindy*