

**The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.**

-John Milton, Paradise Lost, I,i 254-5 (1667)

Ever afterward, when Mari tried to recall her first feelings upon seeing her new home, all she could bring to mind was the memory of deep shock, followed quickly by disappointment.

Ever since she had left home, all the time she spent scrambling to acclimatize herself to the Mountain society, attempting to “fit in” and not seem too foreign quickly giving way to a more focused determination simply to survive, she had not been aware of forming a mental image of what the Archives would be. Nonetheless, there it was; in every whispered exchange she caught the end of, in every rumor and half-heard tale, she formed another piece of a collage in her imagination. The Archives. In her mind it was palatial, perhaps of marble; elegant, towering, breathtaking as befit a building housing the precious manuscripts that somehow made travel possible, made change possible, made building and shaping society possible.

This was another question she filed away in her mind to ask later: what, exactly, did the manuscripts do? Why were they so essential, and how did people use them to travel, to form and break civilization?

She tried to empty her racing mind and simply stood, telling herself that this was her first sight of the archives, of the place that would be her new home: she tried to force herself to believe it. She wasn't sure, at first, that they had actually reached their destination. True, they were at the end; there simply wasn't any more road.

As they toiled upward, the road had become narrower, the cobbles more uneven; she had to hop over gaps where the cobbles had crumbled away, leaving dirt-lined holes. The shops became increasingly obscure, abandoned, dark, finally giving way entirely to rocky walls rising on either side of the road, as though whoever had carved a town into the mountain had simply run out of energy, time, and patience, leaving a half-formed street behind, a flat place sunk into the sand-colored rock.

Not usually made nervous by tight quarters, having been raised in a small cottage with her father, mother, grandmother, two brothers and a sister, Mari was surprised to feel her breath coming in quicker and shallower gasps as the walls closed in - there was just room, now, for two people to walk side by side - she fell behind Is and found some comfort in his broad shoulders in front of her, the calm set of his back communicating complete ease and familiarity with this strange road.

Then, the road ended at a nondescript arched doorway. It looked to be set into the mountain itself. It was simply there: a green door, verdigris and carved vines covering its surface, making it appear arcane and mysterious enough; but still, it was not the grand museum she envisioned. Perhaps, she thought, this is a doorway blocking further progress into the mountain. Maybe the road will open out beyond this wall of rock.

Is fumbled a great key ring from around his belt, and inserted a long, thin brass key somewhere into the intricate scrollwork on the door, then repeated the process in several different places on the door with different keys from the ring-four times he did this, each key seeming to sink straight into the door itself, no keyholes to be seen... The door swung open on silent hinges.

Is tucked the keyring back underneath his deep purple frock coat, into the sturdy belt at his waist, and stepped back, motioning her inside.

She was so bewildered, she stopped just inside the door. Is had to nudge her gently so she tottered a few steps further in, and let him past.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve stopped here in the doorway and looked,” he said, “so many years I’ve been accustomed to this place, focused only on my business, I had not considered what it would look like to eyes beholding it for the first time.”

He smiled then, standing beside her, his arm touching hers in a warm and solid, companionable way; as his eyes roamed over what was visible of the room, they took on a childlike sparkle of delight. “Welcome home, Mari,” his warm voice brought her back to her senses, and she looked down at her hands. No gloves...no luggage...no clothes...her mind started reeling back down the street they had climbed, to the Academy, where a small locker in a dingy room held her few meagre belongings. Nothing there really worth going back for; she took them all up and discarded them in her mind within the space of half a minute’s consideration.

He seemed to be following her train of thought, for he said next, “There is a room here that is always kept furnished and ready for the next Apprentice; though it has been many years since the last one, which would have been,” he harrumphed a bit in embarrassment, “me, actually: I was the last Apprentice. You should find everything you need in there, it should be ready and tailored to your needs. That is,” he hesitated, “after you have passed ...er... been introduced to...the manuscripts.” Mari watched him out of the corner of her eye as he continued, shaking off his discomfort, “Before I introduce you, I will show you into one of the bathing chambers so you can wash the dust of the

day away; when you are ready, I will have a few final words for you before you venture into the Archives.”

“The Archives? Today?” Mari felt everything was somehow going too fast; she had just gotten used to the idea that she was allowed to keep her skin intact, after seemed only a few moments ago that she had been kneeling on the ground, stones biting into her knees through the fine fabric of her skirt; many hours had passed, but she was still just getting used to the feeling of freedom she had, leaving the Academy behind. Meeting the Archives felt somehow ominous, like there was a test involved, something Is seemed on the point of talking about a few times, stopping himself every time. His hesitance to tell her everything he knew had the very effect he was trying to avoid: she grew apprehensive and reluctant to face whatever dark test seemed to lie ahead. Why couldn't he just tell her?

“Mari.” She felt his large, warm hand on her arm, and felt her muscles relax in response; only then did she realize she had been standing in the doorway, her hands balled into fists, her entire body tensed and poised to run. “Take a hot bath. It is going to be okay, you'll see. There is a lot I cannot explain to you, simply because each person's path is their own, and one of the rules as ancient as this mountain itself is that every Apprentice must experience their own version of this place. That means that what unfolds for you will be somewhat different from my experience, or even vastly different. I have no way of knowing. I can tell you this, though: you are completely in control of your path. Should any harm befall you, it will only be that of your own making; likewise, the joys and wonders that come to you will be what you look for.” His eyes roamed over

her face, searching for something, she was not sure what. Uncertainty? Fear? She had a fair measure of both, but underneath it all she felt...excitement.

Excitement at stepping into this glorious room that not many people ever got to see in their lifetimes; exhilaration at being alive, and at the challenge that seemed to be plunked down in front of her, like a brand new path with "tread if you dare" written upon it, just asking for her boots to set out along it and see what lay ahead.

She grinned then, took a deep breath, and let her eyes roam again around the room. "It's...breathtaking," she murmured, and it was. Varied shades of green and plum met her eyes everywhere she looked. The room was, at first glance, like a riotous forest clearing, an oasis of color and texture; the warm stone was carved in such a way that here and there it resembled living wood, the trunks of trees; between the trunks was, somewhat ridiculously, tame, old-fashioned wall, papered in a Victorian style with delicate and very precise patterns of flowers and curving lines, hung here and there with different sized portraits: in one small alcove, a rabbit-like, bespectacled face peered out of a wooden oval frame, below him, a more ornate rectangle studded with jet held a jowled and stern matron. These portraits scattered throughout the cavern gave the place the feeling that it was inhabited; a glimpse of eyes behind the carved leaves of a tree, or above a chair, beside a bookshelf...Mari looked around hungrily, a breathy giggle rising to her lips. It felt exactly like wandering into a forest glade populated by small, shy animals.

Mari walked forward as though in a dream, and ran her hand along one of the "tree trunks" that seemed to hold up the vaulted ceiling like living pillars, their branches

spreading and glorious. Stone. Beautifully, impeccably carved stone. The floor was a rich and ornate rug with varied shades of green; here and there, small flowers and leaves seemed almost to grow out of the floor, so real were they.

The ceiling was extremely far away, but it was warm and golden in tone; it reflected the dancing flames of countless candles, set here and there in sconces tucked into the curled carved stone branches of the trees. The effect was as though the leaves of the trees themselves were, here and there around the room, alight with the warm, dancing glow of candle flame.

“You will never see them,” Is chuckled, and Mari turned back to him curiously. “The ones whose job it is to keep the candles alight and replace them...you will never see them. I have tried; in my youth, I stayed up many nights staring at a single section of trees, knowing that the candles would burn down soon and they absolutely must be replaced. I invariably found my eyelids drooping closed; I thought I’d just shut them and rest for a single moment, and the next thing I knew, the rosy light of dawn would be creeping into the room, there would be fresh candles, and I’d have a nasty crick in my neck from sleeping on the floor.” He chuckled. “Perhaps they are brownies, those creatures of the Old World; perhaps the candles simply refresh themselves. It is one of the mysteries of this place.”

He strode in then, weaving among tree “trunks” and cozy little groupings of chairs and wooden tables. As Mari followed him, her eyes lingered longingly; everywhere, there were books. Stacks of books, small shelves of books; around every corner, it looked as though students or scholarly friends had just that moment pushed their chairs away from the tables, and left for a walk among the trees. She longed to sit down, look

through the books, and allow her eyes to wander around the glorious great hall with its strange winding paths and cozy hidden corners.

Is led her further and further into the cavernous, sprawling room, unbuttoning his frock coat as he walked, to reveal the bright, shimmering green vest he wore underneath. He slipped two fingers into his vest pocket, taking out a rose gold pocket watch, making a small clucking noise as he consulted it.

Finally, they arrived at two of the stone tree trunks which formed an archway in the wall; he turned and walked through them, into a small, narrow, quietly wallpapered hallway lined with doors. A short way along, he opened a plain, wooden door, and held it for her, motioning her inside. "Er...take as long as you like, my dear," he harrumped like a percolating coffee pot. "There should be...bubbles,"

Mari was startled into a snort of laughter. "bubbles?"

"Oh, I don't know, soap, bubbles, oil, whatever it is that you ladies like." He frowned at her sternly, his overhanging brows dramatic, causing a few more undignified giggles to ripple their way out of her mouth.

She covered her mouth with one hand, smiling at him, and with the other, she grasped the door handle, dislodging his hand in the process, and turned, closing the door firmly in his face.

It was an ordinary bathroom, though large and heavily Victorian. There was a marble tub sunk into the floor with - oh, glory of glories! - running water, hot and cold. She turned the taps, and held her chilled hands gratefully under the rush of water. She turned and inspected herself in the wall mirror while removing her coat. She looked windblown, her face dust-smudged, but her green eyes were bright and glowing with

excitement, her cheeks flushed; her dark mahogany hair was wildly escaping from the braids she had neatly pinned and coiled along her neck just that morning.

Good lord, but it had been a long day. She took the pins out of her hair and began to untangle her braids, greedily inspecting the shelves which were heaped with crystal-stoppered bottles containing different colored liquids. She massaged her aching scalp as her hair rippled free, and opened a few bottles, holding them under her nose, closing her eyes in bliss: orange blossoms, sweet honey, bergamot, lively peppermint...she began to feel refreshed and awake as the various scents wafted around the room. She shrugged, grinned, and poured a little bit of each of the bottles into the bath.

She turned the taps off, quickly shed her clothing, and sank into the glorious, hot bath up to her neck, mountains of scented foam rising to tickle her nose and crackle gently in her ears. It was heaven. She felt the bruises and dust of the day soothed away, her muscles unknotting.

There was a banging, crashing noise, and she sat up quickly, then sank back down under the bubbles with a squeak of alarm as a flower-embroidered folding screen marched in through the door. She spotted Is' brown fingers curled around either side, and snorted, making a small trench in the mound of bubbles in front of her face.

"That is an extremely unladylike sound," Is' voice burbled in amusement from around the screen. "I wanted to sit here and tell you a little more as you bathe. It's perfectly decorous," he added insistently, "I can't see a thing."

Mari sighed and rolled her eyes, sticking her tongue out childishly at the screen, and settling back into the bubbles; she reached for a large bar of cinnamon-smelling

soap and resigned herself to the fact that this day would just keep getting more peculiar. “All right, Is,” she grumbled, unfolding a bright yellow wash cloth from the side of the tub and dunking it in the steaming water, “go ahead and lecture, but I’m going to enjoy this bath whether you like it or not.”

She heard chuckles coming from around the screen, and grinned. There were more creaking and thumping noises as he set up a chair behind the screen and settled into it, finally closing the door again with a decisive thump.

Splashing happily in the best bath she’d ever had, Mari listened in growing perplexity while Is tried to prepare her for what lay ahead.

“The thing you need to remind yourself at all times, Mari,” he began, “is that it’s all in your head. Depending on how you perceive what you find in the Archives, your experience can be a Heaven of delightful surprises, or,” his voice grew softer then, reluctant and heavy with some remembered horror, “Or it can be a Hell beyond anything I ever want you to experience.” He paused and took a deep breath. “The main thing is, you must keep reminding yourself that your mind has the power to shift the experience.” The wooden chair he was sitting in creaked as he stood, and she heard the rattle of the door handle as his hand grasped it. “Just prepare your mind now: breathe and center yourself. Empty your mind of past fears and worries about the future; root yourself in your own power, strength, and awaken your ability to endure by breathing into that strong, serene, wise center of yours. What comes to you when you walk in the door to the Manuscript Hall is entirely in your power to shape. If it is dark and horrible, look for the light and tease it out, make it stronger, Mari. If what comes is beautiful, see that

beauty and strengthen it with your attention. Everything in there will take tangible form: it's not illusion, so it can be dangerous,"

The bath water sloshed as she sat up a bit, ready to protest that she hadn't asked to become an Apprentice, that she wasn't ready...his voice rising, he stilled her with his next words.

"You can do this. You have within you the strength and potential to be the best Apprentice this place has ever seen. Just remember my words. Find Heaven in Hell, and be aware that the seeds of Hell lie inside the most beautiful Heaven. It all depends on what you choose to give your attention to. The seeds will all be there - water, with your mind, the ones you want to strengthen and grow. Choose carefully, choose wisely, but don't just react. Remember that you have the power to choose."

With that, she saw the door open and close again above the top edge of the screen, and he was gone.

To Be Continued...