

by Raven ©2011 All Rights Reserved

“In the beginning”

Immortal amarant, a flower which once
In paradise, fast by the tree of life,
Began to bloom; but soon for man's offence
To heaven removed, where first it grew, there grows,
And flowers aloft, shading the fount of life,
And where the river of bliss through midst of heaven
Rolls o'er elysian flowers her amber stream:
With these that never fade the spirits elect
Bind their resplendent locks.- *J. Milton, Paradise Lost*

Amaranth, the unfading flower...the purest red-gold; she took it down from where it hung concealed behind the pomegranates. Cupping, briefly, the pomegranates with her palm- her movement automatic, she had done this a hundred times- she paused for a moment and really saw the pomegranate she held. It was a miracle. Developed from a flower, their insides jeweled and precisely patterned, the pomegranates' inner labyrinth was eloquent evidence of an orderly universe. The skin of the fruit she held had never been broken; the seeds that lay within would never be seen. The pomegranates were potent magic when they were unopened, their potential still unrealized- the decoction of the unopened fruit would retain that eternal potential, a moving life force. She thought of Shrodinger's Cat, her breath puffing out in a laugh: what riches she had discovered when she entered this realm where every time exists, and there is no "past" or "future." She smoothed the garnet surface of the fruit; it was lightly gold speckled. These were the opposite of Schrödinger's theory. Whereas the theoretical cat was poised eternally on the threshold, both living and dying at the same time, the pomegranates were in motion- they grew and evolved, the ripening eternally juxtaposed with the drying out and shrinking. Burgeoning with potential for life, the drying pomegranates held a paradox: perpetual motion in a closed

“machine,” their unbreached skins held all the power of a heart being formed in its mother’s womb, even as the ripe life within them withered. The skin rested in her palm, tough as leather; lighter in heft, they were drying beautifully. She reached behind the pomegranate and plucked a small twig of the bright branch of amaranth from where it hung upside-down from the top of the window; she marveled for a moment at each tiny flower, lacy and perfect. “Love-lies-bleeding” was the country name for this particular flower. She laughed, a bitter, broken sound that she would have been incapable of before she came to this place. The flower was aptly named. She would only need a few. Her bottles and jars clinked softly as she slid them aside, looking for a specific jar- there. The root of amaranth. Milky and mild, it and the flower would make the sweetest tea, when combined with the usual tea she served when he came to check on her. She ground the small flowers and diced root in her stained stone mortar, the pestle fitting against the callouses in her palm doing its work swiftly; she watched the bright beauty turn to powder, and grimly considered the shifting nature of love. They were wrong to say there was no change here in the Lost Kingdom- the heart could change, even in this place where time did not exist.

He slammed the door open, and all at once the still, peaceful room felt overcrowded. He always had this effect- his existence in this world was loud. Cora wondered if it was deliberate; as a Manuscript in the Archives he had been contained, his very being at the mercy of the changing world-he was forced to shift in order to reflect the changes in the world, he had no choice, no freedom of expression. Once he had reached the Lost Kingdom where there was no change in the world, thus the world did not imprint itself upon him, rewriting him, he exploded with power, imposing his will upon his surroundings for the first time. Such power as he

wielded here was dangerous. Manuscripts, it turned out, were the only ones who could shape reality in the Lost Kingdom with their will alone.

Cora darted a glance to the open door- good, it concealed Jac's spear. With luck, she could keep the man distracted enough that he would not ask about it. She smiled to him, wiping her hands on her skirts, swiftly shaking the rosy powder into two cups, then spooning tea leaves to the pot.

"Zimri. Please sit," she motioned to the table, where the small cups and pot of hot water were laid out. He sat, scowling.

"You know we do not use the old names here," he said stiffly. He had taken on a mantle of power in this place, quickly appointing himself the leader, uncontested by people who had been used to floating in a silent bath of peaceful timelessness. He found the world malleable in a way that was to his liking; he was careful to institute rules and changes gradually, so as not to awaken any rebellion within these sleepy, gentle people. But he didn't quite dare rule Cora. Even now with so much changed between them, he was still an Archive, the living shadow of her former love.

Cora's lips curved slightly and she poured out the tea, bending over his cup first, her eyes fixed on her own long, graceful fingers as she poured. They didn't tremble; good.

"I misspoke. It was seeing-"

"you recognized her."

"Jac. Yes."

He eyed her narrowly, and stirred sugar into his tea. Cora passed her tongue over her suddenly dry lips, and busied herself with her own cup, avoiding his gaze.

“The one we have been calling has arrived.”

Cora’s hand shook, and some of the tea spilled onto the curve of skin between her thumb and forefinger. Her cup clattered loudly as she set it into the saucer; the room seemed very still all of a sudden; she could hear a slight thudding in her ears. Her heart? She pressed her napkin to her hand, oddly thankful for the burn that had jolted her into alertness. Calmly, she picked up her cup again, and took a sip, watching Zimri over the rim. She must be careful.

“Cora.” His use of her old name, that caressing tone- an echo of her old love’s voice- made her heart squeeze painfully, even though she knew he was a Manuscript, and not really Zimri, even though she knew his use of her name was calculated. He went on. “I need your help.”

“Where is the one we’ve been calling? How did you find her?”

“She arrived with some others in a strange contraption, an airship of sorts. They were not contaminated; it seems they lost consciousness before crossing. The girl is safe, though it seems she alone may have seen too much; she suffers from the visions.”

Cora was aware that he had not answered her question, but did not want to express too much interest. They were all in great danger now, unless ...

“Zimri, you are not drinking your tea.”

“Cora, I need your help,” he repeated in her lover’s earnest tones, his hand turning the cup around and around in its saucer, making a small scraping sound- bone on bone- that caused her to clench her teeth. “She must be sent back. I don’t know if it is too late, but she...I don’t know if it is possible to destroy someone here,” he mused quietly.

“Destroy? Zimri- you would ... kill her?”

“You know what she is going to do. They say she is the one who will bring time to this place. Cora. I can’t have it happen. The other world, where time exists- that is your world, you humans who control everything, decide everything.” His eyes grew bright and hard. Were those tears? She was frozen, listening, her lips parted slightly as he continued. “This was going to be our place. The place where Manuscripts could be free, could make change, could live. This place was made for us, I am certain. We were meant to be here. She will drain it of its power, she will create time...I don’t know how, but she will do it. I can’t let her. This is our place to be in control of our own reality.”

“Zimri. I don’t know why you Manuscripts were created, but I do know you have a purpose. There is a reason she has come here. I don’t believe it has anything to do with the Calling Ritual.”

“You never made it a secret that you did not believe in the power of the Calling,” he grumbled. He lifted his rapidly cooling tea to his lips and took a sip. Cora’s heart pounded; she hoped he would not notice the color rising in her face. Her scalp prickled, her palms grew clammy. She busied herself pouring more tea into her cup.

“This tea is good. Different,” he took another sip, and she watched as his face grew noticeably paler. His hand trembled, and he set the cup down slowly, his eyes blinking rapidly.

“Cora. What did you...what is in this tea?”

She laced her fingers under her chin, watching him with clinical detachment. “Amaranth, Zimri. It is not harmful, though it contains oxalic acid, which...”

“Bleaches, erases ink,” he gasped, his forehead sweating noticeably. “Why? What will happen to me?”

“I don’t know. You may just sleep. You may be unwritten. It may be that when you are back in the Archives, your story will write itself anew as the world changes. It may be that this will finish you. I don’t know. I will take you to the Archives where you belong.”

“You want time? You don’t want to live forever, Cora? You could have lived forever, in this paradise where all times exist, where you never age, you never change, there is no death or fear.”

“Time means choices, Zimri. I find that with this act, which is the first choice I have made in a long, long time, I remember what it was that was so beautiful about living a finite life. Every choice had its lesson. Even things that were wrong choices- one learned from them. One grew. We cannot grow here; we just go on. When there is an absence of certainty, when we have choices to make and we are evolving, we are learning- take away time, put us in Paradise, and you take away the potential. What you want is not to grow and learn. You want absolute power to determine reality- and only the Maker should have that, Zimri...and the Maker doesn’t have that. The Maker gave us flawed humans choices, for good or ill, so that there is room for growth: in not filling the universe completely, the Maker allowed room for growth, thus not stagnant, not perfect and unchanging, but better than that- God herself is the potential that exists when a thing is growing.”

“Cora I do not ...understand you.” Zimri slipped sideways; Cora pushed her chair back and went to his side, catching him, easing him to the ground. He was breathing. She wasn’t sure whether Manuscripts could die, but she would fulfill her promise and take him back to the Archives to the existence he was created for.

“I don’t have all the answers. I don’t even know whether I have done right or wrong here. But I can’t let you harm Jac, as well as the other innocent woman who has come.”

He stared at her; she flinched as her lover’s eyes grew glassy and dark in his pale, almost transparent face. She laid his head back as he closed his eyes; she placed a hand gently under his nose, felt that he was still breathing slightly, and reminded herself again that this was not her love. It was an echo, a mere expression of a life that had ended long ago.

She took a shaky breath and stood. She walked quickly to the door and took the spear from behind it. She exited the room, closing the door softly behind her. She had to find the others who had come here, and she had to find Jac. She mustn’t waste time. She smiled, her heart leaping at the thought: time. Time was running out.