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~Noah~

*O, light! This is the cry of all the characters of ancient drama brought face to face with their fate. This last resort was ours, too, and I knew it now. In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer. -Camus*

She pushed her fingers into tight lace gloves, her chubby hands clumsy; if she could get it right, get everything right and perfect, they would not go. Or at least they would not be hurt or killed, they would come back safe. Her mind ticked over and over, making bargains with the universe, making rules, new ways she could have control over the narrow confines of her world. The gloves would not go on. She must wear the gloves to dinner- her father had said so. The more frantically she pulled, the more the scratchy, fussy fabric simply would not let her hands in. Her breath came in gasps, her fingers grew clumsier with sweat; the wide sash cut into her waist and stomach painfully as her ribs jumped against it, aching for air. The shadowy thing in her chest awoke- dark, oily wings began to flutter against her bones, frantic to escape the clutching enclosure of her small ribs, the cage of her chest, her neck, her jaw, her skull, her teeth. She could almost hear the slicing sound, the oddly cold musical flapping of gleaming, iridescent feathers- so black, they shone with blue - the desperate opening and closing of the sharp, curved beak, the scraping of its ugly, scaled feet with claws stretching and curling, seeking something to grasp, tear, break.

She had seen a raven die once; the older kids at school, her brother among them, had thrown stones at it because its wing was broken and it could not fly. The glassy yellow eyes lived inside her, staring and reptilian in their fixed intensity...the snapping beak and pointy tongue, the ugly thing crying its rusty defiance at the laces and ribbons, the tight clothing, the pinching shoes, the braids in her hair so tight that her head ached painfully, the silent house; She felt small and helpless, and incapable of doing anything right. She must do everything just right, or they would leave again and never come back. She didn't know she was screaming until her throat burned raw. She tasted salt, threw down the crumpled gloves and put her palms up against her cheeks- cheeks scalding hot to the touch of her clawing fingers, and so wet with tears that her nails slid off. She reached around and pulled at her sash, trying to break free, expand, get enough air; she tore at her braids, feeling some release as her hair loosened.

“Mari. Mari.” she fought the arms around her- fought like a mad thing, with flailing hands still tearing at her own clothing, until the calm voice, the soothing hands penetrated her panic. That patient, warm voice: “Mari. Mari. Hush, darling. Hush. You are safe. You are safe.” Over and over the voice lulled, as calm and constant as the sighing of the sea.

“Mama.” She pushed a little, very weakly, at the arms holding her. Somehow, she had drained herself with the battle and was as frail as a leaf. The arms loosened, and she pushed back to look into her mother's eyes. A gentle hand smoothed her tangled hair away from her face; she blinked each time the fingers brushed past her, but opened her eyes again as quickly as she could so she could see her mother was still there: warm brown eyes, brow furrowed, trembling lips pressed tightly together, but most of all, best of all, love. The love that shone and swam in those eyes warmed Mari, and she lay back in the cradling arms, safe and whole again.

Later, having been given a bowl of warm milk with bread pieces to dip into it, bathed and swaddled in her favorite, softest night gown, she heard them talking. She had meant to come out of her room and stay just at the top of the stairs, but the light of the gas lamps downstairs was warm and mellow; she yearned for that inviting kitchen, to enter that charmed space with her family around her, their warm, alive presence keeping out the dark. She put her feet on the step below her and then bent her knees and bumped down one step on her bottom. slide- bump, move the feet down again, then slide-bump- holding the thick fabric of her nightgown around her, she made a sort of sled. She was an explorer, going down, down, down into a cave below with a strange fiery glow...no, that was too scary. She stopped and took a deep breath, willing the panic back. She felt the flutter of her mind escaping her grasp, and rocked herself on the step murmuring "Safe...safe...I am safe" until the whirring black wings in her head subsided, and the great, ugly bird tucked its beak under its wing again and went to sleep.

Sliding down once more, she rifled gently through her mind until she came upon a story that was not scary; she was sliding on a beautiful red sled, down a snowy mountain to the place where the fairies lived, and that warm, golden glow below her was all the fairy lights, shining on gold- trees made of treasure and jewels, golden cottages, warm cobbled streets, dancing stars captured in diamond jars, hanging from hooks so the night would never be dark...thus her imagination conjured up everything that was cozy, beautiful, safe- and the flopping panic in her heart subsided, lulled. Of course there would be no darkness in fairyland -she smiled delightedly to herself at the new thought - the fairies would never allow themselves to be swallowed by the dark; perhaps if she were very good and kind as Mama had taught her, sat quietly with her feet together and her sash tied tight (her mind flinched away from that, and she took a breath and

pushed the thought aside) if she smiled and spoke with a soft, sweet voice, the fairies would love her and teach her the magic that kept darkness from their kingdom.

She had reached the last step; the voices in the kitchen had grown silent. She heard the old grandfather clock ticking in the hall- it calmed her: ticktock ticktock like a fussy old man, clucking gently to himself as he nodded over his book. She giggled at that, and put a hand up to muffle the sound.

“I don’t know what to do with her,” came her mother’s voice from the kitchen.

“These passions, these storms of hers- they are not normal.” That was her brother’s voice- her big brother, so much older than she, that he was as distant as a mountain. “She is sick in her mind. She should be sent away to a specialist. I have a friend, a doctor, with a new type of asylum...”

“I will not have her shut away in an asylum.” Her mother’s voice shook, but Mari could hear the iron underneath. Her mother was strong- no one would be able to challenge her when she sounded like this. Mari breathed deeply and clutched her nightgown around her bare feet which were beginning to feel chilled. She didn’t know what “asylum” meant, but she was glad her mother would not send her away.

“We aren’t here enough, poor lamb,” that was her father in a rare burst of tenderness, his voice rich and resonant from years of working the theaters and music halls. “We are gone all the time, and she only has you, Vern.”

She heard her Grandfather clear his throat. Grandfather would protect her. They were always away, traveling to the next job as theater people must- Grandfather knew her. Grandfather would tell them. She held her knees tightly, pulling them up under the big flannel nightgown,

holding them to her chest as though the raven inside her would be lulled, would stay sleeping, would not hear what they were saying and come screaming to frantic life again.

“She’s got a shadow inside her, that is true- but she mustn’t be confined. She mustn’t be put in an asylum, or it would be the end of her. Mari’s got a wild creature inside - sometimes that creature is too big for her little body to hold. I haven’t figured it out yet. It is something she struggles with daily. It’s a darkness, a sorrow. It seems to come on when she feels helpless in this world that doesn’t give her any say in her own life. Give her room to grow, give her more freedom, more choices- that is what she needs. She needs fresh air and wide open spaces, maybe mountains to fill her sky, maybe trees to climb.

Mari’s heart leapt at the words. Mountains! Trees! Her eyes stung, and she scrubbed at them impatiently with the back of her hand. Her heart began to flutter and flip, and she rocked herself again, smoothing the fabric of her nightgown under her palms. She would not let the great bird out tonight. One day, she would set the bird free, and be rid of it- she just did not know how to open the cage of her bones and let it fly. The cage was too small for it, poor bird; its fear was her fear as she imagined those great wings, unable to stretch. She tried to breathe quietly through her nose, but soon she had to open her mouth as she could not get enough air or breathe fast enough. Sleep, bird, sleep, she thought desperately. You hideous raven, you nasty, ugly creature, sleep. Her fingernails dug into the stairs painfully. Grandfather would keep her safe. Mother would not let her be sent away. She balled up her nightgown and shoved it into her mouth, clamping her eyes tight so the bird would not see the candlelight, would not awaken and scrape her insides with its beak, claws, paper-sharp wings.

“Mari. Mari.” The arms were around her again. Oh, she didn’t want them to see this again, not so soon, they would call her mad, as her brother did- call her crazy and lock her up- the muffled, far-away voice said again: “Mari. Mari, wake up.”

There was light, a white haze beyond her eyelids. She realized she was awake, and that her eyes were closed. There was warmth on her face; she felt her mouth move in a smile. She was comfortable, so sleepy, warm, and reluctant to open her eyelids; she lay there simply at peace with being. Her breath sounded like the ocean in her own ears; she floated, lapped in that sound for awhile until she realized that if she could hear her own breath, her ears were somehow blocked. Her eyelids flew open, and her brain yammered into life.

She was in a plain room with creamy plaster walls; a window edged with dark wood let in sunlight filtered to an ethereal white glow through gauzy, thin curtains. She was lying in a simple, comfortable bed, so firmly tucked and folded, her arms were pinned to her side by smooth white blankets. She turned her head; it moved easily to the side, with only a slight ache in her neck muscles. She stretched experimentally: her limbs felt achy and stiff, but there were no sharp pains. She wiggled until she had loosened the blankets enough to get one arm out, and gently touched her ears. They were blocked with something that felt smooth; she pried one of the hard balls out of her ear- it looked like clear whitish candle wax, slightly pliable. She removed the other, and sounds rushed in - birdsong from outside the window, the steady rustle of breeze in some nearby tree leaves, and Jac’s voice, saying “Mari. Mari. Wake up.”

Her bed bounced as something landed on it; a firm arm slid beneath her shoulders and heaved her upward; her pillows were roughly fluffed. She raised her chin to see those eyes she

thought she would never see again, sparkling down at her, brimming with familiar mischief, “So, here we are again. Watcher.”

Mari sat up abruptly with enough force to untuck her blankets, and the room spun about her. She fell back against Jac’s arm.

“Stop laughing at me.”

“Am not.”

“Your arm is shaking, for heaven’s sake. Yes you are.”

“What were you dreaming, Mari?”

“I...the last time I saw my family. Before they left the last time.” Mari took a deep breath and sat up, lifted her hand absently to her head, then clutched her hair- her empty, bare head- she was instantly awake, her whole body tense, flying out of bed, her feet landing on cold floor only to sit back down abruptly as her head gave one vicious throb, and the room did a wobbling dance in front of her eyes.

“Slow down, Mari. You’ve been out quite a while. Your Grandfather’s kippah is safe; it’s in a chest with the rest of your clothes.”

“My...clothes?” Mari looked down and noticed she was in a plain, soft, very comfortable red robe of some sort. It was an odd shape that folded about her form like a flower.

“Mari.” Jac’s eyes were serious now. “We’re in a bind, and no mistaking, but at least we are together. Lie back now, and pretend to be asleep. It is nearly time for them to bring the food. I will tell them I’m bored, I will feed you this time, they must leave the trays. I will kick a fuss until they do- they are mild people, they do not like scenes or messy emotions- they will leave the food in order to keep me calm. Then when they have gone, we’ll eat and make a plan. I’ve

never been one to lie around and let someone else decide what my tomorrow was going to be.”

Mari sighed, feeling the fluttering in her chest grow calmer, her breaths deepening. She squeezed Jac’s little, hard hand. Jac was here. Somehow, that made everything okay. Mari smiled as Jac continued to chatter exactly like the Jackdaw she was named after. She was bursting with energy, her clever, monkey-face bright and open, making plans for their escape.

“Jac, why did I dream of my family now? Why did I...” then she remembered the raven wings in her chest. She had forgotten that childhood fantasy that had been so very real to her. Grandfather had helped her live with it; she had learned to hide it, push it down, but it was still there. There was within her- deep within her blood and bones, deeper than her name, beyond the things of this life that floated on her surface- a chasm of grief, a knowledge of cataclysmic loss and betrayal. When the darkness within her awoke and unfurled its wings, she was overtaken by a frantic helplessness: she was trapped. She dwelled within that scream of pain, inhabited it, expanded within it, finding its reach endless, the lance-bright agony eclipsing her ability to see a way forward in life. She was the pain; she was nothing else.

Grandfather had tried to teach her not to be ashamed; it was an illness, he said, just like a cold or like their neighbor who had the wasting sickness. But she carried it with deep shame, and every morning, she had wrapped the pain in chemise, undergarments, corset, corset cover, petticoats, blouse, skirt, coat, kippah; she had pinned it up with her hair, covered it with her gloves. She had hid it, buried it- felt it sink further and further beneath her breath, her skin, through her blood, her bones, then within her bones, even deeper, but never smaller. It had lain there coiled, alive and pulsing - the longer she carried it, silent, the more it burned. She had

forgotten about the raven, but as she thought about it, she could feel it there still, breathing in her chest.

She looked at Jac, whose face had gone still and serious.

She couldn't tell Jac. She couldn't. What if Jac turned away from her? Jac, the first real friend she'd ever had, after Grandfather, after Ariel. Mari's mind flinched away from the thought of Ariel. More betrayal. She forced her lips to curve in a smile, and the action made her feel a bit better.

"We're together, we can get free, Jac. If they're feeding us, if we're in this comfortable room- cottage?- they can't mean us harm." She looked around appraisingly. The room was sunny, simple, cheerful. "Tell me about where we are. I don't remember how I wound up here. I was in the strangest carriage, with the oddest people I have ever met. Oh, I hope they're all right...I do so want you to meet professor Malone." She flopped back on her pillow and laughed suddenly, picturing Jac meeting Varya Leangrin. The shadow in her receded - really, why did she give the depression such importance, when there was so much in this life that was so deliciously ridiculous and funny?

Jac smiled slowly. "Well now, that's more like it," she said, her head cocked slightly to one side, studying Mari. "When I came into the Lost Kingdom - which is where we are now, Mari- I saw things as they really are. Boundaries between us are an illusion; I don't know how to explain this to you, but maybe you saw a bit during your crossing?"

"I was floating, flying, somehow looking down at the world as though it were spread out before me, my past and my future- then I was surrounded by light and sound, until I lost my Self - lost Mari, lost the little things that make me who I am in this life..."

“...and merged, wasn't it a merging?”

“I suppose so, but I wasn't aware to call it that. I certainly don't recall 'merging' with Varya Leangrin.” She giggled into her pillow again, and turned sparkling eyes back to Jac. “I don't know how, but I've been given back my hope, Jac. It's been gone a long time.”

“That's exactly it, Mari,” Jac's eyes burned with excitement. “I think that's what we are meant to see. We are exactly where we need to be. This is no accident, and we are never alone. Have a little faith.”

Somehow, when Jac said that, it was altogether different than when Varya Leangrin had blustered in her superior tone about “Faith” in the carriage. This time it was true, simple and clean, and went straight to Mari's heart.

“Yes. I am safe. We are safe. Ultimately nothing can harm us; nothing can kill our souls.” She lay down and grinned at Jac. “I'm so glad you're here. I'm going to pretend to sleep now...I hope they come soon, because I'm starving. I sure hope there's hot cocoa,” she murmured, her eyelids drooping. She drifted off to sleep to the feeling of Jac smoothing her hair, and the beautiful light, babbling-brook sound of Jac's laughter.