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*Forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet and the winds long to play with your hair. ~Kahlil Gibran*

*I thank you God for this most amazing day, for the leaping greenly spirits of trees, and for the blue dream of sky and for everything which is natural, which is infinite, which is yes. ~e.e. cummings*

### **Prophet**

The light grew dimmer as they wove through the trees, pressing deeper into the forest without an end in sight, it seemed. Mari could not see a discernible path; she could not tell if the creature she followed was leading her somewhere specific, or was just mad, completely insane, and would lead her on a wild chase through the wood until Mari dropped from exhaustion.

The light leather on the creature's back rippled and flapped; it wore some kind of baggy, long vest over all its layers of skins and furs, which moved with it, and concealed its body completely.

Mari's sides began to cramp. Gasping for breath, she tried to call out to the creature to stop. She saw its back disappear into the shadows; it was going so fast, in such a strange, meandering path- dodging from rock to tree, as though they were hiding. Were these woods so dangerous? Mari had not sensed a single predator since they had left the strange shadows behind the foggy wall. She decided to sit for a moment, on a large rock and hope that the creature doubled back. She placed her elbows on her knees, feeling nauseous and light headed from lack of food and running, dodging and weaving through the woods. It would almost be a relief to

pass out. Her throat stung with the cooling night air as she took in great whooping breaths, rather embarrassed and glad that the creature was far away by now and wouldn't witness her pitiable state.

"Tsk tsk." Mari jumped, her heart banging against her ribs; she had not heard the creature come back. She had never actually heard anyone say that word aloud before. It sounded like the creature was sucking on its teeth, or practicing a strange bird call. "Someone's out o' condition. This will never, never do."

Next thing she knew, there was something very hard and sharp under her abdomen, and the world tilted; she was being held in a fireman's carry, across the tiny creature's shoulders. It was beyond humiliating, she must be twice the creature's size, and far too heavy!

Still gasping for air, she tried to protest, only to be met with rusty little chuckles that vibrated through the creature's bony shoulders and into her abdomen. Humiliatingly, she felt she might throw up, so she clamped her mouth shut on any further protests, and just focused on trying to be as light as possible. Well, at least I haven't eaten a proper meal in a while, she thought wryly.

It was dark before the creature slowed. Mari had long since recovered her breath, and had been moving around for a little while, in a silent struggle to get down. The creature held her firmly; every time she tried to say anything, she was shushed almost violently. She thought again that the creature might be completely mad, so she tried to go calm and limp, pretend that she had passed out.

She was thrown to the ground without warning, onto her back. The air slammed out of her, and she drew an enormous breath back in to protest loudly, gathering herself to get to her

feet quickly, mentally measuring how fast she could get her knife out of her belt. Before she could use the breath she had drawn in, a dirty, bony hand covered her mouth firmly, and the creature's voice tickled her ear. Surprisingly, the creature's breath smelled sweet, clean, minty.

“Hush now. Not a word. not a word at all, I warn you. Nod if you understand. I'll not remove my hand until you do. Complete silence from you. It's absolutely necessary.”

Startled at the creature's abrupt shift to more articulate and sharp communication, Mari nodded quickly. Her eyes strained to see in the dark; they were at a bright green mound with a vast array of branches and dead trees propped against it, as though a giant who had been carrying firewood home had set its great armful down for a second.

Mari studied it: it was a very unnatural, round, grassy hill.

The rough little hand was removed from Mari's mouth. Mari took a deep breath and pulled herself to a sitting position, her arms wrapped around her knees. Her head swam; she put her forehead down on her knees and took some deep breaths.

“Need to get some food inside ye, “ the creature had shifted back to its strange, singsong tone of voice. It communicated in a way that made Mari feel that it was thinking about something else the entire time it was talking. “Come now, come,” it said, and a small but strong little hand was grasping her upper arm, pulling her to her feet.

The creature opened a small door, which was either a roughly lashed together bunch of mixed branches, or a very, very clever creation; it didn't look like a door at all, but rather, a bundle of dead branches and slim trees propped against a larger pile of sticks. Mari brushed off her coat in a completely futile gesture; she nearly laughed aloud as she realized she was falling back on automatic behaviors for “visiting someone's home” which simply did not apply here.

Her cheeks burning, she balled her hands into fists and shoved them into her coat pockets. She would not be weak. She would not let this creature think of her as some utterly helpless, spoiled town miss. She did not know why, but it was very, very important to Mari that the creature see her as resilient, resourceful.

She bent her head to duck underneath the tangle of branches, following the shifting, leather-clad back of the creature... and gasped. Inside was a cozy sitting room, looking like something straight out of the most affluent cottage in her town. A large fireplace in which one could roast an entire ox, if one had one of those and were so inclined; beautiful old wood floors, clean and polished with care and long use; a large dining table of some solid, light wood with yellow undertones, with simple and beautiful curved, high-backed chairs, braided rugs on the floor in rich jewel tones mixed with earth colors; a lovely, elegant curved-back sofa with a covering of rich, flowered tapestry; a tray on a low table in front of the fireplace, with a beautiful, plain tea set waiting upon it; and, best of all, the rich smell of stew simmering in a large iron pot hung over the fire.

Mari's eyes were round; she did not attempt to disguise her shock.

"What-" she began, and was abruptly and almost violently shushed by the creature, who made fierce, grotesque faces, and flapped its hands in distress. Mari sank into a chair in front of the long, wood table, and watched as the creature shed its coat and ran around the room with intense focus. She- for now that the concealing garment was off, Mari could tell it was a she, and a very gracefully built one at that- went to each corner of the room, traced a symbol in the air, and muttered a few words under her breath. Mari wasn't sure if it was her exhaustion ruling her, but as she watched from under heavy, drooping eyelids, she felt no fear at being in this room

with a possibly mad person from the forest. Once, she ventured to protest, “Please, I have to get back to my quest, just give me back my trumpet.”

The creature rounded on her sharply. Mari flinched, but the woman did not attack, she just spoke, in an intense, low voice. “Get back to your quest? This *is* your quest,” and turned swiftly back to whatever she was doing, going around the perimeter of the room, muttering things, tracing odd symbols in the air.

“There.” the voice that came from the woman standing in front of her had changed utterly. Where in the forest, it had been a tiny, light sound, jumping around the scale like the song of a bird, now it had a weight, a rich depth, an intelligence and strength to it that made Mari snap open her drowsy lids and give all her focus to the girl. “That’s done. We are safe to talk now. I have had the devil of a time finding you! You can’t have known I was looking, but you managed to evade me so many times, you may as well have been on the run, hiding on purpose.”

Mari made no sound, but stared at the girl with her mouth hanging slightly open. Not only was the voice changed, the girl-no, woman, she was too certain, too assertive, to be called “girl”- stood taller, spoke in a refined accent that hinted at education, perhaps even finishing school, which only the very rich were able to attend.

“I suppose I had better change, or you’ll never be able to get over the shock and hold a conversation with me.” the woman put her hand up to her dusty, leaf-strewn, tangled hair, and tugged at her head. The hair came off, and out spilled a mop of glossy, shining clean, brown curls. “Whew. So much better. I’ll be right back.” Leaving Mari still sitting there in shock, the woman left the room. Mari stood, and walked over to the fire. She picked up a much-used, stained, once-lovely quilted potholder from where it hung just beside the fireplace, and wrapped

it around the handle on the lid of the large iron pot that was bubbling over the fire. She lifted the lid - it was surprisingly heavy - and smelled the delicious steam that wafted out. It was some kind of thick stew; Mari could see mushrooms and carrots in the brown gravy, but could not tell if the stew contained meat or not. Mari's mouth watered, and her head throbbed in one large, painful bolt. She was desperate enough that if the woman didn't come back soon, she'd eat right now, right out of the pot, and manners be damned.

"Oh, you must be starving. How thoughtless of me." the woman had made a transformation; she had washed her face, which now appeared still tawny, but a few shades lighter than it had been. Her skin glowed with health and youth. She must be about twenty, Mari guessed. She had dressed in a simple black floor length skirt with a small train, and a loose shirtwaist of light grey. She had tied her curls back at the nape of her neck with a simple black ribbon. She looked like a rich girl dressed to work in a charity ward, Mari thought with amusement, or what they called a "bluestocking," a university girl.

"Explanations can wait. Here, get some of this inside you. " She snatched the lid from Mari's hand, expertly flipped a wooden bowl out of a basket beside the hearth, and began ladling the rich, brown stew into it. Mari had to use all her self control to refrain from snatching the bowl out of the woman's hands; her body hollowed out and shaking with hunger, she sank back down into the chair. "It's hot. take it slow, dip the bread first." The girl set the bowl on the table in front of Mari, flitted into a corner of the room, and came back with a beautiful little roll of bread, studded with nuts and seeds. Mari broke it apart and smelled it; sweet, yeasty, nutty, delicious. She took a bite, then her body took over. She dipped the bread into the stew, no longer even thinking about whether she was eating meat. It was so delicious, and her body

needed it so much, her eyes pricked with tears. Her nose ran. A cloth napkin appeared at her elbow, and Mari snatched it up to wipe her nose, then looked up to meet the eyes of the girl sitting near her, just across the corner of the table. She had been so hungry, she hadn't even noticed the girl sit down. The girl had been eating a small bowl of stew as well. Her eyes still on Mari, she slowly set down her spoon, and wiped her mouth on her own napkin.

“I'm going to get you a large mug of water. It is safe, pure water. Then we are going to talk.” The girl slowly rose from her place, grabbed two large stoneware mugs from a shelf in the corner, and went into another room. She came back with the mugs brimming. Mari had finished her stew now; she wiped the bowl clean with the last of the bread and ate it. She was still hungry, but she felt heavy now, exhausted.

“Here. this is cold water, it will wake you up a little. You will be able to rest here, but we need to talk first.”

Mari lifted the large stoneware mug in both hands and took a long drink, not taking her eyes from the woman. She set the mug down carefully.

“What is your name?” Mari asked. “I am Mari.”

“I know you as Raven.” the woman bared her teeth in a grin. Her teeth had been cleaned; they were no longer stained brown, and were perfectly straight, Mari noted.

“It would probably be faster if I just told you what is going on, then you can ask questions.” She set more bread and a hunk of cheese at Mari's elbow, refilled her glass from a pitcher, and settled in, as though for a long campaign.

“My name is Jac. That's not the name I was born with; it's the name I was given in the wilderness, and I prefer it. Do you know Jackdaws? They are creatures that collect bright

things. I suppose I was called the name in a derogatory way; when I became one of “the Lost,” unlike most of the others, I had no one with me, no family, no friends; no allies. I had to work for my own survival. I collected scraps. I learned to make do. I finally became extremely blessed with a mentor- but more of her later. Jackdaw, they called me, or Jac. I took the name as a symbol of my resilience. There is a deep strength to be found in becoming, and embracing being, the humblest of creatures.

I was one of The Lost, Mari. I am not sure you know yet what that is; how much did I tell you?”

“I was told by one of the Manuscripts, really,” Mari took a small piece of bread and tore off a hunk of cheese, munching slowly, gathering her thoughts. It had seemed so long ago that she began this strange journey. “I was told that it has something to do with travel. That people come to the Archives to get accurate- very accurate- copies of the manuscripts about the place they are going to.”

“Yes, or as a foundation for changes they wish to make. Everyone must consult the Archives, or they risk upsetting the balance of this world. We don’t really know why, but the Manuscripts are the foundation of creation itself. It is a very delicate relationship; when small change happens anywhere, it is reflected in the Manuscript that has to do with the particular place that is the focus. The Manuscripts define our reality. They evolve as we evolve. When they can’t keep up with the changes as we impact the world around us, even in the most minute ways, there is a refraction, of sorts. The Manuscripts no longer reflect or record our lives, they reflect a different reality. and ... I suppose the reality we create is weaker than the reality they express. We slip out of the net of time, and into a between-place. An undefined place: the Lost

Kingdom, or the Time-Between-Times. It can happen in so many ways, as none of us really knows all the facts about it, not even my mentor did, and she-” Jac paused, and swallowed hard, “She...made it her life’s work to study it. If a person delays their journey too long, and the place they are going to changes, they risk slipping between the veils of time and place. They become the Lost. If they attempt to travel by coach or airship without a manuscript at all, they risk joining the Lost.

“That mist, the strange wall of mist in the woods,” Mari sat straighter in her chair, and set her mug down slowly.

“Yes. You were looking at one of the thresholds; those people were a tribe of Lost. The threshold is a doorway to the time between times and spaces, the Lost Kingdom, it is called. You were so close to it, that their song was pulling you in. You would not have broken through the veil, as that was a veil of time and space- but you would have faded out of here and now. You were so drawn into their world, you would have lived a half-existence, your body in one place, and your spirit, heart, mind pulled to another.

“A tree.” Mari whispered, “I felt I was becoming a tree. My roots stretching into the earth, my being reaching toward the heavens. It was pleasant, peaceful.” She shuddered.

Be here now, Mari. Do not forget those three words. Our path ahead is dangerous, and I want you to keep those words in your head. When you feel the pull again, just say them over and over: Be here now. Be in the place you are in, in the body you are in, in the time you are in, the very moment. The only way to counteract that pull is to notice, in minute detail, the world around you in the very moment you are in. The voice of the Maker is everywhere, Mari. To counteract being pulled out of your own life, all you have to do is look for the voice of the

Maker. Look hard, because sometimes even the humblest of creatures,” Jac smiled slyly, “a donkey, a jackdaw,” she gave an ironic little bow, “will carry the voice of the Maker, telling you: Be Here Now. Live the life you have been given.”

“What were they doing- those people, that tribe?” Mari cupped her hands around the solid, stoneware mug, taking comfort from its heavy coolness against her palm. Jac saying the words “Be here now” had a profound effect on her that felt almost like magic. She was aware of the sounds of the forest outside, of the shifting light in this strange, incredibly welcoming haven; she was aware of the smells, of wood and fire and rich, hearty stew; she was aware of the mobile face of the woman in front of her, the light gleaming on her dusky skin, her untamable, exuberant, glossy curls. “First. Before you answer. I am grateful, Jac. I am grateful.” Mari stumbled over the words, could not find a way to express the way her heart had just opened. This woman had taken her in, trusted her, given her food, led her out of a dangerous place. This was a friend. “I am grateful.”

Jac seemed to understand. Holding Mari’s eyes with her own, she nodded her head, slowly and with great dignity. “that, Mari, that is a gift.” she said simply, and her mobile, beautiful, monkey-clever face turned upward in a grin. Her eyes flashed. When Jac smiled, she smiled with her entire being.

“Before we do anything else, I had better teach you to build a shelter. That hole you dug in the bank was alarmingly bad, Mari.” she chuckled. “I didn’t reach you in time- news usually travels faster in the forest,” she frowned, remembering her panic when she heard Mari was here, of all places; “but the news just then was so full of the coming storm, no one thought to mention the entrance of a woman into our domain. By the time I got there, you were gone, but there were

ample signs that you had managed to get out of the Death Trap you devised.” She shook her head. “Never, ever, dig a shelter so close to a body of water. The ground is not stable, and predators will come to the water; all creatures must drink, Mari. Be within traveling distance of water, but not so close. Also, if you can avoid it, it is best not to make camp in a low place- underground, on the ground, down in valleys- just remind yourself now: don’t hide in the low places unless it is absolutely necessary. Seek the heights. Climb a tree, build a stable platform to sleep on. Climb a mountain, find shelter in the rocks. But more of this later: I will teach you.”

“But please - The Lost. What were they doing?”

“They were holding a funeral.”

“Do you know whose funeral it was?”

“It was someone who...it was a martyr of sorts, Mari. Someone who just became a hero.” Jac’s voice grew rough, and she took a sip of water. She seemed about to say more, but clamped her mouth shut and then abruptly changed the subject.

“Ask me something else, Mari. There is so much to tell you, maybe it would be better if you ask me questions. We must take some days to strengthen you and prepare our stores, so we will have time to talk, and I’ll have time to train you in basic survival skills. “

“Stores?”

“I want to gather some food. We will journey together now, Mari, at least for a time. You and I have a great task ahead of us.”

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Rest was not an option. As Jac gathered her tattered leather clothing and her wig, she explained to Mari what they'd be doing over the coming days. Mari would be learning about edible wild plants as they gathered mushrooms, acorns, roots, bark, sap, berries; Mari would be learning how to set a snare, how to carve a fishhook out of bone, and how to fish. Jac had a plot of land a few hours' walk away, on which she cultivated crops, but she thought it unnecessary to introduce Mari to farming. There were, it turned out, farms within a day's walk, where Jac traded items that she made, or berries, or mushrooms for milk and cheese; but survival technique was the focus now, in case they were separated. Jac thought it would make no sense for Mari to try to hide at this point, or adopt a disguise; it was known, surely, that she was with Jac. The only thing they could do was for Jac to keep up her "insane and harmless" act, and for it to appear that their relationship was a simple one of helping each other find food, and that they should keep outdoor communications to a minimum.

Mari would be learning how to make a rudimentary shelter, and how to scout the land beforehand for the marks of predators. She would be learning how to build a proper fire, and how to start it. She would be helping Jac make water containers out of bark, twine, and a mixture of sap and ashes; she would be learning to tie the three basic knots Jac thought indispensable, and she would be making weapons, learning to camouflage and hide, and learning to defend herself.

They would also be gathering the cones from redwoods, as the bark and seeds were needed for Jac to distill tannic acid, which was both a good thing to have in the medical supplies, and was poison - a corrosive and fatal poison- to Manuscripts.

As Jac told Mari about the tannic acid, she was gathering the weapons she had made, and inspecting them for any needed repairs, taking stock to see what they lacked.

“ We’ll each carry a small, sealed bark-pouch of tannic acid at our belts. You can dip an arrow into it, dip your dagger tip in, or a spear; in an emergency, you can even throw the acid...although only do that if you have no other way to use it.”

“Jac. Why are we arming ourselves against the Manuscripts? What is going on, here?”

Jac’s hands stilled in their busy examination of the end of a bone blade that she had wrapped with twine and leather for a better grip. She sat in a crouch on the floor, looking primitive, perfectly comfortable, and somewhat dangerous, ready to spring to action. She rocked back into a seated position, wrapped her arms around her knees, and propped her chin on her arms reflectively. The instant transformation to schoolroom miss from scrappy forest creature nearly made Mari snort audibly. Jac had much up her sleeve.

“Mari. You have not yet asked, but I am sure you wondered why I came to get you, why I was in disguise, and why I didn’t let you speak until I had set the wards that guard this home.”

“Oh...those strange symbols you were tracing in the air. I thought you were a Mad Creature from the Forest,”

Jac shared a grin with Mari, and continued, “Those were wards. My mentor had...magic, of a sort, although we called it Mysticism, not magic. It is a way of reaching beyond what is visible to the naked eye; it is a way of aligning nature, and can usually only be used for healing or protection, not for harm. The wards make it so that we cannot be seen, cannot be heard,

within these walls. Mari... this is going to be hard for you, perhaps...” Jac paused, and in one fluid, supple motion, she unbent her knees and rose to her feet, discarding the weapon on the floor with the others. She crossed to where Mari sat at the table, and sat down, taking Mari’s hand.

The intimate gesture did not feel odd, after what they had both been through. Mari sensed a kinship with this woman, and was surprised at how much she trusted her.

“The Manuscripts are not safe anymore, Mari. I am being watched. You are being watched, as well. It’s why I had to find you as quickly as possible. There is something deeply wrong happening, and some of the Manuscripts have gone...unstable. Not to be trusted...corrupt. They have begun to venture out of their usual places in the Archives. Manuscripts are bound by certain conventions, and one of those is the understanding that they will stay within certain confines, except for the one time a year that you set them Free.”

“The Sabbath! Is talked to me a bit about that when we first met.” How long ago it seemed, when Is had taken her into that odd little shop, given her those intricately painted little cookies and hot chocolate, and had talked to her about the Sabbath. She had barely understood what he was saying at the time.

“Yes, it happens once a year. You basically release them all and batten down the hatches, staying safe in a protected room, not opening the door or window for anything- no matter what you might hear. It is a dangerous time for you, as some of the Manuscripts are very wild, and possess enormous power. But it is a time you will learn about, if we ever get back to the regular order of things. That particular Sabbath- that one Sabbath a year with no boundaries- is sacred; it

is something that falls within the natural order. That time of release strengthens both us and the Manuscripts with a bond of mutual freedom and trust. This is different. Some of the Manuscripts have slipped their bonds and are venturing into other parts of the Archives, tainting all they come in contact with. Manuscripts are fighting Manuscripts; some of the Manuscripts, of which I believe you met a few - they appeared to be women at that Academy of yours?- some of them have put up a resistance and are fighting back. But they can't last forever; eventually the darkness will win, unless we do something.

There was something that sounded wrong to Mari, dissonant, something out of place, something she needed to remember. She explored the warning feeling, but could not pinpoint what it was trying to tell her. She shrugged, and focused on the work before her, the simple manual task of grinding acorns with mortar and pestle. It would come to her eventually what was out of place, here. Until then, she would listen carefully to the world around her for a message. She would try to hear the voice of the Maker telling her which way to go; even in the smallest, most everyday things, she would look for the Maker's guidance; she was certain that somehow she would discover why she was here.