

By Raven ©2011 All Rights Reserved

*He felt now that he was not simply close to her, but that he did not know where he ended and she began. ~Leo Tolstoy*

*It is not light that we need, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. ~Frederick Douglass*

## **The Zealot**

As the days passed, Mari became increasingly aware that there were gaps in Jac's story. Enormous gaps. Mari soon began mapping out, in her mind, the places in conversation when Jac would shift the subject or look uncomfortable and use misleading language to avoid answering Mari's questions.

At night, in the room that they shared, bedded down on simple mattresses stuffed with feathers, snug under exquisite old handmade quilts, Mari would awaken again and again to Jac's thrashing, screaming, and sometimes crying. Mari never asked. And Jac never told.

Finally, one day, after about four days of respecting Jac's privacy, of not pursuing the subject when Jac threw in red herrings and very obvious bluffs to turn the conversation, Mari lost it completely. She blamed it all on the rabbit.

"You are going to have to learn to kill, Mari," Jac's voice was rough and ruthless. She was speaking in a hoarse whisper, as they tended to do outside, especially Jac, if what she

wanted to say sounded a bit too intelligent for her “insane forest girl” disguise. “If you do not get used to taking life, one day you might hesitate for an instant when more is at stake. A single moment’s hesitation could mean your death.”

And so she made Mari set the snare; she made Mari loosen it and pick up the corpse of the fat hare they found dead the next morning. Mari took the cold, limp body. If there was rigor mortis, as Mari had heard about, it had come, and passed off again. The pathetic little corpse that dangled from her hands was heavy and cold, its fur damp from the foggy morning. Mari’s hands shook, and she felt her stomach churn. Jac’s voice felt like a relentless pressure hammering away at her ears, instructing her how to clean the animal, to preserve the fur, meat and bones. Mari’s fingers were numb with cold, and Jac’s breath came in little silver puffs as she urged Mari on. Mari stopped hearing the individual words as anything but sound she had to endure. Her knife, clumsy in her hand, pressed against the soft flesh. She did not press hard enough and it did not pierce through; she saw the puffs of air, rather than heard Jac laughing at her, and tears pricked her eyes. She wasn’t a wimp, a voice insisted in her head. She was very strong. She had cleansed and prepared the bodies of the dead in purifying rituals for many years; the highest mitzvah one could perform, as there was no one to give thanks for doing such a service. It was, in a sense, anonymous. Not easy work, to be alone with the dead. But this was a life she had stolen. She did not eat meat. Jac had cut her rations back for days now; Mari thought it was because they were saving their food, but now she saw that it was done in order to lead up to this moment, to make Mari hungry enough to cut a body with her knife, hungry enough that her treacherous mouth watered at the thought of meat, even as her mind sickened at the thought.

She let her mind slip away, and stabbed with the knife. Pierced the fur, and cut. Fumbled with the slippery, cold mess, and cut again. Dismembered. Tore. Destroyed. Heard and felt the crunching of the bones, the tearing of sinew. The body flopped pathetically. She didn't feel the tears running down her face; she didn't know that she was breathing quickly and shallowly until she felt Jac shake her.

“Enough, Mari! Enough. It is done. It will never be so hard again.” Jac picked up Mari's blood-covered hand in her own, and guided the fingers toward Mari's face. Mari's eyes stared straight into the cold, green world in Jac's eyes as she felt the hot, dry little hand hand guide her own hand, shaking, clammy, sticky with blood, to trace a mark down her cheek. Blood on her face. Her nostrils flared when the sharp, metal-sweet smell reached them. Her mouth watered.

“There. You are blooded. It's just a rabbit; but for you,” Jac chuckled, “It is a big start.”

That is when something inside Mari snapped. A life is a life. She looked down at the little body that was in pieces all over the ground, and her voice came out like bullets, fast and hard and sharp, never rising above a shaking, rage-filled murmur.

“If you do not tell me what you are holding back, Jac, I am going to walk away. Tell me who you are. Tell me what you are really doing, hiding out here, sneaking around, preparing as though for a campaign. Are you keeping me from my quest? How do I know you are telling the truth?” On and on the questions rattled out of her, as her bloody hands shook, and she sat there on her knees in the pose she often took for meditation. The position of her body was doing nothing to calm and center her now. Her heart hammered against her ribs, and she clasped her

slimy, sticky hands together, so that she would not strike the pert brown face in front of her, or wrap her hands around Jac's skinny neck. She saw a pulse beating there, and knew how easy it would be to make that pulse, that heart, stop. She could not stem the tide of words; all the frustration of the past few days, compounded with her hunger and her disgust at herself for wanting to eat this little creature's flesh, shot out of her mouth. "All you give me are hints, veiled warnings, and you turn the conversation every time we skirt close to something that makes you uncomfortable. Do you think I don't notice? Do you think I slept through your screams at night, the sobbing, the crying in your sleep? You have been play acting in the forest, pretending to be mad; how do I know you're not just a paranoid, damaged woman, making up stories in your head? You give me the whole story now, right now, the truth, or I will leave you this." She picked up the pathetic mess of a corpse that used to be a beautiful, running, breathing creature, and flung it at Jac. It hit Jac in the chest, leaving fur and blood sticking to her, and fell to her lap. Jac did not flinch, but held Mari's eyes with her diamond-hard green gaze. Mari's eyes dropped from that gaze, and her voice lowered still further. "I will leave you to your killing, and I will walk away."

Jac silently picked up the pieces of rabbit, folding every single bit of the corpse into a game bag she had slung on her shoulder. She would use every piece of the rabbit; the small parts she could not use would be made into bait, or used as fertilizer. She took Mari's hand, led her to a nearby creek, and pulled her down to a crouching position. She pushed Mari's hands into the sand, under the freezing water, and scrubbed her palms and under her nails with the rough, pebbly sand until Mari's hands stung. Mari watched her silently the whole time, her eyes locked on Jac's still, shuttered face. She examined Jac closely, as though the movement of the tiny

muscles under the skin of Jac's face would give her an answer. Is she honest? Is she lying? Mari followed Jac's lead obediently, her mind and body exhausted after her outburst. Jac dried Mari's hands off on her skirt, said "Another hare and we will be able to line some fingerless gloves for you. It is going to be cold soon," and set off toward their dwelling. Mari stumbled along behind, her head buzzing with questions and images of blood, bone, entrails, and staring, frozen, filmed-over rabbit's eyes.

Jac pushed Mari into a chair, built up the fire, set the game bag down and sat cross legged on the hearth, her body moving slowly, painfully, as though she had suddenly aged forty years. She stared into the fire, and Mari watched her profile. The firelight gave Jac's skin a rosy warmth, but her face was putty-grey in tone. Mari was all of sudden not sure she wanted to hear the truth.

"It was my mentor. Her name was Cora. She had...she had a deep wound in her spirit, it made her...absent, in pain, hungry. The love of her life had died; she never told me how. She was an Apprentice; he died before she had her trial. So she came into the Archives to try to...disappear. She was here, in the liminal space, on the edge of the Lost Kingdom, for many, many years. She created this home. She had one purpose: she wanted to join the Lost. She wanted to dissolve, to lose herself, to be swallowed up. She could not live with the searing grief. She said it was like having burned lungs, and every breath she took burned her; her heart burned, and the pain was unbearable. Every day, sometimes several times a day, she would journey to the border - the mist - where I found you that day." Jac's eyes flashed once, briefly, in Mari's direction, then settled back on the flames, as though the telling was easier if she could pretend

she was talking to herself, or to the fire. “She would stand there, hoping to be drawn in, hoping to be pulled by the song and lure of the Lost into that half-life that you almost entered, that peaceful existence where your soul is pulled to the Lost Kingdom, but your body remains in the forest. She tried for years, but never had the slightest glimmer of being pulled in. She would stand there until the dew turned clammy on her body. I found her there a few times, standing in intense concentration, her limbs frozen, or on her knees, clawing the earth as close as she could reach to the mist, sobbing and begging. She would say over and over that she wanted a different reality, she wanted a different answer.” Jac drew a ragged breath, and let it out slowly.

Mari shuddered, watching the firelight play over Jac’s young face. Her voice and face were strangely expressionless, as though she had removed herself, somehow. Her hands folded neatly in her lap, Jac resembled an untouched schoolgirl, but Mari sensed now that Jac had seen more horror than many ever saw in their lifetimes. Mari tried to breathe quietly; when she needed to shift position in her chair she did so carefully and silently, so as not to break Jac’s concentration or remind her that there was another person in the room, listening.

“When I got lost in my Apprentice trial, I wandered into this forest. Like you, I wound up at the wall of mist, the border to the Lost Kingdom,” Jac glanced quickly at Mari then, and Mari thought she might have caught a small smile, or was it a shadow from the dancing fire? “But unlike you, something...happened to me. I nearly died, I think. I don’t know how long I was in the forest; I don’t know anything that happened after I met that wall of mist. I came to myself in a bed, being cared for by a tribe of the Lost. There is a reason that they try to pull people in...but I will explain that later. They nursed me back to health, and were kind to me. It

took a long time for them to realize that I didn't want to join them. I went to that wall every day, trying to break through, trying to return to the world where time moves forward- or at least, seems to." Jac huffed a breath that may have been a laugh, and rubbed her arms; her hands were trembling. "Time doesn't move in the Lost Kingdom, Mari. I learned this, and other things about their world while I was there...but mostly, I focused on the borders of the Kingdom. I thought I could gather information and eventually something would lead me to a way out. But soon, they turned their backs on me; I became a scavenger. I stayed near their camps for safety, and I became a thief. They named me 'Jackdaw', and they tolerated me, I think, but they hated what I stood for: I was not going to let the world, my world, go...I was not going to accept this new place, and just forget the life I had before. Forgetting is the first, and most important rule in that society.

Every day, I went to the wall and sat. I thought if I meditated, or was able to get to that near-death state again, somehow I could break through. I don't know how it is that some are able to slip between the boundaries of time and space, and some never do, maybe even cannot. I only know that the Manuscripts are a safeguard against it, as they define the reality of the world we are in." Jac shifted, and sighed deeply.

"We don't really have time for me to explain all of that, or to tell you about the Lost Kingdom. What happened eventually was: I stopped eating, and sat there by the mist border. Cora must have been doing the same, because somehow, she pulled me back through. Cora was my doorway. Cora brought me back to life. I don't know how she did it. I don't know if one's

desire has to be strong enough, or if one simply has to lose one's grasp on life, on the will to live."

"Cora brought me back here, opened her home to me, and taught me everything she knew. She cared for me for years. I think teaching me how to survive gave her a new reason to live, or at least it kept her mind occupied. Caring for me became her primary focus. Eventually, she stopped going to the wall of mist so often. Maybe once, twice a month, I would wake to find her gone, and know she had ventured there again. I was careful; I didn't follow her right away. I would only go to bring her back if she was away for a full day, or more. I was more in danger than she ever was, you see." Jac's eyes found Mari's again, briefly, "Once you hear the song, the call of the Lost, you are susceptible to it. You will always have a small yearning to hear it again, and you will be pulled in very easily. I existed there, for - I don't know how long. It may have been decades. People don't age there. It is a grey, featureless world. Nothing changes there, and yet," Jac shuddered, "nothing is secure or solid. There is nothing to hold onto in that place." Jac's eyes took on a blank look, as though she were seeing something far removed from the firelit room in which they sat. "I could be pulled back in an instant. And so, I was very careful to stay away."

Mari nodded slowly. She had only heard the call of the Lost briefly, and she still startled awake sometimes at night with the haunting drumming in her ears, fading away on the still air as she awoke more fully. Her heart gave a small tug. She would love to hear it again, even though she knew it meant she could lose herself.

“In those days, I was the one who heard sobs in the night. Cora had nightmares, and often didn’t sleep. In a way, it has come full circle: you have taken my place, and I have taken hers. I suppose it is some kind of message to me. I don’t know what it could mean; I don’t have the energy to puzzle it out.” Jac sighed, and rubbed her grey, exhausted face with her hands. “I killed her, Mari. I killed Cora with my own hands.”

Mari did not flinch, did not move, did not even breathe.

Jac continued, in the same dull, emotionless tone, “Cora couldn’t hear the drums, or the songs of the Lost, no matter how she tried or how long she waited. Her heart and soul were already pulled, you see- she was half outside herself, yearning for her lost love. Her ears always straining for his voice, his footsteps, her fingers remembering the feel of his hands, her heart beating in a lopsided rhythm, always waiting to feel his heartbeat join hers. She told me this, over many months, years- she told me often. I think it was her only solace, to finally have someone to tell. But she never told me how he died...maybe she didn’t know.

And so we went on, until the year came - this year, in fact - when the Shadow began to creep into the Archives. Even here, behind the door to the future, we felt the shock waves right away. We felt a deep shift. Maybe we felt it especially here, as this is the future. I am not sure how time works here, but I know that I got here through that clockwork door.”

“Yes.” Mari’s voice was rusty, hoarse.

“It all changed, then. The darkness crept deeper and deeper into the heart of the Manuscripts, and some of them began to go wild, break loose. One day, Cora swore she felt her

love nearby. She got up, with more energy than I have ever seen in her, and left the house, her eyes shining, to walk to the mist barrier again. I only saw her once more, and that was when I caused the light in her eyes to go dark.”

\* \* \*

Cora ran. The way to the wall of mist had never seemed so long before. But she had awakened that morning with her heart pounding in her throat, and a feeling of excitement racing just under her skin like electricity. She had paced the house restlessly, catching herself now and then talking aloud in her excitement. He was here; he was somewhere near. “He can’t be here, he is dead.” But still, her heart clamored on, and she could not settle to any of her morning tasks. Aware of the little girl (as she thought of her,) Jac’s eyes following her every movement, she tried to go about her usual routine, hiding her excitement, until it neared midmorning. She began to set out the tea things, but her body had grown so restless by then that she spilled the tea leaves everywhere.

“Jac. I have to go. To the mist,” she said, and snatched her shawl up from the row of hooks by the door, “I don’t know how long I will be. Don’t worry.” She wrapped the shawl around her head and shoulders to ward off the chill of the damp morning, and she was out the door.

Her feet could not move fast enough. The more she walked, the more the urgency grew in her, until she was flying over the ground, tugging her skirt and shawl impatiently as they caught on trees and undergrowth. Her breath came fast, her cheeks stung and tingled. She had never felt so alive.

There was the wall of mist in front of her and there, yes, there he was. Just standing, as though he'd been waiting for her all morning. Everything in her leaped toward him. She was only arms, heart, soul; those things drove her small body to cleave to him, blowing through the space between them as though her body were straining to reclaim its blood, its beating heart. She dissolved in him in an eternal moment of complete peace, complete perfection. It was only a little while later- or was it hours? - "But he is dead. How can this be? Why - how - was he here?" Her thoughts began to chatter. She looked into his eyes, and the truth started to seep into her awareness. She pushed it away for a time and clung to him, the feeling of his warm, solid body filling and healing a deep starvation in her being.

She didn't know when the arms she wrapped around him switched from love to a kind of restraint. She didn't know when she became aware that he was holding open the wall of mist, creating a doorway with their combined energy. She felt her life force being drained as he held open the door to the Lost Kingdom, the Time-Between-Times. She could not remove herself from his arms now; she could not let go of him, or he would get through the doorway, somehow cause more harm. Her heart still clung to him in love, her arms straining in a near-struggle to pull him away from the mist. And so it was that Jac came upon them; Cora clinging to him with all her being, her heart still straining to be as close to his as possible, her arms, her mind, aware that she was both fueling an evil act with her energy, and preventing a worse evil by not allowing him through the door.

She looked at Jac, standing there looking like a little girl, so lost and small; Cora's cheek was pressed to her love's shoulder, her eyes were just able to look beyond his arm. He was

facing the wall of mist now; all of his being was focused on keeping the door open, and trying to push through. She thought she could feel in him somewhere, in this Manuscript version of her love, an answering echo of yearning toward her heart. Was his spirit somehow helping her, she wondered? How much control did a soul have over the manuscript echo of themselves? She looked into Jac's puzzled green eyes, and she knew then what the only solution could be. She also knew Jac would comply, as she had trained Jac well.

“Pick up my spear,” she gasped, jerking her head toward where her spear lay on the ground. Jac, frowning, picked it up, immediately and without thought switching her stance and grip to hold the weapon properly, at the ready. Yes, Cora thought, she had taught Jac well.

Cora clamped her eyes shut. Her words came out in short gasps, as her arms sought to hold him even closer. She thought she felt him straining toward her now, holding her tight as well, as though he knew and accepted how their story must end. “End it, Jac. This is not my Zimri. This is not my love. There is great harm here. End this. Unite my love and I forever. Strike now. Do it!” Her voice rose in a shriek, and Jac's arms jerked, her knees bent to move, almost without thought. Her knuckles white, hands holding the spear, Jac felt the impact shock through her arms as Cora lunged forward, pushing Zimri with her body weight, hands reaching out at the last moment to grasp the spear, guiding it, helping it, through his back and into her own breast.

Jac, pressed sickeningly close to his back, looking straight into the dimming blue eyes of her mentor and friend, was shocked to see a beautiful smile dawn on Cora's face, as though a beam of sunlight had come out to illumine her. “Never again separate,” she whispered, and then,

so quiet it was like a rustle of wind in the leaves, Jac felt the final, soft breath of her friend on her cheek, as Cora's soul departed with the word, "free." Jac felt the wetness as their mingled blood drenched the front of her dress.

The door in the mist closed...

\* \* \*

"...but it may have been too late," Jac's voice was hoarse now, tears drying on her cheeks. She seemed at peace, as though the telling had drained her of poison. "I don't know how long the door was open. He was a Manuscript, you see. Against the laws of this place, against the laws of all life, he had left his appointed place, and journeyed to this place to open the gateway Between-Times. He must have been taken over by the Shadow. If the door was open long enough, some of the Manuscripts, or the Shadow itself, may have gotten through to the Lost Kingdom. We will have chaos on our hands, Mari." Jac's eyes found Mari's again, and they were no longer diamond-hard green chips. They were vulnerable, scared, child's eyes. Mari wondered exactly how young Jac was.

"I had to do it, Mari, I had to take a decisive action. Since that morning, I have wondered if I am crazy, if I am deluding myself or justifying the harm I did. I took the life of someone I loved very much... but she wanted to be united with her love, she wanted to be set free."

Something broke in Jac then, and her little body was racked by a storm of sobbing. This, at last, was something Mari understood. She gathered the tiny, birdlike body of her friend into her arms, and carried her into the sleeping room. She pulled back the quilt with one arm as Jac

clung to her neck, then slipped her into bed, shoes and all. She covered her again, and held Jac in her arms, rocking her until the sobs turned into gasps for breath, then a few sounds almost like hiccups, and finally, young Jac who was trying to be a fortress, trying to hold herself up under the strain of uncertainty, Jac, who had done the hardest thing of all, made a decision in a split second and acted on it with power; Jac, who finally let her walls crumble and took the first steps into the true strength which is that of vulnerability, Jac the child and Jac the warrior, slept.