

by Raven

When Mari met the Great Archivist for the first time, she was simply trying to preserve her life. Her entire being had condensed down to a simple animal awareness. She was sensation only. She could hear her breath rushing in her ears, and her heart pounding; she was aware only of trying to be as small as possible, protect herself as best she could with her arms, and draw another breath...and another. Each breath she took in made her aware of the precious gift that is the ability to breathe the sweet air, the knowledge that right now she was alive. The certainty that she might die in the next few moments ran through her body in an almost audible shock: a thrum of awareness that took away her usual quick-thinking and quick-acting presence, and made her into a small animal, just trying to hold off the attack.

The certainty that she had, in a sense, provoked this attack did not make it any the less shocking to her. She should have seen it coming; the tension had been building for weeks. The taunts, the small acts of aggression- tripping her in the hallways, hiding her books before the first exam, stepping on the train of her skirt so that she was pulled up short and her waistband ripped- all of this had gotten progressively worse. Their cruelty started out with mocking glances and the nickname "Raven" that they had given her- she didn't remember who started that one- and when she did not stop wearing her

kippah or donning the tallit for davening, the taunting had escalated into, finally, violence.

She stood in the courtyard of the old Academy building, where she had thought to escape for a brief respite between classes. She had given the coffee vendor a coin and he had filled her tin cup with the syrupy brew; fried in a great pan with spices and honey, coffee was her one luxury- coffee, and books, of course. The coffee was thick and syrupy. She crouched on her heels in the courtyard to drink it, straining the grounds through her teeth and savoring the strong bitter sweetness of it, when they began to surround her.

At first, she didn't notice as more and more people wandered into the courtyard. She had instinctively looked down at her book as she always did; sometimes if she didn't make eye contact, they did not focus on her.

Her skin prickled along her arms, and she looked up to find that they had completely surrounded her. They were silent. She slowly set her coffee mug on the ground and rose to her feet, picking her trailing skirt up as she went, clipping it quickly into the belt at her waist, in case she had to run. This action exposed her scuffed leather knee-high boots up to mid-calf, but she was still "decent" in the eyes of fashionable society. That was not the problem. The problem was her kippah, and that she was indefinably...different.

One of them - Kalen, it was, a small, proud, dark haired girl who had been the ringleader against Mari from the start- picked up a stone from the rough weed and rock strewn ground of the courtyard, and threw it, aiming at Mari's kippah. Mari placed a protective hand over the worn, embroidered silk. She felt she should have known it

would come to this, but she could not have avoided it. Mari was not equipped to buckle under and accede to others' demands. Looking back now, she knew she could still have made no other choice than to wear her grandfather's kippah as he had requested. It was all she had, and it was a reminder she needed.

"Raven," said Kalen in a sneering voice, "blasphemer."

"In what way am I blaspheming, Kalen?" Mari tried to keep her voice steady. She took deep breaths in an attempt to dislodge her heart from her throat, and reach the still, calm pool of her center.

"You are an abomination," Mari heard another voice, and whirled to face the speaker. It was Violet, a quiet, blonde woman who had never spoken to Mari before.

There were men surrounding her too, but the ones who began, one by one, pelting her with rocks were the women in the group. "Women don't wear mens' clothing, Raven."

"I am not a Raven. My name is Mari. I am not harming you."

"Raven. Outcast. Blasphemer."

And so it grew slowly, the words almost becoming a chant; she saw their cheeks growing flushed, saw them draw in closer around her until they were crowding against each other, and saw, too, that her life might end this very day.

As if to punctuate her thought, a raven flew overhead, making its raucous remarks heard, settling on the roof to watch. She wondered if a flock of them would come and pick her body for sustenance after her death. Ravens lived in profusion on the mountain; no one knew why. They each seemed to keep alone, and yet there were so many that they could not be seen as anything but a tribe. The ravens were feared, as

they lived off the bodies of dead things. They were outcast, though respected simply because they seemed to possess some arcane knowledge in their dignity of bearing and their watchful gazes.

Mari crouched down lower, shielding her face with her elbows, and holding the precious, worn kippah tighter to her head with her hands. If she was going to die, at least she had kept her promise.

“What is this?” His voice was soft; It sounded husky as though he didn’t use it very often, but it held a stern, deep note of authority that stilled the raised hands, and made some drop their stones back to the ground. “It appears as though- please, someone correct me if I am wrong- you have all come to a consensus, and speedily passed judgment on this young woman’s crime, and have gone straight to the execution.”

Mari straightened slowly, and turned to where the crowd had parted to reveal a man about three inches taller than herself, maybe six feet, of average build. There was a space around him, as though no one dared to make accidental contact with him in his present mood. She had never seen him, but she knew who it must be. Ismael: the Great Archivist. She flushed, lowered her eyes, placed a hand over the soft material of her bukharian kippah, settling it more firmly on her head. She slowly looked up again to find his eyes on hers, and then she understood his power. It was not in his build or physical bearing- it was in his spirit. His eyes were intense; they were dark blue, and seemed to shift color as his thoughts shifted- clouds of dark grey passed through them as she watched. His brows were wild and tangled, slightly overhanging his eyes; with the curls of his dark hair sticking out from under his kippah, and his dusky face glowing with authority, he had the look of an angry Jewish Thor, ready to hurl a thunderbolt.

She felt an unexpected urge to giggle building up in her stomach, and raised her hand to hide her twitching mouth.

His eyes sparkled then, and she could have sworn he caught her thought.

“Well?” his voice did not thunder- it was quiet and civil, but the crowd shrank into themselves a bit in fear. “Will someone please tell me what is going on here? You.” he pointed to Kalen, who was very obviously one of the group’s leaders in the way she stood, taking up as much space as she could, with the proud tilt of her chin, and in the sumptuous, rich wine-colored fabric of her skirt and matching coat.

Kalen dropped the rock she had been gripping in her gloved hand, dusted her glove off on the skirt of her paletot, and squared her shoulders.

“Raven- Mari, I mean- is a blasphemer. She wears mens’ clothing to daven in and therefore blasphemes in the sight of the Maker.”

“hm, I see,” the Archivist folded his arms and regarded Mari. “Mari...or is it Raven?”

“Mari.” she had to clear her throat a few times to get her name out, but she stood proudly and looked him in the eye.

“Mari.” he paused a moment, and his eyes twinkled at her. “You will find, with study, that Raven is a name that can be worn proudly.” She tilted her head, curious as to why he should say that, but before she could ask, he went on, “Tell me, Mari, why do you wear the kippah?”

Mari blinked. No one had ever asked her before. “It is a reminder,” she began, and was mortified to feel tears starting into her eyes. She took a deep breath to will them away, and went on, “it is a reminder to live a holy life; all day I feel as though the warm hand of the Maker is on my head, and so I am reminded that my actions should come

from a place of loving kindness, so that with my life I may be a reflection of the one who gave me life.”

The Archivist gave a slight nod, and squared himself to face the crowd. “would you call this blasphemy?” he asked quietly. Then, as his question was met with silence other than the sound of their feet shuffling on the rocky ground, he went on : “Mari, I would like you to kneel here, please,” he indicated a spot of ground near where she had set her coffee cup; covered with wiry tufts of dried grass, it was relatively free of stones. She looked at him, her heart beginning to pound. “Trust me,” he whispered, and gestured again.

Mari crossed to the patch of ground, and knelt.

“Now. I would like everyone who threw stones at this woman, to come and stand around her, and place their hands on her kippah.”

Mari recoiled, not wanting their hands on her head, let alone touching her most precious possession, but he came and stood behind her briefly, putting his hand on her back, stilling her movement.

She closed her eyes, and heard the rocks shift under their feet, felt the closeness of their skirts around her, and then she felt the pressure of a hand on her head. Then, softly, hesitantly, another. Then more- they settled on her head like a flock of birds, those hands that had thrown stones at her in hatred and murderous judgment. The hands felt warm and solid; unaccountably, tears started into her eyes. She did not check them this time: the hot tears dropped out from under her closed lids and slipped down her cheeks. She tasted them, as they slid between her trembling lips- bitter, salty, sweet. She was named for this: Maror, the bitter herb, - because the greatest beauty in

life and the greatest growth comes with the bitter taste of tears, her mother had explained, long ago.

“Now,” the Archivist had raised his voice. “Those of you who stood here but did not throw stones, I want you to pick up a few stones.” Mari’s heart thumped painfully as she heard the scrabbling of their hands in the dirt. She felt a sudden pressure from her bladder, and wondered if the need to find a bathroom would be her last thought. She stifled another rippling desire to giggle, and opened her eyes.

Ismael, The Archivist, stood before her. The women with their hands on her head had surrounded her in a semicircle; there were only about seven of them, to her surprise. Ismael stood there looking at her with such love, she felt her fear melt away. She trusted him. She did not know him, and yet in a way, she did; in a way, she felt she knew this man as well as she knew herself.

“Everyone who has stones in their hand, throw them now. I want you to throw the stones at this woman you call the Raven.”

“No,” he said, as Mari felt the pressure of the hands on her head disappear so fast she swayed there on her knees, almost falling, “you who stand there with her, do not remove your hands. You are to stay there with her, all who acted as judge and executioner.” He paused, while the hands came, trembling now, back onto her head. “Throw the rocks, and enact your justice,” he repeated, “but,” he said, raising his voice to be heard over a few questioning voices from the crowd, “but anyone who kills another person will kneel here in her place, and in turn, will be put to death.”

There was a pause as the knowledge of what he was saying filtered in. Then, Mari heard the thud of a few stones dropped, followed by a louder clatter like rain on baked earth, as all the stones were thrown back to the ground.

“Yes.” It seemed, then, like the sun came out, as the Great Archivist smiled around at them all. “You may remove your hands from her head, now.” Mari was ready for the pulling away of the support this time, and so she did not wobble on her knees as the hands left her head. She stood slowly, rubbing her knees through the fabric of her skirt, stamping her feet slightly to get rid of the prickly feeling as her circulation came back.

“This woman that you have chosen to make outcast, is representative of something that resides in each of you. You feared her, because you knew you also had the capability of being different, of being misunderstood, and of ‘blaspheming’, as you put it. Judgment is a spear with fire on both ends. Remember this day, and be wary when you pick up that spear to wield it against another- be aware that you will pay a price, that judgment will always burn the wielder, too.”

Mari soaked in his words, and felt that flash of kinship again. She understood now why the Great Archivist was the unofficial ruler of this mountain society called Ardenna. Since she had come here, she had felt very much outside, not understanding how things worked or why people never left the mountain boundaries, or why the view beyond the mountain would change daily, or how it was that the living rock moved; she did not understand the unspoken rules, or why people like her were considered the serving class and must be put into the Academy until they were fit for service, or why the ruling class stayed in their manors built into the side of the mountain and were

seldom seen; she did not understand any of it. But now, she understood at last why the Great Archivist was spoken of with hushed awe, and was never questioned.

“Young lady,” he turned to her, and at once his bearing was lighter, more playful, “how old are you?”

“I am thirty years of age,” she was surprised at how firm her voice sounded, and how steady her heart beat. Standing near him was like leaning against an oak tree; she was washed with serenity and the sense that everything was as it should be.

“Hmm. I think you must be brought outside the Academy. That will be your punishment,” he paused, and smiled at her, “and also, a reward, for your boldness of heart. Usually apprentices start at age thirteen,” he muttered, pushing his kippah back and rubbing his forehead with his fingers, “but I believe the time has come to break from tradition. I would like you to come with me to the Archives, and become my apprentice. It will- “ he held up a cautionary hand as gasps and murmurs rippled through the crowd, “It will be very, very hard work, and I must tell you that it is also highly dangerous. The usual tradition is that I take on about five or so apprentices, because when the time of the Testing comes, usually only one apprentice is left. However, the Maker has given me only you, so if you are willing, we will break from tradition together and begin study.”

Mari looked around at the crowd of astonished, white faces, then turned and stooped down to pick up her tin coffee cup. The coffee had been spilled when the mob closed in on her, but there were still some dregs left in the bottom, which she knocked out on the stones. Straightening, she tied the cup to the belt at her waist, which was a useful belt of her own devising, that held leather straps at regular intervals to which she attached the tools and things like coffee cups, that any sensible woman should carry about with

her. She settled her kippah more firmly on her head, and looked into the Archivist's eyes. "I am ready," she grinned, and followed him without looking back, as he walked out of the Academy grounds.