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“Sarah’s Life”

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.
-Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

Varya Leangrin did not do her own carrying. She had others do the work: Jac and Mari were bundled with sheets over their heads, tied very thoroughly with silk cords binding their arms to their sides, and made to walk; Varya had pressed some of the citizens of the Lost Kingdom into her service by assuring them that they were doing a good deed, that this was for the women’s own health. Jac did not walk silently; she lectured Varya, scolded her, harangued her, her language growing increasingly “purple” as they moved toward the professor’s workshop tower.

“...An’ what you mean, you overstuffed bolster, bursting into ladies’ private rooms and dragging them away from their breakfast without so much as a word of explanation, I’d like to know. You red-faced, india-rubber ball of a woman! You...you toad dressed up in a bonnet an’ ribbons! Your waste-colored soul is leaking out all over, I saw it right away, those nasty, beady muddy eyes and pile-o-waste-hair!” (Jac did not actually say “waste.” she used a much more unladylike word.)

Jac continued on in this vein and showed no signs of stopping. Oddly, it lifted Mari’s spirits to hear her; the sheet covering her face puffed out a few times as they were led gently along, and her shoulders shook. Noises not completely unlike snorts came from under Mari’s

sheet covering; Varya may have thought Mari was weeping, but she would have been entirely wrong.

They were led up endless winding stairs, Jac chattering the entire way, Mari snuffling, and Varya saying not a word or making any other sign that she heard Jac, which had the effect of making Jac angrier. By the time they reached the top, Jac was out of breath. As soon as they were untied and the sheets were removed, Jac emerged, red-cheeked, curls standing out from her head in a wild bush, her eyes bright and shining, angrier than Mari had ever seen her, full of so many sassy things she wanted to say all at once, she was practically choking on them. Really, Mari thought, she looks exactly like an affronted baby bird.

Jac took a deep breath to begin again, and Varya stopped her, raising one of her little gloved hands in the air imperiously. For such a large woman, she had the tiniest hands Mari had ever seen; the sight of those small fingers tapering nearly to points sent a repelled shiver down Mari's spine.

"I have heard enough from you, young lady. Really!" Her round little brown eyes darted sidelong to the citizens who had helped her; they had folded the sheets and moved to stand quietly near the door. "Please take those sheets to the wash house; I will not be needing them any longer. I thank you both for your help- you have done good work this day. The Church of the All-Seeing will reward your good work, if you continue as you have begun." A thin smile spread across her face, her round, rosy cheeks bunching up under her small brown eyes as she watched them leave. She turned to Jac and Mari, the smile not fading, but growing hard as they watched; it was like watching ice form on a pool of water.

"Ch-church of the All-Seeing?" Jac spluttered.

“I have come here to the Lost Kingdom in order to gather souls and save them. You will join in this work; you will be honored to help in this great enterprise.” She patted her hair, her lips parting to show gleaming white teeth. “I,” (as before, her quirks of speech set Mari’s teeth on edge. She drew the word out, thus: Aaaayyee,) “have a calling, to bring light, LIGHT, to the poor souls in the dark places!” She drew in a deep breath and tried to stand taller; being corseted within an inch of her life, the resulting movement was more along the lines of her shelf-like bosom thrusting forward, her chin tucking in (creating, suddenly, an abundance of chins) and her rear thrusting backward- which only made her look even more like a hot air balloon with a string tied around its middle.

Mari took advantage of the fact that Jac was distracting Varya (questioning her on the theology of the “all-seeing” church, and scoffing in admirably creative terms) and moved slowly around the room. She rubbed her arms to alleviate the tingling pain of feeling coming back- they had been tied rather too enthusiastically- and tried to force her stumbling brain into sharpness. She needed to think fast; this strange, circular room was lined with worktables and benches that groaned under a mind boggling array of bright copper and bronze tubes, cogs, gears; there were tools everywhere- surely she could find something to help them now? She moved very slowly, so as not to draw Varya’s attention away from Jac- a flash of Jac’s bright eyes in her direction, then a doubling of volume in her haranguing (Mari caught the words, “charlatan, fortune-telling tent,” from Jac, and “spirit healer,” from Varya) made Mari think that Jac had caught on, and was actually trying to buy her time. The room had windows all the way around; Mari drifted over to one and looked, then stepped back a little, her breath tightening in her chest- it was a very long way down; there would be no escape in that direction.

It appeared as though the tables with their tools and various mechanical pieces had been shoved unceremoniously aside in order to make room in the center of the floor; this had been a workshop, but clearly was no longer used for that purpose. There were candles in large, ornate copper holders that stood taller than Mari set against one of the windows, and a large chair between them. On the floor facing the chair were bright cushions set in orderly rows.

Something about the tables and the pieces they bore tugged at Mari's mind. She drew a quick breath, and, forgetting her desire to escape, whirled to face Varya.

"Where is professor Malone?" she demanded. Varya froze, and turned slowly to Mari. There was a small bit of spittle collected at the corners of her wide, thin mouth. Her face, having shockingly lost its wide, round-cheeked cheeriness, was splotted with red, her eyes narrowed to an angry squint. Her eyes fixed on Mari and did not move; unblinking, like a snake, she held Mari's gaze and that rubbery mouth of hers widened in a slow, malicious parody of a smile. Her eyes still unblinking, unmoving, her tiny gloved hand moved slowly to the reticule that hung from her elbow; she pulled a black lace-edged handkerchief out, and dabbed daintily at the corners of her lips. Only when she had finished this did she finally glance away, looking down at her bag to return the handkerchief. She spoke lightly, as though nothing had happened. "He thought I ("Ayyyeeee") was going to be his assistant, can you imagine? I could not do anything at first, beholden as I was to him, depending on his hospitality, me ("Meeeee,") a stranger here. He had set up a small room for me to sleep, (her eyes darted to a door in the wall, and Mari stored the knowledge away for future reference: there were living chambers up here, adjacent to this seemingly completely circular room) and he had tasks for me to do - Me!" She blinked at

Mari, sniffed, and looked around at Jac, as though utterly certain that they would join in her outrage.

“Where is he?” Mari repeated quietly.

“He is, er, I moved his things into his sleeping chamber. I needed to make room for my Church, I...”

Mari, tingling with indignation from kippah to boots, strode to the chamber door on the other side of the room. Varya followed her, fluttering her tiny hands and squawking like an upset hen.

“Did you know he lied to you?”

“What?” Mari paused with her hand on the doorknob, and looked over her shoulder at Varya. The woman smiled slowly. “He was a citizen of this place when he met you. He was traveling in the carriage he built in order to perfect a means of crossing between worlds for a very few. He was working for...someone here.” Mari frowned and narrowed her eyes at Varya. Could it be? Yes, it appeared the woman was actually blushing.

“Working for someone?”

Varya simpered, and one of her tiny hands fluttered up to settle the cameo brooch at her throat, and adjust the lace at her breast; the bugle beads decorating her gown clacked and clattered like beetles.

“He is still trying to work his way back into the good graces of our kind sponsor, but the sponsor has found a more sympathetic listener. Indeed, he has been most supportive, MOST supportive.”

Mari clenched her jaw. “I find it impossible to believe that the professor deliberately misguided me. I didn’t know him long, but a person’s character has a way of showing through; one cannot live maliciously and prevent it from being written, eventually, on one’s face. This is fact of which you would be wise to become aware, as you seem to value your physical appearance.” leaving Varya to work that out, Mari turned the knob of the little door. Locked, of course. “I must insist that you open this at once. If you are imprisoning the professor-”

“Imprisoning!” Varya shrieked like a steam whistle. “Imprisoning! Absolutely not! He has his work to do; he always was absorbed in the work and cared for little else. Absentminded, annoying little man! We have simply put him into a smaller room while the work takes a new focus. You cannot comprehend right now how important this work is. In fact,” she checked her temper and smiled sweetly, seeming to recall something, “You are greatly needed. This work is for the Good of all, it really is. I hope you understand I can’t allow you to leave until you’ve spoken with our sponsor, he has asked to see you. You can’t imagine what an honor it is, to be chosen for this.” she shouldered her way past Mari, fumbling in her reticule, then pulled out a bunch of keys with which she unlocked the door. She was so close, Mari could smell sweet peppermints on her breath, and see the light dusting of freckles across her snub nose. Mari stepped back. Varya threw the door wide, then turned and circled back to Jac, taking her arm in a fierce grip. “I must ask you two to wait in these rooms. You may as well cooperate, you will thank me later; there is no way out of these rooms, so please do as I request.”

Jac twisted her arm out of Varya’s grip and crouched, preparing to fight, only to straighten and watch open-mouthed as Mari moved silently into the next room. “Mari?” she called.

“Jac, I have to see- I can’t leave- I have to make sure that professor Malone is unharmed.”

Jac sighed, brushed off the red robe she had been clothed in, glared at Varya, wishing for her spear, and walked into the sleeping chambers, muttering. “Taken on a new wounded creature to help, blast it, Mari...” Varya let out her breath and smiled.

“Zimri will be along soon to talk to you both,” she fluted, back to her old musical tones.

Jac whirled, her eyes wide. “Zimri?” she stretched out a hand and lunged toward the door, but she was too late- Varya shut it in her face, and locked it with a firm click. Jac sighed. “From one cage to another. These people do seem to like control.”

“We will get out,” came Mari’s soft tones from the other room. Jac walked toward her voice, and came upon Mari standing, clasping hands with the most extraordinarily funny-looking little man. Mari turned to Jac with a grin. “Jac, I would like you to meet Professor Malone,” she said, more happy than Jac had ever seen her.

* * *

Cora had climbed back into the tunnel she made; it would not do to be found in the healing cottage. Her mind was dark and frantic with confusion; she had grabbed her candle automatically-and was soon glad she had done so. She had not gone far before she discovered the catch in altering the fabric of reality with one’s mind: that fabric became fluid, and it seemed its stability was wholly dependent upon her mind alone.

She walked mindlessly, so focused on her worries that she was not aware of the tunnel, or how far or long she walked. She could not imagine where the women had been taken; she knew that if they had been released by the healers, the room would not have been in such a state of

disarray. The serene healers would never have allowed the bedclothes to trail on the floor like that.

Her first hint that something was wrong was when she stumbled, and her candle nearly blew out. The straight, wide tunnel she had created in her mind had changed- somehow, it had become narrower, the ground uneven. She stopped and steadied her candle, berating herself for getting so tangled in her worries that she hadn't been aware of her surroundings. The tunnel grew narrower up ahead. She took a deep breath, tried to steady her trembling hand to keep the candle from leaping about so wildly, and continued forward. She tried to will the tunnel wider with her mind, but nothing changed.

The walls grew uncomfortably narrow, so that at one point she had to turn a little sideways to keep going. Her discomfort was short-lived, though; the tunnel opened up, and she was in a wide cave- a dead end. She held up her candle, moving forward; the flame danced on smooth roof and walls, stopping before it came to the ground: there was a strange line of shadow circling the room. The light picked out uneven, rough shapes, gleaming off something white here and there, but did not reach far enough to show her details. There was a strange smell in the room, dry, sweet, somehow comforting to her. Cora walked toward it slowly, intrigued. There was a low shelf carved into the walls, running along all sides. With a shiver, Cora realized it reminded her of Roman Catacombs, the burial niches where the dead were entombed. These niches did not hold bodies though, they held...Cora set her candle down, knelt, and discovered the source of the dusty, dry, sharp scent: books. The low shelf in the wall was filled with paper, scrolls, and books with covers. They seemed very old, and seemed to be piled haphazardly. She touched a scroll with the tip of a finger, and it crumbled. She would have to search with great

care, but she was certain there must be something she was meant to find; there was a reason this cave had bloomed oddly in the middle of her tunnel, without her creating it. She had not only discovered the flaw in Zimri's theory, she had found proof that there was something more at work here. Cora had a feeling that no being, neither Manuscript nor human, was able to shape reality here with their will and mind- they could try, but it seemed that the attempt was more of an invitation, an open door for a larger force to reveal truths that lay hidden. Cora shook her head; these thoughts were all very vague, and were leading her no closer to finding Jac and the other woman, the one who would bring Time to this place. All she could do was let go of control, and acknowledge that she had no answers, only questions. She looked around the cave. It was dry and comfortable. She let go of her plans, her feeling of being in charge, and the old Cora went as easily and lightly as a feather blown off a cliff. She sat more comfortably, folding her legs underneath her. Smiling softly, she reached for a large, leather-bound book in front of her that did not crumble at her touch; she opened it, and, feeling obscurely comforted, began to read.