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### “And He Sent”

*Cora had not been aware of her surroundings for - who knew how long? Time did not pass here as it did beyond the barrier, but as a human soul in a human body, a certain type of inherent time always existed. The need to eat, the need to sleep, the space during which actions took place, one breath to another - time in the Lost Kingdom was of an internal nature, rather than being marked by external changes of season or aging. Yet in the catacomb, she was in a space that was truly timeless. It had become just her and the manuscript she was reading- the book of her life. She did not feel hunger; she hung in a space between waking and sleeping that was trance-like. She was no longer aware of Cora, of the being that she was - she had almost become the ink on the page. The reading of her life had become more consuming to her, more immediate, than her life itself.*

*She read a name. Jac. She paused, was aware all at once of drawing in a breath - was that the first breath she had taken in in hours, years? Had she been breathing at all? She let it go, and took another. She felt her heart jump, once, then felt it beating. Felt the tips of her fingers raw from rubbing along the rough edges of the thick vellum pages. She slowed down, read the name again. Jac. Then, a name she didn't recognize: Mari. Another name: Zalman. That name awakened a strange echo, an old familiarity. Discomfort, fear fluttered with it. Somehow she had known that name, and it was attached to something that she feared.*

*She read on.*

Jac looked at the others, slowly and deliberately. She held Mari's green eyes with her own for a moment, then shifted her gaze to Professor Zalman Malone, taking in his strange, wide, constantly shifting eyes. She had never seen eyes like a kaleidoscope before. She felt grubby and dusty. Her shoulders slumped, and she abruptly looked away from the others and flopped down in one of the large, carved wooden chairs that stood against the wall between the narrow, tall windows.

The others were still looking at her. Oh, bugger. When had she become the problem-solver? "There is no way out," she said testily, putting equal weight on each of the words. If they needed her to voice the obvious..."Searched the whole place. Not a crevice. Maybe if they don't feed us for a few weeks, I'll be able to fit through the windows, but..." They all looked at the windows. Floor to ceiling, extremely narrow, they were almost more like elongated arrow-slits than windows. They let in bars of light, and nothing else. No ledges, either.

A sheer and dizzying drop fell away beneath Mari's view when she pushed her nose to one of them to look out. Mari rested her forehead against the cool stone beside the window and sighed.

"Windows are much, much larger in the other room." Professor Malone's voice was soft, wheezy and airy like the steam he had made his life's work.

"But even so," Mari turned back to the others and folded her arms, leaning against the narrow stone window frame, "we are impossibly high off the ground. If we managed to get back into the main room, how would we get down? The single stairway is certain to be well guarded."

Malone was not listening. His eyes had shifted to hold the strange and remote depths of a starry night sky - he had become fathomless, dreamy, unreachable. He ambled over to his worktable, chattering excitedly under his breath. "Can't work; would need to be an enormous span; mass... the sheer boldness of it ...dangerous...clockwork or steam? Boiler that small...wouldn't try it if we weren't backed into a corner... always wondered...always wanted to try but didn't quite dare..."

Mari turned to Jac, noting her raised eyebrows and half-open mouth with a grin. "He's off," she said, and flopped down in a chair on the other side of the narrow window. "I really just want my clothes back," she gloomed. "I feel I could face anything at all if only I were standing in my own boots, with the reassuring weight of my kippah on my head, and my tool belt round my waist."

Jac peered owlishly down at her own red robes. "Yes, I am getting a bit tired of feeling as though I'm wandering around in my dressing-gown." She sat up straighter, clutching the arms of the chair, her curls sticking out all over her head. Mari hid a grin. Just show Jac a task and she perked right up. "They've got us in here for a reason. Clothes, we can get. I feel quite certain I can manage that somehow, if I can just *talk* to someone, or get beyond this door. As much as I hate to say it, Mari, we've got to sit patiently and wait until that horrid slug of a woman comes - what is her name? Mean...grin?"

"Varya Leangrin," Mari chuckled.

"Good Heavens, what a desperately awful name." Jac shook her head, setting her curls flying. "All we have to do is wait and find out what she wants. I can always hide behind the

door and bash her head with something when it opens, if we have no other option..." she said, in a wistful tone.

They did not have to wait long. They had grown silent; Jac had dozed off to the steady sound of clanking, muttering and banging from the corner of the room in which the professor had set up his worktable. Mari was fervently wishing she had something to read, when the large, solid wood door in the entry room swung open.

Mari was on her feet at once, wishing again for her boots and tool belt. She glanced at Jac and saw the bright eyes fixed on her. Good. Jac was awake.

"Just set them down here in this entryway," came Varya Leangrin's fluting tones. "I need you to be ready in case there are ... difficulties."

Varya paraded into the room with a clattering of bugle beads. "Why does she get to wear her normal clothes, when everyone else is in red robes?" Mari muttered to Jac.

Varya's little brown eyes glittered, and that impossibly wide mouth spread in a slow, close-lipped smile. "I won't pretend I didn't hear you, my dear. Your clothes are perfectly safe, and have been cleaned. You are needed; I would like you to come with me."

"Splendid! Now we'll get some answers." Jac hopped up from the chair, only to meet a small sneer from Varya, who held up one of her tiny, gloved hands.

"Just Mari. You may stay here with the professor," she said with a tiny giggle, raising her eyebrows and looking to where he stood, with goggles on now, clothed in a much-battered thick leather apron, with huge leather gloves on his hands. He was pouring hot metal into a mold set between huge clamps, tilting the small, long-handled ladle carefully, whistling softly through his teeth, completely oblivious to Varya's presence. Jac and Mari both smiled to see him so

absorbed, so clearly joyful in his work. “I have had them bring trays of food and drink; you will find it all in the entryway. At least you will have each others’ company, if you can get his fluffy head out of his work.”

Jac’s cheeks flushed as her temper raced. “I much prefer his company to yours, if you will excuse me,” Jac huffed, and then paused. “Mari, if these people mistreat you, make no mistake, I won’t leave a person alive in this place if that’s what it takes to help you.” Their eyes held for a moment in a silent agreement. Jac flounced to the other side of the room to prowl, unheeded, around the professor, and Mari turned to follow Varya out.

Silent, red-robed women fell in around and behind Mari as she followed Varya through the wide tower room, down a narrow stone hallway with tiny windows very high up, affording no view, only light, and into an enclosed room that looked like the interior of a one-room cottage. There were no windows; there was a fire in a large stone fireplace, with an enormous cauldron bubbling over it. There was an old-fashioned tin hip bath, the kind Grandfather used to use when he wanted to just keep working in his workshop. The unexpected tears that came at the thought of her Grandfather receded quickly when, with a gasp, she realized what the hip bath was for.

Varya had turned slowly and stood watching Mari with her small brown eyes. Her wide, froglike smile spread across her face at Mari’s gasp. She said nothing, only nodded to the women who reached out for Mari gently, and began undressing her.

“I- what? wait-” Mari fought them, but it was like being gently and inexorably buried in feather blankets. They were persistent, mindful only of their one task, and it was clear they would not be deterred.

Varya's eyes glittered with enjoyment. "Come now. It has been far too long since you've seen a bath. The women have a new robe ready for you. It is a great honor to meet Zimri, Our Benefactor, so you must be cleansed and purified beforehand."

The experience was humiliating. Mari burrowed inside herself, shut out the knowledge that Varya was watching with that reptilian grin on her face; she submitted to the impersonal washing process and imagined herself elsewhere. It was the only way to silence the ache of tears in her throat, the wild desire to lunge across the room and claw that hateful woman's pale, wide face. She breathed, and silenced her rage and humiliation. This was just a body she lived in. She told herself over and over: I am doing this for the professor. I am doing this for Jac. I will think about this later when I am free. She simply went limp and let them lift her arms and scrub her with a large bar of soap and a rough cloth. She let them duck her under the water, lather her hair...once she had given in, it actually felt good to be clean again, but still, she felt the wings of that monster bird from her childhood stirring in her breast. She focused on the warm, soothing water- but still, to have no choice and no power - she fought down the tears and calmed the bird ruffling its feathers, stirring, readying itself to claw and peck her heart with its sharp beak and talons.

They plucked her out of the bath and rubbed her down with rough towels; they lifted her arms and guided them through new sleeves, wrapping and tying a red robe around her, identical to the last one. One of them gently teased a comb through her tangled, wet hair, and then swiftly braided it, coiling the braids at the base of her neck and weaving a long, wooden pin through them to secure them. The wooden pin stuck out on top. She reached her hand up and felt the simple, long pin: there was some kind of carving at the top of the wooden stick. If that is sharp

enough, she thought, it could come in handy.

Varya had not removed her eyes from Mari - Mari wondered if she had even blinked - the entire time. She finally nodded her head once, and the women gathered up the towels and old robes and went to stand beside the doors. Mari wondered if they were ever allowed to sit down, to talk, to read a book...she searched their eyes for thoughts, and noticed one of the women watching her with a softness in her eyes, a sadness. The woman's eyes held Mari's for a moment and then she darted a glance to Varya, made her gaze deliberately blank, fixing a stare at the far wall.

Hm. So they were human after all. Mari frowned and tightened the belt of her robe. She would reach them. Somehow, these people and their long-subdued spirits held the key to freedom.

Varya gestured imperiously and turned toward a large, arched wooden door in the far wall. Mari followed, making faces at Varya's back. She heard a small, stifled giggle. Turning, she caught the gleam of a smile from one of the attendants she hadn't noticed, standing close to the large door. She grinned at the attendant, who ducked her head and busied herself with the hip bath, but not before Mari had caught her lips twitching. Mari felt a small surge of triumph. Perhaps she could make allies here.

Then, there was no more time for thought as the large door was opening, and Varya ushered her into a dark room lined with bookshelves, filled with books of wildly varying colors and sizes; Mari's eyes roved hungrily over the beautiful volumes. She didn't notice the pale, still man sitting on a low chaise lounge until Varya nudged Mari's arm with a sharp elbow. (how was anything on that round woman so very sharp and bony? Mari wondered)

With a series of clacks and clatters from her bugle-beaded ensemble, Varya bent her knees and stuck out her rear until her bustle was floating nearly straight up in the air like a dirigible. Mari looked at the man, who was seated with a complete stillness that was somehow unnatural, and turned back to gape- there is no other word for it- at Varya, forgetting her dignity entirely. What *was* the woman doing? With a series of small, awkward shimmies which set the beads on her dress dancing and the feather of her hat waving, Varya finally seated herself, puffing, on the floor. She turned her shiny, flushed face up to Mari and frowned so violently, her face resembled a red fist. Mari turned to look at the pale man - really, he was as white as paper- and started as he raised his eyebrows slowly. Finally, Mari gasped, "Oh," and lowered herself to the floor. Ridiculous. Apparently they were meant to sit lower than this still, silent creature, with his oddly flat black eyes, parchment skin, and inky black hair. His eyebrows were like gashes across his expressionless face. Her throat was tight, her mouth dry. She tried to clear her throat very quietly, earning herself another prunny glance from Varya, which awakened a bubble of giggles in her chest.

"Varya." His voice was rich and deep, but weak, as though he had been ill. If Mari had not been so nervous, she would probably have laughed at Varya's attempts to sit up straighter when he spoke her name. She nearly rolled over on her bustle, and one of her tiny, gloved hands shot out in an attempt to surreptitiously push at the floor and send her bobbing back the other way. The feather in her hat waved about in the air as though seeking escape. Varya pressed her hand into the floor and inched sideways in tiny little hops on her bustle (unaware that the feather bouncing about on top of her hat made her movements very obvious) finally getting her legs bent to one side. She then rested on her hand and attempted to appear languid, though it was clear

that her corset was inching her bosom up under her chins in an exceedingly uncomfortable manner. Mari smoothed her robe complacently; perhaps there was something to be said for this simple garb. The pale man watched this performance, his flat, black eyes darting to Mari's twitching lips, seeming to miss nothing.

"Varya," he repeated, "I will not be needing you. You may go."

"G...go?" Varya faltered, darting a glance sideways at Mari.

"I need to speak to this woman alone."

Varya's face grew redder - Mari had not thought it possible- and she looked as though she was going to argue. Then, she let out her breath and sagged a little. Mari nearly felt sorry for her. Mari averted her eyes from the titanic struggle that ensued; with a clatter of beads, small puffing sounds through her nose, an odd creaking noise that may have been the screaming of a corset, Varya was on her feet again. Mari did not look up. She stared at the grain of the dark wood floor, tracing it lightly with her finger while there was a monstrous, deafening pause. Then she heard the hissing sound of Varya's train dragging on the floor, the clacking of her tiny feet. The door opened, and closed solidly, the sound as final as the last heartbeat of a dying man.

Mari was suddenly cold. She shifted, rubbed her arms, and looked up.

Those eyes. They were so flat, dark as ink. They pinned her where she sat.

"What is your name?"

she heard a faint rustling undertone in his voice, like wind sifting through dead leaves. She shuddered.

"Raven," her voice was a harsh croak in her dry, tight throat.

She tried again.

“my ... name. Is Raven,” she said, her heart pounding as she stared defiantly into those flat, ink-dark eyes.