

And One Remained

By Rija Maha

The prison was empty of the innocent and the jailer wandered aimlessly. Though justice was done, without criminals he had no purpose. He was no longer king of his little world. Funny how these attachments grow over time...

When he was first installed in his position, he had a legitimate role. He embraced a high ethical standard. He was young and well-intentioned. He believed in the concept of rehabilitation. He still had love in his heart.

But his world was built on evil, and he could not avoid it himself. If there were not enough prisoners by their own doing, he came to tempt others to join them. He padded his resume, so to speak. He became an expert on evil, and there was little balance in his experience. It was a way of life for him.

He had seen the end coming. One day a bright light had entered that dark domain. She wasn't meant to be there; she had been taken by force. The jailer was lonely for true companionship. He manipulated the circumstances...and eventually she believed she belonged there and was fortunate to know him. Indeed he became the key to her existence. All else was foreign to her, and she was easily kept ignorant through fear.

The problem was, he had to allow her a certain amount of freedom. If she was not close to his equal, she could not maintain his interest. She had qualities he admired and that he wanted to keep for himself. But how could he be a torturer and a nurturer at the same time? His ways of being kept strife in their relationship. With strife came separation. Only the law kept them together and truly ruled her heart. (Little did she know that was a technicality).

The jailer held her through the force of shame. However, his days and nights were lit by the sight, sound, smell, taste and touch of her. She tried so hard to be good! It was a great deal for him, yet he felt a little guilty that she was at a disadvantage. Sometimes he punished her for his own real sins, too. There was a fight between his ego and the feelings he had for her.

Sometimes she was his slave, and sometimes she was his queen. He didn't care to acknowledge that she was important. It was all about "the work". She was given the choice to be lonely or keep him company. Yet, somehow, she always managed to do a little more...something that revealed a glimpse of her true self. He loved her but feared her for that.

He knew how to lock up people, not how to keep them free. He offered a meager existence made good only in comparison to what seemed worse. What he produced was broken and wretched and rotted. In contrast, she extended beauty by her mere presence and kind words to all with whom she made contact. For that reason he always tried to restrict her movement...and make her believe it was by her own choice.

The jailer did what he had come to know. Nevertheless he was not immune to her effects. She awakened in him a remembrance of his youth, of when he was motivated by goodness.

Sometimes he hated her for that, yet he could not bear to lose sight of what she represented. And she persevered beyond expectation.

She didn't appear to be courageous or consider herself to be so, but she was, and he could see it better than she. If it is not reflected, the one who shines light is usually gazing away from its source. And he could not avoid her enlightenment.

Eventually, justice was truly done and she left him. She gathered all of her being and walked out without a word. Lies come to be revealed and they prove the illusion to be hollow. Never again could he cajole her to trust him; she came to have faith in herself. She saw that it was him who was not being good enough.

When fate finally interfered in the way he did business, he felt she had forsaken him. She continued to refuse to return to the darkness of that abode. She stood apart from him and said he must join her in the light. She said she had done her time there and could not be held by that. He was welcome where she was, but he felt he couldn't face the shame. Surely he would always be known for what he did? He could not imagine life beyond these walls.

How could she forgive him for keeping her in such a place, for letting his own desires and fears shroud true love? The law condemned him for centuries; what better could he expect from the one he hurt most, the one who had reawakened love within his forgotten soul, the victim of his pure selfishness?

Actually, he had come to realize she left long before he was forced to let her go. She could not fake what she did not feel...and all the good stuff was gone, lost in the gamble to keep up appearances. He had no kingdom to offer, no power over anyone. What remained but this pitiful – no, not even pitiful – this nothing of a being? There was no bridge left standing – he had seen to that.

So the jailer kept wandering down long corridors, past empty rooms, ever haunted by thoughts of old “glories”. Without prisoners, a prison is lifeless. Even if he could reconcile with shame, what purpose remained for him?

Lost in thought, he barely heard her calling in the distance. It finally penetrated that it was really her voice. She was telling him to come meet her at the door, she would wait for him there. Sick as he felt, what did he have to lose? He welcomed her offer with a tinge of forboding.

He was ever drawn to her. Even now, though she could likely taunt him, he did not resist the opportunity to interact one last time – to meet her at the crossroads. However, this time slyness was to no avail. There was nothing left with which to defend himself. And she kept just out of sight. This time she was fully conscious of what she was doing and he was at a disadvantage.

“Are you remembering the past, my husband?” she said as he came near. “The doors are unlocked; you may pass through at any time.”

“Why should I join you there?”

“Why not? There's nothing better where you are. ...I want to see how you're doing, but I'm not going in there anymore – as you well know.”

“You said you'd meet me at the door.”

“I lied,” she laughed. “I’m sorry about that. But I *am* meeting you at the door. I just suggested that you might step through it.”

Why not, indeed? Surely she had earned his compliance.

The light blinded him at first, and tears rolled down his face. He couldn’t see her clearly because he couldn’t keep his eyes open for more than a few moments in the brightness of full sunlight. She was robust and lovely, and he was so struck by the sight that he did not breathe.

“I keep coming back for you,” she said. “Isn’t it time we moved on from here?”

What did she mean? He was feeling discomfort.

“It’s so warm out here; I’m not used to it,” he complained.

“Take off all those unnecessary coverings,” she answered without a hint of sympathy. “Leave them at the doorway and they will be there when you want them. No one will come along and steal them,” she laughed again.

Indeed, who had need of such things, such baggage, out here? He saw that she was beautifully herself and bare of any shroud.

As he removed his last possessions – that were so desirable when one lived in the cold and the dark – the several layers that covered the surface of his skin, he began to feel a soft breeze, and the tiniest spark deep within his heart flared to life. He felt something stirring with which he was unfamiliar.

She stepped forward then and held out a crystal cup of water.

“Drink this,” she said. In her other hand she held a plate of pomegranate seeds. “And eat these...”