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“Go to Yourself”

Leaving wasn't as easy as he had thought it would be. Rabbi Ariel Wolf rubbed his chin and looked around his home. He had put everything in his office in the synagogue into trunks, he had said his personal goodbyes earlier, he had filled a pack with necessities that would keep him, if he were careful, for a few weeks on the road.

He edged his pack off his shoulders, and heaved a breath as it thumped to the ground. Okay, he'd been a bit dramatic, making his exit speech at the synagogue and leaving this very day- more than a bit dramatic. It wasn't really kind - in fact, there was a tiny bit of malice in the action. He was angry at the gossip, angry at how they had turned on Mari, angry at the lack of compassion or understanding, angry with Margaret, if he were to face the ugly truth. Margaret's desire to blame Mari for the end of a marriage that had died years ago was human, it was understandable, but he found it repulsive. People always needed scapegoats, because it was too hard to examine themselves and acknowledge that they were fully responsible for the events in their lives.

He looked around the house. It already felt like an empty place; he had tidied it before he left for the synagogue this morning- he needed to bid it goodbye, needed to be good to it, as it had been good to him all of these years. He had come back in the door in order to try to find some closure in his heart. To walk away from his home so lightly felt strange, felt wrong, somehow. He searched his heart for regrets about Margaret; there were none. They had not had

a marriage for a long time now, if they ever had truly had one. To get a divorce would throw the town into a frenzy of scandal: the Maker, the Holy One weeps, they say, when people divorce.

Ariel shook his head and massaged the back of his neck, hoisting his pack onto his back once more. He had come to believe that the time the Creator actually weeps is when people marry for the wrong reason. That such a contract should be respected and upheld while his true and pure love was disrespected and slandered had made him do a lot of thinking about the nature of marriage. Marriage the social construct vs. true marriage, the holy union. He was angry with the town: in his mind, the people had become just eyes and mouths, consuming gossip, talking, not thinking, not questioning, not feeling. He felt such anger, it would be good to walk and not stop- walk through the world with no fences, no borders, no ending place and no rules about where he went.

He massaged the space between his eyebrows that was tight and aching; he couldn't worry, couldn't think ahead- he just needed to go on the journey his soul demanded now. The Maker would guide him. If Mari was in this world still, he would find her. He had made a lot of mistakes. He had been scared, and he had let himself believe that the truth was unnecessary, in fact was undesirable, as it would hurt people. He realized now that the person he had been afraid of hurting was really only himself; he had feared the work that honesty required, he feared the reactions of others. He hadn't wanted to go through unpleasantness or explanations, and so he hadn't been honest- and he had lost everything.

Ariel sighed, adjusting his pack. It was heavy, but- his lips twisted in a small, bitter parody of a smile- it would be lighter before long, and he would wish it heavier with food. He was not sure how to stop hating himself, but somehow it seemed like the first big step toward

that was to undertake a journey, to see what it was like to live without any cushions between himself and the world: cushions of the rabbi title, the small luxuries he had always surrounded himself with, the cushion of the “marriage” illusion- these had all been things that made him feel respected and respectable, a better person. Now that he was stripping things away and really looking at himself, he was ashamed at what he had become. He needed to encounter the world with respect and see what he could learn from it. He took one last look around his home, bid his comfort farewell, and stepped outside, shutting the door without locking it. As he walked out of town, with each step he felt lighter- he was walking into the world with an open mind and a heart that was truly vulnerable for the first time in his life. He was sure his old fears and pride would come up, but he would find a way to keep his heart simple, open, ready to learn.

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A journey on foot is not as easy in reality as it seems it will be, when one plans it. He had left town with no map; he had simply walked out. He had worn his most sturdy clothing and boots, but he was uncomfortable all over. His hands were numb with cold, his midsection was too hot, his belt chafed, his boots chafed. He had become so grumbly and grumpy, he could even imagine his kippah chafed. He had also not been prepared for how many thoughts would come up to torment him, when it was just him and the road, for hours and hours. His mind was behaving like the worst sort of ancient aunt- the kind you have to invite to visit because “she’s alone, poor thing,” but who starts criticizing from the moment she walks in the door, and doesn’t stop. However, it was a good feeling to stride forward, to rely on his body and set his own pace. It was a strange feeling, after years of other people setting his schedule as a rabbi, to have no one to see, no “have-tos,” none of the security that comes with a map of the hours of the day. Only

his stubbornness kept him moving forward. “This is good for me,” he kept telling himself. “I am learning something new. I am cutting away the layers of pettiness and pride that I have allowed to grow around my heart.”

He sat and had small sips of water when his muscles grew weary; he stretched and began again when he felt strong enough to do so. He had no idea where he was going, but for the first time in his life, he let go completely- and let the Maker guide him.

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Is was disappointed. There was no way around it. He had ridden away from town in a fine glow of adventurous feeling. He felt his cheeks growing hot as he admitted to himself he had felt proud, felt he must look rather dashing and heroic, riding away on a horse. Of course, his “adventuring” clothes were now twenty years out of fashion, and a bit snug around the middle; also, the shabby basket with a cat inside bouncing in front of his saddle didn’t help his image much. The basket creaked rhythmically as they trotted along; that, combined with the muffled clanging of Is’ iron cookpot and utensils in the saddlebags...Is gave a shout of laughter as he realized how he really must look- utterly ridiculous.

Figaro’s head popped out of a gap between the basket and lid; he had pushed and shoved at it until the lid was bent enough for him to do so. He swiveled his bossy little head around as though looking for the source of the laughter, fixed Is with an eye that seemed to hold disdain, and then the furry head plunged back into the basket.

Is kept chuckling on and off throughout the day, his cheeks bunching under his twinkling eyes, humor fully restored. He had no idea where he was going; he thought if he just kept moving fast enough, they - horse, Figaro and all- would somehow slip between the veils that

separated this plane from the Lost Kingdom. At least, that was the theory. Is hoped it was correct.

* * *

Ariel hadn't known how to bathe; he had brought a big bar of soap, but undressing outside of his home felt terrifying to him-it felt like a bad dream. He decided to get up before it was light, and hide in a bush. All of his ideas were better in theory than they turned out to be in practice: the bush was prickly, and once he got his clothes off with much struggling (he had to clamp his eyes shut, and was scratched in the face every time he bent down to try to take off his pants, his undergarments, socks, boots) he was caught with no easy way out of the bush, and was scratched horribly. Defeated, scratched, naked, shivering, clutching a big yellow bar of soap and feeling utterly ridiculous, he sat down on the muddy bank in the pre-dawn light and fought back tears. Tears! Ariel sternly told himself, "You are a rabbi, for goodness' sake. Have some dignity." but the tears pressed forward. He felt like such a fool, sitting there naked on the ground, defeated by a bush! His bare bottom grew cold and uncomfortable, so he tightened his fingers grimly around his big bar of yellow soap, and headed for the water. It was icy. It was absolutely horrible, but he would be clean, by heaven; he might be a fool with no idea how to survive, and he might be pink and naked and utterly ludicrous, but he would be clean.

* * *

Is scratched his beard, and began to whistle a silly little tune through his teeth. He had never gotten to do these things before-he had been so conscious of his position, he had felt the need to behave with dignity, even if there was no one around him most of the time. He grinned at Figaro, who had slid out of his basket (which Is had placed on the ground in front of the tent)

in a very fluid, snaky motion, and was gazing at the fire, planting his front paws and stretching back until his front was low, his tail and rump straight up in the air.

“That looks like a very good stretch, Figaro, m’boy. I should try it. You’ve lost weight already...look at you, you’re not the plump old Archive cat anymore, you’re a young, supple Adventuring Cat.”

The firelight gleamed yellow in Figaro’s eyes as he turned a silent and dignified face to Is.

Is chuckled. “Right. Fish for you. Coming up, my lordship. I do wish you were as useful as a dog, and would fetch sticks for the fire.” In seeming response, the face turned toward him was replaced, abruptly, with a furry rump. Figaro had turned his back disdainfully and began washing his face, still basking in the heat of the fire.

Chuckling, Is gathered his fishing pole and tackle. It was still dark but the dawn was near; he was deeply thankful he had learned to fish when he was a boy. He trudged down the hill, slowing when he the sound of the rushing water became a loud roar, and he could see small gleams of light playing across the river’s inky surface. The pull was powerful here- it had a deceptively calm surface and a fast undertow, this river- so he had been careful to camp where there was a sturdy tree growing out from the bank, with a crook to wedge his back securely. He propped his feet on a small boulder, feeling the readiness and anticipation settle into his muscles.

Whistling again, he swiftly baited his hook; he had drawn his arm back to let the lure fly, when he saw a large white flash in the water. He set his pole down gently, and crouched to look closer. There- it bobbed up again- an arm? A body, by the prophet’s beard!

“Can you hear me?” He shook his head- the person was probably long dead. He ran up to the camp to get a sturdy rope. Figaro was alert, his fur on edge. The rope was, thankfully, close to hand in a jumbled pile of provisions beside the tent.

He made quick work of fastening the rope to the tree and removing his boots. He tied the rope around his waist- there was nothing for it but to go in himself; he didn't think the person was alive, let alone conscious enough to hear him call or grab a rope. His urgency gave him adrenaline so he barely noticed the icy cold as he leaped into the water, one of his knees banging painfully on a rock. He was pulled quickly downstream but he had the coiled rope in a firm grasp, so he didn't go far. He played the rope out slowly, kicking powerfully with his legs to aim himself toward the opposite bank. When he reached it, he lunged and rolled, then stood, still clutching the rope. His hands were numb, but they were burned badly from the rope and would hurt later, he knew. His bare feet were bruised and cut painfully by rocks and small tree branches as he ran frantically back upstream. “Getting soft, old man,” he panted, his eyes searching for the body. There- it was caught behind a rock. He climbed onto the rock and reached down- the water was icy, the skin was clammy and slippery- he managed to grab an arm and haul the body upward a bit. It was a man. The skin was cold; Is could not tell how long he'd been here. “Poor chap,” he muttered, his teeth chattering. Holding the arm, he edged sideways until he had dragged the body out from behind the rock. The current caught it, and Is nearly lost his grip. He quickly jumped in and put both arms around the man's chest, letting the current take them. They bumped and bashed downstream until the rope tightened painfully around Is' waist- thank the Maker, it caught and held. Clamping the slippery, clammy, heavy naked man to his side with one arm, Is pulled the rope with the other, then held the slack and pulled again. It was slow,

awkward, very hard work, but eventually, as he kicked with his legs, they managed to swing to the opposite bank. Is was so exhausted and bruised, all he could do was flop onto the bank with his shoulders, both arms around the body, then push gradually with his legs until they both had slid clear of the water on their sides. Is lay there panting, his arms clamped tightly around the man. His hands were frozen-he could not seem to remember how to loosen his arms and let go. There was an abrupt expansion of ribs under his arms, and his eyes opened in shock. Then, there was a cough, and Is let go and rolled aside just in time- the man flopped onto his stomach and retched up river water, coughing and gasping.

“Well I’ll be damned.” Is muttered, “Welcome back to life.” He sat up and pounded the man’s back. “Not sure if this will help, and it’s uncomfortable I’m sure, but you’re alive. Get that water out of you and breathe the air that’s meant for men.”

“Stop...stop,” the man held up an arm weakly, as though trying to reach back and defend himself against Is’ enthusiastic wallops.

“You can speak. That’s a good sign,” Is’ teeth were chattering wildly now. He staggered to his feet, put his arms underneath the mans’ arms, bent his knees and lifted the man into a “fireman’s carry,” clamping the man’s legs down with one arm. The man was not large, and he was quite light; with Is’ bulk and height, he carried him fairly easily. When he had managed to settle the man and get one arm free, he gathered the rope and followed it back upstream.

Untying the rope was a thoroughly tedious business with his chilled, numb fingers- the knots had pulled abominably tight. Finally, with much inventive swearing, he got the rope loose from the tree. He simply left it around his waist, and bent to hoist the man up again to carry him up to camp. A shaky hand raised into the air forestalled him.

“I will walk,” the man said in a voice that was hoarse and rusty from river water.

“Suit yourself.” Is watched as the man stood, then lunged to put an arm under his shoulders as he nearly collapsed again. Holding onto each other, they staggered drunkenly up the hill.

Is had brought enough warm clothes for both of them, though the clothes were far too large for the stranger, and had to be rolled up, making him look like a lost child. Is put the large kettle over the fire, filled with river water; he would have liked to make some hot stew but there had been no time to fish. He pulled out dried meat. They would have to make do with cold rations. Figaro kept his distance, eyeing them disdainfully. Is told him, “there will be no fish. Go hunt for your supper, learn how to be a real cat again,” Figaro switched his tail in disgust and stalked haughtily away.

“He understood you.” The man’s voice was still rusty from his ordeal, but it was a very pleasant voice, soft but resonant.

“Yes; he is an enigma, that cat.” Is shifted his eyes away from the stranger and bit into his hunk of bread. He didn’t want to begin telling this man any of the Archives’ secrets until he could tell if the chap was trustworthy.

The man lifted his tin cup to his lips and took a sip of tea, his eyes fixed on Is.

“I lost my soap,” the man said in a hesitant tone.

“beg pardon?”

“I... I was trying to bathe. Entire bar of soap, gone. I suppose I can’t go back and...?”

Is spluttered, some of his tea going up his nose, some down his front. “You...you tried to bathe...in the river? You...think...you’re going to go back and FIND YOUR SOAP?” Is tried to

hold back his laughter, fearing to wound the man's dignity, but his eyes watered, and the laughter burst out. He set down his tea mug and laughed more. And laughed. The man simply watched him, a little color rising in his cheeks, his eyes wounded.

"I don't know much about...the wilderness," the man said, a sheepish smile growing on his face.

"If I leave you alone out here, you will get killed. You could have been killed today, you know- that river is fast and strong, as you found out. I suppose you'll have to come along with Figaro and I," Is mused, "but you're going to learn to fish, you're going to earn your keep, and you're going to have to walk until we can find another horse."

Ariel sat up straighter, and looked steadily into Is' eyes.

"I am grateful for your help," he said softly, "I will be glad to learn."

And so the two unlikeliest of companions met in the middle of the wide world, not knowing what they shared in common, or that each carried a piece of the other's puzzle in life, or how deeply they would challenge each other in days to come.