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And I Implored

Is raked unsteady fingers through his already wild hair, as though rubbing his scalp would calm his emotions and allow his brain to take charge again. He had dashed into his closet to find sturdy clothing; hopefully, he could still fit into his “field gear” in which he used to take small treks off the mountain whenever it had shifted position. When he was younger, he had been very eager to be the best Archivist the mountain had ever known, and thought a firsthand view of the world would somehow aid him. When he cut it too fine one day and was nearly left behind, he folded away his “field gear” into the back of his closet; that was a nasty awakening, making him realize that without an Archivist, all the people would have absolutely no way to travel safely.

He drew in a deep breath, his shoulders slumping a bit in the realization that that particular day had also marked the time when he actively began to search for at least one Apprentice. He tightened the sash of his dressing-gown and turned away from the closet. He had searched very long indeed to find the right Apprentice; there were many that had not worked out. After many years, he had found her. And he was not going to lose her.

“The signs were all correct,” he muttered to himself, frowning in the dark, fierce way he had when he was working himself up to being particularly stubborn; when he was in this mood, the very chairs seemed to hold themselves nervously, as though they were alert and ready to move out of his way as he walked past. He left his dressing room, realizing that before he readied himself to leave, he needed to try to find out where Mari was.

His hard moroccan leather slippers thumped like war drums on the wooden floor as he thrust open his chamber door and strode down the hall with his fists clenched to reign in his emotion. As soon as the thought had come to him that he must go find Mari, the frantic need to be *doing* something- anything- surged up in him like a volcano.

“There’s nothing for it. Got to use the dish,” his voice was low and rough; the only creature around to hear was Figaro, the Archive Cat, and Figaro was nowhere to be seen. Figaro was always on a mission of his own, (which very often involved sleeping on the window seat between bookshelves, curled smugly on a velvet cushion that was flattened into cat-shape and utterly disreputable with black-and-white hairs) and only showed up when he felt a situation was important enough to warrant his presence.

“Must not be an emergency yet-no Figaro,” Is chuckled, then his brows settled quickly back into their stormy frown. He hadn’t used the scrying dish in many years; he was not supposed to use it except in dire emergencies. He wasn’t sure why; his late Master did not often explain things.

“Here, dish-dish-dish-dish,” Is called softly. He had no idea where he had put it last. (He was supposed to call it a Scrying Pool, but Is liked to take the awe out of mystic items by referring to them by the most humble names he could think of.)

“If I were a dish, where would I be?” he muttered to himself.

He strode into the Great Hall, and paused for a moment to take in the new, shifting light. It was as though the Hall were underwater, or in a forest; there were cool green shadows everywhere, which moved and shifted constantly. Is felt as though he were in a strange, windless leafy glade; the air was still and warm, but those shadows moved as though a wind pushed

against countless invisible trees. It was soothing; his breathing slowed, and his eyelids drooped a little as the adrenaline left him. Feeling slightly drained, his shoulders slumped.

“Old fool,” he muttered, massaging his chest absently with one palm; his heart felt like a bruise.

Is’ most defining characteristic, beyond his brilliant but often childlike, lively, nonlinear brain, was his incredible stubbornness. He never let go of something he wanted; he never lost hold of an idea or decision once it had entered his head and he had deemed it important.

“Dish,” He barked, straightening his shoulders and marching into the Great Hall. The bloody thing could be anywhere, he thought. He scanned the bookshelves; the place seemed to have reconfigured itself since he was last here, or since he last actually looked around and paid attention. The room was a tangle of bookshelves and stone “trees,” the branches holding the many candles that illuminated this enormous, sprawling cavern. It seemed that the stone carved (and very realistic) “trees” had actually grown since he last paid attention to them; the place had taken on a wild, overgrown and slightly dangerous air. It was beautiful. He sighed and felt the corners of his mouth curl up slightly, felt the bunched muscles between his eyebrows relax- such an incredible room. He used to spend days in here, reading and studying, feeling as though he were outside and wrapped in the beautiful solitude of a forest glade. He missed those days.

“Dish!” he reminded himself, glad only Figaro could hear him, knowing he must sound like an absolute lunatic. He lumbered through the room at random, deciding that since it was really important he find that dam-d* dish, the room would eventually guide him to it. The Great Hall had its own mysterious ways, he had come to learn over the years.

Sure enough, he rounded the corner of a very odd, twisting set of corridors made by bookshelves he didn't ever remember seeing before (he did not dare look at the books, or he would be a week in finding the dish) and it was as though the bookshelves, when he wasn't looking, shook themselves like a wet dog and settled themselves into straighter lines. There, at the end of the now-straight row, was a window seat. There, in the window-seat, was the dish. There, also, curled up rather pointedly and sarcastically in the dish*, was Figaro.

"Very funny, cat," Is said, although in as polite a tone as he could muster. Figaro had come with the Archives; no one knew how old he was. Is did not know if it was the same cat that had been there when he first became an Apprentice, but it looked like the same cat; if it was the same cat, Figaro was an impossibility, and therefore, must be treated with respect.

The cat lifted his wide, round, wooly head, tilting his completely flat face a little to the side, regarding Is as though he were an intriguing new toy.

"I know. I look like something the...cat...dragged..." Is cleared his throat, and tightened his sash again. "Never mind. Why am I talking to a cat? Give me the dish please," Is snorted in a way that made Figaro narrow his eyes slightly, "Idiot. A cat can't hand you a dish," and reached out to take the wide, shallow, beaten bronze bowl in both hands. It was very warm from the cat's body heat. Is tipped it to the side, trying to slide Figaro's round bulk out onto the window seat cushion. Figaro tilted with the dish, remaining firmly inside and watching Is patiently. His whiskers curled in a decidedly amused and smug manner.

"Oh very funny, Cat." Is began to lose his temper. He reached both hands in the dish, scooped up the heavy, rotund cat, and dumped him onto the window seat. Figaro meowed in his

clear, bell-like voice, and lashed his black tail indignantly. “Too bad, sir,” Is huffed, “there is important business- more important than your nap-and this blasted dish is needed. Good day.”

Feeling like he had definitely come out on top in that disagreement, Is clasped the large, wide vessel against his chest and stomach, lacing his hands in front. He turned and made his way as quickly as he could down the now-straight row of bookshelves, toward the central part of the room. It seemed as though the shelves were helping him now; they channeled him directly to the center of the Great Hall.

“Thanks,” he panted, bending his knees and balancing the lip of the heavy bronze dish on the central table, steadying it with sweating palms, shifting his grip and lowering it slowly until it rested on the table. Is wiped his hands on his dressing-gown, then rubbed the small of his back. When had he become so creaky and stiff?

“Too much time hunched over books and scrolls,” he grumped, “all the more reason to get into the Archives and do something active for once.”

His breathing gradually slowed as he allowed his eyes to roam around the center of the Great Hall. He hadn't been here in quite a long time, but this was the one part of the cavern that never changed. There was an enormous, sturdy wide marble table in the exact center of the Great Hall; it was a beautiful thing, carved to look like a tree stump. Other than the color, which was the pale, cool color of marble with the shades and nuances that only a great amount of time and usage can give, it looked exactly like the sawn off trunk of a great oak. The top had rings of subtly inlaid amber. Is never was told who carved the table, but it was exquisite work; his hand running gently over the smooth top could detect no texture change where the rings were- it felt completely smooth, all one piece.

The trunk had no chairs around it; it was raised in such a way that people could stand and do their work on its surface. It was large enough to accommodate six people very comfortably-six, as that is what it had been made for, presumably; the six people of the Council that used to run this place, many hundreds of years ago. They would stand and conduct their business here around the table; this place used to be the heart of the Archives. It fell into disuse when the Council disappeared, and the system changed. A single Archivist at a time, and as many Apprentices as he or she chose to take on, was how things worked now. They rarely had need of this great stone table, and Is hardly ever ventured to the center of the Great Hall.

He should come here more often; he had forgotten how peaceful it was. Here in the center of the Great Hall was a circular sort of room. It was lower than the rest of the great hall, and ringed by live trees; living giants: redwoods. on the west and east sides of this circle were gaps in the trees, where there were steps down into the room made of large, flat stones. The light there was varicolored, as the only light source in the room was the sky above, filtered through a beautiful circular stained glass window on the ceiling. He didn't know how old the stained glass was; it was thick and bubbled, washed in subtle colors of yellow and gold, with rose in places like a watercolor, and dark blue streaks here and there. It was covered with a seemingly random sprinkling of the Hebrew aleph-bet, mostly black, with an occasional letter appearing larger seemingly at random, picked out in shining gold. He didn't know what it meant; stroking his chin and gazing at it, he thought that one day he should probably find out. There was so much about this place he still didn't know, even though he had spent his entire adult life studying and being caretaker here.

The room was ringed by, thick, stout, enormously strong redwood trees. They passed out through the roof, where there were gaps in the stone ceiling around the large, curved stained glass- six gaps. It was like a jewel set with six wide stone prongs, with gaps in between for the trees to pass through. An extraordinary design, Is thought.

In the north part of the circular chamber was a low, ringed stone wall; they looked like natural stones placed perfectly to fit and hold; there was no visible joining material. Moss had grown over them: the wall looked to be older than anything here. It was curved, like a well, and held a pool of water. Behind it was a tall structure of larger stones, over which trickled a waterfall-like fountain. Is knew that on the other side, on the corresponding side in the Great Hall, there was an identical fountain; the only wall separating this room from the next was the redwood trees; over the top lip of the fountain he could just make out the ceiling in the Great Hall.

It smelled heavenly in here; the spicy smell of redwoods, mixed with a whiff of fresh air from the gaps in the ceiling, and the slightly musty smell of damp stone. The floor was soft with mulch; hundreds of years' worth of redwood detritus had created a soft forest-like floor. He wasn't even sure, now that he came to think it, that there was an actual floor here; it might be made of the hard packed earth that whomever had made this place had found when they carved this out of the heart of the Mountain. Between the Redwood trees were small stone benches, and there were niches on either side of the fountain with shelves.

“Ah yes,” he said, as he eyed the various implements and books piled haphazardly in the shelves, “this is where the dish should live.”

He crossed toward the fountain and took a bronze dipper off a hook beside it. He plunged the dipper into the waist-high pool of water, and carried it with both hands carefully to the center of the room to pour it into the bowl. He crossed and hung the dipper back on its hook, and paused to lower his hands into the pool. The water was icy cold, and woke him up thoroughly. He removed his hands and wiped them once down his face, savoring for a moment the tingling sensation the clear, cold water awakened under his skin. He smoothed his wet hands over his hair, then dried them off on the skirts of his old dressing-gown.

Taking a deep breath, he squared his shoulders. It had been a very, very long time since he had tried scrying; he was not looking forward to this, but he had to try. For Mari's sake. Is' heart began to pound as he felt both anticipation and renewed urgency roiling inside him. Something deep in his belly tightened like an anxious fist. He hoped he would see *something*, anything to tell him where she might be. He reached a hand up, pressing his palm down on his kippah, settling it more firmly on his head, allowing its very slight weight to center him, and focused his thoughts on entering into a spiritual connection with the Maker.

“Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melech ha'olam shecheyanu v'kiy'manu v'higyanu lazman hazeh,” He said the “Shehecheyanu:” (“Blessed are you, Lord our God, Maker of Time and Space, who has supported us, protected us, and brought us to this moment.”) It was a blessing Jews typically said to commemorate firsts: births, weddings, holidays, special occasions; it had been handed down to Is as the blessing that opened the eyes. The blessing enabled a pause to acknowledge being alive, it made one aware of the moment and the newness of it while giving thanks, and it enabled one to truly wake up and *see*.

How the Scrying Pool worked, Is did not know. Somehow, the Shehecheyanu blessing opened the inner eye, and enabled one to see slight reflections of different times or spaces in the pool. One could not control it; what a person saw was whatever they needed to see. He had very little hope of seeing Mari, but he had felt compelled to try this anyway.

The water in the dish was completely smooth, dark and slate-colored, only dimly reflecting the stained glass above it. He was not sure why he could not see the bottom of the light bronze bowl; it was a very shallow, wide dish, after all. But he could not. As he gazed, trying to empty his mind and focus on his breathing the way Master Zalman had taught him, a silvery mist crept across the water. Is' heart began to pound so hard, the white shirt he wore under his dressing gown fluttered slightly with each shallow breath he took in. He leaned his palms on the table, and bent over the bowl.

He saw redwood trees, and thought the bowl must somehow be reflecting the room. The redwood trees were in a sort of silvery mist, or was it just that the water in the bowl was clouded? But then he saw her: Mari. She stepped out of the mist, her mouth hanging open slightly as she gazed at something in front of her. Is could not tell if the look on her face was wonder, or disbelief, and then there was a gap in the mist, and he saw what she was looking at.

It was a circular thing made of copper, with great spiral wheels. A carriage? It was covered in gears and clockwork, with strange spiny, accordion-like things folded up on either side of it, and a small copper pipe on the top that was emitting steam. It was beautiful, in a very arcane and ridiculous way. It shone in places, but underneath it had started to develop verdigris and take on a blueish green tone. The horses in front of it shone with the same color; Is looked

closer, and realized that they weren't horses at all; they were extremely stylized, their joints hinged with large bolts: these horses were clockwork things.

A plump woman in a ridiculously overblown, fringed, beaded Victorian mourning costume stepped out from behind the carriage-thing, and appeared to be frowning or squinting at the sky. She held enormous goggles, her fingers plucking and picking at the leather straps. An odd little man walked toward Mari. He had long, curling white moustaches, a long beard, and was wearing a similar pair of enormous goggles. He had tufts of white hair that stood out like peaks on either side of a domed, bald head. He appeared to be chattering to Mari, gesticulating wildly with his hands.

Is tried to gauge if Mari appeared alarmed, but he could not tell. She didn't seem to be in danger, but he had no way of knowing who these people were; he had never seen a carriage like that, and could not tell from Mari's surroundings where she might be. He also had no way of knowing if he was seeing something from the past, or something happening now, or seeing the future. He huffed out a breath in frustration, his hands clenching on the edge of the table. He leaned too close; his beard dipped into the water, causing ripples to obscure the surface.

The image faded.

That clockwork carriage had looked like the door that Is had never been able to pass through: the door to the future.

Is forgot the Scrying Pool, forgot that he was still dressed in his sleeping garments, forgot that he had not yet packed any provisions or left out food for Figaro; with his heart pounding, he bounded up the stairs out the West side of the room, and headed toward the door to the Archives. He forgot everything in his urgent desire to find Mari. Or was it an urgent desire to go through

that door he had never been allowed to pass through? Or was it an urgent desire to see if that carriage were somehow connected to the door?

He reached the small wooden door that led to the Archives, and placed his palm against it, ready for the tingling that meant it was going to open.

Nothing happened.

His heart jumped hugely, once, and then settled into a light and fast fluttering. His breath came in shallow gasps.

He slapped his hand on the door, palms sweating now.

Nothing happened.

Is pounded on the door then; he shouted at it, commanding it to open. He had never, in forty or more years spent in this place, had the door fail to respond to his touch. He had never heard or read of such a thing happening. Not in any of the dairies or logs that Archivists were supposed to keep; not in any legend handed down by word of mouth had it ever even been suggested that the door had not responded to an Archivist.

He tasted salt; trickling into his crying, calling mouth were his own tears. He didn't heed them; he pounded and called until his voice grew raspy and his fists grew scraped and bleeding.

Then, after a time, he was not aware of how long, it may have been minutes and it may have been hours, when he had actually left tiny marks of his own blood on that plain wooden door, something happened.

At first, it appeared as though ink were bleeding out from inside the door. It spread on the door in small places, rather like when he left his pen nib sitting too long in one space on the parchment. Then it began to spread; it branched and twisted. He let his hands fall to his sides

and stepped back, one palm absently massaging his chest above his heart as his breathing slowed.

The ink formed words.

רב לך

“Rav Lakh,” he read.

He stepped back, his hands trembling, and watched the words fade.

“Hashem, Maker, the one who guides our steps, would you deny me now? Would you deny me Grace?”

לך

The words formed again.

His mind whirling, his shoulders slumped, he stumbled away and took a seat in the first chair he came to. He rested his forearms on his thighs and stared at the floor. He was so tired. He had given so much of his life to this place, to the service of the Maker, never asking why he was asked to do this, only knowing it was what he had to do.

What did it mean? “Rav Lakh,” he tasted the words with his mouth: they were bitter. Why was it in the feminine form? Speaking to a man, one would say “Rav Lekha.” “You have done much?” He tried to translate, seeking to find a meaning. “You have done enough?”

Unaccountably, unasked for, an image popped into his mind. An image of his mother. He didn’t remember what he’d been asking her for: he had been a difficult boy, he was sure- stubborn, too clever for his own good. He hadn’t seen how much his mother worked to take care

of him and make him happy, because it had never seemed to pain her. She had given and given to him, and he had asked for more, as small children will. Because she loved him, she had given. He knew now, after forty years and more taking care of the people and taking care of the Archives, that there was a deep joy as well as weariness in the giving.

“You have enough!” Mother had said to him once, in exasperation.

“You have enough,” Is repeated slowly, looking around the Great Hall. His heart ached like a throbbing wound, a bruise. “You have enough.” The room grew magnified, pulsed slightly as tears filled his eyes, feeling like hot lenses he was seeing through- seeing now what he had been given and what he had given; seeing now what he would have to see, all that he was going to be allowed to see.

“This is it,” he whispered, running his tongue over cracked, dry lips as the hot tears ran into his beard. “I won’t be seeing that door into the future. I won’t be seeing what lies beyond it, will I, Hashem? Will I, Maker, Creator, Mother and Father of us all?”

He wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his dressing gown, and chuckled softly.

“You do have a sense of humor though, don’t you. Talking to me like you’d scold a mother hen who had given too much and just enough of her heart’s blood to nourish her child. All right, then. I will obey. I have fought You, Maker, and I have questioned You and railed at You and I have pounded You with my fists as though I were an angry child. Child and Mother both, all in one mixed-up old man,” he sniffed, drew a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his nose. “I have enough. It is true, I suppose,” he murmured, as his eyes took in the colors and intriguing lines of bookshelves, stone trees and chairs in the hall. His eyes rested on the table in front of him; there, faintly, he saw his own initials “I.S.” carved*. They had faded in the scarred

wood, showing faintly black where grit and the dust of years had rubbed into the marks. He remembered doing that, bored one day with a stack of parchment, feeling rebellious, wanting to venture outside, scratching idly at the wooden table with his dry pen nib. He rubbed his thumb over the marks, and his mind ran over the years he had spent in this place.

“There is still much for me to learn here,” he sighed, rubbing his chest where his heart still ached and throbbed.

“All right, Maker. I will let go. I trust you. I believe in you. You are everything, after all; I serve you, but,” his tears welled up again and his throat burned, “I am so tired. I had wanted to see beyond that door. I had wanted to find Mari, and train my Apprentice; I am so tired, Maker.”

With that, the corners of his mouth turned up, and his eyebrows lifted in amazement. “Rav Lakh!” he began to chuckle then, and soon was wiping away new tears, tears of mirth. ‘You have done enough/ you have done much/ you HAVE enough!’ oh, it is all true. I have found my Home already; why do I need to go through a new door? I have found my promised future... right here, there are mysteries I need to unravel and,” he paused, drawing in his breath sharply, “and, maybe someone needs to write it all down, somewhere- someone needs to delve into the great mystery of the Archives, and write down our history. If we don’t know where we’ve been and what we’ve done here, we won’t get very far. Shouldn’t stride into the future without a map, after all,” and, still muttering to himself, chuckling and repeating “Rav Lakh,” with relish, he placed his hands on the chair arms, heaved himself to his feet, and walked toward his study, head down, shoulders slightly bowed, and one palm massaging his chest, where his large, clumsy heart lay, aching.

**this word has been censored. (- Raven)*

**Surely a cat is the only creature in the world who can sleep in a pointedly sarcastic manner.*

** Ismael's surname begins with an S, so his nickname, also his initials, amuses him endlessly.*