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“Seek For Yourself”

Is, or rather, the Manuscript version of Is, leaned back in his chair and smiled gently at Mari. “It is time, now, Raven,” he said.

Mari pushed her chair back from the tea table and gathered herself to rise. She had already attached the menorah, which looked more like a small brass lantern, to the belt at her waist; she stowed the tiny silver ear-trumpet in the pouch that hung beside it. She had no idea how these things would help her, but it gave her heart to feel their weight.

“Time?” she parroted lamely. She was so weary. What she really wanted, more than anything at all at this point, was a very dull and steady place to call home. Somewhere to sleep, and an occupation for her hands and mind during the day. She would gladly trade in the status and excitement of being an Apprentice for the dull routine of the Academy. Even though she now had a friend, whereas at the Academy she was an outcast, she would trade friendship and love, just so she could lie down and sleep in safety.

Is’ eyes scanned her face. He was not the real Is, but the Manuscripts were obviously not just unthinking echoes; there was intelligence in his eyes. She wasn’t sure how it worked. Was this Manuscript a piece of Is? Did it have a soul? More questions she filed away to ask Is when she was finally out of this maze.

“You need to sleep soon, Mari,” he said softly. “The place I am sending you now will be safe enough. The Shadow has not reached there. It may come in when I open the door to you, but it takes a while for the Shadow to take root and gain strength. Your thoughts all, in a way, just as tangible in here as your actions,” he lifted the teapot and set it back down on the table; it made a very solid thump, “and even more tangible than most objects, will determine whether the Shadow can take root and grow. But enough of that for now - all you need to do now is follow the bookshelves back there,” he waved his hand past the strange tangle of curved bookshelves, and Mari saw that the room seemed to have stretched while she sat with Is and drank tea, “until you come to a small, winding iron stair. Climb the stair, and open the door at the top. It will be open to you now.”

“the...door? Is that the door that I could not open, the one with the ..”

“Clockwork. Yes, it is a door to that place - or rather, to part of it. Sometimes you have to go backward in order to move forward, Mari. No more explanations now, just go. Maker go with you,” he said, and vanished.

“How cliché,” Mari grumbled, “I feel like Alice. People come and go so quickly here...” She took up the little silver bowl that contained dried fruit and nuts, and she poured its contents into the pouch at her belt. The fruit mixture would get into the tiny silver trumpet that was already in that pouch, but she had a feeling she would be grateful for the sustenance. She should have thought about provisions from the start, but she really hadn’t known this was going to be such a long journey. Mari snorted. “just go into the Archives, and look at some Manuscripts,” she picked up the leftover biscuits

and put them into the pouch, too. She had thought she was going to be having a long, leisurely stroll among bookshelves!

Bookshelves: very much like the ones that surrounded her now. She walked among them, longing to stop and browse. The books were beautiful; some leather-bound, shiny, supple and thinning with long use; some bindings looked to be of wood pulp, some of a strange synthetic that looked like metal, but when she touched it, felt like thick, stiffened cloth. Their colors varied from jewel-bright, to colors found in nature; some were hand painted with intricate illuminations.

There were plain books, too, fat and ruffled from long use, stuffed into the shelves here and there. This was a library in use, not a showplace. She loved every winding aisle. Sometimes the curved shelves took a coy little pause, and there would be a deep, inviting window-seat, with thick curtains if one wanted to curl up there with a book and close away the world with just the view for company. She peered out the rippled, bubbling, old glass windows, and saw a distorted view of sand, with sage colored tufts of sea grass, and beyond, a flat blue-grey expanse that could have been either moor or sea.

The Mountain has moved again, she thought. Another thing to ask is. Why (and how?) were they always on the move? It made life interesting enough. The temptation was, of course, to step down out of the mountain town and explore the regions they moved to; the danger was in being left behind. This happened often; people would simply disappear. People would come into Ardenna from outside as well, knowing that if the mountain moved while they were visiting or shopping, they might be whisked away from their homes. Thus, the Mountain society was always changing slightly, and one

soon learned the unspoken rule that these changes were simply not mentioned. If a neighbor disappeared one day, one simply said a blessing for their journey, and did not discuss it.

Mari used to find these odd little gaps in conversation uncomfortable and puzzling; now she knew why it happened. If everyone constantly talked about who had left and who came in, they would never have time to go about their daily lives and talk about the present. Also, there seemed to be a slight undercurrent of superstition around the leaving- as if they feared and longed for it at the same time. If they focused too much on it, they might tip the scales to longing, and feel the urge to leave too strong, and pack up and go, one day. Then where would they be? Most people shuddered with fear at the unknown; even if the unknown was more beautiful than anything they had ever experienced, they'd rather stay with what they knew.

Mari huffed out an explosive breath and rubbed at the thick bubbled window glass. It was cool to the touch. Cold outside, she thought wistfully, and pushed herself away from the window to continue on her quest.

After several false ends and interesting diversions (an alcove with an enormous silver samovar and small, richly enameled cups; a corner niche that was more like a dark, tapestry cave, for those readers or writers who could not concentrate with good views or sunlight, she guessed) Mari finally arrived at a wall of bookshelves that stretched across the room. These books were more crisp, bright and regular, marching to the ceiling in ordered rows, resembling a lawyer's office.

In the corner, in front of the books, was a tiny wrought iron staircase that curved around itself in an impossible spiral.

“It looks more like a melted ladder,” she said, then added, “first signs of madness: complaining to the bookshelves.” She heaved a sigh, and began to climb, pausing now and then to untangle the pouch at her belt, or her trailing skirt, from the sides of the staircase.

The door was a thing of intricate beauty, a thin sister to the clockwork door that so intrigued her in the place she was starting to think of as “The Origin Room.” It was fashioned of a dull, dark gold metal, warm in tone; maybe bronze, she guessed. Some of the clockwork gears were large and intimidating, some small and incredibly delicate. There were raised letters on the door, declaring simply, “תלך” or, “Go:” future imperative, her scholarly mind made a mental note. Did that make it less of a command, more of a promise? She brushed it with her fingertips, felt a slight tingling as though her fingers had fallen asleep, and the sparkling, intricate little cogs began to turn. With a slight groan, the largest gear of all shifted one notch, and the door swung open.

The first thing she noticed was that she was looking, suddenly, through the holes of a mask. She put her hand up to feel her face; it was a small velvet domino, arching up toward her temples and secured with ribbon around her hair. Her hair was piled in the fashion made popular by the Aesthetic Movement, with its heavy influence of “Ancient Greece”. With a steep sinking of her heart, she remembered this costume. She felt her dress- yes, it was the dress; the plain silk dress that she had been so proud of, that had become a memory so shaming, she would still cringe away from the pain of it.

The room was full -entirely full- of people. They were so jammed in, she could not move without pressing up against someone’s arm, back, or without needing to turn

defensively sideways, if they were facing her. She slipped right back into the habit she learned long ago on city streets, and moved her arms a little away from her body, elbows outward and sharp. No one would come too close if her body seemed to take up more space.

They were in fancy dress; the men mostly in evening suits with small domino masks, some of them a little more outrageous, the wigs and pumps of seventeenth century dress seeming to be the most popular. The women were as varied as a jungle full of brightly colored birds; they all had masks, as well, but these were more elaborate, with long feathers cupping their painted faces, or arching up over their heads coyly.

Mari looked around, hoping to escape this night- was she actually revisiting the exact night?- without the past repeating itself. She remembered how they had seemed instinctively to know she was not one of them, and how they had eyed her dress. She had been so proud of that simple dress she had made herself, until she stepped through the door. How shaming it was, the scorn in their faces! Their eyes on her had made her feel so small, like a grasshopper, and, for the first time, acutely aware and ashamed of her clothing and appearance. She had come here, she remembered, on fire with love; she had felt beautiful and the night had felt perfect, until she had let those people with their scornful eyes make her too aware of herself. She saw it now: she should not have let their opinions spoil anything. She should not have thought so much of her own appearance, but should have focused on the night itself, one of the most precious glimpses of paradise she had ever experienced. It was a gift, this night, and she had let it be tainted by thinking too much of others' view of her.

She edged through the crowd, intent on the french doors she could see on the other side of the room. Get through a door - any door, she told herself. Go to a place she hadn't visited that night; change the memory. Her heart pounding, she found herself muttering under her breath, a strange prayer or mantra: "Please, not this night. Not this night. Any night but this one. Not this night." as though if she willed it hard enough, she would not have to revisit this memory, she would not be standing here in a simple silk dress and mask, the cream silk so thin she could practically see it tremble where it covered her heart that was thudding so painfully.

The heat of the room and the press of bodies made her head pound; she began to feel hot, prickly around her neck and slightly nauseous. Though Mari was not the fainting type, she thought it would be wise to move over to stand against the wall beside one of the large potted plants and breathe for a moment. At least the enormous plant would offer her some shelter, some reprieve from all the people.

No one noticed her as she pushed her way determinedly to the plant. Mari was used to being on the sidelines watching. Being a quiet person, she was never the center of attention, but the way people's eyes now slid off her or looked through her completely was odd. Some women sat next to her: a plump matron with a pleasant, pretty face, fanning herself and chattering away to a solemn, thin woman in dark purple. Widowed, Mari immediately noted, though not recently. Mari cleared her throat; they did not look up, nor did they stop talking. "May I offer you some punch?" she hazarded. No response. "Excuse me, you have dropped something," she tried again, stooping over and flapping her hand about rather idiotically somewhere just above the floor.

They didn't even break off their conversation to look. So, Mari thought, I am invisible. Just a spectator. Well, that made things a trifle easier, though why her costume had to change in that case, she had no idea.

The familiar dress and mask were bringing memories pressing back in; her throat felt swollen and sore, and tears kept pricking her eyelids.

Ridiculous, she thought. Ridiculous, to cry now.

She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. This was a beautiful night, really. She decided to relax and enjoy it again, just once, just for a moment, and try to find out why she was here.

She stood up, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand, and then wiping her damp palms on her skirt. It didn't matter; now that she knew no one could see her, she was beginning to feel some stirring of curiosity, and looked around the room more calmly. Everyone was here: that is, everyone who Counted in town. They all flocked here for the season; she had been persuaded, she remembered, by him. Ariel.

It was not her place. This place was out of her league, people like her did not come to here; but he had had an extra invitation, he had pressed her to come, and she could not deny him anything in those early days. "I need to see you," he had said, "I can't stand being apart from you."

She pushed her way along the wall, and then, glancing toward the door and gaining her bearings, her eyes fell on- herself.

Herself, looking small and lost in a plain silk dress, her posture clearly indicating that she wished she had not come. Herself, her hair piled high in glossy curls, and a homemade mask on her face. She looked pale, and Mari was shocked at how much

thinner she looked than she ever felt. She looked radiant. A glowing, innocent girl in a simple dress- of course they glared at her! She saw it now: all those women, who worked so hard with their elaborate and very expensive costumes, did not have the dewy glow of innocence that she could see now in herself. She was unaware, which was something these people (who had been groomed to be Perfect since they were tiny) had seldom seen. Further, the simplicity of her costume was startling. She was also deeply in love, which lit her from within like a thousand candle flames dancing under her skin. Of course they glared! Mari wished she could march up to herself and tell her past self, "hold your chin high. You are beautiful in your own way." She felt a sudden, sharp relief when she realized that she could let the deep shame of that night go. The shame had been all in her mind. They hadn't been sneering at her because she was poor! How very odd to stand there, assessing herself. Herself, of only one year ago.

Then she saw him: Ariel. He was unassuming, but people stood back and smiled when he walked by them; they let him through, and they responded to him, always leaning toward him slightly, as though he was on the verge of saying something they didn't want to miss. It was always like that when Ariel was around, Mari remembered. He had a calming presence. Even watching him from the side of the room, she felt it wash over her, the warm serenity he brought with him. Standing with Ari was like standing in a grove of trees. Immediately grounding, calming, and uplifting. Mari's lips twisted ruefully. It had been so easy, after all, for him to convince her; she was already under his spell. She worried her bottom lip with her teeth. Where had that thought come

from? Didn't she love him? Didn't she believe in him? Wasn't he her beshert, her soul mate?

She edged toward herself and Ariel, just as he took the memory-Mari's elbow and led her to a side room. Mari remembered this; how her heart had skipped around madly at his hand on her elbow, how his arrival had felt like a rescue in that room full of people who seemed to her scornful, forbidding; how comforting the rough brush of his coat sleeve was against her arm, when he moved to put her hand in the crook of his elbow.

Then he closed the door and there was peace again - just the two of them. Well, three.

Mari's breath came shallow and quick as she watched herself watch him. She had no idea how transparent she was! Memory-Mari's eyes glowed ; they were huge and dilated. Her face was so open, so dewy, so flushed, so completely and obviously in love. She was leaning toward him, too, just as all the others did. He didn't have to do any work, Mari thought, I was already won.

Again she winced, wondering where that thought came from. Her heart ached as she looked at herself. She remembered, faintly, that soaring happiness, of being in this room with him, of trusting him completely, and of feeling so incredibly blessed that he loved her too.

Ariel took Memory-Mari's hand, and Mari moved around behind herself to get a better view of his face. She remembered that look, the eyes intense, and moist with near-tears. But then memory-Mari looked down for a second, overcome by shyness, and Ariel's eyes flashed, with a bright gleam, toward the door. Mari took in a startled breath and held it for a moment. It had been almost...sly, that look.

Mari's heart squeezed painfully. Please, she thought. Please do not take this memory from me.

Dream-Mari spoke then, and Mari could only watch helplessly as the memory of their first time alone together unfolded in front of her.

He held her hand tenderly, and his eyes were stormy grey.

"you need to talk to me. your eyes are grey."

"let's go sit down."

And so they walked to the couch in this haven of quiet, the window open so that only the shushing of the trees and faintly, underneath, the counterpoint of mellow creek trickling could be heard.

and the beating of his heart.

"I am not asking you to push me, you are not making the decision for me; I am asking your advice. I need your help. I want to be with you always; I can think of nothing else."

"patience." That she, of all people, should be telling him to be patient would have had her screaming with laughter if her heart hadn't been busy figuring out how to beat in a new location: it was in his body now, her heart.

"will you wait for me?"

"I will wait for you. I am yours. But Ari. this love- to be given this is such an enormous gift. Isn't it enough? I never imagined living life at this pitch; I had no idea that love could be so powerful. To ask for everything to be perfect would be too much. To want to be your wife, to want to have your child, to be a family, isn't that asking too much, when we have so much already?"

"No," he said in a groan, and tears seeped out of the corners of his eyes. "It is not asking too much. don't say that."

"I just mean...cherish this: we are so blessed. "

Mari watched herself as she took a bracelet off her wrist, and fastened it around his. it was a thick chain that was handcrafted in Greece; she had bought it with a vague longing in her heart almost fifteen years ago, on an island called Santorini. She was thinking of love, and hoping for it, as the setting sun turned the sea around the island to molten copper.

She never thought she would fasten it around the wrist of her true love. She never really believed such a thing would happen to her. Now, as she watched, she saw his eyes dart to the door again, and she fervently wished she hadn't. She saw her body leaning toward his eagerly, his body leaning slightly away. She saw a thousand different tiny signals that... that her love, her Ariel, her rabbi, the person she trusted more than anyone else in the world, was lying. Somehow, he was lying to memory-Mari, and memory Mari was too innocent and too deeply in love to see it.

"you don't have to wear this, but I want you to have it. It was made on an island called Santorini, a place I want to go with you some day, and watch the sun set. You can float in the sea there, and hear the pebbles underneath you chiming softly; just lulled by the sea, you can merge with the world. I want to be with you there some day. Wherever I am, you have a haven. You can always come to me- there will never be a time when you can't come to me."

Mari remembered feeling it was the only thing, and the most precious thing, she could give him: a promise.

She did not see then, as she saw now: his shoulders stiffen, the quick glance at his pocketwatch. She did not see the calculating look in his eyes as he took her face in his hands and kissed her passionately, telling her all the while,

"I love you. I love you. I love you. I want to marry you." He paused then, as she took a quick breath, her heart so full and happy, it was almost painful. "Does that scare you?"

He pulled back then, and his eyes searched memory-Mari's face, hungrily, it seemed to Mari.

"No," memory-Mari whispered, "it doesn't scare me. I want to be with you always." he moaned slightly and took her in his arms, stroking her hair as her head lay against his shoulder.

Mari's heart clenched. Why , why, was she being asked to watch one of her most precious memories?

"In Israel, there is a sculpture, " she heard him say softly into memory-Mari's hair, "that turns things upside

down until the sky is the ground, and the ground is sky."

and Mari thought, yes.

The sculpture is you. You, sitting beside me, breathing, turning the ground around me into sky;

*My body leaps and dives when I am near you, it's not sure yet about this sky it is
standing on,
not standing on, floating, flying, falling.*

*Turning the sky into ground;
when I am near you all things seem to be growing, reaching, living; flowers trees
grasses twining toward us out of that
rich loam sky,
the clamor of life makes my body heavy with desire;
my spirit expands, it reaches from sunrise to sunset, from trembling tip of flower petal to
tree root,
and dives back again to tremble in the light of your eyes.*

Yes. Tears pricked her eyes as she looked at him, her heart still straining toward him. Time had changed this memory into a thing tainted by doubt and hurt, but still, she was steeped in longing. She had wished to turn back the clock and experience this paradise again...but she didn't ask for this, to experience this paradise as herself now, knowing what would follow.

Watching herself in his arms, remembering how complete she had felt, how whole and how happy, Mari clenched her hands in her skirt, leaving damp marks on the thin silk. She took a deep breath, and crossed the room toward memory-Ariel. She reached out a trembling hand and touched, as lightly as she could, the curls behind his ear. Her heart ached for him, and for herself; she looked down at her own glossy hair as it

tumbled against his shoulder, and she felt, very oddly, envy. Envy of herself, at a time when she didn't have any idea of the hurt ahead of her, of the evil she would face. Yes, evil. Mari stroked Ariel's curls again, softly, whispered, "להיטראוט" ("I'hitraot,") and turned to leave him, this memory, and her old self, behind.

The evil was not his doing, she thought; but her heart faltered, and she stopped in the center of the room. Or was it? Did he know more than he ever told her? Was he calculating? He, her gentle, kind, good Ariel, was he sly and cruel, sadistic? He would have to be, if he had known what was going to happen to her, and had chosen, for whatever reason, to express his love anyway. He had to be, if he had not meant the things he said, when he asked her to be his bride, when he had held her so close, and spun dreams - beautiful dreams- of their future. Together. Her chest tight, her heart a clenching fist, she refused to turn around and look at him one last time.

She opened the door to the main room, then stopped as though she'd slammed into a wall. The room was empty, deserted, a ruin. Cracks ran the length of the floor; the walls were broken, crumbled. The floor, once glossy, was filthy and mud-caked. She looked up; the ceiling was broken, open to the sky; plants had a stranglehold on the walls. She walked through the middle of the room, finally peeling the mask off her face and letting it drop. She ran back toward the door she had entered. She pelted up the stairs, and her fingers brushed the door. Nothing happened; no tingle in her hand, and the door did not open.

She turned back and sat on the top of the shallow, broad stairs, facing the room.

What did she need to find here? She had watched one of her most precious memories, the paradise to which she had always longed to return; watching it now, a shadow had crept in to taint the memory with doubt.

Was he lying to her? Was this love not true for him, was it a game all along? But then, if that were so, why would he have gone through the year of torment he went through with her? Was this new way of seeing things an illusion created by her mind, sprung from the hell she had gone through with Ariel? Was her mind destroying her one small glimpse of paradise?

Mari shook her head wearily. There was no way she was going to figure this out right now. She desperately needed to sleep, and she needed to find water soon. Food, she could manage without a little longer, but she wasn't going to be able to wander in this tangled wilderness without water, and a regular source of it. Her tongue felt heavy in her mouth. She massaged her face - her head ached, her skin felt dry. Water and rest. She stood and walked again through the decimated ballroom, trying to remember where the ladies' "powder room" was. She didn't walk again toward the drawing room, where she and Ariel had had their long-ago tryst; she didn't want to see if they were gone, she didn't want to see the room destroyed.

There. In the corner, another door hung crazily off its hinges. She pulled one half of it aside, and walked through to the ladies' room.

Running water! She moaned out loud in relief. She used the toilet, then took off her dress and washed in the small sink, cupping her hands to drink, then filling the canteen that hung on her belt. She decided to save the small ration of dried fruit and

nuts in the pouch on her belt for when hunger became crippling. She was used to managing on an empty stomach for quite some time.

There was a small, velvet couch in the corner of the room that was dusty, but still looked solid. Mari shut and locked the door, and curled up to sleep.