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### “Rule”

*“Miriam had a way with water. She could touch the depths with her song and call forth spiritual nourishment...to speak to the rock means to be in conversation with the natural world; hitting it is an attempt to subjugate nature. Miriam knew the words and she knew the music that would open the deep and secret places of earth-wisdom.” - Rabbi Shefa Gold*

Mari awoke to a wet, heavy slap on her cheek. She tried to raise her head, but it was weighed down; she tried to move her legs, but her body was pressed with a cold weight that held her firmly. It was not uncomfortable, but she panicked. She wrestled her hands flat under her shoulders, her elbows pointing up, and tried to raise her shoulders, pushing the back of her head up. It was completely dark, and the air was dank and thick. She could not remember where she was.

A big, sopping, freezing mass hit her head, then slid down her face. She flopped back onto her stomach to wipe it frantically with her hand, then held it to her nose. Mud. Earth. Then she remembered.

She had dug a hole in which to shelter and hide from threats; she had meant to stay only a moment, then make a fire. She must have fallen asleep. She remembered the hollow log across the entrance, in front of which she had begun her tunnel. She prayed it had not collapsed into the hole. Squirming around, she managed to gather her

coat and stuff it into her belt, and then she was digging, clawing forward as though she were swimming through the earth. The small hole was not completely collapsed, but it was on its way. She had to drag herself forward with her arms, making tiny movements with her legs to free them; they had already been partially buried in a collapse of earth.

Inch by slow and painful inch, she dragged herself forward out of the tunnel, scooping earth out of the way. She had to stop now and then to clear her nose and eyes of mud; she strove to breathe through her nose, so she would not inhale the liquid earth and choke, or drown. Her lungs felt like they would burst, as the need to breathe faster and the constriction of her ribs overcame her self-control and made her begin to panic. She pushed forward frantically, her movements now mostly an instinctive thrashing toward the entrance.

It became easier once she got to the place where she had lined the sides with sharp, pointed sticks. She had thought to use these as weapons against any wild animals that thought to hunt her; instead, they had served as a different kind of defense, propping up the walls, giving her a tiny bit of time.

The log had not collapsed into the small tunnel. Luckily it was quite long; it sat solidly across the top, and had probably saved her from being buried alive.

She got her hands around the edge of the hole and heaved; her head popped out of the earth into a deluge, a pouring rainstorm. She felt as though she were being born into a freezing world, her hair plastered to her head, the sharp, hard stinging water pushing her back even as she tried to heave herself out of the tunnel. She heard a rough, savage sound like an animal shrieking, and realized it must be herself. Covered with mud from head to foot, clawing herself forward as great clods of earth fell away

from her body, she finally stood, and lunged toward the small stream. She could hardly see, with the rain washing the mud down into her face. She snatched the kippah off her head, and dunked it into the stream. She was crying now, heaving great, dry sobs. She held her kippah in the freezing water until her hands became numb and she feared she might drop it.

She fumbled at the strings of the pouch at her belt, and shoved her kippah inside. Then she wrestled her coat out of her belt, and forced her arms into it. Sodden, full of mud, it was nearly impossible to get her limbs into the freezing, heavy cloth. She felt instinctively that her vulnerable body needed as much protection as she could layer upon herself.

She spotted the flat rock and her flint by the stream, and remembered her naive triumph at making the small fire and building a shelter. Still sobbing angrily, she snatched the rocks up, and hurled them into the stream.

She regretted that act sharply as soon as the stones left her hand. She would now have to find a new way to make a fire. Her anger and shock at nearly being buried alive was now threatening her survival.

Watching her arrowhead fly into the stream, knowing she would not be able to recover it in this blinding rain sobered her as quickly as a slap across the face. Shaking violently, Mari scrubbed the mud from her eyes; the rain, or her tears, had washed most of it away.

Thankfully, she had all her gear still tied to the belt at her waist. She pulled her coat up over her freezing, dripping head, and ran forward into the small stream. She slipped on the large rocks, and fell into the water, breaking her fall with her hand; her

wrist jolted, and there was a sharp pain as her ankle turned, her foot jammed between rocks. She slowly gathered herself, crawled forward carefully out of the stream, stood and took stock. Her ankle was not sprained; her foot felt bruised and her wrist was stiff, but there was no lasting harm done. She would have to breathe, go more slowly and carefully. She adjusted her coat to cover her head more securely, and set off into the woods to try to find some shelter.

Under the hood created by her coat, she soon fell into a half-doze as she stumbled along. Her world became the ground under her feet, the sheet of rain before her eyes, and the heaviness of sodden clothing. She walked like this, mechanically, for quite some time before she realized that the rain had slowed to a quiet patter, and she was sheltered from most of it by the ever changing roof of trees over her head.

She lifted her coat off her head, and let it fall on her shoulders. She would have to find a way to get dry, or her muscles would seize up before morning. She fished a few nuts out of her pouch, finding that underneath the sodden kippah, the contents inside had remained relatively dry. She placed the nuts on her tongue and chewed slowly, resisting the urge to bolt them all down. Those few nuts awakened her body; her mouth watered, and her stomach clenched painfully. She would have to find a place to camp, make a fire if possible, and gather some mushrooms, some herbs, some bark.

As she plodded along, she found herself wondering what would happen if she died. If an Apprentice died inside the Archives, would they just become part of the Archives? The Manuscripts had hinted to her that she was being shown what her task here would be, and that somehow her future with the Archives would be revealed.

Wouldn't they have told her if she was going to die here, so shortly after entering the vast wilderness of this place?

But then, she had forgotten about the Shadow. Maybe since the Shadow had tainted this place, they were not able to know anymore what her role among them would be. If she died, even as her spirit joined the Maker, would her essence somehow stay here, a stray Manuscript, hoping that a new Apprentice would come along that she could save from the same fate? She smiled and gathered her hair, rolling it between her hands to squeeze some of the water out. She took her kippah out of the pouch, and squeezed it gently between her hands. It hadn't been greatly harmed by its journey through the mud and stream; its embroidery was still bright, the tiny, bright crystal beads still dotted its surface here and there. She put it back on her head, and felt gratitude wash through her. She was alive.

There was a strange mist ahead of her; it hung luminous between the trees like a softly draping grey silk curtain. She followed with her eyes as far as she could - the line across the trees where the mist began was oddly defined. She approached it slowly, ready to run if it proved to be somehow threatening.

There was a movement behind the mist; shapes all bending and straightening, then moving forward very slowly, in the same direction. She walked as softly as she could; there was no check in their movement, no sign that whatever it was had noticed her presence.

The closer she got, the more it was clear that these were human forms. She could not see any colors or specific features, just dark outlines in the soft, near-opaque grey mist, as though she were looking into a curtained room, lit from within.

She crouched behind a tree as close as she could get to the mist, and watched the shapes for a time. They moved and bent, always in the same direction, and always walking, so slowly, toward something she could not see. She decided she had to take a risk, get closer. She moved forward to the grey wall; there was no reaction from the shapes. They were clearly human beings; they shuffled forward, bowing every now and then. She could hear no sound. She held out her hands to the grey wall, and met resistance. It looked like mist, and yet she could not pass through. It had no texture; it was not cold or hot. There was no feeling to it at all, she just could not move past it. It was as though time itself had become a solid form, right there in front of her, not allowing her to exist in the other space.

She watched for a few moments, then walked sideways along the foggy wall, following the people. This, at least, was something new; it was not a doorway or a way out, it was not an answer, but it gave her some way to take action.

Squinting ahead through the trees and along the wall of mist, she saw what seemed to be a large gathering of the people or creatures. They stood still, and from her vantage point, they resembled a building of some sort. As she grew closer, she saw that they were gathered closely, shoulders almost touching, in concentric rings. Each inner ring of people rose head and shoulders higher than the one outside it, so the resulting shape was regular, symmetrical as a flower, and beautiful. They swayed very slightly, but still she heard no sound.

She tried to bash her fists on the wall of mist, but still, nothing. It did not hurt, her body simply refused to exist in the same place as that mist.

Then she remembered: the menorah and the small silver trumpet. Surely one of the items would help her here. She fumbled at the strings that held the pouch closed, and slipped her fingers inside to pull out the small trumpet. She placed the tiny straight end into her ear.

She heard a rhythmic thrumming like a heartbeat, a sound of deep, soft drums, and human voices, humming in a chant-like, atonal drone. The tiny hairs rose on the back of her neck, and she shivered. The sound filled her belly; it made her chest feel like it was slightly vibrating, and her body swayed a little where she stood. She was soothed, although she felt heavy in every limb. Soon, she thought, she would take root, she would plant herself, an inhabitant of this forest; she would be at peace, she would reach down into the well of the earth and stretch her contentment and serenity toward the sky.

“You don’t want to listen too long, miss,” a small voice sounded somewhere above her head. She jumped slightly, and the ear trumpet fell out of her fingers. Her fingers had grown numb and icy since she’d been standing there; she hadn’t noticed. How long had she stood, listening? She looked down at the pine needle and leaf-strewn ground, to find the small silver trumpet. She heard a scrabbling down the trunk of the tree next to her, and a tiny brown hand snatched the silver trumpet before she could stoop to pick it up.

“Pretty thing, pretty, pretty,” the small voice crooned. She studied its owner, who held the silver trumpet in front of - her? His? - Mari couldn’t tell - eyes, twisting it back and forth, letting the light glimmer on the curled, shining surface. It was a person, maybe a teenager, Mari could not tell. He or she had brown skin and thick dark brown

hair, wildly curling, dull with dust, tangled with bits of pine needle and dirt, pulled roughly back into a ponytail, tied with a leather thong. Studying the person as he or she examined the silver trumpet, Mari saw that some of the mess was actually deliberate; the hair was braided here and there, with bits of stone, leaves, and pine needles twined in it. The face was extremely dirty, drawn and thin, which is why Mari could not tell the person's age. The eyes were startlingly bright green, and they flashed at Mari from time to time, as though assessing her reaction to the creature's possession of her trumpet. The eyebrows were almost comical, arching neatly over each eye in perfect half circles.

"Please. I need that," Mari began, and the crouching creature slowly straightened. He or she was very small, almost like a child, with no spare fat - a wiry, muscular, catlike form. Mari backed away a little, sensing that she would have to be wary. It did not do to underestimate the strength of a possible adversary.

"Well, now, what do ye need it for, Missy? Listen to that lot any longer," the creature waved the silver trumpet at the misty curtain of fog, "and ye will not be needing much of anything soon." Dirty, jagged teeth showed in a feral grin, and the creature laughed, giving forth a surprisingly musical and pure sound, rippling up and down the scale like beautiful, liquid birdsong. It tilted its dark head, and studied Mari with bright, amused green eyes. "Come, then. Come after, have tea, listen to what I have to tell ye, and I'll give ye back your pretty whistle," the creature grinned again, put Mari's trumpet to its lips, and blew a series of clear, musical notes.

"How-" Mari gasped.

"Now then, follow along. I was teasing afore, but not about that lot. They'll catch ye, and make ye one of their own, only worse," and with a scornful, dark look at the

shapes beyond the mist, the creature started off through the woods. It had a surprisingly strong walk, interspersed with a hop here and there, as though it was avoiding something that would make too much noise, or simply out of high spirits, Mari could not tell. It certainly made not a whisper of sound when it moved. It was covered in hides, its feet tied into small boots made of leather, with, here and there, fur coming out of the folds- rabbit skins, turned inside out, so the fur was on the inside, Mari guessed. Her feet throbbed in her own beloved boots, and she longed to get out of them, out of her sodden stockings and clothing. The creature's getup looked somehow right in this forest; it blended in, and looked so very comfortable. Mari fixed her eyes on the retreating back. As the light grew dimmer, it grew harder and harder for her to keep up with the creature. Every now and then, it would skip back to her, peer into her face, and chirp something encouraging. Mari stumbled along after it, no longer looking around her. She was going to have to trust this creature- no, this *person*, this human being- because she was weary to the bone and had no other choice.