

**Steampunk Torah** *Parsha Behar* Leviticus 25:1-26:2  
May 14, 2011 by Raven

Mari scrambled to catch up with Ismael, so many questions racing around her head that she remained silent; one hand clamped her kippah firmly on her head, and in the other she clutched a great handful of her skirts so she wouldn't trip over her hem on the uneven cobblestone street. The road they were walking up was the broadest road on the Mountain; it wound its way up, curving back on itself, making its way eventually to the building at the top which housed the Archives. Mari had only heard of this place; she had never thought she would see it, let alone be on her way up there with the Archivist himself.

On maps this place was called Ardenna, but the inhabitants just called it the Mountain. The Mountain was home to a strange and often delightful hodgepodge of cultures; many of the inhabitants had made their way here with their families simply to see it, and never left. Still others had come here to live by choice, because of the ever-changing excitement that living here involved. Mari wasn't sure why the majority of people who lived here had come here as children and were orphaned; no one seemed to want to discuss how they wound up here, and Mari was not rude enough to press them for information. Perhaps she had finally found someone who would tell her; she intended to ask the Archivist all the questions that had been driving her crazy.

She darted a sidelong glance at him, only to see him looking at her with a frown gathering like a dark storm on his formidable brows. He walked easily beside her; Mari tried to hide that she was out of breath, but her ribs began to strain against her corset, and, seeming to finally notice her difficulty, Ismael slowed.

He studied her from under his wildly curling brows, still frowning. “You’ve had quite an ordeal this morning,” he began, and glanced up ahead to a small red door set amidst a row of shops selling everything from books to ladies’ gloves and ribbons. “I know you’ve already had some coffee,” His eyes twinkled at her, “but let’s have some refreshment, and I’ll tell you a little bit about what you’ve gotten yourself into, before we make our way further up the mountain to the Archives. It’s better if you’re in a more serene state before you meet the manuscripts.” With that incomprehensible statement, he turned and held open the little red door for Mari, who had stopped dead in the center of the road, opening and closing her mouth like a fish, bursting with so many questions she felt like she was choking on them all.

Chuckling, he took a few steps toward her and grasped her elbow, opening the door again and ushering her into a warm, dark room. “Chocolate, I think, Beatrice. For two,” he spoke somewhere to the back of the room. It was so dark in there, Mari was still blinking her eyes to make out anything beyond the gleam of candlelight on dark wood, and the muffling velvet of deep burgundy drapes that seemed to be everywhere.

Ismael, still grasping her above her elbow, steered her toward a table in the corner and pulled out a chair. She plopped into it ungracefully, and let out a big, relieved breath.

“There!” he chuckled, “I was getting worried, wondering when you’d breathe again.”

She looked across at him and smiled ruefully. Her head was still spinning with the idea that here she was, Mari, children of servants, who had only a scant month ago been sent to the Mountain from her small village in order to be trained at the Academy

until she was deemed fit for service herself, sitting across from The Great Archivist, someone she had only before heard of as a shadowy figure of legend.

“I think I need to thank you for...for my life, sir,” Mari began, surprised with how at home she felt talking to this man; if the stories she’d heard told in whispers at the Academy were even partially true, she should be in awe of him, or seeking to escape an apprenticeship. Instead, she felt glad of his company, and happier than she’d been since she had arrived in this strange place.

“Well, now! Please call me Is.” He grinned at her, unexpected dimples appearing in his dusky cheeks. “You’re welcome. You’ll repay the debt many times over before we are through, make no mistake. I have not given you any choice in the matter, but Apprentices never do get a choice: Apprentices are chosen.”

He smiled and pushed back from the table slightly as a small woman with iron grey hair, painfully disciplined into a knob on the back of her head, whose body filled her colorful orange and cream garments as solidly and firmly and with the same cozy air as an upholstered couch, bustled up and set a tray on the table with a clatter. The tray held a steaming pot of rich chocolate, which she proceeded to pour into stone mugs she set in front of Mari and the man Mari would now try to think of as “Is.” The woman, whom Mari supposed was Beatrice, unloaded a plate of small baked disks of potato topped with what looked like soft, creamy cheese and chopped tomatoes, and a plate of prettily iced ginger cookies, patted Is on the shoulder, and bustled away again.

Mari’s stomach let out a yowl at the sight of the food; it felt like days since she’d had a proper meal. She jumped slightly, and put her hand down to rub her stomach, mortified; she heard Is chuckle and glanced up at him, ruefully, her lips curling in a

smile. “There’s a zoo in my stomach,” she joked, reaching for the enticing cup of chocolate.

“Eat up, my girl, and I’ll explain some of the things to you that you will need to know. First, you must understand that I don’t know everything there is to know about the Archives.” He filled a plate with cookies, took a sip of chocolate, and studied the curling, flowery icing design on a cookie before dipping it into his chocolate, and munching on it with a look of bliss on his face. “No one, to my knowledge, has ever learned everything there is to learn about the Archives; they change, you see. That is one of the reasons they are dangerous.”

Mari took a tiny, hesitant bite of a potato, and her eyes widened in surprise as the mixture of sweetness and savory spiciness flooded her mouth. She heaped her plate with potatoes, and Is, watching, chuckled again.

“Good. I can’t abide a woman with a small appetite.” He sighed, and laced his fingers under his chin, his elbows propped among the plates. “The most important thing for you to know about the Archives is that they are carved into the mountain. No, not carved,” he corrected himself, frowning, “it’s more like they *grew* there. They are living things, and the rock shelves that house them are formed of a substance that...breathes. You will see, when it is time for you to walk among them. I call you Apprentice now, but really, you must be accepted by the manuscripts before you are fully an Apprentice. I have complete confidence that they will accept you; it has been a very long time since there has been an Apprentice with such a courageous heart from the very start.” He smiled at Mari and took another sip of chocolate.

“Because the manuscripts are living, and are in our care, our Sabbaths are different; you must let go of Shabbat as you know it, from this day forward. Our Sabbaths are...somewhat dangerous, and yet I have found them the most rewarding times of my life. Tell me what you know about Shabbat, Mari.”

Mari, puzzled, set down her fork and gathered her thoughts. “Shabbat is when we enter the time beyond time. When we light the candles, we say the blessing that opens the door for the Neshama Yetera, the extra piece of our soul which enables us to take in the brighter light of the Sabbath, to come into our being. It is a cyclical time; when we enter the still, healing pool of Shabbat, we youthen, in a sense, because we are stepping back from relentlessly forward-moving time into a stillness, a peaceful island that connects through all the Sabbaths, all the way back to Gan Eden, before time was formed. Shabbat is a time when everything is renewed, and we pause to experience the delights of our senses and of living in this world, always aware that within us resides a life-spark of the Maker; we celebrate and give our joy and thanks to the Maker with song and laughter on this holiest of days.”

“Well said!” Ismael smiled. “you’ve already expressed part of what I need to elaborate on now. Shabbat is a time when we put down our work, yes?”

“Of course. We put the work down as though it is finished, even if it isn’t - that way we can experience true and deep healing for this one day.”

“Shabbat is also a time, then, of letting go. It is so easy to focus, our whole lives, on building things - we build our relationships, build our job history, build our ambitions, build our homes, we acquire more and more money and more stuff,” he took up another cookie, cocked an eyebrow at it, grinned and put it back down on the plate, “and it is

easy to mistake all that for security. We think: the higher our job title is, the more stuff we have, the bigger our house, the more secure we are.

Really, what we are is increasingly trapped, enslaved.”

“I can see that,” Mari nodded. “When I was forced to leave my home, I couldn’t carry very much with me. It was an agony to choose what to take...but as I walked away, I felt such enormous freedom, I was almost giddy with it,” she grinned at the memory of the sun on her face, and her sturdy, trusty boots carrying her down the road, away from everything she’d ever known.

“Yes. Thus, the Manuscripts can become a burden. We are their zookeepers, if you will, but we are also their servants. You will understand what I am talking about in time...you can only understand this by experiencing it.” He frowned, tracing designs on the table in a spilled drop of chocolate. “It has been handed down from Archivist to Archivist, straight from the Maker himself, that every Sabbath, we set the manuscripts free.” He smiled at Mari’s dubious expression. “That sounds silly, I know, but it is actually dangerous. The manuscripts...they hold everything that is true and real in our world. They change every moment, as the world around us changes. If a leaf drops off a tree in the Namigian fields, the manuscript that holds the description of those fields changes. Think of them - hundreds of thousands of manuscripts, rustling, moving, changing, breathing as the world breathes. The shelves around them are created of living rock, and the shelves, no, the very mountain itself, into whose heart winds the endless corridors and shelves, all of it is affected by those changes.

On Shabbat, we set them free from our bond, and we let them grow wild.” He paused, and took a deep breath. “Only in the setting them free of our bond can we

retain the security of that bond. It is a paradox. You'll find that there are many paradoxes in this life work of ours," his eyes twinkled at her from under his brows, "and it is fascinating, I can assure you."

"When we set them free, what do we do?"

"Put our arms over our heads, and crouch under a sturdy desk," he chuckled, "just kidding. We sit and listen, mainly, Mari. When you set the Mountain free of your bond, when you are no longer its taskmaster, when you are no longer looking at the manuscripts and saying 'how can I use you, what can you do for me?' or asking them, 'what can I do for you?' when you set them free to experience their own Shabbat, the gift you receive in return is that they open their pages to you and give you the deep beating heart of their entire being. This is the most important aspect of our job, Mari. You must never, never forget to Keep the Sabbath. If the Mountain does not escape its bonds and run wild every Sabbath, I would not like to think what would happen. It is essential to the very survival of our world that you remember to do this."

"I will."

He drew a deep, relieved breath, and pushed back from the table. "I think, if you are finished with the meal, it's time you began to meet our manuscripts." He paused, threw some coins on the table, and offered Mari his arm. "It is an irony that only in letting go of the 'security' of ownership, do we find true security. When we connect with the living heart of the mountain, we connect back with what is eternal; when we die, when we hear that resounding shofar blast to the soul, we take nothing with us but what we have built in our souls, during the times we let the things we enslave, and the things that enslave us, go. It is so important to remember this, Mari. Nothing you will ever do

in your life, nothing I will ever do, will be more important than what we find each time we set it all free. I don't know what you will find - it is different for everyone - but I assure you, once we get to the top of this mountain and open the door to your new home, you will let go of wealth," he glanced down ruefully at his shabby coat, worn in places, "and you will gain immense riches."

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