

“Standing” / “And he went”

“I was asleep, but my heart stayed awake” - Song of Songs, 5.2

Is lost track of the passing of time. There had been a flash of understanding in the beginning when the door to the Archives was first barred to him. Understanding had fled with the directionless days; he ate little, drank tea out of habit, and slept often. He had read many books at first, realizing he had not taken a “holiday” in longer than he could remember. He meditated in his room, trying to calm the despair that threatened to drown him. His sleep was restless; he often got up in the middle of the night to wander the building in search of Figaro the cat. After a few nights when Is found Figaro and took him back to bed, taking great comfort in the big cat’s warm presence, stroking him and falling asleep to the sound of Figaro’s great, rumbling purr, Figaro began making it a regular appointment, often staring at Is or crying to get his attention, then leading him to bed. Soon this became the only time Is was aware it was night, and therefore time to sleep.

In the first two weeks, there had been the sound of pounding on the front door to the Great Hall. Is stood in the hall, frozen, staring at the door, imagining it was shivering slightly under the force of the blows. He thought he could hear cries, shouting. The pounding became intermittent- sometimes very fierce, sometimes it went on for a long time as though whomever it was outside was ready to endure until answered. Is was frozen; he did not know what to tell the

people, and so he stood there in his dressing-gown, staring fearfully at the door. Eventually, the knocking stopped.

Is stopped getting dressed. He would bathe simply to try to relax, and because as a true gentleman he simply could not stand to be unclean, but he took to putting his comfortable sleep wear on again; he lived in his dressing gown. He had made attempts to write at first, but had grown so despondent and weary that every time he sat down and took up his pen, his shoulders would slump and he would feel in desperate need of a nap.

There is no telling how long this would have gone on had it not been for Figaro. The enormous black and white cat simply ran out of patience.

Figaro had lived in the Great Hall as long as anyone could remember. He had been there when Is first entered the Hall as an Apprentice, and the Master Archivist at that time had mentioned that Figaro had been there when he was a boy, too. Everyone knew this was technically impossible, but learned to stop questioning it. Figaro was a pleasure-loving creature; he felt better when he was happy, so he made sure he was happy. It was really that simple. He found favorite places to curl up, and he spent much of his time sleeping or seeking out company for pleasant exchanges which usually involved food or cuddling on one side, and approving purrs and kneading paws on the other. In Figaro's eyes, all benefited; it was a completely satisfactory existence.

Only a few times in the history of the Archives had Figaro been known to be roused. Figaro roused was a thing not easily or quickly forgotten. It happened when the Archives were threatened, or when people were simply not behaving in the way they were supposed to behave.

Figaro was thoroughly roused now. He took to following Is mercilessly; he paced behind him with heavy footfalls, and when Is stopped, he either sat with his warm, heavy bulk pressed hard against Is' legs, or he actually leaped into Is' lap or onto his desk, staring at him with quiet, intense reproach.

He began to alternate this behavior with scratching on the front door that led out into the Mountain town. Perhaps his plan of quiet civil disobedience was not having a fast enough effect on the human who paced the Hall restlessly; perhaps he heard sounds outside that drove him to act with more urgency. Who knows what goes on in the mind of a cat like Figaro?

All we need to know is that eventually, it worked.

Is tried swearing at the cat; this behavior was usually met with a disdainful look, and Figaro would promptly turn, pointedly presenting to Is' bleary and fed-up eyes a broad expanse of shining black rump, with proud, sinuous tail- usually lashing indignantly. Is was always tempted to aim a (small, gentle) kick at the broad rear end thus exposed; he never quite got up the nerve.

Is tried ignoring Figaro; it worked for a few days. The cat was everywhere, though, and always staring, always voicing disapproval in his clear, expressive meows. No matter what Is did- bribes with tidbits of food, attempts to distract with new toys fashioned out of boiled wool, raising his voice, cajoling, petting- still Figaro kept up his campaign of pressure.

Finally, one morning before dawn, as the light in Is' windows (showing a grey, craggy world outside; he idly wondered where the Mountain had moved to now) melted from darkness into rosy light, as he lit his meditation candles, shuffling around the room in his dressing gown and slippers, everything exploded.

One moment, all was still, mellow silence- the next, Figaro set up such a scratching and wild yowling from the entry way into the Great Hall that Is' heart jumped and he dropped a match. As he stamped at the smoldering carpet with the hard soles of his morocco leather slippers, his temper flared up into an inferno.

“CAT!” he bellowed, “ENOUGH!” his heart pounding, feeling (if he had stopped to notice) more awake than he had in months, he stormed down the hall from his room into the Great Hall, his dressing gown coming untied, the skirts streaming back from his sleeves like the cape of a medieval crusader, heading to battle.

He got to the door and wrenched it open before he gave any thought to what he was doing. He looked out, sucked in a surprised breath, and looked down at Figaro, the cold air from outdoors waking him completely like a wet, cold slap in the face. Figaro appeared to be unsuccessfully trying not to look smug. Is snorted, and transferred his gaze once more to the world outside a door he had not opened in months. His hand clenched so hard on the doorknob that he felt as though the door had taken root and grown out of his hand.

There were people camping, lined up next to one another closely along the narrow walkway. Where the walls opened out, Is saw tents, the smoke of campfires, the bustle of people getting ready for morning. Those near the door roused slightly and looked at him with blank faces. It was as though they had lived there for many weeks and forgotten who he was, forgotten why they were there.

Soon, comprehension dawned in the scruffy, unwashed faces nearest to him- they struggled out of their blankets and heaped clothing and backed up, which he found jarring. As soon as Is had seen this crowd outside his door, he had been prepared for them to reach for him,

talk to him, attack him in a mob, but he did not expect this- fear and wariness. They whispered to each other, and he heard the whisper fly backward, mouth to mouth through the crowd, until all grew still. The smoke from the fire drifted sideways into the crisp grey sky, but all movement of preparation for the day had ceased.

Is cleared his throat. "I can't pretend I don't know what you are doing here," he began in a soft voice that had the rusty, husky sound of long disuse, "but I did not know you were here." He cleared his throat and took a deep breath, to try to be heard through the ranks of people. They were all kinds of people, he saw, as he looked at them more closely. He looked beyond the blankets and rumpled clothing, and began to see them as individuals, to pick out the distinct and unique spark that lived behind each separate face. There was a man near him in a once-impeccable, expensive suit; his beard had grown, giving his face a worn look, and he had layered a yellow blanket over his suit. There were children who looked well fed enough, but grey-faced and tired. The women, oddly, seemed to have fared the best, no doubt due to the many layers of clothing they always had to wear. Perhaps those petticoats had kept them warm, or perhaps women were hardier creatures than men knew, Is thought ruefully.

A man with a lean, hard face shoved people aside and edged his way to the front of the group. "We thought you might be dead. We thought you had an Apprentice who would come eventually. We have been waiting here for many weeks, some giving up and leaving again, taking their chances with no guidance."

Is cleared his throat and tried to speak, but the man continued. Words tumbled out of his mouth as though they had been building up behind his lips for a long time.

“We have no way to travel. The towns are slowing in all ways, frozen in limbo, every single bit of planning- even the harvest!- halting while they wait for their representatives to return from what we thought were routine Mountain visits. My home has been left behind already; the Mountain has moved twice since I came into this place. Many of us have no way back. We have been waiting. You must help us.”

At this, the crowd began to murmur. The volume rose as voices mingled and competed to be heard; all were variations on the same story- their homes left behind, their journeys halted, the towns left behind as the Mountain had moved while they made what they thought was a brief visit, while they waited for Is to do a job they had always depended on.

Is gently held up his hand, and the voices died down. Their eyes, all pinning him to the doorstep, still held trust. They wanted him to solve their problems. They wanted him to have the answers he had always given; they had depended on him so much that they had forgotten he was a human being, subject to mistakes and failings, illness, depression, mortality.

“I am not sure what to say to you all,” Is began. “I will first give you my apologies that I waited so long to open this door. I was not,” he paused and took a deep breath, “not myself. I have been unable to enter the Archives for a long time now.” he paused as the crowd broke into noisy talk and exclamations of alarm. “We have all relied for a long time on these Archives. Long ago, before any of us were born, they were created out of a need to keep us mindful of how our actions impact the world and each other. I have studied them all my life, and have come to the conclusion this is why the Archives came to be: to remind us that everything we do and say has enormous impact on the world.”

“But the Lost Kingdom,” a child’s clear voice rang out above the murmurs of the crowd, “We can’t go anywhere without a scroll from the Archives, we could be Lost,” the child sputtered to a halt. All eyes turned back to Is.

“Has anyone ever met someone who has gone to the Lost Kingdom and returned? Has anyone ever heard what it is like?” Is asked quietly. The people shuffled their feet, murmured dissent, shook their heads.

“All we know is that once in awhile, we are able to see their shadows; we can see them thinly through the fabric of time, the people on the other side, the people who have slipped between the veil that separates our world, our time, from that place.” He stroked his chin, feeling the prickliness of weeks’ growth of ragged beard, and his lips lifted in a slow smile. “We have been living our lives in fear of the unknown- all of us. The Archives, once created as a small check of our actions, have become something we depend on so much, that we have ceased to live bravely. The changes we make are supposed to be mirrored in the Archives. I am seeing this is no longer the case- our fear has mastered us, and now our lives are controlled by the Archives. We have stopped making changes when they need to occur, and started binding ourselves, censoring ourselves, limiting our lives unless we have a scroll in our hands. I would not have seen this, had the door not been shut to me. I would not have seen this had this stubborn cat,” he glanced down at Figaro, who leaned solidly and smugly against his lower legs, “forced me to open the door to you. People, it is time. Go back to your homes, however you may get there, or stay here and make new lives. Don’t wait for me to return. I am going to go seek the Lost Kingdom, and find a new way forward for us. It is time to break free of our old definitions of life; it is time to re-examine the boundaries of our world. Go home, and live your lives. When

you travel, know that changes may occur; know that you may reach a destination that is not the one you intended. Simply be prepared, and see the changes not as detours, but as the direction your life is meant to take. It is time for us to gain a new perspective. It is time for us all to trust: we have no choice. I urge you not to live your lives frozen and waiting, but it is your choice. You must do as you see fit. I will try to come back with some answers, if I can return...but do not wait for me. Go live your lives.”

With that, he backed into the Great Hall and firmly shut the door. He hesitated, then reached down to stroke Figaro’s broad, wooly forehead.

“You were right, and I thank you, old fellow.”

His duty of respect to the Archive cat done, Is rushed to his room with a thundering of his leather slippers on the wood floors. He shed his dressing gown and unbuttoned clothing as he ran, kicking off the slippers when he reached his room. He opened his closet and pulled out the rugged garments that he unearthed back when he had decided to follow Mari into the Archives. Much stained, patched and worn, the green of the thick trousers had faded to a pleasant mossy shade. He smoothed his hand over the clothing lovingly. It had been too long since he had faced the unknown. He had grown soft and comfortable, living his predictable days here in the Archives, warm, snug and complacent. Yes, there was danger in working with the Archives, but Is had learned how to master those rapids long ago- he had been far too safe for far too long. It was time for him to shed this old life. With a great bound of his heart, he realized he was grateful that the Archive door had been locked to him.

He ran his fingers through his wildly mussed hair, got into the sturdy pants, rough spun, comfortable cotton shirt, and reached for his “bush coat,” its many useful pockets still packed

full of things he had thought he would need on his trip to find Mari long ago. It was somewhat snug around the waist, as he had bought it as a young man when he had decided to leave the Mountain for a time; he cinched the belt tighter and told himself that with a few days' travel, it would fit once more.

He dashed to the washroom, brushed his teeth, and gave himself one last shave. He didn't intend to fuss about such things on this trip. He looked in the mirror and a rueful, rusty chuckle escaped his lips. His dark curls were wild, his eyes feverishly bright, his cheeks darkly flushed.

"I look like a complete madman."

He splashed some water on his face, smoothing down his curls with his damp hands, and patted his face with a towel. He drew in a quick breath as he was leaving, turned around, went back to his room, and snatched up his old tapestry kippah from where it hung beside his door. He held it briefly to his lips, said a quick prayer for the safety of the Archives in his absence, for the safety of Mari and the Mountain people, and last, that the Maker would guide him in his travels. Then he placed it on his head where it fit like an old friend. He felt complete; he felt ready. With Figaro trotting determinedly at his heels, he left the Archives for the first time in years. As he shut the door behind him, he looked down at Figaro. "Coming with me, old fellow?" he smiled as Figaro sat his solid rump down on the toe of Is' boot. "I will be glad of your company, and wouldn't want to leave you here to fend for yourself."

The people had already begun to disperse. They drifted away in groups, some talking quietly, some in a seeming daze, not speaking at all. It would take them a long time to digest such a big change. "They will adjust," Is said under his breath, lifting Figaro's solid bulk into his arms. "None of us have any other choice."

He found a horse that looked sturdy enough, a frisky young chestnut mare with a gleaming coat. The horse danced impatiently, her great hooves bringing up bits of turf that clung to the ruddy-faced owner's trousers. "She's temperamental, sir, I won't lie to you," the horse merchant mumbled.

Is grinned, handing over the money; he had gotten a good deal with saddle, saddlebags, blanket and tack thrown in. There was an expansive feeling of warmth and excitement in his chest, and he clapped the owner on the shoulder. Finding this mare boded well for his journey, he felt. Figaro wrapped his body around Is' arm, digging his claws into the thick wool sleeve, eyeing the mare distrustfully.

"She is perfect for me, then," he laughed, and negotiated further for a beat-up old basket he spied in the rafters of the stable. The owner helped him tie the basket in front of the saddle, pushing a sleek rope through the rough basket weave, securing it under her forelegs as the mare tossed her head and knocked against Is repeatedly, shuffling sideways.

Is laughed heartily, pried Figaro's claws one by one out of his coat, and opened the top of the basket. Figaro crawled in quickly, seeming grateful for the hiding place, circled once, and settled. His eyes gleamed gold as he eyed Is reproachfully from the back of the basket.

"Off we go, then." Is planted his boot in the stirrup and swung his leg over the saddle, ignoring the pull in his leg muscles as he mounted, attempting to swing up gracefully as he did when he was a young lad. "It seems this isn't something you forget how to do," he grunted, and the horse merchant grinned.

As he stopped to fill his saddlebags with canteens of water, salted dried meat, fruit, nuts and bread, he threw his white and burgundy striped wool tallit* over his head and wrapped it

around his neck and shoulders; it would serve double duty now, keeping him warm as he rode. He supposed some would call that sacrilege, but the old ways were changing out of necessity. He would be mindful of the religious garment he wore even as he was thankful for its protection. The mountain had travelled into a region he had not seen before: it was grey, misty and cold, with harsh slate-colored rocks and the tang of the sea in the air.

Any starting place will do, he thought with a grin as they finally set out down the main road and through the gate that led off the Mountain, into the unknown. His goal was to simply ride as far and as fast as he could, until he slipped between the veils of time and into the Kingdom of the Lost. He was not sure what he would find. The only things he knew of the Lost Kingdom had been from reports here and there of those gone missing, of people seeing carriages shimmer and disappear, of the times those Lost had been seen, glimpsed as vague shadows in the unlikeliest places: on roads, in Inns and even in homes. They were seen but could not be reached, and did not see-they went about lives in their own place and time, oblivious to the ones who stood and marveled at them. He knew he was not going to his death, but it felt like a death of sorts- wherever he was going, everything he knew, everything he was certain of was being left behind.

Who ever would have thought he would seek to join the Lost? Is chuckled, putting his hand inside Figaro's basket and stroking the silky fur, feeling Figaro's whiskers as the cat pushed his face loyally into Is' hand. It is all worth it, he thought; whatever happens is worth this joy of feeling truly awake.

**tallit: a prayer shawl*