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The best way out is always through. - Robert Frost

### Journeys

Rabbi Ariel sighed heavily and rubbed his face, dropping his head into his hands now that everyone was finally out of the synagogue for the night, and there was no one to see. He pulled off the kippah Mari had embroidered for him, dropped it on his desk, and ran his hands through his thinning hair. Mari. Why had he lied to her? He had felt at the time that there was no other choice, but now he questioned. He questioned every day, in fact. He awakened in the morning with the question in his mind before saying the *modeh ani* prayer of gratitude; he went through the service automatically, his mind, heart - no, his very soul- filled with the question until he felt completely hollow, just a container for a question. His prayers fell from his lips like unwieldy, leaden things; they did not rise to the heavens. They did not lift his heart. Ariel believed firmly in an immanent God as opposed to a purely transcendent one- a God "above," somewhere up in an unreachable heaven. He believed God was within us all, and all living things, and thus we should live our lives striving to see and reach the spark of the Divine within each fellow being.

He believed this, and with his life, he practiced it. At least, he used to. Now, he wasn't sure. Ari sighed again, running his fingers over the primitive, lumpy embroidery. Beautiful embroidery, because it was done by her hand with such love. He was losing,

or had lost, his faith. He didn't know when it went, or where- it may have crept out silently when he lied to that pure woman who loved and trusted him so completely.

There is no despair so deep and so complete as that which fills the soul of a person who has devoted their life to God and cannot pray. He struggled for words; his inner silence was a vast, echoing thing- it filled every corner of his being. Why had he lied? What did his life stand for, if he could not live the truth?

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Is sat up, pulled the heavy coverlet aside, and swung his legs out of bed. He padded over to the small wooden table in front of his window, and struck a match to light a candle, murmuring a small blessing for the coming morning. His movements were automatic. He was still pulled toward sleep as his body went through the motions he had taken every morning for forty years, since he had first become an Apprentice.

He sighed, hitched up the trousers of his warm flannel pajamas, and settled onto the cushion he had had made especially for meditating. Folding into a seated position, he crossed his legs lightly in front of him and straightened his spine, breathing deeply. The flame danced and wavered as he exhaled, trying to empty his mind of all racing, chattering thoughts, and focus on his intention for the day.

Mari. His thoughts circled around her; she'd been gone a month. He frowned and took a deep breath again, willing his mind to clear. Gone a month. Was she going to join the list of lost Apprentices? Why had he lied?

As that question bubbled to the surface of his mind, his eyes snapped open.  
Why had he lied?

It was tradition...it was what he was supposed to do. It had always been this way; Apprentices were never told how many had tried and failed. Apprentices were never told the complete truth.

His stomach clenching, he raised his knees and massaged his calves. Pins and needles; his legs never used to fall asleep so quickly. He huffed an impatient breath, setting the candle flickering so wildly he thought it might go out.

There would be no peace, no calm, no centering today.

Is knew what he had to do. He knew it was wrong; he knew it went against every rule. In all his time here, with all the Apprentices who had failed the test and disappeared, never to return from the Archives, it had never crossed his mind to do what he was certain he was going to do now.

Yes- certain. As soon as he admitted it, his heart felt lighter.

He was going to go into the Archives. Not as a routine visit, not on a retrieval for a patron; he was going to delve deep into the heart of the Archives.

He knew people were only supposed to do it once in their lives. He knew that the chances were that he'd be facing his own challenges, and never cross paths with Mari at all. The way the Archives were made, it was possible he and Mari could be standing right next to each other in space, but be completely separated in time and never see each other. But he had to try.

He didn't know why. He just knew he had to. His old Master had taught him that there were never any accidents in life; there were no detours. Everything that happened bore a lesson that the soul needed in order to grow, his Master insisted; if one was going to fill one's unique space in the world, one had to look for the blessing

and the message in each stage of the journey- each stage including the “stages” that seemed like accidents or mistakes.

“So,” he grinned, “Thank you, Master Zalman, for giving me a way to justify the enormous mistake I am about to make now.” Chuckling, he rose. He winced as his joints protested; he rubbed his calves which were still tingling with lack of circulation. Feeling like an old fool, he limped over to his wardrobe to see if he still had any clothing suitable for an adventure into the Unknown.

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Jac feared she may have inadvertently lied to Mari; A lie of concealment was still a lie. Like a small boy, she attacked weeds and undergrowth with the flat of her spear as she walked home, dragging her game bag behind her. She didn’t care what, or who, followed her; she even wished they would- she would love a fight to take her mind off Mari.

Jac knew there was no going back through the future door. Obviously! Jac’s face set into an even deeper scowl, and she felt a flash of anger toward Mari. Why hadn’t Mari said anything? Mari was intelligent, surely she should have seen the glaring fallacy in that? Obviously no one could go backward through a door that led to the future! It simply wasn’t possible.

At least, Jac didn’t see how it could be possible.

Jac’s muscles felt itchy with the need to act, but there was nothing to do but keep living, keep hunting. Maybe she’d go back later to see if the mist border was back in its place again, just to give herself something to do to quiet her noisy mind.

Jac had so many questions, and no answers. She pulled herself up, the game bag dropping to the ground as she hefted her spear in her hands. So familiar - the spear, once Cora's, now fit her palms like it was a part of her, resting against the calluses that had formed to hold it perfectly...she hefted it and her mouth lifted in a brief smile. She needn't have lied to Mari completely.

She would go. She wasn't sure where, but she would. She would stay long enough to pack provisions for them both, and she would set out to try to find Mari. No matter where her journey took her, at least she would be living each day with truth guiding her, not squatting here in the forest, each day of her life being consumed by a falsehood.

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Mari waded through the stream, this time her feet having no trouble navigating over the rocks; Jac had trained her well. She felt a small glow of pride at her balance, and the new strength in her muscles. The pride faded and she gave an embarrassed laugh as her gaze lighted on the fallen tree where she had made her first "shelter." Time is measured more accurately in comparisons of how far we've come, than in weeks and months, Mari thought.

Having no clear idea where to walk, she simply went forward. Keeping the sun behind her, she walked for hours; she hadn't walked this long when she exited that french door so long ago. So long! It felt like years. There was no door; there was no building. Mari stopped, took a few mouthfuls of water from her flask, and dropped to her heels. She rummaged in the game bag Jac had made for her, and pulled out a strip of dried deer meat. She gnawed on it and considered.

Jac had told her to find the “future” door, and go through it again. Go back through the future door?

Ah, but what she hadn't told Jac was that she had not come here through the future door. Not really. What was it that the Manuscript Is had said? “The door to the past, sister to the future.” She had gone into the past, and then when she walked out of the room in which her memory was unfolding in front of her, the ballroom had transformed into a crumbled, overgrown, destroyed husk of its former self. Was that the future? She had slept, then ran wildly through the halls, and opened a french door which led her...here.

If this was not her future, there was not a way for her to fix anything that happened here. But she was in a labyrinth of her own making, wasn't she? Is-the real Is- had told her that all the power here was hers, that reality in this place was of her own making.

She frowned, and tucked the rest of the meat back into the bag. Somehow, she doubted things were under her control anymore. Is had not known about the Shadow, how it had crept into the Archives with her, and began tainting the Manuscripts, twisting reality and poisoning the purity of this place.

Still, the door to the future - that beautiful clockwork door she had seen so long ago- she had never passed through it. Maybe it was time for her to actively seek it out, to find it, to make it appear. Somehow she felt she had been led all this time. Perhaps there were no shortcuts in this place- perhaps every step of her journey was necessary, to bring her to where she was now. She felt strength and vitality running through her;

her training time with Jac, and all the hardships she had been through, had helped her grow.

So far from that heartbroken girl who had walked away from her hometown, thinking she would not survive without her love to depend on, she had now become a warrior who knew that she had strength, wisdom, and courage. She stood straighter now, and her eyes assessed the world levelly. She knew her own power now. She was ready to find that door and face whatever lay beyond it.