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“And He Went Forth”

“Surely G-d was in this place and I, I did not know.” - Jacob, Gen. 28:13

Cora sat and read. She forgot about Jac and the other woman whom she'd discovered missing from the Healing Cottages; she forgot that she was alone and lost; she forgot that she was sitting in an odd catacomb that had somehow hijacked her own created tunnel - a very strange catacomb filled, not with corpses, but with books and scrolls.

She sat on the dry floor, her legs tucked comfortably to the side, and she read, her lips parted slightly, her eyebrows raised.

She was reading her life.

Small black spots swam before her eyes. She stopped for a moment, dropped her forehead against the large book, and breathed in the dusty, slightly acrid scent of its pages. There was a reason she was here. This was no accident. There was a reason she picked up this book, of all the books that crowded the niches in this strange room. She took one more deep breath, murmuring softly, “The Maker was in this place. And I...I did not know it.” Life Force was always with her, in her every breath. To forget that was her choice alone. To remember it was to allow light back into her heart. She opened her eyes and sat back up, feeling safe and comforted.

As she continued to read, the only sound in the dry, warm catacomb was the crackle of thick, brittle parchment pages turning. Her breath came faster. This was her life written clearly

with all the internal twists and turns as well- not from an outside perspective. It was like reading her own diary, if she had written it as though it were about someone else, but with full knowledge of their mind and heart.

She frowned, and turned back a page. She was reading something now that had never occurred in her life. She scrutinized the page, and found the last place in the story that was a clear memory. Ah, yes. It had been a confusing crossroads in her life. She had made a choice, but it was not easy. The book's story followed- Cora's heart flipped over- followed the choice she had not made. She skipped pages ahead, scanning the text. She could see the story eventually went back to the choice she had made. She let out a breath she hadn't known she was holding. So this wasn't a book of judgment of some kind, to tell her what the right choices were. It seems the book simply told about every possible life- the one she had, and also the ones she could have had.

The more she read, the more the branches were all told. All the lives she had not led were laid out in the book, as though they had happened, too. It was comforting, and it was heartbreaking. She saw where her choices had led, and she saw what her life could have been, had she made different choices.

There was good and bad in all of the outcomes.

She laid down the book, blinking her eyes, and put a hand up to her brow to massage her forehead. How long had she sat there with her head hanging over that book? She uncurled her knees; the pangs of stiffness they sent her told her she had been there a long time.

The thickness of the book drew her eyes- so many pages left to read. She rubbed her neck and laughed; the sound of her voice was oddly muffled in the dry room. She was tempted to skip

to the end and “peek” at how her story ended.. She wasn’t sure why she was here in this strange, catacomb-like dead-end passage, but there was only one way to find out. She stretched, re-settled herself on the floor with her knees drawn up, her back propped against the crumbling shelves, and turned to the next page.

* * *

Ariel wrestled. Actually, he walked- trudged, one heavy foot in front of another, back along a seemingly endless forest track. But as he walked, he wrestled with his own thoughts and emotions. He was going back. It had made sense when that maddening man, Is, had berated him, but now, the act of walking back without having accomplished anything or found Mari made him feel like a failure. Ismael’s words had hit him hard. Not because they were true, but because all of his own deep feelings of inadequacy and shame had been voiced aloud by another. It had been hard to hear. There was some truth in the man’s words: Ariel, in trying to avoid responsibility, had hurt not only himself, but every single person in his life.

Sometimes he wasn’t sure he had the strength to set things right. His legs were so heavy, and the road ahead seemed to blend into the horizon; it was endless. He stopped, and dropped his pack. He dropped to the ground to sit cross-legged in the middle of the dusty road, digging in his pack for the dried meat Is had given him. If he could have seen himself at that moment, he would have seen how much he had changed in such a short time - his matter-of-fact attention to the task of keeping his strength up with food was without the underpinning of self-pity that would have accompanied hunger in the days before he had set out on his journey. His hands had hardened from practical tasks, his legs were more supple, and he thought nothing of sitting on the

dusty ground. Ariel did not know it, but he had come very far; all he could see was the seeming pointlessness of the outward and backward physical journey he had taken.

He gnawed on the strip of meat, still wrestling. What was he going back for? What did he intend to do? He supposed he had to talk to Margaret; she was still his wife, and that needed to be remedied. He needed to honor her by being honest; he needed to give the end of their marriage the space and time it deserved, in order to try to find some kind of wholeness in the ending. He needed to set her free, and set himself free, before he could even think of making a new beginning.

Tears pricked his eyes; he forced them back with a small, dry laugh. “Those tears are just childish rebellion. I don’t want to do something unpleasant, that’s the truth. But I am going to do it.” He took a deep breath, and drew back in his mind, distancing from his emotions. He imagined he was a bird, pulling back into the trees, then up into the sky. From that vantage point, he looked rather silly - a man sitting in the middle of the forest track, gnawing on a bit of meat.

Then he saw another thing: there was strength in him, and there was dignity. It wasn’t the dignity of his rabbinical title, his kippah or tallit; it wasn’t the dignity of standing on the bimah with all of the people looking to him for guidance- all that had been stripped away. This was true dignity- the dignity of a man doing what he knew was right, even if it was painful, even if he had to admit he was wrong; even if he had to face anger and attack from Margaret and the congregation. Nothing they could say or do would erase this dignity- the dignity of a human animal, aware that he was connected to all other beings, that he had a responsibility to treat them all with respect. The dignity of a person who was not running away.

An unfamiliar feeling warmed him. Love. He felt love and compassion for himself. He was trying. Determination straightened his shoulders. He pressed his feet to the earth and stood in one fluid movement, swinging his pack onto his shoulder. His chest expanded, and he let out his breath in a prayer of gratitude. A small smile teased the corner of his mouth.

“The Maker was here.” he grinned. “The Maker was in this place, and I...I did not know it.”