

# Mountain story

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## Chapter 1: Tribe

Zak stared into the wilderness, trying to forget about his ever-present thirst. It was only late afternoon, but the trees in the wilderness, which were unusually thick here, seemed to already have long shadows. Sitting next to him was Clarice, his best friend from the tribe. Every few moments, they tore their eyes from the shadowy trees to stare longingly at the beautiful rain clouds that covered the top of the Great Mountain, hundreds upon hundreds of miles ahead of them, but which never seemed to descend to their level.

"I'm telling you, I can hear a stream". Zak said to Clarice. "It doesn't sound that far. I think I can be there and back in an hour, and nobody else will even know I've gone!"

"The wilderness is just tempting you" said Clarice, disapproval clouding her normally beautiful face. "It happens to all of us. But nobody who has entered the wilderness has ever come back. I would know."

Despite his dehydrated exhaustion, Zak's heart quickened, as it did every time Clarice talked to him. He was even thirstier than the others, because he was from one of the many families of goat-herders, and they had to share their little remaining water with their livestock. Clarice, on the other hand, was from the storyteller caste, and so would one day be one of the most important people in the tribe. The storytellers were second only to the Map Readers in importance, and so her family had a higher water-ration.

Zak was luckier than the other low-caste children. He had Clarice to share her water with him. But it was never enough, and it humiliated him to accept water from his best friend while his family grew thirstier and thirstier.

"I have to do this, Clarice. If we don't find water, then within the week our animals will start to die! And the tribe will have nothing to eat! Already the goats have stopped giving us milk."

"Zak, there is no river! Are you so sure that you can hear it?"

Zak thought so. Clarice widened her large eyes, worried.

"Zak, the wilderness is just trying to tempt you. I'm worried about you. You were always weaker than the other children at the meditation exercises we do to avoid this." Zak's face reddened with embarrassment. Clarice continued. "There are illusions in the wilderness, and weak-willed people (at this, Zak's face reddened even more) get taken in by them. We have to trust the Keepers of the Maps to keep us on the right path! That is how we got to where we are today!"

Zak knew that she would win the argument, like all arguments they had, but today his thirst made him irritable and unreasonable.

"Maybe I will be the first person to enter the wilderness and survive." He said defiantly.

Clarice looked at him with a slight expression of pity that made Zak feel even more irritated.

“Maybe I’m stronger than the other people!” He added. The moment the phrase came out of his mouth, he knew that it was a childish attempt to provoke her. He braced himself for her response.

“No Zak, you are just a child.” Zak opened his mouth to point out that he was almost an adult, and that she was only one year older than he was, but she put her finger to his mouth, gently. Suddenly his thoughts became confused, and he was unable to speak. He wondered if she knew what effect she had on him. The idea that she did was scary, but also somehow exciting. In any case, he suddenly found himself incapable of doing anything other than closing his mouth and listening.

“Zak, it isn’t a question of strength.” Clarice said. “There are strange forces in the wilderness. When you enter it, you never return. The wilderness attracts you in with illusions, and then, before you realise it, it ensnares you in a terrible darkness full of suffering. You know this – the Map Readers and we the Storytellers have been telling you since the day you were born.” Zak shuddered. He knew the stories of the wilderness that were told to the children from the youngest age. But Clarice was a storyteller, and she could make the stories come to life. Clarice’s eyes glazed over as she started to tell the story, as she naturally entered a storyteller’s trance. Her voice changed. Zak suddenly felt as though someone else was speaking with her voice. He flinched away slightly. She continued.

“In the darkness, arrive the terrible, shadowy creatures that creep and slither towards you from all of the crevices and all of the shadows.” She said, her voice seeming to echo slightly as she spoke. “Creeping insects and slithering snakes that, with a single bite, can paralyze you before they start to consume you. But you remain alive, and you die slowly, in agony, as they begin to digest you. Then there are the terrible wolves that follow you silently and patiently, waiting for you to sleep. They bite off your feet and your hands and then let their cubs consume you, slowly. That’s how their little ones learn to kill. And what if you *do* find water? In the wilderness rivers, huge sharp-toothed scaly creatures lie in wait for you and, when you least expect it, clamp down on you with their jaws, and slowly pull you under the water and wait for you to drown, slowly, before they start to rip you apart and eat you. We know this because when we disrespect the wilderness, it sends us these plagues as punishment. Do you think you are stronger than those things? That you can face them at the source, where they are strongest and most numerous? Our strength comes from resisting the temptation of the wilderness, and respecting the path that is set out for us in the maps. If you disrespect the Map Readers, you disrespect all of the progress that we have made to come so far up the mountain, and you put the rest of our journey in danger.”

As she spoke, her voice had taken on a rhythmic, slightly musical tone, and Zak could not help but be captivated. He didn’t want to agree with her, but her voice seemed to draw him in and make it impossible not to. She was a storyteller, and she spoke with the authority of her ancestors.

“I just can’t keep watching my family and my animals dying of thirst!” Zak said weakly. But the temptation of the wilderness had already died down. Clarice relaxed slightly, and gave him a sad smile.

“That is what James said,” she replied simply, as if that should end the argument. Zak shuddered, shocked that she was willing to say his name. He hadn’t known James, and usually he wasn’t mentioned in the camp. He had been the son of one of the Map Readers, but when Zak was only a baby, he had disappeared into the wilderness, never to be heard from again.

"Maybe he survived..." Zak started.

"I hope not, for his sake". Clarice responded.

"What do you mean?" Zak asked, shocked. "Abandoning the tribe is a terrible crime, but surely not one that deserves death! Nothing is worse than death!"

A shadow passed over Clarice's face, which had nothing to do with the rapidly setting sun.

"There *are* worse things than death, Zak"... she muttered. "In the wilderness death is the best thing that can happen to you."

"What do you mean?"

Clarice thought for a moment, hesitating. "You won't tell anyone?"

Zak's heart quickened. Clarice was from the storyteller caste. For her to tell him a secret was a privilege unknown for a goat-herder.

"Never" Zak responded, after a moment's hesitation. He was deeply moved by the honour, and ready to accept the burden of whatever she was about to say to him.

"One person did survive."

"Who?"

"Exu".

Zak shivered as a chill crawled down his back. Despite being delighted to spend time alone with Clarice, he suddenly wanted to be near the fire with the rest of the tribe, where he felt totally safe. The dark wilderness suddenly seemed much closer.

"Exu"... Zak replied hesitantly, forcing himself to say the word. "Exu is just a story to scare small children. All adults know that he doesn't really exist..." Clarice nodded, and Zak was relieved. The air seemed warm again.

"I'm sure he doesn't exist.... any more" She replied. "But he did. A long time ago." Zak waited for her to continue.

"He was the only person who has entered the wilderness and returned. But when he did, something about him was different. He had had the life sucked out of him. His eyes seemed dull and lifeless. Something had happened to him, and we didn't know what. He had become unable to listen to reason. So our herbalists tried to cure him. But he refused to be cured. Then, during the night, he started creeping around."

Zak felt an old terror rising inside him. The stories he was hearing were very similar to the ghost stories the children used to tell each other about Exu, when they weren't learning their trades. Coming from Clarice, however, suddenly the stories didn't seem like a game anymore.

"Finally, the tribe realised that nothing remained of the man that Exu had once been. He had become worse than dead."

Zak knew the rest of the story, because it was the threat which all parents used to control their children. But in that moment, he felt as though if Clarice said it, it would become true. Zak wanted to tell her to stop, because he knew what was coming. But he couldn't find his breath to form the words. Ignoring his shaking head, Clarice continued, merciless.

"Then, creeping around at night, silently, he started trying to drag children into the wilderness."

*“stop... STOP!”* Zak said weakly, then, with false bravado. “That was a long time ago, right?”

“Generations ago, yes.” Clarice answered. “When our tribe had only just begun to climb the mountain. But it is the same wilderness that you see before you. Do you really want to be the next James, abandoning your loving mother and father and brothers and sisters and disappearing without a trace? Or worse, the next Exu, creeping in the night with lifeless, unblinking eyes, and locking your clammy fingers around children’s feet and dragging, dragging them into the wilderness?”

Zak didn’t answer.

“The story is true, Zak”.

“What happened to Exu?” he asked, finally.

“They tried to kill him. They set traps in the camp. And the children were kept safe and guarded at all times. And his visits became less and less frequent. Until finally he was never heard from again. Before Exu, we took more risks. Our paths were wider. But now we don’t take those kinds of risks anymore. We train ourselves to remain on the path the Map Readers set for us, and we strengthen our minds with the meditation exercises in order to resist the temptations of the wilderness. And if someone leaves the path and doesn’t return by the next day, we sequester the children, set traps, and hurry on along our way. One day we’ll be at the top of the mountain, and there, there will be no more wilderness. But in the meantime, we just have to keep resisting the temptations of the wilderness and trusting in the wisdom of the Map Readers. Without them, we would never have left the bottom of the mountain, and we would have been killed by the droughts long ago.”

Zak smiled ironically.

“You might want to tell that to whoever has all of the water, then?” He said sarcastically. Clarice didn’t find his joke funny.

“Have you not heard our stories about the desolation of the bottom of the mountain? Since we have been climbing the mountain, it has been generations since anyone in our tribe has died of thirst. And we have more water every year, the closer we get to the top. We won’t be the generation who will live at the top, but this is our duty to our children’s children. If you want things to get better, sometimes we have to put up with a little bit of thirst. Don’t worry, we’ll find a river soon. Or it will rain. In the meantime, perhaps a bit of meditation will calm you down. Frankly, I don’t like the way you’re looking at the wilderness with that thirst in your eyes” (Zak’s eyes snapped back to Clarice’s face). “You seem slightly delirious. I’m worried about you. Everyone knows that you are more vulnerable to the wilderness when you are weakened.”

“Fine.” Zak said. “I think I have few hours of sunlight left. Leave me here and I’ll meditate, and then we can meet at the fires later.”

Clarice’s eyebrows rose involuntarily. Zak wondered for a second what she was surprised about, then suddenly realised that it had always been she who had ended their meetings, and he who had tried to convince her to stay with her for just a few more minutes. But for once, he wanted to be alone. He had to think about everything she had just said, and when she was in front of him, he couldn’t think clearly. Clarice hesitated before getting up. She still looked concerned, and didn’t seem to want to leave him alone so close to the wilderness.

“What’s wrong, are you afraid you’ll miss me?” He asked her cheekily

“No” she responded, ever so slightly too quickly. “See you by the fires at dinner time. Good meditation”. And with that she got up and left.

Zak nodded, closed his eyes and started his breathing exercises. For a second, he forgot about the wilderness as he fought against the even bigger temptation to turn around and see if she was looking back at him as she left. His heart began to beat faster again.

Eventually he could take it no more. He opened his eyes and looked behind him. No. He was alone, and he couldn’t even see her silhouette. He assumed that she was back among the hundreds of tents, in the large makeshift village that the tribe had constructed in a large clearing the day before.

Then, looking down beside him, he saw that she had forgotten her large water skin behind. In a second, his mouth-burning thirst flared up again like never before. He tried to swallow, but he just gagged painfully, as he had no saliva left in his mouth. He grabbed the water skin, squeezed it and folded it in every possible direction, but only a droplet of water came out onto his tongue, and it seemed to evaporate upon contact.

Then, suddenly, he was sure that he could hear it. A river, which surely couldn’t be more than a few hundred metres away. He looked up at the sky. Dusk was a few hours away yet. The tents were visible behind him. A few steps couldn’t hurt, just to see if the sound got any louder...

Grabbing the water skin, he took a few tentative steps towards the wilderness. Then a few more. Yes, he was sure. The sound was getting louder. And his thirst more urgent by the second. He walked a little faster, now with more purpose. If he arrived quickly, walking in a straight line, then all he would have to do was fill the water skin, turn around exactly a half-circle, and jog back, and he would be back on the path well before nightfall. By that time, the fire would be clearly visible. He’d find it easily!

A moment later, he was walking deeper and deeper into the trees, not turning back. He didn’t want to turn back and risk re-considering, returning to the camp to vainly meditate while he became thirstier and thirstier.

He might have thought differently had he seen the wispy fog that began to snake out from among the branches behind him.

## Chapter 2: Slithers

As Zak walked deeper into the shadowy trees, he felt a cold wind start to pick up. The wind whistled through the trees, and the sound of the river disappeared. Zak began to walk much more hesitantly, picking his way across the forest floor. He took detours for a few minutes at a time to avoid particularly thick patches of trees.

As the sound of the wind drowned out the sound of the river, Zak was suddenly filled with doubt. His thirst was making him feel dizzy. He stopped and turned around, considering returning to the camp. He was starting to feel extremely uneasy, and he began to ask himself whether the sound of the river had indeed been his imagination. He decided that it would be better to return to the camp, maybe try again the next day. He couldn't stop thinking about what Clarice had told him, and his uneasiness was quickly turning to fear.

Turning back in the direction of the camp, he saw that a thin fog had filled the air behind him. He turned again and looked in the direction that the wind was coming from, and noticed that the trees in that direction were rapidly fading from view as the wind carried with it an ever-thickening fog. He turned back towards where he thought the river was, but now that he could no longer hear it, he wasn't sure if he was facing exactly the same direction as before. He looked around himself for a second, turning on the spot. He didn't admit it to himself, but deep inside him a panic was rapidly growing.

The river forgotten, he turned around and started walking fast in the opposite direction, the direction that he thought he had come from. The trees seemed thicker than they had done, but maybe it was just because he was walking faster.

As the fog rapidly thickened, his fear began to turn to panic. Suddenly he was sure that all around him creeping and slithering beasts were crawling malevolently towards him, and that he would only be safe when he arrived back on the path. Given energy by his panic, he started sprinting as fast as he could through the forest, ignoring the pain when he collided with trees or scratched himself on the thorny bushes in the undergrowth.

His panic increased. The fog seemed to suck the energy out of him, but he couldn't bring himself to slow down. The fog thickened, and he started to trip over the roots of the gnarly trees that blocked his path, falling heavily, scrambling back to his feet, and continuing even faster, ignoring his painful bruises. The grass he had been running on gave way to spiny bushes that tore the skin from his legs as he tripped over them. He quickly realised that it wasn't exactly the same route he had taken earlier, but he hoped that it was more or less the right direction. Before he knew it, he was scrambling rather than running, tripping every few meters as the fog grew even thicker and he could barely see the ground in front of him.

Zak had experienced cold before, but the clammy fog that now washed over him brought a new kind of icy chill that he had never experienced. The whiteness in the air seemed to bring with it a sense of profound hopelessness, turning into a feeling of cold terror that chilled his very bones. A part of him realised that he must have somehow missed the path, and that now he must be running in the wrong direction. But he

couldn't bring himself to stop running, hoping that he was mistaken, that he was about to burst out of the trees into the welcome warmth of the campsite on the path...

Finally, he stopped, exhausted and unable to continue. Taking a few deep breaths, and beginning to control his terror, he turned around slowly and began to walk back the way he had come, hoping that he had crossed the path without realising it in his haste. Gone was his defiance. Now he walked nervously and jumpily. He heard a scuffling sound behind him. His heart jumped into his mouth and he jumped and turned around, holding up Clarice's water skin as though it was a weapon. Another strange sound, this time from the other direction. And another.

In the thick fog he couldn't make out the origins of the sounds; he only knew that they were getting closer. He felt as though he was being observed by malevolent eyes all around him. He tried to cry out for help, but in his panic, his voice seemed to be trapped in his throat. He knew that he had no energy left to run away. He screwed his eyes shut and braced himself, waiting for some horrifying beast to clamp its jaws around him, or worse, for creeping Exu's clammy hands to clamp around his leg...

Nothing. The sounds had disappeared. He forced himself to stop hyperventilating, and then closed his eyes, and employed one of the tribe's meditation techniques to calm himself down. Taking a few deep breaths, and beginning to control his terror, and then started walking again, this time slowly, constantly looking around himself for signs of the path.

Finally, after hours of searching, wandering blindly through the thick mist, the fog began to clear. As it did, a hopelessness even more profound gripped his heart. With every new tree he saw, he became more and more certain that he was well and truly lost. He seemed to be in a wood, but with strange, scary, gnarly trees that he had never seen before, which cast their final faint shadows across the ground as true night fell. With the night, a silence came upon the wood, broken only by what seemed to be the sounds of slithers, and occasionally the sound of something scuttling across the ground. For a second, Zak was tempted to cry out, hoping that someone, somewhere, would hear him, but something in the oppressive silence of the place made him afraid to break it.

Tears ran down his face as he continued walking, but now he walked without purpose or hope.

He became conscious of a pain in his hand, and looked down at it. He was still gripping Clarice's empty water skin, holding onto it with all of his strength, his fingers turning white with the strain. Making a conscious effort, he relaxed his grip and let the water flask drop to the ground. He looked at it for a second, waiting for his thirst to come back, more powerful than ever. But this time, he didn't feel any thirst. Instead, the feeling that filled every part of his body was the most profound misery he had ever known. As he looked down at the water skin, and the patterns on it that had been embroidered by one of his friends' mothers, his head was flooded with images of the tribe, and he was overcome with regret. Despite his dehydration, tears ran down his face. He tenderly picked the water skin back up and hugged it close to him.

It was all that he had left of the tribe.

More tears ran down Zak's face. If only he could find the tribe again, he would accept his punishment and promise never again to leave the path, never to disobey the Map Readers who guided the tribe, as they had done for the many generations since his tribe had been climbing the great mountain. But it was too late. He was in the Wilderness, and he was going to starve to death, or be sucked into some kind of muddy hole, or be ripped apart by savage beasts or eaten from the inside by terrible parasites... Perhaps it would happen today, perhaps in a period of weeks, but he was now destined to die a lonely and painful death.

As this thought hit him, his energy, so far only maintained by his adrenaline, finally left him, and he fell to the floor, unable even to move himself into a sitting position. He felt wave after wave of nausea, and he started shivering violently.

Eventually, just before the darkness of the night became complete, he managed to drag himself to a nearby bush to take shelter.

Before he crawled under the bush, he checked it for snakes. Everybody knew that the wilderness was full of snakes, as well as all manner of poisonous insects and vile beasts. The moisture on his clothes and skin from the fog began to feel even more icily cold, and he experienced another moment of pure and acute despair.

"At least if I freeze to death tonight, it will be over quickly." He thought to himself. He hugged his knees to his chest, and hid his face, sobbing quietly as he prepared himself for the most uncomfortable night of his life. In vain, he tried to gain warmth by thinking of the sparse but satisfying food that his family would be eating around the fires, and of the comfortable intimacy in the tents as the tribe camped.

Most of all, in an effort to try and forget about the biting cold around him, he thought about the storytellers who told the history of the tribe every night, by the fires. Since the day that he had learnt to understand the language of the Tribe, their stories had always moved and fascinated him. They told stories about what life had been like for their ancestors who had lived at the bottom of the mountain, plagued constantly by droughts.

They told sad stories about the Tribe's animals that died of thirst, and couldn't find grass to eat because of the droughts.

They told terrifying stories about the terrible forest fires that tore through the dry grass and forests around the villages, killing everything in their paths.

They told longing stories about how the people had stared up at the clouds at the top of the great mountain, the clouds whose water never seemed to reach the bottom.

They told hopeful stories about the day when the tribe, using the maps that had been drawn by their ancestors who had descended from the mountain many hundreds of years ago, had finally decided to climb the mountain, to escape from the terrible dry land that could no longer sustain them.

But most of all, they told joyful stories about the land that awaited the Tribe at the top of the mountain, a beautiful paradise of abundant lakes, crystalline rivers and refreshing streams, where the people would never again have to experience thirst.

Zak thought about his family, and Clarice. His tears intensified as he thought about the shame that they must be feeling at his weakness. He lay shivering under his bush and thought about all that he had lost. His family would surely already be mourning him, and tomorrow, the tribe would once again continue on its way. Very soon, Zak knew that he would be nothing but a mere memory, worse than dead.

### Chapter 3: Wilderness

Zak's eyes blinked open. The night before, he hadn't imagined that he would even be able to close his eyes, so great was his terror and despair, but now he realised that he must have slept. It was light, and the sun shining through the trees had burnt away the last of the mist and the morning dew. For a second, as he saw the shafts of sunlight that shone through the trees, he felt a moment of optimism, but then remembered the terrible reality of his situation. He was lost in the wilderness, destined to wander forever in darkness, never to reach the top of the Great Mountain, or even to play his role in the journey, to be remembered by his descendants who would one day arrive.

With this thought came a feeling of crushing depression, and he closed his eyes again, allowing the feelings of hopelessness and despair to wash over him in waves, causing him almost physical pain. He thought about all that he had lost.

After a while, though, he began to feel warmth on his face as the sun shone even more brightly through the trees, and he began to realise that his feeling of hunger was beginning to become stronger than his feelings of hopelessness and despair. Wiping the tears from his face, he slowly and shakily stood up. Looking around himself despondently, he randomly chose a direction and started to walk, unconcerned as to whether he was climbing or descending the mountain.

After a few hours lost in his thoughts, through his tears, he started to notice trees that had low-hanging fruits on them. They weren't fruits that he had ever seen before, but he ate them anyway, even though they were probably poisonous. Everybody knew that most of the fruits in the wilderness were deadly poisonous.

A few minutes later, he was surprised to discover that, rather than the burning feeling and nausea in his stomach that he had been expecting, the fruits seemed to fill his body with a kind of sweet warmth, as did the sun, which was now approaching its zenith in the sky, shining down through the leaves of the trees, which were becoming less thick by the second. Despite himself, he found that, without having realised it, alongside his feeling of depressed hopelessness, a strange feeling of curiosity had appeared, telling him to walk just a little bit further. He realized that it was probably temptation, but now that he was as good as dead anyway, why not follow it a little further and see where it took him?

The day passed. As the sun began to set, he sat by a spring that he had found outside of the forest, and drank heartily from its fresh, cool waters. He hadn't realised how thirsty he had become, and despite his misery, he had to admit that he was drinking the tastiest water he had ever encountered. Before he had approached the spring, he had been apprehensive, thinking about the terrible scaly water-monsters Clarice had told him about. But, with a morbid chuckle, he had quickly reasoned to himself that he could either drink

the water and risk dying, or not drink it and die for sure. Either way, he reminded himself, he was essentially dead already.

So there was no point in being both dead *and* thirsty!

He knew that he was surely doomed, but as he drank, this knowledge suddenly seemed less painful. The vision before him, as he looked up and down along the mountain, was mesmerising. He suddenly understood that it had been his fear and despair that had made the Wilderness seem so dark and scary the night before, but now that he saw it in the sunlight, he began to see a new kind of beauty that he had never known before on the path. The orange and red lights of the setting sun danced across the blanket of cloud above him that seemed to extend as far as the eyes could see. Looking upwards in the other direction, forests and clearings that extended up the sides of the Great Mountain as far as he could see, until they became lost in the clouds far above.

He had given up on his family now, and his tribe. However, as he looked at the beautiful views above and below him, a strange new feeling began to grow inside him. He would never reach the top of the mountain, and he was as good as dead anyway, but he was also thankful that he had been able to have this incredible experience before he died, something that would probably never be experienced by those who never strayed from the route plotted by the Map-Readers. And, as that thought went through his head, he suddenly felt a little better about his situation. Yes it was still hopeless, and yes he missed his family with an almost physically painful intensity, but there was no need to die just yet. Perhaps tomorrow he would find another stream before he died of thirst. Perhaps the next day he would find some more fruit before he died of hunger.

He got up and began to look for firewood. At least this night, he wouldn't die of cold.

As he woke up on the third morning, and started walking, Zak felt more optimistic, and looked around himself in wonder at the new plants, and the stunning views. When he heard sounds among the trees, he jumped, and terrifying images of wolves, or snakes, or even the dreaded *Exu* filled his head, but nothing attacked him, and his optimism quickly came back. He wondered to himself what had happened to *Exu* to turn him into a monster, and what it had felt like.

Then, as he walked, uncertainty gradually began to replace his fascination. Something wasn't right. He could feel something, a feeling that he had never experienced before. Despite the bright sun, he felt as though there were more shadows than there should be, that there was a strange fuzziness starting to appear in his head...

After a few more kilometres of walking, he was no longer looking around himself in curiosity, but in fear. Nothing around him seemed to have changed, but everything suddenly felt different. His steps began to become uncertain. He couldn't hear anything, but every few steps, he would stop for a second and cover his

ears. He put a trembling hand over his heart – it was beating much faster than it should have been. He looked at his hand, and saw how much he was shaking. He looked around himself again, and saw no explanation. Whatever was happening to him, it seemed to be coming from inside rather than outside. He thought about the dangers of the wilderness that Clarice had described for him, and it took him a second to realise what was happening. Despite the hot sun, suddenly an icy fear spread through his body. He sat down heavily as his legs could no longer carry him. His whole body was shaking. There was only one explanation. He was becoming a monster, like Exu!

He took some deep breaths, trying to calm himself. He remained seated, and closed his eyes. Perhaps by meditation he could save himself. He breathed even more deeply, and tried to recall images of the path, and make a barrier around his mind, to keep out the dark forces of the wilderness, as he had been taught. For a second he felt better, and a seed of relief began to grow in the dark pit of his stomach... then the feeling of unease suddenly became even more pronounced.

“I’m too weak, Clarice was right”, Zak thought to himself as he gave up on his meditation and tried to control his almost uncontrollable panic. “And even the strongest of minds would become infected this deep into the wilderness!”

He spent another moment trying to control his panic... Then he realised that he had only one option. He was already lost, but at least he could save the others. If he got as far away from his tribe as possible, then at least he couldn’t return to haunt them when he did become a monster. He took one more deep breath, and felt his nerves calm. His sense of purpose cleared his mind, and he knew that there was only one last thing for him to do in his life. Gathering his resolve, he leapt up, and started to run as fast as he can. Since he had been born, and his father and grandfather before him, his muscles had become attuned to walking *upwards*. Now, however, for the first and last time in his life, he found himself sprinting *down* the great mountain.

The trees whizzed past Zak on either side as he sprinted down the mountain. The strength of his resolve seemed to give his feet wings. As he felt the vibrating feeling inside him become stronger and stronger he just ran faster, and when he started to hear strange deep sounds around him he ignored them. As the trees became thicker and thicker and he could only see a few metres ahead, he dodged them and continued, feeling better with every mile he covered. Then, from one second to the next, suddenly there were no more trees, and his view ahead of him was unobstructed. And before him, was a vision that made him stop dead.

Hundreds of creatures that he could barely comprehend were travelling up a wide path that snaked off slightly uphill into the distance, along the side of the Great Mountain. They were massive, a hundred times bigger than any being that he had ever seen or even heard of before. The first ones he saw were those heading up the hill, and away from him, and all that he could see of them was their long brown hair that stretched almost to the ground. As he looked in the other direction, his amazement increased tenfold. The lumbering beasts moved with a sort of grace, and now it was possible to see them clearly. Massive ears flapped around a strangely elongated head, which stretched out into a trunk. Huge tusks, reminiscent of some of the wild boars that followed the tribe, protruded from either side of its mouth, stretching five or ten

meters ahead of the creature. Truly it was a sight to behold. As he was about to turn and flee, lest they notice him and attack, suddenly he noticed something even more unbelievable. People were riding the creatures!

In that second, he felt a moment of pure confusion. He had thought that his tribe were the only people that existed. It had never occurred to him to question what the Map Readers had taught him, but now he saw that they were wrong about the Wilderness. As he remained on the ground, paralysed in amazement, a rider on one of the creatures noticed him, and raised his hand. A ripple of effect followed this action, as all of the animals behind him came slowly to a halt. The man shouted to Zak. He spoke in a thick accent, but nonetheless, the language he used was similar enough to Zak's that he was able to understand.

"Who are you?" The man said.

"My name is Zak, and I come from the tribe!" Zak replied weakly, sweating with nervousness.

"Well then, you are lucky that you found the Path!" the man said. "Come and join me on my Mammoth!"

Zak started towards him, but after a second, stopped dead.

"I can't" he said sadly. The man looking down at him furrowed his eyebrows.

"I'm afraid I'm becoming a monster!" Zak continued dejectedly, his big eyes filling with tears as he looked up at the man on the Mammoth. "For the last day, I've been feeling a strange feeling in my gut, and my hands are trembling, and my head feels fuzzy. It's getting worse and worse. I fear that you will have to leave me to die alone in the wilderness before I harm you and your tribe!" The people on the Mammoth laughed, not unkindly. Zak retreated a step, taken aback, slightly irritated and offended, despite his utter despair. This was no laughing matter.

"Don't worry, traveller!" Said the man, chuckling. "What you have been experiencing are the calls of our Mammoths. When they talk among themselves, they communicate at a lower frequency than we can hear. It makes you feel fuzzy. We're all used to it."

Zak almost fainted with relief. The man's chuckle became a full guffaw as he saw the delighted expression on Zak's face.

"Don't worry young wilderness walker. You are no danger to us and we are no danger to you! Come and join us as our guest! You won't reach the top of the mountain without the help of a faithful mammoth – no one ever has."

Zak's mouth went dry at the idea of mounting one of these incredibly dangerous looking creatures. But as it did so, he saw other faces begin to appear from over the side of the mammoth's back – faces of women and children. There were even children riding on these massive animals! Zak was young, brave and proud. If a child could do it, then so must he be able to. So he ignored his fear, and walked towards the mammoth, even in the knowledge that with a flick of its head the creature could disembowel him. As the creature saw him approaching, it knelt its front legs, and moved his tusks to the floor. Now that he was closer, he realised that he had underestimated the length of the giant creature's tusks. They were wide and large enough for him to walk on, and the gentle behemoth stayed completely still as Zak walked up onto its head. There, he found a family of people sitting cross-legged on the huge animal's back looking at him with unabashedly curious expressions.

Zak almost fell over as the mammoth lurched to its feet. He hastily sat down. All of those who were sitting down automatically adjusted their weight, as if they had been riding these creatures all their lives, which Zak supposed they must have been. Despite their obvious curiosity, the family on the back of his mammoth didn't talk to him, but contented themselves to merely look at him with a kind of apprehension and nervous admiration, as he was the first person any of them had ever seen who was not from their tribe. They were too nervous to ask any questions, and they remained silent during the ride. Zak contented himself, therefore, to look around him, at the wonders that he could see. He quickly became used to the musky smell of the mammoths, as it permeated his clothes and his very skin, making him feel as though he was already one of them. As the beasts rumbled along, Zak felt the morning's optimism filling his veins with warmth once again. For the first time since he had left the tribe, he realised that he was feeling something that he had thought he would never feel again. Hope.

It was only when they stopped to make camp that he finally got a chance to talk to anyone. His driver signalled to him to dismount the mammoth and follow him. They walked off together, looking at the people of this strange new tribe who milled around or unloaded tents and camping equipment from the backs of their beasts. As they continued walking through the giant campsite, he found that the people further ahead who had already been there for a while were taking care of their mammoths, tending to their needs. Zak knew that it was rude, but for a second he had to pull away from his guide and stop to look back down the mountain behind him. This part of the mountain was not as steep as the path which he had come from, and below him he could see a lightly inclining plain with the huge woolly behemoths grazing with the sun setting behind them. As had begun to happen so often, he found himself utterly stunned.

"Come on, you can talk to them now!"

Zak jumped as he heard his guide call out loudly behind him, for it was only the second time that he had heard him speak.

"Talk to who?" Zak asked impolitely, before he could think better of it.

"The Interpreters of the Signs, of course! Those who guide us on our great journey!"

## Chapter 4: Mammoths

Zak apprehensively entered the tent. Behind it stood the biggest Mammoth of the whole tribe, a creature so huge that Zak could barely comprehend it. As he entered, he saw a large, slightly fat man in ornate mammoth-fur robes sitting cross-legged on a divan, poring over some scrolls. When he heard Zak come in, he looked up, a huge, friendly smile on his face.

“Welcome to the Tribe of the Mammoths!” Said the Interpreter of the Signs. “How lucky you are! Providence has brought you to us, for in the wilderness you can wander for your whole life without finding the true path to the top of the mountain. But even this is better than following one of the wrong paths, as we know some people do. You no doubt come from one of these paths.”

“Yes” Said Zak, excitedly. “And I was told that we were the only tribe! We didn’t even know that these Mammoths existed!” The Interpreter of the Signs nodded understandingly.

“We know of other tribes who have incomplete knowledge. They are not following the true path.” He said, full of pity.

“But we have maps as well. And Map Readers who guide us!” Said Zak. “And we have been following the Path as long as anybody can remember. Only I was stupid enough not to trust the Map Readers, and *that* is why I found myself in the wilderness.”

“It was not chance that led you away from the path, but providence” said the Interpreter of the Signs. “You were led here, because this is the true path. Surely you don’t believe that a mere chain of coincidences could have led you from the wrong path to the right one? You were led here, so that we could teach you the way of the true path.” He said. Zak began to protest, but then stopped. Suddenly it dawned on him that this wise man must be right! He knew now that the maps from which his tribe got their directions could not be accurate, as he had been told they were, because they had not spoken of other tribes. Neither, therefore, was the path that they were taking! So this *must* be the true path! He began to listen

Over the course of the next few hours, Zak learnt many things. He learnt that this tribes’ maps had described signs that the tribe of the mammoths would see on the path, and he learnt that most of these signs had already been seen, which meant that they were almost at the top.

As he gained this knowledge, Zak became more and more excited, and filled with a feeling of enlightenment. What the Interpreter of the Signs said to him had an unexpected effect. Zak was immediately convinced that indeed it was providence that had brought him to this path, but not so that he could join the Mammoth people in their climb. Excited, he shared his revelation with the Interpreter of the Signs.

“You have shown me that you have information that my tribe does not possess. You have explained things in a way that make more sense than the Map Readers in my tribe have been able to. Furthermore, on the backs of your wonderful, amazing beasts, I have travelled further up the mountain in a day than I travelled in a month with my tribe. I must therefore conclude that this *is* the true path, as you have said. However, I have a role more important than merely joining you in the final climb to the top. I am sure that you understand that loyalty to your tribe is the most important virtue.”

As he said this, the Interpreter of the Signs nodded sagely. “Perhaps then, your tribe once had the roots of wisdom, but merely lost their way. For this is a great virtue, perhaps even the greatest. Without it, we would all be lost.”

“So the providence that brought me here could only have had one intention. I must return to guide my family to you, even if I die doing so, because if they do not realise that your path is in fact the true one, they will be forever doomed to continue along a path that will lead them nowhere.” The Interpreter of the Signs nodded once again, remarking on the wisdom of this child; wisdom which could perhaps one day even rival his own.

“Every moment, it becomes more and more evident to me that it was providence that brought unto us a man whose mind was open to the truth.” He said sagely. “I bless you upon your task. For you to have survived so long in the Wilderness, it means that you must have had a sacred task. Someone who enters the wilderness without a sacred task quickly becomes lost, or worse!”

Zak nodded, thinking about James, and Exu, and the others who had disappeared, never to return. He supposed that they had not had a sacred task, and so what had happened to them was only natural. The Interpreter of the Signs knelt in front of Zak, put his hands on his shoulders, and enveloped him with his gaze, his eyes full of affection.

“When you arrive with your tribe, we will gladly welcome them as though they were our children, because a long-lost child is what you have shown yourself to be! Please dine and rest with us tonight, and tomorrow you will begin your quest to guide your family to the true path.” Then, in a rare moment of spontaneity, he hugged Zak. Zak felt tears come into his eyes at the kindness and generosity of these people whom he had only just met.

That night Zak dined on mammoth meat, stewed with as many local vegetables as the travellers had been able to find before sleeping. It was a fabulous feast, and an even more fabulous experience. For the first time in his life, he knew the honour of being a guest among generous people. He couldn’t wait for his family to experience the same thing as he was experiencing now. Every time he now thought of the moment when he had become lost, he felt himself filled with warmth and pleasure at the knowledge that in fact it had been because of providence, and that there had been an intention behind his suffering.

After he had eaten, his host took him to the main campfire, where they sat drinking tea and chatting as more and more members of the mammoth tribe arrived. Eventually, the whole tribe seemed to be present. Zak thought about what always happened in his tribe after dinner – when the tribe gathered around the fire to hear the storytellers tell the stories of the tribe’s history. He mentioned as much to his host.

“Zak, it sounds as though your tribe really is simply a more primitive version of ours! We have a similar custom here, but rather than listen to storytellers, we have *poets*. It is a more advanced form of art, which requires more skill.” Zak frowned for just a second but before he had time to answer, a silence began to fall over the whole crowd, and a sense of eager expectation fell over the tribe. He forgot what he was going to say. “Look, one of the poets is coming out now!” Said his host. “Tonight is very special. Because you are

here, in your honour, he is going to tell a poem about the history of our tribe, and why we are climbing the mountain. This is a great honour.”

Zak was speechless. According to the traditions of his tribe, he was from the Goat-Herders caste. “Honour” had always been completely out of his reach. But before he could think any more about this, a man dressed in ornate mammoth-fur robes stepped out of the crowds and stood next to the fire. Now a complete silence fell over the crowd, and somewhere, a man started beating a deep mammoth-leather drum. The sound was so low that Zak could barely hear it – it made his head feel fuzzy as it had earlier, but this time he embraced the feeling, and felt it calming him, making him feel peaceful, and more receptive to the other sounds around him. Then, in a deep, slow voice, the likes of which Zak had never heard before, the poet began to recite. Zak shivered when he saw that the poet was looking only at him while he recited:

*A lone mammoth walking slowly, alone  
Through the marsh of the ruin of a field once sown  
Its brothers, by the flood ripped apart,  
and it's masters **stripped** to the bone*

*In that desolation below, we had only our fears  
In any minute the rains could destroy,  
The **toils** of ten thousand years*

As he recited, tears formed in the poet's eyes, echoed in the eyes of the people watching, as they were moved by the slow, mournful beat of the mammoth drum. The poet continued.

*Always we were forced to mourn  
For our crops, our lives, our villages torn  
Another grey night, another grey dawn  
Under the clouds where the **deluge** was born*

*So our forefathers and their noble beasts  
set out on the quest for the peak,  
Leaving below that great black cloud,  
and the havoc that it would wreak*

*And here we are! Continuing forth!*

*For our children a safe haven we seek!*

(Now the mammoth drum began to take on a more triumphal tone, and the poet stood differently, spoke louder, clenched his fists. The crowd began to become restless as they felt his energy infuse them.)

*Thus began the great mammoth voyage*

*Which we continue today, with great hope and courage*

*Our old homes crushed, perhaps, by many a flood*

*Or under the rains sunk into the mud*

*The fate of those remained, we'll never now know*

*But soon, **above! Above the clouds!** And the rain, safely below!*

*Our mammoths will roam in the sun's dry glow*

*Our crops without fear or regret we will sow*

*The plague of rain, behind us will be*

*And, without fear, our children will grow*

The people erupted in applause, Zak loudest. He could see that these words held special meaning for the people who were listening to them. For them, these words represented everything that the tribes were working for, working towards. Zak, whose tribe had also been journeying up the mountain for generations, in order to escape from certain calamity at the bottom, understood this as much as anyone.

Over the course of the night, he listened to the recitals of the poets of the tribe of the Mammoths. Some poets recited bitter poems about the times of the terrible floods at the bottom of the mountain. Others recited hopeful poems about the day when the tribe of the Mammoths, using the maps that had been drawn by their ancestors who had descended from the mountain many thousands of years ago, had finally taken their Mammoths and begun to climb the mountain, to escape from the terrible wet marshland that could no longer sustain them. Some recited joyful poems about the top of the mountain, where it was always dry, where water was always a safe distance away.

He sat rapt with attention as he listened to the beautiful poems of the Mammoth Tribe, and did his best to memorise them, so that when he returned to his tribe, he could help Clarice to learn this more

advanced form of art. He looked forward to the delighted expression of wonder she would surely have when he would show her how she could move the traditions of the tribe forward.

He slept in a large tent with the same family who had discovered him. When he awoke in the morning, he was showered with gifts, which would help him on his sacred task. All of his presents were given to him in a bag made from tough mammoth leather, all but unbreakable. When he had first encountered the Mammoth tribe, he had been wearing clothes that had been worn down to rags, but now he was dressed in comfortable and luxurious mammoth-fur travel clothing, and his new bag was filled with provisions. In one night, his entire outlook on life had completely changed. He had a feeling of thankfulness running through his very veins for the luck that had brought him to discover the true path, and now he had the privilege of being the one who would guide his tribe back to it.

The Interpreter of the Signs came to see Zak off. Before Zak left, the Interpreter of the Signs had one final warning to impart.

“Remember, Zak, the worst thing that can happen in the wilderness is that you lose track of your sacred task. If you keep your sacred task clear in your mind, you will be safe. But if you waver, you will be worse than lost.”

Zak nodded solemnly. Then, turning to the rest of the Mammoth Tribe, with one hand on his heart, he threw his other hand into the air, waving one final emotional goodbye to the people who had welcomed him and treated him as their own. As he did so, his host, the man who had first welcomed Zak into the tribe pumped his fist into the air and cheered. The cry was immediately taken up by the whole tribe. It seemed as though everyone had gathered to see him off, and all of a sudden they felt as much his family as his original tribe had done. As he looked over at the Mammoth Tribe, cheering their support for their new brother, Zak felt a wave of emotion that threatened to overcome him. But he had not forgotten his own tribe, his family, and Clarice, who still made his heart flutter whenever he thought of her. And he had a lot of ground to cover. Dragging his eyes from the beautiful spectacle before him, he plunged back into the trees behind him, and walked decisively away. Behind him, he could hear the cheers of the tribe becoming quieter, until finally, only the sounds of the forest accompanied him.

His plan was to travel horizontally along the mountain back in the direction from which he had come, in the hope that eventually he would be able to see his tribe below him.

## Chapter 5: Fall

For a week, Zak walked along the mountainside. On the seventh day, as he walked, he noticed that on either side of him, the sloping hill became was becoming steeper and steeper, and the lush forest was starting to give way to rockier terrain. Before he knew it, the mountain above and below him had turned into a rocky cliff, and he found himself walking precariously along an increasingly narrow route along its side. Finally, after stepping on some unstable ground that sent little stones clattering down the steep hill below, he stopped to reconsider. He looked around him. Looking down, he could see that the forest continued at the bottom of the cliff, many metres below. He thought about trying to go down to it, but couldn't see an easy route to climb down. Ahead, the path he was on seemed to continue, leading upwards, but he worried that it would become even more narrow and dangerous if he continued. Then he looked behind him, and a pang of fear hit him.

Without him noticing, behind him, a rapidly thickening fog had been picking up. Zak looked down at the path, suddenly nervous and agitated. The fog seemed to be crawling towards him, rolling malevolently along the path towards his feet. An icy cold feeling gripped his heart as the first wisps of fog rolled over his feet and up his body. Around him, the air was becoming thick, and visibility decreasing rapidly. He tried to control his panic, looking around himself for an escape route, or a good place to sit down and wait for the fog to pass. Looking around himself, he saw no solution, and his nervousness increased. Then, before the fog completely filled the air around him, he looked up...

He almost jumped in surprise. Above him, a strange face was looking down at him from above the cliffs. For a second, relief began to fill Zak, but as he opened his mouth to call out to the man on the cliff, he felt a moment of doubt. That man had obviously seen Zak before Zak had seen him, so why hadn't he said something already? He took a closer look at the face through the mist.

"Hello?" Zak said hesitantly. His voice was weak, but clear nonetheless. The man didn't react. The face just stared at him, unblinking, licking its lips. The man seemed ageless, neither old nor young. Zak's eyes locked into his for a second. Then, as the icy fog wrapped itself around the whole of Zak's body, he saw the face slowly withdraw, with a hint of what seemed to be a greedy smile at the corners of its lips. An icy fear spread through the whole of Zak's body. For the first time in his life, he felt a presentiment that he was in the presence of someone who wanted to do him harm. He looked back down and around, but now he could see nothing. Despite his terror, he forced himself to look up again. This time, he didn't call out. Zak wondered who it could be, so far from one of the paths, creeping around in the Wilderness. Then a terrible thought hit him.

"Exu".

In a moment of panic, he grabbed the wall of the cliff, flailing his arms around for a second before he found it. This fog was even worse than the first. He suddenly found himself standing on the edge of a steep mountain face, plagued by panic and vertigo, and unable to see more than a meter in front of him. What's more, the fog seemed to bring it's own anxiety with it. It was as if the fog itself had something within it that made it impossible to feel safe.

Thinking of the man above, he felt an uncontrollable desire take him to run, ignoring the danger of the cliff to his right. Clutching his Mammoth skin bag, he started shuffling as fast as he could along the path, always keeping his left hand on the wall of the cliff. A moment later, as his panic increased, he began to run, stumbling clumsily along as he slipped perilously on the now wet stones of the narrow path. A few moments later, he stopped, realising that it was only a matter of time before he fell down the steep drop. Looking around himself frantically, seeing nothing, he pressed himself back against the cliff, clutching his bag to his chest.

Then he felt a strange sliding feeling against his leg, as if a snake was crawling up his leg... He looked down, confused, wondering what it could be...

*Yank.*

Zak screamed. Suddenly he was in the air, upside down, a viciously tight noose around his feet, cutting into the skin around his ankles. And then he was being dragged up the side of the cliff. He felt all of the blood rush to his head. For a second he struggled, trying to free one of his feet, but every movement just made the noose tighter and even more painful. He looked up, but could no longer see even the top of the cliff a few metres ahead of him. In a panic, he did the only thing he could think of. He grabbed his bag, thrust his hand into it until he found the knife that the mammoth tribe had given him. Pulling his hand out, he lost his grip on the bag, and saw it drop out of sight into the fog in a second. Gone. No time to think about it. He was almost at the top of the cliff. Swinging and contracting his muscles, he managed to grab the rope with his free hand and with the other started frantically sawing at the rope that bound him. With a jerk, the knife cut through the rope.

As he started to fall, he thought he saw a clammy hand thrust itself from above the cliff, trying to grab onto his leg. His last thought as he began to accelerate downwards was relief that at least Exu hadn't been able to get him.

Time seemed to stop for a moment as he dropped through the air for a moment... and another moment....

And then violently hit a hard surface. He began to roll down the side of the mountain, his clothes being ripped apart once again, and the nearly healed cuts on his arms and legs reopening in seconds. He tried to secure himself every time he hit a hard surface, but continued falling, utterly unable to see his destination in the thick fog.

As the fog started to thin, the only thing he saw was the ground that seemed to be accelerating towards his head.

His last feeling before losing consciousness was not one of pain, but of wetness around his ears.

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His last conscious thought was the despair of knowing that he would die without completing his sacred task.

## Chapter 6: Wolves

As sensations began to return to him, his mind could not make sense of what was going on. He concluded that he was still in the tent with his family, that he had gotten ill, and that he had been having strange dreams and nightmares. He could feel hands tending to him, and then he realised that he was wounded. He must have fallen, and his family had come to pick him up. He was relieved to realise that it was all a dream, and that his life was as it was before, but for some reason, as he became more awake, the dreamlike quality remained. Finally he was able to open his eyes.

The person tending to him definitely wasn't a member of his tribe. He quickly understood that she was a woman, because even though he couldn't see her in the darkness of the tent they were in, he could feel the tenderness in her touch, and the smallness of her delicate hands. As his vision adjusted to the darkness, he saw that she looked different to anyone else he had ever seen before, but very attractive. Her eyes were wider than usual, and her face seemed rounder. She was extremely light skinned, so much so that he felt as though her face was shining with reflected light.

After this thought entered his head, so did the pain of his wounds. He slammed his eyes shut again, and a new wave of pain flowed into his head. His mind worked slowly. He realised that his dreams had not in fact been dreams, that he really had gotten lost, and most importantly, that he was still alive to complete his sacred task. With that thought in his head, he lost consciousness again, but this time the experience was something more akin to sleep.

He remained in his bed for a period of weeks as he recuperated, often slipping in and out of consciousness, and dreaming fevered dreams of mammoths, and of fog, and of his family and the storytellers in his tribe. In his mind, all of the scenes seemed to blend into one another, and the details of what had happened to him became hazy and vague. At first, he remained scared that Exu would find him, but after his terrible fall, he found that he was simply too tired to be scared, and contented himself with sleeping, and waking up only briefly each when his mysterious saviours gave him soup to drink.

Finally, however, he began to feel more and more restless, and managed to force himself to get out of bed. As he did so, his carer walked in through the entrance of the tent and encouraged him. He could not understand everything she said. Even though it was clear that she was using a language which was similar to his own, it was more difficult to understand than the Mammoth Tribe's. However, he had been unconsciously listening to these people talking to one another outside the tent for a few weeks now while he had been recuperating from his nasty fall, and he had developed an instinctive understanding of what his carer meant when she talked to him. He walked feebly towards the entrance of the tent he was being kept in, helped by the nice lady, and stepped out into the fresh air. He almost collapsed a second time as the noises, sounds, coolness, and smell of fresh air assailed his senses, but he forced himself to remain standing, not wanting to embarrass himself in front of this attractive woman. After a couple of deep breaths, he forced himself to look around, and found that he had no idea where he was on the mountain.

Then he saw the people, and was struck by the incredible strangeness of their behaviour.

Everybody who was walking around kept their heads pointed firmly downwards. Nobody could be seen looking up at the mountain. The children he could see were visibly stopping themselves from looking upwards, as they invariably noticed disapproving glances from the adults around them. But it was even stranger. The older people were, the less likely they were to be looking anywhere other than directly towards the ground. He tried to ask his carer why this was, but she didn't understand him. She indicated to him that he should return to his bed, and she seemed to promise him that he would be able to explore again tomorrow. Before he was able to sleep, she made him drink what seemed to be milk with oatmeal boiled inside it, and he felt more strength returning to his weakened muscles.

Over the next few days, this pattern continued, and through necessity, he quickly gained the means to communicate. As soon as he felt able to, he asked his carer about why the people looked only at the ground. He was surprised to find that he understood her response perfectly, but he was even more surprised at what she said to him.

"Our tribe was once at the bottom of the mountain." She began. Zak raised an eyebrow. She continued, not noticing the slightly wary expression on Zak's face. "There, we were constantly plagued by terrible fogs, not unlike the one that almost killed you. The fogs brought with them strange illusions, that tempted people away from the villages, into the wilderness of the great mountain, where they were consumed by wolves.

Finally, our ancestors started up the mountain, hoping to rise above the fog, for in our ancient texts, we were taught that at the top of the mountain there is a place with no fog and no wolves, where you can see until the horizon with perfect clarity, and explore without any fear of wolves. Now, no wolves have been seen for generations; therefore, we know that we are almost at the top of the mountain. And we have managed to get this far because we discovered the one way of beating the fog. We have learnt that our eyes are constantly tricked by the fog, and that the only way to reach the top of the mountain is to focus purely on the Path, and never raise our eyes to be corrupted by the illusions which are found all around us. Because we follow the *One True Map*, it cannot be wrong."

"But if you don't look away from the path, how can you know that it is the true one?" Zak asked incredulously, after a moment of disbelief. "I once made the same error, I thought that there was no other path, but then providence led me to another path, and I learnt that in fact that that was the true one. Now I am returning to my tribe in order to show them the way to the true path!"

His carer looked at him confusedly. "Listen to how confused you sound! You are living proof of what happens when you deviate from the Path. You were a victim of the fog. Now that you are with us, as long as you avoid the temptation to look away from the path, this can never happen again. When the fog rises, deceptive mirages appear. It seems as though there is a reliable path, but in fact it is merely the wilderness."

"I was not a victim of the fog." Zak said. "Exu attacked me..."

"The guides tell us that after the fog, people find themselves with memories of things that didn't happen. The fog creates illusions. Whoever you think attacked you, was surely an illusion brought on by the fog. The wilderness has no people - every time people leave the path, the fog returns and they disappear for

ever, ripped apart by wolves in the wilderness! You are merely lucky that you fell down to the path before the wolves arrived.” Zak felt a moment of relief. This explanation made much more sense. Clarice had told him that Exu no longer existed. And besides, now that he thought about it, his memories of the fall were confused, and he felt that it was perfectly possible that, in his panic, he had imagined someone who wasn't really there. But there was still something in the woman's explanation that Zak felt uncomfortable with.

“If they disappear forever, how can you know that they get ripped apart by wolves?” Zak asked, pressing her for answers. He was still naïve, but since he had been to the wilderness and survived, he felt that what she was saying couldn't be completely true. “If they never come back, how do you know what happens to them? Maybe nothing at all happens to them!”

“Because that is what is written in the ancient books and maps, and they are what have gotten us to where we are today.”

“What if your books are wrong?” Zak asked. He wanted to ask her if they mentioned mammoths, but he didn't know the word in her language.

“The books are not wrong. The fact that we are still alive is proof enough of that. The people who don't listen to the books get ripped apart by wolves in the wilderness.” She said. She was beginning to become less and less patient with Zak's apparent stupidity. What she was saying, it seemed, was common knowledge, and childish to question.

“But you don't *know* that people get ripped apart by wolves in the wilderness! I was *in* the wilderness, I didn't get ripped apart by wolves!” He said, now slightly irritated himself. “You at least need to *see* the other path before you tell me that it doesn't work!”

“The maps say that the other paths lead only to the wilderness, where you will get ripped apart by wolves.” She said. And it was clear by her tone of voice that she felt that this concluded the discussion. Furthermore, she had started to become very annoyed. Zak was socially aware enough that out of politeness he should stop insisting that he was right. And he already knew that he had been wrong once, so he accepted the possibility that their maps were truly the correct route to the top of the mountain. But nonetheless, he suspected now from his own experience that their book *may* not contain all of the information that he needed to reach the top of the mountain.

Over the next few weeks, he travelled with the group as his wounds continued to heal. He learnt to exactly no surprise that they called themselves the *Tribe of the One True Map*, and were led by the *Guides*, the only ones who could understand the *One True Map*. Now that he was able to walk again, their break from travelling was over, and they all walked together. They formed quite a procession, all looking down at the ground. Only the Guides were allowed to look up from time to time, since, according to the woman who had taken care of Zak, they were the only ones able to distinguish between reality and the illusions of the Wilderness. Out of politeness, Zak began to walk in the same way as the other members of the tribe, especially as he became more and more uncomfortable under the force of the disapproval of those who saw him looking up and around. As he did so, he felt a seductive feeling begin to come over him. Constantly looking at the ground was hypnotising, and once again he began to feel the child-like comfort of not having to

think about his decisions. The responsibility was with the Guides, even more so than with the Map Readers of his own tribe. As his life began to feel simpler, he found that he *wanted* the map to be true, and he tried to stop himself thinking about his experiences which contradicted the things that the Guides were saying.

He began to easily understand why his carer had become angry at him when he had questioned the books. He had not just been attacking the truth of her beliefs; he had been attacking her very security in her way of life. But even that thought became weak and hazy compared to the feeling of acceptance that he was feeling from the tribe, all of whom treated him like family. During the evenings, in the darkness, the people relaxed and stopped looking at the path in order to look at the singers, as they sang beautiful songs. As in his tribe and that of the Mammoths, this was Zak's favourite time of the day. Huddling together in warmth and comfort, they sang together. They sang sorrowful songs about the terrible plagues of fog and wolves. They sang triumphal songs about the tribes' victory over the delusions of the fog, and about the wolves who now attacked only one another, no longer attacking the tribe of the One True Map, as long as they stayed on the path. In these moments, Zak forgot about his doubts, and felt as though he wanted to stay with these people forever. Zak enjoyed the songs of this tribe even more than the poems of the Mammoth tribe, because here, the whole of the tribe joined in, and it gave him a feeling of tremendous companionship and togetherness.

It would have been very easy for him to become seduced by this lifestyle, had it not been for a suspicion that started to build in the back of mind that this path would not lead to the top of the mountain or even to a place from where he would be able to see his people. Deep down, he began to realise that he would not achieve his sacred task if he continued on this road. So, involuntarily, he began to glance upwards from the ground as they walked, more and more often. Once again, he began to feel the disapproval of this new tribe, but this time it was not enough to stop him. When the fog was weak, and he knew that nobody was looking, he began to look out for other paths every chance he got.

One day, he saw a huge rock, and stared at it for a moment, wondering why it gave him a strange feeling. Then he realised what the feeling was. He had seen this rock before! Then he finally understood the suspicion which had been preying on his mind. This tribe was walking in circles! They had probably been doing so for many hundreds of years, passing their maps on to their descendants as they continued their never-ending journey. Had they been willing to look upwards even for a moment, Zak thought, they would have realised this.

A few days after this realisation, looking down from a tree he had climbed when he thought nobody was looking, Zak saw the path that he needed to take; a path which was hidden from view by a small wood, but which led up the mountain as far as he could see.

He ran to the Guides to speak to them, to tell them about his discovery.

"The path you are taking is wrong!" He said excitedly. "You are moving in circles, and just behind that wood is an easy route that will take us all the way up the mountain!" He looked up at them with big eyes and a big smile, full of anticipation.

He had expected them to respond with similar excitement, but he was sorely disappointed. They looked at him, some with disapproval, others with barely concealed disgust in their eyes. Zak's smile wavered, then disappeared. He flinched beneath their withering gaze, now nervous and unsure of himself.

"We have heard people talking of you." One of them said. "You are the person who we saved. We took you in as family, and now you do nothing but criticise our ways. You are ungrateful and you are wrong. But those who have erred once will do so again, so we are not surprised to hear you telling us lies. If you are to stay with us, you will follow our ways and obey our rules, or you will no longer be welcome here. What makes you think that you, barely past childhood, can know better than us, the Guides who are following the One True Map?"

Zak was stricken. He was truly thankful for what they had done for him, and he was hurt to his very core to discover what the people he had come to love truly thought of him. He thought that as somebody who had travelled the wilderness and gained experience, they would have been thankful for his advice, despite his young age.

"Can you not even send an explorer to the other side of the trees to check what I am saying? I am not asking you to trust me; I am asking you only to use your own common sense!"

The Guides looked at one another, and all seemed to come to a silent agreement. Now, the look of disgust was shared by all of them, and some were shaking with rage at this impetuous youngster who was arrogant enough to challenge their way of life.

"You are no longer welcome here." The Guide said, barely able to control the cold anger in his slightly trembling voice. The other Guides looked sympathetically at their colleague, each of them knowing the force of will required to control his anger and keep his voice at normal level. "If you are going into the wilderness to be ripped apart by wolves," the man hissed, "don't you *dare* try to take any of us along with you!"

Tears ran down Zak's face at these words, but to the Guide, these tears were just further evidence that he was a manipulative trickster. But the Guide was not a man without pity, and he was a strongly moral person. He also realised that Zak's parents had clearly not known how to raise their child properly, and that it wasn't *completely* Zak's fault, that he had grown up to be immoral. Out of duty, therefore, despite his righteous anger, he decided to offer Zak one last chance to choose the right path.

"If you are willing to grow up and follow our path, Zak, we don't mind if you stay with us" He said gently. At this, some of the other Guides looked at him with raised eyebrows, demonstrating clearly that they didn't share his sympathy. The man's eyes hardened. "But if you are going to continue criticising our lives, you will not be welcome." The other Guides nodded, their expressions of disgust and rage softening ever so slightly, into mere distaste and anger.

In that moment, Zak realised that there was nothing that he could say to change the minds of the Guides. In the face of their utter certainty that he was wrong, for a second, he even felt that perhaps he was wrong after all, and that perhaps he should go back and join the tribe outside, at least to give their way of life a *try*! But this thought didn't last long. He would not abandon his own tribe, who accepted him for who he was, in order to search for the acceptance of people who wanted to change him completely. He looked each of

the Guides in the eyes, and as they realised that he had not changed his mind, their expressions hardened again. In that moment, he finally understood that he would never again be welcome here, not without sacrificing who he was.

A terrible feeling pierced his heart. He had never experienced rejection before, and it felt like a physical pain clawing at his insides. Without another second's hesitation, tears of anguish running down his face, he stood up and turned around, and began to walk away, breathing shallowly, towards the wood whose branches hid the path up the mountain from view.

Nonetheless, he felt a responsibility to the people who had saved him from certain death. He broke into a run, and stood on the highest rock that he could find, shouting so that the whole camp could hear him.

"Just behind those trees is the route to the top of the mountain. You have been walking in circles, and the maps are wrong!" He shouted, to anybody who would listen. "I have been through the wilderness, and I was not ripped apart from wolves! I have walked on three paths, and I am about to walk on a fourth! Anybody who just explores behind these trees will see that I am right! There is another route that leads up the mountain, and I am going to follow it. I hope that one day, at this point, you will look up, and see this place again, and that on that day you will follow me!"

Then he turned around, leapt from the rock, and walked purposefully in the direction of the trees, refusing to look back.

In that moment, he suddenly made a drastic decision. He realised, there and then, that the only way that he would find his tribe again was if he reached the top of the mountain, and could see *everything* beneath him.

Almost none of the members of the tribe of the one true map even raised their heads to watch him go, and they all felt sorrow for this perfectly nice person who was certain to be ripped apart by wolves in the Wilderness merely because of his refusal to follow their map. But some of them felt something else as well, a strange feeling of unease and doubt, that they had suppressed since they were children. After a moment, the attractive woman who had taken care of Zak flicked her head upwards involuntarily before forcing herself to look back down guiltily, fearing the judgement of the Guides.

Her upwards glance did not last long enough for her to notice that several others had done the same thing.

## Chapter 7: Cliff

As Zak wandered along the path, which he had easily found, he looked around himself nervously for wolves. He knew from his experience that there was no danger, but over the time that he had spent with the Tribe of the One True Map, they had been mentioned so regularly that he couldn't get them out of his mind. The first night was particularly scary, as every shadow he saw seemed to be a creeping wolf. He woke up regularly to feed his fire. Then, the next morning, as he woke up, he spoke to himself in a loud voice, in order to calm himself. "Exu, wolves, fogs, illusions, monsters. These people don't know what they're talking about! I'm safe here!" He waited a second, then drew in a deep breath, and then repeated himself, this time shouting as loudly as he could. He stood warily for a second, waiting for the wilderness around him to contradict him. Nothing. Another deep breath, and he set back off. He felt better – as though he was leaving his fear and his crushing feelings of rejection behind him.

As he continued walking, he relaxed even more. The resources on the path that the tribe had been taking had worn thin through repeated use, but here the resources were abundant and lush. He found enough food that he was never hungry, and although at times he had to climb, for the most part, the area of the wilderness in which he now found himself was far easier to traverse than any of the three paths that he had discovered so far.

As he realised this, a new thought came to him, and it was as though a light had appeared in his head. The wilderness was not truly the terrible place that the people on the paths made it out to be. In fact, he realised, when the people were scared of the wilderness, what they were really scared of was simply the unknown! But Zak now knew that some paths were in fact worse than the wilderness.

As Zak walked, alone with his thoughts, he was able to think about this revelation that he had had. The paths were all routes through the wilderness. But now he began to realise that these paths were imaginary. There was no difference between a blade of grass that was part of the "path" and a blade of grass that was part of the "wilderness", except in terms of people's perception of it. For the first time, he began to think that it was in the wilderness, not the so-called "paths", that he would find the route to the top of the mountain.

In his carefree state, weeks passed as Zak walked, not experiencing hunger or thirst, and finally having the chance to reflect on the mysteries of life that he hadn't even realised had been bothering him. But he did begin to experience loneliness. He had grown significantly, and loneliness was no longer something that crippled him. He had become stronger and more independent, in a way that he had never imagined he could be. But independent people can still be lonely.

After a few days of walking uphill and making good progress, out of the clouds, he began to perceive a nasty sheer cliff face of the mountain ahead of him. For a second he reevaluated all of the conclusions that he had recently come to. Perhaps the various tribal leaders had been right, and the wilderness had just tempted him into a path that would lead nowhere! He walked more and more hesitantly as he thought about this; and his loneliness became so great that it led him to consider even returning to the people he had just left, full of

apologies and willingness to walk with them, even in circles, for the rest of his life. In that moment, he felt that having a group of people who loved him was far more important than being right, and he considered going back to join them, and even to participate in the persecution of anyone else who didn't respect the authority of the maps.

The cliff seemed to stretch as far as the eye could see in each direction, and he couldn't imagine any way of scaling it. Finally, just as he was about to turn back, full of despair, he saw a line of smoke that seemed to snake its way up the cliff. People!

Suddenly, all of the pessimism that he had been feeling left him, and he broke into a run. If there were people near the cliff, perhaps they knew a way of scaling it!

For the next few hours, he focused purely on the smoke that he knew was the evidence of people. He wondered what their story would be, what they would be like. He wondered whether they would want to hear what he had discovered about the paths and the wilderness, or whether they would treat him like the people on the last path. He wondered if they would speak any language that he understood. And he wondered what they would look like.

As he thought these things, he didn't notice time passing, and before he knew it, he was there, and had the answers to all of his questions all too soon.

He walked around a final rock, with the sounds of conversation and the smells of food and other examples of human habitation emanating from behind it. He knew a moment of excitement. They were speaking the same language as the people who he had just left! The people who had left that tribe had not been ripped apart by wolves! As he finally came out from behind the rock, he found himself apparently in the middle of a village.

He saw instantly that there was something not quite right with these people. They walked around, not staring at the ground like the last tribe that he had met, but looking around themselves with a glazed expression in their eyes. Their faces were fixed in bizarre smiles that sent shivers down Zak's back. He went up to someone and began to speak to him. He couldn't shake the feeling that when he looked into his eyes, he could see the back of his head.

"My name is Zak, and I come from the Tribe." He said hesitatingly. "Who are you?"

"We are the colony at the top of the mountain." Said the man, in what Zak felt to be a tone of forced cheerfulness. "Welcome to the top of the mountain!"

"What?" Zak asked cautiously. They were speaking the same language as the people who he had just left, and he understood each individual word, but what he had understood couldn't be right. The people looked at him suspiciously. Some of their smiles disappeared.

"Welcome to the top of the mountain." The man repeated. By this point, everybody within hearing range had begun to gather ominously around him, all looking at him with the fixed smile and the same glazed-over look in their eyes "This is the paradise that you have been searching for." The man continued. "Congratulations on picking the one true path that led you here."

“This isn’t the top of the mountain...” said Zak cautiously, still wondering if he had misunderstood something. He had become very experienced, but there was one lesson that he had not fully learnt, the lesson of discretion. In social matters, he was still naïve, because it was still relatively recently that he had left his tribe and encountered other people for the first time. But as the peoples’ expressions hardened he realised his mistake. They started advancing on him. He noticed the fear and insecurity that had passed fleetingly, almost imperceptibly, over their faces when he suggested that what they were saying wasn’t true. A burly man stepped past the first man he had spoken to, and spoke to Zak in a low but threateningly clear voice.

“We were part of the tribe of the One True Map. But their Guides didn’t know the true way. Our leader, however, was the greatest of these guides. He read the books, and realised their mistakes. The maps needed to be reinterpreted. But they were closed to this truth, and he was persecuted, as were we, his followers. So we left, and found this path, just as he said we would. And now we are at the top of the mountain. Our leader told us when we got here that it was written that there would be people who would be deluded, and not appreciate the paradise, being so greedy as to want to rise even further. He said that such people would be a threat to the society, and would spread their delusions. Thanks to these tricksters, we have begun to *see things that aren’t there*. Are you one of those people, who will bring more delusions to us?” He asked menacingly.

Zak had been retreating, but suddenly stopped to stand his ground. Something that they had said to him had touched a nerve, and his fear left him, replaced by a suddenly burning anger. Before he thought better of it, he replied in an acid tone. “If you think that you are at the top of the mountain, it is YOU who are deluded!” He said confrontationally, his voice rising, suddenly full of fury. He may be a young man, but he felt that he was more experienced than any of these people, and he was sick of being told that he was deluded. Frankly, that these people should imply that he was the deluded one, was simply insulting. “You are no better than the tribe that you left behind you, who closes their eyes to the truth, just because it is easier! You can only continue to believe this ridiculousness by turning your heads away from the cliffs behind you!”

As he said this, the reaction was instantaneous. Some of the tribe members recoiled in horror with little cries, hiding their faces from the cliff face, worried that it had become even clearer, while others drew weapons and rushed towards him.

“TRICKSTER!” Somebody shouted, and the cry was taken up by the multitude. Zak was unprepared for the sudden fury of the attack, and stood frozen for a second. He had experienced the benign pity of the Tribe of the Mammoths. He had experienced the disapproval and even the disgust of the Tribe of the One True Map. But never had he experienced the naked fury mixed with hysterical fear that he was seeing now. Then the burly man reached him and punched him hard in the side of the head. Zak scrambled away, shocked into action. He felt stones hitting him hard in the back of his head, but in his panic he felt no pain as he focused only on increasing his speed to get himself away from this terrible place, with these terrifying glassy-eyed people.

He kept running without looking back, always full of fear that one of them was right behind him, and he continued running even when their cries seemed to fade into the distance.

And he kept running when the fog came down once again, and once again he could see only a few feet in front of him. The fog brought with it a feeling of cold isolation, and increased his terror and panic more and more every second. And he kept running, the burning in his legs constantly stroked by the cold, malevolent caress of the clammy fog, until finally his legs could carry him no more, and he fell to his knees, remaining prostrate on the ground, sobbing quietly and shuddering as the fog continued to wash over him.

## Chapter 8: Clearing

A few hours later, due to his sheer exhaustion, Zak began to slip in and out of a restless sleep. He constantly dreamt that he was being chased by glassy eyed fanatics, but that no matter where he tried to run, he just kept going in a circle and finding himself back at the village. He tried to run in a different direction, but was confronted by snapping, bloody eyed wolves, as saliva dripped from their hungry teeth. Then he dreamt that Exu was crawling towards him, dragging his old, decrepit body across the ground, silently, and then wrapping his clammy fingers around Zak's leg as he slept... Then he dreamt that he became one of the glassy eyed people, and looked up as a great cliff faded in and out of view. He dreamt that he was now accepted as part of the society, surrounded by people looking at him with empty eyes and a huge, exaggerated, vapid smile, which he returned...

His eyes snapped open and he woke up in a cold sweat as the fog began to disperse in the cold morning sun. He looked around himself and saw that he was in a forest, and through the fog and the branches, the sun's rays seemed to be individually visible, appearing through the trees behind which it was rising. He was mesmerised by this sight, as the sun's rays seemed to dance from side to side as the light wind moved the trees' branches. He was too tired even to shiver, and just sat there, looking upwards in a kind of terrified trance. He didn't become aware of how cold he was, or of the passage of time, until a couple of hours later he felt the sun's warmth just starting to gently kiss his skin. His eyes were red, and had dark rings around them, and every time he closed them, he still saw the hysterically euphoric faces of the people who had attacked him.

He sat up and looked around himself. How he had reached such a point, he didn't know, but he was next to a lone tree in the middle of a clearing in a forest. He could not tell which direction led upwards, or which went downwards. The clouds were still low, and he could barely see higher than the trees. His sense of direction was completely confused. But there was something else that was confusing him. Several identical forest-paths led away from the clearing, seemingly leading in every different direction.

There was one path that seemed to attract him. He found that his gaze was always drawn to it, and his mind filled with curiosity. After a few minutes of this, he decided that he should obey his curiosity – it would be better than sitting against a tree waiting for the glassy eyed people to find him. But as he got up, he remembered what had happened last time he had obeyed his curiosity.

What if the path he took led him back to the people who had tried to kill him? The possibility alone was enough to paralyse him, and the forest seemed to close in on him. He was unable to breathe, and in his head, he suddenly saw the people, their smiles mingling with their expressions of hatred as he imagined them creeping towards him from all sides. He sank to the floor as his body was gripped and shaken by a panic attack.

When he recovered, an immeasurable amount of time later, he just didn't have the energy to get up. He couldn't risk encountering those people again. The only thing that he was thankful for was the fact that his friends in the Tribe of the One True Map had not made the mistake of following him, and been subjected to the same fate. He sat on the grass, not far from the tree in the middle of the clearing, looking at each of the paths for signs that the scary people were following him. He was scared that no matter which path he took, there was a chance that the glassy eyed people would be waiting for him in the shadows, following him sneakily just out of his view, waiting for him to sleep, so that they could gently creep up behind him in the cold darkness...

He crawled hastily to the exact middle of the clearing where he would be able to see attackers easily, and looked around himself constantly. His fears were once again his constant companions. He once again felt like he was in the wilderness, and that he was going to be ripped apart by wolves. All of the revelations and increases of understanding he had experienced disappeared under the emotional strain of his situation.

For a day and a night he remained there in his pitiful state, his nightmares getting worse and worse, but still unable to find the motivation to move. His feeling of helplessness only worsened, until he once again reached the point where he just wanted to die. He was just a boy, and he had been through so much in the last few months since he had become lost. It was too much for him.

When he began to hear voices coming from one of the paths, therefore, he simply remained where he was. If he was going to die, he was going to die, and he could be thankful for the experience that he had had. Besides, even death was better than this constant paralysing fear.

After a second, however, he realised that the language that they were using wasn't in fact that of the circle walkers, and he felt a second of hope. He must have stumbled across yet another tribe!

"I wonder what their ridiculous maps will make of *this* place" he said to himself, out loud this time, and with a low but bitter laugh. It was the first time in three days that he had heard his own voice, and although it was weak, the sound of it gave him strength. He tried again, talking to himself slightly more loudly.

"If I hear one more tribe tell me that they are on the one true path, I will tell them exactly what I think and I don't care what happens to me!" As he said this, his voice became stronger, and he realised that he was not as weak as he thought. As he heard the group enter the clearing from the trees, he stepped out from behind the tree where he had been hiding, and, ignoring his fearfully beating heart, he turned to the people he had heard approaching him.

"I am Zak! I come from the tribe! Who are you?" He shouted to the strangers as they entered the clearing, clenching his fists behind his back, ready to fight them if necessary.

Now he saw that they were a motley but large collection of people. He was particularly struck by the differences between them, and for the first time noticed that in all of the tribes he had encountered up until now, everybody seemed to look the same. People had worn the same clothes, spoken in the same way.

But these people were different; varied and individual. One of them spread his arms and smiled warmly, walking towards Zak.

“Zak! Well met! My name is James, and we are the Explorers of the Wilderness!” Shouted one of the men, with a big smile.

Suddenly, a feeling of intense confusion spread through Zak’s mind, and his heart started beating faster. For a second, he wasn’t sure what was wrong. Then he realised. He had just heard the language of *his own tribe* for the first time since he had become lost. Without realising, he had shouted at these people in his own language, and this man had replied! Who could it be? Then he remembered the name.

“James?” He asked weakly.

“Hello!” The man replied.

“But you’re dead... everyone knows you died!”

“I was not informed!” James said, as his friends laughed cheerfully. “Isn’t it funny how the people who have never been to the Wilderness always seem to be the surest about what happens there?”

Powerful emotions accumulated in Zak’s head. It wasn’t possible – he must be dreaming. Or there must be a mistake. His head started to swimming, and he became dizzy. James now laughed too.

“And you, my fellow tribesman. You also left the tribe to wander the Wilderness. Are you dead?” Zak shook his head dumbly.

“Yet, I think you’ll find that everyone *knows* you died too, by now!” James finished, still laughing. Zak didn’t know what reaction he should have. It was all too much for him. His mind swam with confusion... Then the corners of his mouth turned up...

Suddenly, everyone was laughing, Zak harder than anyone. It was the first time he had laughed like that since he had been a child in the tribe. And now all of the stress from the last weeks came out in his laughter. Suddenly, he felt safe. And he had never felt so relieved. He would have company for the journey back to his tribe! One of his own! The two of them working together would easily be able to find their way! His ordeal would soon be over! Then, with his relief, all of the tiredness of the last two days hit him, and he felt it wash over him like a wave. He collapsed, and a second later was snoring peacefully on the ground as the explorers gathered around him, concerned at first, but then laughing even harder than before as they saw that he was merely sleeping.

A few hours later, Zak’s eyes blinked open. Around him, he could hear conversation, and a hot fire was blazing a few metres away from him, with food cooking on it. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, and saw James sitting next to him, watching over him. “Welcome to the explorers, dear Zak.” James said, seeing him sit up. “Come and join us around our fire.”

“So, you are James...” he said, still unable to believe his ears. “The tribe will be so happy to learn that you are alive when we return to them!” James’s raised an eyebrow slightly as he said this, but Zak didn’t notice, so excited was he to be talking to James, who he had believed dead. Now that he was with a member of his tribe, he suddenly realised how much he had missed them, and his mind filled with images of his

family, of Clarice, of the fires and the tents, and even his dear goats. "James, by what accident did you become lost from the tribe? How did you survive so long?"

James was silent for a second, as Zak looked up at him expectantly. Then he gave a sad smile.

"I left the tribe out of choice, Zak." He said.

Zak felt a moment of disgust shoot through his mind like a biting snake. "So you really were a traitor..." he began to say, feeling an intense, ugly anger run through him. Then, a second later, he felt his anger diminish as suddenly as it had appeared, and he looked down at himself, shocked at the inexplicable rage he had just felt run through him. A couple of months earlier, he had thought that unquestioning loyalty to the tribe and the Map Keepers was the greatest possible virtue, but now he had seen the dangers of unquestioning loyalty. James' understanding expression remained on his face.

"Yes, Zak, I left the tribe out of choice." he repeated, clearly and without shame. This time, Zak felt a moment of discomfort, but nothing like the anger he had felt the first time. He wondered where that anger had come from.

James continued. "I *left*, because the path, and what I was told to think, wasn't enough for me. And if you are honest with yourself, Zak, so did you."

Zak recoiled slightly before he realised that James did not mean it in an insulting way. But he was still wrong of course, and Zak didn't hesitate to tell him so. "No, James, you're wrong. It was serendipity that made me leave the path, so that I could find the true path..." Zak trailed off as, to some embarrassment, he realised that he was reciting a story that he no longer really believed. James's sympathetic expression remained the same. Zak had been so certain of what the Mammoth Tribe had told him, so certain of the truth of his sacred task, that even when he had realised that there was no 'one true path', he had remained true to his original purpose.

"Ok, fine, perhaps it wasn't serendipity." Zak continued. "I was thirsty, and I heard a stream..."

"Did you hear a stream though?" James asked him. Zak found this slightly irritating, but began to answer nonetheless.

"Yes, but I didn't find it..." Zak said hesitantly, with a gradual understanding building in the back of his mind.

"There was no stream, Zak. There was only your mind, which was telling you that there was something more, telling you that what the Map Keepers had told you couldn't be the whole truth. You were thirsty, but not for water. You wanted to explore. If you had truly wanted to return to the Tribe, you would have been able to do so. I know this because it was the same for all of us when we left our tribes. Every time you thought you might be back on the right track back to your... *our* tribe, you panicked and ran in the other direction, subconsciously fearful of returning to your life of blindness."

Zak was struck dumb once again. For all that he had begun to consider himself wise, he was now in the shadow of a man whose wisdom undoubtedly eclipsed his own. He didn't have to ask whether James had realised that there was not in fact one true path to the top of the mountain. His wisdom seemed to be of a different kind than the false certainty of the Map Readers. Zak didn't reply, but merely looked at James, waiting to hear more. Nodding in understanding, James began his story.

“I left the tribe deliberately after a series of arguments with my father. I was to be the next Keeper of the Ancient Maps. When I saw the Maps, however, I understood that they had been relevant once, but were no longer of any use. My father insisted that it was we who were wrong, that we hadn’t interpreted the maps correctly. But it was obvious to me that a lot had changed since those maps had been written, that what was once a path could now just as easily be a forest. So one day I ran away, because I knew that the people of the Tribe would never change. I was plagued by doubts, and at many points wanted to return. But something always happened to make me continue. Somehow I managed to survive, but it wasn’t a good life. I wasn’t used to fending for myself, because usually the Map Readers in our Tribe are sustained by the toils of their followers. On many occasions I ate things which were poisonous and which almost killed me. I think that I would have died if the Explorers hadn’t eventually found me. They took care of me, and nursed me back to health. Then they taught me a new way to find the top of the mountain, and it was as if they had turned on a light in my head. I learnt to stop being limited by paths, and maps, and old books. I learnt that the only true path to the top of the mountain is the path that *we* carve out ourselves!”

Zak sat, rapt with attention. The sensation of illumination that James had described was not unfamiliar to Zak, because he was feeling it at that very moment! Every word that James said to him seemed to illuminate something in his mind that he hadn’t even known had existed. James continued.

“That is our task. We are the explorers. We don’t just follow paths, we also *create* them! We try to take each and every route, and clearly mark every route that doesn’t work. If a path is blocked, we use the techniques that we have learnt in our travels, to try and clear it. Sometimes we use fire; sometimes we have to cut through some woods. And if we are sure that a given route doesn’t work, we mark it, and try another one. We are stronger than the mountain, and unlike the superstitious climbing tribes, we are not intimidated by it. As long as we are patient and determined, nothing that the mountain can put in our way can stop us. If anybody is going to find their way to the top of the mountain, it will be us!” As he said this, Zak saw that his eyes burned with determination. He could hear in James’s voice that he and the explorers would do whatever it took to get to the top. He felt a profound feeling of admiration growing inside him.

James stood up, and beckoned. “Come with me, and I’ll show you our work. The sun is about to set, but we still have enough light to do a little bit more exploring!” Zak followed James, with excitement giving him a skip in his step, despite his hunger. Suddenly, and without expecting it, he had just found that which he hadn’t known he was looking for, his purpose in life. He would join the explorers. He would not just follow paths; he would *learn how to make paths as well!* In that moment, it seemed to him as though the Explorers were the first people whose words had truly made sense to him. Surely there couldn’t be any higher calling than this one? He said this to James as they walked.

“I hope that one day everybody will be explorers. Just think what we could do if everybody was with us!” James replied, without slowing down. “But it’s not an easy life, and we are persecuted wherever we go.”

Seeing disbelief on his Zak’s face, James explained himself. “Because of people like us, the wilderness – in other words all that which is unknown – is shrinking. But this isn’t a good thing for everybody. You may not think that you are knowledgeable, Zak, but you are. You are very young, and very

intelligent, and open minded, and this means that you are a threat to the people who hold power in each of the civilisations that you will encounter. You have seen the wilderness, and you have realised its secret – namely that it does not exist, that it is merely the unknown, exploited by those who would profit from people’s ignorance. Those people who hold power on the various “paths” have the strongest of vested interests in ensuring that the wilderness remains a mystery, and something to be feared, for this is the base of their power. These are the ones who will fight the hardest against anybody who attempts to explore and make inroads into the wilderness, for the more we understand about the wilderness, the less use we have for those who profess to be leading us on the ‘one and only true path.’” James turned his head towards Zak as they walked, and smiled ironically, with a hint of bitterness. “They get their power from this superstitious fear that the people have of the mountain. They invent terrible devils, and convince people that they really exist. In our tribe, it was Exu. All of the tribes have their equivalents. Of course, these evils never really exist. They make their followers think that the mountain is more powerful than they are. They don’t understand that we have the power to make our own paths, the power to stop limiting ourselves. If I could just share with those people the techniques that we have learned to create paths wherever they are needed, I guarantee you, believe you me, that those so called “Map Readers” would become redundant within weeks, and their useless old maps nothing more than kindling.”

At that moment they reached one of the paths that led out of the clearing. Zak didn’t have time to reflect on what James had just said, despite the fact that there was some aspect of it that made him feel slightly uneasy. Before he had time to think about it, however, the sight of a white plaque that had markings on it in various languages distracted him. He realised that he must have missed this plaque in the earlier fog.

“Here is one of the signs that we leave. I wrote it!” James said proudly. “Since I was training to be a Map Reader, I know how to write in the language of the Tribe. Unfortunately, I also know that I am one of very few people who can read it. When people have somebody to think for them, they will make very little effort to seek understanding themselves. This is where the Map Readers in the various tribes get their power. This writing says that this path leads to a tribe of people who believe that they are at the top of the mountain, and react violently against anybody who attacks this delusion of theirs. The plaque over there says that we have just come from that direction, and it leads back down the mountain, even if sometimes it appears that it leads upwards. The plaque over there says that we have already tried to clear that path, but that it was too difficult, and it remains blocked. We have given up on it.”

In that moment all of the last doubts Zak had just been feeling disappeared from his head as he realised what he had to do to become an explorer and arrive with his friends at the top of the mountain. The last path that James had just mentioned was in fact the same one that had grabbed his attention earlier. No matter how difficult it was, he knew that he would be the one to discover its secrets. James had a wisdom that he perhaps would never have, but Zak had travelled all over the wilderness, and had gained skills which the explorers probably didn’t have. And when he found out the secrets of this path, he would return and write a plaque of his own. This would be his new sacred task.

Over the next few hours, Zak explained what he planned to do. Everybody was greatly encouraged by his resolve, and as a unit the people promised to go with him. Despite all being fairly sure that it wouldn’t

work, they had also learnt from experience that certainty was deceptive, and they were excited at the possibility that they might have been wrong. Zak, however, explained that he wanted to go alone. The explorers respected his wishes. They took rites of passage very seriously, and believed that everybody should have the chance to find himself.

He didn't know why he was so sure about it, but he felt that this was the route that would lead to the top of the mountain, and he was sure that he would succeed where the others had failed. He felt close. He would get to the top, and he would complete his new task by coming back and mapping out the route to the top of the great mountain for everybody.

## Chapter 9: Path-cutting

Zak remained with the explorers for almost a week, as they did what they could to prepare him to go on his way.

During the nights, being very practical people, rather than sing about their journey, or act out the horrors of their past, or recite poems about wonders of the top of the mountain, they instructed Zak in the techniques that he would need to arrive at the top. Over this time, they showed him all of the maps that they had drawn, and taught him how to understand them and make copies for himself. They also taught him how to write, and Zak attacked his study with the same determination that had taken him so far up the mountain. More than just techniques, they had taught him the importance of not thinking that the mountain, with all of its dangers, was stronger than he was. Over and over, they had explained the importance of doing *whatever it took* to carve out a path, of not going back until every possibility had been exhausted. Before he had left, James had given him one final piece of advice. "Don't forget, Zak. The worst thing that can happen to you in the wilderness is that you forget that you are stronger than it." And now he tried to keep that thought in his head.

Now he was going over the lessons that he had learnt as he walked along the path with trees on either side of him as far as he could see. After a week of motivating discussions with the Explorers, he felt himself burning with a determination stronger than anything that he had felt up until now, and knew that this time, nothing would stand in his way to stop him from arriving at the top of the mountain.

As the hours passed, however, and the sun began to rise higher and higher in the sky, Zak started to feel uneasy. The path didn't seem to change, physically speaking, but he gradually realised that he was hearing less and less animals. The peaceful quiet was turning into an eerie silence. He began to walk more hesitantly. Then, after turning a corner, he came across a weird sight.

Whereas before, the gap between the trees had been easy to walk along, suddenly he came up against a copse of thorny plants and brambles that seemed to block the path like a wall. The middle of the brambles had been burnt away by fire, which Zak supposed the Explorers had started in order to pass through them, but they had already grown back. Zak shuddered, and began to feel even more uncomfortable. Despite what the explorers had said about clearing a path by any means necessary, he had a deep cultural unease about using fire in such a cavalier and reckless way. Since he had been young, he had listened to the stories of the tribe's storytellers about the terrible forest fires that destroyed entire villages at the bottom of the mountain.

Whereas before Zak would have exploded with rage at the sight of a deliberately started fire in a forest, he now dismissed that thought as lingering superstition from the tribe. He was better than that now! Nonetheless, he knew that he could not bring himself to consider starting a fire to eliminate the obstacle before him. After a few moments of hesitation, he entered the forest in order to find a natural gap in the hard thorny bushes that he could pass through.

Despite his knowledge that nature obeyed its own rules, there was something about these thorny brambles and stinging nettles that bothered him. Walking into the forest, trying to find a way around them, he discovered that the wall of thorny bushes and nettles continued for around an hour's walk, and then suddenly stopped, just as strangely as it had begun. Turning around to find the path again, this time walking on the other side of the wall of brambles, he found that the thorny bushes had indeed grown in a perfectly straight line. Eventually he found himself just metres from where he had started.

Over the rest of the afternoon, he came across two similar walls of brambles, each higher and thornier than the last. Despite himself, he began to understand why the Explorers had resorted to fire to burn them. He began to understand that there was something really not quite right about this path, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He had spent the whole of the morning and most of the afternoon walking along the path, but despite this, he had barely advanced a kilometre. Each time, he walked along the walls of thorny trees and bushes, hoping to find a tree which he could use to help him climb over them, but each time, he found that there was no tree close enough, and he had to make the long detour. As he reached the third "wall", he was exhausted, but he still didn't consider reaching into his bag for the fire-starting tools that the explorers had given to him. It seemed that this was one of his tribal superstitions that he was not yet ready to let go of. An hour later, back on the path, he continued walking, his morale weakening, waiting for the next growth of thorny bushes and nettles that would once again push him into a pointless detour.

An hour later, he turned a corner, and stopped dead. Suddenly, without warning the landscape seemed to have turned inside out. While a second ago, he had been walking through green, lush and leafy trees, suddenly he found himself in a kind of blackened wasteland. A great fire, the likes of which he had never seen or heard about, even in the songs of the poets, had ripped through the forest, and nothing seemed to be alive for kilometres ahead, and as far as the eye could see to either side. Suddenly, he could hear nothing but the silence of a dead forest, and he breathed in the stink of charred death. A feeling of cold fear and disgust suddenly shot through him, and grew more and more intense.

*"This sign says that we tried to clear the path, but that it was too difficult, and we had to come back".* James had told Zak. So this was how they *cleared* paths? Zak horror rising in his stomach.

*"If a path is blocked, we use the techniques that we have learnt in our travels, to try and clear it. Sometimes we use fire..."* James had said. This is what it looked like, to *create* a path? Zak felt as though all of the optimism of the last week was turning into cold, dark emptiness.

Zak looked around desperately, praying to find some evidence that he was wrong about the conclusion that he was coming to. A second later he saw, lying abandoned on the floor, an axe just like the one that the explorers had given him, and some piles of wood carefully placed around some of the trees. There was evidence that little fires had been started all around. There was no doubt about it, this fire had been started deliberately.

*"When there is no path, we create one!"* James had said cheerfully. Zak felt as though he was going to be sick. In his Tribe, which had been climbing the mountain to escape from droughts and forest fires, fires were considered the most terrible of plagues. The only time that the tribe would venture into the wilderness

would be to extinguish a fire, such as those occasionally started by lightning strikes. There was *no* greater sacrilege than deliberately starting a forest fire. There was no other crime among Zak's people for which the punishment was always death.

Still filled with horror, Zak started to walk through the blackened wasteland, looking around himself at the death and destruction, continuously fighting the urge to vomit. As he walked, more and more of the things James had said to him started to come back to him.

*"We are stronger than the mountain, and as long as we are patient and determined, nothing that the mountain can put in our way can stop us"*, he had said.

For the next few hours, as the sun started to drop behind the immense mountain above him, Zak continued crossing the mess of blackened tree corpses, gradually picking his way through to the other side, and he felt as though a part of his soul was being burned away as he did so. Occasionally he could make out the remains of one of the "bramble walls" that now formed a carpet of white ash and blackened thorns along the ground as far as the eyes could see. He knew that he would never be able to bring himself return to the explorers, after what they had done.

Despite the betrayal that he felt, however, he remained filled with determination, and he knew that he would not turn back. Far ahead, the green forest continued, as did the "path".

Hours later, dripping in sweat and white from ash, he re-entered the forest path. All of a sudden, it was as if the fire-blackened wasteland had never existed. Everything was once again peace and tranquillity. Despite his lack of an appetite, he forced himself to eat some food in order to keep up his strength, and then continued walking. Although it was beginning to get dark, night was still a good hour away, and he wanted to get as far away from the forest fire as possible.

Zak had just stopped to set up camp, and was unpacking his tent from his bag, when he realised what had been making him feel so uneasy since he had entered the path. Looking around himself, Zak suddenly realised that this really *was* a path. Not like the places he had visited before, where the paths had been in the imaginations of whoever was guiding the tribes. No, here, he now realised, something had been done to the ground to ensure that no trees grew on it. Something profoundly unnatural. There were occasional fallen trees on either side of him, but none of them fell across the path. People were maintaining the path, keeping it clean. This was something that he had never seen before. Something about it made him feel uncomfortable. An ominous shiver crawled down Zak's back, and a creeping feeling of fear began to build in his stomach. Without stopping to think, he picked up his bag and started walking again, constantly looking around himself. Something told him that if he set up camp there, where he had planned to, something terrible would somehow happen.

Eventually, seeing that night was really starting to fall, Zak begrudgingly came to a stop, trying to ignore the crawling feeling that something was watching him, and threw his bag down on the floor in front of him, on top of some leaves. Then something really terrifying happened

In horror, Zak watched as the ground in front of him seemed to open up, and the bag and the leaves dropped into a pit that seemed to appear out of nowhere. As he looked closer, he saw that the leaves had in fact been carefully placed on top of a net. Had he walked even a step further, it would have been him, rather than his bag, that would have fallen into the pit. He recoiled in horror and disgust. Touching the side of the deep pit, he saw that it had been greased with something to make it slippery, impossible to climb out of. He couldn't imagine who would want to prepare such a trap. An image flashed back into his head, of the ageless man who had stared at him from the cliff above, unblinking, licking his lips. Suddenly he felt that it hadn't been an illusion after all. His heart began to beat faster. He finally understood that this path would only lead to something terrible. Despite his anger with the explorers, suddenly he just wanted to escape back to them and be in the safety of friends. There was still a little bit of light, but he saw that there seemed to be the beginnings of a fog rising just ahead of him. Immediately, the subtle fear that had been growing in his stomach throughout the day turned to full-blown panic. Leaving his bag behind in the pit, and without thinking twice, he turned and began to sprint headlong into the night, back in the direction from which he had come, back towards safety. As night well and truly fell, and the fog began to thicken, he continued running, with no thought left in his head except his panic.

Just as he landed in the leaves in front of him, he realised his mistake. He should have been looking more carefully at the path. But because of the rising mist, he hadn't been able to see as clearly as he had hoped. Involuntarily, he cried out as the ground below him began to give way. Whereas before he had thought that his foot was about to touch the ground, suddenly he found himself suspended in the air. Before he knew it, he was sliding down into one of the pits, grabbing desperately but uselessly at the slippery edges with his hands...

As soon as he landed at the bottom of the large pit, a thick, icy fog slid slowly over the sides of the holes. Over the next couple of hours, blind with panic and desperation, he tried to escape from the pit by every method he could imagine. Over and over again he ran against the side of it and *jumped* as high as he could, but he couldn't even scramble halfway up the side until the grease left him sliding helplessly back down. Whoever had dug the pit, had done their job properly.

Finally he realised that, for the first time, he was truly helpless, and that despite his experience and independence, he was more vulnerable than he had ever been in his life. He finally sat in the middle of the pit, realising that there was no more point in wasting his energy, and simply waited to see what would happen.

When he woke up in the morning, he was shocked to realise that he had actually managed to fall asleep. He supposed that he must be starting to get used to these strange and scary situations. He thought about this realisation for a few seconds, but he didn't have much time to reflect on his situation. His heart jumped as he heard footsteps approaching his pit. An instant later, a rope was dropped down. He nodded grimly to himself as he looked at the rope and his suspicions were confirmed. He had seen it once before. But this time, he knew that there was no escape. He sighed, and then cautiously climbed up it, realising that right

now, nothing was more important than simply getting out of the dreaded pit. As he scrambled over the edge and stood up shakily, he recoiled as he saw himself faced with four burly men, who had bows and arrows trained on him. He was not surprised that among them was the man he had seen over the cliff, with the same smile, the same licking lips, a noose in his hands.

“My name is Zak and I come from the Tribe” He said cautiously, with his eyes narrowed at the threatening men. “Who are you?”

They spoke a similar language to the Tribe of the One True Map. Although Zak didn't immediately understand everything they said, their meaning was completely clear.

“We are the Guardians of the One True Path. You are now our prisoner. Come with us.”

## Chapter 10: Guardians

“But what crime have I committed?” Zak asked them.

“You are seeking to reach the top of the Great Mountain.” Said one of the men simply.

“But what’s wrong with that? Isn’t that what everybody is trying to do?” He responded. At this point he was merely perplexed, and not yet scared or angry. He still couldn’t fully and truly let go of his naïve confidence that people merely wanted to hear the truth, and when he told it to them, they would accept it joyously. The man replied.

“The other tribes who are trying to climb the mountain use maps, which are of course fallible, but we have something better. Our tribe once lived at the bottom of the mountain, where we were plagued by snow. Every winter was more vicious than the last, and year after year our livestock and crops were frozen to death. But we knew that at the top of the mountain would be a land of beautiful warmth, where we would be closer to the sun, which would blaze down upon us and makes our plants grow. Then our wise men managed to find the maps of the other tribes, and managed to compile all that was true from them, leaving behind all that was false. So now we have a book of maps that contains everything there is to know about the great mountain and how to reach the top. The other maps are older than ours, but our map was compiled from the truths in all of them, and the falsehood was left out.” He repeated, as if it was something that he had memorised.

“Well then why are you still here? Why are you not at the top?” Zak asked, immediately convinced that these people were as ridiculous as everybody else he had met who thought they were on the one true path to the top of the Great Mountain. This time, however, he was finally given an answer that he didn’t expect in the slightest.

“Many of us are. But there is not enough space for everybody. In order to get to the top of the Great Mountain, you have to earn the right to be there. Otherwise, we would have to *share it with unrighteous people!*” He said with disgust. “Can you imagine? We know from our books that the paradise at the top of the great mountain is our right, and our right alone! Only people who followed *our* path have the right to be at the top. Not followers of the bad paths! But you have been lucky. You are not one of us, so you must therefore be ignorant. But you will have a chance to work for us and earn your entry to the top of the mountain! Can you imagine? You might get to be one of the righteous ones!” He smiled sympathetically at his prisoner.

“Couldn’t you banish me into the wilderness as my punishment?” Zak asked hopefully. The tall man looked at him with an expression of pity on his face.

“Saying things like that make it clear that you don’t know what’s good for you, and this is why we’ll have to punish you if you try to escape, you see. It’s for your own good. We know the truth, and you will have the chance to learn the truth from us. You are truly lucky that we found you!” he said, his smile of optimism returning to his face even as he kept the bow trained on Zak’s chest.

Zak sighed as he looked at the man. When he had started talking, his eyes had gradually glazed over, until at the end of his seemingly memorised speech his expression was similar to the one he now saw in his nightmares, that of the glassy eyed tribe who had believed that they were at the top of the mountain.

“Fine.” Said Zak exasperatedly. “But I want to know more. When will I have an opportunity to listen to your storytellers?” The men looked at him, confused. Zak continued, rolling his eyes. “Storytellers, poets, singers, actors, whatever! When will we see them?”

“Ha!” Said one of the men. “Storytellers? Poets? Pah. Actors??? Pah. You primitive tribescreature! And you wonder why your tribe is still so far below? We are serious men here. We have no time for such childish frivolities! We are workers! Ha! “Storytellers”. What a ridiculous little slave you are.” The other men looked at Zak with exasperated expressions on their faces, unsure whether to scold him or laugh at him. Zak, deeply offended, promised himself that he would not say another word to these people.

Zak walked for hours with his four captors, depressed, angry and helpless. They did not make any effort to subdue him, for it was clear that he had no chance of escaping, and nowhere to go even if he did. They continued to walk (avoiding any piles of leaves they came across), the path meandering gently uphill, until the trees started to thin. Here there was no sound of birdsong or beautiful flowers. Rather, he began to hear strange noises that he had never heard before, but which were definitely human in origin. He could hear *bangs* and *booms*; sounds that he couldn't comprehend. He could see smoke in the distance, and the faint scent of civilisation reached him, but with a kind of dirty undertone to it. Every tribe that he had met until now had been travelling, which meant that they never stayed in one place long enough for the human smell to become pervasive, and it was always complemented by the fresh flowery scents of nature. Here, however, the smell of human society was the only thing that existed, and it offended Zak's sensitive sense of smell, making him feel lightheaded and queasy.

Zak's captors were much lighter skinned than anybody who he had seen before, almost white, with thinner and longer noses, blue-green eyes, and light-coloured hair that seemed to reflect the sunlight that flashed through the trees. Despite his feeling of concern at the apparent hopelessness of his situation, he couldn't prevent himself often looking at them with curiosity, and they at him. As they continued walking, for the first time in his life he began to see permanent buildings, and he found himself distracted from his captors as he looked around him with wonder. As they walked further, the number of buildings increased, until a great wall with a gate set in it came into view. Zak couldn't imagine a reason for having built a wall on the side of a mountain. Then, they drew closer to the wall and the gate, his eyes widened in understanding. The wall was not made of wood, or any material that Zak was aware of. Rather, it consisted of the thickest thorns and brambles that he had ever seen, that grew at least twenty feet into the air in perfect straight lines. In front of the wall were pits filled with vicious looking pikes. Contrasting against the brambles and thorns of the giant bush was a gate that was made of hard metal, that seemed to have been somehow built into it. After they crossed over a small bridge over the pikes, the Captors banged on the metal gate and shouted a password, and it opened slowly.

Spread out in front of Zak within the walls was the first city that he had ever seen. Despite their authoritarian discipline until that point, as his captors saw the expression on his face, they could not stop themselves from smiling, disarmed by the expression of naked wonder in his eyes.

“I see you are impressed by our fortress!” said one of his captors. “Now you see what can be built when you don't waste time telling each other stories!!!” He said. The other captors sniggered under their

breaths. Zak had promised himself that he wouldn't talk to these people anymore, but now he couldn't resist asking the question.

"Why do you need a fortress?" He asked.

"Because there are unrighteous people who try to get to the top of the mountain, and there is not space there for them and us as well. Because our ancestors got here first and used the right path, we deserve to be at the top of the Great Mountain more than they do. So wars started, and we are attacked regularly. That is why we and our slaves have been planting thorn-walls to block the paths. We know from the book that there is only space for exactly one-hundred-and-forty-four-thousand people at the top of the mountain. Even one person more, and it would no longer be a paradise, but a hell, filled with unrighteous people!"

Zak wanted to ask hundreds of questions. He wanted to ask whether their book mentioned mammoths. He wanted to ask how they knew that its description of the top of the mountain was true if they had never been there. He wanted to ask why the fact that their ancestors had arrived in that place first meant that other people should be condemned to misery on the lower levels of the mountain. He wanted to ask so many more things, but when he saw the expression on the faces of his captors, he realised that it would be truly and utterly pointless. So he remained silent as he walked through a town that was built for war, buildings that were built with resources that should have been used for things that were actually useful. So much futile effort. And he remained silent as he was led into a dark and scary building, which, they explained to him, was the prison. It was not a concept he had ever heard of before. Where he came from, if people weren't welcome in the tribe, they were sent away rather than kept inside. Then he remembered that he had been told that he was now a slave, and it made more sense.

Before he knew it, Zak had found himself in a dark prison cell. He had never encountered anything so disgusting. The air was wet with the smell of fear, sweat, excrement, a million other acrid and disgusting odours. Stagnant water dripped steadily from the ceiling into a mouldy puddle on the floor of the small, damp, stinking cell. For a second, he felt as though he was about to wretch. He looked around himself, feeling claustrophobic. It was the first time that he had ever looked up and not seen the sun, the stars or the trees. He looked around himself, feeling unhappy and agitated. After a second he jumped as he caught sight of a face watching him from the other corner of his cell. Zak felt nervous, and pressed himself back against his bars. He relaxed slightly as the face smiled weakly at him.

"My name is Zak, and I come from the tribe", said Zak dejectedly. "Who are you?"

"My name is Eli, and I have no tribe," responded the man, in an accent that sounded familiar to Zak. This was confusing to him, but he couldn't be bothered to think about it, and changed the subject.

"What is going on here?" Zak asked. "Why were you put in this prison?"

"Because I was telling this tribe things that they didn't want to hear. Rather than listen to me, they decided that they would put me to death. So here I am, waiting until my sentence is carried out."

"They are putting you to death just for telling them things they didn't want to hear?" Zak asked sarcastically, an openly incredulous expression on his face. It seemed clear to him that this man couldn't be telling the truth.

“Yes,” said Eli, ignoring his ridiculing tone. “They react by killing me because they know that what I say is the truth. If you have managed to travel so far up the mountain, I expect that this attitude isn’t strange to you, because you cannot arrive here by one path alone.”

Zak nodded cautiously, but still wasn’t ready to trust this new person, since he now realised that everyone who he had encountered had lied or been mistaken. Although he could imagine that people would react badly to truth, the idea that he could be put to death just for disagreeing with them was just beyond Zak’s comprehension.

“What was this so-called “truth” that you were telling them, then?” Zak asked, still angry, his voice thick with sarcasm.

“That they were wrong in thinking that there was only space for one-hundred-and-forty-four-thousand people on the top of the mountain. As you must have noticed by now, this isn’t a normal mountain. It doesn’t follow normal laws. There is space for everybody, and no need to kill your enemies to enter it.”

“Surely this was good news then?”

“You think?” Said Eli, smiling sardonically. Zak was struck momentarily by his ability to smile despite knowing that he was going to die soon. Although maybe what he had said wasn’t true. Zak now felt that he had not met anyone who he could truly trust. So this time, he promised himself, he would catch Eli out when he said something that he knew wasn’t true. His anger that he couldn’t take out on his captors became focused on his new cellmate.

Eli, though, had heard the edge of ridicule in Zak’s voice, and continued, explaining himself.

“When I said that anybody could get to the top of the mountain, I undermined the authority of the leaders of the society, who claim to command the sole path to the paradise at the top of the mountain. And furthermore, these people have been at war for so long, that now their society is built on hatred. Over the course of this conflict, both sides have committed atrocities. They no longer want to share the mountain with each other. I told them that when they reached the top of the mountain, all of their animosity and hatred for each other would disappear. But this wasn’t what they wanted any more. They have come to need this conflict – it has given them their identity. They believe that they can only be happy at the top of the mountain if their enemies – the so-called “followers of the bad paths” – are at the *bottom*. They have become twisted. The unhappiness of those they see as “bad” is just as important to them now as their own happiness. They talk of the terrible things at the bottom of the mountain with joy and nasty pleasure, revelling in the thought of their enemies suffering. Many are even sadistic enough to want to be able to see the people suffering below them. So my message of peace wasn’t good news in the slightest.”

This didn’t make much sense to Zak. He had encountered many people similar to those that Eli was describing, but all of them seemed to be driven by an overwhelming desire to reach the top along with their compatriots. He couldn’t believe that people could be driven by such negative things as hatred. It was much more likely that these people were just mistaken, like everybody else. Then a terrifying thought hit him. Perhaps there was in fact *no path* to the top of the mountain. And as he thought this, he felt despair hit him again. The anger he had been feeling turned instantly to a feeling of deep misery and hopelessness, and he looked helplessly at Eli. The person in front of him wasn’t from his family, or even one of the other friends he

had made during his travels, mistaken though they may have been. But he was the only person who was there to support Zak now, and he had no choice but to seek comfort from him.

“I believed so strongly that this was the right path!” Zak said, his voice breaking into sobs halfway through his sentence. “And now I have no way of returning. I had a sacred task, and now I have nothing!”

“But this *is* the way to the top of the mountain.” Eli said. Zak looked at him, at first sceptically, but then he was unable to keep up his disbelief when he looked into Eli’s eyes. He felt himself comforted by the strength of the understanding that was staring back at him, and what seemed to be an optimism based on greater knowledge. At first sight he had seemed like a crazy old man, but now that Zak looked again, he seemed to radiate authority and wisdom. He knew instantly that there was something different about this man, something that he had never encountered before.

“How do you know?” Zak whispered, for the first time without any sarcastic edge in his voice.

“Because I’ve been there.” Eli said. Zak turned his head sharply and looked at him pointedly, with anger and suspicion in his eyes. This was an outlandish claim that he had not yet heard before from even the strangest of the people he had met on his travels, and his first instinct was to disbelieve him. But now he saw him clearly for the first time. Eli was still in the shadows, but now Zak’s eyes had adjusted to the dank gloom of his cell. As he looked into Eli’s eyes, he could see no trace of insincerity, madness, delusion. And now he realised that his whole mannerism was different to the Map Readers who he had met before. He hadn’t announced his achievement with trumpets and attempted to use his knowledge or achievements to make Zak impressed. His silent authority seemed to come from understanding, not the passionate conviction of someone who had filled himself with false certainty. In that moment, Zak suddenly became sure that everything that the old man had told him was true.

“Tell me everything” Zak whispered, the smell and the claustrophobia of his cell now forgotten.

Eli began his story.

## Chapter 11: Eli

I was like almost everyone else on the great mountain. I was born in one of the climbing tribes. The Guardians would have called it “primitive”, and I’m afraid I can’t much argue with them. One day, I just wanted to explore. So I left. It was as simple as that. I wandered into the Wilderness, and never turned back. For many years, I wandered aimlessly along the mountain, travelling with various tribes, and learning their poems, their songs, their secrets. And I travelled through the wilderness, too, discovering *its* secrets. I quickly learnt that the secrets of the wilderness were greater than the sum of all that was written in the various tribes’ books.

My desire to explore knew no limits, and I did something that perhaps nobody else can say that they have done. I actively chose to go back down the mountain, and spent time among the civilisations that had been left behind. I saw many things, seemingly all of them terrible. They are not there out of choice; rather; their whole civilisation is built on keeping the people down. The people’s natural desire to climb the mountain is repressed by whatever means possible, and these yearnings are forced to manifest themselves in ugly and perverted ways. People are forced to repress a vital part of who they are, and as they do so, inevitably other important things are repressed with them; such as kindness, or rationality. They become either mindless or twisted. They are told from birth that even to *think* about the mountain makes them evil and deserving of punishment, and this belief is constantly reinforced; it is what keeps them there. But of course, the mountain is always there, always at the edge of their vision, and it is a vital part of their nature to think about it. They are told vicious lies about what awaits them at the top of the mountain, and they are afraid even to look at it.

Eventually, after seeing so many maps, and hearing so many stories, I was able to put together the puzzle, and the route to the top became clear to me. Every path had its value, and all were necessary to reach the top. I made my own map. But I still had lessons to learn. I thought that the other people would be interested in the map that I had created by gathering the knowledge from all of the different tribes. But I was sorely mistaken. My journey to the top of the mountain ended up being a lonely one, and I was constantly attacked by sorrow for the people I met, who lived their lives in futility when paradise was right within their reach.

Even though I knew the way, my journey was far from easy or safe. There were things in the wilderness that none of the so-called perfect maps and ancient books had even dreamed about. I encountered huge scaly vicious creatures that towered above even the trees. I encountered vicious tribes who reacted to the fact that I was different to them with hysterical fear. On more than one occasion I was attacked and left for dead. I found myself going for days without food or drink. Yet, during my travels, I had not limited myself to merely thinking about how to reach the top of the mountain. I had also learnt how to keep my body young and healthy, by eating the right foods, and living in the right way. So I persevered, refusing to allow myself to die before I completed the task that I had set for myself. And finally, I reached the top.

When I eventually reached the top of the mountain, I found out that it was everything that I expected and a hundred times more. It was more than the sum of everything that had been preached by each

of the different tribes, because there was much more that was forgotten than remembered. How arrogantly mistaken the people were to think that they could describe perfection through mere weather patterns and images! A land of plenty, where one has only to look down to understand the secrets of the earth, all of which are spread out in front of him. The people on the top of the mountain gained knowledge just by looking down, knowledge which none of the ancient books had access to. When all of this information is available, it is as though everything clicks into place and suddenly makes sense. But finally, even that was not enough for me. Despite my happiness, there was a part of me that couldn't be fully content. I didn't want to be happy while all the people of my own tribe were miserable. So I plotted a route back down the mountain, to find my own tribe again. Because I knew the quickest routes through the wilderness, a journey that had taken tribes generations to complete, I was able to do in only a few years. The journey down was also very difficult, and fraught with danger and pain.

But what was most terrible, was the moment that I *found* my old tribe. When I tried to speak to them about my discoveries, they refused to listen. They called me crazy, and when I continued to speak the truth to them, they locked me away, and tried to drug me into a stupor. It was an imprisonment a thousand times worse than what we are experiencing in this cell, because there, they tried to imprison your mind as much as your body." Zak shuddered, counting himself lucky that he had not encountered this tribe. They seemed worse than any that he had so far encountered, even the guardians.

"But, fortunately for me, the person who was in charge of drugging me listened to me, and, rather than suppress what I was saying, he brought his friends to speak to me, and I gradually acquired a following of people who accepted the truth. And so, one day, we arranged to escape together into the wilderness. We didn't want to leave forever, merely enter the wilderness and come back, to show the rest of the tribe that the boundaries that the Map-Readers had drawn between the path and the wilderness were false and nonsensical.

But, just as we were about to enter the wilderness, we heard a voice behind us. The map-readers had arrived, with the families of the young people who had rescued me. In that moment, their courage failed. Can you believe it? They accused me of *forcing* them into it! And so their families attacked me. I ran into the trees, barely escaping with my life."

An image of the glassy eyed people who thought they were at the top of the mountain sprang into Zak's head. Eli continued.

"The next day I came back, looking for the person who had saved me. I wanted to invite him to join me. I should have been more careful. Before I knew it, I had fallen into a trap, and I was hanging head down from a hunting noose. In that moment, I was sure I was going to be killed. But, one more time, I was lucky. He came to rescue me, before anyone else saw me. He cut me down, and told me that he and the other young people who had rescued me had been locked away, and that the tribe had orders to kill me. He had managed to escape in order to warn me. I was told that the Map-Readers, in order to keep their power, had made up lies about me. My whole tribe now feared and hated me. My tribe was no longer mine, and I had to leave forever. Even my own family was ready to kill me if they saw me again. And only because I spoke the truth to them! That was my only crime! It was the most terrible moment that anyone could ever go through." Now, as

Eli spoke, tears ran down his face, and Zak felt a wave of anger at the injustice that this poor, beleaguered old man had gone through.

“Your tribe could be so terrible as to do that?” Zak asked himself.

“It isn’t *my* tribe. Not anymore.” Responded Eli. “In my pain, I left behind even the name that the tribe had given me.”

Zak sat there, thinking about the terrible darkness that this old man had gone through. And how it was all the worse for having been to the top of the mountain, and thus known the brightest of lights. They sat in silence for a moment, as Zak digested the poignancy of Eli’s story.

“What was your name before you changed it?” Zak asked, after a moment, absent-mindedly. The old man turned to Zak and looked him straight in the eyes.

“Exu.”

## Chapter 11: Exu

Zak scrambled backwards, slamming his head against the bars in his haste to move as far away as possible from the man. Old fears filled his head. So this was the man of his nightmares, the man who had terrified generations of the children of the tribe. Suddenly, no thought was in Zak's mind except the question of how he was going to get as far away from Exu as possible. The man remained still, observing him, a sad and bitter expression on his face.

"Are you going to drag me into the wilderness?" Zak blurted out with false bravado, breathing hard and trying to hide his panic.

"HA!" exclaimed Exu, a bitter laugh. He continued laughing for the best part of a minute. Zak remained terrified, then, despite himself, began to calm down. "I wish I could drag us both into the wilderness! And so do you!" Eli said, through his laughter, bitter though it was.

Now Zak relaxed completely, his panic being immediately replaced by a mixture of shame and regret. He thought about how the man must have felt.

"Exu is dead, Zak," the old man continued. "Your tribe killed him the minute that they chased me into the forest. When Exu died, Eli was born. You can call me Eli."

Then a terrible thought hit Zak.

"My tribe..." Zak began. Eli nodded grimly, knowing what Zak was thinking.

A tear formed in Zak's eye as realisation hit him. "I can never go back."

"Yes. Zak is as dead as Exu, now. The worst thing that can happen to you in the wilderness is that *you return to the tribe.*"

Zak felt a hollow feeling welling up inside him. He couldn't explain to himself how he felt, but he supposed that Eli could understand. He looked at Eli with tears running down his cheeks. Thoughts of his family, and Clarice, flowed through his head. For the first time, he thought about the stories that Clarice must be telling about him. About his death. From the moment that he had realised that he wasn't going to die in the wilderness, he had expected to one-day return to his tribe – the idea that he might never find them had never occurred to him. Now, suddenly, it was as if he had just lost his family and his friends all over again.

"I've lost everyone. They might as well be dead to me..." Zak said, feeling the last of his hope draining away.

"But they are not dead. They live, and some will thirst for something more. Zak, I have learnt that people need to reach the top of the mountain on their own. If you force people to do something that they are not ready to do, even if it is the right thing to do, you will only harm them. But there is something that you *can* do. When you arrive at the top of the mountain, you need to write the next generation of books, books which contain the truth, the truth that you have learnt from exploring so many different paths. Then, if the time ever comes again for the people to leave the top of the mountain, they will one day be able to use your books to find their way back. Everything that you have done and learnt has brought you to this moment. You will reach the top of the mountain, but when you do, you must not do what I did and return to help your

friends. If they are ready to get to the top of the mountain, like you, they will find a way. The paths to the top are too difficult to traverse without great willpower and willingness to suffer in order to achieve your task.”

“But those were great men, Eli, who arrived at the top of the mountain. I am just a child!”

Eli looked at him for a moment, his eyebrow raised.

“Are you?”

Zak stopped dead. On the floor of his cell was a puddle, formed by the dripping of stagnant water from the ceiling above him. He went over to it, and in the faint light, looked down at his reflection. He slowly drew a breath, and then let it out slowly. He hadn’t realised how long it had been since he had seen his reflection. The face staring back at him was nothing like the image that he imagined of himself. Thin scars ran down his face, partially hidden by a thickening beard. He stroked the hair on his face, and looked down at his body, which had become large and muscular.

“No. I’m not a child anymore.” Zak said to himself, now feeling strength and courage infuse his body, and all of his muscles. In that moment, for the first time, Zak thought, and really thought, about his journey, and for the first time felt a surge of pride and accomplishment. If he had managed to get this far, surely the worst of his trials were behind him after all.

Everything this wise man had told him was completely new to him, but nonetheless made perfect sense. It even seemed like the only thing that could ever make perfect sense, bearing in mind what he had seen in his travels.

Zak didn’t know at what point he had changed from the person who was kept on a so-called “one true path” by fear, into the person who chose his own path, but suddenly, he knew that not even the army of the Guardians would stop him from doing what he had come so far to do. He felt as though, after listening to Eli, all of his irrational fears had left him, as though all that seemed to be left in him was resolve.

“So how will I escape from here?” Zak mused softly to himself. Eli nodded approvingly.

“You are not the first of the lone wanderers to be captured by the Guardians, and you will not be the first to escape.” Eli responded approvingly. “The people you left behind would tell you that you have got this far by luck or providence. But there is no luck or providence. There are only opportunities, and the ability to perceive them and take advantage of them. Don’t let those jealous of your achievements convince you that they are the results of providence and luck. Rather, continue to trust in yourself. There are always opportunities, and there are always those who are daring enough to risk taking them. I have full confidence that when the opportunity arises for you to escape, you will be courageous enough to take it. These people are used to everybody obeying them unquestioningly. Like all of the tribes you have met, they enforce their rules through fear of the wilderness. You have no fear of the wilderness, so you have a tremendous advantage over them. The Guardians will try to break you down psychologically and emotionally, but everybody had to pass through obstacles such as these to arrive at the top of the mountain.”

Zak remained speechless. His eyes closed as he tried to digest the important things that the Eli had said to him. In his mind, the old man had painted him a picture that seemed to portray the whole world in a clarity that Zak had never seen before – he had never heard so many things that had touched him so deeply. But when he opened his eyes, all he saw around him was a small, dark, dank cell, with no escape route. It was

all well and good to suddenly have wisdom at his disposal, but it didn't change the fact that he was now a slave to a society that would force him to work dawn till dusk to block the paths that he had intended to map. Eventually, he realised that the wisest thing to do at that moment, was to try and get some sleep. He didn't know what the morning would bring...

## Chapter 12: Overseer

Zak's eyes snapped open, as a loud metallic *clanging* sound jerked him violently out of his sleep. A metal flask was being hit against the bars of the cells. He looked around, wide-eyed and blinking as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He could hear people groaning. A voice at the end of the corridor shouted at the prisoners, telling them to prepare for work. He looked over at Eli, who hadn't moved. He seemed to be an exception to the orders. Then he thought for a second. Of course, he had been sentenced to a painful death. What more were they going to do to him, if he didn't obey? "Besides", he thought to himself, "Eli was doubtless too old to be a good slave labourer".

As he stretched, his muscles seemed to creak with protest. Apprehensively, he realised that his body was still exhausted from his attempts to escape from the pit the previous night, and that he would need a long rest before he would once again be able to think about moving anywhere quickly. As the guard came back, Zak opened his mouth, about to explain this, but something in the guard's expression stopped him. There was none of the good-naturedness that he had seen in his captors the day before. This man was looking at him with violence in his eyes, but a kind of calculated, cold violence, unlike the hysterical aggression that he had encountered among the glassy eyed Fanatics who had attacked him before. Silently, for the first time in a long time, Zak swallowed his pride, lowered his head, and did as he was told. Half an hour later, after a hastily eaten breakfast, he found himself being marched away from the fortress as part of a group, carrying digging tools, and small bags with food and water for lunch.

An hour later, they arrived at a ditch, and were told to begin digging.

At first, Zak treated the experience like the other experiences he had had – he was curious about it, and fascinated to learn something new. But after a while, as his muscles seemed to protest more and more loudly, he found himself flagging. An hour later, his muscles seemed to scream in protest, and it became more and more difficult to even lift the spade that he was supposed to be using to dig the pointless hole. Eventually, as the sun started to rise, and it became more and more difficult to see through the sweat that ran down his eyes, and as he began to grow dizzy from exhaustion, he let the spade slip from his hands and wiped his eyes, breathing a sigh of relief as he felt his body relax for the first time that day. He leaned peacefully for a few moments against the side of the hole that he was digging.

CRACK!

Zak screamed in pain as he suddenly felt as though fiery acid had been spilt down his back, and the feeling seemed to spread all the way across his body. As if it was someone else, he heard himself scream, and he dropped to his knees. He heard a series of cracking sounds behind him, and each time it was as though a new fire had spread across his back. He curled himself into a ball, not risking turning around and making himself even more vulnerable to whatever was causing him that pain. A few moments later, and he realised that he had been left alone. He fearfully looked behind him, and saw the overseer, re-curling his whip.

"If you stop working without permission again, I will whip all of the skin from your body," the man said, with a voice of cold, righteous authority. "You have an important duty, helping to block the paths from

unrighteous ones, and I have an important duty in making sure that you do it. If either one of us are going to be part of the hundred-and-forty-four-thousand, both of us need to do our duty. This is what's best for me *and* for you. Do you understand?" He obviously felt that he was being particularly charitable in explaining himself to the slave.

Zak remained silent for a second, as he began to understand all of the new information that was going through his mind. In that moment, when he had felt the most intense pain he had ever experienced, it was as if his whole view of things needed to be reassessed. Then he saw the whip being uncurled again threateningly at his lack of a response. For a second, he knew a moment of paralysing fear, as he began shivering in terrified anticipation of another whipping. "*Yes, understand!*" he replied falteringly, in his heavy accent. Suddenly, he realised that the only thought that he needed in his head at that moment was of how to avoid going through that pain again, and that any deeper thinking would have to wait. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he got up, somehow found the strength to pick up the spade again, and pounded it into the ground, with even more strength than he had done up until then. The overseer grunted with approval. Zak had thought that he would be unable to even lift the spade again, but, for the next few hours, with the only thought in his mind being of his next spade-swing, he somehow managed to keep going until the break.

When he eventually stumbled miserably back into his cell that night, he felt as though every muscle in his body had seized up. He collapsed weakly onto his straw bed, and ignored the simple but nutritious meal that had been left next to it. He just wanted to let himself die, to let his mind fade away and never to have to think about paths, tribes, or the top of the mountain, ever again. What seemed like a second later, he felt himself being shaken awake, and in a moment of hysterical fear, he thought that it was already the next day, and that it was time to go to labour again. He immediately broke out in a cold sweat, because he knew that he would have difficulty getting up off his makeshift straw mattress, let alone picking up a spade and beginning to dig... Then he realised that it was too dark to be morning, and that he was looking up into Eli's face. He realised that he must have fallen unconscious, because he hadn't heard his companion approaching.

"If you go to sleep now, you'll die tomorrow" Eli said to him, in his calming voice. "I should have warned you about this yesterday," he continued, as Zak rolled over and Eli saw the thick welts on his back from the whipping he had received. One of them was bleeding slightly "Get up, and stretch with me. Right now, for you, stretching is more important than sleeping. Even if you sleep for a week, your body can't recover on its own from the toils of the first days of forced digging. And then you'll have to eat, otherwise you'll die tomorrow from lack of energy."

Zak didn't have the strength to question what Eli said to him. Despite the immense pain that every movement provoked, he managed to force himself to go through Eli's stretching routine, and then, an hour later, to eat the simple but wholesome meal that had been left out for him. All this time, his mind was blank, as he only had the energy to think about his next action – be it chewing or swallowing. Eventually, he found himself rolling back into his bed. His last feeling before he went to sleep was of Eli rubbing a kind of ointment into the bleeding wound that the whip had left on his back, singing an ancient, calming song from the tribe as he did so. It stung horribly, but his tiredness was so great that he managed to go to sleep anyway. Seemingly

a second later, he was once again awoken by the strange metallic sound, and before he knew it, he was dragging his exhausted body out of bed for another day of forced, backbreaking labour.

## Chapter 13: Doubt

Over the next few weeks, Zak quickly came to understand that the hoped-for opportunity to escape would not be appearing any time soon. The system that the Guardians had created to prevent slaves from escaping was much more complete than he could ever have imagined. And he also realised that a few more whippings like the one he had experienced on the first day would be enough to make escaping the least of his worries. So he did the only thing that he could - he settled into the rhythm of the life of a slave labourer.

As he did so, he felt a strange haze begin to appear in his mind, which he had to constantly fight to keep at bay. He began to realise that in the act of obeying every order that was given to him, he was never having to truly think for himself, and life became simpler. On one level, despite the backbreaking labour, he had a strange feeling of lightness, and he found himself strangely grateful to the guards for every tiny kindness that they offered him. And there were moments where the guard's constant "reminders" that it was *"better to be a slave in a society of truth than a king in a society of lies"* began to sound strangely seductive. Just as his time among the Tribe of the One True Map had made him begin to fear wolves, despite his knowledge that there was no real danger, now he could begin to feel the seduction of the possibility of becoming one of the hundred-and-forty-four-thousand righteous ones, and all that he would have to do would be to obey the guards better than anyone else. Of course, he told himself that he was obeying in order to divert suspicion from himself, in order to increase his chances of escaping later, but there were moments when he was forced to ask himself whether that was really the whole reason why he was so willing to do everything that he was told, less and less questioningly.

Nonetheless, the more that Zak settled into the rhythm of the obedient slave, the more that something deep inside him began to become more and more restless. Although on a subconscious level, his free will was being constantly chipped at, he also realised that there was something inside him that was becoming more and more angry, more and more agitated. As the months went by, there were more and more moments when he looked the guards in the eye for that little bit too long, and some of the guards began to look upon him with suspicion once again. Finally, one day when he least expected it, he snapped.

A slave-girl, obviously recently captured, appeared in his digging team one morning. On the forced march to the dig, he didn't notice her, except to remark on the fact that she was exceptionally beautiful. When, finally, the work started, the noises of digging carried over just as they always did. However, Zak had been a slave for many months by then, and he was very sensitive to the minor changes in the atmosphere of the workers. He quickly realised that something wasn't quite right. The other slaves weren't focusing on the act of digging - their attention was elsewhere. For the first time in months, he tentatively looked around to see what was happening, what was about to happen. Then he saw the disturbance.

The recently captured girl was standing obstinately, looking around her, with a hard expression on her face, daring the overseers to react. Her pick lay on the floor next to her, abandoned in obvious disdain. One of the overseers quickly caught sight of her and advanced, uncurling his whip with a deadly look in his eye. Now the slaves stopped even pretending to work, as they looked in morbid fascination at the girl's hard

expression. It was not often that such an open display of defiance was seen, even with new slaves. As the overseer approached, she turned around and looked him in the eye with a fiery glare, not faltering for a second. As he approached her, he brought back the whip over his shoulder, and only at the last minute did the girl turn away, shielding her face from the lightning-fast whip as it cracked across her exposed shoulder. She went visibly pale, but didn't cry out as Zak had done. She turned back towards the overseer and looked him in the eye again. Once again, she turned away from the whip at the last instant as it came down a second time, this time leaving a welt on her other shoulder, which immediately became visible through her shirt. All of the slaves winced in anticipation – they all knew that this would be a particularly savage beating.

Crack!

Crack!

The whip came down again and again, and the overseer continued whipping (Crack!), no passion in his eyes (Crack!), just a sense of duty, as he brought down the whip again and again (Crack! Crack!), as he had no doubt been trained to do in this situation.

As the other slaves looked on, she went paler and paler, but still refused to cry out. After a few more blows, Zak couldn't take it anymore. Before he could stop himself, he was crying out at the top of his voice:

“STOP! This isn't RIGHT!” He screamed.

There had been silence before among the other slaves, who had been looking on in morbid and grim fascination, but suddenly the silence was deafening, as the slave master calmly turned his head to where Zak was standing. Zak felt fear wash over him as he saw the expression on the man's face. Despite his apparent calmness, for the first time, Zak could now see genuine anger. Somehow, the silence that had hung over the slaves before somehow became even tenser. A few of the most seasoned slaves knew what was going to happen, and they did their best to fade into the background, looking away, and doing whatever they could to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

The overseer walked slowly towards Zak. With a practiced gesture, he sent one of the other slaves to go and find one of the other overseers. The slave obeyed unhesitatingly – he didn't want to be punished as well.

“You've made things worse for both of you, slave.” The first overseer said to Zak, gently uncurling his whip.

Before Zak fell unconscious from the pain, his voice hoarse from screaming, his last conscious thought was his disbelief that the new girl had maintained her silence throughout her beating.

Hours later, Zak lay in his bed, completely still. Every movement he made seemed to reopen the profusely bleeding wounds across his back. Eli was treating his wounds with copious amounts of the same ointment he had used on that first day; some forgotten part of Zak's mind wondered how he had managed to smuggle it into the cell. Tears ran down Zak's cheeks, as he thought about the poor girl, who would probably have escaped with a mere fifteen lashes if it hadn't been for his outburst. She had been mutilated by their whips just as much as he had, but she didn't have Eli to help her dress the wounds. Zak had now learnt that Eli was kept alive because of his ability to heal the wounds of the ruling elite of the Guardians of the One True Path through his knowledge of herbs and medicines. But without Eli's professional help, which was reserved for the elite, it would be a miracle if the new girl lived out the week.

Zak inwardly cursed himself, again and again. He had *known* their system – he should have *known better* than to try and defend her. He should have *known* that he was just making things worse for both of them. He should have *known* to control himself. He said as much to Eli.

“Zak, you weren't the one who whipped that girl. Don't let them make you feel like you're the one that did that to her. This is just one of their ways of trying to suppress that thing inside you that makes you free, despite any bonds they can tie you with.”

“If I manage to escape, they'll whip everyone...” Zak replied, in a moment of realisation, as he thought about what they had just done to that girl, just because he had attempted to defend her. “If it happens because of me, what difference does it make to them whose hand the whip is in?”

Eli was silent, for a moment, and Zak could perceive a hint of anguish on his face.

“She knows that had you been ordered to whip her, you would have refused to do it.” Eli answered, after a moment. “I think that even the overseers knew that. That means more than you can know. What if *nobody* spoke up to defend her? What if *nobody* ever managed to escape? If you escape, they'll be punished, but you will also give them hope, and make them understand that their system of slavery *can be defeated*.”

“But how can I *know* that I'm right?” Zak asked, his resolve leaving him for a moment, as he once again reflected on the enormity of what he planned to do. “How can I know that I'm not just deluded like the others?” Although in his heart he was convinced that he would do whatever it took, the day's events had left him feeling like a helpless child, doomed to fail a task greater than so many great men.

“That is one of the simplest and at the same time most difficult things in the world, and doesn't become any easier with age” Eli replied after thinking for a second. “The answer is simple. You can *never* know that you are right.” Zak looked up at him, confused. This wasn't the answer he had wanted to hear. Eli continued: “Remember that we *all* make mistakes; this is an unfortunate side effect of being human. The only way that you can ever be right, is if you are willing to admit that you are wrong. None of us have all of the information, but we have to do the best we can with the information available to us, and be willing to change our opinions when new information becomes available. Otherwise you will end up like the tribes that are unable to change their path when they find that their maps no longer work. It's not much, but it was on the basis of this exact same advice that I found my way up to the mountain, so now I trust that it will help you do the same.”

Zak nodded and reflected on this for a moment. As always, Eli's honest words gave him strength. Once again, he pictured in his head the moment when he would arrive at the top of the mountain, and know paradise, and be able to write down his experiences to allow future generations not to make the same mistakes that he had seen, and to be able to record Eli's wisdom, and make it available for everyone. He knew that his new Sacred Task was so important, that one way or another, he *had* to escape.

As Zak went to sleep that night, like so many other nights, he was comforted by listening to Eli singing the songs and reciting the poems of all of the different tribes that he had encountered, and repeating his directions to the top of the mountain. His last thought before he went to sleep, was that he was closer now to his final goal than he had ever been before; closer than any of the people he had met on his travels. The thought gave him strength. He *would* complete his sacred task.

## Chapter 14: Fog

Over the next few months, Zak was the essence of the obedient slave. No longer did he risk looking the overseers in the eye for that one moment too long. However, the slightly seductive feeling that he had had before, the temptation to just accept his situation and perhaps be one of the hundred-and-forty-four-thousand had finally completely disappeared. Now he burnt constantly with a cold rage, and knew that he was going to do *whatever* it took to escape.

He learnt a lot about the society, and came to understand that they were similar to the tribe who believed they were at the top of the mountain in their attitude, but much, much more dangerous. He came to understand that the reason that the leaders of the society hadn't already reached the top was because there were other tribes with whom this one was constantly at war. Each "guarded" the path to the top from the others, and anybody who tried to approach the paths that would lead to the next stage of the journey to the top of the mountain was instantly cut down by the arrows of ambushing soldiers. So the Guardians of the One True Path sent wave after wave of their warriors to attack their enemies of the same name. The warriors of each tribe died willingly, as much slaves to the society as Zak was, always in the same hope of gaining the reward of being allowed to be one of the fabled hundred-and-forty-four-thousand.

One day, as Zak pounded his spade into the ground for what seemed like the millionth time that month, a terrible scream rent the air. He did his best to ignore it, just focusing on pounding his spade into the ground for the millionth and first time. Somehow, the girl had survived the beating that she had received on that first day. At first, she had continued to refuse to work, but eventually, the slave masters had found a way to win her obedience. One day, rather than beat her, they had chosen another slave at random, and beat him in front of her. Ever since, she had begrudgingly begun to obey.

Despite this, nothing the slave masters could do to her had been able to take the rebelliousness out of her every expression, and she made it very clear that she had no respect for the society or anybody in it. Over the months since, she had been beaten more regularly than any of the other slaves, and everybody was openly surprised by the fact that she was still alive, since other slaves had been killed by lighter beatings. It was as though she just had more will-to-live than anybody else. Over time, the slaves had had to learn to ignore the beatings that she received and just carry on working, for fear of receiving similar beatings themselves. Zak had no idea what infraction she had committed this time.

Today, however, was the first time any of the slaves had heard her cry out in pain.

Zak's face was a grim mask as he heard the whip *crack* again across the girl's back. In the months since she had first appeared, he had been trying to find the opportunity, and the courage, to finally talk to her; to apologise to her for the beating she had received on that first day, which he still felt responsible for despite everything that Eli had said. This time, however, he promised himself that he wouldn't make the mistake of trying help her. He knew that that would just make things worse for both of them. Rather, he mentally added it to the list of things that these people would have to pay for when he did escape. And he knew that he would – somehow. He focussed his anger and sympathetic pain into attacking even more

vigorously with his spade the wall of the hole he was being forced to dig. He still burnt with purpose, and was biding his time.

*Crack!* He tried to clear his mind by thinking about his sacred task again.

*Crack!* He wished that he would at least be able to speak to her and comfort her after the beating. However, socialising among captured slaves was completely forbidden, lest they continue to talk to each other about the “bad paths”. Of course, this too was for ‘their own good’.

Zak continued to hack at the dry ground with his spade, harder and harder as the sound of the girl’s cries increased under the merciless whipping. He could almost hear the skin being torn from her back as she screamed. *Crack!* He winced in sympathetic pain. He knew that it wouldn’t last much longer, and through incredible force of will, he forced himself to continue ignoring her screams, just focusing on his sacred task, even though it went against every fibre of his nature to continue ignoring the pain of people around him. *Crack!* As her screams continued, Zak felt more and more sympathetic pain, as he too remembered the bite of the whip all too well. Since the last time that he had attempted to plead on behalf of the girl, he had not committed the slightest transgression.

But since then, months had passed, and the anger that he felt at the constant injustices that he had been seeing around him had become harder and harder to suppress, and he could no longer ignore what was happening just by thinking about the top of the mountain and the paradise that would await him when he escaped.

He pounded and pounded at the ground with his spade, his muscular body covered in sweat now, as he tried to shield his fellow slave’s cries from his mind. The beating should have ended by now, but it only seemed to be getting worse. The girl’s terrible screams rent the air.

*CRACK!* But this *crack* came from just below him. Zak jumped slightly, and, looking down in confusion, saw that, with the force of his blows, he had snapped his spade in two. He looked up, and saw that all but the most obedient and desensitised of the other slaves had stopped their work and dropped their digging equipment to watch the beating. The overseer beating her was their only guard that day, but he alone was sufficient to keep order, because the slaves were not just held in check by the overseer’s discipline, but also by the strength of their belief that this truly was the best thing for them. This belief was the one recourse they had; the desperate hope that there was some ultimate meaning and reward for their struggles.

Zak looked down at the floor, searching for his spade, but he didn’t see it. He only saw the ground moving beneath him. He looked up, and became aware that he was walking purposefully towards the slave master, his body made light by adrenaline. All of the slaves were now looking at him, too shocked to shout out a warning to the overseer. He tried to stop himself, but he felt like he had lost control of his body. It was as though when his spade had snapped, something within *him* had snapped at the same time. He advanced towards the overseer who still hadn’t stopped the beating, sweat dripping down his back as he looked

hungrily down at the bloodied back of the beautiful young woman as his whip came down harder... and harder...

Adrenaline seemed to fill all of the blood in Zak's body. Now, all of his energy was focused into his anger, and suddenly all that existed for him was the hated overseer. The violence that he had been seeing over the last few months had gradually chipped away at something within him, something that was peaceful. As he was a meter away from the overseer, he finally left her alone, sensing that something was wrong, and turned around.

Right into Zak's clenched fist.

When Zak had arrived at the fortress, his muscles were already hard and wiry due to the difficulty of travelling through the wilderness and the difficulty of the climbing that he had had to do to arrive at this height of the mountain. Nonetheless, he had not been anywhere near strong enough for the digging that he was expected to do from dawn till dusk. And, without realising it, he had become much stronger over the time he had spent being forced to pound his spade into dry ground. He had been well fed, and where before he had been skinny, now he had become muscular.

And now, each minute of frustration from the past year added strength to his punch.

The overseer hadn't expected Zak's blow, and had made no effort to defend himself. Time seemed to slow down for Zak as he saw the man's head snap backwards, and heard a loud *crack* that had nothing to do with the impact of his fist. The man's neck was broken, and he was dead before he hit the ground, his face caved in; a bloody mess. After a few seconds, the adrenaline that had coursed through Zak's veins began to dissipate, and then disappear completely. He suddenly felt as cold as he had the day that he had left his tribe, and he felt a stabbing, blinding pain in his hand as the pain of the chipped bones in his knuckles began to hit him. He looked around him, his eyes glazed over in a state of shock, and saw his expression mirrored on the faces of all of his fellow slaves. He then heard them start to murmur among themselves.

"He's a follower of the bad paths!" He heard one of them say. As Zak heard this, he felt some of his adrenaline, and therefore his courage, return to him.

"NO!" He shouted. "How do you decide whether a path is "bad"? Why should you believe in something that is used to keep you slaves? Do you really think that you have the slightest chance of arriving at the top of the mountain if you stay here?"

"They know what's best for us!" Somebody said, towards the back of the small crowd of slaves that was gathering. "We're lucky to be here! If we are faithful, we will be rewarded! Don't listen to the follower of the bad paths!"

Zak sighed, trying to find the strength of will to be patient with his fellow captives.

"Look, I promise that I know the way to the top of the mountain." As he said this, the slaves looked at him with disbelieving disgust. Zak closed his eyes for a second, trying once again to gather patience. "Listen," He continued, "I know I can't convince you that my path is the right one. But why don't you listen to

this. You can either come with me, and you have the chance of freedom, or you can stay here and know that you will die as slaves, left to die of starvation when the Guardians no longer need you." Zak insisted desperately, trying one more time to convince them. He saw some of the slaves thinking about what he had said, and one or two even made a hesitant move towards him. He felt a moment of hope...

Then one of the slaves towards the back started shouting, and a few started running back towards the fortress to raise the alarm. The slaves who had begun to advance towards him stepped back, anxious to be as far away from Zak as possible so that blame not be apportioned to them. They knew that they were all going to be punished, but they also knew what terrible tortures they faced if they tried to escape and then failed. Zak turned away from them, surveying the landscape in front of him. He knew from Eli's directions that if he could get past the trees to the large clearing beyond it, and manage to get to the other side of the clearing into the forests on the other side without being seen by the slave-catchers, he would have a chance of escaping. It was a long shot, but at this point, it was the only choice he had. He looked down at the girl, who lay twitching on the ground, blood seeping from the open wounds on her back. He only had to think for a second before making his decision.

Just as it had been the day he had first saw her, the two of them would once again share their fate.

Despite the urgency of the situation (he could hear the slaves' shouts as they disappeared into the distance to search for the overseers), he approached the girl tentatively. For months he had been imagining the moment when they would meet for the first time, and he felt like it shouldn't be rushed, even if a few moments later they would be having to sprint for their lives. He put his hand on her shoulder, merely brushing it, worried that even that light touch would be painful for her in her wounded state.

Suddenly she burst into movement. She turned herself around faster than he would have thought possible. Before he was able to jerk his hand away, she had his wrist in an iron grip, her other hand went straight for his throat. Zak felt as though his eyes were pierced by her fiery stare, and her face that was twisted into an expression of absolute anger and hatred. For just a second, he was unable to breathe as he found his throat caught in a vice grip that he would have thought impossible from such slender figures. Then, as her eyes focused on him, her expression softened, and he felt his arm and throat released just enough to allow him to jerk away, coughing violently.

"The guard?" The girl asked him, in a weakened voice.

"Dead." Replied Zak, hoarsely, his eyes flicking to the side, where the guard was visible, lying motionless on the ground with his neck bent into an unnatural position. "If we don't run away, we'll both be killed."

The girl seemed to ignore him, following his eyes and staring at the guard for a second until she seemed satisfied that he was indeed dead. Then she seemed to focus back onto Zak, and realised what he had said. "Escape?" she responded confusedly.

"Yes. Its now or never." Zak replied. She nodded, and got up weakly, looking at him with an expression of determination.

"Julia" She said.

"Zak" He replied

Zak knew that there was no time to waste with a more complete introduction. The slaves who were going to raise the alarm would now be arriving at another one of the digs, and he certainly didn't want to stay long enough for one of the other slaves to realise that by capturing Zak, he could raise his chances of becoming one of the hundred-and-forty-four-thousand.

He jumped down to where the guard was lying, grabbed his bag of provisions and his machete from beside him, and started running, closely followed by Julia. A few seconds later, he heard the sounds of chase being given. The few minutes that followed were the most intense of Zak's life, as they ran as fast as they could through the woods. They could hear the sounds of the chase becoming louder behind them, and they knew that every second that they remained unseen would increase their chances of escape.

As they sprinted through the woods, a new feeling came over Zak. They ran as fast as they could, but as they did, a strange peacefulness came over his mind. He felt no more fear, he simply knew that they would either make it, or they wouldn't. He became intensely aware of everything in his surroundings – the next tree root that he might trip over, how much he had to reduce his speed to allow the girl to keep up with him, how to navigate the most direct route between the trees. He looked behind him and saw a hard expression on the girl's face, and he instantly knew that she understood how he felt. Then his heart fell as he heard heavy footsteps less than fifty meters behind them.

They had been seen, and it would be impossible for them to get across the plain and into the trees before they were caught. The guards would definitely be faster than they were and in the clearing, they would be clearly visible. The guards would cut them down with bows and arrows within seconds. It would be mere sport for them. All hope was lost. Looking back at Julia, he saw that she shared his despair, but he could see from her expression that she would keep running until the end. Zak found some small inspiration in this, and the two of them increased their speed that little bit more, as the end of the forest became visible.

Suddenly they were out of the trees, but they stopped dead. In front of them, hanging malevolently in the air, was the thickest white fog that that Zak had ever seen, and with the fog came the same paralysing sense of impotence and terror as always. Wordlessly, Zak and Julia's hands found each other and gripped tight, as the fog rolled over them. They looked at each other properly for the first time, and then, a second later, their faces became invisible as the fog became too thick even to see that small distance. But as they stood there, contemplating the whiteness before them, Zak suddenly realised that his sense of resolve hadn't left him. As he looked at the fog, in that instant, he realised that the fog had brought him to where he was today, that he had faced the fog on several occasions before, and that each time, in the end, *he had prevailed*.

This time, he knew that the fog was his ally. He suddenly realised that fear of the fog was just like fear of the wilderness – what he was really scared of was the unknown. But now he also knew that the unknown held salvation, as well as dangers. Almost without thinking, Zak raised the Julia's hand to his mouth and gently kissed it, and felt her grip his hand slightly harder in a sign of acknowledgement. It was now or never. Together, they took a step into the fog.

A second later, they were running full pelt through the fog, their speed given to them by determination, and now, hope. If the fog remained this thick for long enough, it would be impossible for the

slave catchers to find them. He heard the sound of his would-be captors crying in frustration as they entered the fog, and could no longer see each other. Gripping each others' hands as tightly as they could, they ran through the clearing, ignoring the arrows that hissed angrily past their heads. When they reached the forest on the other side, they continued running through it, avoiding trees at the last second, and calling each other's names whenever their hands became detached. Each time they connected hands again, Zak would raise her hand to his lips and kiss it, unconsciously, for fear that it would be his last chance to do so.

An hour later, they were still running, but barely. Zak knew that Julia was on her last legs. Adrenaline had allowed her to ignore the terrible pain that her wounds from the beating must have been causing her, but now she was starting to lag behind even more, dragging her feet, and the fog was also taking its toll. Their route had become much steeper, and they were having to move much more slowly in order to avoid stumbling and falling. It was becoming more and more difficult to maintain their concentration enough to avoid tree roots, rabbit holes, and other potential dangers. At this point, a twisted ankle could be just as fatal as an arrow in the back.

Then, suddenly, before they knew it, they were out of the fog, and intense midday sunshine was shining down on them from a blue sky, warming Zak's skin instantly. They stumbled to a halt, and turned to look behind them, without loosening their grips on each other's hands for even an instant. The fog was still behind them, but was quickly being burnt away by the intense sunshine. Zak's other hand rose to his forehead to shield his eyes as he looked at the beautiful view behind him. Looking down into the mist was like looking into a white sea, which stretched into the distance, with trees breaking out of it in the distance like green islands. But, in the heat of the sun, and the warm dry breeze coming from above, the fog was becoming visibly thinner by the second. Like the residue of a wave being absorbed by sand on a beach, the fog receded from below them, revealing more and more of the kilometres of forests and clearings that they had sprinted through to arrive at that point. No signs of civilisation or pursuers were anywhere to be seen.

As Zak began to turn towards Julia, an exhausted but encouraging smile on his face, he felt her hand suddenly weaken in its grip, and then become limp. His reflexes were just quick enough to catch her as she fainted. A look of deep concern replaced his smile, and Zak knelt next to her and laid her on the wet ground. He gently touched her forehead, and his expression of concern transformed itself into one of open fear. Her face was icy cold to the touch, despite the intense sprint that she had just done and the hot sunshine that beamed down on them. Looking at her a second longer, he realised that she was shivering violently. Her eyes opened and closed feverishly, but only the whites of her eyes were visible.

He suddenly realised that she should never have been able to withstand such a sprint, just after the most savage beating he had ever seen. Completely uncaring of his own comfort, he immediately pulled off the shirt that he was wearing and put it over her, and then looked around desperately for some wood that he could cut to start a fire. He saw that a hundred meters above them was the start of another forest, and he could vaguely hear the sound of what seemed to be a spring. Praying that he would have more luck than he had when he had gone looking for water on that first fateful day, without a second thought he took Julia in his

arms and began to trudge up the increasingly steep incline, noting with increasing fear the blood that dripped down his arms as some of her wounds reopened. The pain made her stir and groan, and she began talking in her own language.

Despite the fact that he couldn't understand her, it was clear to Zak that she was talking incoherently, and this confirmed his suspicion that she had a fever, and a very bad one at that. He increased his pace.

An hour later Julia lay on her front by a small, hastily lit fire, still shivering violently. Her head lay on Zak's shirt, out of which he had fashioned her a pillow, using some dead leaves. Twenty meters away was the spring, and Zak felt like *this* was the spring that he had been searching for since the very beginning.

He was heating up water in a metal pot that he had found in the bag that he had taken from the guard, but was unable to keep his eyes from straying anxiously back to Julia. She lay there helpless, unmoving except for occasional spasms of her arms and legs. Carefully using the sharp edge of the machete, he had cut the back of her shirt to make her back visible, and what he saw shocked and terrified him. Her back was a lattice of open wounds, vaguely visible under a coating of dried blood and mud.

As soon as the water boiled, he waited for it to cool down just enough, and then used it to wash Julia's back until the wounds were clean and clearly visible. One of them was already showing the beginnings of an infection. He tried his best to control his rising panic. After all this effort, her life was no more secure now than it would have been had he left her to be beaten. Wishing that he had some quicker way of doing this, he sprinted to the spring, refilled the pot, and put it back over the fire to boil again. Leaving the water to heat up slowly, he ran into the forest, trying to find some of the same herbs that Eli had used to heal his wounds on the occasions when he had received beatings. He knew that if he didn't do something to treat the wound tonight, tomorrow would already be too late.

He got back just as the water was starting to boil, his hands full of the herbs, which he had luckily found not far off. He tried to ignore a wave of fatigue that washed over him. He clumsily cut the herbs with the machete as his vision began to become hazy with tiredness, throwing them in the boiling water, and stirring with a metal spoon that he had also found in the bag, until he had made a mashed paste. Waiting until the paste had cooled down just enough, he smeared it into Julia's wounds, and became even more concerned when she didn't even seem to notice that he was touching her, despite the terrible stinging pain that it should have caused her. Her skin was still cold to the touch, and as soon as he was finished, putting another flask of water on the fire to boil just in case he'd need it, he ran to the trees with the machete to cut some more wood to throw on the fire. Before he started cutting, he hesitated for a second, trying to force his eyes to focus. Tiredness seemed to weigh on his shoulders like a blanket of lead. Shaking himself, he began to cut.

When he got back to the campsite with the wood, he took stock of the other things that were in the bag that he had taken, and made use of what tools he could find to start preparing some traps so that he could catch something that he could prepare for dinner. Every few moments, he stopped for a moment to call on the last vestiges of his will to force himself not to go to sleep. He knew that if he succumbed to his fatigue now, he would not wake up until well into the next day, and Julia would already be dead.

For the rest of the day, Zak ignored his fatigue and called on every fragment of knowledge he had ever acquired about living in the outdoors, in order to do whatever it took to make sure that Julia was well cared for. She drifted in and out of fitful sleep, but Zak was careful to wake her regularly to force her to drink, not eating anything himself until she was satisfied that she had had enough. In his intense activity, caring for Julia, hunting, and cooking, Zak didn't notice as the sun passed its zenith, and then gradually began to set. He already felt as though they had escaped weeks earlier, and he could scarcely believe that he had woken up that morning thinking that it was just going to be another day of forced labour. As night fell, unnoticed by Zak whose hazy vision adjusted naturally to the light of the fire, Julia seemed to drift into a sleep which was less agitated, and more peaceful, although he wasn't sure if it was his imagination. Her temperature was still fluctuating between extremely hot and extremely cold. Zak threw some pungent leaves onto the fire to discourage the hungry mosquitoes which he could hear whirring past his ears, and which were no doubt feasting on Julia's naked back. Finally, despite the black spots appearing at the edge of his vision due to his utter exhaustion, he managed to find the energy to wash Julia's wounds a second time, and re-make the herbal healing ointment. Earlier, he had taken his shirt and the part of Julia's shirt that he had had to cut away, and had washed them thoroughly in the stream, hanging them above the fire to dry, Now, he took them down, and cut them into bandages, which he used to dress Julia's wounds one more time. Satisfied that there was nothing more that he could do for the moment, he allowed himself to drop to the ground next to Julia, and fall asleep, not realising that he still hadn't even eaten. Using his last ounce of energy, he slipped his hand inside Julia's and felt a slight flutter in his stomach as he felt her hand grip his, ever so weakly.

## Chapter 15: Destination

Despite his fear that he would fall asleep for days, Zak woke up before the sun began to rise, shaken out of his sleep by his worry for Julia. Over the course of the day, her condition didn't seem to improve much, and Zak was still trying to do whatever he could to make sure that her wounds were properly cleaned and dressed. He knew that there was nothing else that he could do, and he felt a sense of terrible frustration and powerlessness at his inability to do more, to somehow fix this.

This girl had an effect on him that his travels had done nothing to prepare him for. It was something that he felt in the way that she had looked at him before they had entered the fog together, something in the way that she hadn't allowed the slavers to crush her spirit like they had done with everyone else. It was something that he had begun to understand from the moment that the two of them had taken each other's hands before they had run away together.

In that moment, Zak had understood that their fates were tied – and now he realised that, in reality, their fates had been tied from the moment when he had first noticed her, and stood up for her despite knowing that he was risking his life to do so. Zak barely understood the feelings that came over him when he tenderly dressed Julia's wounds, and stroked the hair back from her forehead, just willing her to get better, as silent tears rolled down his face. She, on the other hand, when she opened her eyes, just looked straight through him with a vacant expression on her face.

By the end of the second day, Zak felt no less tired than he had the first, and, after checking her wounds one more time, washing and replacing her bandages one more time, and satisfying himself that they at least seemed to be improving, he once again lay beside her and looked wonderingly at her face until he couldn't keep his eyes open any more. Just like the first night, he used the last of his energy to slip his hand into hers, and was once again comforted as she returned his grip, slightly more firmly than she had the night before. His last thought before he went into a dreamless sleep, was that some of the colour seemed to be returning to her cheeks. This time, Zak *really* slept.

Zak was woken up by the light and warmth of the sun, and for what seemed to be the first time in years, he woke up without any feeling of urgency. He chose to keep his eyes closed, and allowed his other sensations to roam. Despite having caught a cold during the night, he distinguished the smells of various flower blossoms, and felt a gentle breeze across his naked back. Somewhere in the trees above him, he could hear little hatchlings chirping in their nest as they waited for their mother to return with food. Just in front of him, he could hear the slight crackle of the last embers of the fire that had kept them warm during the night. After a few minutes just lying there, he lazily opened his eyes, and blinked a few times as his pupils began to adjust to the light.

Suddenly he felt a strange jolt in his stomach, and felt his heart begin to beat faster, as he realised that Julia was lying calmly on her side, naked from the waste up, facing him with a serene smile on her face, looking into his eyes in the same way that he had been gazing into hers the night before. Zak felt himself redden slightly as his eyes flicked involuntarily downwards. He had needed to cut up their shirts to make

bandages for her wounds, and now he realised that there was nothing that she could use to cover herself up. So she lay topless, with no embarrassment about her perfect exposed breasts and flat, slightly muscular midriff. Neither did she seem to have any shame concerning the welts from repeated beatings that were visible on her side. Zak couldn't help but remark once again on her incredible beauty – he had to struggle to keep his eyes from straying downwards along her body. She seemed mildly amused by his discomfort, which of course made Zak feel even more embarrassed.

Zak's heart beat even faster as he also realised with even more nervousness that, in a manner of speaking, he was now about to meet her for the first time. They lay there in silence, for just a moment, returning each other's smiles, neither wanting to ruin the moment, both kind of enjoying the sense of nervous anticipation. "I don't know how much you remember..." Zak said softly after a while. For a second, she didn't respond, and he realised that as far as he knew, perhaps Julia didn't even speak the language of the Guardians of the One True Path. A moment later, he was about to try another one of the languages that he had learnt, when Julia replied, a smile on her face.

"I remember enough." Julia responded, speaking the language of the Guardians perfectly, but rolling the "r"s. "You saved my life. In more than one way."

Zak just nodded – he didn't know how to respond to that.

"We should keep moving," he said, awkwardly, after a while. She nodded and stood up. She winced with pain, no longer feeling the need to hide behind a veneer of toughness. Still, it was clear that at least the worst of the fever was over. As she turned around and pulled off her bandages, Zak could see that her wounds no longer seemed in any danger of getting infected, although they still looked incredibly painful. A few minutes later, they began walking slowly up the forested slope, neither of them seeming to be in much of a hurry anymore.

As they walked, Zak began to tell Julia his tale, about all of the strange tribes he had encountered, about his journey, and about how much he had learnt. While he spoke, he became lost in his own story, and the deep emotions that it brought back, and he didn't realise that he had unconsciously begun following Julia, as she led him along a woodland path.

As Julia listened to the beginning of Zak's story, she smiled humorously at his description of the attitudes of his tribe, and the tribe of the Mammoths. Her face softened into understanding sorrow as he described the Tribe of the One True Map, and the Fanatics who had thought they were at the top of the mountain, and who had attacked him for not agreeing with them. Her face became a stony mask of concealed rage when she heard Zak talk about the explorers, and how they had used fire to "create paths".

Then, as Zak described Eli and the sacred task that he had given to him, and Eli's descriptions of the paradise at the top of the mountain, her smile didn't reappear. Rather, it was replaced by a sceptically raised eyebrow. Zak noticed her scepticism, and recoiled slightly. He suddenly remembered that, in reality, he knew nothing about this girl, and now that he thought about it, she might well share the attitudes of any of the people who he had encountered. Steeling himself for her response, he finally asked the most important

question in his mind, the question that he had been unconsciously putting off since the moment he had started talking to her.

“So... how do you plan to reach the top of the mountain?” He asked hesitantly.

“I don’t...” Said Julia drily, returning Zak’s guarded, slightly bristling look. “I’m walking this way because that’s the way back to my people. That’s where I belong, not the top of some mountain” Zak looked at her confusedly, and suddenly slowed down and looked around, realising that he had been following her, rather than following Eli’s directions, which would lead towards the top of the mountain. He tried again, wanting to be sure that she had understood him. He was convinced that, despite their perfect command of the language of the Guardians, there must have been some kind of misunderstanding

“So what is the path that your tribe are taking on their way to the top, then?”

Forcing Zak to match her pace, Julia walked slightly more before answering.

“Zak, I couldn’t care less about the mountain, and neither could anybody in our tribe. *It’s just a mountain.* We are happy where we are. And I miss my family. None of us *care* about getting to the top of the mountain.” Zak stopped dead.

“So your tribe is like the ones at the bottom of the mountain, that keep people down, and stop them from climbing the mountain by brainwashing them...” Zak said suspiciously. A flash of anger crossed Julia’s eyes in response.

“If you want to go to the top of the mountain, do you think that me or my family are going to waste any effort trying keep you here? Just take a left turn here, travel a few months uphill, climb a sheer cliff face, get enslaved again for a couple more years, escape, and then travel for a few more years. I’ll even leave you the provisions from the bag.” Zak was taken aback by the cold, disdainful anger in her voice. But he also realised that he had indeed been somewhat impolite.

“Julia, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to insult you or your family.” He said, gently. He had just found this wonderful girl, and he was inexplicably terrified at the possibility of losing her. But she seemed open minded, and it seemed like an even bigger shame not to help her to understand the things which he had learnt in his journey. “But surely, if your tribe is going to keep you down and stop you from climbing to the mountain and finding true wisdom, then you need to continue with me instead! At the top we’ll find a better life, we’ll find happiness and wisdom. And I’ll be able to complete my sacred task and we’ll be able to help future generations who leave the paradise at the top, and are unable to find their way back!”

Julia looked at him again, the mixture of pity and exasperation on her face surely a mirror of Zak’s own. Zak braced himself for her response – it was now obvious to him from her attitude that she was going to be closed-minded.

“You actually can’t hear yourself, can you?” She asked him. As he started to respond in a slightly angry tone, she cut him off. “*Sacred task?*” She continued, her voice rising slightly, in a kind of coldly amused sarcasm. “You think that I’m going to abandon my family like you did, just because of this self-important sacred task that you’ve imagined for yourself, inspired by some delusional old man?”

“*Hey*” Zak began, now much angrier than she was, but again, she cut him off.

“If you had really learnt anything on your journey, then you would realise that *paradise isn't something that you find ready made at the top of some mountain!* The people at the top of the mountain are perhaps a bit further away from the worst of the mosquitoes, but they're still *humans*, just like everybody else, and they make the same mistakes as all of the other humans. The only real paradise is the one we make ourselves, and that is what my people has been trying to do for as long as we can remember.” As she said this, she turned around and started walking, continuing to talk but not looking back to check whether Zak was following him. Zak, despite his growing anger, followed her, waiting for his chance to respond. When she didn't continue, he replied angrily.

“It was thanks to the directions of that so called *delusional old man* that we were able to escape!” He said, his voice now shaking with rage. As she continued walking, making him have to jog slightly to keep up with her, she looked back at him with an irritated expression, then thought better of replying and continued. Zak continued. “This so called *delusional old man* was also the one who taught me the skills I needed to heal you. If it weren't for my respecting him and listening to what he had to say, you would have died twenty times in the last three days. He was a wise man, and he found his wisdom at the top of the mountain. How can you tell me not to believe in what he had to say? He gave me a sacred task, and even if I don't understand it fully, trusting him has got me this far, and I will continue to do so. So I will go to the top of the mountain, with or without you. But *you*, at the very least, could show some respect to the delusional old man who saved you from slavery and death.”

Julia finally stopped, and looked back at him, this time with the tender shadow of an apology in her eyes. “Zak, regardless of your points of view about the mountain, I couldn't be more grateful to you for what you have done for me, and in this short time, I have come to deeply respect and admire you, and feel something more. But it was *you* who did those things. If Eli hadn't been there, you would have found some other way to do it.” Before Zak could protest, she silenced him by putting her hands on his shoulders and looking deeply into his eyes. Despite his anger, he once again felt the now familiar feeling of his heart starting beat faster, and the retort in his head seemed to disappear.

“I don't doubt for a second that Eli was wise,” She continued, “but from what you said, it sounds as though he found his wisdom in the journey, not the destination. Do you think that he would really have been so wise if he had been born at the top, rather than travelling along many different paths? He found his true wisdom when he went *down* the mountain, not when he reached the top! But it wasn't perfect wisdom. From what you've told me, its clear that his own views about the importance of the mountain clouded his view of the tribes he spent time with.” She paused for a moment, and Zak said nothing. Suddenly, his responses were mixing together in his head, and he wasn't sure what to say. He was sure that she was mistaken, that the civilisations at the bottom of the hill *were* in fact repressed, but suddenly, the truth of that didn't seem to matter quite as much. Before he could get his thoughts in order, she started speaking again.

“Zak, truth is like Paradise. You don't find it ready-made at the top of a mountain. You find it on your journey. But that journey could be anywhere. Why *this* mountain? Why not other mountains? Why not a cave? Why not the sea?” Zak's eyes widened.

*Other mountains?* The possibility had never occurred to him, and in that moment, he felt as though his whole world had been turned upside down. Julia nodded, still firmly holding his shoulders and looking into his eyes. “Sweet Zak. There are people who find wisdom by sitting under a tree with their eyes closed, and, without moving an inch, travel further than the most prolific of travellers. Wisdom occurs whenever you travel through the wilderness, but you must have realised by now, that the wilderness is *in your mind*.”

The journey is important, but what is even more important, is to *realise when you’ve found your destination*. There are people like your so-called ‘followers of the One True Map’ who arrive at their destination, and then walk past it as they focus only on their map, or their path, and fail to look up for long enough to realise that their destination has come and gone. Don’t be like them. I’m starting to fall in love with you. What we’ve been through together was the most intense experience of my life; we couldn’t go through that without a deep bond developing. But if you want to just write me off and forget about me like all of the other people you have met on your journey, and continue into the hills, then I will cry today, and tomorrow, but eventually I will find someone else, who I would love no less, and be happy with them, just as I would have been happy with you...

But if that’s *not* what you want, it would be better to realise it now, rather than when you are a slave of some other tribe that sees the top of the mountain as something worth *guarding*.”

Zak’s mind swirled. He stopped walking and sat down heavily, leaning against a tree trunk, as his mind swirled with dizzying new thoughts. He was coming to understand that every time his mind opened even slightly, a million things seemed to flow in and force his mind open even more.

“The thought of my sacred task was the only thing that got me through my time as a slave...” Zak said weakly, after a moment. He was already coming to accept that perhaps Eli’s wisdom had not been all encompassing, and after the importance that Eli had had in his life, this thought was deflating and depressing. Julia crouched in front of Zak, running her hand comfortingly through his hair.

“If Eli was as wise as you say he is, Zak, then perhaps he realised that you were the type of person who needed a sacred task in order to keep going. But the importance of your sacred task was to get you through your time in slavery, and out of it. Now it’s time to think about what *you* want to do, otherwise you are just a different kind of slave, still doing what other people tell you, rather than what you want.” Zak nodded dumbly. He reassessed his thoughts, as he tried to remember *why* climbing the mountain had been so important to him in the first place.

“And the view from the top of the mountain,” he said half-heartedly, after a moment. “I had always imagined what it would be like to look *down* on the clouds for the first time.” Julia rolled her eyes, despite the edge of an exasperated smile appearing at the edge of her lips.

“OPEN YOUR EYES, ZAK! She shouted. “LOOK!”

Suddenly, for the first time since they had started their argument, Zak stopped and looked around himself, taking in his surroundings. And what he saw left him stunned and speechless. Since she had started walking again, Julia hadn’t been leading him on a path, she had been taking him to a ledge, where the forest ended and turned into a sheer cliff face that seemed to drop as far as the eye could see. From their vantage point, they now looked down on the most incredible, breath-taking view he had ever seen. Below the cliff was

a sea of forests, valleys, and rivers, with waterfalls whose mist seemed to explode in rainbows as the sun reflected off them. The forests descended gradually into the distance, thousands of meters below, hundreds of kilometres away. The morning sun was visible below them on the horizon, slightly blocked by swirling cloud formations below them, the likes of which Zak had never seen before. For the first time, he realised, he was looking down on the clouds.

Turning his head away from the setting sun, he could see the dim and hazy silhouettes of other mountains, even bigger than this one, hundreds upon hundreds of miles away, perhaps thousands, and the more he strained his eyes, the clearer they seemed to become. He realised that he had simply never even attempted to look that far away before, his vision always fixed on the next rock that he would have to climb across to get higher up *this* mountain, never on what might exist elsewhere. To the south, he could see where the sky seemed to melt into the ground, and suddenly he realised that for the first time in his life, he could see the ocean in the distance. His mind felt ready to explode with wonder, and he was only dimly aware of Julia taking a seat next to him and putting his arm around her shoulders, seeming to melt into his side as if their bodies had always been meant to be together.

For what seemed like hours, Zak sat back against the tree, looking down on the route that he had taken over the last year to arrive where he had. Turning his head, he could also see the view *up* the mountain, a view which he now realised was no less beautiful.

Of everything he now saw, the most striking sight before him was the sight of how blind he had been since the start. In the face of all of this, he realised that it was impossible for him to hold onto his view where his one tiny mountain was the whole of reality. In his determination to reach the top of the mountain, without even knowing why, he had ignored the incredible things that were far away, and the even more incredible things that were just in front of him. And now he was at risk of making the same mistake again, because in front of him, was the most beautiful and wonderful girl who he had ever imagined being with. With this thought in his head, he turned to Julia. And before he even knew what was happening, her mouth was caressing his, and then she was kissing him, passionately. In that moment, he knew that the only thing that was truly important, was the intense feeling welling up inside him, the rawness and purity of her lips against his, of his heart that seemed to want to jump out of his chest with joy. In that moment, he knew that he had truly found his destination. There were other mountains, and other journeys. But there was only one Julia. Wherever she was, was where he was meant to end up.

By Nyan Storey