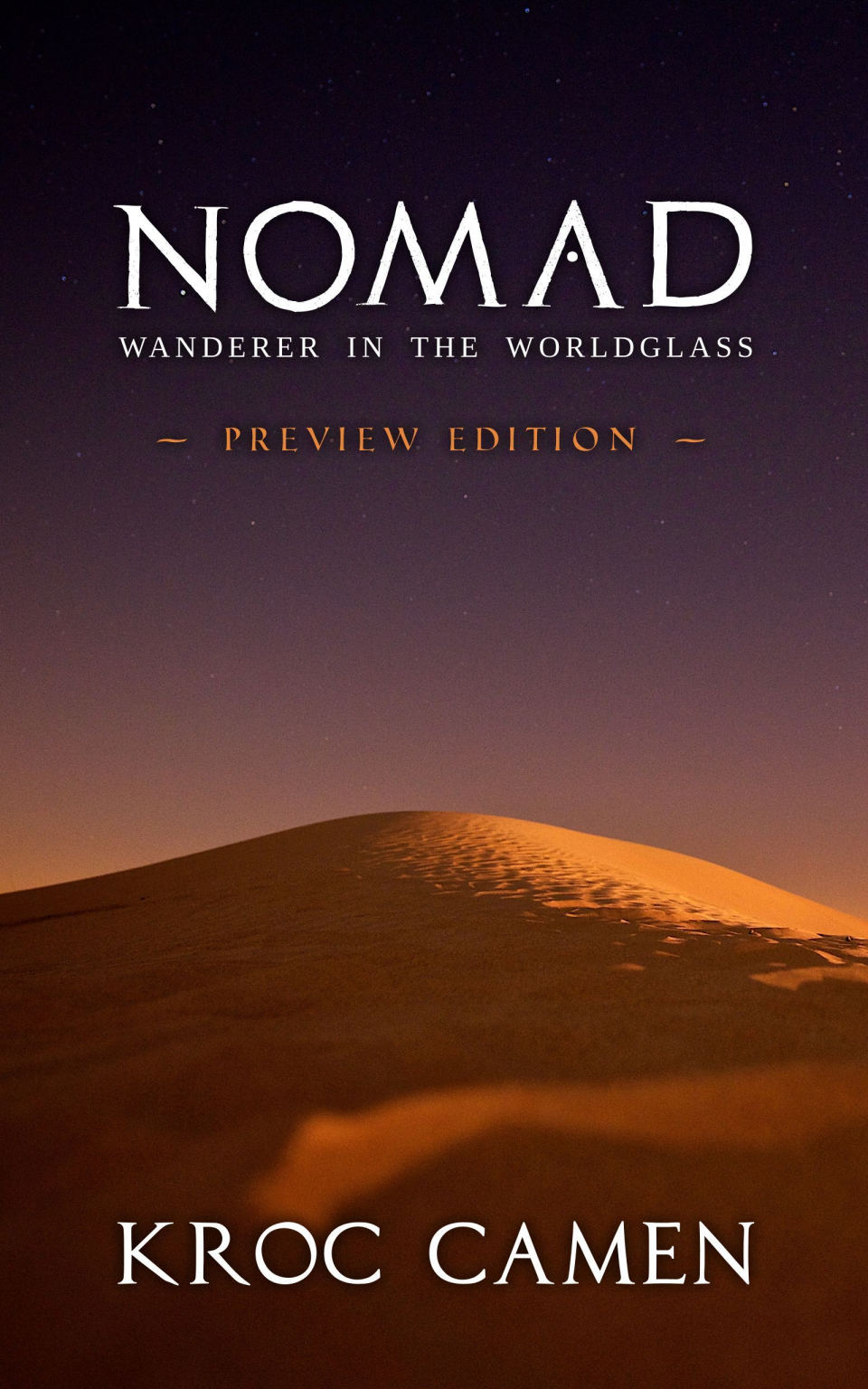


NOMAD

WANDERER IN THE WORLDGLASS

~ PREVIEW EDITION ~



KROC CAMEN

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WANDERER IN THE WORLDGLASS

— P R E V I E W E D I T I O N —

2026-06-28

KROC CAMEN

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Cogito, ergo sum.

*For my wife, who demanded
I write more and read to her.*

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~

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i.

Imagine an hourglass, except rather than measuring hours, it counts out aeons. Its circumference is 25'000 miles. The glass walls are 60 miles thick. The sand within forms a desert almost 8'000 miles wide edge to edge.

The peoples within know not where they came from, or why, but all know where their end lies; the sinkhole in the centre of their world, 200 miles wide and forever growing as the 600 mile sandfall that encircles it erodes away the mountain-high perimeter. Even a hundred miles away, dunes collapse seemingly for no reason as the sand shifts a thousand miles undersand. Some believe that it simply empties out in to space to become new stars. Others believe that it pours down over an entire other world like theirs. There is no way to know for sure, even if anybody could survive the sinkhole, there would be no conceivable way to return to tell the tale.

ii.

The whole herd clan are gathered to see you off. The wise-woman of the clan places a wreath of cacti flowers around your neck and ritually kisses you on the cheeks and forehead. The riders steady the camel beside you; even though it is loaded down with more provisions than you have ever seen a camel carry, the beast shifts nervously, feeling the tension in the air. It has been painted with warding symbols for protection and dressed with charms and the people all touch it one last time for good luck.

The wise-woman places her hands on your shoulders and addresses you calmly and clearly, “this camel has been trained from birth for one task only, she will head, without any need for guidance, toward the centre of the worldglass, to Journey’s End, where all life drains away. She will refuse to backtrack or deviate too far, even if you beat her. The provisions you have will not be enough, she who carries you will return to the sands she came from and you will have to go the final leg alone. Spirits willing, you will be found by others before you

too return to the sand.

“You must tell no other soul whomever where you came from. Nobody has ever returned from leaving but if you were to seek us out again, you would immediately be put to death. Our clan founder, the Wayfarer, first and greatest of the wise-women, warned us that for every wicked emotion there is a clan devoted to it, and they seek to find us so that they may take all that we have for themselves. There is greed and avarice out there, and selfishness, above all. Be on the watch at all times for where your clankind here welcomed you with open arms, out there you will be greeted with one arm open and one held behind the back, grasping a knife.

Though we wise-woman may never leave the clan, the Wayfarer longed to see Journey’s End with her own eyes once more and foretold that the spirits would call out to some among us to draw them to Journey’s End, that they would grow restless and bring disharmony unless they went to their calling, even if only death awaited them.

“Now go, and do not look back, for you have been called and our love is the lightest load you will carry, may you take it with you all the way to Journey’s End.”

I.

At the crack of dawn we were whipped awake by the slave drivers and formed into two lines side-by-side. A caravan of extra guards and supplies had arrived during the night and they were unpacking an incredible amount of equipment consisting mostly of wooden poles and hundreds of long leather straps. At first I was worried they were going to hang us all at the same time but there was murmurings that we were being taken to a slave market to be sold.

Our hands were bound together using leather bracers and every third pair of men had a wooden pole placed across their backs with their arms backwards around it, binding the two together, with the leather straps attached to the wrist bracers of every person, linking each pair together forward and back into a massive train of people which would pull the supply wagons at the back. The extra trouble to bring in a small fortune's worth of leather, let alone the weight, seemed excessive when hessian rope would do but this was clearly not the driver's first rodeo and they had the process down to an

art; within an hour of dawn-break the caravan was rigged and ready to go. Being late to market meant money lost and cheap hessian rope probably broke too easy and lead to delays. There was little risk of escape anyway, two camel riders lead the front to set the pace and the remaining guards followed on camels spaced along either side of the train. If anybody even tried to make a run for it, they wouldn't get far.

We set off not knowing how many days we would be travelling. It was practically a death-march, we stopped for nothing; anybody who fainted was dragged along and those presumed dead were cut loose and stepped over. We walked from dawn to dusk. At night, the guards built a fire and we formed a circle around it, still bound and reined together into a train, now curled around the only warmth during the freezing night. Sleep was difficult with your hands bound behind your back and every part of your body aching, but I eventually passed out from exhaustion into a death-like dreamless sleep. At the crack of dawn, and of the whip, the whole process would repeat.

I kept my mind occupied and distracted myself from the heat through the day by reciting the 500 fables in my head to make sure I didn't forget any. I remembered the confusion I experienced the first time I saw clay writing and I blessed the wise women of my clan for preserving the 500 fables for generations which I needed more than ever now. We had string numbers where the types of knots and spacing recorded numbers in strings, for managing the clan's food supplies, but no writing; everything was passed on orally. Every child in the clan was expected to memorise the 500 fables—I'm not

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sure if there were exactly 500, I had never counted them out, but there were hundreds of stories that every child heard, first as bed time stories and tales told by elders around the campfire, and then drilled into us at school. The girls with good memories and recital skills were then tasked with learning the greater oral histories and the best of those who wanted to become the next wise-woman had to pass a week long cross-examination of knowledge followed by a recital of the entire oral histories, fables and all, in front of the whole clan without getting a single word wrong.

I was only 7 or 8 years old the last time anybody had to do the test, I didn't understand the significance of it at the time, I was just glad I got time off school to spend all week watching this game where the wise-woman asked the lady questions about the fables and I had fun trying to guess the answer to as many as I could. Then she recited everything; the history bits were boring and I didn't understand it all, but I was utterly enthralled by the recital of the complete fables. She finished the last fable and everybody clapped and then there was a big party. Later I learned that apparently she was the youngest person to have ever passed the test at just 25. Passing this test granted a woman the title of Keeper and they worked directly with the wise-woman as more able-bodied assistants until the wise-woman's memory began to fail and a new one was selected which was every 30 years or so. My mind wandered back to the clan... would there be a new wise-woman by now, who was selected, was it that lady who I saw pass the test back then? It was the first time I had thought about my previous life in terms of the present, but I had to put those thoughts

away; right now I was a prisoner being dragged to sun-knows-where to do moon-knows-what, probably involving back-breaking labour until I was no longer useful and finally put out of my misery.

For three days we trekked through empty sands. Those who hadn't died were looking pretty rough, I was holding up much better than expected, I had the fables and my deep-trek training in the months leading up to my departure from the clan had prepared me for surviving on minimal provisions for days on end. We were given water only twice a day, once at dawn before we set out, and again at midday—none in the evening—but before the sun set on the third day we arrived at a watering hole and there for the first time we were unbound and allowed to drink our fill and wash the dried sweat and faeces from our bodies. As I sat and watched the sun go down, I wondered why the slave drivers had afforded us this one small dignity... it must be because we would arrive at market tomorrow and they wanted us to be in our 'best' condition for sale. I shared this idle musing with my yoke-mate and soon the whole convoy was buzzing with anticipation—anything was better than this but I reserved my relief for the day I was once again free.

We were up early and on the move immediately, the pace was quick but we were all mentally prepared, it couldn't be more than half a day at this pace. Four hours later, the sands inclined into a vast, wide hill. A well worn path lay diagonally across the slope to minimise the incline and then curved through a small V-shape cut into the hill that meant that we wouldn't have to scale the entire hill face-on. As we rounded

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the bend and saw the other side of the hill for the first time I realised we had crossed the lip of a giant crater-like depression and at the centre of the crater lay our destination:

The city was called “Pebble Rock” for at distance it looked like a small pebble set into the sand and the mass of people arriving were as ants; little black dots in close ranks and tight lines mindlessly following one another, streaming from every corner of the crater and converging under the pebble.

Small openings pock-holed the surface of the pebble everywhere, the windows and balconies of thousands of homes. The people of Pebble Rock valued property above everything and above everything, sitting atop the rock, was the only external building, a city atop the city, a palace, the exclusive property of the wealthiest, one above all and all beneath them. Naturally, property extended to people too; slavery was the grease that kept Pebble Rock running. An entire class of people that never had to sweat lived upon backs of those who did the sweating for them.

Our convoy merged with others and came to a standstill. There was much jostling, shouting and camel snorts as rival slaver gangs and merchants argued over who was in front of who. The next few hours of shuffling forward under the scorching midday sun was more torturous than the walking. I could see the shade under the pebble (the rock tapered in at the bottom giving it its pebble appearance from a distance) but forward progress was but a few steps at a time. As we edged nearer, and the pebble towered over us, the rabble grew into a cacophony of shouts, animal noises from livestock and the jangle of reins everywhere. Finally under the shade I could

begin to discern order amongst the chaos: porters in coloured tunics were separating out merchant caravans and goods from slaves, arguing with caravan drivers over the semantics of this-or-that trade good and which entryway to go to and generally screaming at anybody and their camel who decided to stand in the wrong place and block the way.

As the crowds pressed in all around us, guards went down the line unhooking the reins followed by a porter who was throwing red cloth collars over each person's head—a way of identifying which batch of slaves came from which slave merchant. The crowd of slaves behind me had continued to shuffle forward despite the slow movement up front and I soon found myself trapped in a mass of bodies, heads and differently coloured collars every-which-way I looked. I had lost sight of the guards and most of the other captives I had travelled with as the mass of bodies pushed forward in to a frightening cram. There was sudden movement up front and the whole mass of us was swept along uncontrollably. Porters with long whips appeared out of nowhere and were directing the rush of slaves ahead and before I knew it I had been sucked into the darkness inside Pebble Rock.

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I had expected pitch-black darkness and solid rock scraping my head but as my eyes adjusted to the darkness and I looked up a saw a high ceiling, light rays from slits cut into the rock slicing across the room through smoke and... people! balconies upon balconies, several floors of people above us, some looking down, some engaged in conversations, or just

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going about their business as if nothing was happening below. The noise within was worse than outside, the shouting, clucking, bleating and clanging echoing back upon itself into a thunderous roar coming from everywhere at once.

The rush of bodies petered out and I began to see what was going on. We may have gone through the slave entrance but we were as cattle to them: four men were sitting on very high stools between wicker fences dividing the way forward into five 'gates'. The men held very long sticks and with the assistance of bouncers in the pen the men sorted through us, diverting people down different pathways based on some criteria or other. Bodies jostled and bounced around as the long sticks prodded and divided us. A stick came down suddenly on my left side and I was sent off through one of the gates into a long switchback of wicker fences designed to act as a buffer for slaves coming in quickly with the queue ahead moving slowly.

As I stood in queue for whatever came next I looked around and there were not many people in my gate but the other gates were being flooded with all kinds. I tried to make sense of what they were dividing us up for, the weak, old or sick-looking; the strong and able-bodied men; and my group which was maybe the cleanest, healthiest looking. Was I going to be put to the worst kind of hard labour because I was the healthiest looking one here? Peering around my queue mates as I shuffled forward I could see more porters, this time with desks stationed along the fence, each had an assistant that was picking coloured beads from a box and threading them onto a string.

I was straining my neck and ears trying to listen in to what was being said up front when suddenly a porter barked in my ear “Name?”, I hadn’t noticed the desk to my left and I stared in shock at the porter, my ears ringing. His assistant had the string prepared with a bead already threaded. “Americ?” he barked again. This was the word people used for language and it suddenly clicked, he was asking if I understood his language. “Oh, yes” I said. “Good, name?” he said quickly without any hesitation whilst his assistant threaded another bead on the string. He obviously did this every day and no longer had any patience for anybody so I tried to be as clear and direct with my answers as possible, lest I end up shovelling shit for the rest of my days.

The porter had on his desk a clay tablet in a frame and a metal stylus in his hand and he was putting my answers into the clay; the writing was a series of closely spaced vertical lines, some angled or crossing and wasn’t like writing I had seen elsewhere, a lot more words could fit onto a tablet with this narrow writing and it took fewer taps, he was very efficient and could tap out words almost as fast they could be spoken. “Can you read and write?” came the next question. “No”, I had said instinctively before realising that my answer could be the difference between back-breaking hard labour and a job with a chair like this guy. The assistant already had what must be the “uneducated” bead prepared before I quickly blurted out “I can do numbers! I know string-numbers, and I can read clay numbers!”. They used different clay numbers here, but they would be easy enough to learn compared to writing which was as far as I could tell, completely random.

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When I first encountered clay numbers it was at a market and a lady had a display of her fruit and vegetables and beneath each tray was a clay plaque decorated with a pattern of lines. She had spaced them out across her stall assumedly to stand out rather than have them all together. I thought these were maybe ornaments or decorations for the home so I picked one up and turned it about. For an artistic design it was pretty crude and asymmetric but then it all fell into place—these were warding symbols to drive off the flies and rot! I wanted to know more so I asked the lady “What are these symbols for?” and she looked at me as if I had just called her mother the offspring of camels. “The price” she replied as if she couldn’t believe her ears. “No, I don’t want to know the price, I want to know what these warding symbols are used for” I explained. “No, the symbols are the price... were you abandoned in the desert as a baby?” she bit back, “Look, here, it says three-eighths!” pointing a finger at the lines. I stared at the lines but I couldn’t make sense of them; maybe the lines counted the numbers but that would mean there would be three lines and then eight lines, but there weren’t even enough lines for that and they were all different angles and sizes. I think it finally dawned on her that this was new to me and it seemed to amuse her enough that she softened a bit. “Have you never seen writing before? My, you really were raised by wolves! Here, this says ‘3’”, pointing to the first set of lines, “this is the solidus” (pointing to a longer line between the two groups of lines), “and this is ‘8’”. It appeared that they didn’t use string numbers but made drawings in clay but I couldn’t discern the connection between the lines and the numbers. I

looked around at the other plaques to see what other symbols were used. There was a variety of them, so there must be at least 10 or 100 different symbols and each one meant a specific number somehow. "Could I buy this from you?" I asked her. "You mean the plaque?" she asked dumbfounded. I suppose from her perspective it sounded as if I wanted to buy sand off of her. "If it helps, sure" and not one to let a deal walk away she added "do you want any of the others too?" so we picked out plaques that had a variety of numbers on them and haggled out a price and she wished me luck, waved me goodbye and I went around the market looking at the plaques, asking about prices and within a few hours I had the whole number system worked out and memorised.

Raising his hand to stay his assistant's bead, the porter seemed to relax a little and leaned forward to ask "Math?". "Yes", I said, I mean I could do market numbers no problem but I wasn't sure if he was expecting geometry. "What's 57 times 36?" he said pulling numbers out of the air. "twenty hundreds, two and fifty" I replied immediately. "I have a good memory too!" I added trying to improve my chances. The porter eyed me up and down trying to discern if I was bull-shitting him. He thought for a moment and then looked over his shoulder to his assistant and said "We'll check this one further, blue". The assistant replaced the previous bead and fumbled for a blue one, threaded it and then tied the string into a loop and hung it around my neck before shoving me down the line without so much as a goodbye.

I was under the balconies now and the roof sloped down and the walls enclosed us as we approached the end of the

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fenceways, every person was now pooled together, each with their own necklace of colour-coded beads to identify them. Hot air blew against our faces from the back of the cave-like area we were in and orange light danced over the rock ceiling. Then the muffled screams began. I looked about trying to understand what was going on and there was much murmuring as everybody else was doing the same. Were they killing off the worthless ones? What barbaric insanity was this!? Word fed down the crowd, they were branding us. Up until now I had been trying to remain calm and make sense of everything, if I was going to escape I had to remember where everything was and plan carefully but now I was scared and panicking. If waiting outside in the midday sun was torture, this was terror; the screams emanating from up front weren't helping. Another batch of slaves began arriving from the gates behind asking what was going on and so the fear spread through the ranks quickly.

As much as I didn't want to move forward the thinning crowd ahead was the only direction I could go, over their shoulders I could see several open fire pits with hot irons heating in the flames. Men wearing leather tunics to protect them from the heat were feeding the fires with fuel, others were pumping bellows, and at each fire pit sat on a stool was the iron master doing the branding. He was juggling several hot irons at a time in the fire to keep things moving which only meant fresh screams came every 10 seconds or so. There were many guards, all with metal swords in the belt and armed with a club, tasked with keeping the flow going. People were grabbed from the front of the crowd and pulled over to

the iron master and made to sit down on a stool. A rag wrapped around a stick was shoved into their mouth to bite down on and the guard held their arm in place whilst the iron master selected a red hot iron from the fire. Anybody who resisted got beaten and branded without the bit between the teeth. Those screams rang through the head like a bell. Another worker was ready with a cloth which he dunked in a bucket of water, slapped it on the fresh burn and tied a tourniquet before shoving the victim to the back of the cave past the fire pits.

The wall of flesh behind pushed me closer and closer to inevitability. My heart was pounding, my head light from my panicked breathing. I was trying over and over again to think of a way out of this, some way to take control of the situation but my mind was spinning in circles. I didn't even see the hand grab my arm and yank me with such force my feet left the floor. The rest was a blur of senses, "blue" the guard uttered to the iron master as I was thrown to the chair, my legs giving way easily. The searing heat of the fire. The smell of burning flesh in the air. "Head" came the voice of the iron master and the guard clamped his beastly hands on top of my head and under my chin. Do I not get the bit!? The iron master's hands passed over the hot irons and instead selected a long fine needle. Were they going to poke my eyes out because they didn't want anybody reading their secret numbers!? I was done with caution, I'd rather die fighting than have my eyes poked out. I tried struggling but with my arms still bound behind my back, my head in the guard's vice-like grip and my legs as weak as aspic, I was utterly power-

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less. As the iron master raised the red hot needle I grit my teeth, held my breath and scrunched my eyes shut as tightly as I possibly could, I was going to fight with everything I had left. A hand grabbed my ear and pulled, there was a sharp pain in the side of my head, some rustling, a crunching sound, and a sudden disorientating rush as I was lifted off the stool and pushed away.

I stumbled and flopped forward, my whole body shaking, my jaw having been clenched so hard it ached. I was caught by a porter in a blue tunic but before I could even stand on my own I looked back. I couldn't tell you what I was expecting to see, my mind just assumed that I'd see myself, to witness what I had just been through because I didn't see it. I didn't understand what had happened—I wasn't blind—but I did get my answer because the next person was getting the same treatment. The iron master took a short leather lace from a box at his feet and with that hand gripped the guy's ear whilst picking up the hot needle with the other hand. Ear-piercings! That was what that pain was and the strange feeling like something is stuck to the side of my head. The iron master pushed the lace through the ear-lobe with the hot needle and then wrapped the two ends together in a leather tag he had palmed all whilst putting down the hot needle and picking up some kind of pliers in the other hand, crimping a metal stud through the leather tag to seal it.

"This way please" the guy in the blue tunic said, directing me away as another blue tunic swept by to catch the next guy. My head was still spinning and I completely lost track of which directions I was being lead. Dimly lit tunnels, this way

and that, some stairs up, more tunnels, a door, a room, neck cloth and bracers removed, a chair, “Wait here for now”. I sat massaging my wrists trying to get the movement back into them. There was the door I entered through, four chairs on each side of the room, another door on the opposite wall and some kind of oil lamp sculpted into the bare rock wall providing the only light. I had hardly finished looking around the room when the door I think I came through opened and several people entered the small room; a blue tunic, a guard and three other people like me, two women and one guy. The blue tunic was explaining “you just need to wait here and you’ll go through some basic tests soon” as the guard was undoing the bracers. The three other captives dropped to their seats around the room and we all stared at each other in disbelief. The man was all hair: beard, sideburns, eyebrows, the lot. The women had their hair tied back highlighting their pale-faces and one was holding her hand over the ear tag unsure if what just transpired was real.

The guy spoke first. “I think we just narrowly escaped a nasty fate there!” he said trying to force a bit of joviality. “We’re not out of the fire yet” I added, trying to temper expectations. I had no idea what came next, this was the first moment I’d gotten to think since being sucked into the rock. What was all this about? Why did we get ear tags instead of being branded. “I think it’s because I can read” the man announced trying to keep the conversation going, “can you read and write?” he asked in the direction of the two women. The one who was holding her ear and staring into space stammered out a “yes” as if it were expected of her. “I can’t

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do words, but I can do numbers” I butted in so that she didn’t have to explain herself any further. He continued unabated, “I reckon we’re going to be sold to some merchant or other and do accounts or scribing—it sure beats breaking rocks!”. The shocked lady was opening and closing her mouth like a sand lizard whilst the other woman held her hand and comforted her; the thought of having to break rocks may have broke her mind. “Rogert, by the way” he introduced himself. “Oh, Sarah” said the calm lady and she nudged the shocked lady to produce another word from her, “Esmae”. Both women looked to be in their 30s, Sarah was younger and hardier whilst Esmae looked older but with hands that had probably never held anything more strenuous than a stylus.

I kicked my feet out, leant back on my chair and stared at the ceiling trying to figure things out whilst the ‘I got it all worked out guy’ regaled the women with his life story. After almost an hour of having to listen to tales of adventure and fisticuffs of questionable veracity, the opposite door opened and in stepped a tall, older woman with grey-streaked hair done up in a bun but her long sleeveless dress was of a striking colour—depending on how you looked at it, it could be blue or green, some called it “teal” or “cyan” but its proper name was turquoise and it was rare and expensive—to have an entire dress made of this single colour said a lot more than all the colours and embroidery and metal accoutrements a merchant could pile on his person. On her upper arm was an unusual silver armlet that was kind of maze-like. She was carrying a clay tablet in a frame much like the questions people earlier. “Oh, four people today, that’s nice!” she said as

if to nobody, and then “this way!” in a sing-song voice as she left the room before we had even stood up.

We filed out of the door, the talkative guy whispering “I’ll tell you later” to the women. The next room was larger with the walls cut flat and many desks and stools. 4 down the left wall, 4 down the right, and then at the end of the room against the right wall the sing-song lady already sat at her desk. In the left corner, on a chair, sat a guard who wasn’t expecting much trouble from us. We all chose desks and sat down on the stools. Each desk had a lamp, a wax tablet and a metal stylus. The sing-song lady began at once, “I am Juliana Principa of The City Skills and Labour Department, my job is to ensure the city has all the necessary people and skills available to function. There will be a series of tests to determine where you fit in but for now just write down an informal introduction, if you can’t write words please just write the numbers that you know” and with that she was eyes down looking at her tablet as if we had vanished from before her.

What in the worldglass was wrong with this crazy woman!? Had she no idea of the trauma we’d just been through—kidnapped, beaten, marched through the desert for days on end and treated like cattle—we were still in the rags and loincloths we’d started out in! I had half a mind to go over there and shake some sense into her where she sat but then the guard would have to get off his chair. I turned to the others to see if they were showing the same exasperation but they were already heads-down etching away at their tablets. I can’t be left behind here I thought to myself, these people can already write and I can’t and it’s going to be much easier to escape

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chained to a desk than it is chained to rock. Even though I could read clay numbers I hadn't ever actually done any writing. It looked simple enough, just press the stylus into the clay but the wax was hard and you couldn't just press straight down into it so I had to scratch away like trying to etch a stone. It was messy and looked like the aftermath of a chicken fight.

There was a tut from the calm lady and she picked up her tablet and waved it over the flame of her desk lamp a few times and then returned the tablet to the desk before using her thumb to press flat the wax. She had made a mistake and was rubbing it out! I felt stupid for not realising this myself and after warming my wax tablet and covering my tracks I etched out all the unique number symbols plus a few words I had learnt from sight due to how common they were, such as "IN", "OUT" and "NO CREDIT" even though I didn't know how the individual lines were chosen to make one word into another. I had some space left at the bottom and, worried about not knowing enough to fill the tablet, I added the warding symbols I knew; I needed all the luck I could scrape together right now.

When I was done Esmae had already finished and Rogert was spinning the stylus across his fingers whilst Sarah was holding up her tablet and examining her work carefully. As soon as her tablet touched the desk our overseer looked up from her work reading a handful of tablets whilst tapping out another one, "Excellent!". She strode between the desks collecting up our tablets and eyeing them over, "All very good work, now let's have some refreshments shall we?" she

announced as she returned to her side of the room, opened the door beside her desk and stuck her head through just to warble “Cleoooo dear, refreshments if you could!” before returning to her seat, setting down our wax tablets and getting a fresh clay tablet from the shelf that ran under each desk for such things. Not a second was wasted with this woman, on anything.

Not a minute later a youthful woman walked in, her hair was short and tussled, and she was wearing a long white robe with short sleeves and turquoise trim although the metal armlet on her upper arm was a simple band, not elaborate like Principa’s. Cleo was carrying an ornate pitcher and a stack of... glass? She set the pitcher and strange tower of glass down on her mistress’s desk and plucked a piece from the top, placed it next to the pitcher and then poured water from the pitcher into the glass. I could not believe my eyes what I was seeing: pure, completely see-through, polished-to-perfection glass, crafted into a mere cup. I had never seen such a thing, I couldn’t even begin to estimate its worth, and there were five of them here! And the water! As pure as the glass. When the water stilled, it’s as if it simply disappeared! I turned to the others to see if this was normal where they’d come from. Rogert was sucking air through his teeth. Sarah had merely raised her eyebrows and Esmae was gawping, wide-eyed and transfixed, although this was normal for her thus far.

Once the assistant had poured water for her mistress she picked up the glasses and dispensed them one by one to us before returning to pour out water. As I waited I turned the glass around in my hand mesmerised by the play of light,

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bending and shifting around. How was such a thing even possible? I was familiar with glass, we used glass knives in my clan but that glass was a muddy black-brown colour and whilst it was sharp it was brittle and couldn't be sharpened many times before you needed a new blade. We had almost no metal because we could only get metal from scraps of iron ore found on loose surface rocks and forging iron required a strong furnace and that required a lot of firewood and there were not many trees around and we mostly used brush wood and tumbleweed, although all of our tent-pegs were metal because nothing else was as strong and reliable. Digging for metal was a new concept to me when I left the clan, if you had enough metal to start with you could make a tool that was a cross between a hammer and a knife—a pick they called it—and you could force your way into a rock with this and pick the ore out from inside. Everywhere I had been metal was used to barter so there was lots of it about which meant that there had to be well-fed furnaces which meant that higher quality glass could be made, which was a milky colour like crystal, and this could be polished into beads and jewellery. But glass like this cup? There was only one place I had ever seen this type of glass before.

~

I was twelve. On your thirteenth birthday (to reflect the thirteen moons of the year) you had a coming of age ceremony and were considered an adult and had to provide for the clan whichever way you were able. Every 10 years an expedition of those who had since come of age was arranged to go

see the edge of the worldglass. It was a five day trek there and those going would be expected to catch their own food. My birthday would have been during the trip so my mother said I had to wait until next time but I was burning with the need to see the edge of the worldglass that I had heard of in the fables and when I asked anybody who would talk to me questions about everything: why was the sky blue? Where did the sand come from? Where was it going? When my mother said I couldn't go I asked my father. When he said no I begged, pleaded with them, to go—can't my coming of age ceremony be delayed until I got back? Again, no. Preparations were already under way and you couldn't delay your coming of age ceremony, it was the most important day in your life. I even tried cajoling: "But the whole clan won't be there until they get back anyway, surely you want everybody to be there?". Final no, that was that. So I snuck out at night and went to the wise-woman to beseech her for permission to go. She listened patiently to my pleas and asked me to wait whilst she checked the stars and consulted the bones of the ancient wise-women before her. Finally, seeing that the winds were good, she agreed and told me to sneak back into bed and not to tell my parents, she would handle everything. I'll never forget the wink she gave me when I slipped back into the night, my heart racing from the excitement of knowing I was going. I didn't sleep.

Sure enough, days later, the expedition was packed and, waving to one and all, we set off. It was a long journey and it was tough—I was the youngest one there and I was always trying to prove I was just as good even if I fell short. As the

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days passed the sky darkened ahead of us, at first I hadn't noticed, but by day 3 there was a visible difference in the colour of the sky in front of us compared to behind us. By day 4 the difference was stark, like we were approaching an impossibly huge mountain or we were uncovering where the night hid during the day. On the 5th day it was a vast black wall that filled your eyes and we rode in silence, partly in awe, partly afraid of the enormity of it. Eventually the stars came out in front of us, even though it was not night. Behind us was day, but there in front of us was night. We were going up hill now and then the sand became clumpy, and then it was wet and it got wetter and soon the camels got bogged down. "We're here", the expedition leader said. He was the most experienced shepherd in our clan who could spend months away at a time grazing the goats.

We put on mud shoes to stop us getting stuck and started for the edge. Ahead of us was an embankment, the top of the wet sand hill we had been trekking up for the last hour, no horizon beyond, just the darkest night sky full of the brightest stars that you ever saw. It looked as if you could just fall off the edge of the world. "Is it solid?" I asked the expedition leader. "Go, see for yourself" he said and smiled at me. "I'll get there first!" yelled one guy and we were all off, running as best as we could in the wet sticky sand up the embankment. We pushed and shoved each other and we got soaked and caked in sand all over and some stopped to throw sand balls at each other and we laughed and screamed and I fought and tugged and climbed until every muscle in my body hurt and my heart felt like it was going to explode. On my hands and

knees I crawled upwards, dragging myself one hand in front of another until suddenly my hand hit the stars. I couldn't believe it, I stared at my hand, catching my breath, and watched as water clear as the glass ran down my arm. Condensation, thousands and thousands of miles of it. The glass was cool, smooth and absolutely solid as a rock but utterly flat and completely see-through as if it were not there. I laughed at the absurdity of it as I began pulling myself up. I pressed myself against the glass, arms out and let the night sky swallow me whole. The laughing and screaming behind me fell silent, I could feel the others' eyes fixed on me in awe. "It's solid!" one whispered, and they all stopped their infighting and rushed to reach the top.

It was all true; the fables, the Wayfarer; all of it. It was real, and I had touched it with my own hands. At that moment I knew in my heart that Journey's End was real too and my purpose in life was to go there, that nothing would stop me or turn me away from it. Before now, I didn't know what I wanted to do when I became an adult, I had tried just about everything and I was not the best at any of it. Now I knew with certainty what I needed to do. Anything I could learn from the Keepers of the oral histories that could clue me in. Whatever prepared me for the journey: hunting, butchering, navigating, surviving in the desert. That day I turned thirteen, and my parents had been right—it was the most important day of my life.

~

"Water?" came the voice of Cleo and snapped me out of my

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daydream. “Oh, yes please, thank you” I stammered putting the glass cup down. She poured the water out and picking up the glass I turned it about tilting the water one way and another. It was like I was holding the worldglass in my hand and I imagined a worldglass somewhere out there that was filled with water instead of sand. What would it be like to live there? How would anything survive? It would certainly make for an interesting story. “Phew, that really hits the spot, eh?” came the voice of Rogert. I had been daydreaming again. Not wanting to come across as disrespectful I took a swig of the water and was almost knocked off my stool by the impact. The taste! How could water have such distinct flavour? Surely it was just the lack of food I’d had in days. I peered into the glass to double check it was actually water I was drinking.

“A man could retire and live very comfortably on one of these!” came Rogert again. Turning the glass about in my hand I murmured “It’s as if it were cut from the worldglass itself”, half to myself. “Nonsense!” he snorted, “that’s an old wives’ tale, everyone knows the world’s a bowl that rests on the back of a tortoise!”. I didn’t even think before I reacted— “That’s not true, I’ve been to the edge of the worldglass and touched it with my own hands!”. Idiot! I wasn’t supposed to mention that but it just came out of nowhere. He wasn’t prepared to back down, “Liar! Nobody’s ever returned that tried to go to the edge of the world, it’s at least a hundred days travel away!”. I chose to hold my tongue, better to be thought a liar than endanger my clan. How could he be so confident that we were on the back of a tortoise when he hadn’t seen it. I had stuck my nose against the glass and looked down and

there was no tortoise there.

“My my, we are feeling refreshed now aren’t we?” chimed in Principa. We finished our water and thanked Cleo as she collected up the glasses and the water pitcher and left the room. We were then questioned on numbers and math, it was like school all over again (except the four day march and starvation). You could tell the two women were educated but the guy was not as sharp as his bragging would suggest. He struck me as someone who picked things up as he went along and filled in the gaps with bravado, however his knowledge of metal weights and how to convert between them when bartering was excellent. He could tell you exactly how much tin you needed if you wanted change from two fifths silver and one of copper. My clan had almost no metal and certainly no concept of “buying” or “selling”, everything we had was for the survival of the whole clan and it was carefully managed so that nobody starved and nothing was wasted. Learning to barter was a rude awakening for me! It had not even entered my mind that a merchant could be dishonest, in fact dishonesty seemed to be the entire purpose of trading. After the numbers came an increasingly incomprehensible series of tests where we were taken individually to other rooms and poked, measured, and even asked to count the number of lines we could see on a tablet held at a distance whilst covering one eye and then the other.

At long last the mad woman was satisfied, “You’ve all done splendidly well and must be tired. You’ll be shown to your quarters where you can get some rest and someone will be along in the morning to get you” and just like that she

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about-faced and was off. “What was that all about?” asked Rogert. “I thought I knew and then I didn’t” said I. “Did she say quarters?” asked Sarah. A guard and a green tunic entered the room and was somewhat taken aback for an instant that we had been left unattended but recomposed himself and directed us out the tiny chair room we had started in many hours ago and along a number of twisty passages until we arrived at a slightly more elaborate door with two guards either side and through that, a straight passageway with a set of doorways (though no doors) left and right, beside each being a series of shelves carved into the rock and each room’s shelves had at least an oil lamp and a bucket that I could make out but when we had gone beyond the guarded door we were first hit by the smell of food! The green tunic showed us the shelves and explained, “Take a room each, there’s a bucket of water in there to wash yourselves down and put your old clothes and the dirty water here”, patting one shelf, “and change into your new robes here”, tapping another shelf that had some folded cloth on it. “There’s drinking water in each room and some food, and when you’re done with the night bucket, please put it back here”, he added, using his foot to poke the bucket that sat on the floor in the lowest cubbyhole cut into the wall. We all bade our guide goodbye and good-night enthusiastically, eager to eat and sleep. Rogert was practically giddy with excitement, “Do you smell that? I haven’t eaten in a week! We sure lucked out here!”. He was right, we’d all been through a lot and this outcome was honestly better than we could have expected even if we were still slaves.

I had already been standing nearest the first room on the left so I took that, Rogert took the room opposite me and the two women who always stuck together took the next two rooms opposite each other down the hallway. I picked up my lamp and took a look in my room. It was a small cube cut out of the rock. To the left was a cot bed: strips of fabric weaved over and under each other and pulled tight around a cheap wooden frame. The only floorspace paralleled the doorway and at the other end of the room, next to the cot, the rock had been cut only down to waist-height rather than all the way to the floor and this acted as a table of sorts. In front of this was the bucket of water, and on the table was a water pitcher and cup, clay, but they were glazed however so not the lowest quality, and lastly a glazed bowl of stew and it smelt simply incredible. My stomach nearly leapt out of my body with the violent gurgle it made in anticipation. This was not the thin watered down gruel I had last eaten five days ago, this had vegetable chunks and actual strands of meat in it! Loud slurping noises were already coming from the other rooms and Rogert was positively vociferous with his praise for the stew. For me, just savouring the smell was not a moment to be skipped. The smell hung thick in the air like the fat-rich smoke of a hog roast around a camp fire. I sipped carefully and the warmth flushed all through me and the flavour burst forth like a fire, roaring like a lion. It was so good to finally appreciate food again rather than eating out of necessity to survive. I tried the water to compare. It was clear but it didn't taste nearly as good as the stuff from before. Maybe it was the stew that had altered my taste, or that I hadn't eaten for five

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days, or maybe it was the glass cup? Either way it was unlikely I would ever experience that again.

I sat down on the edge of the cot and began to drink deeply from the stew whilst I thought about the events of today. Before all the Principa stuff my plan had been to sneak out at night, steal a camel and make for the water hole half a day away that I'd stopped at on the way here but this plan was full of flaws. I could hardly be the first slave to think of escaping in the dead of night, this place was way too organised to fall for that. There was two guards outside our quarters and a few more through the tunnels and I wasn't even sure how I got to... wherever we are now... I just remember there being stairs at one point. It simply made more sense to bide my time, play along, learn the layout of the place, movement of the guards, where the water and camels were stored etc. and not give any inclination to my captors that I was thinking of escape. So long as I had escaped hard labour, haste was not the solution yet. If I got caught, death would be the good outcome, the alternative wasn't worth imagining.

I put the bowl down thoroughly revived and went to my doorway to fetch the clothes they had provided. It was a pair of leather sandals and belt, and a set of undergarments and robe: white but of a common grade of cloth so slightly yellow in colour though thankfully not the terrible coarse itchy hemp stuff. A cloth had been provided with the bucket and I washed myself down, changed into the undergarments and put the bucket of dirty water and unspeakable rags I had been wearing on the shelf. Rogert was snoring loudly. Sarah and Esmae were whispering to each other, I think they were both

in one room finally taking the opportunity to have a proper conversation without having to constantly deflect the questions of the man who couldn't even be quiet whilst sleeping.

What I couldn't figure out was where the slave drivers who brought us here were amongst all this? I had been expecting we'd turn up at an open-air market and we'd all stand around whilst buyers prodded us and inspected our teeth like camels and there'd be heated exchanges of words and then I'd be carted off someplace else. This place... this place was more like a cattle market. Was the price agreed beforehand or some kind of estimate made before we went in? Why not just line us all up and let the buyers choose? Surely the price couldn't be set before the 'quality of the goods' was established otherwise the slave drivers could pull one over the buyers. Is that what the questions were for? And then I saw it, I had been staring right at it—the ceiling! This was no open-air market where people just turned up and competed with each other; the city owns and controls the market! The city decides what's good quality and what's not, the city sets the prices and the city runs the auctions! We got the ear tags because we're the quality merchandise and maybe buyers don't want it branded, less risk of gangrene, who knows. The buyers come here because they know everything is measured by the same scales no matter where the goods came from, and the the sellers come because even if they're not getting the best possible deal they at least know none of their competitors are getting a better one. On top of that, not only does the city get to skim a bit off the top of everything, it also got first pick of the bunch

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for itself. It was all so insidiously clever, nobody could cheat and the city always got its cut.

I thought back to the meeting with Principa. Where did she fit into this scheme? The questioning was obviously for grading our abilities, I could do numbers but not write whereas the others could. That's what the wax tablets were for, to make sure nobody was lying! Only once it'd been established we weren't lying did they bring out the water. But why the glass cups? Surely not everyone here drank from glass cups. Just one of these was more than all the wealth I had seen up until now. When I thought about it, it made no sense to allow a slave—the lowest of the low—to sample from such a treasure. Why even bother? What did it prove, that the city was rich? That was already evident and what does that matter to us if we were going to be sold on? We had no say in the matter. Wait, that was it—that was what the glass cups were about! A simple merchant's trick, a bait-and-switch! The cups were there to suggest "there's more where that came from", motivate us to do well in the tests which increases our resale value. Those five could be the only glass cups in the entire city, maybe in the whole of the worldglass, and whilst she might own one of them the rest are being borrowed for effect. I had to admit I respected the audacity, to drink from a glass cup like that would be a lifetime opportunity for anyone.

And this stew—they could have given us gruel or stale bread and we'd still live until tomorrow (and even been grateful for it!) but the city was playing tricks with us again; "You're safe here. Be obedient and there's more where that

came from” it was whispering. I thanked the wise-women and blessed my clan because even though I was being taken advantage of, as a slave and with the tricks the city seemed to be playing on us, none-the-less my clan had spared me from greater horrors by teaching me many things. I doubt the branded slaves were being given stew and their own water pitcher, or even a bed for that matter. I knew all of it could be taken away from me in an instant if I displeased the city.

Hopefully tomorrow wasn’t going to be more tests, but if that wasn’t the case then did that mean I was going to be auctioned off? If I did get sold to a wealthy merchant then that would mean I’d be out of here and that would give me ample opportunity to escape. Whereas most people needed a caravan to travel between places, I knew how to survive in the wilderness and could make the journey on my own under the cover of night. The night. Was it night? I hadn’t see the sky since I’d entered Pebble Rock. Regardless my body was crying out for sleep now. I blew my lamp out, climbed into my cot, put my hands behind my head and stared at the darkness and let out a deep sigh. Not even in my wildest dreams could I have imagined this place and what had happened.

How did I even end up here?

II.

The days and nights dragged on for an eternity but seemed to have passed in an instant in hindsight. 10 days, 15 days, 20 days. I couldn't remember if the moon came after the sun or the sun came after the moon, or maybe the sun had come after the sun one day. 25 days. Everything used up and inessential had been discarded long ago. I kept my small wooden shovel just in case I came across a muddy patch where I could dig for water. Most of my water supplies were gone and I had stopped giving any to the camel. I went over the plans in my head again and again trying to not forget them as I struggled to stay cognizant through the heat and dehydration.

The planning and preparation had taken a year. It was 10 years to the day since I had returned from the edge of the worldglass. Everybody had said I was a changed person since that day. I was relentless in my pursuit of knowledge; I focused on my studies, I threw myself against the most difficult and dangerous challenges like hunting, and protecting the herds at night from wild animals. I was stubborn and

belligerent and single-minded and I pushed back against anything I thought was irrelevant or would take me away from my goal. Granted, I had to learn that all knowledge was useful even if not immediately apparent, and part of that was if I was ever to leave the clan I would have to learn to do as I was told, even if I didn't like it. But, once my parents and the clan could see that this wasn't just a phase or momentary obsession, that my mind was really set on going to Journey's End, that I was the immovable lizard on the rock, they eventually, finally, relented.

I made my official plea before the wise-woman, related everything I had done to prepare myself. She listened patiently and I waited, my heart pounding, on my hands and knees prostrate before her. She asked, coincidentally, "What will be your last words before you die?". I hadn't expected this question; I had expected her to question my sincerity, my determination, my resolve, ask me to go kill a wildcat with my bare hands or something. I couldn't even formulate a response and just spluttered incoherent noises trying to think of what to say. Was I going to be killed and this was the Wayfarer's dark secret passed down from wise-woman to wise-woman to make sure that nobody ever left the clan!?

The wise-woman spoke for me, her voice was calm and the words came easy. "When you leave, you will be dead to us. You might survive the journey, but we won't be able to know that, ever. That fate is not ours to decide. The clan cannot survive worrying about what may be and what may have been. After 28 days your funeral will be held and your parents will enter mourning. You will never be spoken of as living

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again. Your story will enter the oral histories but your name will not be remembered, just as with all those who never returned before you and the Wayfarer before them who chose to have her name buried under the shifting sands of history.”

I was choking on a mixture of emotions and tears. The full weight of what I had been pursuing had come to rest on my back and I had to fight, fight with my bare hands, for myself. Did I really want this? Was it necessary? The thought of my parents mourning my death. Not some uncertainty fate had yet to decide, but a certainty I had to choose. Like a wildcat the thoughts scratched at me. I had to wrestle them into my control. This fate was mine. The seed had been planted there at the edge of the worldglass, yes, but it was I that watered it, that nurtured it, that let it grow rather than weeding it out as my parents had tried to do for so many years. Others had spoken of wanting to join me when they saw how determined I was to go to Journey’s End, but their resolve was as a succulent and uprooted easily. Mine was a tree with deep roots and it burned with a fire and the flames could not be put out by mere wind or water. No animal could climb it and no man could chop it down. I had already made my decision that day I turned thirteen—understanding the cost of that decision and coming to terms with it was what truly made me an adult, now.

Carefully, piecing the words together one by one, I answered: “The Wayfarer called for me and I have prepared myself to answer. To go unprepared is the same as to not go at all.”

The wise-woman leaned back in her wide, round wicker

chair, it creaked, and she let out a deep sigh. "You will still have at least another year of preparations ahead of you. The provisions must be gathered and you must train harder than you have ever before. Know that you will take everything the clan has with you and the cost to us will be great. There are many decisions to make and you must say your final good-byes."

I looked up from my position in the sand. The wise-woman had her elbow on the arm-rest of her chair and her head was lent on her fist, thinking. She looked down at me and smiled. "But you may go, who am I to deny the Wayfarer, after all?"

I think I smiled back before shoving my head into the sand in obeisance and thanks and then crawled out of the tent backwards, my legs too weak to stand. I sat back on my rear outside catching my breath and turning to my side I saw my parents, holding each other close, staring at me in tense expectation. I stared at my parents trying to think of what to say but the only thing appearing in my mind over and over again was the question the wise-woman had given me, "What will be your last words before you die?"

28 days. All weight that could be shed had been shed, even the shovel, for the camel was struggling now, its steps were queasy and uneven. I knew that when the camel below me decided to sit down, that was it, it would not be getting up ever again. Whatever remained I would have to carry and whatever I could not carry that had not already been discarded would have been wasted strain on the camel. For weeks I had debated strategies with the most experienced clansmen: How to balance load versus speed, what to carry and when to ditch

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it. How much water to give to the camel, when to stop and preserve the rest for myself. Tough decisions with no certain answers.

We planned for 28 days travel, beyond that relied entirely upon survival skills and fate. Nobody knew if there was any water that far out, or an end to the dunes. Where there were rocks there was pebbles and grit and where there were pebbles and grit there was vegetation and where there was vegetation there was small animals and where there were small animals there was big animals. But between us and anything else, if it existed, was an endless desert and I had not come across so much as a pebble thus far. We knew only that there were other clans in the worldglass who could be dangerous, if trusted. Some did not wander, but built permanent homes using clay bricks and this folly had lead to much grief.

The camel plodded to a stop and stood still. All was silent. I waited, devoid of thought, knowing that the decision was hers to make. It could have been 1 minute or 10 minutes, there was no difference, but the camel decided and used the last of its strength to lower me gently rather than collapse where she stood. It was her final gesture of good will. The time had come; it was my turn to act now. I climbed off, carefully placing my feet on the hot sand. I was draped in a thin muslin sheet from head to toe to protect me from sun burn with a long, thicker hessian cloth wrapped around my head and dangling down my back but I was completely naked underneath having ditched my remaining clothing earlier to reduce weight. I had slept against the camel to keep warm during the cold nights, now the long cloth wrapped around my head was

all that I would have. There was no face opening or eye-holes in the sheet as to protect my eyes from sun glare and I had no need to steer the camel; she had been trained to follow her innate sense of where Journey's End lay. Most animals had this innate sense: The birds would all arrive, lay their eggs, raise their young, and then all would fly back toward Journey's End and be gone for the rest of the year.

I kneeled down in front of the camel and lifted my cover over my head. I smiled at her, but I had no tears I could draw upon. I rubbed her face gently and patted her, "You did good, thank you". She closed her eyes and tucked her head into her legs to shelter her face from the sun. Standing up I looked down at the poor animal and wondered if this was real or a dream. Covering myself, I slung the last two waterskins over my shoulder, turned away and began the last walk of my life. The sun, moon, and stars would be my guide now.

~

It was dark, but it was hot and dusty. I coughed and spluttered awake. My head was pounding and my whole body ached, my skin tingled all over and I was drenched in sweat. Everything was bobbing up and down like I was on the back of a camel and a grinding, creaking noise filled the darkness. Had I fallen asleep on the camel? If so, how was it that I was laying down and why was it hot like the day if it was dark like the night? I peered into the dark around me, light shone through cracks in the darkness and I came to realise that I was in a narrow, wooden box where every surface had been covered in pots, shelves and nets, stuffed full with indecipherable objects of all

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sorts of shapes.

I lay back again, my neck was sore, and tried to remember where I had been. I remembered the stars, the moon, the sun—cold, hot, cold, hot. Lots of walking through sand, I was on a journey through the desert? I was going somewhere. I had a camel, but I don't remember what happened to it. Did I die? There was a woman, but I hadn't seen her before. Was she the Wayfarer? And then it all started coming back to me like a rush of blood to the head: The Wayfarer! The wise-woman! Journey's End!—I was crossing the desert, my camel died, I went on foot... I passed out. I had made it across the desert, barely. I must have been rescued by someone but I had no idea who, or where I was.

There was a shunting sound of wood scraping against wood and a burst of light. I did not lift my head but I just turned my face to look, the light was blinding and I shut my eyes waiting for the pain to stop. The brightness under my eyelids went away and opening my eyes again I saw a dark figure blocking the sunlight. I blinked and raised my hand to block more light, trying to adjust my eyes to see. It was a woman, she was wearing a white headdress that covered her neck and the sides of her head with a dark-coloured headband around the forehead that went under the headdress. The headdress hung down to her shoulders overlapping the white cape or robe that hid her arms at her side. Under the cape was some kind of coloured dress but I could not make out exact colours or details in this bright light and with my hazy vision.

“Oh! You are awake, amiko!” she said in a soft, peculiar accent. She turned and closed the door behind her gently.

Panic set in. I didn't know this person, I didn't know where I was. I tried to stand up but my body could barely move. "No, no, no" she whispered gently rushing over to me, "you are weak, you must rest. I will give you water". I stared intensely into her eyes trying to figure out if she was a dream or hallucination. She lifted a waterskin to my lips and poured a little, I tried to fight it but I couldn't hold it back. I coughed and lay back down breathing heavily. The water was cool and soothing to the throat. "Do not worry, amiko, you are safe" she said soothingly.

This was... another person... not from my clan. Every person in the clan was either someone I knew, or was directly related to someone I knew. But this woman was an adult that I had never met—that hadn't simply been 'around' my whole life, from my earliest memories. This woman could not know that we even existed. This was monumental, terrifying. I couldn't tell her about my clan, where I was from, where I was going. I couldn't remember if I had even planned what to say when I first met another person from outside the clan!

I just looked up and down her trying to come up with anything to say. "Ah, sorry," she said apologetically, "I am being rude; my name is Maria. Do you have a name?". I lost my name when leaving the clan, I left it behind with my parents who had given it to me. I hadn't yet thought about how I was going to get another one. I kept my mouth shut and just shook my head. "Oh my, you must have lost your memory in the sun!" she said, gently raising a hand to her mouth. Her hands were like that of a child's, unmarked and unworn. These were not hands that had ever plucked a hen or

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butchered a goat, how did she ever survive into adulthood!? Her accent and words were strange but it seemed like she had asked if the sunstroke had made me forget things so I nodded. It was coming back to me but I still didn't know where I was.

"Pardon me, but can you... not speak?" she asked hesitantly. I can speak, if I could think of what to say, I thought, but no, I can't NOT speak if that's what you're asking, so I just shook my head again. "Oh you poor thing, you must have been through so much!" she said averting her gaze. "You must be very confused," she said turning back to me and looking me in the eyes, "we are merchants, my husband and I. We found you alone in the desert, you were almost dead. We rescued you, gave you water and bone broth."

Merchants? What is this word? Merch? Trade...?¹ Trading...? Traders! They exchanged things! That's what all this stuff must be, they exchanged one thing for another. They had saved my life, given me their precious water, nursed me for who knows how many days whilst I was delirious with sun fever—I had to give them something back! That's when I realised that I was neither naked, nor wearing the muslin sheet over my head, and my cloth was gone! I looked down at myself, I was not wearing the goat skins of my clan, but a pale off-white shirt made of some kind of woven, spun fibre. My legs were bare but I was wearing shorts made of a much thicker, dark brown grade of rough leather. They had given me clothes, too! I sat up in an instant and looked around in a

1. "Merch" = "Komercesto", "Trade" = "Komerco", which is where this leap of deduction comes from.

panic trying to see if my cloth was still here somewhere.

“Oh, the stuff you were wearing when we found you? We kept it here” she said, grabbing a bundle from behind me and placing it on my lap. It was the muslin sheet and my long cloth wrapped into a neat pile. I pushed the muslin aside and began unwrapping the long cloth, feeling down the seam with my fingers looking for it, hoping it was still here. Back and forth I ran my fingers, piling up the cloth messily and then I felt it and breathed a sigh of relief.

All we knew of outside our clan was from the fables and a few specific instructions that had been passed down by the Wayfarer from wise-woman to wise-woman to be given only to those—myself—who left the clan: There were many different clans in the worldglass and each embodied a specific spoiling of the spirit; boastfulness, conceit, covetousness, impatience, and so on. I worked with the Keepers to examine the details and they taught me about the subtleties and nuances of the fables, how the meaning of a fable could be flipped on its head if you looked at it from a different perspective. We would debate deep into the night on the minutest detail, like prizing a rock apart, their knowledge and understanding of the fables and oral histories was unending. I could suggest an idea and they would instantly know of 10 other related details in any other fables, reciting the specific passages without having to backtrack. I could only remember a fable word-for-word if I started at the beginning. It was one of my most cherished memories in the clan, being able to spend so long dissecting the fables with such skilled teachers and reliving them all over again.

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The conclusion we came to was that the people outside would probably be just like us, except that they would have no yoke on their spirit to steer them or to hold them back. Those that were weak would have a spirit that would seek out badness with a passion, a determination equal to my own. That was frightening, but they also said that most people might appear fairly normal, like us, on the surface at least. They would have their own clan, their own “personal god” the Wayfarer had called it, that they would always side with when the choice presented itself. Perceiving that ‘personal god’ was the key to understanding them, and keeping myself safe.

“What is it?”, she asked, peering down into the cloth. I carefully pinched it in my fingers trying not to lose it again and worked it free from the cloth before rolling it with my thumb into my palm closing my hand over it so that I would not lose it. Maria was confused, puzzled at what this may be. I slowly brought my closed hand up to her and I unfurled it gently so as to not accidentally flick the tiny bead, smaller than the little fingernail, somewhere amongst all this stuff where it would never be found again. The Wayfarer had left instructions to the wise-women that if one was found, it should be kept explicitly for whoever was called to Journey’s End. Because there were many clans in the worldglass, and they did not all know each other, they exchanged things of value and this thing was as rare as hen’s teeth and said to be worth a person’s life. The Wayfarer had called it “gold”. The tiny rock was a brilliant yellow colour unlike anything else and it sparkled and glistened like dewdrops in dawn light.

Maria’s eyes widened at the sight of it. Whilst she had been

focused on my hand, I had been watching her expression, and there I saw it: What I was looking for, for just an instant, a glint in the eyes—greed. That’s what all this stuff was for, why they carried a clan’s worth of materials and possessions in a wooden box everywhere they went. It all made a lot more sense now.

She raised her hand to cover the gold from her sight and made her excuses, “Oh no, I can’t accept this, that’s too generous, please. We could hardly leave you to die there...”. I pushed my hand against hers trying to urge her to take the gold. Maria closed my hand over the gold with her soft fingers. “Let us not speak of this now, you still need rest and you probably don’t even know where you are if you got lost in the desert. We went past Ba’shem yesterday and we’ll be arriving in Bel’athan tomorrow around midsun. We’ll speak again, then, yes?”. I nodded, playing along, but I knew a trap had been set: I was the prey, and now I had to slip out without getting caught. She wanted the gold, its value was worth my life, seemingly more. I didn’t know what they did with gold, or why she didn’t just take it when I offered, but whatever it was I just wanted to be out of here. I don’t know what I had imagined, making first contact with another clan—maybe another goat herd like ours however different—but it hadn’t involved being trapped in a box.

“Now rest” she said, guiding me to lay down. If they were planning to kill me, they’d do it at night, when I was sleeping. I could wait until they stop for the night and then slip out hopefully without them seeing me. I lay down and nodded at her. She wrapped my cloth up neatly and placed it by my feet;

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the gold bead was still in my hand. I watched down my nose as she left the room quietly and then I stared at the ceiling and thought deeply. Many herbs and plants seemed to be hanging from the ceiling, gently swinging back and forth with the rocking motion of the room.

When I awoke again it was cool and dark. I felt much better now, the room had stopped moving and the constant grinding noise was gone. I heard the crackling and popping of a fire outside. I sat up quickly realising that I had slept longer than I had wanted. I held my breath and listened intently. The murmuring noise of talking outside. The door was slightly ajar letting the gentle fire light in. This was my chance, I had to be careful. I remembered the gold bead and wondered if that had been a dream. I carefully checked my hand and it was still there, phew. I put one foot down carefully on the wooden floor and pushed with my toes, checking for creaks. One foot, good. I leant forward and looked down at the floor. There was space down the middle of the room to walk, but the sides of the room had been made into box compartments all along the walls; I had been sleeping on a pile of animals skins and furs. There was a waterskin on the floor below me—not mine, I must have discarded mine when it ran out. How many days had I been walking?? I carefully picked up the waterskin, it had plenty of water in it, and gently put my arm through the strap and positioned the waterskin on my back.

I looked up, there was my cloth and muslin sheet where my feet had been. I thought carefully about them. Along with the gold bead, these were the only things in the entire worldglass that I had left over from my clan. There was no going back, I

had already made that decision. I placed the gold bead in the middle of the cloth pile, they could have it. It was at least fair for saving my life and then they wouldn't need to come after me. If I took it with me I could see trouble would follow me everywhere I went. I understood now why the Wayfarer had kept gold a secret, and required me to bring it: the gold was worth a life, and crossing the desert cost you your life—I had died and been brought back from death, no name and nothing remaining from my previous life.

I placed my finger tips, splayed out, upon the floor and pressed down, seeking stability. Then my other foot. I crawled along the floor like a wildcat hunting, spreading my weight across my fingers and toes, making no sound. I reached the door, my head almost against the floor and peered outside through the gap. A camp fire. Two camels sat around it. Two persons, one their back to me, the other I recognised from the side profile. It was the woman Maria. She wasn't facing me, but she might be able to see me out the corner of her eyes. Thank the Wayfarer the box had been parked sideways to the camp fire so that I could see them through the door gap on this side! The wooden box I was in was high off the sand, probably on wheels like an ox cart. Immediately in front of the door was a set of wooden steps below me. I would drop behind the stair block and slip behind the wide side of the box that faced the night, hopefully using the wheels for cover, then I would be off into the night. I stayed motionless, barely breathing, listening carefully, looking for the right opportunity to appear.

“What about this lost soul?” the person with their back to

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me asked, a man. Must be the husband. I could hear a rhythmic scraping sound, probably whittling.

“Almost fully recovered” came the reply from the woman. She was sewing thread through some cloth held in a circular wooden frame.

“Good.” the man said, non-committally.

“I... I had a chance to speak to them.”

“Oh?” he said. The whittling stopped.

“No name, couldn’t—or wouldn’t—speak.”

“A run-away slave”. The whittling resumed.

“That’s the thing; no tattoos, no branding, no piercings or tags—nothing.”

“Some random goat-herder lost in a sandstorm.”

“Probably. But why naked with just a veil and a headscarf—and no knife, no waterskin!”

It had been a very tough decision to finally discard my knife. I knew I might need it, but I had practised methods to disarm a man in a knife fight with the huntsmen so I knew that I wasn’t entirely powerless.

“People do strange things when the sun cooks their noggin.”

The woman slapped the sewing frame on her lap in a sort of half-hearted huff and looked up, “Say, you don’t think it’s one of those uncontacted tribes, living way out on the edge of the world?”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood to attention. They knew about us! The clan was in danger! I had to get back and warn them! How??

“Nonsense.”, came the easy and concise speech of the man,

“Fairy tales. Superstition”. The woman picked up her sewing and resumed. “There’s just endless desert out there,” he continued, “and until someone carves a trade route through it, that’s all it’ll be.”

I would have breathed a sigh of relief, had I been breathing.

“There was... one other thing”, the woman said hesitatingly.

“Yes” came the reply. It wasn’t even a question.

The gold! She was going to tell him of the gold! I was desperate to flee. If I went now I would be seen immediately, and even though I could get a head-start, they could be on the camels and after me in a moment. I didn’t know what day it was any more, I would be risking everything on it being new moon and there being no moonlight with which they could follow me.

At that moment one of the camels locked eyes with me and was startled, flicking its head to the side and snorting. The woman turned to the camel, asking “What is it Hephaestus?”. “Wild dogs?” the man asked, looking up from his whittling. The camel began to unwind its legs and started clumsily trying to stand. This also startled the other camel. Both the man and the woman got up from their knees trying to grab the camels’ leads and bring them under control. This was the opportunity I had been hoping for.

I sprung forward like a pouncing cat, pushing the door open. It made a creaking noise but I didn’t even look to see if I had been spotted. I swung myself sideways over the stairs to the sand. There were two long poles reaching forward from

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the bottom of the box, for yoking the camels, and the wheels were significantly taller than I had imagined, so much so that they extended in-front of the box as far as the stairs. There was no time to go around the side. Something possessed me to push the door to, despite the noise, before crouching and running underneath the box, out the back and off into the night.

I ran as fast as I could, my knees were barely working and my heart was beating so hard it felt like it was going to burst but the sharp cold night air was reinvigorating. I only looked back over my shoulder when I could no longer keep up the pace and had to slow down. The camp fire was just a distant light and I could not make out any details, just moving shapes crossing back and forth through the light. I think I had made it out without being seen!

I swung the waterskin around to my front, took a drink and tried to find a maintainable pace just above walking speed. I looked up at the night sky—a half moon, just enough light to see by. All I had to do was follow these wheel ruts and camel footprints. Once they discovered I was gone they were hardly likely to turn their box-cart around to follow me as it would completely interrupt their planned route, and for what? They would find the gold and have what they wanted.

I looked up at the stars as I walked alone through the night, marvelling at how my ancestors had watched over me. The twists and turns of fate to have survived the crossing and escaped danger! It was a strange feeling, knowing that these were the same stars as the last time I had seen them—however many days ago that was—but I was somewhere entirely new,

completely unknown to me. There would be no more clan, just memories, and there would always be some kind of danger ahead, but I would find my own way forward now. To think I was actually on the path to Journey's End! Well, once I found out which direction it was.

Afterword

Thank you for reading this far.

My only hope is that you wish to read more.

You can read the complete manuscript by becoming a Patreon at *patreon.com/KrocCamen*.

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I would like to get this published when it's finished.
If you can somehow help with that, please reach out.

Kind regards,
Kroc Camen

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TANNER HELLAND

The book was made possible by a number technologies and people which I would like to call out:

Linux. If you have not already ditched Windows, you should.

The Psion 5mx is a “palmtop” computer from 1999. For it’s size, there is no better keyboard on a handheld device. It runs off of just 2 standard AA batteries and offers a decidedly “distraction free” writing experience, given that it predates WiFi. Chunks of this book were written on it.

Producing the ebook (.epub) and PDF files was made possible by Matt Gemmell’s excellent “pandoc-publish” project which provided the tooling and template to turn my text into well-styled digital book files: github.com/mattgemmell/pandoc-publish

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