

A MOUNTAIN, INVERTED

A mountain, inverted. There is a wiry forest of conifers around its base, from which it thrusts downwards. A little under halfway down, the trees abruptly give way to steep, pale meadows, punctuated with banks of scree. From here the mountain tapers away, growing greyer and more severe the further it descends from the surface. Banks of snow hang suspended in crevices and in the shadows of cliffs. And beyond that, further down still, the mountain tapers to a sharp white peak, dangling into the open blue void.

Of course, you are aware that it's only a reflection. The actual mountain is right in front of you, and the inverted mountain is only a paper thin image projected onto the lake below. But they don't look so very different from where you're standing.

You inhale slowly, deeply, hold the air in for a moment, then let it go. A little of the tension leaves your shoulders. It's so peaceful here, you think to yourself, as you light your lantern and enter the cave mouth.

You trace your fingertips along the warm, terracotta walls of the tunnel as you walk. The whole space around you seems to glow lovingly in the lantern light. After a few minutes, another passage forks off sharply to the right. Just as you had been told, the way is marked by a dagger drawn in chalk on the wall. The blade of the dagger points towards your destination, and the hilt back towards the surface. Well, you call it a dagger, but it's really just two intersecting lines. You continue straight ahead.

It takes longer than you had expected to reach the city—hours, at least, with a branch in the tunnel every couple of minutes. You are just beginning to get hungry when the passage abruptly opens out onto a broad flagstone road. A dagger on the opposite wall points to the right, not that it's necessary; only a few metres away is the archway marking the city limits.

With more excitement than trepidation, you cross the threshold and start walking down the main boulevard. The stone walls on either side are arrayed with vacant doorways and windows, all the way up to the dark grey ceiling high above you. Occasionally, streets lead off orthogonally to the left or right. You feel a swell of relief every time you find another dagger scrawled onto a wall. The breadth of the streets and short range of the lantern light makes them all too easy to miss.

Whatever expectations you had of the city, it far exceeds. The high vaulted ceilings, the perfectly geometric masonry, and the intricate engravings are all quite unlike anything in your village. Subtler, yet more powerful, is the sense of scale that slowly coalesces inside you. Even after at least a kilometre of following the daggers through the labyrinthine streets, there is no sign of an end to the city. You would think you were walking in circles were it not for the fact that you have been consistently heading in one direction. You try to estimate what the population of the city must have been back when it was still inhabited, but the number is beyond your comprehension.

You stop in a courtyard—modest by the standards of the city, but still twice the size of your village’s marketplace—to rest your feet and eat something. You rummage through your satchel, fingers lingering for a second on the paper envelope at the top, before reaching eagerly for a wrapped bundle of food. Once sated, you begin refuelling your lantern.

Your fingers slip. The flask of lantern oil clatters against the ground. You curse loudly, snatching the flask back, but you are too late. About two thirds of the oil is gone.

Such a stupid mistake. A familiar surge of internal anger washes through you as you refuel the lantern with exaggerated care. You momentarily entertain the idea of turning back, now that you may no longer have enough oil, but the thought of returning to the village without having done what you set out to do—because of your own carelessness, no less—is unbearable. You turn the flame down to its lowest setting to conserve your remaining oil, and continue onwards.

Misfortunes rarely visit alone, as the priestess used to tell you. Minutes later, you admit to yourself that you are lost. You haven’t seen a dagger since leaving the courtyard. You could continue forwards, hoping that the lack of daggers only means that you haven’t needed to turn off from this street, or you could retrace your steps carefully to be sure. Perhaps you missed a dagger because your lantern is dimmed.

After a moment’s deliberation, you continue straight ahead. The further you walk, the less opulent and the more functional the houses carved into the walls start to appear. Perhaps a kilometre later—it’s so hard to judge distance down here—you find yourself in what must have been the industrial district of the city. The buildings are mostly large, open warehouses; some empty, others littered with old, rusted contraptions. You still have not seen a single dagger.

You are about to turn back, when you feel a slight breeze tickle the back of your neck. You recall the second piece of guidance that the priestess gave you before you left—the first being, obviously, to follow the daggers—if you cannot follow the daggers, follow the movement of the air. The airflow leads you into a warehouse a hundred metres ahead, and within it, to a vertical shaft in the centre of the floor, with a steep, narrow staircase winding clockwise around it like the thread of a screw.

You feel the air, now stronger and more insistent than out in the street, pulling you onwards. You take two steps forwards, then stop. Surely, if this were the right way, there should be a dagger to indicate it? There isn’t. But where could the air be flowing to, other than where you’re going? This is just another way to the same place. You’ll rejoin the route marked by the daggers soon enough, you tell yourself.

With an odd sense of finality, you start descending the stairs. The stone here is rough hewn and uneven. The lantern light barely reaches three steps in front of you. There is no railing or barrier between you and the open vertical shaft immediately to your right. Thoughts of falling brush against the back of your mind like stinging nettles. You try to focus on your breathing.

Thankfully, things soon fall into a certain rhythm. Inhale, exhale. Sixteen

steps to the next landing, then a turn, then sixteen steps more. It's simple, really. So long as you don't think too hard. Every time your mind deviates—to how deep this shaft goes, or how much oil is left in the lantern, or the fact that you're going to have to climb back up this entire distance later—you sternly bring it back in line with the current flight of stairs.

You aren't sure what you had expected to find at the bottom of the shaft. As it happens, there is simply a large, rusted heap of metal. Something about it reminds you of the haystacks in the fields outside your village. You used to love hiding inside them when you were younger. The sensation comes back to you all at once: hot, dark, dense, and bristling all over with sharp stalks of straw, but safe, safe from everything.

The lantern flickers and dims, its flame about to die. You curse at yourself under your breath—in audible behind the sound of rushing air—for standing around wasting oil. Not that anger will solve anything. You extinguish the lantern, and all at once, the world ceases to be. Your soul exits your body. You are adrift, a mote of dust in an empty ocean.

No, you are not. You are still here in the darkness. You feel the rock beneath you, hard enough to be felt through your shoes. You feel the warm metal of the lantern still grasped in your left hand. And above all, you feel the wind tugging relentlessly at your hair and the hem of your robe.

You're going to be fine, you tell yourself. There's still a little oil left in the bottom of the flask. You can refuel it now, and then it's ready to be turned back on when you need it. You don't even need light to guide you, really; the wind should be enough. And it can't be much further, surely.

With unwavering concentration and monumental effort, you pour the last of your oil into the lantern, stow it in your satchel, rise, and begin to walk in the direction of the airflow. You shuffle forwards slowly, arms groping out in front of you. The ground is not quite even, and you almost trip several times. There is a sharpness to the air now that wasn't there before. It's like the tension in a cat's shoulders the moment before it pounces on a dormouse.

The wind blows through you. It wails and roars in your head without pause. You trace one hand along the cavern wall whenever it's within reach, but there is nothing for you to grasp onto. Sometimes the cavern opens out and there are no walls to touch; your only connection to anything is through the soles of your feet. Minutes, or hours, or days pass—there truly is no difference. Perhaps, somewhere on the other side of the kilometres of rock above you, the stars and moon might be drifting overhead, but their light can't reach you now.

Another step forward, and there is no ground beneath your feet. You are weightless. The ground reappears under your face and arm and hip and thigh. Pain reverberates throughout your body. Your every nerve is saturated with it. It pulses brightly with every heartbeat, and swells and recedes with every breath. For a time you are paralysed by the immediacy of it all.

Eventually, without being quite aware of what you are doing, you sit upright and pull the lantern—miraculously undamaged—from your satchel. Once your hands stop shaking, you light it, and a pool of warm light forms around you. You can just about make out the ledge you fell from a couple of metres above

you, and, just below it, a large, bone white dagger inscribed in chalk, pointing to the right.

There isn't much of a choice now, is there? You quickly find that you cannot put any weight on your left leg, so you instead drag yourself across the floor in the direction of the wind and the dagger.

Just around the corner, you find what you have been seeking. The cavern floor here is littered with red and white paper charms, each about the size of your hand, each with a small crease in its centre. Some are old and faded, while others look like they could have been laid down yesterday. They seem innocuous enough, but you know what lies sealed beneath them.

You take the envelope from your satchel and remove the three identical paper charms inside, gripping them tightly to keep them from being blown away by the wind. Now you just need to find the one crack in the ground that is uncovered.

You find it at the opposite end of the cavern—it is difficult to miss, being three or four metres in length and more than half a metre wide at its centre. It's like an open wound in the earth, consuming the air itself in a neverending backwards scream. There is a fundamental wrongness about it, like mistaking a stranger for a close family member.

You desperately want to cover it, to fill it in, to make it cease to exist, but these flimsy pieces of paper in your hand were made for something a hundredth the size. You feel humiliated. After all you've been through, you surely deserve a second chance. But what is there to be done?

You look back in the direction you came from. You remember your village, the colour of the sky, the sound of wind blowing through trees, and the delicate movement of butterflies. Then, you remember the sound of raised voices, the visceral shock of being pierced by twenty pairs of eyes at once, and above all, the ever-present hot, queasy feeling of shame.

You lean over the edge and look down into the abyss. There is something down there—some faint filament of light. It shifts and turns slowly before your eyes, forming the outline of a hand, or the branch of a tree, or a mountain, inverted.