



Trees Think in Flowers

a philosophical fable

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INTRODUCTION TO THE LEGEND

It is so hot here that your mind melts and refuses to form complicated sentences. All you want is water, and shade.

We are walking through the market. The noise batters your ears: traders shouting, goats bleating, the jangle of cheap bracelets. It smells of sweat, chilli, the exhaust of old diesel engines, and the sweetish rot of mangoes underfoot. Ordinary life. Ordinary, sun-scorched earth.

And then, suddenly, the smell disappears.

It simply stops. For a moment we go deaf. The air turns dense, cool, smelling of ozone... and of something violet. A coolness drifts from a half-open gate.

We stop.

A beautiful girl greets us with a smile. She looks at us without surprise, as though she had been expecting exactly us. She nods us inside.

— Come in.

I let you go first. And carefully, you cross the threshold before me.

The garden is deafening in its silence. After the chaos of the market, there is not a single sound here. No wind, no birds. Above us hangs a tree — enormous, ancient, its flowers a violet that simply should not exist in nature.

At a plain table sits a woman. Old. Her arms, to the elbow, are covered in wrinkles and age spots. Before her stand two cups. The steam has almost gone.

She does not say hello. She simply lifts the teapot and fills our cups to the brim. Sets one before you. Then one before me. The butter on the bread is melting, though the garden is really quite cool.



The silence presses on your eardrums. You feel awkward. So do I. We are sitting in the middle of someone else's peace. Quiet. As it should be. We are welcome — that is all.

A flower falls beside your cup. Then another, straight into the hot tea. There is a small sound — plip. You watch it. The violet petal slowly unfurls in the boiling water, colouring it from within.

Bewildered, you look from the flower to our hostess. The proper, well-mannered part of you is about to lose its mind. Logic demands politeness. Etiquette demands the standard question.

— How much do we owe you? — your voice comes out confused, and far too loud.

The words hang awkwardly in the air.

The wind stirs a branch. Another flower breaks free and falls straight into your cup. The tea shivers as it takes the flower in.

The woman looked at the flower. At your fingers, stained with violet pollen. Then her eyes moved to her granddaughter. She smiled — a little shyly — reached out, and took the flower from your fingers. Held it, thoughtfully.

— The tree is paying for you, — she said quietly. — It drops its beauty so that you won't forget. And you... you simply drink your tea. While it's still warm.

She laid the flower beside your cup, lifted her eyes to the tree above us, and spoke a single word:

— Jacaranda.

The word turned over and over in my mind like a wheel. We glanced at each other. Certain I had misheard, I risked repeating it:

'Ja-ca-ran-da... What is it?'

— Jacaranda, — the girl's gentle voice said, and my racing thoughts settled at once, at peace with the beautiful word.

— It is a name, — the woman went on. — That is what our tree is called. The tree listens. And when a thought grows clear, it answers with a flower. Trees think in flowers.

She fell silent for a moment, and ran her hand along the edge of the table.

— A name is precious too. It is given to us at birth. It carries meaning, strength, a path for the whole of a life.

I swallowed, and nodded quickly. All my life I had tried to earn the right simply to be. To be good enough, successful enough, correct enough. For so long I had lived inside a world of marks and grades...

And above it all — quietly, unhurried — the Jacaranda opens its flowers. One. Then another.



CHAPTER ONE. Niima

The mist was thinking.

Slow and heavy, a shadow woven of dew and silence, it drifted between the trunks, stroked the roots, and settled on the leaves like dust. The garden breathed it in — drawing the coolness into every pore of the bark, keeping it deep within.

Nia pressed his palm to the Jacaranda.



Beneath the bark, a pulse was beating. Dull, steady, it rose up into his fingers, narrowing the whole world behind his closed eyelids down to that single rhythm.

Listen.

The air between the tree and his skin thickened, grew warm. On the other side of the trunk, something pressed a cheek to his palm. A presence. It was breathing. It was waiting.

He did not open his eyes.

From deep within the tree, fingers reached toward him. Slender. Nia felt them touch his palm from the inside — and go still.

‘Grandpa!’

Safi's voice — and the presence flinched back, dissolving into the wood. The little bells in her braids rang out sharply, in the way only mornings can.

Nia opened his eyes. The world came back: grey mist, wet leaves, the morning chill on his cheeks. A warm mark remained on his palm.

‘What's the matter with you?’ Safi stood two steps away, out of breath, her braids in disarray. ‘Were you talking to the Jacaranda?’

Nia looked down at his palm.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Ba-Nina's calling.’



They walked toward the house through the wet grass.

Nia glanced back for a moment. A single violet flower had broken free, and caught in the leaves.

A thought darted forward, tasting of something entirely new. But a clinging shadow stepped on the feeling just as it was being born. Nia shook his head, trying to throw it off. The shadow flattened, dissolved... and the thought went out.

The boy went on after his sister. The flower watched the small retreating figure go.



The kitchen smelled of cardamom, honey, and jasmine. Breakfast was already laid on the table. Bread, cheese, a plate of mango. And a great teapot, wrapped in a cloth.

‘Wait,’ said Ba-Nina, without turning round. ‘Breathe in, first.’

Nia closed his eyes. Breathed in. Something inside him warmed — slowly, the air filled his lungs, the cardamom settled on his tongue, his shoulders let go of their tension.

He heard Safi's soft breathing against his shoulder, and smiled.

‘There,’ their grandmother said quietly. ‘Now you're here. All of you.’



The door creaked. In came Vik-Tor. Short, stocky. Ink stains on his fingers. He nodded to everyone without a word, and sat down in his chair. The chair sighed with pleasure at being needed. Vik-Tor picked up a cup — his large, favourite one,

cracked along the bottom. Drank his tea, looking out through the window at the garden.

No one spoke. This was their morning. Silence, first.

‘The maps are in revolt,’ he said. His voice was low, familiar. ‘Rustling all night long.’

Safi leaned forward, nearly spilling her tea.

‘What maps, Grandpa? The ones from the library?’

Vik-Tor gave a fond little smile.

‘The library has a life of its own. At night the books finish writing their own pages, the covers change colour. The maps draw new roads. Roads that don't exist. Or don't exist yet. This morning I found a path. Through the Field of Whispers.’

Nia choked, and reached for a napkin.

‘You always said no one could go there without a reason.’

‘You can't,’ his grandfather agreed. He gave Safi a sly wink. ‘Which means a reason has appeared.’

He reached into his waistcoat pocket and drew out a bundle of violet cloth. The cloth smelled of violets and resin.

Nia felt a coldness. It gathered at the base of his collarbone into a small, tight knot, and began to pulse. Nia shrugged his shoulders. Somewhere deep down, a familiar feeling stirred.

Nia looked at the Map. His fingers reached toward it of their own accord.

But before he could touch it — the air above the table thickened.

‘Strange...’ he began. And fell silent.

The steam above the mugs grew restless, twitched, broke from its steady thread, and darted closer to their grandfather's warm face.

Vik-Tor started. The petal Map slipped from his fingers and settled onto the table.

Above the map, the air trembled, stretched out into a thin violet thread. The thread curled into a ring, spun quickly round an invisible finger, jerked, and turned the other way. Within that dance, the edge of a wing appeared.

She appeared above the table.

Small. Fragile. Almost transparent.



She looked at them in a way that dried Nia's mouth entirely.

Safi reached out a hand — as though to hold onto something already vanishing.

‘Quiet,’ Ba-Nina breathed. ‘Don't breathe.’

The girl opened her mouth.

Words were born in each of their minds — as though they were their own.

‘I...’

The voice broke off. The girl's left hand grew thin — through it, the edge of the table showed. She looked down at her own hand. At a poppy-seed bun. Swallowed.

‘Niima,’ she whispered.

And faded away to the shoulders.

Safi gasped, and covered her mouth with her hand. Niima surfaced out of nothingness, drawing herself back — with effort. Almost invisible.

‘Please... I'm afraid of ceasing to be.’

She looked at Vik-Tor.

‘You can see me. Can't you?’

A tear hung on her cheek — and dissolved into the air before it reached the edge of her face.

‘Then I still exist.’

Niima looked down at the Map. The petals beneath her drew the light into themselves.

Nia slid his own mug of tea towards her. Slowly, carefully.

Niima looked at the mug. At the warm steam.

‘May I?’ Almost soundlessly.

Nia nodded. She leaned in toward the tea — and breathed in its warmth. Her outline trembled, grew a little more solid.

‘Can all of us see her?’ Nia asked, surprising himself.

Safi shot him a look of pure outrage.

‘You mean you can’t?!’

‘I can. I just want to be sure. Is she... alive?’

Niima sank down onto the Map.

‘Every thought of yours,’ she said, and her voice suddenly grew deeper, as though many voices sounded within it, ‘every spark of inspiration, every idea — we are alive. And without us, would you be?’

She looked at Nia.

‘Have you ever felt as though someone were speaking for you? That words came of their own accord, not thought up by you at all? That something suddenly appeared in your head that you never knew before, and yet it was — unmistakably yours? That is us. That is me.’

‘But why?’ Safi breathed out. ‘Why do you come to us?’

Niima said nothing for a moment. She lifted her head toward the ceiling — and through it, seemed to see something far away.

‘So that you won’t forget that you are more than just bodies. That you are also an idea. And that a thought, once born, never entirely dies. It waits. Sometimes for a hundred years. Sometimes longer. But it waits.’

She looked at them again. Smiled — for the first time, without fear.

‘I’ve been waiting for you.’



Vik-Tor laughed quietly.

‘She has a point, hm. In the library there are books no one has opened in a hundred years. They are not dead. They are only waiting.’

He raised his eyes to Niima.

‘Are you like them?’

‘I am like them,’ she said quietly. ‘But I remember what it means to be needed.’

Ba-Nina pushed the poppy-seed bun toward her.

‘Have breakfast with us.’

Niima took a single poppy seed. Tiny, black. Held it in her palm — and her outline grew sharp, solid.

For a moment.

Then it wavered again, grew transparent.

‘If no one helps me become real,’ she said, ‘I will disappear.’



Nia stood. Pushed back his chair.

He looked at Niima. She sat on the edge of the Map — small, almost transparent. Looking at him. Waiting.

Everyone was waiting.

He opened his mouth. Nothing.

One thought kept turning: if I say no, it means I believe this is happening. If I say yes, I’m just agreeing so I don’t have to think.

He looked at Niima. She did not look away.

He remembered: the morning. The Jacaranda. The warm touch against his palm, from within.

It had been her.

‘Yes. We’ll go.’

Safi hugged him from behind. Her little bells rang out — softly.

‘Of course we'll go. Together.’

Niima rose into the air above the Map. Brushed his cheek with a wing. Warm, almost weightless.

The air thickened. The bells in Safi's braids grew warm. The world tilted.

CHAPTER TWO. The Thinking Garden

Safi realised she was breathing only when the air touched the skin of her wrists, and sank through the thin bone, through the skin.

First, a coolness. Then, the taste of old copper.

Underfoot, everything was violet. It gave beneath each step and slowly rose back up, remembering her weight. It rustled. It sighed.

— Stop.

Nia's voice came edged with worry.

Safi lifted her head.

The garden had no edges. Trees grew straight out of silence. Their roots glowed a faint violet. At its centre stood the Jacaranda. In it met everything that had already happened, and everything that had not yet decided whether to happen at all.

It was thinking.

Petals rose, one at a time, out of step with one another, and faded before they reached the branches. Each one left a scent behind. Honey. Dust after rain. The bitterness of things left unsaid.

— This isn't a garden, — said Safi, and her voice came out thinner than she'd meant it to.

— It's the first one, — something answered. And it made no difference who — the tree, the wind, or someone standing very close indeed.

A path of leaves nudged them toward a structure that might have been called an observatory, if observatories were built of crystal and woven vines. Through its walls, the sky showed clear. Its roof stood open — to the stars, to the rain, to whatever thought happened to pass by.

Safi could still feel the clinging coolness on her skin when something began to gather in the doorway...

First, an outline. Then, a pause. Fingers unrolling a scroll, trembling slightly. He looked straight ahead, as if checking that the world had not disappeared.

He was short — barely reaching Nia's waist. His skin was the colour of amethyst. His eyes were sharp, testing the world for weaknesses. His clothes were immaculate:

a dark violet tunic, trousers pressed to perfection, boots polished to such a shine that you could see your own doubt reflected in them.

— Three minutes, forty-two seconds, — he said. — You are late.

The words settled on the petals underfoot and left dents in them. The petals shivered, and stilled.

— We didn't exactly get to choose when we'd arrive, — Safi breathed out, surprising herself.

— You're Thought, — Nia cut in.

— I am Noen, — he replied, and there was as much answer in it as there was refusal to say anything further.

He unrolled the scroll. Checked something. Frowned more deeply.

— Delay is unacceptable.

Behind his shoulder, the air trembled — gathered itself into a shape, and burst into colour. Its feathers held no single shade for longer than a second.

— Ndoto! — cried Niima, from Nia's shoulder. — Imagination — who chose to have wings. Because that's the only way she can ever touch you.



Ndoto swayed through the air — a little too close to Noen's immaculate tunic. He stepped back, half a pace. She swayed after him, playfully.

— Distance, — he said, drily.

Ndoto snorted a burst of colour — a flash in which, just for a moment, you could hear laughter.

Between the two of them there was neither fondness nor enmity, but some third thing: a way of being alive that had never quite worked out which of them was in charge.

The Cheche came tumbling after. Small sparks. They settled in her hair, on her shoulders, on the back of Safi's hand. Warm. Alive to the beat of her pulse.

— Is this... inspiration? — she asked, afraid to close her fingers.

— I would call it wanting, — said Noen, and smiled for the first time. — Before the thought. Before the image. An emptiness that wants to be filled.

One little Cheche flickered — and went out.

The warmth beneath Safi's palm vanished before she understood what had happened. On her tongue, the taste of frosted grapes burst and was gone.

Everyone looked at Niima at the same moment.

— I can feel myself, — she said. Her voice shook. — I don't know why.

Ndoto touched her beak to Niima's shoulder. The Cheche gathered in a ring and burned brighter, trying to give her back her colour with their warmth.

Something shifted in Noen's eyes.

— Not knowing, — he said quietly, — is a structure too.

Safi reached out her hand. Her fingers met a resistance in the empty air — faint, but real. As she breathed out, Niima grew a little more solid.

— You don't need to know why, — said Safi. The cold of the grapes still lingered on her tongue. — You just need to be.

Something glinted in Niima's eyes. Wet.

— And if I disappear...

— ...we'll dream you up again, — said Nia. — Probably.

They had already dreamed her up. Here. In the scent of jasmine. In the silence.

Noen brought them all back to reality, unrolling the scroll. The petals upon the parchment shifted of their own accord, and settled into a new path.

— The Field of Whispers is waiting.

— And if we're not ready?

He looked at her, and smiled with his eyes alone.

— Readiness is a thought too. A decision. And I am already here.

Ndoto rose upward. The Cheche flared and went out all together, leaving warm points of light on the petals. Niima gripped Safi's hand, and for a second she felt almost real.

The garden breathed out.

They stepped forward. Underfoot, the ground gave way and whispered. Every step carried them outward, and deeper in, both at once.

Safi turned to look back. The Jacaranda watched them go with its branches. And her body took the Garden inside itself.



A flower broke free from a branch. Safi held out her palm. Warm. Alive. It smelled of beginnings.

— Let's go, — said Niima.

Behind them, everything closed. The Garden stayed on in her palms. In her breath. In the beating of her heart.

The flower opened.



CHAPTER THREE. The Field of Whispers

The savannah stretched wide, drinking the moisture from the air. The sun had settled low over the land. Grass, golden and waist-high; the rustle of footsteps, insistent, quiet. A shimmer of heat-haze. Each breath brought dust, dryness, and — faint as a hint — milk.

Ndoto had gone quiet on Safi's shoulder, her wings folded. Her feathers had settled into a single shade — sandy, sun-bleached. The Cheche had dimmed, huddling like tiny embers at Nia's collar.

— Nothing is born anew here, — said Noen drily, studying his empty scroll. — Here, there is simply what has already been.

Nia stepped into the grass. It parted around him.

The space drew back from Nia, leaving a vacuum around him. Words lost their weight, thoughts their footing. The air grew painfully clear. In that clarity, Nia watched his own doubt take shape. Time stretched thin.

On a flat stone sat a boy of about seven, a blue pencil in his fingers. Beside him — slightly blurred, made of the same single light — sat two more. And more still. The first gripped his pencil and could not bring himself to break it. Another was already crying, knees pulled to his chest. A third, the sharpest of them, had just thrown the broken pieces into the grass and was staring back, defiant.

The boy raised his head, and his gaze was reflected in Nia's own eye. In that reflection, indecision rose up like a taste — a stranger's taste, and yet already his own. Somewhere inside Nia, a tree stood still, waiting to see which of these reflections it would choose to flower with.

Nia lowered himself onto the stone.

— Grandpa spent two days looking for it, — he said aloud. — He wasn't angry. He bought a new one. Gave it to me first.



All three raised their heads at once. Nia picked the broken piece up out of the grass. Held it out — and all the hands reached at once, and closed into one. The air went still. The grass stopped rustling. Nia blinked — and the warmth of the closed fingers rose up into his chest. He breathed out. The world moved on again.

A new whisper sounded, different this time: a thin, metallic ring. A single sharp knock. Nia turned again. Further off in the grass, he saw himself at ten. A graze on his elbow. And beside him, two more. One with the same graze, smiling, proud of it. The other tucked his arm away inside his sleeve.

— I did it, — said the proud one.

— It doesn't always work, — the second one said quietly, in objection.

They were both right. Nia looked at them. And said nothing. The whisper grew lower now, and thicker. Heavier. Nia did not turn at once — he needed to gather himself first. A boy of about fifteen sat with his arms around his knees. Beside him, another. And another. A whole ridge of figures, each darker than the last. Despair, it turned out, came in a great many shades.

— Some moments can't be mended, — said the nearest one. — I've tried.

— Drop the idea, — said another. — It's safer that way.

The voices talked over one another. Louder, softer, sharper, gentler. Too many, all at once.

— Don't drop it, — came a voice from an old man mending a net, off to one side. His fingers moved precisely, out of long habit. — I've lived my whole life with that idea inside me. A discarded thought doesn't drown. It sleeps in caves of salt, and comes back to you carved anew by wind and tide. You'll know it by the ache, by the fresh pattern on its stone, when you try to take hold of it again.

Niima stayed close to Nia's shoulder. Her wings trembled with every word spoken.

— Who am I supposed to believe? — Nia whispered, and the emptiness answered with the echo of his own question, multiplied a thousand voices over.

Niima said nothing, for a moment.

— Love, you'll hear every one of them, — she said. — What matters isn't who to believe. What matters is understanding what you feel, as you listen to each in turn.

Nia stood still, deafened. He could not tell where the advice ended and his own fear began. The voices came in waves, without pause. A branch of the Jacaranda swayed. A flower fell, slowly, turning as it went. The air stopped moving. Something shifted in his chest. The voices fell silent. Every figure — every cluster, every branching path of them — lifted its head to the sky, for a moment. And for that one second, before the petal touched the ground, every face, every version, every age of him stood perfectly still.

The petal settled into the grass. Everything scattered again. Each of them returned to his own silence, his own moment, his own truth. Nia breathed out. He had not noticed he'd been holding his breath.

— You don't have to choose, — something said, in the very breath he took. — You are the depth in which all these selves breathe alongside you. Walk on. The Idea hears every one of them, together with you.

Nia took a step forward. Ahead, among the stalks, stood a man. Calm. Complete. He simply was.

— And who are you? — Nia's voice sank away into the silence.

The stranger smiled with Nia's own eyes. In the fold of his pocket, a familiar shape could just be made out — short, sharp-edged. Nia knew: there, inside the cloth, rested a decision from his own past, grown into someone's future.

Somewhere close by, Safi's little bells rang out. Nia caught her eye through the gold of the grass. She was looking inward, past everything around her. She was

stepping off her own path. Nia and Safi met at the border of that single instant. In her eyes burned the very same sparks that now lived in his own.



CHAPTER FOUR. The Labyrinth of Doubt

The Labyrinth did not wait for them. It happened, with every step. The moment Nia asked himself a question, the wall ahead would split apart, letting in the cold of a new doubt. The ground beneath their feet lost its firmness, giving way to the geometry of uncertainty. Cracks multiplied — remembered themselves — and became corridors. The air smelled of broken mirror, and of a morning that had never come.

They walked carefully, but their steps still rang out in hollow echoes. Ndoto gripped tight to Safi's shoulder. The girl swayed, and touched a hand to the cold wall. The mirror absorbed Safi's face, and gave it back tasting of someone else's decision. She touched the glass, and the cold heard her hand.



The Cheche flew on ahead, peered round the corners, and came back without a word. The mirrors on either side turned to follow them — slowly, with a dry, glassy creak.

— It's hard to breathe here, — Safi breathed out.

— Noen, — Nia touched his shoulder. — The Map.

Noen unrolled it. Its edges had dimmed, and trembled.

— Extraordinary, — a flicker of confusion crossed his voice. — The architecture isn't stable. The Labyrinth grows for as long as you doubt.

He fell silent for a moment, watching another passage split in two at the end of the path.

— Become the thought, — Noen's voice grew thin. — The Labyrinth feeds on your 'maybe'. Feed it your decision instead, or it will eat you with your own doubt. Choose a thought. Only one.

Nia opened his mouth.

— Choose the thought I ought to be thinking...

He'd said it aloud.

— But that's already several thoughts, — he added at once. — To choose one, I have to think about what I'm choosing, why I'm choosing it, and what happens if I choose the wrong one...

The Cheche fell to thinking. They propped their little heads on their fists.

— Yes, — Niima sighed. — Choosing one is already at least three.

Nia tried. But everything crowded into his head at once. A foot striking a ball. The rustle of a sweet-wrapper. And then, all at once — wet earth, freshly watered. Sharp, unmistakable. The smell hadn't asked permission. It simply pulled his grandfather's voice up out of him: *We're right here.*

— What is that? — Nia stopped short.

— What is what? — Noen didn't understand.

— The earth. Wet. I can smell it, right here.

Noen frowned.

— A smell cannot exist without a source, — he said. — It may well be a trick...

— Or it may be true, — Niima said quietly. — Only not here, and not now. Memory comes knocking. Sometimes — through the nose.

Home. The garden. Warmth. The thought covered everything. It had come hand in hand with the smell. There was something dishonest in it: a feeling that had decided it was, itself, the correct answer.

— Stoop!

The shout came half a second too late.

The mirror split open — and revealed the road home. The Jacaranda shook out its violet. Vik-Tor's laughter. Ndoto tore towards it. Niima darted to cut her off — just managed to catch the edge of her wing. Both of them flew straight into the vision. The mirror closed.

Nia went still. Horror hit him all at once — that his friends were gone, and that the cause of it was his own feeling. Warm. About home. He had wanted peace, and

hadn't meant for anyone else to pay for it. This was the price of allowing himself to feel something real — and failing to hold onto it.

The walls began to shudder. New cracks appeared. Guilt grew up through the soles of his feet, binding Nia to every fractured mirror. He could feel his own responsibility becoming the very weight of the Labyrinth itself.

— Noo! — Safi shoved her brother, looked into his eyes, saw the panic there. Grabbed his shoulders, shook him. — Nia! You're my brother! We don't leave each other behind in mirrors!

The panic wavered — and went into hiding.

— We are all walking toward the same goal, together, — he said aloud.

There were too many thoughts now. Home. Guilt. Fear for Niima. Safi's anger. Dozens of corridors, each pulling him a different way. The mirrors were not reflecting — they were offering. In every fractured pane of glass, Nia could taste the flavour of his own refusal. The guilt did not press down on him; it multiplied his presence, until he felt that there was simply too little of his real self to go around all these corridors.

The harder he tried to choose correctly, the more options appeared. So he stopped searching for the one right thought. He closed his eyes.

Somewhere inside his own mind, Nia unclenched his fist, and let every corridor come flooding in at once. The Labyrinth shuddered, losing its footing. Thought became a silence large enough to hold all the noise within it.

The wall shuddered. Rippled in rings. Ndoto broke free first, dragging a weakened Niima along behind her. Nia threw open his arms. The relief was almost intoxicating. For a moment, his head went empty. He stepped toward Safi, embraced her. And then, all at once, understood: the corridor was too quiet. Too empty. Noen had dissolved into a silence that Nia had not managed to fill with his attention in time. The empty space where he'd been smelled of a forgotten formula.



— Him too, — Safi whispered. — Bring the thought back!

Nia drew a breath. He caught himself thinking of just one thing — the steady sound of a map being unrolled.

— Noen, you're here! — the Cheche all cried out at once.

Noen emerged from a crack in the wall, straightening his tunic.

— Your fear, — he said to Safi, — was a reaction to an empty space. There are a great many empty spaces here. Even I, it seems, was one of them, for a while.

Not everyone knows how to apologise in words. Some apologise simply by coming back.

— Friends, — Nia said quietly, — this is only halfway.

They walked on. The corridors stretched away — dark, mirrored, endless. But with every step they gathered into a single path. And then the sky opened up within them, breaking into a violet downpour of meaning. The Labyrinth dissolved into the scent of wild strawberries and marula, and became the ground beneath their feet.

Safi sank down into the grass. Her braids spread out among the stalks, black rivers in a violet sea. She picked a berry — the taste of the strawberry was real, bold, and it brought her body back into itself. Nia dropped down beside her. The grass was soft, and smelled of earth, and of peace.

The Cheche, worn out from so much glowing, scattered into the grass like living sparks, falling asleep right there on the petals. Ndoto covered Safi with a wing,

shielding her from the last glints of mirror-light. Everyone else drifted off after them.

Only Safi, already sliding down into sleep, felt it — somewhere far off, beyond the horizon — something heavy. Still without a shape. But already on its way to them.

CHAPTER FIVE. The Wall of Fear

Nia woke to the cold. Overnight, the ground had drunk up all the warmth, leaving a heavy dew on his jacket. Beside him, Niima was hungrily sucking the pulp from yesterday's marula, holding it in fingers gone nearly transparent. Her wings, thin as jacaranda petals, trembled, catching the grey light. The Idea needed warmth.

— You've got my whole face covered, — Nia's voice was hoarse.

Niima gave a small laugh, touched his cheek with her fingertips — cool, almost weightless — and flew across to Safi, who was already sitting up, plaiting her braids. Her little bells rang out sleepily, half-voiced, afraid to wake the silence of the savannah.

— Are we there? — Safi asked, looking at the horizon.

— We are always on the way, — Noen replied. He looked rumpled, his outline blurred. Today, even he had his doubts.

They walked on. The grass crunched underfoot, leaving clingy red seeds on their trouser-legs. Ndoto flew low, almost brushing the ground, checking every stone before it reached Safi's feet. The savannah began to reveal its rock: first a scatter of boulders, then the whole coarsened hide of a hill.

And then the savannah ended. Before them stood the Face.

The land of Manika had breathed this profile upward, and frozen there. Vast, patient, it did not gaze into the infinite — it held it. A granite brow, worn smooth by wind. Wrinkles cut deep by rain. The mountain remembered everyone.

Nia stopped. The air around the mountain grew dense. Safi's little bells burst suddenly into a sharp, anxious ringing, and just as suddenly fell silent, crushed beneath the sheer weight of the stone.

— This is it, — Nia whispered. The sound bounced straight back off the granite.

Safi stood at its foot, head thrown back. In her eyes trembled a pain she recognised. Nia touched the stone. It was cool. Beneath his palm, a rhythm pulsed — too slow for a heartbeat, too even to belong to nature. Niima pressed herself, frightened, to Nia's shoulder.

— This is not a mountain, — a crack ran through Noen's voice. — This is fear, made into architecture.

Nia saw them. Thousands of faceless figures, locked in struggle with their own faces. Hands covering the emptiness where a gaze should have been. These were the ones who had hidden their dream away inside themselves, until it turned to stone.

— They're alive, inside their own fear, — Safi whispered. She reached out a hand toward one of the stone shoulders, but Niima flinched back in fright.

The cold of the stone flowed into Nia's palm.

'Why look upward? Up there is wind. Up there, you can fall. Here it's quiet. Safe.'

His shadow, on the red earth, shivered — and pulled itself free of his heels.

It was HIM.

HE did not breathe. HE was the pause between two heartbeats. His presence had the taste of a word, swallowed back in silence.

— Sit down. Become stone. In stone, silence tastes of safety.

Noen sank down, bewildered, into the red dust. The Cheche dimmed, burying themselves in Nia's hair. Safi froze; her little bells trembled, letting out a thin, almost ultrasonic moan. In Nia's hands, Niima turned nearly transparent, her small fingers loosening, helpless.

Nia looked at his own numbness. Something warm and recognising stirred in his chest. This guard had spent years wrapping him in cotton wool.

— You're right, — Nia said quietly. — Being alive is frightening.

He reached out a hand and touched his double's shoulder. HE was ice-cold.

— I'm not going to fight you. You're part of me. You just need to rest. But you're wrong about one thing. You've guarded me from pain — but you've been stealing my life.

Nia did not want to drive HIM away. He wanted to take him along. To wear him on his shoulders. His shoulders bent beneath the weight of every *no* he had ever told himself, but this was an agreement, not a defeat. Nia took a step. His foot found purchase in a crack in the rock.

There is no pain, in stone. But there is no marula in stone, either. No colour of Jacaranda.

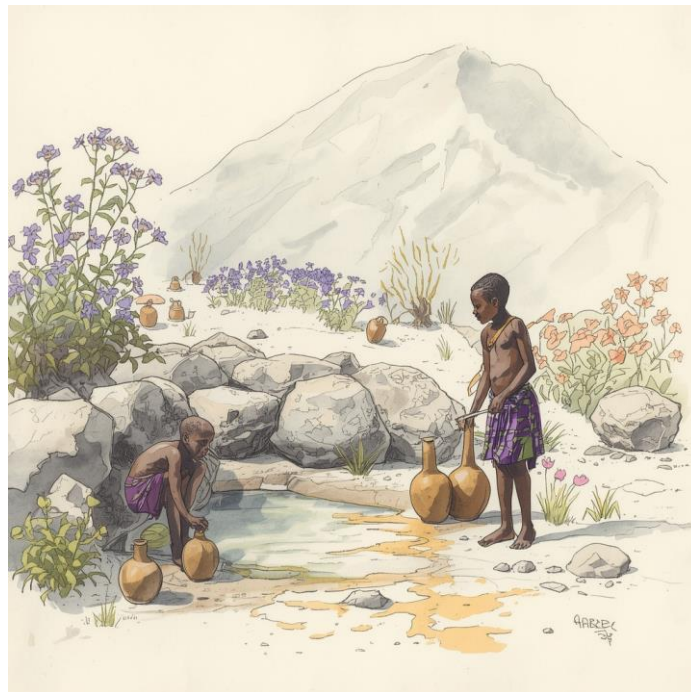
— Come on, — Nia said to Safi.

He walked first, taking the worst of the mountain's cold upon himself. Safi followed close behind, gripping tight to his belt. Her little bells began to ring in time with his steps — steady, certain. Niima, sensing his resolve, began to fill with colour; her light turned warm, and gold.

The weight pulled downward, clung to the rocks, whispered: *Stop. Look how quiet it is for them, in there. Forever.* But Nia walked on. He thought of Safi, who believed. Of Niima, who dimmed, but never went out.

They climbed for a long time. The savannah became a red sea, far below. On a wide ledge, Nia turned to look back.

Below, the children of Manika province were walking barefoot, carrying clay jugs. They went up to the faceless bodies and left water at their feet. One girl touched the granite with her palm. She was not saving anyone. She was bearing witness. The children did not choose whom to give water to. It ran down over the stone, washing time itself. Memory has no conditions.



Nia closed his eyes, and let the thought go:

‘I am walking. I believe.’

Time stopped. The stone shivered. Where Nia's thought touched the granite, the impossible happened. A shoot broke through the very flesh of fear. The Jacaranda did not break the granite — it soaked into it with meaning. The stones began to dream aloud, in flowers.

A violet vein ran into the grey rock, curling around the faceless figures. The stones were not breaking apart — they were beginning to dream. Nia went up to one of the motionless figures and touched its shoulder. The stone did not warm. The figure's fingers only pressed themselves tighter against its face. That, too, was a decision. Nia did not insist.

The Wall of Fear was changing colour: violet bloom in some places, bare grey stone in others. The mountain did not divide them into the saved and the left behind. Nor did the children with their jugs.

Safi took Nia's hand. Niima rose into the air, and the light coming off her turned warm, golden. Ndoto gave a satisfied flap of her wings.

— Do we go on? — Safi asked.

Nia nodded. The weight on his shoulders had grown lighter, but it was still there — his cloak, now. This time, they carried it together.

CHAPTER SIX. The Market of Sceptics

They were pushed out into noise.

It struck from every side at once — like a wall, like a physical force. Dust. Pepper. Old paper. The sourish smell of hopes that never came true — sold here wholesale, no complaints about quality accepted.

‘Step right up, don't be shy! Fresh doubts, straight from the field! Two for the price of one!’

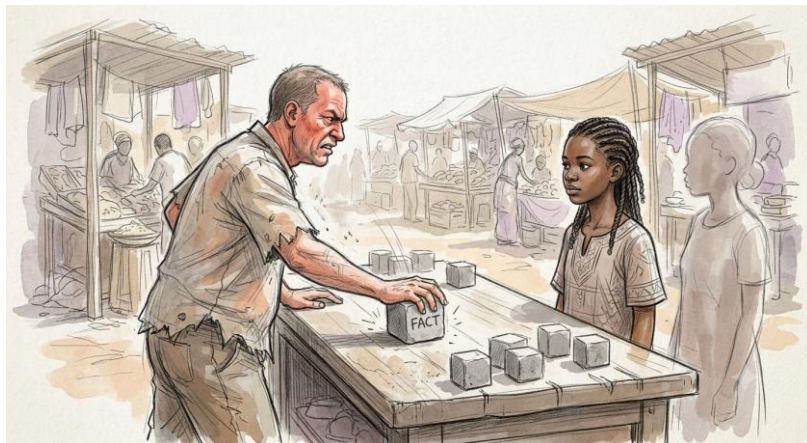
The square was vast, riotous with colour, its stalls pressed together, each fighting for its own scrap of sun. Here, everything they carried with them suddenly seemed absurd.

The petal Map in Nia's hand flickered, embarrassed — and went dark. Safi's little bells fell silent. Ndoto hid herself in his collar, only a single eye gleaming out from within.

‘Even the instruments feel shy here,’ Noen observed, straining to hold his own blurring outline together. ‘Here, people believe only in what can be touched, weighed, and sold by the pound.’

At a stall heaped with grey cubes stood a Trader. Red-faced, sweating, beneath a sign that read: FACTS. Sold Singly. Cheaper By The Dozen.

‘What have you got? A thought? Well, I've got a FACT!’ He slammed a cube down onto the counter. ‘Three kilos in weight, hardness seven on the Mohs scale. Drop it, and it'll hurt. Drop your thought on my foot, and I won't feel a thing!’



The crowd roared with laughter. The Trader drank it in, growing bigger with every laugh. He laughed loudest of all — first and loudest — using the noise as a shield against silence.

Nia picked up one of the cubes from the table. Weighed it in his palm — for a long, careful moment. Ran a finger along its cold edge. And set it back down, without a word.

Safi stepped forward.

‘Your facts are solid,’ she said. Her voice came out quiet, but there was something in it that made the Trader stop laughing, for a moment. ‘You can build things out of them.’

She paused, and caught his eye.

‘But when my grandfather built our house, he always left a gap between the stones. For the mortar. For warmth. For a window, to watch the sunset through.’

The Trader looked at her — and his face suddenly shifted. He turned his eyes to his cubes. To his own hands, calloused, dusted with cement.

‘A beautiful view from a window...’ he muttered. And fell silent.

The crowd went quiet. Someone coughed. The Trader began fidgeting, pushed the cubes aside — and from beneath them, with a creak, drew out a small, dusty jar.

‘This isn't a fact,’ he said, quietly now, almost a whisper. ‘Fragments. From broken hopes. I meant to throw them out. Perhaps... perhaps I'll glue my own back together.’

Safi smiled.

‘They'll come in useful.’

Somewhere in the settling quiet, an invisible bell gave the faintest chime. The Trader took a step back.



They walked on.

The market's clamour did not let up — every new stall met them with a fresh dose of scepticism:

‘You've got no experience!’

‘It's been done before!’

‘Too late!’

‘And who exactly do you think you are, if you don't mind my asking?’

Safi tried not to pay attention, but the voices dug into her back. The dust grated on her teeth. The sun had climbed higher now, and beat down without mercy. They seemed to have been walking for an eternity already, and the stalls showed no sign of ending.

She lost count. Past them drifted: a fortune-teller selling certainty about tomorrow ('but only today — tomorrow's already too late'); a boy with bottles of yesterday's rain — the Cheche sniffed them and soured, disappointed; an old woman with a set of scales, weighing other people's excuses...

Nia stopped. Caught his breath. Ran a hand over his face — it came away damp.

'We've been walking for hours,' he said quietly.

'The market is large,' Noen replied. His outline was noticeably paler than it had been that morning. 'And it stretches exactly as far as we're willing to linger in it.'

Ahead, beneath a stone arch, stood a Woman. Tall, buttoned to the collar, a stopwatch in her hand.

'Three minutes, forty-two seconds,' she said, without raising her eyes. 'Below the required speed. You have no certificate.'

Noen stepped forward — and, for the first time all day, lit up.

'Ah, figures! The efficiency of inspiration — eighty-seven per cent!'

'Subjective parameters are not accepted. A standard is required.'

Ndoto hovered right in front of the Woman's face, shimmering through every colour at once.

'And can I be measured?'

The Woman raised her stopwatch — and froze. The hand had stopped.

She stared at the device, not believing her eyes. Tapped the glass. No response.

'It isn't broken,' she said, to the empty air. 'There's simply... nothing to measure.'

Safi crouched down right there on the dusty ground. Took a piece of chalk from her pocket. And began to draw.

One line. Another. A crooked little house, its window bigger than its door.

'My brother used to draw just as badly,' she said, without turning round. 'Grandpa built it anyway. And that house is still warm, to this day.'

The Woman looked at the drawing. At the stopwatch in her hand. At the chalk lying on the ground.

‘I cannot let you through,’ she said. But her voice wavered. ‘You have no certificate.’

‘I know. May I leave you the chalk?’

The Woman said nothing for so long that Safi had already begun to rise. Then the Woman's hand moved slowly downward, as though against its own will. Her fingers closed around the chalk.

She turned it over in her hands, studying the white dust on her skin.

‘This isn't in the instructions,’ she whispered. ‘But I find... I find I want to draw something. A crooked line. And a window the wind can fly in through.’

The stopwatch in her other hand gave a shudder — and suddenly began ticking to the rhythm of a waltz.

She laughed. A bright, ringing laugh, breaking every protocol she herself had ever made.



They left her there, laughing, and walked on.

But the market seemed to have no thought of ending. The stalls stretched on in an endless row. The voices grew ever more insistent, ever more clinging.

Somewhere deep in her throat, the dust began to scratch. Their legs grew heavy.

‘We need to rest,’ said Nia.

Noen shook his head.

‘If we stop here, we risk never moving again at all.’

But Nia was no longer listening. He leaned wearily against the back of someone's stall.

And then they saw the Old Man.

He sat on an empty crate, right at the centre of the square. Selling nothing. Demanding nothing. He simply sat there and sighed — and every breath he let out left a trace on the air.

Nia went closer.

‘We got through the Wall of Fear,’ he said, and his voice came out thin, almost pitiful.

The Old Man raised heavy eyes to him.

‘Ah, yes, yes. Congratulations. Plenty of people have got through it. Sweet, I must say.’

The word 'sweet' fell to the ground like a wet rag. It drained the meaning from everything they had lived through. Nia felt himself shrinking inside.

‘You have to believe in yourself,’ he forced out.

‘Of course you do. Very touching. Especially at your age.’

Every phrase they gave him, the Old Man took, crumpled in his hands, and handed back — a little smaller, a little duller, a little more foolish.

‘He's not arguing with us,’ Noen said quietly. ‘He's shrinking us.’

Safi said nothing.

She simply sank down onto the dusty ground, beside the Old Man's crate. Sat, legs tucked beneath her, and fell silent.

Nia looked at her. Hesitated. And sat down after her.

Noen stood a moment, undecided — his immaculate suit clearly protesting at such company as dust. But he too settled down beside them, carefully turning up the hems of his trousers.

A minute passed. Then another. The market roared on all around, but here, by the crate, there was a strange stillness.

‘What are you doing?’ the Old Man asked. For the first time, something like confusion flickered in his voice.

‘Sitting,’ said Safi.

‘What for?’

‘I don't know. We're tired.’

The Old Man said nothing. But his shoulders — for the first time — sank, just a little. Not from being belittled. From tiredness.

‘I'm tired too,’ he said, very quietly. ‘I can't even remember... how long for.’

Safi did not hurry. She sat and looked at her own hands, covered in white dust. Somewhere far off, a donkey brayed. The wind carried the smell of frying onions and bread.

‘I’m tired too,’ she said at last. ‘But we came to you. Because someone had to.’

The Old Man was silent for a long time. His fingers — dry, spotted — lay motionless on his knees.

Then he sighed. More deeply. As though letting in something he had long grown unused to.

‘I’m going somewhere...’ he said suddenly, and confusion crept into his voice. ‘I’ve forgotten where. But I know I was going — with this.’

He pointed to a dusty flower at his feet. Violet, withered, almost weightless.



Safi bent down and picked it up. Blew on the petal. And then — a drop. Small, warm. It slid off the dead flower, and fell into his palm.

The Old Man flinched.

‘It... it remembers me,’ he whispered. ‘And I don’t even remember where I was going.’

He began to cry. Silently, like a child. Tears ran down the deep furrows of his face, and he did not wipe them away.

Safi took his hand.

'I don't remember how to get up,' he said at last, his voice very quiet.

'I'll help you.'

She stood. Held out her hand to him — and he, after a moment, placed his palm in hers. Cold, dry. She held it tight.

He rose. Slowly, with difficulty, leaning his whole weight on her. Safi did not let go.

And when he had straightened, ahead of them, at the edge of the square, stood that same Woman with the stopwatch. It was still ticking to its waltz. In her other hand, she held the chalk.

She saw the Old Man. He saw her.

A long silence settled between them. Full. Deep. The kind that could hold an entire life.

Safi stepped back. Left the two of them together.

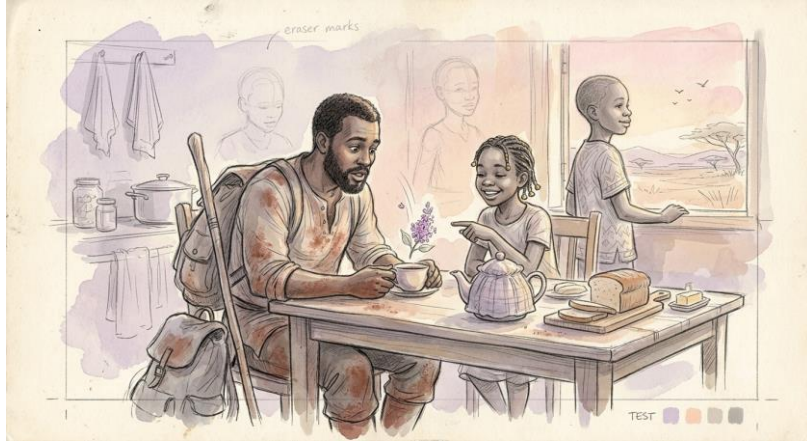


They walked on. The dust slowly settled, and the air ahead grew clearer, more transparent.

CHAPTER SEVEN. The Threshold

They stepped across the threshold — and were already standing at the window.

The gate creaked. Two travellers, dusty and worn out, opened it. They looked up at the violet cloud of the Jacaranda.



Safi went out to meet them.

She knew that look.

Ba-Nina was laying the table. A teapot beneath its cloth. The butter on the bread was melting, though the garden was cool. She nodded to the guests, and filled their cups to the brim, without a word.

The wind stirred the branches. A violet flower broke free, and fell into a guest's cup.

Plip.

The petal unfurled in the boiling water, colouring it from within. The guest looked, bewildered, from the flower to their hostess. Reached into a pocket.

‘How much do we owe you?’

Safi smiled — a calm, grown woman's smile.

‘The tree is paying for you. It drops its beauty so that you won't forget. And you... you simply drink your tea. While it's still warm.’

Nia looked at the flower in the guest's cup. He watched the petal unfurl. And knew: an entire life had found room inside that single moment.

Somewhere deep in the garden, a small bell rang out. The echo of a road already travelled.

Nia smiled. Inside him, Niima was smiling.

‘We thought we were setting out to save ideas. But it was the ideas who came to save us.’

The Jacaranda answered with a flower.

AFTERWORD. Mumbi

A mountain, its face turned to the sky, in the province of Manika. It watched me, waiting. A labyrinth, a crack running through the South African savannah. A Jacaranda, beneath which I sat, and understood: the tree had been waiting for me. For someone who would listen.

I needed to hear that self of mine — the one who sits beneath the tree, in silence.

My own Nul sat beside me all those years. Whispering: *Sit still. You have no certificate. A flower in your teacup is no kind of argument.* I very nearly believed him. But then I remembered the taste of the tea — cardamom, honey, jasmine. And my father's voice: *Now you're here. All of you.* And I wrote the first line.

My daughter taught me depth, at twelve years old, when she went to help sick children, and broke straight through the cotton wool of my own fear. My son taught me love without conditions — simply being there, with no lists, no need for control. My sister held the door open, whenever I lost myself in the labyrinth of my own *what ifs*.

I built my own Wall of Fear out of 'not now' and 'I'm not ready yet'. I thought it was protection. It turned out to be emptiness. I will not save every stone. Some will stay grey. But I have stopped trying to force them to bloom. I simply leave water at their feet. Like the children in Manika. Like Ba-Nina, who simply pours the tea.

Now, this book is yours.

You came in through the gate. Sat down at the table. Asked about the price. The tree answered for you.

I drink my own tea. I watch the Jacaranda bloom. Silver — like Safi's little bells. Gold. Rust-orange. Deep midnight blue.

We thought we were setting out to save ideas. But it was the ideas who came to save us.

Marina Shmatova. Beneath the Jacaranda, which thinks in flowers.



P.S. Africa gave me the name Mumbi. Creator. The tree does not ask whether I have earned it. It simply drops a flower into my tea.

THE END



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