

An entertaining, thrilling philosophical adventure of humankind's search for truth, purpose, and meaning in life.

Listen to the Wind

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Chapter 1

Mibutu stood tall and strong, contemplating the lazy mists bathing the expanse west of the great city. The olive skin of his bare back, beaded with sweat, and the long straight tresses of black hair glistened in the orange light of dawn. His labored breath came, not from the long walk in the darkness to the edge of civilization, but from Mibutu's troubled thoughts of truths hidden beyond the mists and of doubts whispered in the great city. His pursed lips and furrowed brow faced west, yearning to uncover the shrouded mysteries that drew him. The balls of his naked feet dug into the brown soil lifting callused heels from the ground and pleading with Mibutu to step forward, onto the grassy plain, away from the canopy of green leaves behind him. Powerful leg muscles joined the clash in favor of the dauntless move into the milky haze until they twitched at the mind's hesitation.

Birds serenaded the dawn out there to the west. Sweet, unknown fragrance seemed to linger in the mists.

This was in the days before the land was divided, when it was all one. Some will say that this was when the world was young, but others tell that it cannot be known how long the land had stood out from the water or for how much time the water had been before these days. The chronicles establish that it was in the tenth generation after the god who rescued humankind gave intelligence and cunning to the people, however long the earth had been before.

Manhood had come to Mibutu as though it were a common thing. He hid this truth from the elders and from his peers who

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looked upon its coming with awe. Mibutu knew himself to be a man before the rituals, before the foreskin had been carved away. The rites of passage had seemed a child's game calculated to make fathers proud and boys pretend firmness in the face of shammed perils. Although he valued the purpose of the sport, as far as he understood it, Mibutu saw in it a weak shadow of what the patriarchs must have intended. To see older men without courage reciting legends of brave men long dead to sons who feared to question either the ancient traditions or the approaching future had seemed a mockery of things sacred. Genuine fear on the faces and in the stifled screams of his friends had served only to deepen Mibutu's restless longing.

Painfully, with a suddenness that shocked and confused Mibutu's body, he pivoted, turning his face to the great city beyond the trees and his back to the beckoning mists. *I must give the elders time to approve, he thought. I'm going, whether or not I go with their approval. If it weren't for Mother and Father, who would endure the shame, I'd be on my way now.*

Mibutu now wished that he had not told of his plans. Before telling, he might have begun his quest with neither permission nor prohibition. THE INSCRIPTIONS did not forbid the journey as far as anyone knew. No assembly of elders had ever committed to parchment any firm decision, making it a crime to venture into the region to the west. The Writings, the recorded statements of discerning men from the second and third generations after the bringing forth of humankind from the soil, clearly counseled those of their own time to remain on the far plains of the east, but the cause of the warnings might have been only temporary. Although elders in the great city sometimes enacted laws on the basis of The Writings, The Writings were not themselves counted as infallible. The Writings contained

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indistinct passages from which even the elders inferred different meanings. Scribes had copied and recopied the manuscripts across the years resulting in mutated versions and debates over which of these represented the lost originals. *If I'd only set forth without telling my mother, Mibutu thought, I'd have violated only the unquestioned consensus that it's unwise to go west.*

Mibutu's mother had always been a true believer. In that, she was like Mibutu now that he was a man. The son, now striding with sluggish reluctance toward the great city, believed along the lines of his father's method. Reason, not bias, braced Mibutu's faith in traceable truths that he could track with his mind to their sources. His mother was content to merely believe uncritically what Mibutu felt compelled to validate. She had discouraged the asking and answering of questions, saying that the whole process cast doubts at certainties and hinted at the possibility that the faith of her parents and grandparents might have been somehow flawed and in need of revision.

Mibutu's father had held his tongue whenever Mibutu's mother had laid out objections to inquiry. He had once said to Mibutu, "Your mother's faith is strong. No need to unsettle it. Another path conveys her to the same waters. Don't think less of her because she cares so little about the spring from which those water flow."

When Mibutu had walked alone with his father, his father had coached him to consider, even as a child, reasons for embracing The Great True Story.

"Look around you at all that is," Mibutu's father would say as they worked together in the fields. "Do you know of any man

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or woman who could've made a tree or a goat?"

"No," Mibutu would answer.

"And apart from The Great True Story, Mibutu, can you explain your mind? Can you account for speech that rolls from the human tongue and puzzle out why brute beasts growl and bray?"

"No, father. I can't."

"Have you ever heard, or can you force your mind to believe, that stars and rocks created themselves and decided of their own accord to behave in predictable ways? Did stone and wood and the flesh of beasts and fish conspire together without mind?"

"No, father," Mibutu would say, "the god who rescued us from the god who made us and gave us minds to think and words to speak, he's responsible. THE INSCRIPTIONS show us the terrible power of the god who made us. No other explanation will do."

"Use the gift of your mind, Mibutu. Explore all that is and you'll know the wisdom of THE INSCRIPTIONS far more than the scribes who recite the words blindly."

Mibutu's mother had a simpler faith. "Of course THE INSCRIPTIONS are true," she would say. "Everyone knows it. Your ancestors knew it. The wisest dignitaries in the great city say that it's so."

"But why do we believe it? How do we know?" Mibutu would ask his mother in the year before he became a man,

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meaning only to draw her out on the greater reasons that she never acknowledged.

"Mibutu!" she would say, "you mustn't question The Great True Story. Your doubts'll spawn turmoil and the god who made us will find us and take away our spirits. You must swallow your questions."

He had tried to explain to his mother that his searching questions did not shatter faith but, rather, founded it upon reason. Mibutu sensed that his mother had tried to understand, but she could not. *No matter*, he thought. *Her faith is strong without foundations*. He had soon learned that the best course would be to leave his mother to her own method and to pursue his own pathway.

When Mibutu had revealed his plan to visit the west, his father smiled and his mother told the elders of the great city.

Now, by no clear rule, the elders must determine whether Mibutu would travel with their approval or without it. All who learned of the issue thought that it was a question of whether or not Mibutu would go. With Mibutu, that question had long been settled. He would wait, let them make whatever grand proclamations they cared to make, and then he would go. For the sake of his mother, Mibutu hoped for approval. For her sake he waited.

Chapter 2

Weeks had passed since one of the elders had approached him, kindly seeking to learn Mibutu's purpose and probing gently the spirit of the young man bent on taking a journey west. The gray-haired man, stooped with age and leaning on a gnarled walking stick, had surprised Mibutu by his clear eye, friendly manner, and willingness to hear Mibutu's explanations. The old man called upon Mibutu one evening as the sun settled low. They sat together on a stone beside the meadow.

"You are a strong and noble young man, Mibutu, yet your mother seems to fear for you and the path you're taking. I, of course, have no reason to take her side. You were recently enrolled as a man. Your guide through the ordeal put down that you were brave and cooperative, if not whole-heartedly enthusiastic. If it is adventure you seek, are there not ways to satisfy the need within the normal range of things practiced among the people?"

"But, sir," Mibutu had replied, "it's not adventure, but truth that draws my heart to the west."

"Truth?"

"Yes. THE INSCRIPTIONS are said to be atop a high mountain out there to the west. The Writings describe the place, as we all know. I want to see them, touch them, read them, copy them anew onto parchment, and bring the words back to the great city."

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"But we have the words already, Mibutu. You have learned them from your youth. I am told that you can recite the words from memory. Why would you want to risk life and reputation to make such a perilous journey? You must touch the words before you will believe?"

"It's for the doubters that I go."

"The doubters want you to go?"

"No. The doubters want me to stay. They seem content to speak of misgivings without investigating, just as some are content to believe without examining facts."

The old man had smiled a smile that comforted Mibutu and caused him to think that the elder understood his quest. But the smile seemed inharmonious with the line of questioning that continued.

"Why, Mibutu, would you search for confirmation of a thing known already to be true? If the people are content to accept the former witnesses, what need have they of a fresh one? The doubters would doubt if their own eyes beheld THE INSCRIPTIONS and their very fingers traced the words in stone."

"Skeptics would be responsible for their unbelief if I bore witness. Some might hear me. Believers would have their faith confirmed."

The elder's smile faded. He said, "If you consider the parchments inadequate, Mibutu, then are we forced to count you

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among the skeptics?"

"Not at all, sir. I believe because the former witnesses are trustworthy. The first council of elders knew those men who saw THE INSCRIPTIONS and bore witness that they were worthy men. That's enough to resolve my faith."

"Well, then, it's settled. The chain of succession from the first council to the current one is unbroken. To hear the council is to heed the original witnesses. The power of the engraved words is not lessened by their transcription to parchment. Their meaning is not distorted. The god who rescued us from the god who made us gave the words to the first released man. We have those words, certified by credible testimony. Your dangerous journey would be for no worthy reason in the eyes of the council. Do you want to bring shame to your good family and distress upon the people without cause?"

"No, sir. I don't."

"Then it's settled?"

"No, sir. It's not," Mibutu said with a determination in his voice and on his face that caused the elder to wince. "With deference to your high station and to the exalted council, I must profess to have a purpose understood by few, if by any other than myself. If the council doesn't prohibit the journey, I shall go," Mibutu had said, without mentioning that he would go even if the council banned the journey.

The comforting smile returned to the elder's face. This time the smile seemed in harmony with his new words, but out of symmetry with the elder's former statements. "Count me as your

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friend, Mibutu. I shall present your position to the council with favor. My words will be your words, as you would say them if granted the privilege of addressing the assembly. I warn you, as a friend, that not all of those on the council will smile upon us. I will appear unmindful of your safety and inconsiderate of your mother's wishes. I will put my own reputation in the council at risk for your sake. We will see what we can do."

To Mibutu the elder's shift from antagonist to advocate had seemed abrupt and unnatural, but he had so badly wanted the approval of the council and to have a voice in his favor addressing the assembly that he laid his confusion aside and bowed a bow of respect. The elder bowed in reply, completing the contract.

I should've asked the elder when the decision would be made, Mibutu thought after the weeks had passed and no word had come. He awoke early every morning with no other thought than, this will surely be the day, and day after drawn-out day proved him wrong. My heart grows stronger for the journey while time binds me here. What's time to old men who recall years as if they were days? They can't see it. The urgency to find—to prove—truth. They should uphold my purpose, champion it, send me as their agent on the quest to confirm reality.

Every day he worked the fields with his father and wondered at his father's silence, burning between them. His father had planted and nurtured the seed in Mibutu's breast, and now he appeared to take little notice of the lush, living plant and the full, ripe grain. *Is he not proud of me? Were the questions he asked in my youth merely a father's games to occupy a child's*

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time?

After weeks of turbulent silence, inflated by too many empty, idle words, Mibutu could hold his swelling thoughts no longer.

Father and son sat in the tiny shadow of their crude wagon loaded with unthreshed sheaves of grain. The day had been full of idle talk and sprinkled with the mulling over of high principles without talk of how the ideas might apply to the specific choices Mibutu faced.

"Father," he said in calm tones restrained by a tight thread, "a man doesn't sit idle, awaiting a mother's blessing. A man doesn't wait for approval to do what his heart demands when nothing prohibits it."

"That's true, my son."

"Tell me truly, Father. Can you not see the worth of the journey? Is it foolish to want to prove a truth already known?" Mibutu's voice rose a bit when he spoke.

"Remember, my son, no turmoil. Let's talk as men of the people."

Mibutu lowered his voice, straining further the taut thread. "Yes, Father. I haven't forgotten."

"I remind you only in the way that I'd remind any other man of the people, Mibutu. A grown man doesn't tell another man what to do."

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Mibutu tasted the respect and it washed away the crusty offense deposited by the weeks of silence. He felt small, ashamed that he had taken offense for silence provoked by his father's esteem. "Thank you, Father," he said. The real transition to manhood lost the flavor of a child's game in that moment.

"I can't tell you to go or to stay, Mibutu. I've turned on my bed every night since the day you told of your plan."

Mibutu's father stood, put his hands into the sheaves of grain, and shifted the load from side to side. Not looking at Mibutu, he said, "When I was your age, I dreamed of making such a journey. I held the dream until your grandfather gave me your mother to wife. My father knew of my yearning, but didn't share it or understand it. He arranged for my swift marriage when I spoke to him of my thoughts. The dream stayed in my heart until you were born. Now the dream's yours."

"Should I go? Will you feel that I've transgressed when I'm gone? "

"The question's yours to answer. THE INSCRIPTIONS don't prohibit the journey. No trespass can exist where there's no rule."

"Can you offer something to help me? Some word of blessing?"

"I can't pronounce the final blessing until I'm perishing, Mibutu. It's forbidden. You know that you have my heart. It beats strong in you. Of that I'm proud. Your mother has begged me to get you a wife. That's one privilege that's mine alone, as your father. I'll not negotiate for a wife until you tell me that

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you're ready and pleased with the woman. When you go on the journey, you'll be free."

"But, Father—"

"Mibutu, who taught you the ways of the wolf and the bear?"

"You taught me, Father. No other."

"Did you learn new skills in the ordeal, as the other young men learned them?"

"No, Father. The ordeal was as a child's game."

"How did you learn to milk water from dry ground? Did you learn the plants that are good for food from a stranger?"

"You instructed me in all these things and many more."

"Only your own heart can decide the question you ask me to answer, Mibutu. If your heart's prepared for the journey, your hands and feet equip you as well. If your heart wavers, your body will fail you. The heart that seeks approval isn't prepared for what such a journey might require. To give you permission would be to rob you of some small portion of your own will. It'd imperil you. If you're to make the journey, you must command your whole resolve, unmixed with consent. It matters not if any other man or woman understands your purpose. Only the man who owns his goal undamaged is worthy of its achievement. I'll not defile your purpose by giving it sanction."

Chapter 3

The tavern was dim, raucous with murmuring, clanking, laughing, thudding, and coarse motion. Mibutu's nostrils took in the pungent odor of beer and sweat. He felt stalking eyes from the moment he entered the dim, cavernous, echoing space. A busty barmaid smiled as she passed. Mibutu surveyed the crowd, studying it as he stepped forward and joined it. Unlacing his shirt until his bare chest glistened in flickering candlelight, he reached a hand to his head and pushed his neatly arranged hair into a disordered snarl. A huge, ragged mongrel lay on the bare earth beside one of the many heavy, rough-hewn wooden tables and Mibutu reached down to stroke its reeking fur. The thankful dog thumped its frazzled tail against the ground. Mibutu rubbed the creature's stench into his own skin and onto his shirt. He put his hands in the dirt and then wiped his soiled hands across his face. Standing and moving slowly through the mob, he felt no more of the stalking eyes. The barmaid frowned as she passed a second time, looking away as they met.

At the seller's table, Mibutu dropped two coins and walked away with a mug of beer, drinking as he walked and letting more liquid run down his chest and onto his shirt than into his mouth and down his throat. Familiar faces, sometimes startled at seeing Mibutu in the tavern, dotted the clumps of men. Some nodded hesitant greetings. Mibutu swallowed his sense of awkward shame and walked on until he heard the clinking of ivory on heavy wood. He stepped toward the sound. *I hope he's here*, he thought.

At a bulky table pushed against a wall he found the young man he had been looking for, tossing dice and drinking beer.

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The young man looked up.

"Mibutu! Haven't seen you since the ordeal. You'll wreck my concentration, walking up like that."

"I'm sorry. Didn't mean to—" Mibutu started, and then he edited the course of his words. "Didn't mean to give these other men an advantage. You need to keep a pile of coins until I can take them from you." Then he cringed at the thought that his words might chafe an old blister, a wound left over from the ordeal when Mibutu had come out on top in contests with this belligerent man who did not much enjoy being bested. Mibutu decided to play the card he had thrown and see how it went.

"Get in line, Mibutu. Other pockets're waiting to be emptied before I can empty yours."

Mibutu watched as the nervous rival rattled dice. He felt the coins in his pocket, his seed, and his chance to move his mission forward.

"You're grabbing the dice too fast!" one of the young men said when he lost a toss. "Wait till we've had time to count."

"Any fool can add that fast."

"But the light's no good!" the young man howled.

"No turmoil. No turmoil," whispered the others as if with one voice while other revelers paused to look, smiles fading.

"We can wait for the slowest. It's no problem. We can wait."

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The game continued. One after another, those waiting their turn to have their pockets cleaned turned their coins over to the young man. Mibutu measured beer with his eye as his friend consumed it.

It came Mibutu's turn to roll the dice. He laid his coins on the table beside an equal number of coins put down by the man who had won against the others in succession. Mibutu fingered the polished cubes. "Just like the ordeal," Mibutu said, provoking on purpose now. "Sure you're up to the contest?"

"I'm sure, Mibutu. The god who rescued us guides my hand when I roll the dice."

"Some things are left to chance," Mibutu said. "Why would the god who rescued us concern himself with dice?"

"He's strengthened my hand, Mibutu. Did you know that I've been honored, since the ordeal, to guard the grand council when it convenes?" He pointed at the table, urging Mibutu to roll.

"You're honored, indeed. Your family must be very proud of you. Not many are chosen for such high distinction." Mibutu threw the dice, counted the spots, shook his head, and handed the dice to the proud guard of the assembly.

"Of all the young men, only one hundred are chosen for the honor." He too tossed the dice, counted, and handed them to Mibutu, scooting his coins to Mibutu.

"The god who saved us guides my hand only when the stakes are high, Mibutu. Silver at great risk draws him to me."

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Mibutu put down half his coins and cast the dice. "It must be hard to keep the elders' meeting place a secret. The elders've entrusted you with a high duty."

"That they have, Mibutu. They know who to trust."

The dice rattled across the table again and Mibutu lost half his coins. Mibutu shook his head as he pushed silver toward his companion.

Mibutu dropped four coins on the table and said, "I'd think it'd be hard on the eyes to stand so long in the sun while the council meets at high noon."

"That's a myth," bellowed the man. "The elders assemble in the morning. The guards leave for the place before daylight, usually back in the city by noon. I won't roll again for that much silver. Add to the pile or I'm done with you."

"Does the sun glaring in your eyes—and the blowing wind—make it hard for you? Your eyes were sensitive to sun and wind during the ordeal. Your eyes must stay open when you guard the great assembly." Mibutu put the rest of his coins on the table and shook the dice in his hand.

"I can take as much wind as the next man. The sun's a bother, but I can take it. I'll not ask for a post on the other side, where the sun would be at my back. A guard of the assembly doesn't complain about his duty. Roll the dice. Your silver calls to me."

Mibutu rolled the dice and lost his last coins without a hint of displeasure or passion. This was the way of the people when

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they behaved as the people were trained to carry on.

"I'd buy you a drink if I had coins," said Mibutu.

"Drinks are on me, seeing there're no more comers and I seem to have all the coins."

"You'll need your rest. Surely you can't stand guard without sleep."

The guard looked at Mibutu, glassy-eyed.

"I'm abed by this hour when I have to rouse that early. Tomorrow I arise when the rooster crows and not a moment sooner."

Mibutu extracted his weighted dice from the table; replacing the original set without notice while the swaggering guard of the grand assembly of elders purchased another round.

Before the night ended, Mibutu knew the approximate distance to the elders' meeting place from the great city. He knew from the guard's backward flip of the head when he mentioned the great city that the city was to the young man's rear when he faced the rising sun in the eastern sky. The day of meeting would not be hard to discover. Mibutu would simply watch for the night when the guard retired early.

I'll visit the meeting, Mibutu thought. I'll learn the tally.

Chapter 4

Mibutu had discovered this patch of ground three days before the elders were to meet, but he did not know the day of meeting when he had found it. He had known that it must be east of the great city and remote. It had to have been at such a distance that guards could walk to it, wait for the assembly to finish its meeting, and walk back to the city within the span of time beginning at dark morning and ending before noon. The elders, he supposed, would ride in wagons, but the terrain of the place would have to allow access for elderly men. The location had to be remote.

Mibutu had sketched maps of the roads, oft-used paths, and farms east of the city. His callused feet had stepped off the distances. Of the few possible sites, this one showed the most promise. Evidence of traffic on the soil sanctioned Mibutu's opinion that this was the place. Even the arrangement of stout logs in a tight circle, not where nature would have put them by the thoughtless falling of trees, suggested crude order.

On the grass-covered hillside, not ten long paces from the edge of the coarse ring of logs, Mibutu had meticulously removed the sod and laid it aside. He had gouged out the trench in which he now reclined, arranged strong sticks across the shallow trough, covered them with an old cloth, and that with the grassy sod. The excavated soil and stone had muddied a lazy stream on the far side of the hill, observed only by molested fish. The guard had gone to bed early the night before.

Through his grass-shielded window, Mibutu watched the gray dawn swell sluggishly into morning. The muffled strain of

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singing birds and of the weak breeze were the only sounds. When Mibutu had first crawled in and pulled the last clump of wispy weeds over his face, his heart raced. Then time paused and demanded reflection because he had nothing else to do. Vigilance faded. His thoughts wandered there in that peculiar pocket in the earth where a man rested with his body and spirit united. Exhilaration had followed him into the hole and then giddiness replaced it after he felt safe. Then his impatience led to anger and courted doubts.

Maybe this isn't the place. It's possible that the day's wrong. He wanted to throw off the sticks and soil, to go home, forget the whole undertaking of dealing with the council on any terms, and get on with the journey west. *I'm trapped*, he thought, *and I've set the snare. If I move now and if they come I'll surely be in danger.* The thought held him there and made him tremble for a moment. Then he thought, *they're not coming. I'll wait until noon. I'll know it by the sun.* He settled for making this experience a trial run to see how long he could keep still in a hole.

His knee bumped the sticks and soil fell into his eyes. Mibutu thought again of the first man waking up to find that he had a mind. *What was it like*, he wondered, *for the first gifted man to open his eyes and to know how to think for the first time?* Mibutu closed his eyes and tried to picture nothingness and then open them as though it were the first time. *Did the first man know that the god who rescued him had put words on his tongue before the man had a woman to speak to? When he thought with words did it shock him to have them in his head?*

Mibutu began to rehearse The Great True Story in his mind, but not in the exact words of THE INSCRIPTIONS. His

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recitation was a simple narrative of the steady sequence of events beginning before the first man and connecting themselves to all living men and women. *The god who made us created the whole material world for sport, he recalled. He didn't love what he made except for the fun of watching it to see what it would do. This explains why he made the platypus with its bill, the zebra with its stripes, the bright orange fish, and so many other animals with showy feathers, spots, and ornaments that serve no other purpose. He created the spectacle of life and rock and water for his own pleasure. Man was just one of the creatures and on a level below most of them. The god who created us, whose name we must not know or speak, enjoyed watching the battles between his creatures.*

After a very long time, the god who made us grew weary of the game he'd made. He left the material world for long periods of time to go enjoy other diversions that men in the flesh could not understand were it told them. This too went on for a very long time. While he was away the animals would continue to fight and breed and struggle with no one to watch them. There was no intelligence in the earth in those days. Men and women were naked and savage beasts, with no reason behind their impulses to survive and reproduce.

The earth was turmoil then. The god who made us could find the earth, at the center of the material world, because of the turmoil.

One day the god who rescued us found the material world when the god who made us wasn't near to it. He watched the stars and moons and smiled at the clever thing that another god had made. Then he heard turmoil on the earth and came down to watch it. At first he took delight in watching, just like the god

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who made us had amused himself. After a very long time he came to fancy beauty and to scorn turmoil, but he hadn't the power to take away what was in all creatures.

There were dragons and monsters in those days and their numbers increased because there were no creatures to defeat them. Mankind was reduced to only a very few strong men and the women they protected in caves. While the god who rescued man was watching, the last men were killed and the last women starved in the cave, fearing to come out to gather food.

The god looked upon mankind with pity, so he decided to restore life to the last man. He didn't know how to make a new man, but he knew how to put a spirit into a body. He found the body in the dust of the earth, broken, and he breathed into it a spirit with intelligence.

When the first man with intelligence stood up, the god who rescued us made him master of the earth, told him to replenish it, to subdue it, and to govern it with wisdom. "And let there be no turmoil among the people, lest the god who made you find where I have hidden the material world and return you to the dust or make you, once again, a beast."

Mibutu heard a smothered snap. *Someone's near*, he thought. *A squirrel or a rabbit doesn't have weight enough to shatter branches when it walks.* Then a massive stag stepped into the clearing, proving that no human was near and that Mibutu's concealment was complete.

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Mibutu thought of his mistake in believing with such certainty that the sound had been made by a man. *Evidence can seem strong when we forecast what it'll mean*, he thought.

Chapter 5

The stag had ambled away, but rodents and birds had broken the silence many times. Once, a tree limb broke from a tree and fell to the ground of its own accord, leaving Mibutu in awe of the events without number that must happen every day in even the most remote places, unobserved by human eyes, pondered by no spirit. He had spent countless hours alone in the woods and meadowlands around the great city, hunting, collecting wild berries, and just wandering, but his experience in his windowed grave was different. Here, Mibutu observed while feeling that he was no part of the transaction. His mind was free here, locked away from stimulation and waiting for the noonday sun to end his experiment.

"The boundary is secure!" shouted a distant voice, and Mibutu heard it in almost the same detached manner in which he had heard nature playing out its drama. The truth dawned on him slowly.

They're coming!

The robed elders shuffled into view without ceremony, taking their places upon the rough logs. With only a slight turning of his head Mibutu could see each one in turn. Their voices were distinct, even from Mibutu's concealed place beneath the sod. The elder who had visited him sat so as to face Mibutu, even seeming to look straight at him at certain intervals when the elder was avoiding eye contact with peers. Five men sat in council while Mibutu looked on.

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Just as he had hoped, the elders spoke mainly of Mibutu's journey.

"We have thoroughly explored the young man's purpose," said one of the elders who Mibutu did not recognize.

Thoroughly explored? I'm the only one who fully knows my purpose and I've not told the half!

"He proposes to go off on a one-man crusade to find THE INSCRIPTIONS—alone, if we have it right. He claims to be a true believer with no other goal than to bring back fresh testimony for the people, to build faith in believers, and to convince the skeptical. His mother disapproves. The father is silent. What more do we have?"

"You have summarized well what the young man told me," said the elder who had promised to speak to the council as though he were Mibutu himself.

Close enough, but there's more! I must share The Great True Story with others who may not know it, who might provoke in their ignorance the god who rescued us. I want to satisfy my own heart. Why did they not invite me here to tell my own heart?

"We must forbid the journey," said one.

"We should merely say that we do not approve it," suggested another.

"What's the difference?"

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"To forbid the journey would introduce a precedent into our chronicles binding the hands of this and all future councils. The precedent would have to be overturned if we were to decide that it would be to our advantage to send someone into the west who could be trusted to return with reports consistent with our tenets."

"And to simply fail to approve it would be quite another matter," said the elder who had visited Mibutu. "We can enter the matter in the chronicles in such a way as to suggest that we were asked our opinion in a specific case involving a young man who seemed destined to die the death of an ambitious pilgrim. His lack of ability, lack of preparation, would serve as sufficient grounds to disapprove of the trek. What we put in the records should suggest that he was perfectly free to go if he chose to do so. What we announce to the public can be quite another thing. It could be written carefully. Placards could say that the council received a request and that it has been disapproved. No one will notice the difference."

Enraged by the chicanery of this elder who had posed as a friend, Mibutu felt his fleshly parts pressing him to throw off the sod and confront the pretender on the spot. His mind found dominion over the animal and then his face smiled in the darkness. *I'm going on the journey*, he thought. *It's not forbidden.*

"I say that we make no statement at all," said another elder who had been silent until then. "Time will settle the whole concern. He's of marriageable age. A wife and children will hold him here. And what would be so threatening if he were to go? If he's a true believer, perhaps he could thwart the

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fulfillment of the prophecy, or forestall it."

The prophecy. He can mean only one. The Writings speak of a great heretic who will come to the people from the west, turning the hearts of the people away from The Great True Story. Surely, if they believe the prophecy they'll see the urgency of telling The Great True Story to all who might live far from this place!

"The prophecy is doubtful," said one. "Some versions of The Writings insert the words 'I fear that' before the rest. The writer of those words probably meant only to say 'I fear that a great heretic will come from the west and turn the hearts of the people.' That's no more a prophecy than if he had said that he feared so many other things."

Mibutu saw the others looking at one another with mixed expressions. He had heard the debates about the prophecy many times. *They refuse to argue it only to avoid turmoil*, he thought.

"It would strengthen the people to have a witness from this generation. It would cause no harm," said the one who seemed youngest among the old.

"Why?" asked another. "What difference does it make? Does it really matter if THE INSCRIPTIONS even exist, inscribed upon stone? Belief is all that matters and we have that now. The people believe it. We have words on parchment that bring order and meaning to the lives of the people and to the community as a whole."

Standing up suddenly, another elder rose from his log and shouted, "It does matter! Our faith is vain and empty if there be

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not words in stone—"

"No turmoil. No turmoil," interrupted the others.

Mibutu was stunned that such variety of sentiment could exist among the leaders of the people, that even among the elders there flamed passion needing to be restrained in the very heart of their collective deliberations. All of this only strengthened his resolve to go out to THE INSCRIPTIONS, to bring solid faith back to the faltering people.

No other subject came up for discussion among the elders. By the time they left Mibutu alone in his crater they had settled upon the decision to announce rigid disapproval to the public—if Mibutu mentioned his journey again—and to eventually enter an altered version in the chronicles.

As the elders ambled away from the meeting place, Mibutu strained to focus his mind upon the new development, but his body demanded that he get off of the rock pressing into his back and find some suitable place to urinate.

An entertaining, thrilling philosophical adventure of humankind's search for truth, purpose, and meaning in life.

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