

Elias opens his eyes. The words are coming from the mouth of a strange man who is sitting on the bench next to him. His large hands are folded neatly on his lap, and his face seems perfectly chiseled. He looks like a pilgrim who has strayed here from ancient times. Elias finds himself wondering whether his journey to this place took him dozens or hundreds of years, and he is suddenly gripped by the feeling that both options are possible. But however long his journey may have been, it has not robbed the man of his spark. Elias observes him with curiosity, meeting his unwavering eyes. They don't seem to be searching for anything like those of Elias, and they never waver. They fully take in everything that happens before them, and anyway seem to give it little import, as if it wasn't all that important. How could it be? His silver iris could spawn a new star right now, and Elias would find it completely natural. He returns from the depths of the man's gaze and listens to him speak once more.

"I am Karlaz, a free man. I ask you again: What do you want?"

Who is it? Why is he asking me this? What kind of question is that – what do I want? What do I *really* want?

The torrent of thoughts starts forming into words and Elias opens up: "Just before you asked me, I had a thought. It was very different from the loudmouthed ones I know so well. She said that I must never waver from the search for my own path. She gradually faded and disappeared into the darkness. I would like to know more about this path she spoke of."

That was indeed what he wanted most at the moment.

"You mean about the path which you have lost?"

"Wait, what do you mean 'lost'? I don't remember losing any path."

"People often lose themselves and then don't even remember when and how it happened. Born into freedom and full of energy, they go out into the world to take the very first wide street at the very first intersection they encounter and make their way towards the biggest attractions. There, they lose

so much of themselves that they forget the path their soul was originally leading them towards. Old age finally robs them of the rest of their strength, and when, just before dying, they remember the direction they should have taken, they are out of time.”

Elias ruminates whether he himself is not lost in the world and is not like those people of which Karlaz speaks. He’s not like that though. He knows what he is doing; he knows where he is going. And what’s more, he’s seen enough of the world to know what’s what. No, no, how silly; he is certainly not at all lost.

Karlaz peers keenly at him and asks, “Do you doubt what I just told you, my boy?”

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His voice thunders at me, as if he could read my thoughts. He looks straight into my eyes and the strength of his gaze rips me outwards, beyond the confines of my body. He grasps my very essence and drags it to the farthest horizons of understanding. Through celestial trails, he carries me to the world beyond the Snow Line. There, he ejects me and I hang suspended above time and space. The emptiness rings with a piping which announces the coming of the Many. Fire birds descend from the sun which burns even brighter there than in our world. They come from above and penetrate my misty mind. They descend to the farthest recesses where I am forbidden to look, and their swords incinerate the dark strings of thoughts which suckle on my weakness. My inner canvas becomes illuminated. There is no longer room for the Dilettante, the Accountant or the Judge. They are cast out along with the other specters. The battle ignites my insides, and in one of the deepest recesses I spot a pearl. The silent girl whom I had been searching for is standing next to it. Her hair is woven into the light of the stars. Rescued from the darkness, she has become a young

queen. We clasp hands and she points with the other one towards the distance. There, knights clad in golden armor walk up steps which rise towards twelve gates of a Shining City. Dark figures slink towards them, but the stairways are forbidden to them. The knights walk through the Moon Gate, and they lay their pearls on an altar which sits squat next to a majestic tree. They all slowly sit down to play the Drums of Eternity and I see that they had finished all they had set out to do, lived a good life and their eternal return has been consummated. The distance between me and them is immense.

The image of the knights dissipates, and the queen draws my attention to the opposite direction. I see men and women walking a wide path, dancing and singing. They are joyful, but their dress is soiled, and they carry heavy burdens on their backs. She takes me farther away. Suddenly I see that there are myriad people like them. They are walking away from the Shining City and their path leads them downhill, where a different city stands. I am overtaken by fear, as I see many figures there roaming aimlessly. It is dark, and those living within its walls have not yet performed that which they set out to do. They are suffering, moaning. They did not live a good life and had not found peace. My guide takes me back to the crowd and I see myself. A bottle of wine in my hand, I laugh and dance. It's me! I can see myself better than if I were looking in a mirror. The clothes I wear are dirty, and the burden I carry is heavy, but I am joyful nonetheless, ignorant of the place I am headed towards. The queen speaks to me.

“Doing what is proper and true, that is the only thing that matters. Have you forgotten that your life has long been put up for wager? The game has begun and there is no path leading out of the Labyrinth of the World than up the Stairs of Truth. Do not wait one second, do not look back. Set out on your journey immediately and do not ruminate on what to take with you! Leave the wide path which so many people take. Those who have built it promise the

pilgrims paradise, while there is only suffering in store for them. It is an easy way, but a false one. Better to cover your ears and search for the narrow path which winds between the cliffs but always rises upwards. Those pilgrims who take it experience many hardships and their eyes will be tearful, but they will be fulfilled. They will reach the stairs which lead out of the Labyrinth. The Path remains hidden to many, and out of a thousand pilgrims, only a few would find it. But make no mistake: no one will be refused. You are made free, and so it is the choice of each man and woman which direction to take.”

I want to tell myself to turn towards the other path. I want to leave the path of the multitude and go in the right direction, to the place where I can find my pearl and bring it to the altar of the Shining City. The queen sees that her seed has been planted and fades into thin air. The image disappears along with her. The space around me starts collapsing. I wish to be strong.

But Karlaz averts his gaze and the burning phoenixes immediately leave me. Where before there was light, there is darkness once again. The force of the ocean pushes me out from the depths of my inner world. The gates have closed and the space around me crumbles. Two stars which had been cast to fly across the entire universe collide and I am caught right in the middle of it all. They explode, and everything beyond the Snow Line rips apart. I return to earth where the sun above the river seems to turn on an irregular spiral. I gasp for breath and try to get up, but weakness overtakes me. A surge of pain shoots from the base of my spine and my body contorts in a sharp spasm.