Coat

The herd was on the move. Something in him told him that even if nothing without did. On top of a butte surveying the edge of the great plain, he glassed the countryside with a cylinder that held a lens. He saw a languid river half-hidden by reeds and yellow, hip-length grass from the base of the butte to the horizon. The sun was obscured by the thick atmosphere, but rain was unlikely. Through the haze the landscape was dreamlike, but he had been here before. It was halfway to winter and they wouldn’t survive without making contact with the herd again.

The wind blew and he pulled his coat tighter around him and fumbled with the zipper. He looked at the zipper and remembered why it was that he was sent to find the herd while his wife and son remained with the tribe at the campsite with friends and fish and fire. He comforted himself thinking about all the generations who had done this before. Generations that existed before their history. Who had followed the herd with the same customs, different customs, strange customs. Who fashioned incomprehensible materials that were so simple. There was evidence of them. Some elders claimed they were a simple, natural formation, others said they were tools left by the creator. When he said they were left behind by a long dead civilization, there was silence. The next day they presented him with the silver cylinder that held the lens. Go, find the herd and we will follow, they said expressionless. That was five years ago. Every year after the feast of the solstice he was tasked with finding the herd. Every year he felt that the impassive eyes which watched him go held a hope that he would not return.

He wasn’t the only one who harbored these views, but he was the only one who expressed them. At first his wife humored him, then she gave in to the logic of his argument. His father had told him stories about the many different peoples who had lived on the plains and in the valleys where the tribe stayed in the summer picking fish from lakes and streams. He speculated about people living on far off continents. He said his father told him that his grandfather had once talked about these people and their cultures. But that it was illusory like a half-remembered rhyme. His father told him that they built great cities and towns on the rivers in the plains when they bent or converged. The proof was under the ground, you had to know where to look.

He climbed down from the butte casually placing his feet on the familiar holds of the near sheer face. It would not take him many more days to find the herd. He placed a stake in the plain for his tribe to follow and entered a cave.

Here things were protected from the elements. The sun barely slipped through the cracks and illuminated the back wall as if it was outside and dusk. A bent wheel with thin spokes twisted like reeds, aluminum cans, pieces of strange clothing almost completely disintegrated, plastic lighters and a toy dump truck lined the wall. He’s thought about the origin of these items so much he feels like he remembers where they came from. As he looks at them again it reminds him of his conclusion, the idea that separates him from the rest of his tribe. This is where the last members of the last civilization came before they reemerged and fathered the tribes and forgot.

There are footsteps outside. He feels for the long blade at his side. The cave darkens as a brown bear, thin from generations of famine, rears on his hind legs in the doorway. He draws his weapon and turns to face the bear who roars monstrously. It goes down on all fours and charges. The cave gets lighter, and he dives out of the way. The bear turns to look at him as he thrusts the blade under its skin under its shoulder at its heart. He removes the blade quickly so it doesn’t get stuck. The bear roars and turns toward him but falters and falls on its back gasping for breath as its chest expands emphatically. He stands facing the bear with both hands on his blade for ten full minutes. His eyes are wide and his heart is barely kept inside by his ribcage. For those ten minutes not a single thought passes through his mind. After his heart winds down it’s like waking up, he listens to the bear continue to gasp and rattle and he leaves.

He walks to the river. He found the blade half buried in the plain last year. Before he found it he had wandered the mountains and plains with only a short dagger, an extended arrowhead. He was sure the elders were withholding a more effective weapon. He removed the rust with a coarse stone and then sharpened the blade with it. The first of the herd he saw he killed with the blade. It looked the same as now, covered in almost black blood. He took the hide, tanned it, and fashioned a scabbard. The tribe came days later. He showed his wife the sword. She made him show the rest of them, reluctantly. Some said it was amazing what minerals there were to be found in the ground and how they were attracted to each other. Some said it was amazing how much the creator loved his creation to put such tools in the ground for him to find and use. And the same argument repeated itself. He said nothing.

In the river he washed the blade with water and reeds. He gave thanks to the ancestors before his ancestors who had left the blade. He returned it to its scabbard and saw that his coat was torn. When his father died he passed on the coat. It was his last act. It was a well-worn brown like his skin. It felt like the hide of an animal he had never seen before. There was a picture of something unidentifiable on the left lapel with unreadable writing circling it. It was a picture of a plane. The writing said, 101st airborne. He felt the despair of knowing the truth would be lost. It was the beginning of the end. He would pass it down to his son who would pass it on to his and the tear would get larger and larger like forgetting. The coat would be discarded in several generations, barely a coat at all, more a scrap of foreign leather. The truth would begin to seem ridiculous. They would dismiss their father or grandfather’s stories of an ancient civilization. They would choose another explanation for the artifacts and the people who left them would be truly forgotten.

He swam across the slow-moving river and followed its path east. The mountains receded behind him, and by the end of the day he found a hoof print in the riverbank. A day at most. The thick atmosphere began to threaten. The smell of rain permeated the air and although the sun was still two hours from setting, dusklight had set in. He trotted across the fields of hip length grass. He remembered there were boulders in the plain not far from here. He would pitch his tent under one.

As he jogged he almost tripped over a rise in the ground hidden by the grass. He stopped to look and dug at the ground with his hands out of instinct. Underneath there was a coarse gray stone and next to that, deeper, there the ground turned black and hard and cracked. They met at a right angle, a stone path and its raised edge. Maybe this was a town, he thought. No, a great city. He sat and imagined the people who lived here. What they did and wore and thought and made. He put his foot briefly on the black ground to feel what they had felt. It was cold. He trotted off again toward the rocks with a strange sense of satisfaction. The truth doesn’t need to be believed to be true.