

The Mountain of Mastery

Book 3 of the Elsebeneath series

by Juno Threadborne

For my son, Sam.

Chapter One: The Puzzle and the Stuck Sides

Sam sat on the back steps, turning the cube over in his hands like maybe—just maybe—this time it would make sense.

It didn't.

He stared at the colors. Red, blue, yellow, green, orange, white.

They weren't scrambled.

They weren't solved.

They were *stuck*.

He'd made it this far before—two sides done, clean and perfect. But the other four?

Always a mess. Always a mystery. Always just *barely* wrong.

He twisted one face—*click*.

Then another—*clack*.

Then paused.

Something didn't feel right.

He turned it back. Rechecked. Re-twisted.

"Ughhhh," he groaned, flopping backward onto the step. "I'm doing everything right."

The sun was warm. The air was quiet.

Even the birds seemed to be taking a break.

Sam didn't cry.

Didn't throw the cube.

Didn't give up.

But he did... *doubt*.

"Maybe I'm just not a puzzle person," he muttered.

He rolled the cube between his palms, listening to the tiny, ticking clicks it made.

He'd learned the tricks.

He'd practiced the moves.

He even knew the names—corner twists, mirror flips, moves that felt more like spells than steps.

He even made it *most* of the way, *most* of the time.

But lately?

Every time he tried to solve it, he just felt... stuck.

Like he knew the pieces, but not how they *wanted* to move.

Like something *inside him* was the part not turning right.

He closed his eyes.

The cube felt heavier now. Not physically.

Just... more important than it should've been.

He exhaled slowly.

The air shifted.

Just a little.

Not a gust. Not a whoosh.

A *nudge*.

He opened one eye.

The trees looked taller than they had a second ago.

The sky looked wider.

And the step under him—

—wasn't a step anymore.

It was **stone**.

Old. Weathered. Carved with symbols he didn't recognize, but felt like they meant something anyway.

He sat up slowly.

The cube was still in his hands.

But the yard was gone.

No fence. No swing. No birds.

Just sky, stretching far above him—soft purple and blue like the inside of a thought.
And ahead of him—

A mountain.

Tall. Jagged. Wrapped in fog.

It looked... *honest*.

Like it wasn't trying to impress anyone. Just *be*.

Sam stood up, brushing off his pants.

He looked at the mountain.

Then at the cube.

Then back again.

He didn't say anything.

Didn't need to.

Because somewhere deep down, maybe in his chest, he knew:

The mountain wasn't going to teach him how to solve the puzzle.

The mountain *was* the puzzle.

And he had already taken the first turn.

Chapter 2: The Trail of Tried Things

The path looked too clean. Like someone had swept it, then left it full of memory.

Small plastic balisongs, some snapped in the middle.

Even some half-built toy car tracks.

Yo-yos of all kinds. One of them looked just like his first yo-yo—the green one with the cracked cap.

He knelt down. Picked it up.

It still had a piece of string tangled around it. Faded. Fuzzy.

He turned it over in his hand.

“This one gave me a bruise. Right here.” He touched his shin.

Then he smiled, just barely. And set it down again.

He trudged on, cube in hand, watching the mountain stretch away like it was trying to stay out of reach.

He stopped.

Turned the cube once.

Once more.

The colors were still wrong.

“Why is everything so hard?” he muttered—not angry. Just... tired.

He kicked one of the yo-yos aside. It spun, clicked, then rolled to a slow stop.

The silence that followed wasn't quite empty.

It felt like the moment between a breath... and the answer.

“Because trying is hard.”

Sam jumped.

He turned.

A turtle stood behind him. Mossy hat. Knowing smile.

“Practicio?”

The turtle smiled wide.

"The very same," the turtle said, his mossy hat tilting with his grin.

"And I see you've made progress."

Sam looked down at his cube.

"Not much," he said quietly.

"Two sides is halfway. You'd be surprised how many stop at one," Practicio said with a little nod.

"Come. I want to show you where mastery *starts*."

He turned towards the mountain.

"See that? That's the Mountain of Mastery. You can only get there if you're determined not to quit."

Sam shook his head. "Is that why it's taking so long?"

Practicio nodded. "That's right. When you think you'll fail, you'll never get there."

"Have you ever made it?" Sam looked at him hopefully.

"Once. But I've never reached the top."

"Has anyone?"

Practicio patted Sam on the back and smiled. "Let's find out."

Chapter 3: The Climb of First Doubts

The path ahead was jagged. He could see the whole path—winding back and forth, sometimes looping over itself like a scribble someone had tried to erase and then changed their mind.

“This looks hard,” Sam said quietly.

Practicio was quiet for a moment.

“You’ve done hard things before,” he said. “But you’ve always gotten better.”

Sam didn’t answer right away.

He adjusted the cube in his hands. It felt heavier here. Not like plastic. More like stone. Or maybe it was just the idea of the climb pressing into his palms.

The first few steps were steep. The stone was worn smooth, but every so often, a small grip had been carved into the rock—like someone had tried to make it easier. Not easy. Just... possible.

They walked.

Sometimes the path narrowed to a breath’s width. Sometimes it widened into ledges scattered with odd little shrines—stones stacked in threes, a single sock pinned under a rock, a page from a book weighed down with coins.

No one else was climbing.

But the mountain didn’t feel *empty*.

At one point, Sam paused at a flat patch with a circle of footprints baked into the dust.

“Someone waited here,” he said.

Practicio nodded. “Or turned around.”

They kept climbing.

The wind picked up—not cold, just *curious*. Like it wanted to know what they were doing here.

Sam didn't talk much. He was thinking.

About the cube in his hands.

About the mountain under his feet.

About how this place kept showing up when he didn't know what else to do.

Eventually, they reached a ledge wide enough to rest. Sam flopped down onto the stone, breathing heavily. Practicio sat beside him with the kind of sigh that only very old turtles know how to do well.

They sat for a while.

And then Sam looked up.

The clouds had parted just enough to show what lay behind them. Not everything. Not the Islands. Not the way back.

But far below, nestled between the rising cliffs and curling fog, Sam saw it.

The Valley.

He recognized it immediately. The soft bends in the path. The garden rows. The shadow-ringed grove. Even the crooked little shed, puffing its steady trail of smoke.

He leaned forward.

"That's where I was," he whispered. "That's where I got the—"

He stopped, checking his pockets.

The watch. The seed. The shard. The chart.

Still there.

Still quiet.

Still waiting.

He looked down at the valley again. It looked so small from here. So gentle.

“Practicio,” he said slowly, “what is this place?”

The turtle didn’t answer right away.

He picked up a small pebble, turned it over in his hand, then set it down again.

Then he said:

“It’s called the Elsebeneath.”

Sam turned to look at him.

"It's everything you carry when you're not sure you can keep going. The doubts. The tries. The pauses. The parts of you that want to give up—and the parts that *don't*."

Sam looked back toward the valley.

“And the island?”

Practicio smiled.

“Where you land when you think you’ve failed.”

He looked at the mountain above them.

“But the Elsebeneath isn’t a punishment, Sam. It’s not where broken things go.”

He turned to Sam, voice soft now.

“It’s where you go when you’re still becoming.”

The wind blew softly. Sam held the cube in both hands and turned one face.

Click.

Something inside him clicked, too.

And the climb wasn't over.

But it felt a little less lonely.

Chapter 4: The Shrine of the Start-Overs

The mountain curved inward, then outward again, like it had forgotten which direction it was supposed to be going. The path here was quieter. Less dramatic. Less eager to prove itself.

Sam slowed down without meaning to. Not because he was tired. But because something here was... strange.

It wasn't the view—though that had shifted. Clouds hung lower now, like sleepy thoughts.

It wasn't the air—though it smelled like warm dust and old glue.

It was the *sound*.

Soft clicks. The occasional *clatter*. The kind of noise that happens when someone is trying something new and hasn't yet decided whether they've messed it up.

"Careful," Practicio said, gesturing ahead with a stubby hand. "This part of the mountain's still figuring itself out."

Sam blinked. "The *mountain* is?"

Practicio shrugged. "Aren't we all."

And then—

They saw her.

Or maybe they saw her *shrine* first.

It was impossible to tell where the stacks ended and the structure began. Wobbly towers of toy blocks. Dolls with half-embroidered faces. Bent paperclips. Mismatched socks bundled into tiny cushions. A violin string wrapped gently around a broken watch.

And in the middle of it all: **Tilda.**

Sitting cross-legged on a stool that may have once been a lamp, wearing seven layers of pouches and a pair of goggles strapped too tightly over her eyes.

She didn't look up.

She was sewing a piece of fabric that kept unfolding—longer than seemed possible, with no end in sight.

"Hello?" Sam tried.

She didn't answer.

He stepped closer. One foot crunched something.

The noise made her freeze.

"Oh *dear*," she said softly, "you didn't step on the *almost*. Did you?"

Sam looked down. "The what?"

She lifted her goggles.

"The green one. Sort of... twisty? Like someone tried to braid a scarf and gave up halfway?"

Sam moved his foot. Beneath it was a tangle of yarn and pipe cleaners shaped like a lopsided helix.

"Sorry," he said.

She waved it off. "Oh no, don't be. That one's very forgiving. Was made during a thunderstorm. Full of static and good intentions."

Sam looked around. The longer he stared, the more he saw.

The shrine wasn't a junk pile.

It was a **history museum.**

Just one no one had ever finished curating.

“What is this place?” he asked.

Tilda finally looked at him. Her eyes were bright. One of them might’ve been glass.

“This,” she said, “is the Shrine of the Start-Overs.”

She gestured with a paintbrush missing all its bristles.

“Every one of these,” she continued, “was left by someone who started. Who tried. Who reached the middle and said, ‘perhaps not today.’”

Sam turned to Practicio, who had settled comfortably on a rug made of mismatched felt squares.

“She’s been here a long time,” he said. “Longer than anyone knows. She remembers the pieces most people forget.”

Tilda smiled proudly. “Some people come back for their things. Others don’t. But they all mattered.”

She tilted her head at Sam’s hands.

“Is *that* yours?”

Sam looked down at the cube.

“Yeah.”

“Would you like to leave it?”

The question wasn’t sharp.

It was like someone asking if you needed to take your coat off. Not because it was hot—just because you’d looked a little tired from carrying it.

Sam hesitated.

“I’m not... done with it.”

Tilda nodded. “Then it’s not done with you.”

She dug into one of her pouches, pulled out a pencil shaved nearly to nothing.

“This belonged to someone who couldn’t finish a poem,” she said. “He came back years later. Said he finally understood the second stanza. Left behind his lunchbox instead.”

She offered the pencil to Sam.

“Trade?”

Sam shook his head. “I don’t want to give up.”

“Oh, darling.” Her voice didn’t mock him.

“Neither did anyone else here. That’s the point.”

She leaned in slightly.

“Sometimes we put things down not because they don’t matter, but because we need our hands free for the next part.”

Sam looked at the cube.

He thought of the move he always did when he got stuck.

Twist, flip, reverse. Over and over again. It didn’t fix anything. Just comforted him in a loop.

He turned the cube slowly.

Paused.

And *undid* that move.

It left the cube messier than before.

But he *felt* lighter.

He didn’t leave the cube.

But he left the move.

Tilda clapped gently.

“Ah! A *shed pattern*! Beautiful. That one’s going to hum when the light hits it just right.”

Practicio chuckled.

Sam smiled, even though he didn’t understand.

They walked on.

And the wind behind them sounded like applause made of scissors and glue.

Chapter 5: The Shortcut of False Progress

The path curved around a steep rock wall, climbing up in slow switchbacks.

Sam's legs were tired. Not *hurting*, really—just that kind of tired where you stop looking at the view and start looking at how far there still is to go.

He didn't complain.

But he didn't talk much either.

Ahead, the main trail wrapped around another bend, disappearing behind a chunk of stone.

And off to the side—

A second path.

It wasn't even marked. Just kind of... *there*.

It cut straight through the rocks. Smoother. Wider. Not as steep.

Sam stopped walking.

"Hey," he said, pointing. "That one looks faster."

Practicio caught up, blinking behind his glasses. He looked at the shortcut, then at Sam.

"It is," he said simply.

Sam squinted up the slope. "Have you taken it before?"

"I have," said Practicio. "Long ago."

He didn't say anything else.

Sam stepped toward it. The ground here wasn't as rocky. It didn't twist or wobble under his feet. It just *went*. Straight up. Like it wanted him to keep going.

He took a few more steps.

And for a second—it felt *great*.

Like getting a question right on the first try. Like jumping two stairs at a time. Like maybe he was actually *good* at climbing.

He smiled.

But then he glanced at the cube in his hand.

He couldn't remember what he'd just done with it.

Like—he knew he'd turned it recently. He always turned it while walking. But now?

It looked the same.

He turned it again.

But it didn't change.

No new pattern. No new color where there wasn't one before.

It was like the move hadn't counted.

He furrowed his brow and tried again. Same turn. Same cube.

Still nothing.

Sam stopped walking.

The shortcut kept going—but suddenly, it didn't feel like a path anymore. It felt like one of those moving walkways at the airport, the kind that makes you think you're making progress even when you're not.

He tried another turn.

Still nothing.

His chest tightened a little.

Not in a panicky way.

Just that sinking feeling you get when you realize you've been working on something without *actually* working on it.

He turned around.

Practicio was still back at the fork, sitting now, poking gently at a rock with a stick.

Sam walked back down the shortcut. It didn't resist. It didn't help either. Just... stayed smooth.

When he stepped off, back onto the main trail, the cube suddenly felt different.

He turned it once.

The pieces moved.

Colors shifted.

The shape changed.

Like progress had returned.

Practicio looked up as Sam sat beside him.

"That path was weird," Sam said. "It felt like I was moving, but the cube didn't care."

Practicio nodded.

"It doesn't. That shortcut skips the parts that help you grow. The parts that teach you where the pieces go."

Sam turned the cube again, slowly this time.

"Have you really been on it before?"

Practicio smiled faintly.

"I have. I took it once when I was younger. Got farther up than anyone I knew. Felt proud for a while."

He leaned back a little, watching a bird flap past like it had forgotten where it was going.

“But the next time I tried to help someone else? I didn’t know how. Couldn’t explain anything. I’d missed the hard parts. Missed the turns.”

He looked at Sam.

"It turns out, the slow parts aren't just slow. They're where you *learn*."

Sam didn't say anything right away.

He just nodded.

Turned the cube again.

And for the first time in a while—he could feel it changing.

Chapter 6: The Song That Shows the Way

The mouth of the cave looked like the mountain had taken a breath and then held it for a thousand years.

No sign. No warning. Just an opening of smooth stone, half-curved like the inside of a shell. Sam peered into it, holding the lantern Practicio had lit with a match that smelled faintly of cinnamon and dust.

The light reached maybe five feet.

Beyond that—only suggestion.

Practicio didn't speak right away.

Sam stepped forward.

The sound of his foot scuffed the stone.

But it didn't echo.

Not even a little.

He stepped again. The same. The cave didn't seem to *swallow* the sound so much as *soften* it—like someone had wrapped the air in cotton.

Sam took a few more careful steps. The tunnel curved, then curved again. The light wobbled across uneven rock.

Then the path split.

Three directions. All identical. All waiting.

Sam turned in place, holding the lantern high. It flickered a little in the chill, trying its best.

"Well," he muttered, "I guess I could just try one."

He picked the middle path and walked five steps.

The air shifted.

Not colder. Just *less clear*. His hand started trembling, and the lantern shook too.

Step.

No *echo*.

Step.

No *light past your own*.

He turned back.

The fork was gone.

His chest tightened. “Practicio?”

No answer.

“Practicio?”

Still nothing.

He turned a slow circle.

And then—

A note.

Soft. Delicate. Hanging in the air like a single thread catching moonlight.

Not words. Not a melody. Just... *recognition*.

Sam turned toward it.

And there she was.

Perched on a smooth rock that leaned out from the wall like a stage built by the stone itself.

Thimble.

Same piano-key feathers. Same nervous little flutter. But this time... her scarf was tied with confidence. Her eyes were steadier.

Sam blinked.

"I—I thought you were back in the valley."

Thimble smiled gently.

"So did I."

She fluttered down beside him, talons clicking softly.

"This place doesn't move in straight lines."

She tapped the wall with her wingtip.

"It listens. But only if you *listen first*."

Sam looked back into the dark.

"I don't know where to go."

"I do," Thimble said. Then she blushed slightly. "At least, I think I do."

"But you have to help me sing."

She pulled out a slip of paper. Faded. Worn. The same one she'd given him on the island.

Only now—it had more lines.

Sam stared.

"You finished it."

Thimble tilted her head.

"Not alone."

She began to hum. Softly. A few shaky notes. Then she stopped.

“No... not like that.”

She closed her eyes. Took a breath.

And then—she sang.

Just a few lines. But they *fit* the cave like a key fits a lock.

The sound *traveled*. It curved. It came back—not with words, but with *shape*. Sam could *feel* which direction was right.

He tried to hum along.

He was off.

Thimble gave him a kind look. “Slower. Let the walls sing back before you start again.”

Sam nodded.

Together, they sang.

Practicio reappeared around the bend just as the second echo returned.

“Ah,” he said with a smile. “Resonance. You’ve found it.”

For the next stretch, they moved by melody.

Each time they sang the phrase just right, the sound echoed in the right direction. Not like magic. Like sonar. Like the cave was mapping itself in response to their trust.

At one point, the tunnel narrowed.

Practicio had to shuffle sideways.

Sam took the lead.

He hummed a single line.

The cave *agreed*.

He stepped forward.

“I didn’t know a song could... guide you,” he whispered.

Thimble answered softly:

“When I first wrote it, I thought it was just for me. But it never echoed right until someone else sang it too.”

The melody carried them the rest of the way.

The cave grew brighter—not because of sunlight, but because of memory.

Sam could feel it: the end of the tunnel. The beginning of something else.

One last hum. One final echo.

And then—

They stepped into the light.

Chapter 7: The Towers of the Climber

The ridge was quiet.

Not silent. Just... *careful*.

Every sound Sam made felt bigger here. The shuffle of his shoes. The click of the cube. Even Practicio's breathing had softened, like the mountain was asking them to tiptoe.

They came around a bend, and Sam stopped.

The path opened into a wide ledge—flat as a table, with the sky stretched out behind it like a second sea.

And right in the middle of it all—

Towers.

Dozens of them.

Stones stacked in impossible columns. Balanced on edges thinner than paper. Some were taller than Sam. Some bent sideways in slow, impossible curves. None of them moved. Not even in the wind.

Sam whispered, "Whoa."

Practicio gave a tiny nod. "You're not the only one who climbs."

Then Sam saw him.

A figure crouched near the far edge of the ledge. Small. Steady. Horns curved back like question marks. Patches of gray fur dusted with chalk.

The goat was turning a single stone over and over in his hooves—checking the weight, brushing off dirt, tapping it against his horn once, twice, listening for something only he could hear.

He hadn't noticed them.

Or if he had, he was pretending he hadn't.

Sam took a step forward.

The goat's ears twitched.

Another step.

The goat carefully slid the stone into place—high on a tower already taller than him—then backed away with almost painful slowness.

Only once the stone had settled did he finally speak.

“That one took me seven tries.”

His voice wasn't proud. It wasn't tired either.

It was *measured*.

Sam took another step. “They're amazing.”

The goat didn't look up. Just said:

“Please don't get too close. If the air shifts wrong, they'll all come down.”

Practicio settled onto a nearby rock. Said nothing.

Sam stayed where he was.

“Do you live up here?” he asked.

The goat shrugged. “It's quiet. And the rocks are better.”

Sam nodded. “Do people come to see them?”

The goat snorted, just barely.

“No. I don't let them. Not anymore.”

Sam frowned.

“But... they’re incredible. Don’t you want people to see what you’ve built?”

The goat finally looked up. His eyes were sharp. Not mean—just... sharp.

“If they see them, they’ll want to touch them. Or ask how I did it. Or—worse—they’ll say something nice. And then I’ll start wondering if I’m only good because someone said so.”

He went back to polishing a stone.

“So I build alone. And I keep them standing.”

Sam sat down. Not close. But not far either.

He didn’t speak for a while.

Then:

“I’m trying to solve something,” he said. “It’s a cube. It’s hard. But when I’m around other people... I mess it up.”

The goat didn’t answer.

“But I want to share it someday,” Sam added. “I think.”

The goat paused.

Then placed another stone on a smaller tower nearby.

“Then don’t wait too long.”

Sam looked up.

“Why not?”

The goat didn’t meet his eyes.

“Because the longer you build alone...
the scarier it gets to show someone what you’ve made.”

He stood slowly, stretching his back with a quiet crack.

“If you wait until you’re perfect, you’ll never be ready.”

He turned toward his pack—a small, faded canvas thing tucked beneath a flat stone.

Next to it sat **a second stool.**

Tiny. Carved. Covered in dust.

Sam noticed it, but didn’t ask.

Didn’t have to.

The goat reached for a smooth, unfinished stone—and stopped. Just held it for a second.

Then placed it gently back in the bag.

Sam stood, too.

The cube was in his hand. He turned one face. Then another.

He looked at the goat.

And smiled.

“They really are amazing.”

The goat blinked.

Then, very quietly:

“Thanks.”

Just one word.

But Sam could tell it landed *somewhere*.

He walked back toward Practicio.

They didn’t speak until the towers were behind them.

Then Sam said:

“I think I get it now.”

Practicio raised a brow. “What’s that?”

Sam looked at the cube.

“The point isn’t to be perfect.
It’s to be ready to share it anyway.”

Practicio smiled.

They kept climbing.

The trail narrowed as they went on, curving tightly along the edge of a sheer cliff.

Up ahead, it split again.

Not like the shortcut. This time, it was nature deciding, not convenience.

The left path was thin. Too thin for a shell, even a careful one. The right path wound lower before curving back up around the cliff face.

Practicio stopped.

Sam looked at the narrow path.

Then back at the turtle.

Practicio smiled softly.

“I’m not built for ledges like that.”

Sam nodded.

“You’ll catch up?”

Practicio gave a slow blink.

“I always do. Eventually.”

Sam looked at the path ahead.

Then at Practicio again.

Then started walking.

And for the first time since the mountain began, his steps echoed *alone*.

Chapter 8: The Wind and the Whisper

The path was narrow.

Not dangerous. Just *quiet*.

No birds. No towers. No voices.

Just Sam.

And the wind.

It tugged at his sleeves like a kid trying to ask something without words. It wasn't cold. It wasn't warm. It just... *was*.

Sam didn't speak.

Not at first.

He walked.

The stone beneath his feet had changed—flatter now, worn smooth, like it had been walked by a hundred feet before his.

He turned the cube once.

Click.

Then again.

Clack.

And then—

A whisper.

Not a word.

Just a sound. Small. Doubtful.

He froze.

“Practicio?” he called.

But he already knew.

It wasn’t him.

The wind carried something else.

“What if I’m only good when no one’s watching?”

Sam turned.

No one was there.

He turned the cube again. The move felt sloppy. Wrong.

“What if I’ve just been lucky?”

He took a step forward. The wind followed.

Not chasing. Not leading.

Just *with* him.

Another whisper:

“What if you’re just wasting time?”

Sam gripped the cube tighter.

He didn’t run.

He didn’t yell.

He reached into his pocket.

Pulled out the mirror shard.

Held it up.

It caught the wind like it was catching breath.

Sam stared at it.

Not at his reflection—there wasn't one, not really.

Just a shimmer. A suggestion. Like the mirror didn't show you *what* you were.

It waited for what you'd say.

So Sam spoke.

Quietly. Like he was still deciding whether he meant it.

"I don't know if I'm good at this."

The mirror shimmered.

The wind shifted.

"But I know I'm not done."

A second pause.

Then, almost in a whisper of his own:

"And I don't have to be the best to keep climbing."

The wind eased.

The next turn of the cube felt smoother.

The wind picked up behind him—just a little.

Like it was pushing him forward.

And Sam kept going.

Not to prove anything.

Just to *keep going*.

Chapter 9: The Ridge of Resting Fears

Sam had reached a resting place—narrow but flat—near the top of the mountain. Practicio had taken another route at the last fork, too wide for the ledge.

Now it was just him.

The light was fading.

The wind was *not harsh*—just present. Like it was waiting with him.

He set the cube down beside him.

His pockets were full.

Each item weightless, but meaningful.

He looked back.

And from here?

He could see everything.

- The trail of trinkets below.
- The Valley of Yet-Stills.
- A glimpse of the Island of Almosts, just *barely* visible—like a smudge of memory on the horizon.
- The cave behind him, the place of song.
- The cairn where he had added his own star.

Sam let out a breath.

“I’ve come a long way.”

But then—silence.

Too much silence.

He realized he was alone.

What if Practicio doesn't find the way?

What if he falls?

What if I'm the only one left climbing?

The silence started to turn.

Sam pulled the mirror shard from his pocket. Looked into it.

Maybe it flickered. Maybe it reflected just his hands holding everything—cube, shard, seed.

He started talking aloud.

"It's okay to be scared. I think I'm scared.

I think... I miss him.

I think I don't want to do the rest alone."

No one answered.

Until—

"Neither did I."

Practicio's voice—quiet, steady.

He was coming up a winding side trail that joined the ridge.

Sam leapt to his feet. "You made it!"

Practicio sat down heavily, shell brushing the stone.

"I always do. Eventually."

Then he looked at Sam, and there was something new in his eyes. Not just kindness.

Understanding.

“You know... a long time ago, I climbed this mountain for someone else.
I thought if I could reach the top, they’d believe in me.
I didn’t make it. I got lost.
But... that journey still brought me back. It showed me who I wanted to walk beside next.”

Sam listened quietly.

Practicio placed something on the ground between them.

Maybe it was a trinket from *his* own early journey—a small cracked compass, a toy wheel, a square stone etched with a star.

“I thought I’d buried this. But here we are again.”

They sat together.

The wind picked up slightly.

“It’s okay to rest,” Practicio said.

“You’ve climbed more than most ever do.”

“But we’re not at the top yet,” Sam replied.

Practicio grinned. “No. But now you know how to get there.”

Chapter 10: The Turn of Practicio's Path

The sky was thinning.

Not in color—but in distance.

The summit was close now. Sam could feel it in the air. The wind had gone quiet again—not gone, just... *watching*.

Practicio slowed down.

Sam didn't notice at first. He was focused. Steady. The cube in one hand, his feet finding each foothold like the mountain was answering him now instead of challenging him.

But then he looked back.

Practicio had stopped.

Sam walked down a few steps. "You okay?"

Practicio blinked slowly.

"Yes."

Then he shook his head.

"No."

He sat down on a flattish rock, carefully adjusting the mossy hat that had traveled with him all this way.

Sam sat beside him.

The silence was different now.

Not uncomfortable. Not heavy.

Just... *honest*.

"I've been here before," Practicio said.

Sam waited.

"I made it this far once. Almost to the top. But I turned back."

Sam's eyebrows pulled together. "Why?"

Practicio didn't answer right away.

Then:

"Because I wasn't climbing for myself. I thought... if I reached the top, someone else would see me differently. That I'd finally be *enough*."

He chuckled, but it didn't sound very funny.

"Turns out, it's hard to reach something when your heart's looking the other way."

Sam looked down at his cube.

Then at his pockets.

He reached into one—the left side. The one where he kept things that weren't about *solving* anything.

He pulled out the crumpled, muddy poster.

YOU'RE STILL MOVING, AND THAT COUNTS.

He smoothed it out the best he could and held it out.

Practicio blinked.

Then smiled, just barely.

"Zoomie's?"

Sam nodded.

“Maybe it’s your turn to carry it for a while.”

Practicio took the poster gently.

Folded it with careful fingers.

Tucked it under his shell.

Then stood.

Not fast.

Not suddenly brave.

Just... ready.

“Thank you,” he said.

Sam smiled. “You helped me when I didn’t know how to keep going.”

Practicio nodded.

“Now you’ve helped me remember why I started.”

They looked up.

The summit was just ahead now.

No more riddles.

No more shortcuts.

Just a little more sky.

And they climbed.

Together.

Chapter 11: The Loop of the Wrong Move

Sam took a step.

Then another.

Then another.

Then—

“Haven’t we been here before?”

Practicio said it first, but Sam had already noticed.

The path bent in a familiar curve.

There was the same scuff mark in the rock.

The same tuft of grass shaped like a question mark.

The same... bird?

It blinked at him.

Flew in a circle.

Landed in the same spot.

Sam turned the cube in his hands.

Right face. Top face. Back face.

Something clicked.

Then un-clicked.

He tried a different move.

Left face. Inverse top. Double twist.

The pattern shifted—then collapsed again.

Still wrong.

Still familiar.

Practicio had gone quiet.

Even the wind felt stuck.

Right face.

Top face.

Back face.

Sam sat down.

Looked at the cube.

“What if the right move is the wrong one?” he whispered.

The question landed in his chest.

He looked at the path.

At the loop.

At everything he thought he knew.

And for the first time—

He didn't turn the cube.

He turned **himself**.

Took a breath.

Then did the one thing he always avoided:

Flip. Side. Spin. Twist. Break the pattern. Drop the rule. Leap.

The cube shifted.

The pieces moved in a way he hadn't asked for—but they moved.

He looked up.

So had the mountain.

The loop was gone.

The path had cracked open into something new—**not paved**, not easy, but *his*.

Practicio stepped up beside him.

“You didn’t solve it,” he said.

Sam shook his head.

“I stopped trying to.”

They looked toward the summit.

One step left.

Just one.

Chapter 12: The Summit of Stillness and Stars

The path ended without warning.

No archway. No sign.

Just a last flat stretch of stone.

Sam and Practicio stepped onto it together.

And for a second, Sam waited for something big to happen.

Lightning. A trumpet. Maybe one of those flags you see in hiking pictures.

But none of that came.

Just air.

Wide and clear.

The summit wasn't what he expected.

There was no prize waiting. No secret trick. No magical burst of light that made everything make sense.

There was only this:

A still, shallow pool in the center of the stone.

Round. Smooth. Just deep enough to hold the sky.

It looked like water.

But something about it felt older than that.

Like it remembered things.

Practicio stopped a few steps away.

Sam walked closer.

The surface didn't ripple.

It didn't glow.

It just reflected.

But not his face.

Not exactly.

He saw:

A pencil, worn down to nothing.

A cracked yo-yo.

A page of music with his handwriting on it.

A poster.

A seed.

A mirror shard.

And a cube—his cube—sitting in his palm.

Not solved.

Not perfect.

But different now.

When he turned it, the pieces moved together in a way they hadn't before.

They weren't falling into place.

They were following.

He looked at it for a long time.

He hadn't finished it.

But it didn't feel unfinished.

It felt... understood.

He glanced down at the water again.

The reflection was still there.

But it wasn't copying him.

It was showing him the weight he carried—and how none of it had stopped him.

Sam reached into his pocket and pulled out the **mirror shard**.

Held it above the pool.

The shard caught the sunlight and flickered.

The pool caught the shard—and stayed still.

One sharp. One whole.

Both reflections.

Both true.

He sat down beside the water.

He didn't feel like celebrating.

He didn't feel like shouting.

He felt like sitting.

And maybe that meant something.

After a while, he held up the cube.

Practicio looked at it. "You're not done with it."

"No," Sam said. "But I don't think it's done with me either."

Practicio nodded. "That's how you know you've learned something."

They stayed like that a while.

The wind came and went.

And Sam realized—

This wasn't the end of anything.

It was just the first time he knew where he stood.

“You made it.”

Sam turned.

At the far edge of the summit, barely more than a silhouette against the sky—

the cat.

The one from the valley. From the ridge.

From the constellation he couldn't finish.

She was perched on a smooth stone, tail curled neatly, telescope charm glinting like a quiet star.

Her voice was soft. Familiar.

“I told you the stars would show up eventually.”

Sam didn't say anything right away.

He looked up at the sky.

It was brighter now. Not bursting. Just open. Clear.

The kind of sky that had made him stop, and doubt, and climb anyway.

He smiled.

The cat smiled back. Just a little.

Then turned toward the horizon again.

Still watching.

Because that's what she does.

And now?

So does he.