

Physics would only get him so far. That much he knew. He tried to focus, tried to remember he was top in his class, that the High Adare' Ramroth himself had guaranteed him a job if he passed this test. Numbers crunched in his mind as he struggled to make sense of the probabilities.

He was standing at a crossroads. The wooden signpost had faded with the seasons and he could not read any of the weathered script. The path to his left was well worn. The track lay deep and the trees on either side hugged it intimately, reaching across the top to link arms. It smelt like a fayre's sweet embrace. The track to his right was all but frozen over. The sky above it was heavy with snow and sleet, the path almost unrecognizable, but he thought he could see the end if he stared through the bad weather for long enough.

He closed his eyes for a moment to think. He had to find someone who needed his help. He searched his pockets and found half a flask of water and a steel ring. The ring belonged to a man who needed his help. He looked at the woodland path once more before heading into the blizzard. The shortest path would have to do.

The snow crunched beneath his boots and the icy wind tugged at his robes. It felt so real, he thought, and he clutched the ring tighter. Very quickly, the cold became almost impenetrable, ice clawing at his lungs, and he slowed, falling to his knees.

*I've chosen the wrong path*, he thought, gritting his teeth against the pain. He looked up and could see what he had thought was the end of the path now. It was a door sprung from the mirage where ice met air and he made toward it with what little energy he had left. It took a long time and he was exhausted by the time he pulled on the handle. He collapsed onto warm, hard ground and lay there for a while, waiting for the heat to awaken his numb limbs. When at last he stood up and surveyed his surroundings, he found he was at the crossroads again. He felt frustration rise within his chest and he balled his hands into fists, stalking off down the woodland path.

He could keep up a good pace on this road. There was enough light streaming in from above, enough shade to shield him from the bright star, no loose rocks or gnarled roots hindered his progress and he made good time. After the fourth hour of walking though, he began to feel a nagging doubt. Had he chosen the right path this time? How could it be the wrong path? The hours dragged on and he stopped. When he looked back and then forward again, he could not tell the difference. Was this a trick? He dared not close his eyes to think for fear of forgetting which direction he was headed in.

He had a few options; he could continue walking and hope the hours would not turn into days, or he could venture into the woods that lined the path and risk getting lost forever. He took the last sip from his canteen, knowing he had already made up his mind. He had been finding paths since he was three years old and he would not let a group of old wizards stop him from pursuing his passion.

He took a few deep breaths, expelling the frustration within him as Maya had taught him to do, and looked for an opening along the road. It took about five minutes till he found a space where the trees cleared a little and he could move amongst them. There was no path here, but he walked on nevertheless. It felt good, walking amongst the trees along an

unmarked route. This was *his* path; he had found it. He would find the man who needed his help, he was sure of it.

In that instant, his feet left the ground and his essence fell back into his body with a force that made him jolt and bite his tongue. He half-sat up, tasted blood, and looked around him wildly.

‘Please, calm down,’ came a voice from behind. The voice was joined by a gentle hand on his shoulder pulling him back down into a horizontal position.

‘What about the man? I have his ring,’ Nolan said, feeling in his pockets for the trinket but finding nothing. A strange confusion settled over him then and the voice’s face came leaning into his line of site. It wore a kind smile.

‘What you are feeling is the after-effect of the memory we implanted,’ the man said kindly, ‘it will feel like it is a part of your memories, but the feeling will pass. It takes time for your brain to separate one memory from the next.’

‘Oh,’ Nolan replied, his head sinking back into the head rest. ‘Did I pass the test?’ he asked. The man chuckled lightly, and Nolan could hear him tapping away at his glass monitor.

‘What do you feel you learnt at the cross-roads?’ the man asked. Nolan frowned. The memory of the man who needed him still felt very real and he was having trouble focusing on the ceiling above him. It looked...odd.

‘Ummm - I learnt that I must not choose paths but find them,’ Nolan answered absentmindedly, regurgitating lines from his textbooks. Silence greeted him and he sat up, turning on his reclining chair. The ceiling was making him nauseous. The shock of what he saw then hit him hard. The man he was talking to had no body, and the monitor he was working on was attached to nothing. Nolan turned back suddenly and saw that the only solid part of his surroundings was the chair he sat on, the upper parts of the wall where it met the ceiling and the ceiling itself. It was an illusion and someone else’s perception of reality had made his detail-orientated mind muddled. He had responded with active nausea which now threatened to become his breakfast all over the floor which did not exist.

‘The test continues?’ Nolan asked the levitating head, remembering to keep calm – this was just an exam after all, he was in no real danger.

The head smiled reassuringly and repeated his question; ‘What do you feel you learnt at the crossroads?’

Nolan swung his legs off the chair and tested the invisible floor. He chose not to answer the head; it was obviously pre-programmed to ask the same question over and over. The endless black beneath him seemed solid enough and he put all his weight upon it, holding the edge of the chair for safety. It was an overwhelming sensation. Floating in a world of darkness, not knowing which way was up or down, not knowing if you were going to fall at any moment or not. They had taken his senses away and he could feel panic leap in his chest. He concentrated his thoughts on Maya’s lessons, the breathing. It worked. He looked back at the smiling head again, before taking his first few tentative steps into oblivion.

He knew he just needed to stay focussed. The examiners would never place his life in peril or his mental well-being at risk. He just needed to redo the crossroad tests; he had evidently missed something.

The calm and rational thoughts left him after the third day. Nolan found many more cross-roads and walked many more paths. Some he walked for a few minutes and some lasted for what felt like an eternity. He had no one but himself and the smiling head every time he came back to the same room to be asked the same question.

*'What do you feel you learnt at the cross-roads?'*

*'What do you feel?'*

*'The cross-roads?'*

*'Do you feel you learnt?'*

*'What do you feel?'*

*'At the cross-roads?'*

He dealt with himself and all the emotions he thought defined him in the first few weeks. He traced the emotions back to the thoughts that created them in the months that followed and when he finally found the path led only to himself, the part of him he thought needed rescuing; he found the way home.