

The Cord of Babel

—There are not enough words in the English language for wind. The higher I climbed, the more the frigid breath of the sky sent me rolling through the endless blue.

It seemed a cruel joke played on my kind. Avians like I, in generations forgotten, joined countless other species in ascension. We grew and gained anthropomorphic forms, obtaining wits beyond our feral brethren. Yet, we avians alone gave much to achieve it, taloned hands replacing our wings, forever taking from us flight.

—It was found in a valley near Mount Kailash by a very lost hiker. At first, it circulated only in conspiracy circles like a photo of ghosts, any truth of the matter intentionally obfuscated by the powers that be. However, an anomaly so close to such a frequented spot soon became too much to hide. The convocation of evidence grew too great to refute. It stretched every scientific law and theorem, new ones birthed in desperation to make sense of the impossible object. Initially, I did the same, believing it nothing beyond the bounds of reason or logic. I was incited by its innate defiance of these tenants, driven to explain it in terms I understood. Only in its study did I realize the pointlessness of my task.

—I reached Lake Manasarovar long after the cord became common knowledge. Already tensions between the religious pilgrims of the sacred place and the spellbound foreigners seeking to study the anomaly. With the last of my money, I collected what I would need for the long climb.

At forty pounds, the pack would try my strength on the long trek. Mostly water and food, I bore the weight. I prepared to take things slowly, comforting myself with the knowledge that the burden would lessen over time.

I spent the night in a cheap hotel with an ominous bloodstain on the wall. In the old bed, I lay awake for hours, wondering if I would ever return, if I would want to. My migraines were getting worse; I suppose it would make little difference whether or not I came back. That I would even go seemed the only choice I had left.

There is liberation in having no plan for return. I could give this task my all; be without fear of consequences or responsibilities.

—Waking before the sun rose, I started into the mountains as amber sunlight shone in the east. The light stained the snowy peaks in brilliant orange and gold as if fire were flowing down from the sky. Even with a week to acclimatize, hiking through the high altitude of the Himalayas took the air from my lungs. Though trained with climbing, hiking proved an unfamiliar test, my feet sliding on the scree and heavy pack leaving me unbalanced. Winds blew down from the snow-capped peaks like a coyote's cry, biting through my jacket, feathers, and skin.

As I crested over a short peak, I was accosted by a sudden gust, leaving me pivoting on my claws to regain balance. When the air no longer blinded me, I looked out across the azure expanse of open sky, towering mountains stretching out below. The sunlight danced across the deep-blue depths of Lake Manasarovar, a small crowd already walking knee-deep into the water, praying before hurrying back to the warmth of the temple.

I stopped briefly by the rocky shore before leaving. Fed by the Kailash glacier, the water tasted pure, but so cold it quickly put an ache within my beak. The Hindus at the temple believed the waters sacred, so pristine that drinking them would purge one of all sins and impurities. I gave no credence to the old tales, but a claim of health and peace would do me well. With a sigh, I continued, admiring the decorated *kos minars* along the trail. The unknown and unexplainable drove many to faith. When the unexplainable announced itself as clearly as the anomaly, and so close to a sacred site, it caused many to believe it a sign from higher beings.

After three hours of hiking, I finally summited a ridge and saw the object nestled into a valley between the mountains. It was small and hard to see, but unmistakable and alien. I walked closer as if in a dream, my eyes to the ground. Somehow, I felt that luck would damn me now that I was so close. I was struck by a sudden fear and hesitation to look at the anomaly, its strangeness creating a foreboding. Would it not be real? Would it live up to the myth I had created in my mind? Would my body fail before I could even touch it?

It seemed a dream, a numbness dulling both body and brain. I forgot the burning ache in my muscles, the cold sweat dripping from me, the fatigue weighing on my every move, and the ever-present pain inside my head.

A chain-linked fence stood around the object, rattling slightly in the wind. Standing around it were a number of pilgrims and sightseers. Scientists and photographers took notes, monks performed rituals of reverence or purification, all staring in stunned disbelief. I froze as I came so close, the object shocking my every wit. Eyes trained on the line against the sky, I took a moment to enjoy the pleasant scent of incense and offerings from the monks, listening to an eerie throat-song from a Bon-monk. In pictures and from a distance, I had seen this very scene, but it still struck me to come upon it with my own eyes.

Hanging down from the cloudless sky was knotted cord. An ancient, sinew rope hung from the endless blue. Not affixed to anything above, it reached beyond the eye, tied with knots as if to be climbed. None knew when it arrived, but inspection told that stretched beyond the tentative ranges of the Earth and into the starry infinite. Twirling around the ever-moving Earth, astronomers predicted it reached towards the Hoag's Objects Galaxy, but possibly beyond into millions of light-years of black, perhaps even to the end of the universe and beyond.

The sciences each strained in their own directions but turned up nothing with which to explain the object. In defeat, they fell silent, some admitting their failure, others quietly struggling in vain for any explanation. As soon as I laid eyes upon it, I knew there was none to be found. For as impossible as it was, it was equally mundane; a cord hanging from infinity, untouched by the forces of nature or reality. Many had sought to scale it already, most falling to paste from great heights, many never returning, and a few descending with nothing or everything to say.

Wondering which I would be, I walked past the warm scent of ceremonial candles, and the dull ringing of brass bells. The fence was already torn asunder, so I stepped over the last visage of mundanity. The rope hung tethered by a large granite boulder half-buried in the ground. The stone had lain in the mountainside for uncountable millennia, the object freshly tied to it. Blackened burn-marks scarred the top of the rock, worsening near the tip where the stone melted into a hole as if unearthly lightning bore through it.

With an air of reverence, I climbed the rock, gently touching the hole through which the rope was tied. Several chanted prayers for me as I gripped the cable, the line tight with upward tension. Curiously, there was writing woven into the cord, Chinese characters I could not understand spiraling upwards beyond legibility.

Mountain air filled my lungs and chilled my core as I gripped the rope and took a deep breath. I would not allow myself to return once I started; there would be no point. No matter what, I had precious little time left. In my last breath, I savored my final moments on this earth. All the pain and tiny pleasures seemed amplified. My legs ached from the walk and a jagged black pebble lodged itself in my shoe. Men and women sung and worshipped in honor to the heavenly object, their words sincere, if confused. Wind carried a mournful howl over the slopes and valleys. All around, the Himalayas stood immense and proud across the horizon. The black, glacier-capped, Mount Kailash gleaming in the rising sun, once the tallest point for miles, now supplanted by an alien cord.

It felt surreal, and I was not ready, but I would never be. Before I had time to reconsider and regret, I jumped from the solid ground and onto the rope. For a moment, I closed my eyes and felt weightless, dangling from cable like a spider.

Afterwards, it was disappointing. Without intent to come back, I knew everything was different. Everything had changed; nothing had changed. I remained in the valley, still felt the breeze, and still smelled burnt meat; now, only from half-a-foot higher.

Tarrying would bring me nowhere, and I had precious little time, so I began my ascent. I would not fall back to the earth like a stone; so, I took care to secure my climb. At all times, I made sure at least one carabiner secured my harness to the rope. Once I locked a new latch above a knot, I could undo the lower and take another step up. I closed my talons tightly around the cord and felt my harness tighten as I leaned into it. My legs burned from the strain and my body felt unbearably heavy as I hoisted myself up. Even so, my few weeks of intense training paid off, and I lifted the weight with better assurance.

Hanging from the harness felt wrong. Every instinct told that the rope would not support my weight, that the harness holding my waist and chest was unnatural. I was a bird, I ought to fly on my own wings. Why was I tethered by thin ropes and straps just to lift myself from the earth.

Only a few meters off the ground, the winds seemed far stronger than on the ground. The chill bit deeper into me, any exposed skin flushing hot and red, beak throbbing as warm air left it. Gusts roared in howled and inflated my hood, causing me to sway disquietingly on the wind.

The work soon left me exhausted, my breath burning in the back of my throat. I wanted to prove my ability, if only to myself, rushing up the rope with all my strength. Sweat soaked my underclothes, freezing uncomfortably against my skin. Soon, pushing myself too far, I stopped to catch my breath, unable to rise any further. In truth, I was embarrassed to succumb to human weakness in full view of the observers.

Afterwards, I found a rhythm to the climb. Lifting myself slowly, I took a single breath of rest after each rung. At that pace, I could cover considerable distance without breaks. I put on gloves when my scaled hands grew raw, wiped my nostrils when the cold made them run. With only the static blue above, I fell into a trance as I rose ever higher. Eventually, thirst gave me pause.

Sitting back on my harness, I rationed sips of water and looked down. Hundreds of meters above the ground, I looked out at the late-afternoon sun beginning to fall golden in the sky. Looking down should have scared me, the rocky terrain so lethally far. Instead, I found it beautiful, the snowy peaks glittering like diamonds below, the greater mountains still looming above. Was this how my ancestors saw the world on the wing? Like petals floating on a grey sea, I could make out temples and pilgrims by the lakeside and around the base of the rope. Already, they looked like ants; they and the world wholly separate from me.

With bittersweet resolve, I looked back at the rope and continued upward. Over the distance, the words along the cable gradually transitioned from Chinese characters to English. Most were gibberish, a seemingly random string letters and spaces. “*da n uwNDa8 3da.*” But occasionally, a word or sentence would be formed from the babble. “*4dwa Repose wd8.*” Like monkeys at keyboards, the letters strung on randomly, sometimes forming something meaningful. I know not how much was written along the light-years of rope, perhaps everything was or would be said could be found if one looked far enough.

“Kandata had but only one good deed to his name; once, whilst wandering through the forest, he avoided stepping on a spider in his path.” Read one, preceded by meaningless noise, and followed by twenty-seven letter ‘d’s. As I read, I shivered in the growing dark and decided it a fine place to rest.

All three carabiners secured me well to the cord; I produced a thicker jacket for warmth. Wrapped in a feathery sleeping bag, I watched the mountaintops turn amber and the lower lands shift to darkness. Above, the skies took on similar hues of gold, red, and blue in the setting sun. If not for the jagged line of mountains in the distance, heaven and earth seemed to melt and blend. Slightly higher the glacial peak of Kailash, supposed home of Lord Shiva.

Clouds gathered around the darkening sky. They flowed past swiftly like waves on the ocean surface. A steady stream of air accompanied occasional gusts that shook the cord like a twig. Hanging within it, the gathering front looked otherworldly. Swathes of grey whirled around like monochrome ink caught in a turbulent river. Haze blocked sight around me, the clouds rushing past in an endless, ghostly veil.

Sleeping at twenty-two-thousand feet proved difficult. The harnesses dug into my ribs, and the constant swaying made me nauseous. Rocking me meters side to side, the winds roared in my ears and buffeted my sides. I smelled hot iron, soon realizing it blood. Frigid air dried the skin on my face where beak met skin. Ice crystalized into frost around my eyes and nostrils. Cold clawed deeper, piercing coats, flesh, and core. The darkness of night fell around me and temperatures dropped below zero. Physically, I was prepared for all the wrath nature would throw my way. But, survival and comfort were different states.

A half-moon watched brightly above the pale snow, a blue eye staring coldly across the land. Clinging desperately to life, I hung from an inexplicable cord over a mile in the air, drifting into dreams in which I could still only question the nature and destination of my journey.

— All that has drawn me from my musings are the passing of small birds, riding the winds and flying past me. I must appear strange to them; one has abandoned their place in the sky. Yet, I found myself jealous. I cursed the mind my forbearers had traded for their wings. I wanted nothing more than to fly weightless, unbound by concepts of entropy or annihilation.

Were I asked, I could not say what I hope to find up the cord. There may be nothing. I may die miles above my world. It matters little if find some grander truth, for that was never my intent.

Most of my existence is spent being dead or not yet born. It was not until it became fleeting that I realized how much of my time was wasted. In my last few days, I wanted to do something exceptional. Yet faced with something so alien and beyond understanding, an anomaly beyond mortal ken, I am forced to wonder if such a thing is even possible. What mortal can be exceptional, when given the scale of their existence? All can do now is continue to climb and observe.