

The Unconnected Roots

The  
Unconnected  
Roots

By Sandeep Rana

## **Dedication**

*To all the wanderers who got lost chasing dreams.  
And to those who found meaning in the unknown.*

## **Acknowledgements**

This book would not have been possible without the unwavering support of my family, friends, and the readers who continue to believe in the power of imagination. Special thanks to the creative minds who helped shape the world of *The Unconnected Roots*, and to my early readers for their invaluable feedback.

## Preface

There are places that don't exist on maps—hidden realms where time blurs and memories echo louder than voices. *The Unconnected Roots* began as a whisper, a fleeting thought about what lies beyond the visible world. It evolved into a journey—a personal and fictional exploration of being lost, trapped, and ultimately awakened.

This is not just a story of fantasy or suspense. It is a metaphor for every moment we feel stuck in life, unable to move forward or backward. The protagonist's mysterious entrapment in a shifting world mirrors the psychological loops we all fall into.

The river, the mountain, the forest, the ruins, and the swamp—each of them are not just geographical directions but emotional stages. The treehouse becomes the mind itself, a place of shelter, confusion, and discovery.

*The Unconnected Roots* It's the beginning. The roots go deeper, and the journey continues.

Thank you for opening the pages of this world.

— **Sandeep Rana**

## The Dry Spot in the Storm

It was a cold night. The sky thundered loudly, like gods and demons were waging war above. I found myself in the middle of a forest. There was no shelter around—nothing to keep me from getting soaked.

That's when I saw a tree. But this one looked... strange. It seemed to have four legs. The thick trunk was supported by what looked like massive roots, raised two feet above the ground. The tree's bark was dark and gnarled, as if it had been twisted by something unnatural. A low hum seemed to emanate from it, vibrating through the air.

"Thank God, finally—a place I can hide," I whispered to myself and rushed toward the tree, desperate to escape the deluge of rain.

But as I approached, something didn't feel right. The air felt heavier, almost oppressive, as though I were stepping into a place that was not meant for me. The tree's eerie presence seemed to pulse with an ancient energy.

I stepped closer. And then I saw it.

The ground between the tree's roots was completely dry. Everywhere else, water poured and pooled from the heavy rain, but not here.

"What the hell... how is this possible? This patch is at ground level too, yet not a single drop of water?" I muttered, confused and uneasy. I couldn't look away. It was as if the tree itself was creating its own bubble of reality, untouched by the storm.

I took a step forward, feeling the dryness under my feet. "This is too strange... but maybe I'll be safe here."

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As soon as I stepped fully into the patch, the world around me shifted. The sound of rain ceased. The weight of the storm seemed to evaporate.

I stood still for a moment, absorbing the strange calm. But something wasn't right.

Suddenly, I heard a cracking sound—a branch snapping somewhere close. I jumped to my feet, heart pounding. I spun around, my breath coming in quick gasps, but everything appeared still.

“Must be some other tree's branch. Damn this monsoon,” I muttered, trying to convince myself. But the unease gnawed at me. I turned back to the tree, hesitating before stepping back into the dry patch beneath its roots.

The moment I did, a shiver ran down my spine. The rain started again, but it never touched the dry space where I stood. It was like the world was split in two, and this one place was untouched by nature's fury.

“Is this an illusion?” I thought, my mind racing. “Am I losing my mind? Or is this tree... special?”

I shook my head. “No, no. I'm just tired. I need to get out of here.”

I closed my eyes, trying to clear my head. The soft hum from the tree seemed to lull me into a strange calm. Within minutes, I fell asleep, curled up in the dry space beneath its roots.

But something woke me.

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I felt water—cold, soaking water—begin to seep beneath me, slowly flooding the dry patch. My eyes snapped open. I shot to my feet, heart hammering in my chest.

The ground was completely dry.

I stood frozen, staring at the dry patch beneath me. The air felt thick with something unexplainable. "What... what the hell is happening?"

A sudden, unsettling thought gripped me—this wasn't just a tree. This wasn't just a dream. There was something more to this place. Something that didn't belong here.

That's when I heard it.

"Wait, son," a voice called out from behind me.

I spun around, startled, to see an old man standing in the distance. He was tall, with a light beard, and despite the heavy rain, he stood firm, as though unaffected by the storm.

"Who... who are you?" I asked, my voice trembling.

The man's eyes were calm, almost knowing, as though he'd been waiting for me. "What are you doing here in the middle of the night?" His voice was gentle but firm.

"I... I lost my way," I stammered. "I was looking for shelter. But—this tree..." I didn't know how to explain it. "I don't understand what's going on."

The old man took a step forward, his eyes never leaving mine. "Come under my umbrella," he said, his voice soft. "You're soaked through, and this rain won't stop anytime soon."

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I hesitated, then nodded. “Thank you.”

As I approached, I felt the air around me shift again. The tree behind me, with its eerie hum and strange dryness, seemed to watch us, its branches creaking as though alive.

The old man’s umbrella shielded us from the rain, but as I walked beside him, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I wasn’t leaving the tree behind. Something was pulling me back, toward it. Toward the unknown.

“Are you from around here?” I asked the old man, trying to distract myself from the creeping unease.

He glanced at me, his face unreadable. “No,” he replied softly, “I’ve been here a long time.”

As we walked together, I couldn’t shake the strange sensation that had settled in the pit of my stomach. The old man walked with a calmness that felt almost too serene for the chaotic storm surrounding us. His voice was steady, but I couldn’t ignore the nagging feeling that something was terribly wrong. The tree—that tree—loomed in the corner of my mind, its strange power pulling at me.

I glanced up at him, and that’s when it happened.

His face—his face—began to shift. At first, I thought it was just my imagination, but then it became undeniable. His features warped in subtle ways. His once clear eyes seemed to stretch, the skin on his forehead crinkling in unnatural patterns. His mouth, which had been kindly smiling moments ago, now twisted in a way that made my heart race. It was as if his face was being reshaped by something outside his control, something darker.

I froze, my blood turning to ice.

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His height seemed to change too. He stood taller now, his frame growing more imposing with each passing second. The umbrella in his hand trembled, its handle twisting like a snake, almost as if it were alive. I backed away, my body refusing to obey my mind. I couldn't look away from the horrific transformation happening before me. The wrinkles on his face deepened, and his skin became a sickly gray, almost as though it was decaying right before my eyes.

I stumbled backward, my breathing becoming shallow and erratic. "Wh—what's happening?" I whispered to myself, my voice trembling with fear. His lips curled into a grin that seemed too wide, too predatory.

"Come closer, Shivi..." His voice was no longer warm, no longer kind. It was a low, guttural growl, dripping with something sinister.

I gasped, turning on my heels and running without thinking. My legs moved faster than I could comprehend, my heart racing in a panic-driven blur. I had to escape, had to get away from this... thing that was pretending to be a man.

I didn't know where I was going, but my feet carried me on instinct, straight back toward the only thing that had ever made me feel safe, or at least... real—the tree. The four-legged tree. Its gnarled trunk loomed ahead, standing tall and ominous against the storm. The dry patch beneath its roots still looked untouched, as if it was waiting for me to return.

I reached the tree, stumbling to the dry ground under its roots, and threw myself back into the strange, dry refuge. The sensation of the earth beneath me felt grounding, comforting even, compared to the twisted presence of the

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man behind me. I turned back, half expecting him to be right behind me, but there was nothing.

Only the howling wind and the pounding rain. And the eerie silence that surrounded the tree.

I couldn't bring myself to look away from the spot where the man had stood moments ago. Had I imagined it? Or had he truly... changed?

I buried my face in my hands, trying to steady my breath, but the image of that thing—whatever it had been—haunted my mind. I felt as though I were caught between two worlds, one where this was all just some twisted nightmare, and another where something dark and ancient had woken up and was coming for me.

I closed my eyes, trying to shut out the terrifying thoughts, but the image of the tree, with its twisted roots and eerie presence, was burned into my mind. I couldn't leave. Something told me that if I did, the man—or whatever he was—would find me again.

And this time, I wouldn't have anywhere to run.

I was exhausted, my body trembling from the relentless running, my mind clouded with fear and confusion. My legs ached, my chest heaved with every breath, and yet I couldn't stop. Every step I took felt like it was carrying me farther into some abyss—into the unknown.

But then, something strange happened. The panic that had fueled my flight started to fade. The pounding in my head began to soften. My breath, which had been ragged and uneven, slowly evened out. I didn't understand it, but my body felt... heavy. So heavy.

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I blinked rapidly, trying to keep my focus, trying to stay alert. But the exhaustion was overwhelming. The dry patch beneath the tree, once comforting, now felt like a sanctuary. A strange kind of peace began to settle over me, dulling the fear and making my limbs feel like lead.

I wanted to stay awake. I wanted to stay alert, to be aware of everything around me. But my eyes refused to stay open. The rhythmic sound of the rain, the cool breeze brushing past, and the soft hum of the tree seemed to lull me into a daze.

My head drooped. I told myself to stay awake, to not let the darkness take over. But the weight of my own body, the sheer exhaustion from the terror and running, was too much.

I don't remember when I stopped fighting it. I don't remember the exact moment when the world around me blurred and became distant, as though I were watching it from behind a fogged window.

And then, just like that, I was asleep.

I didn't know when it happened. One moment I was trembling, eyes wide with fear, and the next... I was gone. My breath deepened, my muscles relaxed, and the sharp edges of fear and confusion faded into the quiet of unconsciousness.

I slept in the dry patch beneath the roots of the tree, unaware of the storm still raging around me, unaware of the shadows that watched, waited, and whispered in the silence of the night.

I didn't know what to make of it. The moment I woke, there was no mistaking the shift in the air. The storm, the

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forest, the strange tree—none of it was there anymore. I lay on my back, staring up at a wooden ceiling, the faint smell of fresh timber filling the air. The ground beneath me wasn't the dry patch under the roots anymore. It wasn't the rough earth I had come to know. No. I was on something soft—almost like a mattress or a cushion—covered with a woolen blanket.

I sat up slowly, a dull headache pulsing behind my eyes. I rubbed my temples, trying to gather my thoughts, but confusion had already set in. Was it all just a dream? The man with the changing face, the eerie tree, the strange pull toward it—all of it felt so real. Too real. And yet, now I was here, in what seemed like an entirely different world.

I took a deep breath, and my eyes scanned the room around me.

It looked like a small wooden cabin of sorts, but it wasn't like any house I had ever seen. It had a rustic charm, with thick wooden beams that stretched across the ceiling, and walls adorned with simple, hand-carved furniture. The air inside was fresh, as if it had been cleared by the natural surroundings outside. Through an open window, I could see rays of sunlight piercing through the trees, casting a soft, golden glow on everything it touched.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed, my feet meeting the cool wooden floor. The room was sparse, almost minimalist in its design, but there was a sense of peacefulness to it. A small table was tucked into the corner, with a single chair beside it. A few books, some old and worn, lay stacked on the table. There was a small fireplace on the far wall, cold and unused, but it seemed well-kept. Above the fireplace, a shelf held simple trinkets—carved animals, small vases, and what looked like a collection of smooth stones.

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I rose to my feet, my legs slightly unsteady, as if I'd been lying down for much longer than I could remember. I stumbled toward the window, instinctively wanting to look outside, to orient myself.

The moment my eyes fell on the view, I froze. It was a scene unlike anything I had ever seen before, so breathtakingly beautiful that it took my breath away.

Below me, stretched out as far as the eye could see, was a river. Its surface gleamed under the morning sun, a soft silver sheen rippling with the current. The water moved lazily, meandering through the landscape, carving its path around the smooth, rounded stones that dotted its bed. The riverbank was lush with greenery—wildflowers, tall grasses, and dense clusters of trees that leaned over the water, their branches swaying gently in the breeze.

Beyond the river, rising majestically like a titan, was a massive stone mountain. Its jagged cliffs loomed high into the sky, covered in patches of dark green moss, and partially shrouded in a light mist that seemed to rise from the river itself. The mountain's peaks were sharp and imposing, yet they had an undeniable beauty, as though they had been sculpted by time itself. The early morning light bathed the entire scene in a soft, golden hue, making it appear almost magical.

I could hear the distant chirping of birds, the kind of peaceful, melodic sound that spoke of a place untouched by the chaos of the outside world. The air was crisp, fresh, and calming—nothing like the damp, cold, stormy night I'd just endured.

I blinked, unsure of what I was seeing. My heart began to race again, not from fear, but from something deeper. Something was off, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

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How did I get here?

The last thing I remembered was running—running away from the man who had changed his form, away from the tree, back into the forest. But now, I was in this strange, serene place. A wooden house. A treehouse? The more I thought about it, the more disoriented I became. This didn't feel like reality. Was I dreaming? Had I passed out somewhere and been carried here?

I stepped away from the window, my mind racing. I needed answers. There had to be an explanation for all of this. I walked across the room to the door, cautiously opening it, and stepped outside.

I was standing on a small wooden platform, the floor beneath me creaking softly with each step. The platform was surrounded by wooden railings, and beyond that, the landscape stretched out before me in its full, unblemished beauty. It was as if I had stumbled into a world untouched by human hands. The trees were ancient, their trunks thick and gnarled, their branches reaching upward like the arms of silent giants.

I slowly walked toward the edge of the platform, peering down at the ground below. The house—or whatever it was—was built high in the trees. I could see the thick branches supporting it, intertwining with the trunk of a massive tree that had become part of the structure itself. The house was perched within the canopy, hidden from the world below.

There was no sign of anyone else—no footprints, no trails, no other human presence. It was eerily quiet, aside from the sound of the river, the rustling of leaves in the breeze, and the occasional chirp of a bird. The air felt almost sacred, untouched by time or modern life.

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I stood there for what felt like an eternity, the feeling of being watched creeping up on me once more. But this time, it wasn't the same fear I'd felt before. No, this time, I was filled with an overwhelming curiosity.

I wanted to know what had happened. Why was I here? Was this some kind of dream, some kind of trap, or something else entirely?

I forced myself to focus on the moment, trying to keep my thoughts in check. I glanced around, looking for anything that could explain what was happening. As my eyes fell on the ground below, I noticed a small trail leading into the forest. It wasn't much—a few loose stones and broken branches—but it was enough to catch my attention. Someone had been here. Someone had passed through.

Without thinking, I began to follow the trail, my curiosity outweighing the fear that had gripped me earlier. The morning light filtered through the trees, casting dancing shadows on the ground as I made my way deeper into the forest.

I hesitated at the edge of the wooden platform, staring down at the narrow trail that disappeared into the dense forest below. The sun was still rising, its light filtering through the leaves in golden shafts, but even in the daylight, there was something about that forest... something that made my chest tighten. My feet itched to move forward, yet my heart held back.

As I began to descend the wooden staircase spiraling around the massive trunk, the memory of that man—his face shifting like melting wax, eyes that held a void deeper than night—clawed its way back into my mind. My breath quickened. My fingers trembled against the wooden railing.

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I tried to shake the image away, but his presence felt stitched into my thoughts.

What if he was still out there?  
What if this was all just part of his illusion?

I reached the forest floor, my shoes landing silently on the soft bed of moss and leaves. The narrow trail beckoned like an invitation I couldn't refuse. Every step forward was met with a battle inside me. My curiosity urged me ahead, but that lingering fear—subtle yet firm—whispered caution into my ears.

The trees here were taller than those I'd seen before, their roots rising from the earth like the limbs of sleeping beasts. Sunlight peeked through the canopy in fragmented patches, and though the world around me was silent, it was not peaceful. The silence felt... listening. Watching. Almost as if the forest was aware of me, sensing my intrusion.

With every crunch of twigs beneath my feet, my mind conjured him—that man. I could see the way his back hunched unnaturally, how his voice came in dry rasps like something dead trying to breathe. I remembered the way his skin had started to change, wrinkling, stretching, folding upon itself like cloth twisting in slow motion. It hadn't been a hallucination. I saw it. And when I'd seen enough, I ran. I ran as fast as I could back to that strange four-legged tree... and after that, darkness.

But if I had escaped him, how had I ended up in that wooden treehouse?

That question circled my thoughts like a vulture, picking at my confusion. Had he brought me there? Had someone else found me? Or had the forest itself decided to cradle me?

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A sudden rustle to my right made me freeze. My heart leapt to my throat. I turned slowly, my breath caught in my chest. But there was nothing. Just trees and shrubs, and the slow sway of branches above.

I shook my head. Stop imagining things, Shivi. You're just scared.

But fear has a way of growing stronger in silence. And this forest was feeding it like fuel to a fire.

Still, I walked.

Because as terrifying as the thought of seeing him again was... not knowing the truth was worse.

I turned back from the forest trail, unease gnawing at my thoughts like tiny invisible teeth. My stomach growled—loud and sharp—reminding me of a more immediate need. I hadn't eaten in... I didn't even know how long. The tension and fear had masked the hunger until now, but suddenly it hit me like a wave.

I climbed the stairs back into the treehouse, footsteps a little heavier this time, the strange silence of the forest pressing against my back. The wooden floor creaked softly under my weight as I stepped inside. The air was warm, slightly scented with pine and something sweet—maybe wild herbs or old wood.

I walked over to the small table near the window, where a few books still lay. Next to them, I spotted a small wooden bowl. Inside it were some dry fruits—almonds, figs, and raisins—neatly arranged, almost as if someone had prepared them just for me.

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Beside the bowl was a copper jug and a clay cup. I poured myself some water, the coolness of it shocking my parched throat as I drank.

I sat by the window, slowly chewing the dry fruits, still unsure if I was a guest here... or something else entirely.

As I chewed slowly, letting the sweetness of the figs and raisins soothe my empty stomach, my eyes wandered—almost unconsciously—back to the small stack of books on the table. There were four or five of them, all old, their covers worn and faded, as if they had been leafed through many times before. Some titles were written in strange, curving letters I couldn't immediately recognize, while others had no titles at all—just plain, dusty covers.

A thought struck me like a sudden gust of wind: Maybe there's a clue in them...

A clue to how I got here.

To who brought me here.

To what this place really is.

I wiped my hands on the edge of the blanket and pulled the nearest book toward me. It was lighter than it looked, its pages yellowed but well-preserved. A faint scent of old paper and dried leaves rose from it as I flipped it open.

My pulse quickened.

On the very first page, in neat, hand-written letters, was a single sentence:

"He who sleeps beneath the tree of shifting roots shall awaken where the past still breathes."

I froze, my fingers tightening around the edge of the page.

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Was this... about me?

That sentence echoed in my mind—“He who sleeps beneath the tree of shifting roots shall awaken where the past still breathes.”

I sat there, stunned, the half-eaten fig forgotten in my hand.

Shifting roots?

My mind raced back to the strange tree in the forest—the one with four legs, its massive roots raised above the ground like limbs frozen mid-crawl. I remembered how the ground beneath it had been dry when everything else was drenched. How the moment I sat under it, the rain began to seep in. How, when I stepped away, it dried again instantly. Almost as if the roots were alive... aware.

Were they moving?

In that moment of panic, maybe I hadn't noticed. Or maybe they didn't move in the way eyes can see—maybe they shifted through time, space... memory.

What if that tree wasn't just shelter?

What if it was a door?

I looked back down at the book, my hands trembling now. The words weren't just poetic nonsense. They meant something. Something real.

And if this place was where the “past still breathes,” then maybe I hadn't just escaped the forest...

Maybe I'd entered something far more mysterious.

## The Journals

The leather cover creaked softly as I opened the book. The pages inside weren't printed like a typical novel. They were hand-written—scrawled in a hurried but neat hand, with ink that had slightly faded over time. The handwriting was old-school, elegant, and yet there was a nervousness in the lines—as if the writer had written with shaking hands.

The first page had no title. Just one sentence written right in the center:

"If you are reading this, then the tree has chosen you too."

I felt a chill crawl up my spine.

I turned the page, and that's when the story began.

*Entry 1:*

*March 17th. I don't know what day it is anymore. Time slips differently here.*

*I was on a trek in the Western Ghats, alone. I lost my way during a storm. The rain was relentless. That's when I found it—the tree. It looked like it had legs, like it could walk if it wanted to. I crawled beneath it, hoping to wait out the storm... but when I woke up, I wasn't in the forest anymore.*

*I was in this very room.*

I paused, heart pounding.

The date meant nothing—but the experience? Identical.

I flipped to the next entry.

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### *Entry 2:*

*This house is safe. Too safe. No sounds from below. Only birds. I thought I saw someone through the trees—a man—but when I blinked, he vanished. I'm beginning to question reality. But the strangest thing? This place feels... familiar. As if I've been here before. Or maybe, I never left.*

I turned more pages. Some entries were detailed, others scribbled like sudden thoughts. A few pages had sketches—of the tree, the mountain, symbols I didn't recognize. One page stopped me cold.

### *Entry 7:*

*The roots. They move.  
Not in front of you. Never while you watch. But if you turn your back... they shift. They re-route. They build a path only when they choose. I think they're alive. Or maybe, they are something else entirely.*

*I looked up from the book slowly... toward the window.  
Toward the forest below. A knot tightened in my stomach.*

*The roots move.*

*The tree chose me.*

*And someone else had been here... before me.*

I flipped the page again, my fingers trembling slightly as I moved through the weathered pages. The writing became more frantic, each entry more desperate than the last. The man in the journal seemed to be losing his grip on time and reality.

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### Entry 10:

*I tried to leave. The path that led into the forest? It's gone. I turned back and found myself in front of the same house again. The door... it doesn't open the way I remember. It feels as though something is keeping it shut. It's been hours—no, days?—but it still feels like I just arrived.*

### Entry 12:

*The tree... I saw it move. Not the way a tree sways in the wind. No, this was different. It twisted. It shifted. I think it's alive. It speaks to me in ways I don't understand. The roots... they hold something. Maybe they are a key. But I can't figure it out. Every time I get close, the ground trembles. The air thickens. I've begun to fear it.*

I was now leaning forward, the words in the journal creeping under my skin. The details were chilling, too real—too much like what I'd experienced.

### Entry 15:

*I found something beneath the roots. An old carving. The symbols are... familiar. I've seen them before. In my dreams, perhaps. Or in some life I lived before this. I can't recall. But there's a feeling that I've walked this path before. That the forest knew me. The tree knew me. It wants something. But I don't know what.*

*The air feels heavy tonight. Something is coming.*

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The writing on the next page was smudged, the ink smeared like the writer had been in a hurry. I could barely read the words, but the desperation in them was clear.

### *Entry 18:*

*I can't trust the tree anymore. It has changed me. I think it's begun to change my thoughts, too. I see things in the roots now. I hear whispers. I see things that aren't there. I... I don't know how to stop it. I don't know how to leave.*

### *Entry 20:*

*I've seen him. The man from my dreams. He's real. I know he is. He's been watching me since I arrived here. I saw him last night, just standing at the edge of the forest. He said nothing, just stared at me. I don't know what he wants. But I feel it. He's coming for me. He knows something. I can't escape this place. I've tried, but the paths keep changing. The tree keeps shifting its roots. And the house—this place—seems to trap me here. I can't remember the way out.*

The ink on the last page was thick, almost like it had been drenched in something dark. I hesitated before I turned the final page, but something in me urged me to finish it.

### *Final Entry:*

*I don't know how much longer I have. The tree has become more than I can understand. It's as if it has seen into my soul. Or maybe it always knew me. I am not the first to come here. I will not be the last. I will leave this journal behind for the next one, whoever they are. If they come,*

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*they must know: The tree is not just a tree. It is something far older, far more powerful. It is a keeper of forgotten things, of lost memories. It holds the past—and the future. Be careful. The roots can twist time itself.*

The journal dropped from my hands, its final words echoing in my mind like a warning. I felt the weight of the room press in on me, the soft rustling of the wind outside now seeming like a distant whisper, a reminder of what lay beyond the walls. My heart thudded in my chest.

There was no mistake. The writer was here before me. Had experienced this same madness, the same fears.

The tree. The shifting roots. The man.

I was caught in the same trap.

I couldn't escape this place. The tree wasn't just a tree. It wasn't just a dream. It was the start of something far bigger. Something I was already too deep into to understand, let alone control.

And as I sat in that strange, silent room, I couldn't help but wonder: Would I be able to leave at all? Or would I become the next to write in that journal?

I sat motionless, the journal open in my lap, its brittle pages rustling slightly with the wind. My eyes kept going back to one particular line:

“I've seen him. The man from my dreams. He's real.”

The words echoed in my mind like the toll of a distant bell. The man from his dreams. I had seen him too. That same old man—eyes too sharp, skin too loose, a face that shifted. Not just expressions or moods, but entirely different

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features, like clay being molded by unseen hands. And the way he stood there, in the forest that night, almost waiting for something... or someone.

I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry.

Was he the same man the journal warned about?  
Was I following the exact same path this writer did?  
Were we all being lured by the same entity... or worse, the same curse?

The more I thought about it, the clearer something became. The journal wasn't just a random collection of thoughts. It was a warning. A map of madness. And he—the man—was at the center of it.

Who was he?

Was he the one who built this house? Was he once a victim, like us, lured by the tree of shifting roots, only to become a part of its strange ecosystem? Or was he always something... else?

Somewhere in the back of my mind, a terrifying possibility began to form:

What if the man wasn't just trapped here?  
What if he was part of the trap itself?

Maybe the writer of the journal had encountered him in a different form. Maybe he too had once trusted that figure—an old man offering guidance, pretending to be lost, drawing the innocent deeper into the forest's embrace. That would explain the strange way he appeared to me. Not as someone aggressive or violent, but curious. Studying me. As if measuring my fear.

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I leaned back against the wooden wall, the silence of the room now feeling suffocating.

Was he ever human at all?  
Or had the forest made him into something else—  
something that could no longer remember its own name?

What if every person who entered this place became him,  
in time?

A sick, shuddering thought hit me. The man wasn't chasing us. He was warning us. Or replacing us. The way his face changed—like he was trying to hold on to who he once was, before the forest twisted him into something... unrecognizable.

That would mean the writer of the journal was either dead, lost... or worse, transformed. What if he became the very thing he was writing about? What if the journal was his last attempt to leave behind a piece of himself—a version untouched by the forest's curse?

And now... now it was my turn.

I shut the journal slowly, my hands trembling.

This wasn't a dream.  
This was a cycle.

And I had just stepped into the next phase of it.

I couldn't sit inside any longer.

The weight of the journal's words, the unsettling silence of the room, the memory of that shifting-faced man—all of it had built up like pressure in my chest. I had to get out. I

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needed to find a way out of this strange place, wherever or whatever it was.

With a deep breath, I stepped out onto the wooden platform again. The early morning glow still lingered, but the golden warmth from before now felt distant—like a memory slowly fading.

I stood motionless at the center of the wooden platform, the crisp morning air clinging to my skin. The world around me was too still, like nature itself was holding its breath. After everything I had been through—the shifting tree roots, the strange man, the journal—I had only one desire left in my heart: to leave this place. To escape. To find something familiar, something human, something real.

But when I looked around, what I saw didn't comfort me—it made my chest tighten with a silent dread.

I turned my eyes first to the right. The river.

It shimmered beneath the soft light, lazy and silver, weaving its way through the dense vegetation like a ribbon tossed from the heavens. From this high up, it looked peaceful—calm even. But something about it didn't sit right with me. There were no boats, no bridges, no signs of life. The banks on both sides were covered in thick, ankle-deep grasses, too even, too perfect. It was as though nothing had ever dared cross it. The trees near the river seemed to bow toward the water, their long limbs dangling into the current, unmoving, as if hypnotized.

And the mountain behind it—massive, regal, unmoving—stood like a wall between me and the sky. Its presence was daunting. Not merely tall, but towering, a beast carved out of stone and earth. The peak disappeared into mist, hiding

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its true height, and clouds spiraled around its upper ridges like a crown of smoke.

But it wasn't just the size of the mountain that stopped me—it was the silence. Mountains usually echo life: the call of birds, the hum of wind, the cries of distant animals. But this one stood in complete, unnatural stillness. The river too made no sound. Not a trickle, not a splash. No wind rustled the leaves nearby. It felt like a painting—gorgeous, detailed, surreal—but frozen in time. Dead.

I squinted toward the far side of the river, looking for a path, a trail, a ferry—anything to help me cross. But there was nothing. The waters looked deceptively shallow, but I had a sinking feeling they hid something. Something watching. I had seen enough strange things here to know appearances meant nothing. Just one misstep and that silver river could pull me under.

I turned slowly away from it.

The second direction, to my left, led to the forest—the one I had emerged from before, running breathless from the man with the changing face. In the daylight, I thought it would feel less threatening. But no, the darkness had not lifted. In fact, the shadows had thickened, as though the rising sun had only deepened the night between the trees. This forest was not made of the ordinary. The trees were tall, too tall, their trunks unnaturally straight, spaced like sentinels. Their branches curved inward, forming a thick canopy above that swallowed the light whole. I couldn't see more than a few feet past the first line of trees.

I stared into it, trying to will myself to see something more. A path, a break in the trees, a sign. But it stared back at me, silent, breathless.

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A memory stirred—when I had hidden under that tree with the four roots... the way the ground dried and soaked unpredictably. How the man had changed his face like melting wax. The sound of cracking branches that came from nowhere. I remembered how the moment I had fallen asleep, I felt water beneath me again, only to wake up in a wooden room instead.

Was that forest even real? Or was it something else—a dream, a test, a trap? My instincts screamed against going back there. The deeper I stared, the more I felt like it was looking back. Not the forest, but something within it. Watching. Waiting. Hunting.

I backed away from it unconsciously, my shoulder brushing against the wooden frame of the treehouse door. That side was not an option either.

I turned next toward what lay directly ahead of me. This was the third path—a narrow slope that dipped into a misty valley. Here, the ground seemed softer, the incline gentle at first, then sharp. But the real feature that caught my attention wasn't the slope—it was what lay within it.

Ruins.

Scattered remnants of something long forgotten. Half-sunken stone pillars jutted from the ground like broken bones. A massive arch stood tilted, as though gravity itself had tried to pull it back into the earth. Vines coiled around every surface, creeping like veins. Time had weathered everything to near unrecognizability, yet there was an order to the way the ruins were laid out. A structure. A pattern.

The mist made it difficult to make sense of, but the shapes, the angles—they felt deliberate.

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And then there was the smell.

It drifted faintly up from the valley—a bitter scent, smoky and pungent. Not the pleasant kind from burning incense. No, this was sharp, acrid... like dried herbs left too long over fire, or worse, like burnt offerings. The kind used in ancient rituals. The kind that summoned, not sanctified.

I rubbed my arms, suddenly cold.

It was quiet, but not in the peaceful way the river was. This was a suffocating silence, like sound had been swallowed whole. Like the valley was waiting for someone—or something.

A crow cried suddenly from above. I jolted and looked up, but saw nothing. Only mist curling along the edges of the slope like bony fingers.

Something told me that once I entered those ruins, I might not come back the same. If I came back at all.

I turned away, heart beating faster now. I had seen three paths. None were welcoming.

And then I looked toward the final direction.

The fourth path.

My breath caught.

Here, the land descended into a swamp. A massive one. Far more grotesque than any I'd ever imagined.

Where the other directions were defined by silence or mist or shadow, this one was filled with sound—a wet, sucking sound, like mud pulling at flesh. Frogs croaked low and

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guttural. Flies buzzed thick in the air like living clouds. The trees here were twisted, their trunks bent and malformed, as if they had been poisoned long ago and were still trying to grow despite it. Moss hung like curtains from every branch, wet and heavy, sagging into the thick, green-brown soup below.

And the smell. Dear god, the smell.

Rot. Decay. Death. Like something old had died there, and kept dying over and over again. The stench hit the back of my throat and stayed there.

Dark pools broke the surface of the marshland, each one reflecting the sky above in a strange, distorted way. But when I looked closer, I saw that they didn't reflect me.

I wasn't in the water's reflection.

Only the trees.

Only the sky.

Not me.

I blinked and stepped back instinctively, gripping the railing of the platform.

That swamp... it wasn't just dangerous. It was wrong.

Like the air itself had given up trying to sustain life.

I stared longer, despite my better judgment. Far in the distance, half-sunken into the mire, was a structure. A small wooden hut, tilted sideways, one half buried. A window, cracked and moldy, stared directly at me. Though it had no eyes, it looked back at me.

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My legs locked.

I couldn't go there. I couldn't go any of these ways.

River and mountain—too far, too dead.

Dark forest—too twisted, too haunted.

Valley of ruins—too cursed, too quiet.

Swamp—too rotten, too unnatural.

I was trapped.

All paths led to places I couldn't trust. Like each one was a test. A challenge. Or maybe a punishment.

But I had to choose eventually.

This place... whatever it was... was not going to let me stay comfortable for long.

My eyes darted from one path to the other, and I realized something terrifying.

They were all watching me.

The trees in the forest, the arch in the valley, the window in the swamp, even the mountain beyond the river—they all had presence. Weight. Like this world was alive and waiting.

And I... was the trespasser.

A lone breath escaped me, shaky and tired. I slumped slightly, the adrenaline slowly leaving my body, replaced with helplessness.

Where do I go?

What do I trust?

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Is this place testing me? Or is it toying with me?

I stood there, surrounded by beauty, danger, and the unknown—caged not by walls, but by choices too strange to understand.

And somewhere in the distance, I thought I heard something moving.

Something coming.

The wooden floor creaked softly beneath my feet as I stepped back into the treehouse, my heart heavy with a strange blend of fear and frustration. I had scanned every direction, explored the possibility of escape, and found nothing but barriers—natural, eerie, and impossible to pass. There was no path forward, only dead ends wrapped in illusion.

The air inside the treehouse was slightly warmer than outside, infused with the earthy scent of old wood and paper. I walked over to the table once more. The journal I had read still lay open, its cryptic line echoing in my mind like a whisper I couldn't ignore: "He who sleeps beneath the tree of shifting roots shall awaken where the past still breathes."

Who wrote this? And how long ago? More importantly—how did they know exactly what I had just experienced?

But now, something else pulled at me. There were more books—three others stacked neatly on the corner of the table, each one older than the last. Their covers were cracked and dusty, their spines faded from age. I hadn't noticed them before, but now they called to me, like pieces of a puzzle demanding to be put together.

## The Unconnected Roots

I sat down and pulled the first one toward me. It had no title, just a leather-bound cover with a faint symbol carved into it—like a crescent wrapped in vines. As I opened it, the smell of old ink and mildew drifted up. The handwriting was delicate, the ink faded but legible. This wasn't a journal—it was a record. A list of dates, events, and... names.

The moment I pulled the first journal toward me, a quiet stillness settled in the room—as if the treehouse itself was waiting for me to begin.

The cover was leathery and cracked, the faint crescent symbol almost worn away by time. The pages inside were yellowed, their corners curled and brittle. But what surprised me most was how carefully everything had been written. No random scribbles. No torn-out pages. Every word seemed placed with purpose.

I flipped through the first few pages—dates, observations, tiny inked maps. Then, an entry that caught my attention:

*Entry #1 — "The River Man"*

*Day 4.*

*"I tried the river again today. The water runs too fast to cross, and there's something beneath it. I can hear it at night. Whispering. It only stops when I stop looking.*

*I saw a man walking near the bank—a pale figure, barefoot, hair dripping wet. He turned toward me, but had no face. Just smooth skin, like a blank page.*

*I don't think I'm alone here. Not really."*

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I shivered and leaned back. A faceless man by the river? Was it the same man I had seen—the one whose face shifted like melting wax? Could it be that others had encountered him too... or were these all different manifestations of the same force?

I turned the page, heart thudding.

*Entry #2 — "Dreams of the Roots"*

*Day 7.*

*"The tree. It moves at night.*

*I don't mean the branches swaying. I mean the roots—they shift like snakes beneath the soil.*

*When I slept under it, I dreamed I was sinking—like the roots were dragging me into the earth. But when I woke, I was inside this house.*

*Same as before.*

*Same as you, if you're reading this."*

I paused. Same as you. That sentence hit hard.

I whispered aloud, "You knew someone would follow..."

Had the writer truly predicted that someone—me—would eventually come across this journal? Or had others come before me and left this for the next?

I couldn't tell. But something about their tone was... resigned.

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I reached for the next book. This one was thinner, bound in fabric, almost falling apart. Inside, the ink had faded even more, but it was readable.

*Entry #3 — "Faces That Don't Stay Still"*

*"I've started to believe the faces here aren't real. I met someone two days ago—a young woman, said her name was Reva.*

*We talked for hours. She seemed normal. Kind, even.*

*But as night fell, her face changed. Her jawline hardened. Her voice grew deeper. Her eyes turned grey, then pitch black.*

*I ran.*

*I've been running ever since.*

*They find you when you stop looking."*

I closed the book for a moment and stared at the flickering candle on the table. So I'm not the first. Maybe not even the fifth or tenth.

Each entry felt like a breadcrumb left behind—by people who had been pulled into this place just like me. But why? Was it the tree? The roots? Or something else?

I opened the third book—the thickest of all. Its cover had no symbol, no markings. Just dust.

*Entry #4 — "Names"*

This one started differently. Less journal, more... reflection.

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“The names fade quickly. My own feels foreign now.

This place doesn’t want you to remember who you are. It wants you to blend in. To forget.

I write them down to hold on—Isaac, Lina, Thoran, Aanya, Meera, Navid.

I met each of them. All lost. All searching.

Only two of us made it back to the house after exploring.”

I stared at the names. One stood out—Aanya. Something about it stirred a distant memory, but it vanished before I could grasp it.

The entries continued—sketches of the treehouse, the landscape around it. Even a crude drawing of the man whose face changed, except here, the face was scribbled out entirely, with just one note beside it:

“Don’t trust the ones who shift.”

Then, another line in bold, pressed deep into the paper:

“Every path is a test. But the house is the heart. Start from where the breath still lingers.”

That phrase—start from where the breath still lingers—echoed inside me. It sounded like a riddle... or a direction. Was it referring to this treehouse? Or maybe... something deeper?

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I sat there for hours, flipping through every word, page by page, trying to find the thread that connected them all.

The first writer feared the river. The second warned of the tree's strange powers. The third encountered people who weren't really people at all. The fourth began to forget who they were.

And I was experiencing all of it now—one layer at a time.

I leaned over the table, hands buried in my hair.

"Am I next?" I whispered into the silence.

No reply.

But as I sat there, a breeze slipped in through the open window, rustling the journal pages on the table—pages I hadn't seen yet. Toward the back of the last book, something fluttered loose.

A folded sheet.

The paper was old—folded several times over and tucked between two torn pages near the end of the last journal. Unlike the rest of the entries, it wasn't written in the same neat handwriting. This was rushed, uneven. Desperate.

I carefully unfolded it, expecting another personal account.

But it wasn't a message. Not exactly.

It was a code.

Rows and rows of seemingly random symbols, characters, dots, and slashes. Some lines were underlined. Some were circled in red ink. And at the top, just one sentence in trembling handwriting:

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"If you understand the breath of the roots, the path will open. But none of us could."

My eyes moved quickly, scanning the sheet. The code looked like nothing I'd seen before—some hybrid of numbers, alphabets, even tiny sketches—almost like musical notes mixed with script. There were dashes between some letters, dots beneath others. Some symbols repeated in threes.

Beneath the last row was a small triangle drawn in ink, pointing downward. A note beside it read:

"This is where it begins, not ends."

I stared at it for minutes, trying to understand. The others—the people who left these journals—they must've tried to solve it too. This was their last resort. A key none of them could turn.

Why?

Had the code been incomplete? Or was it that they were looking at it wrong?

I held the paper up to the candlelight.

Nothing changed. No invisible ink. No secret message in the shadows.

Then I tilted it sideways—and noticed something. The layout... it wasn't random. It mirrored something. A pattern. Like the roots of a tree.

I quickly opened one of the older journals—the one with the sketches. I flipped to the page showing the twisted tree. And there it was: the shape. The spread of roots beneath the

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ground. The code was shaped like the tree's roots, line by line.

My pulse quickened.

"Breath of the roots..." That's what the message said.

Maybe the code wasn't meant to be read linearly. Maybe it had to be traced, like following the way roots twist beneath the earth.

A puzzle.

A map hidden inside a message.

I looked again. Certain symbols repeated more than others—especially near the triangle at the bottom. My fingers followed the path—starting from that symbol and tracing upward, across the branching rows. Like climbing in reverse. From depth... to light.

And that's when I saw it.

A shape. A shape hidden within the madness.

Not letters.

Not numbers.

A map.

A tiny, intricate sketch—nearly invisible among the code lines. Like something woven into static, waiting to be seen.

A circular formation. A clearing. A mark like an "X."

And next to it—four small dots forming a square.

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Four markers.

Four directions?

Was this the way out?

Or just another trick of the mind?

One thing was clear now—none of them had been able to crack it.

But I had.

And now, I had something they didn't—a direction.

And maybe, just maybe... a way out.

Coded Page (Handwritten, Folded and Faded):

"If you understand the breath of the roots, the path will open. But none of us could."

Δ

S-3-Δ ∴ A4x !t! ΩpΩ 3-L-7 ... /X/

→ r\_2\_λ ◇H◇ —|— 9#q m:m • 7t-R

— — —

ψψ E<sup>oo</sup>r v=5= !c! f\_f ΔmΔ ←

0oX #3# ▲u▲ :z: λ7λ 1-1-1

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"This is where it begins, not ends."

Hidden Pattern:

The triangle symbol ( $\Delta$ ) at the top marks the beginning.

There are repeating symbols (like  $\Omega$ ,  $\Delta$ ,  $\psi$ , and  $\diamond$ ) placed symmetrically—these could represent landmarks or directional markers on a map.

The “/X/” symbol suggests a hidden location or endpoint.

The numbers interlaced with letters (e.g., 3—L—7, v=5=,  $\lambda 7\lambda$ ) could represent coordinates or steps.

The line “This is where it begins, not ends.” hints the reader should start from the bottom (upside-down roots?).

I stared at the page for a long time.

At first glance, it was chaos—symbols, numbers, foreign letters, and scattered phrases that didn’t belong together. It felt like the ramblings of someone who had gone mad in this place. But something about it wouldn’t let me look away. My fingers brushed the ink, slightly raised in places, like it had been pressed in with intention. Whoever wrote this wanted it to be found. Wanted it to be solved.

I re-read the top line:

"If you understand the breath of the roots, the path will open. But none of us could."

The breath of the roots?

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I glanced at the symbol at the top—a triangle. Simple, clean. It reminded me of the way the four-legged tree looked from a distance. Like a pyramid resting on thick limbs. Roots breathing. What does that mean? Could it be talking about the tree that brought me here?

I moved to the first coded row.

“S—3—Δ ∴ A4x !t! ΩpΩ 3—L—7 /X/”

The triangle appeared again—Δ. Then “3—L—7”... a pattern? A coordinate?

Could these represent directions? Landmarks? And what was “/X/”? A location? A destination?

I kept reading.

→ r\_2\_λ ◊H◊ —|— 9#q m:m ◉ 7t—R

That arrow. Could it mean east? Or just to move in a sequence? And the ◉ ... that looked like the half-moon I saw last night from the window. Could the journal be referencing times of day, or phases of the moon?

"This is where it begins, not ends."

That line chilled me. Was the code meant to be read in reverse? Or upside down?

I held the page up to the light. Nothing changed.

Then I did what I hadn't thought to do yet—I flipped it.

Read from the bottom upward.

Now the symbols began to mirror each other. λ7λ and 7t—R, then v=5= and 3—L—7... it was like a bridge between left

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and right, above and below. Almost like a map, split by a central spine.

I checked the shelf behind me. Nothing there. Then I looked up.

Above the fireplace, on the beam, something carved into the wood caught my eye.

A small triangle.

Just like the one on the page.

My heart pounded. Was it a sign? A marker? I rushed to examine it. Below the triangle were three tiny dots—· · ·— and a line underneath. Morse? A reference to the dots on the journal?

I grabbed the book again. On the first row:  
“· · A4x”

A4x... a shelf? A section?

I darted back to the stack of journals. Most were untitled. But one—near the edge—was labeled “A4x” in faded ink.

My hands trembled as I opened it.

The first line read:

“He who finds this volume holds the map. But only those who listen to the silence of the roots can read it.”

The map was hidden.

Inside the code.

And maybe... somewhere inside this room.

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The air inside the treehouse had changed. Or maybe it was just me—now alert, pulsing with a strange urgency. I stared at the journal labeled A4x, its pages frayed at the edges, the ink slightly faded but still legible. The line echoed in my head like a whisper I couldn't shake:

“He who finds this volume holds the map. But only those who listen to the silence of the roots can read it.”

What did that mean—listen to the silence of the roots?

I looked around the room again. The treehouse was part of the giant tree—its walls, floor, ceiling all fused into the living wood. Roots weren't visible in the traditional sense, but they had to be here, embedded deep in the structure. The journals were old. Maybe others had figured out part of this, just like I was doing now. Maybe they gave up, too afraid or too confused to push further.

But I couldn't give up. I didn't want to end up like them—names forgotten, memories buried in these pages.

I flipped through the next few entries. Unlike the earlier journal, this one wasn't personal in tone. It was mechanical, almost clinical. More like... instructions.

“To read the code, one must see through the illusion of ink.”

Another riddle. What illusion? I tilted the book again. Still nothing.

But then something occurred to me.

Earlier, I had felt raised patterns on one of the pages—as if pressure had been applied while writing. What if the ink wasn't the message, but a layer hiding the message?

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I moved to the small desk in the corner and checked the drawers. Old scraps of paper. A half-used candle. A few sticks of charcoal. Then—a small, dusty glass bottle. Inside it, a nearly dried-out ink pen... and a black stick of wax.

Wax.

My eyes widened.

I remembered something I'd seen once about revealing hidden writing with heat. I rushed to the fireplace, quickly lit the candle, and carefully held the journal page just above the flame—close enough for warmth, but not to burn it.

At first—nothing.

But then, as the paper warmed, something began to shift. Faint lines appeared under the symbols. Hidden strokes that didn't belong to the original markings. I leaned closer, watching in awe as new patterns slowly revealed themselves.

“Beneath the lowest shelf, beneath the sleeping roots.  
Triangle, circle, triangle.”

I nearly dropped the journal.

That symbol—the triangle again. But now, paired with a circle. And a location: beneath the lowest shelf?

I dashed to the wall where the shelves were mounted. One, two, three—three shelves of books. The bottom one sagged slightly under the weight. I knelt beside it, running my fingers along the underside.

Nothing.

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Then I noticed a groove—just a small line in the wood, barely visible. I slid my finger into it and heard a tiny click. My pulse spiked.

A panel slid open in the wall.

Inside, carved directly into the living wood, was a hollow. A box-shaped recess. Nestled within it was an old leather pouch tied with string.

I took it out carefully. It was surprisingly light.

I untied the pouch and unrolled the cloth inside.

A scroll.

And on it, hand-drawn in meticulous detail—was a map.

The map was unlike anything I had ever seen. It wasn't a map of any city or region I recognized. It was circular, with four large symbols etched around its perimeter: a river and mountain, a dark forest, ruins, and a swamp.

The same four directions I had seen from the treehouse.

In the center, where the treehouse would be, was the symbol of the triangle, enclosed in a ring. Around it, lines branched outward in chaotic paths—but most ended abruptly, marked with red Xs or skulls. Only one path, winding and narrow, curved away from the center and seemed to continue beyond the borders.

It had no label.

But a note was scribbled next to it in red ink:

“Only when the roots align can the real path reveal itself. The others were blind. Do not be.”

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A riddle... again.

“Align the roots...”

Was this the "code" no one else had ever figured out?

I stood up slowly, staring at the map, my heart racing. This wasn't just about solving riddles. It was about survival. About escape. This path—this one path—could be the way out. And whoever had left this behind knew that.

But what did it mean to align the roots?

Was it literal? Was it something to be physically moved? Or something symbolic?

My eyes wandered back to the tree trunk itself, which formed the core of the treehouse. Carved into it, faint but visible now, were marks. Patterns. Three triangles, one on top of the other. The same shape I'd seen repeatedly.

What if these symbols weren't just clues? What if they were mechanisms?

I sat staring at the symbols again. That coded message haunted me:

“Align the roots. The path will open.”

I didn't know what exactly I was aligning, or where it would take me, but I couldn't ignore the strange pull it had on me. Something about those words stirred something inside me, something ancient and instinctive—like the tree itself had whispered them into my mind.

I stepped out onto the platform once more, the air colder than before. I made my way down the ladder and stood beneath the great wooden structure. My eyes followed the

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thick roots stretching in all four directions—one to the river and mountain, one to the dark forest, another to the misty ruins, and the last disappearing into the swamp. I took a deep breath and slowly walked toward the center where all four roots met the base.

I knelt down, placed both my palms on the bark, and whispered, "Show me."

To my shock, the roots began to shift.

It wasn't violent. It was graceful, like they'd been waiting for my voice, for me to acknowledge them. Each root turned slightly—aligning themselves perfectly with the compass directions. They pulsed faintly under my hands, as if alive.

And in that moment, I knew—I had unlocked something.

Driven by a strange confidence, I ventured toward the river first. The water was calmer now, gleaming like silver under the afternoon sun. But it was still impossible to cross. Deep, wide, and without any visible passage. The mountain behind it stood like a wall. No foothold. No path.

I turned back and tried the forest. The trees moaned as I stepped near, their limbs swaying without wind. The darkness was thick, pressing on my skin like fog. I couldn't see more than a few feet inside. My chest tightened the further I went. Something was watching. I didn't wait to find out what. I backed away.

The ruins were next. Mist greeted me, thick and cold. I thought I saw movement—silhouettes or maybe shadows. But as soon as I stepped in, all sound vanished. No footsteps, no heartbeat, not even my breath. I panicked. My

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mind screamed but no noise escaped. I barely made it out, coughing and shivering.

Then came the swamp. The air was still. The mud slick and wet beneath my feet. I moved cautiously, but it wasn't long before the ground gave way beneath me. I sank up to my knees, something slithering past my leg. I scrambled out, breath ragged, my hands shaking.

I returned to the treehouse, soaked, scared, and exhausted. The roots had shifted again—back to their resting form. As if they'd shown me what I needed to know.

Back inside, I dried myself and collapsed into the chair by the desk. My eyes scanned the table. The books. The journals. The map. All of it waiting for me.

This place was no accident.

I was brought here.

But now I know something that I didn't before.

There is a way out.

And if there isn't... I'll make one.

## Journey to the Mountain

The roots aligned.

I don't know how or why—but they did. Like obedient soldiers responding to a silent command, the twisting, shifting limbs beneath the house stopped writhing. A stillness settled over the world, eerie yet strangely inviting. I took it as a sign. The message in the journal had been clear—or as clear as riddles could be. I was meant to go. Somewhere. Anywhere. But it had to start now.

I chose the river.

There was something about it. Maybe it was the way the sunlight danced across its silver surface, or maybe it was that cave I had seen carved into the side of the mountain behind it. Hidden. Waiting. My heart wouldn't stop thinking about it since I'd first laid eyes on it. The river didn't just flow through this place—it remembered it. It whispered secrets to the wind.

As I made my way down from the treehouse, I glanced back one last time. The wooden structure stood quietly above me, almost protective. It had kept me safe, but it wasn't my home. Not really. My real home—my real life—was somewhere far away from this world tangled in roots and riddles.

The descent to the river was longer than I'd expected. The terrain was lush, overgrown, but soft underfoot. Ferns brushed against my legs, wildflowers peeked through fallen logs, and the trees above hummed softly as though they were breathing. Time felt suspended, as if morning stretched its fingers endlessly through this part of the forest.

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Then I saw them.

Not people. Not monsters. Creatures.

A small bird landed gently on a branch ahead of me. Its feathers shimmered slightly—not unnaturally, just more vivid, more alive than what I’d seen back home. It tilted its head, watching me curiously, then let out a soft chirp before flitting away.

Further ahead, a group of rabbits emerged from beneath a bush. They didn’t scatter like they normally would at the sight of a human. Instead, they froze—just for a heartbeat—and then one hopped toward me. Its dark eyes held no fear. Only recognition. Like I was expected.

The feeling was strange. Comforting. But strange.

And it didn’t stop there. As I walked deeper into the path toward the river, I saw more of them. A fox nestled beside the roots of a tree, calmly observing me without alarm. Tiny field mice darting between tufts of grass, yet pausing long enough to meet my gaze. Even the bees that hovered around flowers didn’t seem in a hurry. As though everything here was waiting. Trapped... but peaceful.

A memory sparked in my mind: the journal’s pages had mentioned something about “those who belong to the tree’s shadow.” Could these creatures have wandered here like me? Drawn in? Trapped by curiosity or by fate? Their calmness was unnerving. As if they’d given up trying to leave... or perhaps forgotten they ever tried.

Still, I moved on. I couldn’t afford to become part of this strange calm.

## The Unconnected Roots

By the time I reached the riverbank, the sun had climbed higher, lighting up the water in a blinding shimmer. I shielded my eyes and looked across.

There it was—the cave.

Not huge or gaping, but dark and unmistakable, nestled in the rock like a hidden mouth waiting to be opened. My breath caught. Something was pulling me there. Not in the same magnetic way the tree had, but a quieter tug—like a whisper calling me closer.

And then reality struck.

The river wasn't shallow.

I'd assumed I could wade across or find stepping stones, but now I saw its depth. The current wasn't furious, but it was steady, strong, and wide. The rocks beneath its surface glinted like teeth. There was no bridge. No boat. Just the water... and me.

I knelt down beside the bank, dipping my fingers in. It was cold. Clean. Pure, even. The kind of water that hadn't been touched by pollution or time. I looked around, searching for anything that could help me cross.

Nothing.

And yet... I wasn't alone.

The fox appeared again—this time, on the other side of the river. It stood beside the cave, almost like a guardian. It looked at me, tilted its head, then calmly sat down. Waiting. Watching.

## The Unconnected Roots

I had to find a way across.

I sat by the riverbank, staring at the flowing water that separated me from the cave.

It felt cruel somehow—being so close, yet so impossibly distant.

There was no bridge, no stones to hop across, no fallen tree acting as a path. Just the endless silver sheet of moving water. The river was beautiful, but it was merciless too. It would swallow me whole if I dared step in unprepared. I needed a boat.

The realization settled in slowly, weighing me down.

No one was going to bring me a boat.

No one was coming to save me.

If I wanted to cross... I had to build one myself.

I stood up, brushing the dirt off my palms. My eyes drifted to the dense wall of trees behind me—the jungle. Bamboos. I needed long, sturdy bamboos to make a raft, something strong enough to float and carry me across. And vines. Something tough and flexible to bind them together.

The thought of entering the jungle alone sent a shiver down my spine. It wasn't just the fear of getting lost. It was the unknown—the weight of this world pressing into the trees, the strange quietness that spoke louder than any roar.

I took a step toward the trees... and froze.

A flutter of wings overhead.

A sudden burst of color.

## The Unconnected Roots

And a voice.

"Going alone, are you?" said the voice, playful yet warm.

I blinked up in surprise—and there, perched on a low-hanging branch, was a parrot.

Bright green feathers, a dash of red along his wings, and wise, curious eyes that seemed to see me—not just glance at me, but really see.

"You can talk?" I stammered, half believing I was losing my mind.

The parrot bobbed his head proudly. "Of course I can talk. You're not the first wanderer to need a little... encouragement."

I stared at him, lost for words. Somehow, it didn't feel strange. Not after everything I'd seen. Not after the journals, the treehouse, the roots.

"You're scared," the parrot said simply, hopping down a branch closer to me. "But that jungle's not here to eat you alive. It's waiting to help, if you ask nicely."

I gave a nervous laugh. "Help? Trees and vines don't exactly talk back."

"Maybe not to you," he teased, fluffing his feathers. "But that's why you have me. Come. I'll guide you."

I hesitated, glancing between the river and the dark green edge of the jungle. My heart pounded against my ribs.

"What's your name?" I asked finally, almost shyly.

## The Unconnected Roots

He tilted his head, as if considering. "You can call me Mithu," he chirped. "Everyone does."

Mithu. The name felt comforting, like a thread tying me back to something real.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded. "Okay, Mithu. Let's go get some bamboo."

He let out a sharp whistle of approval and took to the air, circling above me before darting toward the trees.

I followed.

As I stepped into the forest, the world around me changed.

The trees here were tall, ancient, their trunks twisted with time, their leaves forming a canopy that filtered the sunlight into dappled patterns across the ground. There was an earthy scent in the air—damp soil, moss, the sweetness of distant flowers. But it wasn't just the forest that made me pause—it was the silence. A deep, sacred silence that didn't feel empty... it felt alive.

Mithu fluttered from branch to branch just above me, occasionally glancing down with that ever-curious look in his eyes.

"Stay close to me," he said. "This place doesn't like strangers wandering too far from the path."

"What path?" I asked, nervously scanning the floor, which was covered in leaves and vines.

"The one your heart chooses," Mithu replied. "Just walk with intent. The forest will allow it."

## The Unconnected Roots

I didn't fully understand, but I kept moving. The deeper we went, the more the silence began to hum. And slowly, it wasn't silence anymore. I began to hear soft rustles in the underbrush, the chirp of hidden crickets, the flutter of wings above. And soon, the forest revealed its gentle residents.

A rabbit peeped out from behind a log, its white fur nearly glowing in the soft light. It twitched its nose at me, unafraid. Then another came, and another—until three of them were watching me with curious eyes. Not scared, just... aware.

“They’ve seen many come through here,” Mithu said. “But not many return.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Some lose their way. Others forget why they started.”

The rabbits slowly hopped away, disappearing behind a mound of ferns. Just then, a low chittering caught my attention. A family of squirrels danced across a branch overhead, one of them clutching a nut almost twice its size. Their eyes sparkled with mischief as they paused to study us, then scampered off with lightning speed.

A sense of calm washed over me. This forest wasn't hostile—it was just old. Careful. Watchful.

We moved deeper, and then I saw them—tall, straight bamboo shoots rising like green spears toward the sky. There were dozens of them, maybe hundreds, clustered together in a grove near a quiet stream. Their stalks swayed

## The Unconnected Roots

gently in the breeze, whispering secrets to one another in a language only the forest could understand.

“This is it,” Mithu announced, settling onto a thick branch above me. “You’ll need about eight to ten of the strongest ones. Look for the yellow-green ones—not too dry, not too fresh. They float better.”

I rolled up my sleeves and approached the grove, carefully choosing each stalk. With a sharpened stone I’d kept from the treehouse, I began to cut. It took time, and my arms ached, but there was a rhythm to it. As I worked, tiny birds gathered nearby—bright red sunbirds, blue flycatchers, even a hummingbird that hovered just inches from my face, its wings buzzing like soft thunder.

Mithu talked now and then, telling me about the creatures of the forest, the changing seasons, how even the trees moved ever so slightly with the pulse of the world.

Once I had enough bamboo, the next problem was carrying them. Each stalk was longer than I was tall, and even tied together with strong jungle vines, it was heavy.

“I can’t carry this all the way back,” I said, panting.

“Who said you have to do it alone?” Mithu whistled a short, melodic tune.

And from the shadows came help.

A pair of sturdy foxes emerged from the foliage. One was red with a white underbelly, the other a darker shade of brown. They looked at me, then at the bundle of bamboo, and without a sound, began dragging it gently along the forest floor. From the treetops, a few monkeys climbed

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down, curious and clever, helping balance the load as we moved.

It felt unreal.

These creatures—gentle, knowing, kind—had seen something in me. Or maybe it was Mithu’s doing. Maybe the forest still had hope for one of us.

Slowly, step by step, we made our way back through the woods, bamboo in tow, until we reached the river’s edge once more. The sun was starting to dip, bathing the world in a soft, golden hue.

I sat down, wiping the sweat from my brow. My body ached, but my spirit felt lighter. Around me, the foxes rested in the shade, the birds flitted from branch to branch, and Mithu perched beside me, watching the water flow.

“You did well,” he said.

“I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“You listened,” he said simply. “That’s what matters.”

I smiled, gazing at the quiet river again. The mountain still waited. But now, I was one step closer. I had the bamboo. Tomorrow, I would build the boat.

And maybe, just maybe, I would find a way out of this place.

The next morning, the world felt still.

The soft light of dawn seeped through the trees, casting golden ripples across the river’s surface. A low mist clung to the ground, and every leaf glistened with dew. I sat by

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the riverbank, staring at the bundled bamboo, half in disbelief. I had never built a boat in my life. The task ahead felt enormous. Yet, for the first time since I arrived in this strange world, I felt purpose. Direction. Even if it was just across the river.

Mithu landed beside me, his feathers puffed against the morning chill.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“As ready as I can be,” I replied, standing and stretching my sore limbs.

The creatures who had helped yesterday returned as if on cue. The brown fox carried more vines in his mouth, while the monkeys swung down with branches that looked sturdy and straight. It was as if they knew exactly what I needed before I even did.

With their silent cooperation, the work began.

I started by laying the bamboo stalks side by side, forming the flat base. Mithu explained that the thicker ends should be alternated, to balance the boat and prevent one side from sinking more than the other. The monkeys handed me the vines, and I weaved them tightly around the stalks, binding them in multiple places. It was slow, careful work. I had to test every knot, every binding, making sure it would hold against the river’s current.

As I tied the final row of vines, I noticed a rat—small, grey, and determined—dragging a thin piece of something shiny toward me. At first, I thought it was a trick of the light, but as it came closer, I realized it was a needle-like thorn—strong, sharp, and curved. The rat dropped it near me and squeaked.

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I smiled. “You think this will help?”

Mithu tilted his head. “They all want you to succeed. They’ve seen too many give up.”

I used the thorn like a hook, threading vines tighter, adding another layer of security. With every loop and twist, the raft began to take shape—not perfect, not elegant, but strong. Functional. Mine.

By midday, I had built a platform big enough to sit or even lie down on. I added cross-supports underneath using branches the monkeys brought. Then I lashed them tightly, testing each piece, pushing, pulling, shaking.

It held.

Finally, I dragged the boat, with the help of my animal companions, to the water’s edge. The river flowed steady, silent, like it was waiting for me. Watching.

I hesitated.

“What if it doesn’t float?” I asked.

Mithu hopped onto my shoulder. “Then we swim. But you’ve done well. Trust it.”

The raft slid into the water gently, almost naturally. It bobbed lightly, stable, as if it had always belonged there.

I climbed on slowly, testing my weight. It rocked, then steadied.

It floated.

My chest filled with something I hadn’t felt in a long time—hope.

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Mithu took flight, circling above. The monkeys clapped from the trees, and the foxes sat still, their eyes fixed on me with a strange knowingness.

I looked back once more, at the forest, the creatures, the treehouse far behind me. Then I looked ahead—toward the river, the mountain, and the cave carved into its side like a silent mouth.

And then, with a deep breath, I pushed away from the shore.

The current was gentle, as if the river itself was guiding me. Trees leaned over from both banks, their branches forming a quiet cathedral of green and gold. The raft drifted smoothly, creaking faintly under my weight. Mithu flew close, then perched on a stick I had tied upright like a mast.

“Just follow the flow,” he said, voice soft against the breeze. “It knows where to take you.”

The forest beside the river hummed with life. Birds I’d never seen before—emerald and sapphire feathered—sang in overlapping harmony. Dragonflies with translucent wings danced above the water like tiny spirits. A pair of otters peeked from behind a mossy rock, watching me with curious eyes before slipping back into the water.

I passed a tree where hundreds of butterflies clung to the bark like petals. When the raft drifted close, they took flight all at once, forming a cloud of soft colors around me. For a moment, it felt like they were escorting me, gently reminding me that I wasn’t alone.

“Have others crossed this river before?” I asked Mithu.

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He paused before answering. “Some tried. Most turned back. The river doesn’t harm... but it tests your patience. Your belief.”

Just then, something stirred in the water beside the raft.

I tensed, heart racing, until a sleek form rose to the surface—it was a dolphin, smaller than usual, but glowing faintly beneath the skin like it carried the river’s light. It swam beside me for a few seconds, then dove under the raft and vanished.

I leaned back, feeling the raft sway. Time stretched. There were no signs, no markers. Only movement, and the mountain slowly growing larger in the distance.

Hours passed. Maybe more.

I sipped from a coconut Mithu had brought, chewing its soft white flesh slowly. He shared small berries he’d collected—sweet and sour—and they calmed my stomach.

Eventually, the trees thinned. The river curved, narrowed. Rocks jutted from the surface, and the current picked up speed. I gripped the vines tied to the raft, steering gently as Mithu called out, “Left! Now right!”

The raft bumped once, then glided clear.

Ahead, the cave in the mountain became clearer—massive, dark, almost breathing.

A soft wind began to blow from that direction, bringing with it a scent I couldn’t name—something ancient, like damp stone and memories. I shivered.

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Then, as if summoned by that wind, a deer appeared on the riverbank. Its fur was silver-white, and its eyes shimmered like water. It didn't run. It watched me.

Mithu whispered, "The watchers. They only show themselves when something important is near."

As we neared the base of the mountain, the river split. One stream curled left into the woods. The other narrowed, pushing directly toward the cave.

And as my raft followed the second path, the world grew quiet again.

Not silent—but holding its breath.

I was almost there.

The moment my raft scraped against the pebbled shore beneath the cave's mouth, an eerie stillness wrapped around me. The river, which had sung all this way, suddenly hushed—like it had reached its destination, like even it dared not whisper too loud here.

I stepped onto the shore slowly. The cave was massive, its entrance arched like a forgotten temple gate. Moss draped from its sides. The stone was dark but not cold. Strange symbols had been etched onto the rocks, barely visible unless the sunlight kissed them at just the right angle. Mithu perched on my shoulder now, quiet, watchful.

"You feel that?" I asked.

He nodded slowly. "This place remembers."

Inside, the cave opened into a wide chamber. The walls shimmered faintly, not with light, but with age. It felt like

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walking into a dream someone else had once lived. My footsteps echoed gently. The floor was uneven—stone, patches of moss, and delicate white flowers growing out of cracks. I bent down and touched one. It didn't bend or break. It pulsed faintly under my finger, like a heartbeat.

We kept walking deeper. The light from the cave's mouth faded. But instead of darkness, a soft glow took over—emanating from the very rocks around me. Bioluminescent insects flitted past. Their bodies sparkled like stars trapped in this forgotten place.

Then I saw them—drawings. All along the walls, etched with what seemed like patience beyond human understanding. Stories. Circles within circles. A figure standing beneath a tree with roots reaching skyward and downward both. Lines stretching from the figure's chest into all directions. Creatures drawn alongside—rabbits, birds, foxes, insects. They weren't beside him—they were part of him.

“Mithu... these stories—”

“They were here long before you. Before me.”

“Who drew them?”

“No one knows. But they appear when they are needed.”

I stepped closer, tracing a line that moved from the tree into a spiral that became a mountain, then a cave, then... a mirror. And in that mirror—my breath caught—it looked like me. My outline. My hair. Even the pendant I wore since childhood.

I staggered back.

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“This isn’t just a cave, is it?” I whispered.

“No,” Mithu said. “This is a memory. Not yours. But of the world itself.”

A path opened deeper inside, flanked by glowing fungi and dripping stone. The air grew warmer, then cooler, shifting like breath. As I followed it, the hum of the cave grew louder—not a sound exactly, but a feeling. A vibration in my bones.

Then... I reached it.

A single stone slab stood at the center of the chamber, flat, wide. Carved upon it—a map. Not of the land, but of roots. Like the ones below the treehouse. They twisted, connected everything. The river. The forest. The ruins. Even this mountain.

At the center of those roots was a name. I couldn’t read it at first, but as I stared, the symbols shimmered and shifted, rearranging into letters I could finally understand.

“Origin.”

“This is the beginning,” I said aloud.

“No,” Mithu answered softly. “This is the reminder.”

I stood before the stone slab for what felt like hours, though time had lost its shape in this place. Mithu didn’t speak. He only watched, as if guarding silence itself.

A faint breeze touched my cheek—from where, I couldn’t tell. But it carried the scent of old paper and something

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even older... like the echo of firelight or forgotten breath. My eyes followed the lines branching away from the map—engraved paths that didn't stop at the slab's edge. They extended into the walls, faint grooves in the stone.

One of them seemed more prominent, almost inviting.

"I think it wants me to follow," I said.

Mithu nodded. "But not everyone is meant to."

I didn't answer. My feet were already moving.

The deeper path narrowed, then curved, then opened again—like inhaling and exhaling. The glow was softer here, a pale blue. The air smelled sharper now—like rain on stone. And then... I saw it.

A door.

Or what looked like one, though there was no frame, no hinges. Just an oval outline etched into the wall. Symbols spiraled around it. A faint humming, like a sleeping song, came from behind it.

Without thinking, I placed my hand at the center.

The stone pulsed warm. The symbols lit up, circling outward in slow waves—and then the wall vanished. No sound. No shaking. It simply faded, revealing a room.

Inside, I saw shelves carved into the cave itself. And on those shelves... books. Dozens. All bound in leather, some cracked with age, some shining as if written just yesterday. Scrolls, too. And a small fire pit at the center—still warm.

I stepped inside, reverently.

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At the back of the room was a desk, carved of black stone. A single book lay open there, its pages glowing faintly. I approached it slowly, heart pounding. Mithu landed gently beside it, silent.

The handwriting was unfamiliar—looping, elegant, but rushed in places. Some pages were clean. Others smudged. But one thing was clear.

This was a journal.

And it began not with words, but with a drawing.

Of him.

The man. The one I'd seen changing faces.

My breath caught. He was standing under the Tree of Shifting Roots, looking toward the four paths—just as I had. And below it, the words:

“He who came before... lost his name.”

I turned the page. More entries. Some written in deep sorrow. Some in anger. Some in wonder.

“I’ve tried all four paths. Each offers something and takes something. The mountain gave me memory. The ruins gave me understanding. The forest gave me fear. The swamp... I will not speak of the swamp.”

I looked up. Mithu was watching me. I turned another page.

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“The tree is not what it seems. It does not trap us. It listens. It bends. But it reflects what we bring into it.”

More pages, more reflections. The man—whoever he was—had been unraveling, layer by layer. Sometimes he wrote with hope. Other times with despair.

Then came a final entry.

“I am forgetting my name now. But I remember one truth. The way out is not forward. Not backward. It is through. Each path is a mirror, showing who we were, who we are. Only when all reflections align, does the root return you.”

I sat back. My mind raced. He had tried everything. Just like I was doing. But what had happened to him in the end?

I turned the last page. Blank.

“No ending?” I asked softly.

Mithu tilted his head. “Maybe his story became yours.”

And in that moment, I felt it. Not fear. Not sorrow. But... connection. A thread between me and everyone who had ever stood beneath that tree. Maybe we were all versions of one another.

I stood. I had seen what I needed. Felt what I didn't know I was seeking.

It was time to return to the surface.

Back through the glowing passage. Past the stone slab. Past the bioluminescent insects who still flickered like stars. Until the cave's mouth welcomed me once again.

I stepped out into the fading twilight.

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The cool air hit my face. I could still hear the gentle hum of the river behind me. The jungle ahead looked oddly familiar, yet I couldn't place why—until I stepped forward.

The trees were aligned exactly how I had first seen them. The twisted vine that resembled a question mark. The rock with moss growing in the shape of a crescent. The distant sound of a wooden wind chime tapping softly in the air.

My feet slowed. My breath caught.

No... it couldn't be.

I followed the path, unwillingly, as if drawn. Step by step. My heartbeat quickened. I turned the last corner—

There it was.

The treehouse.

Not just any treehouse. The treehouse. The same broken railing. The same cracked window. The same half-burnt candle still resting on the wooden table inside.

I stood frozen at the threshold.

Had I... never left?

Was this whole journey a circle? A test? A loop I was bound to repeat like those before me?

Or worse... was I already one of them?

As I stepped back into the house, the silence greeted me like an old friend. Dust settled exactly where it had been. The books were still open. The journals still scattered.

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I sat down slowly. The chair creaked in the exact same way.

And I realized—I wasn't alone.

A whisper.

Soft. Familiar.

“I was here too... once...”

I turned.

But no one was there.

Only my own reflection in the darkened glass. Only my own eyes, wide with the terrifying recognition:

The path forward is not through escape.

It's through understanding.

## Epilogue – The Loop

I sat in the corner of the treehouse, numb, staring at the wooden floor as if it held the secret to everything. My heart pounded—not out of fear, but confusion. I had crossed the river. Climbed the mountain. Discovered the cave. Returned through glowing tunnels. I had escaped. Or so I thought.

But here I was. Back at the treehouse.

Not a second had passed since I had first left. The candle still flickered on the desk. The books still lay open in the same positions. The wind whispered through the same window slit. As if the journey had never happened. As if I had never left.

But I remembered everything. The river. The parrot. The jungle. The cave.

I had to know why. How this place bent time—or memory—or reality itself. I couldn't rest. Not now.

So I left again.

Back down the wooden steps. Back across the familiar clearing, where the sky still hung in that strange twilight. I followed the same path toward the river. But this time, something felt different. The trees leaned a little closer. The air hummed with a subtle vibration, like a sound I couldn't quite hear.

The river greeted me like an old companion—wide and still, shimmering with a layer of fog. The boat I had built was still there, tucked along the shore, half-hidden behind tall grass. The mountain loomed in the distance, its peak swallowed by low-hanging clouds.

## The Unconnected Roots

But I didn't want to climb it again.

This time, I sat by the river and stared into the water.

That's when I noticed it.

The reflection.

Not just mine—but others. Brief flashes. Faces. Movements. The ghost of the parrot overhead. The shimmer of bioluminescent insects. Glimpses of my journey—in reverse.

It hit me like thunder.

This wasn't just a place. It was a loop. A circle. Not a line from point A to point B. But a cycle designed to test. To trap. Or to teach.

And I had missed something.

Something crucial in the beginning. Maybe in the journals. Maybe in the symbols etched into the cave walls. Maybe... even in the map.

As the water rippled and the mountain's reflection twisted into unreadable shapes, I made a vow. I wouldn't take the same path again—not blindly. I would return to the journals. Decode what I had missed. Speak again to the creatures, if they still remembered me.

Because now I knew: The key to escaping this place wasn't ahead of me—it was behind me.

And the next time I reached this point... I would be ready.