

# The Tribe of Babel

## Part 1

“Poke it!”

“What if it’s alive?!”

Babel looked around; a small branch hanging loosely off a dead tree caught his attention. He walked toward it, keeping one eye on the big clump of fur. He leapt up and broke the limb off. “Here, use this.” He handed it to his brother.

“Why can’t you do it?” Leil whined.

“Cause you’re the youngest. I’ll be able to take care of you if you get hurt, but I’m way too big for you to lug back home.”

The younger brother, branch-in-hand, furrowed his eyebrows, and poked at the animal gingerly. When no response emitted, he did it again— harder.

The animal awoke with a stretch and a yawn.

“It has 5 legs!”

“No, silly. That’s his trunk. It’s a baby elephant!”

“It’s kinda hairy.” Leil said as he once again used the branch to move the trunk. It curled around the branch and threw it across the plain. “Woah and strong!”

Leil looked to his brother, “Can we keep it?”

Babbel shrugged his shoulders, “I don’t know...How are we gonna carry it all the way home?” The creature stood up, stretching out each of its limbs, nudging Babbel at his heels with its trunk. “I mean, if it follows us, it’s not really our fault...”

Leil smiled and bent down to pet the furry thing, “And it’s soft!”

## Part 2

“No sign of its mother?”

The boys shook their heads simultaneously.

Aunt Hilna bent down to look at the animal. “Doesn’t quite-” She sniffled. “Look like a baby elephant. Are they really—” She sneezed, “this hairy?”

“And that brown?” Uncle Binjo piped in.

Their Grandma waddled into the little hut; most of her weight balanced on the cane Babbel’s father made her years ago. “Now, let me see what everyone’s been talkin about. Got everyone keen on whatcha found.” She squinted with her old eyes; wrinkles devoured her face. She looked left, then right. Picked it’s trunk up and when it let out a hysterical squeal, she dropped it, confusion evident on her face. “What’s this thing doing all the way down here in the desert?”

Leil spoke up, “can we keep it. Pleeeeeeease?”

His mother answered, “Now this elephant doesn’t belong with us and you know it, Leil-leil.” A pout formed on his face as tears began to swell.

Babbel noticed his grandmother’s furrowed brows, “What’s wrong?” He asked her.

She bent down, bones cracking, and patted the furry creature, “I don’t believe it’s an elephant. No, no...that looks more like what our ancestors always described what a mammoth to be.” A happy squeal resounded from the baby mammoth.

### Part 3

“We were planning on leaving soon anyway.” Babbel’s father remarked. Their tribal community was gathered around a fire. “Food has become scarce again, if we travel up North, it will be colder, but what choice do we have? There will be more food options there, maybe a place for what cattle we have left to graze.” His voice turned desperate.

“And what about Suni?” Leil had named the baby mammoth.

“No idea what it’s doing down here, but it’s probably the last of its kind.” Babbel’s mother added, “we do have a responsibility to nature to help it survive and it won’t do no surviving down here in the desert.”

“We can take him and a couple people North, there is no real reason why we should stay.” His voice rose, he had found a new confidence.

The entire tribe consisted of all of Babel’s family: cousins, uncles, aunts, grandparents. They moved every season, but the desert doesn’t provide much room for growth and safety. They were all tired of picking up and moving, and Babel’s father had long been talking about picking somewhere more final to reside.

Babel’s grandfather stepped forward, warming his hands near the fire, “The water is still here, it’s low, but it doesn’t show signs of being depleted anytime soon. I say we stay. The north brings exposure, vulnerability... We would do better to stay here; where we are comfortable.”

And that was the final word. Some of Babel’s cousins snuffed the fire out, and then they all went to bed in their little straw, nomadic huts.

#### Part 4

Perhaps it was the heat, the sun, the dry air, or maybe Babel’s cousins didn’t quite put the fire completely out, but Babel woke to smoke filling up his family’s hut. An immense heat and flames licked the sides of it. He coughed and sneezed and shook Leil to wake up. His brother’s eyes opened and looked past a worried Babel to his father who appeared to be asleep.

The fire had reached their parents' side of the hut; the straw and wood added fuel.

Their parents awoke; they jumped out of their cot and yelled for Babel and Leil to get up. Their father snatched up Leil out of the boys' shared cot and snagged Babel by the arm, dragging them out to safety. Their father assumed his wife took to grabbing for provisions, knowing supplies in the desert are scarce.

As Babel's father turned around to go back in, the hut began to shift. The straw roof was in flames, the walls bending to cave, and their mother left inside.

It collapsed, swallowing everything within.

Babel's eyes welled with tears as his father fell to his knees with a grieving sob. Leil was fortunate; he still held onto his father, shielded from the sight.

Screams overtook Babel's senses, he turned to look at more of his family's huts in flames. Some were left stuck inside, others dousing with water, trying to put out the fires.

"Alloy..." His mother's voice drew him and his father's attention back to their hut.

Alloy leapt forward, dropping Leil in the process and yelling for his other son to help. Alloy reached for a blackened wooden beam, shoving the least burnt part into Babel's hands. "Push!" He yelled. "Push!" The beam burned at their hands, Alloy's becoming almost one with it.

The lifted beam unearthed Seya, covered in burns, and holding something concealed, protected by a blanket.

Seya's skin, full of black and red blotches, appeared to be all but slipping off. Her hair was burnt to the fringes. Her eyes were full of agony.

Alloy crawled to her, bringing her into his arms; she cradled the bundle still. They sat there, weeping together; Alloy beginning to mourn. He knew there was nothing he could do for her, except hold her until she was with their ancestors.

The bundle heavily fell out of her arms, allowing a trunk to peek through. He clambered away from the blanket and stumbled his way towards the boys.

More than half their tribe's huts had burned down and with it, their hope for life in the desert.

## Part 5

The tribe sat together with unwavering grief. Some still in shock, others bound by tears. Leil's head laid in his father's lap, Babbel sat near.

Rocks of all sizes lay strewn atop the shallow graves they had dug; Babbel's and Leil's mother in one of them. The rocks were there to help stray any wildlife that hung near.

Seya's grave was beautiful. Alloy had searched across the plain for anything that could come close to mirroring her. The rocks were built up tall, representing her energy. Yellow flowers were intertwined into the mound, illustrating her love for the Earth.

Surrounding the mounds was a circle of rocks, set to protect their spirit's travels.

Babel stood outside the circle and relaxed his throat, just as his mother had taught him. He breathed in air and let his stomach expand, then he let out his cry. Vibrations reached out, caressing them all with his chant, massaging their woe and allowing their ancestors to come nigh. His lips took shapes of all the vowels his mother had once demonstrated to him. They stretched, forming o's, e's, i's... He sang for his mother, for his family, for his tribe.

## Part 6

Babel's grandfather spoke first. "We'll send a group up North to find us a new home." His voice strained, "I know it's soon after the fire, but we have nowhere else to go... With the huts burned down and the bodies soon bringing in wolves and the big cats... Alloy, my son, will you take the lead..."

Alloy still grieved for his wife, but he knew he had his sons to look after; to care in the way that only Seya could. He stepped forward, his family's attention fully grasped. They each looked for hope in Alloy's voice, something to latch onto.

He drew in the sand the path they would take, his hands covered in cloth bandages.

“We’ll need at least ten other volunteers to be safe.” His stick broke. It too was charred from the fire. Alloy blinked back the tears begging to fall. “The cold will bring a need for warmer clothes.” Some of the women nodded their heads in understanding. “The leather and furs we have will be dedicated to it. The north is unforgiving. Besides the weather, the wildlife is treacherous too. We’ll need weapons and food.”

A mental list began to grow in each of their minds as to how they each could help.

Alloy continued, “Our goal is to find somewhere we don’t have to move from. Somewhere with long-lasting water and food, and a place for us to rebuild. Once we are out of the desert, only our ancestors are there to guide us. None of us have been out that far before. Know it will be dangerous, know you may not come back to your family. But this is what we have left to do. We will leave in a week's time, those who want to come, step forward.”

A few of Babbel’s cousins stepped forward, some still at the age of clinging to their mother’s sleeve. Their fathers moved them back and took their place. A few women, one of them their tribe's healer, also stepped forward. Babbel stepped forward with Leil right behind him.

Alloy had his volunteers and then some.



## Part 7

Aunt Hilna pinched Leil's cheeks, "You two stay together now, don't leave each other's side, not even for a minute." She brought Babel into a hug. "And listen to your father, even when he's being a bit of a stick." She smiled softly at them, a sadness lurking just below the surface.

Alloy came up behind them, "It's time to leave, go ahead and say bye to your grandparents, they're off by the horses." They scurried off towards them, mammoth in tow.

Aunt Hilna frowned at her brother, "They shouldn't be going with. They're just kids."

Alloy nodded, knowing she'd question him, "I can't be without them. Not now. Plus I don't think Suni would go without them either." As he said this, Suni clumsily bumped into Leil, tossing the young boy to the ground. Babel jumped onto him and began to tickle him, earning playful screams from Leil. Their grandpa walked towards them, holding something behind his back.

She shook her head, "Are you sure this is what Seya would've wanted?"

"I know it is."

Leil tugged on his fathers arm, out of breath from running, “Papa! Come look at what Grandpa gave us!” He pulled at him again, dragging him from the conversation.

With a beaming smile, Babbel held a small knife out to his dad for him to admire. Etched onto the handle was their mother’s name, *Seya*.

Alloy managed a smile, a pain shooting through his chest. “It’s time we go.”

## Part 8

Babbel sat on one of the horses with his father and Leil sat with their uncle on his. Once the terrain was unfamiliar, Alloy and Binjo acted as scouts, moving farther ahead than everyone else. The rest of the group, including the boys, hung a little farther back as they walked slower. They borne the supplies and provisions.

As days passed, still in the desert, the boys rode on the horses again; they tried to stay together as night neared. Babbel’s eyes met the horizon. It stared back at him, with darkening secrets; a wall of sand formed.

“Papa, Papa!”

Alloy listened to his son’s worry, realizing the danger before them.

The group worked fast, blindfolded the horses first, then covered their own mouth and eyes. Uncle Binjo and Alloy tethered their horses together. The boys sat on the horse with them,

facing the older rider's chests for added protection. The rest of them linked up, tying a rope to one another. With no shelter, all they had left was to continue onwards, in hopes of the storm dying out soon.

The sand stretched to the sky and rushed towards them. Wind whipped at their faces, particles pelting, burrowing itself into any crevice. The sand slowly overtook everything. Those who walked, did so with their hands outstretched in front of them. Their mouths dried, an aching feeling for moisture that couldn't be satisfied. Friction built around them, shocks of electricity whenever they felt something with their hands. An explosion of light took over their senses. And another, and another.

Still, they trudged on, and as the sand cleared, they realized they were split in two. The boys, Alloy, and their uncle together, and the rest of the group by themselves. Separated, miles apart.

## Part 9

One of the rules they had established was if the group split up, they'd continue on. They were not to waste time, as everyone back home was waiting.

"It's getting greener," Babel observed, kicking a small pebble into bushes. "How long until we're back with the others?"

“As long as they too go North, we should be able to meet up.”

Leil sighed, missing Suni, “Do you think they’ll be okay?”

Alloy managed a smile, knowing who Leil was really missing, “I’m sure they’ll be just fine.” The pack on his horse held only what little food they had. He hoped for the terrain to shift faster, or all he had done was for nothing.

The bushes that Babel had kicked the pebble into rustled, a couple dead leaves falling off. A trunk snuck its way through the leaves. “Suni!” Leil yelled happily, rushing off to greet him.

Suni’s eyes had been protected; wrapped with a cloth, but he stumbled, falling onto the ground. He had followed them, leaving the other group behind.

Babel asked his father if they could take a break, “It’s going to be too dark soon anyway.”

His father agreed, “We’ll leave as soon as the sun allows us a path.” They laid blankets on the ground. Suni curled up near the boys, all of them exhausted, hoping for an easier day tomorrow. They ate some of their food, but their stomach’s still grumbled.

Alloy watched as his sons fell asleep, his brother in-law not long behind them. The sky was an inky-black, stocked full of lavish white lights. Some of the stars blinked back at him.

His wife was fond of nature and stars were some of her favorites to gaze at. He closed his eyes, imagining her dark locks of hair, her brown eyes and yellow crystals that shined in them. He flinched as flames took over her face. Her hair was gone, scorched. Her eyes were bloodshot, the lids long gone. A painful shame coursed through him. He flinched again, but lamely swallowed his regret. He turned on his side, faced away from the faces that reminded him of his wife, and he tried to close his eyes again. Sleep would not come to him tonight; instead, guilt was the only thing accompanying him.

#### Part 10

With the horses well-rested, their travels accelerated. The sand slowly became overwhelmed with grass, trees held lush leaves, and the sounds of birds filled the air. Still no sign of their other half of the tribe.

“Ooooooh what are these?” Leil grabbed for a bush full of deep red berries, they were unlike anything they’d ever seen.

Babbel’s stomach rumbled, “Don’t eat them all, I’m starving.” The group hungrily ate them and picked the bush clean.

They walked for a little while after their snack, until each of them began to complain.

The boys groaned, both clutching their stomachs. Uncle Binjo leaned over his horse, vomiting. Alloy weakly fell from his, heaving in the process.

“I think it’s the berries,” Alloy muttered as his red stomach's contents met the ground.

The boys’ stomachs hurt, but it seemed as if Alloy and Binjo's reaction was worse. They all laid there, comforted by the grass. Moaning and groaning, one by one, they eventually fell asleep.

Leil woke first, he shook Babbel aggressively, whispering with utter excitement. “Wake up, wake up! Do you hear that? Wake up Babb!”

“What do you want?” Babbel replied, annoyed by his brother.

“Listen!” He shushed him.

Babbel heard it then, the sound of rushing water. He opened his eyes and looked around, nothing near was responsible. He looked over at his dad and uncle, they were still fast asleep.

With no sense of waking them, he and his brother hurried to find the source. Suni followed quickly behind, accidentally bumping into Babbel.

The foliage grew thick; the grass wet with dew, another thing the boys had not experienced before. Sifting through limbs and leaves, a small clearing entered their view. A heavy stream flowed before them. Fish of all sizes darted to and forth, and although his stomach still hurt, Babbel knew what the fish and the strong flow meant for his tribe.

“Mama would’ve loved this place. She always said how flowers can be more than just yellow.” Babel’s fingers brushed the petals of a purple flower; its stem weaved into rocks and the sand, reminding them of their mother’s grave.

Suni dipped his trunk into the water, bringing it to his mouth. The boys followed his actions, suddenly realizing their own desperate thirst.

Smoke then wafted over them, “Must’ve started a fire for tonight.” Babel guessed, as the sun had moved down.

“I saw him…” Leil said as he stared at the little fishes swimming downstream.

“Saw who?” Babel asked, then cupped more water in his hands to drink.

“Papa…before the fire.”

“What are you talking about?” Babel’s eyes bore into his brothers.

Leil bit into his bottom lip and drew a circle in the water with a finger, he shrugged.

“He was awake before it happened. I woke up when he came back in.”

Footsteps came up behind them, cutting their conversation short.

“Hey boys, looks like you found us some water. Good work.” Uncle Binjo greedily bent down, “I started a fire, I think it’s gonna be a bit cold.” He looked around, taking in the

small clearing, trees for firewood and shelter... “Tomorrow we’ll circle back for the rest of the group. Hmm...and fish for dinner sounds great, too.”

Babbel said nothing, Leil still drew circles in the water.

“Something wrong?” He looked between them, neither meeting his gaze. “Come on guys, you should be excited. What’s wrong?” More smoke entered the clearing, “Oh I see... I can put it out. I’m sorry, I didn’t realize...”

Babbel shook his head, “No it’s fine. Let’s get some fish for dinner.”

## Part 11

Although his stomach was empty, Babbel hardly felt hungry enough to eat. A horrible, angry feeling had overtaken him. He watched as his father laughed alongside them. Smiling... eating... talking...

Babbel abruptly stood up and left to travel further down the stream. Questions directed at his sudden departure, but the voices morphed into nothingness behind him. The moonlight glistened on the water, his reflection stared up at him as he walked.

He didn’t travel fast enough; Alloy had followed him.

“Babbel? What’s going on? Are you still not feeling well?”



Babbel turned around, his anger worsened. The knife his grandpa had given him suddenly found its way into his hand. “You did it, didn’t you?”

Alloy paused, his heart dropping, “I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about...”

“Yes you do!” He pointed the knife, accusation laced into his words, “You wanted us to leave so badly!”

Alloy lifted his hands in defense. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Put the knife down, Babbel. You don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“Like you wanted to hurt her?” Clutched into his other hand were purple flowers, dirt still fastened to the stems.

“I...I didn’t mean for that to happen. She wasn’t supposed to go back for the mammoth.”

“His name is Suni!”

Alloy shook his head and stepped forward, “Give me the knife, Babbel.” He stepped forward again, less than an arm's reach from the blade.

Tears flooded Babbel’s eyes, blurring his vision. “Get away from me,” he pleaded, slowly taking a step back as Alloy took another forward. He dropped the flowers onto the ground.

“You don’t mean it, we are all we have left! I didn’t mean to... She wasn’t supposed to —That stupid mammoth!” He snatched for the knife, but he was unexpectedly thrust into Babel. The knife slipped into his belly with ease, and he slumped, leaning onto his son. He fell to the ground, staring up at Babel. His mouth moved, but formed no words.

Behind Alloy, the culprit of the push that had landed Alloy onto the knife. Suni stood there, small, white tusks protruding below his trunk.

The knife, still in-hand, was full of blood, dripping onto the purple flowers that he had dropped.

Voices entered from the opposite direction they had come from. The other half of their tribe had found them.