“There you are!” a cheerful, strange voice interrupted. “We don’t have all day! But, we do have all night, which is perfect for me, anyway!”

A small, furry creature, walking awkwardly on four short legs, approached the men and chuckled to herself, content to enjoy her joke alone.

Realization struck Raja, and he asked, “Are you Mafid?”

“I am the one and only. And you must be Raja. I see you’ve brought along some stragglers.”

“This is Damien and Akan,” Raja explained to the small creature, apologetically glancing at Damien’s baffled face.

“And they are welcome!” she said heartily. “But you are late!” Raja continued to eye Damien and Akan’s bewildered expressions. They stared bug-eyed at Mafid. Every move she made was scrutinized.

Raja spoke with reservation as he stared from his companions back to the little creature. “Yes...I got lost.” Then he corrected himself. “Actually, I didn’t listen to Humil, and I wasted two days before realizing my mistake. I’m sorry.”

“Well, it’s strong to admit when wrong!” she said, then continued, “In reality, you are just in time.” She again chuckled heartily, clearly amused at the confused looks she was incurring from her new friends. “Follow me.” She began briskly walking towards the forest. Though she was small, she was incredibly fast. Damien looked alarmed but Akan just shrugged at him before following Raja as he pursued Mafid.

“You’ll find water and food prepared.” Mafid explained. Raja wasn’t surprised; but the other two looked expectantly at her - even amid their visible doubts. The thought of a meal overcame, at least temporarily, their suspicions of this animal.

“And then we will begin.” Mafid’s voice sang over her shoulder.

A simple but delicious dinner was laid out for Raja and his companions. Raja had had several meals since arriving, but Damien and Akan ate hungrily.

After consuming his fill, Damien turned to Mafid, who sat contentedly aside watching the group.

“Who, er, what exactly are you, Mafid?” he asked trying to be polite.

“What could I be but a platypus!” Mafid exclaimed.

“Aah, I thought perhaps you were -"
Damien was cut short by Mafid. “Don’t say a beaver. Do not say a beaver!” Mafid’s voice increased in volume and higher in tone. “How would you like to be confused with a sloth? Or a sea monster?” She asked, waddling over to where Damien sat. She stood up on her haunches and looked up at him expectantly. “I am a wonderful mix of many things that makes me entirely unique and a perfectly perfect platypus.” With no response but raised eyebrows from Damien, she retreated back to her resting spot while calling over her shoulder, “Nothing else, my friend, nothing else.”

The men smiled, eyeing each other while Mafid continued. “And what are you Damien?” Damien responded, bemused.

“A human, of course!”

“And who are you Damien? Why are you here?” Her voice turned more serious.

Damien paused. “We are here,” he opened his arms wide indicating Akan and Raja in his answer, “to find treasure in the East, and to escape Yalwuna.”

“The escape Yalwuna,” Mafid echoed. “And have you escaped?”

“Well, we are are we not?” He chuckled lightly at his own question directed toward Mafid.

“You have not escaped!” Mafid asserted with surprising vigor. And then she began to laugh, “But you are right indeed. We are here! And perhaps you will escape. Time will tell.” She looked pointedly at each man. They weren’t sure what to do except stare back. “But, we must not stay here for long. Tonight we travel through the valley of Achor,” she announced abruptly breaking the silence. “May each of you be ready for what you will meet tonight, for you will each meet - no more nor less - than yourselves. And there you will find a door of hope.”

Raja wondered at this small creature full of riddles, most of which he didn’t understand. Where would she lead them? What was the Valley of Achor? And what did she mean by a door of hope?

The men spent time preparing for the night’s journey. Mafid had provided packs to wear and Akan and Damien were especially attentive to preparing enough food.

When the sun had set completely, Mafid announced, “It is time. Follow me.” They arose and followed Mafid through near total darkness. The path was hard to see and protruding rocks tripped them, while Mafid glided smoothly along the ground. How she could move so quickly on such short legs designed for water, not land, Raja could not explain.
“Never fear!” her voice rang out in the darkness.

“Ouch!” exclaimed Akan, who had been struck by an unseen branch.

“Raja, I believe you have a compass?” Mafid inquired.

“Yes, I do; but what good is it in this darkness?”

Mafid stopped and turned to look at him, as if questioning his sanity.

“Not much used to night traveling, are you?” she said dryly. “Seems I’m the only one who is.” She laughed, then continued, “You folks left your sense of humor in Yalwuna, eh? Well, that too may be found tonight.”

Mafid turned and looked at Akan. “May be, I said. No promises.” She winked.

“Now, the compass. Raja, hold it towards the moon - a little higher, towards the moonlight, tilt it just a bit - there!” The moon’s rays struck the face of the compass, and suddenly, the light was magnified, creating a soft, unearthly blue glow. Though not bright, it illuminated the pathway clearly, highlighting branches and rocks that before had made the pathway treacherous.

Mafid turned to continue down the pathway and, as she did so, Raja saw her eyes closed tightly. “You don’t need the light?” he asked, astonished that she could travel so quickly with her eyes shut.

“Raja, each has his own gifts that make the pathway smooth. Mine are different from yours, and yours differ from mine. What is easy for you may prove difficult for another. Don’t forget that.”

She hadn’t answered his question, but he had learned from Humil to reflect on what a guide shared, and so he pondered her words as they made their way down the trail.

Mafid’s quick pace seemed effortless for her. The men were getting tired. And though the gentle light made their travel possible at night, fatigue quickly turned to exhaustion; and each man grew quiet, lost in his own thoughts and focused on keeping up with Mafid. The “valley” was not a smooth, low-lying plain like Raja expected. Rather, it was a series of steep ascents and rocky descents, requiring constant alertness and unfailing focus. Despite the help of the light, each man tripped many times.

As they continued on and on through the night, Raja began to reflect on his journey thus far. He thought back on his life and the path that had led him here. Respa, Inrock, and Humil had each seemed so certain that he had a calling to seek and a mighty mission to fulfill. But so far, it seemed he had done little to justify their belief in him. The ship he had chartered had crashed. And then, no sooner had he arrived on the Island of Humility, he had pridefully launched headlong into a
failed expedition across the desert. If it weren’t for Humil’s help, he’d be dead or headed back to Yalwuna. Raja gratefully thought of the gifts each one had given him, and the unique strengths they had shared that had helped him to this point. But what had he given them?

That question led to others...What did he really have to offer? What unique gifts would grant him success on this journey? He began to wonder if, perhaps, Respa hadn’t really known him. Perhaps he had seen in Raja something that was not really there. He searched his soul for an answer to his questions. Mafid had promised he would find himself this night. So far, he found himself woefully wanting.

Without slowing her pace, Mafid quietly spoke to Raja. “I’m no good on land, Raja.”

Raja was surprised by Mafid’s comment. She had fearlessly and speedily been leading the way for hours, and the men had struggled to keep up. What could she possibly mean?

“I’m built for the water you see, and my front legs - why to walk, I have to walk on my knuckles to protect my feet.”

Raja hadn’t noticed before; but he could now see her webbed feet balled up uncomfortably, though she continued on.

“You seem to be doing just fine, Mafid. In fact, we’re struggling to keep up with you!”

“I hadn’t noticed,” replied Mafid with great surprise. Then, opening her eyes, she winked purposefully at Raja, to make sure he knew it was all in good humor.

Closing her eyes once again, Mafid continued on. “But while my legs are terrible on land, I have an incredible sense of space. My bill is a complex and sophisticated system that can sense movement and objects all around me. You could say I can see and sense without eyes, nose, or ears. That’s why I was chosen to be your guide here tonight, Raja. Not because my legs and limbs are perfect for walking, but because I can see the way. You know what I see in you, Raja?”

Raja shook his head, wondering what this friendly little beast could possibly see in him.

“I see a seeker,” Mafid stated simply. She continued quickly moving on, waddling smoothly around rocky terrain. “What do you see in you, Raja?”

This creature’s questions continued to unsettle Raja, and made him think deeply. “I see in me,” he began, “someone who wants to find Cowra, and isn’t sure if he ever will.”
“You will.” Mafid asserted cheerily, as if there were no question about it. “But I sense something else is weighing on your heart.”

“It is,” he replied. “I’m proud and stubborn. I lost two days trying to find you, simply because I wouldn’t listen to Humil. I am afraid. Yes I have followed Respa’s counsel; but do you know how many times I’ve questioned my path and feared moving forward? Just this afternoon, when Humil left, I was unsure if I could go on. I have nothing to offer. Compared to you, and Humil, and Respa, and Inrock - why I’m nothing.” Raja ended with a sigh, and was surprised to hear Mafid laughing.

“Ah Raja, do not be offended that I laugh at you. You know the truth? We are all nothing. But, we are all enough. Do you understand?”

Raja contemplated her words, then replied, “No Mafid, not really.”

“None of us has everything we need to reach Cowra, Raja. Not me, not Humil. But did you ever consider that’s why we’re here, together? Did you ever think that I’ve needed you tonight? Raja, though you are imperfect, you bring hope that there are those who still seek Cowra. I need to know that; and you do too. If you were not here tonight, what would that mean?”

Raja thought for a moment before Mafid answered his own question. “It would mean you were somewhere else, not looking for Cowra; and that would mean that I was here for no reason. But Raja, you are here. Imperfect, but perfectly, here. That’s all you can ever be, at least for now. Find contentment in that, Raja, and never stop trying to be where you should be. That will be to you a door of hope, no matter where you go.”

Mafid glanced back at Akan and Damien, whose heads were both down, intently following the path, both lost in thought. “Now Raja, I have a feeling you’re not the only one with hard questions tonight. I have a thing or two I’d like to talk with Damien and Akan about as well. Raja fell behind Damien, and watched in admiration as Mafid began a conversation with his friend. He could tell Mafid cared deeply about each of them, and that she sensed intuitively their unique struggles and needs. Raja continued to contemplate Mafid’s words as the night wore on. The counsel she shared sunk deep into his heart, full of puzzle and promise at the same time. He felt he would continue to remember and consider her words for a long time to come.

Mafid’s sure guidance lead Damien, Akan, and Raja safely through the valley to the base of another mountain. By the morning’s first light, Mafid stopped and announced the time had come to rest. “You will find all that you need to recover just up ahead; but I must leave you for now.”
“Leave us?” asked Raja, alarmed. “But the Phoi - Humil promised you would help!”

Mafid looked at the group carefully before replying, “Can’t be much worse than last night, based on the looks of you all. You look terrible.” She laughed. “But no worse for the wear I’d say; in fact, much better!”

She turned to Raja. “I will return, but Forlov and Maiba will likely find you before I do. Do not fear! All that is needed will be provided, my friend.”

With that, Mafid turned away and was soon lost in the tall grasses that lined the trail.

After only a few minutes journey down the path, they came upon welcoming tents, a fountain of clear water nearby, and a large rock upon which was found a variety of foods fit to match any person’s hunger.

“What a feast!” exclaimed Akan, and Damien and Raja agreed. They ate, and slept, then ate and slept again. As the evening shadows began to grow long, they counseled together. “Should we continue on now, or wait for tomorrow morning?” Raja asked his friends.

“Let’s wait here,” Akan suggested. “We have all that we need, and who can say what lies ahead? If we are to meet the Phoi, as you have suggested, we will need to be well rested and prepared.”

“I agree,” said Damien. “What’s the point in pushing on now? Night will soon be upon us. Let’s take advantage of the means that are here, and rest ourselves.”

Raja struggled to know what to say. Mafid had not instructed them whether to go or stay; but her words were clear: All that is needed will be provided. He also thought about their conversation the night before, and her counsel to “never stop trying to be where you should be.”

“Let us continue,” he finally suggested. “We will pack what we can take with us, and walk until nightfall. The way will be prepared - Mafid promised.”

Akan and Damien both seemed unhappy with his recommendation.

“It has been provided,” Damien asserted. “Right here! If we abandon it, we can’t complain if there is nothing provided up ahead.” Akan nodded his head vigorously.

Raja replied, “Let’s not waste the light that we have right now. We are well rested and we still have time before it gets too dark. We will be glad we chose to continue, I feel sure.”

Damien and Akan seemed unconvinced; but as Raja gathered food and drink for their journey, they followed suit. Soon, they were once again on their way.
By nightfall, they had reached the top of a plateau, just in time to witness an incredible sunset, before the sun dipped below the horizon. As far as they could see, in each direction, lay the sea. The grasses made for a soft bed, and the temperate weather was warm enough that Raja removed his long shirt and belt before retiring for the night.

Raja slept soundly, until awakened by Akan’s voice calling for Damien. Dressing quickly, he found Akan standing on a high point, looking out across the plateau.

“How have you seen Damien?”
Raja grew alarmed. “No, was he not here when you awoke?”
“No!” Akan replied anxiously. “Could he have gone back down the trail?”
“Perhaps, but what would have lead him that way?” Raja wondered.

As they thought in silence, both men heard at once a muffled cry. Quickly they followed the direction of the cry, which lead them towards the edge of the plateau overlooking the sea. Upon reaching the edge of the cliff, they looked down to see Damien, grasping tight to a protruding rock that stretched out dangerously over the ocean.

“Damien!” yelled Akan. “We are here!”
Raja ran back to where they had camped for night and fetched a rope from his pack. By lowering the rope to Damien, who placed it around himself, they were able to slowly pull him back up over the cliff. Oddly, rather than displaying relief for his safety, Damien seemed distressed.

“What is wrong, Damien? What happened?” asked Raja. Looking at the ground, Damien explained, “When Mafid led us through the valley, and you used the compass for light, I was so fascinated by its workings. I have never seen anything like that before, Raja!”
Raja felt his stomach begin to sink.

“This morning, when I awoke, I searched for it among your things, Raja.” His voice broke off. Regretfully, Damien shook his head.

“Where is the compass, Damien?” Raja asked desperately.

“It was still dark, and I took it with me as I walked here. I was going to wait for the first rays of morning light to see it better. I was sitting, just there, when the ledge gave way. As I fell, I dropped it! It is lost, Raja! It is lost! I am sorry! I am so sorry!”

At once, the three men looked towards the roaring seabed below. Treacherous waves crashed onto the rocks. Instantly, Raja felt sick. Could anything
have survived such a fall? A deep anger began to well up inside, surprising him with its suddenness and fury.

“How could you Damien? How could you? Respa gave me that compass! Do you know what will happen without it? Have you any idea what your foolish choice has cost?”

Respa had promised the compass would lead him and those with him to Cowra - but what would happen without it?

“I must find that compass, Damien!” he yelled. “And if I cannot -”

His words hung in the air. What would he do? He could not tell. He must find the compass.

Raja traced the edge of the plateau until he found a grass-covered path leading down, down, down to the sea. He followed it thoughtlessly. His chest was tight with anger, and his breath short from fury. Question after question ran through his head. How could Damien have done this? Why would he have taken the compass while he slept? With each unanswered question, Raja’s anger grew.

As he continued following the rocky path, in his haste, he lost his footing and fell. Raja tried to catch himself with his hands. As he did so, his foot twisted painfully, and his hands were cut by the sharp gravel and the heaviness of his fall. Cursing, Raja picked himself up and continued limping down the slope. With each step, his anger at Damien and himself increased.

A sharp curve finally brought him to the sea’s edge. The treacherous rocks were not far away. Driven by rage and sorrow, Raja rushed into the ocean, and was immediately pushed back by the first mocking wave to reach him.

*All that is needed will be provided.*

Raja heard Mafid’s cheerful voice counselling him not to risk his life in a fruitless endeavor. Still, he pushed forward, pounded back again by mighty waves.

*Humility stands supreme,* Humil’s peaceful voice reminded him. But he pushed the thought away, reasoning that humility could do little to return the compass to him.

*Never rely on the weakness of your own intellect; rely on the truth that is spoken to your heart.*

Respa’s words pierced his soul, causing him to pause.

*Respa was wrong,* he thought bitterly.

Raja was a powerful swimmer and he was determined to beat the sea. Though the ferocious waves and jagged rocks should have turned him away, anger blinded him, and he dove in thoughtlessly, recklessly, pridefully.
Instantly, Raja found himself pommelled by wave after wave. Tossed to and fro like driftwood, he didn’t even have time to breathe. As he was being dragged under by the surf, and thrown against the rocks, Raja realized how futile his fight was. He couldn’t win.

“Grandpa, he doesn’t die, does he?” the youngest voice was filled with concern.

“No!” one of the older children reassured him. “Let Grandpa finish the story. This is the best part!”

Grandpa patted his lap, and the little one climbed atop his knees. When he continued, Grandpa’s warm voice filled him with reassurance.

“The waves of life can never drown the ship within.”

“The ship within?” the children asked in unison. “What’s that?”

“I think I know, Grandpa, can I tell them?” the oldest child asked. Grandpa nodded.

“Inside each of us is a ship - one that can never be drowned by all the water in the world. It’s a ship of goodness, of truthfulness, and purity. And unless we let in the water - or the sadness, the evil, the ugly - that ship will never sink. It cannot! It will float and float and float, forever! But sometimes, the boat within gets hurt, and ugliness, or pain, or loneliness start to seep in.”

“Then what?” the little boy asked, his eyes wide.

“Then comes Forlov!”