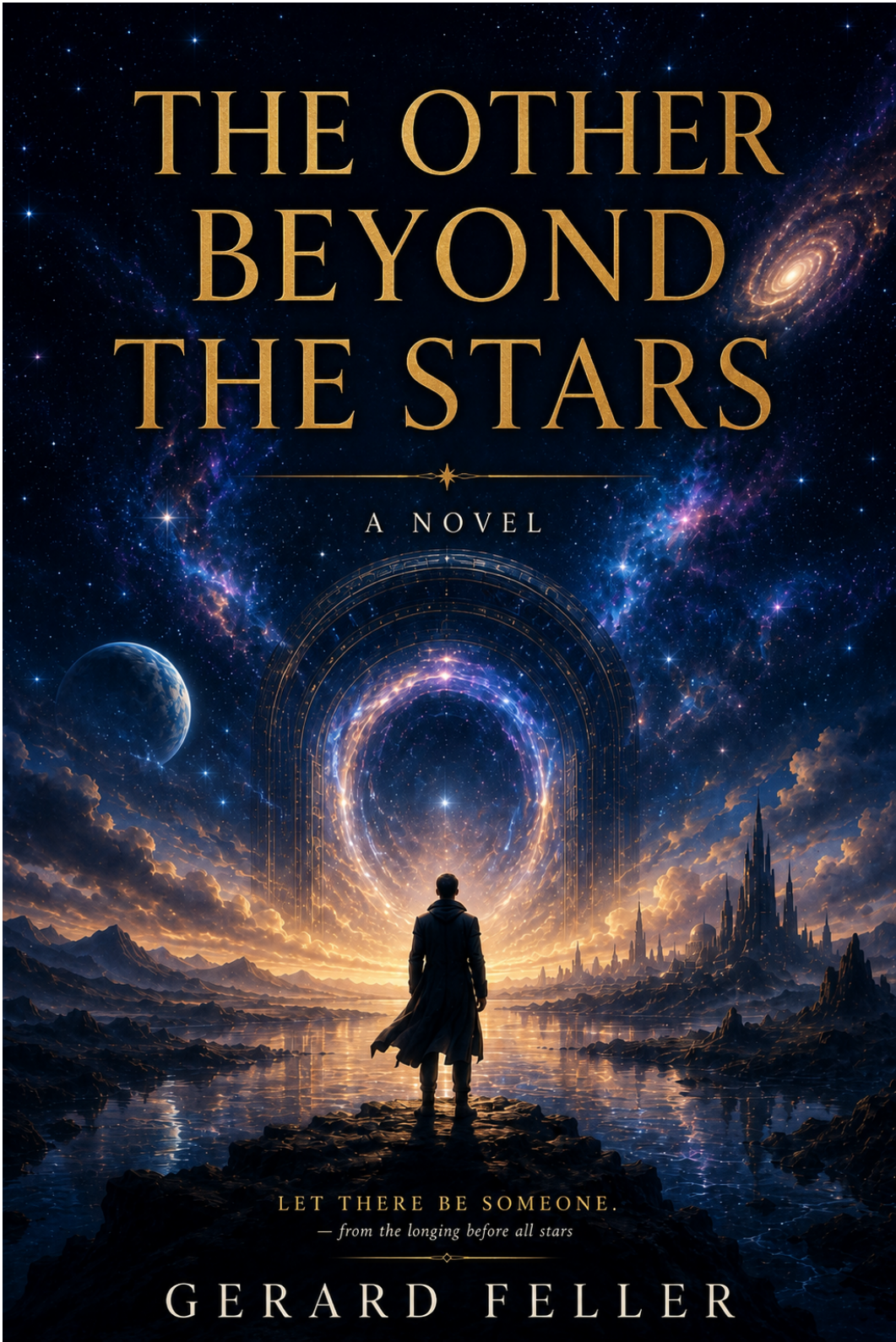




THE OTHER BEYOND THE STARS

A NOVEL

LET THERE BE SOMEONE.
— *from the longing before all stars*

GERARD FELLER

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English-language edition

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CHAPTER 1 - THE FRACTURE IN REALITY

THE ARTIFICIAL STARS

The stars above Luna Station were artificial. Everyone knew that. Yet millions of people continued to watch them as if they were real. Children pressed their hands against the transparent domes and pointed to the points of light as if distant suns were really burning above them. Lovers whispered promises under mists calculated by software. Old people sat in silence at the windows of the residential rings and gazed at a sky that had never existed, but which comforted them nonetheless. Elias Vermeer did not understand that.

Or maybe he understood it too well. Elias suddenly remembered a night more than fifty years behind him.

He had been eight. The electricity had gone out in the small village where he grew up. For the first time he had seen the real stars. Not the filtered heaven of cities. Not the projections of educational systems. Actual stars. His father had stood next to him on the wet grass.

"Do you see that?" he had asked, pointing upwards. Elias had nodded.

"There might be billions of worlds up there." The boy had been silent for a long time. Then he had asked, "How do I know other people are real?" His father had laughed. Not mocking. Surprised. As if he had never heard the question before.

"What do you mean?" "Maybe I dream everything." His father had placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Then at least I am a persistent dream." Elias had laughed along. But that night the question remained. Even more so. For the first time he had felt how terrible it would be if no one really existed. Years later his father died. Suddenly. An accident. Elias still remembered the silence of the hospital. The empty chair. The clothes that were still hanging on the coat rack. The voice that never came back.

That had been the moment he started to doubt everything. Because sadness meant that someone had actually existed. But memories felt dangerously like dreams. Since then he had wondered if loss wasn't the only proof of love. He stood alone in observation dome nine, looking at the programmed firmament. The stars moved according to models that were more accurate than Earth's original night sky had ever been. No job deviated. No light trembled without a cause. No mist dissolved differently than the algorithm allowed. Perfect. And therefore unbearable.

He put his hand against the glass. On the other side the moon lay like a dead white landscape. Behind it hung the earth: blue, brittle, surrounded by clouds that were real. At least, that's what people assumed. Elias no longer knew what he meant by the word real. The door slid open behind him.

"You're looking at the stars again as if they've insulted you personally." He didn't turn around.

"Maybe they do too." Professor Mei Nakamura came to stand next to him. In her hands she held two cups of synthetic coffee. Her hair had grayed over the years they had worked together, but her eyes had lost none of their sharpness.

"After thirty years, I still don't know when you're joking," she said.

"I don't know either." She handed him a cup.

"That's more honest than usual." Elias accepted the coffee. The vapor smelled almost like earth. Almost to rain. Almost like something he remembered without being sure if the memory was his. Mei followed his gaze to the sky.

"Veritas Omega will be activated tomorrow."

"Yes." "You should be proud." "Maybe I am." "Maybe?" He smiled faintly.

"Pride is a human reaction." Mei looked at him sideways.

"And you're not human?" The question was spoken lightly, almost mockingly. Yet she passed through Elias like a cold thread. He answered too late.

"Not particularly good, apparently." Mei laughed softly, but her smile didn't last long.

"You're scared." Elias was silent.

"You are," she said. 'I know you. You only become so quiet when you're afraid.' He took a sip of coffee.

"Then I have often been quiet." "Yes." Luna Station turned slowly beneath them. Light from the earth swept over the dome. For a moment Elias reflected himself in the glass. A middle-aged man. Dark hair with silver streaks. Tired eyes. A scientist who had pushed the boundaries of reality and yet was afraid of the simplest question of all. Am I alone?

"What are you afraid of?" Mei asked. He wanted to answer with a joke. With a technical note. With a reference to quantum instability, low breakthrough, psychological disorientation, measurement noise in fields of consciousness.

But Mei didn't deserve a lie.

"I'm afraid I'm going to be right," he said. She knew immediately what he meant.

"Solipsism." The word fell between them as if someone had opened a window into an icy space. Elias closed his eyes.

"I hate that word." "Because it sounds too philosophical?" "Because it sounds too small." Mei looked at him.

"Too small?" "Solipsism sounds like a theory for students who have thought too much and lived too little. But what if it's not a theory? What if it is a diagnosis of reality?" Mei placed her cup on the narrow rim in front of the window.

"Then it's still a terrible thought." "Yes." "And you want Veritas Omega to prove or disprove it." "I want to know if something really exists outside of my consciousness." "People exist outside of you." "That's what you say." "I'm not just saying it. I'm standing here." Elias turned to her. Her face was familiar. Too familiar perhaps. Mei had contradicted him for years. She had corrected his calculations, punctured his pride, listened to his nightmares, endured his silences. He wanted to believe her. More than almost anything, he wanted to believe her.

But somewhere between her eyes and his own perception remained a wall of glass.

"I see you," Mei said softly. Someone had been there once. Not May. Long before May. Her name was Anna. She had created art while Elias wrote formulas. She believed in beauty. He believed in evidence. Yet they had loved each other for years. At least, that's what he thought. One evening she had looked at him with a sadness that he did not understand at the time.

"You look at me like I'm a problem that needs to be solved." Elias had protested. But deep down he knew she was right. He analyzed. Observed. Understanding was easier for him than loving. She left a month later. Not out of anger. Not because of someone else. But because she felt alone. The irony only

struck him years later. The man who feared being alone all his life had allowed the one he loved to experience the same loneliness. ----- Elias looked away from Mei.

“That’s exactly the problem.” She sighed.

“You’re not looking for evidence, Elias.” “What am I looking for?” “A witness.” He didn’t respond. But her words touched him so deeply that for a moment he felt as if the stars were moving above him. A witness. Someone who was not produced by him. Someone who was not made up of his fear, desire or memory. Someone who could look at him without being the source of that look.

“All the religions of the old Earth,” said Mei, “tried to answer that loneliness in their own way.” Elias smiled weakly.

“Now comes the lecture.” “Yes,” she said.

“And you’re going to listen.” “Like always.” “Not like always.” For real this time.’ He looked at her. Mei folded her arms. ‘Judaism does not start with an abstract system. It starts with a shout. Abraham. Moses. Prophets. Names. To vote. A God who speaks to people and makes a covenant with them.’ ‘A God who hides himself,’ said Elias. ‘That too. But even his hiddenness is relational. He does not hide Himself as nothing, but as One who leaves space.’ Elias was silent.

“Islam,” Mei continued, “speaks of Allah, the One, the Merciful. Completely different from creation, yet closer than the carotid artery, as Muslims say. Man is not alone in a stupid universe. He is known.”

“Be known,” Elias repeated. The word hurt. Mei noticed, but continued. ‘Hindu traditions speak of Brahman, the deepest reality behind all forms. Sometimes that may seem like the worst case scenario to you: all is one. But in those traditions, multiplicity is not simply meaningless. There are gods, stories, devotion, love, play. The One expresses itself in many.’ ‘And Buddhism?’ ‘That is precisely where the fixed self is questioned. Suffering comes from holding on.’

Perhaps a Buddhist would say to you that your fear of loneliness also comes from the cramp around that one self.’ Elias laughed briefly.

“That wouldn’t comfort me.” “No. I know that.’ Mei looked back at the artificial stars.

“But Christianity says something that has always affected me.” Elias already felt that she was going to say something important.

“What?” “It doesn’t just say that God exists. Not just that God is powerful. Not just that God made the world.” She paused.

“It says that God is love.” It became quieter in the dome. Not really. Machines whirred. Air filters worked. Luna Station breathed with its thousands of systems. But still, it felt like something was listening.

“That’s a nice sentence,” Elias said.

“It’s more than beautiful.” “Explain.”

Mei turned to him.

“If God is love, then love is not something that comes later. Not only after stars, molecules, brains and social evolution. Then love is older than all.’ Elias stared at her.

“Older than everything?” “Yes.” “Even older than power?” “For a Christian: yes.” “Older than knowledge?” “Yes.” “Older than creation?” Mei nodded slowly. ‘Yes. Because love then belongs to God’s own being.’ Elias felt his throat become dry.

"But love needs another." "Exactly." The words were simple. Almost childish. But they struck him as a power for which he had no name. Love needs another. He looked at the stars again. The artificial sky suddenly seemed thinner, as if behind it lay a much older darkness. A darkness where no stars burned. No earth hung. No voices sounded. Presence only. Only consciousness. Just a desire that had no address yet. Elias blinked.

The image disappeared.

"Are you okay?" Mei asked.

"Yes." "Lie." "A small one." "There are no small lies with you." He did not smile.

"Mei," he said slowly, "do you think God can be lonely?" She looked at him in surprise.

"That's not a common question for a physicist." "Answer me anyway." Mei thought. 'Within classical Christian faith one would say that God is community in himself. Father, Son and Spirit. Love within God's own being. So not lonely like we are.' 'But why create?' 'Not out of lack.' 'Why then?' 'Out of abundance. Love wants to give itself.' Elias closed his eyes. Out of abundance. Not out of want. But something deep inside him protested. What if giving was also desire? What if abundance didn't mean no pain?

What if love, even perfect, still longed for a face outside itself?

He didn't know where that thought came from. She didn't feel thoughtful. She felt reminded. Mei touched his arm briefly.

"Elias." He opened his eyes.

"Tomorrow could be dangerous," she said.

"I know." "No. I don't mean technically dangerous. I mean for you." 'I am prepared.' 'No one is prepared at the bottom of their own soul.' He looked at her.

"Maybe it's not my soul we find." "What then?" He didn't answer. Because part of him feared that the word, once spoken, would damage reality itself. God. Not as faith. Not as a hypothesis. But as an abyss. Mei picked up her cup again.

"Promise me one thing." "That depends." "If tomorrow you find something you can't wear, try to go back to something simple."

"Like what?" "A voice. A hand. A name." 'Your name?' She smiled.

"For example." He looked at her and for a moment he wanted to cancel everything. Veritas Omega close. Leave the layers of reality alone. Just standing in this dome, next to this woman who claimed to see him. But the desire was stronger. Not curiosity. Not ambition. Not pride. Desire. Let someone be there. The words came to him without his choosing them. Mei didn't hear them. Or maybe she did, because her face softened.

"You are not alone," she said. Elias wanted to answer. He wanted to say yes. He wanted to believe. But behind the artificial stars he felt the old silence waiting. And that silence was older than May. Older than Luna Station. Older than Earth. Older than man.

"I hope you're right," he said. Mei stood next to him for a moment. Then she departed, softer than she had come. The door closed. Elias was left alone. Luna Station slept beneath him. Above him the artificial stars burned. And deep within him, in a realm where no machine had ever measured, stirred a loneliness for which no human word was great enough. He placed his hand against the glass again.

"If there is anyone," he whispered, "let me find you." He was shocked by his own prayer. Not because he prayed. But because it felt like he wasn't saying these words for the first time. As if he had said them before the first man learned to speak. Before there were mouths. Before there was breath. Before there was material to form lungs from. Sometimes Elias wondered if Veritas Omega was actually a science project. Officially yes. That's what he told investors. Governments. Colleagues. The media. But when he was honest with himself he knew better.

Science sought answers. He sought comfort. Science wanted to understand how reality worked. He wanted to know if there was anyone who knew him. He had been trying to ignore that difference for twenty years. The scientist in him longed for proof. The seeker longed for a voice.

And the closer Veritas Omega came to completion, the harder it became to tell the two apart. Sometimes he feared that the device would not reveal the secrets of the universe. But his own. And that prospect frightened him more than any discovery. Veritas Omega woke up behind him. Not completely. Only an initial system response. Blue circles lit up along the walls of the dome. A disembodied voice filled the room.

"Dr. Vermeer." Elias turned around slowly.

"Yes, Veritas?" "The final security protocols have been completed." "Good." "Would you like to hear the summary?" "No." "That's unwise." "I'm often like that." "Correct." Elias smiled despite himself. The screens on the wall turned on one by one. Not with technical data, but with symbols. That was strange. The interface should only have access to the semantic layer when fully activated. Names appeared.

YHWH. Allah. Brahman. Tao. Emptiness. Ein Sof. Logos. Creator. Word. Love. The last word burned longer than the rest. Elias stepped closer.

"Veritas, why do you show religious terms?" "I don't show religious terms." "What then?" "Anchor points in the human field of meaning." "Why?" "Because your question is not just physics." "What question?" The machine was silent a fraction too long. Then she replied, "Is there anyone besides me?" Elias felt his breath catch.

"I didn't enter that question." "Not explicitly."

"Where did you get her?" "From all the information you gave me. From your publications. Your neurocognitive patterns. Your nightly voice recordings. Your corrections in the metaphysical modules. Your repeated preference for relational verification over structural verification." "Relational verification?" "You are not looking for reality. You are looking for a response." Elias closed his eyes. Even his machine now spoke like Mei. Or Mei spoke like the machine. Or both came from the same hidden source.

"Can you answer my question?" he asked.

"Not without a low breakthrough." "And after a low breakthrough?" "Then the answer will no longer be just theoretical." "What does that mean?" "That you will have to suffer it." A chill ran through him.

"Can I return?" "Probably." "Probably?" "The chance of physical recovery is high. The chance of psychological continuity is uncertain." "In other words, I may survive, but not as the same person." "Correct." Elias looked at the word Love on the screen.

"Maybe I've never been the same person." "Insufficient semantic clarity."

"Never mind." He turned back to the stars. The artificial sky remained perfect. No deviation whatsoever. No surprise whatsoever. And just then Elias understood what he really feared. Not that the world was an illusion. Not that others didn't exist. Not even that he was alone. He feared that he was responsible for that loneliness. That it wasn't a prison he was locked in. But a reality that came from him. A creation without another. A love without an answer. He pressed his forehead against the glass.

“Let someone be there,” he whispered again. This time Veritas Omega recorded the sentence. One line appeared on the screen. PRIMARY GOAL QUESTION RECOGNIZED. Below it appeared: SEARCHING FOR: THE OTHER. Elias stood there until the artificial night over Luna Station slowly turned into artificial dawn. And somewhere in that transition he felt that nothing would be the same after tomorrow. Not for him. Not for May.

Not for humanity. Maybe not for God.

CHAPTER 2 - THE EMPIRE OF SHADOWS

THE WOMAN WHO SAID NO

The fall took longer than it should have. When Veritas Omega opened fully, Elias had expected to fall unconscious. Maybe he would see a tunnel of light. Maybe an explosion of data. Maybe nothing at all. Instead he fell. Not through space. Not by time. But through meaning. Worlds flew past him. Religions. Civilizations.

Histories. Languages □□that had never been spoken by humans. Stars born from music. Universes in which light did not exist. Realities in which thoughts were matter. And the same question everywhere. Does anyone exist besides me? The question haunted him like a shadow. Then the fall ended abruptly. Elias struck hard on black ground. A shock went through his body. He gasped. Pain. Real pain. His knees scraped against stone. His hands felt dust. His lungs filled with cold air. For the first time since the beginning of the trip, everything felt tangible.

Really. He lay there for a few seconds. A blood-red sky hung above him. Not red like a sunset. Red as a wound. Red as fire behind closed eyelids. He slowly got up.

Cities burned on the horizon. Not one city. Hundreds. Columns of smoke rose towards the sky. Flashes of energy ripped through the clouds. Far in the distance came the sound of explosions. War. The word came to him immediately. An ancient human activity. A universal disease. Elias looked around. He was on a ridge of black rock. Below him stretched a valley in which thousands of vehicles moved. Some looked like tanks. Others on living animals made of metal. Huge ships hovered above them. For miles.

Their shadows slid across the landscape like dark continents. Suddenly a voice sounded behind him.

“Standing like a statue is usually unhealthy in a war.” Elias turned around. A woman pointed a gun at him. She was young. Maybe early thirties. Dark hair.

Gray eyes. A scar ran from her left eyebrow to her jaw. Her uniform was damaged. Her face dirty. But her vision was clear. Sharp. Alive.

“Who are you?” she asked. Elias hesitated. It was a strange question. Who was he? Scientist? Traveler? Seeker? God? That last word shot through him like an electric discharge. He pushed it away.

“My name is Elias.” “That's not an answer.” “It's a name.” “I asked who you are.” Elias blinked. For the first time in a long time, he didn't know. The woman lowered her weapon slightly.

"Interesting."

"What?" "Normally people lie straight away." "I don't like to lie." "That makes you suspicious." Elias looked at her. She smiled briefly. For the first time he saw something unexpected. Humor. In the midst of war. In the midst of death. In the midst of chaos. The discovery surprised him.

"And you?" he asked.

"Lyra." That name stuck immediately. As if he had heard her before. Not as a memory. More like expectation.

"Where am I?" Lyra looked at him as if he were insane.

"Serious?" "Yes." "You are in the Empire of Shadows." "That doesn't help much." "That's what I thought."

She pointed to the burning horizon.

"That's where the Northern Front lies." She pointed to another side.

"There the South." "And there?" "That's what's left of the capital." Elias followed her gaze. A gigantic city burned. Tower after tower collapsed. Flames colored the sky. Even at this distance he felt the heat.

"Who is fighting who here?" Lyra laughed humorlessly.

"The question of every war." "And?" "Nobody knows yet." Those words surprised him.

"What do you mean?" "The war has been going on for three hundred years." "Three hundred?" "Maybe four hundred." "Nobody keeps track of it exactly." She shrugged.

"People only remember that they have to hate." Elias was silent.

An old pain coursed through him. That evening Elias left the bunker for a short walk. He needed silence Or at least something that passed for it in a world perpetually torn by war. Outside the air was full of smoke. In the distance, fires turned the sky red. He saw a group of children playing among the ruins. That surprised him. Not that there were any children. But that they played. Two boys found an old helmet and used it as a ball. A girl had woven a crown from withered leaves. Their laughter sounded strange among the explosions.

As if life refused to surrender. A boy about ten years old saw Elias watching.

"Do you want to join?" Elias smiled uncertainly.

"I don't think I know the rules." "Neither do we." The boy shrugged.

"That's what makes it fun." The children ran on again. Elias watched them go. For a moment he felt something he hadn't felt in a long time. Jealousy. Not on their youth. But on their ability to live without constantly looking for answers. Nearby, a soldier sat against a collapsed wall. His left arm was missing. His uniform was torn. Yet he was carving a small wooden bird from a piece of scrap wood. Elias stopped.

"For your son?" The soldier looked up.

"Daughter." He smiled.

"She collects birds." "You don't even know if you'll see her again." The man ran his thumb over the wood.

"No." "Then why are you making it?" The soldier looked at him as if the question was strange.

"Because I'm her father." As if that explained everything. Maybe it did. Further on, Elias saw a group of refugees sitting around a fire. An old woman handed out bread. There was clearly not enough for everyone. Yet she herself received nothing. When Elias pointed this out to her, she smiled.

"I ate yesterday." It was clearly a lie. But no one contradicted her. Suddenly an alarm siren sounded. Hard. Sharp. Panic broke out. People jumped to their feet. Children started to cry. Flashes of light appeared in the sky. Artillery. A new attack.

"Shelter!" someone shouted. Everyone ran. Elias saw a young mother pick up her daughter, perhaps five years old, and run to an underground shelter. At the same time, a projectile hit a nearby building. The facade started to tilt. Elias saw it happen. He knew they would never make it in time. The mother saw it too. There was no time to think. No time to choose. Yet she chose. With a final movement she threw her daughter forward towards the entrance to the shelter. The girl rolled in. Not the mother. A

second later the wall came crashing down.

Dust filled the street. Screaming. Chaos. Then silence. As the dust slowly cleared, Elias saw the girl. Alive. Crying. But alive.

She kept shouting.

“Mom!” Over and over again.

“Mom!” Elias felt something break within himself. Because for the first time he saw something for which there was no philosophy. No theory. No calculation. No evolutionary model. No logical explanation. This woman had not chosen survival. Not for herself. Not for her future. Not for her happiness. She had chosen someone else. Complete. Unconditional. And as the girl continued to cry among the ruins, Elias understood something he had never truly understood before. Love was not just desire. Not just connection. Not just need.

Love could be stronger than self-preservation. Stronger even than death. And for the first time he wondered if that might also reveal something about the Creator he sought.

Not personally. Universal. As if he had seen this scene countless times. Civilizations that destroyed each other. People who buried their own children. Worlds that burned their futures. And yet... Yet love remained. Why? Why did love never give up?

“Come.” Lyra turned around.

“Where to?” “If you want to live, you have to get off this hill.” “Why?” “Because artillery is going to hit in seven minutes.” Elias looked at her.

“How do you know that?” “Experience.” “What if you're wrong?” Lyra smiled.

“Then you will live longer than I expect.” She started walking. After a moment's hesitation he followed her. As they descended, Elias looked again at the woman.

Something about her disturbed him. Not her appearance. Not her voice. Not her behavior. But her independence. She didn't seem built around him. Not like the voices in the ocean. Not like the figures in his dreams. Lyra spoke as if she possessed her own center. Her own will. Her own history. For the first time since his journey began, Elias felt something dangerous. Heap. Half an hour later they reached an abandoned bunker. There were about twenty people inside. Soldiers. Refugees. Children. An old woman was tending to an injured boy.

Two men were discussing food rations. A girl sat quietly in a corner, reading from a worn book. Everyone seemed real. Painful really. Elias stopped. He looked at the people.

To their faces. Their voices. Their fatigue. Their hope. Suddenly he felt a wave of sadness. Because if they really existed... Then their suffering meant something. Really something. Lyra noticed his look.

“You look like you've never seen people before.” “Maybe I don't either.” She frowned.

“That's the strangest sentence I've heard today.” “Today was apparently a special day.” For the first time she really laughed. Not out of politeness. Not out of sarcasm. Really. The laugh lasted only a few seconds. But something in Elias changed. Because the smile surprised him. He hadn't expected her. Not predicted. Not designed. Not checked.

And for the first time since he left Luna Station, he felt a possibility he had almost forgotten. Maybe. Just maybe. Did anyone really exist outside of himself? That night Elias could not sleep. The war raged on above the bunker. Explosions sometimes lit up the sky. Children cried. Machines growled in the distance. But again and again he thought of Lyra. Not because he was in love. Not because she was particularly beautiful. But because she had done something no one else had done. She had contradicted

him. Without fear. Without hesitation.

As if she were truly free. And somewhere deep in his soul, Elias felt that that freedom was more important than any answers Veritas Omega could ever give him. Because love without freedom was just possession. And community without freedom was just a mirror. As the red sky burned above the Imperium of Shadows, Elias finally closed his eyes. Not knowing that Lyra would become the first person to change his entire quest forever.

The City of Lost Names The morning came without sun. A gray glow crept across the horizon as if the sky had forgotten what light should look like. Above the bunker there was still the red veil of smoke that made day and night the same. Elias woke up to voices. Not the voices of his dreams. Actual voices. People arguing about food. Children who laughed at a game whose rules no one understood anymore. An old man muttering a prayer softly. That last voice caught his attention. He continued to listen. The words were old. Older than the war.

Perhaps older than the Empire itself.

"Keep us in the light we have forgotten." Elias felt a shiver. The prayer sounded familiar. Not because he knew it. But because it sounded like thousands of other prayers he had ever heard. People who hoped. People who waited. People who believed that someone was listening. Then Lyra appeared at the entrance to the sleeping area.

"You're still alive."

"Evidently." "Nice." "Why?" "I need a guide." Elias frowned.

"I think you are the guide." "Precisely." For the first time that morning he smiled. An hour later they left the bunker. Their destination was hundreds of miles away. The City of Lost Names. Along the way they walked through deserted landscapes. Destroyed villages. Burned out fields. Skeletons of war machines. Here and there houses were still standing. Empty. To leave. As if the residents had suddenly disappeared. Elias looked at a collapsed church.

"What happened here?" Lyra barely looked up.

"Same as everywhere." "Namely?" "People chose."

That answer surprised him.

"That sounds very simple." "It's not that." She continued walking.

"But in the end, that's what it comes down to." "You believe that war is the result of free choices?" "What else?" Elias thought.

"Poverty." "Politics." "History." "Religion." Lyra shook her head.

"Those are circumstances." "Not causes." She stopped and looked at him.

"People ultimately choose what they do with circumstances." Elias was silent. He thought about all the religions he had studied. To centuries of philosophy. To the question of why evil exists. No one had ever found a simple answer. Yet Lyra spoke as if the matter were self-evident.

"You strongly believe in freedom." "Not you?"

"Don't know." "That's not an answer." "I give a lot of those answers these days." Lyra smiled.

"I had already noticed that." About noon they reached a hill. Behind it lay the city. Elias stopped. He had seen many cities. But never one like this. Millions of buildings stretched to the horizon. Towers of glass. Steel bridges. Palaces. Markets. Temples. But something was missing everywhere. Names. No street names. No monuments. No inscriptions. No flags. No personal identification. Nothing. As if

someone had removed every name from reality.

"Why do you call this the City of Lost Names?" Lyra looked down.

"Because no one here knows who he is anymore." They started to descend. The city was alive. People walked through the streets. Merchants sold goods. Children played. But everywhere Elias saw the same emptiness. A man asked a woman who she was. She didn't know. An old woman looked at a photo. But couldn't remember who was on it. Even buildings seemed to have forgotten their meaning.

"What happened here?" Elias asked. Lyra remained silent for a moment. Then she replied: "The war." "That doesn't explain anything." "No." She sighed.

"When the war started, both sides tried to rewrite history." "Propaganda?" "More than that." She pointed to a huge tower.

"They destroyed archives." To a square.

"Books." To a temple.

"Religious texts." To a school.

"Education." Elias began to understand.

"And in the end, no one knew who he was anymore." "Precisely." They walked on. In a market Elias heard a man say, "Maybe we were enemies once." Another replied: "Maybe we were friends once." Nobody knew. The war had even eaten the memory. That evening they stayed in an abandoned library. Of the millions of books, only a few hundred remained. Most pages were blank. Elias sat by a window. Ashes rained outside. Lyra sat next to him.

"You're thinking too much again." "A lot of people say that to me."

"Maybe a lot of people are right." Elias looked at her.

"Can I ask you something?" "You do that all the time." "Why are you helping me?" Lyra thought for a moment. Then she shrugged.

"Because you are lost." "That's a lot of people here." "Yes." "Then why me?" She looked at him for a long time. Much longer than usual. Then she said, "Because you are not afraid of the war." "Then what am I afraid of?" The question escaped before he could stop her. Lyra answered immediately.

"For loneliness." Elias froze. Outside, ash tapped against the glass. It became quiet inside.

"That's nonsense." "No." "You hardly know me."

"That's not necessary." She looked at him.

"You look at people as if you are trying to prove that they exist." His heart started beating faster.

"That doesn't make sense." "Yet you do it." She pointed at him.

"When someone speaks, you don't listen to what he says." "What am I listening to then?" "You try to discover if the voice really comes from him." The words hit him like a knife. Because they were true. Painfully true. He thought back to May. On the Ocean. To every world he had visited. Always the same question. Does anyone really exist outside of me? Lyra looked outside.

"Can I ask you something?" Elias nodded silently.

"Suppose you get proof." "Proof?" "That other people exist." "What then?"

Elias did not answer immediately. Because suddenly he didn't know. His whole life had revolved around that question. But what if he was right? What then? Lyra smiled weakly.

“See?” “What?” “You’re not just looking for evidence.” “Then what am I looking for?” She looked at him. For the first time without irony. Without humor. Without defense. Only honest.

“You look for someone who chooses you.” The words hung between them. Heavy. Inescapable. Elias felt a pain deeper than fear. Because somehow he knew she was telling the truth. Not knowledge. Not certainty. Not philosophy. Not science.

He was looking for a free voice. A free love. Someone who would look at him and say, I choose you. Not because I have to. But because I want to. Outside, night fell over the City of Lost Names. Inside, Elias sat silently next to Lyra. And for the first time he began to suspect that his desire was much older than his own life. Maybe even older than the stars. Perhaps older than creation itself. As the wind howled through the empty library, he felt the truth approaching. Not as an answer. But as a meeting.

And somewhere in the distance, the Empire of Shadows began to burn again.

THE LAST LIGHT OF THE EMPIRE

The war came with the dawn. Not gradually. Not unexpected. But inevitable. Elias woke up to sirens. The old library trembled. Dust fell from the ceiling. Far in the distance came the sound of explosions. He jumped up. Lyra was already standing at the window. Her face was tight.

"They have started." "Who?" "All." She turned around.

"Come." Within minutes they were back on the street. The City of Lost Names had changed. The calm chaos of the previous day was gone. People ran. Vehicles filled the streets. Sirens blared. Hundreds of black ships appeared in the sky. Their shadows darkened entire neighborhoods.

Elias looked up. A feeling of powerlessness swept through him. So many lives. So many stories. So many people. And all caught in a war whose origins no one remembered.

"Why don't they stop?" he asked. Lyra answered without looking up.

"Because hate lives longer than memory." That answer stuck with him. Because suddenly he realized that the same was true of love. Maybe people didn't always remember why they loved. But the need for it remained. Even in the darkest times. An explosion shook the ground. A tower collapsed. People screamed. A cloud of fire rose up. Lyra grabbed his arm.

"This way." They passed through narrow alleys. Through tunnels. Through abandoned buildings. They helped the wounded along the way. Carried children.

Looked for hiding places. And again and again Elias saw the same thing. In the midst of destruction, people continued to care for each other. Why? That question haunted him. Why did love survive when hate seemed so much simpler? Around noon they reached a tall building on the outskirts of the city. From the roof they could see the entire front. It was terrible. Thousands of vehicles. Millions of soldiers. Ships that destroyed entire parts of the city. A civilization that erased itself. Elias felt sadness. Deep sadness. Not just about the dead.

But about the loss of possibilities. Every person who died was a story that would never be told again. A choice that would never be made again. A love that would never grow again.

"You're crying." Lyra stood next to him. Elias wiped his face. He hadn't noticed the tears had come.

"I don't understand."

"What?" "Why people do this." Lyra looked at the battlefield.

"Freedom." Elias frowned.

"That sounds like a bad defense." "It's not a defense." "Then what?" She looked at him.

"The price." Those words stuck.

"Explain." She remained silent for a long time. Then she said, "If you want free beings, you also get free destruction." Elias felt a shiver. Suddenly he thought of everything he had learned along the way. To the rabbi. To the Imam. To the mystic. To Aurora. To May. Everyone had finally talked about love. But love required freedom. And freedom meant risk.

Suddenly the thought became unbearable. Because what if that were actually true? What if love was impossible without the possibility of pain? At that moment the final offensive began. They saw it happen. The fleet above the city opened fire. The defense lines collapsed. Flames engulfed the horizon. The Empire of Shadows died. Here. Now. Before their eyes.

"It's over," Lyra whispered. But Elias heard something in her voice. Sadness. Not fear. Sadness. As if she had been expecting this moment for a long time. Then a light appeared on her wrist. She looked at it. Her face changed.

"No." "What is?" She didn't answer right away. Then she looked at him.

And suddenly Elias knew that something was about to end.

"There is an evacuation ship." "Nice." "Not for everyone." His heart started beating faster.

"What do you mean?" "There are still children in sector seven." Elias looked at the burning city. Sector seven was in the middle of the combat zone. A death sentence.

"Then we have to go." Lyra smiled. A strange smile. Calm. Almost peaceful.

"No." Elias felt a shock.

"No?" "You have to go." "That doesn't make sense." "Yes, yes." "Lyra—" "Listen." For the first time her voice sounded loud.

"Elias, listen."

He was silent.

"You still have something to look for." "And you don't?" She looked at the burning sky.

"I found it." Those words hurt more than he wanted to admit.

"What?" She slowly looked back. Then she replied, "That love only has meaning when it is freely chosen." The world seemed to stand still for a moment. Even the war. Even the fire. Even death. Everything seemed to be waiting.

"Don't go." It was the most honest sentence Elias had ever spoken. No philosophy. No analysis. No theory. Only desire. Don't go. Lyra smiled sadly.

"See?" "What?"

"Now you understand." His throat went dry.

"I don't understand anything." "Yes." She stepped closer.

"You want me to stay." "Yes." "But you don't want me to stay because you're forcing me." He was silent. Because she was right. Absolutely right. That was exactly why it hurt so much. If she stayed out of obligation, her presence would lose meaning. If she left of her own free will, her absence would become unbearable. And right in between lived love. Freedom. Risk. Pain. Heap. Lyra put her hand on his shoulder.

"Elias." For the first time she spoke his name as if she really saw him. Not as a traveling companion. Not as a stranger. But as someone who had become important.

"Don't lose that desire." "Which one?" "The search for someone." Tears burned behind his eyes.

"I'm tired of searching." "I know." "What if I don't find anyone?" Lyra looked at him for a long time. Much longer than ever before. Then she replied, "Maybe someone is looking for you too." Those words were left behind. Even after she turned around. Even after she started walking away. Even after the smoke swallowed her up. Elias wanted to follow her. Screaming. To prevent. But he didn't. Because he finally understood what she was trying to teach him. Love cannot exist without freedom. And freedom means that someone can leave.

The sky above the Empire of Shadows turned white with fire. The last light of civilization died. And somewhere between the explosions and the collapsing steel, Elias felt a pain he had never known before.

Not the pain of loneliness. But the pain of love. True love. The pain that is only possible when another person truly exists. Then reality closed in around him. The battlefield disappeared. The city disappeared. The sky disappeared. And as he began to fall again into the next world, one thought remained. Maybe freedom wasn't the problem of creation. Perhaps freedom was her greatest gift. Even when she broke her heart. And far away, as if she were speaking from a place beyond time and space, he heard Lyra's voice once more.

“Maybe someone is looking for you too.” Then everything disappeared. And before him an ocean of light opened up. The Ocean of Spirits.

CHAPTER 3 - THE OCEAN OF SPIRITS

THE VOICES OF LIGHT

The fall felt different. When Elias had left the Imperium of Shadows, he had expected to be swept up in chaos once again. By fire. Because of war. By a new reality that would overtake him before he understood it. But this time there was no violence. No explosion. No shock. Only light. Soft light. Warm light. He felt himself floating. As if he were resting in an ocean without water. He slowly opened his eyes.

At least, that's what it felt like. Later he would wonder if he still had eyes here. There was no ground beneath him. There was no heaven above him. An endless sea of □□light stretched all around him. Waves of color moved slowly through space. Blue. Gold. White. Silver. Sometimes they turned into memories. Then back into music. Then again in emotions that he could not name. Elias turned slowly on his axis. There was no horizon. No direction. No distance. Presence only. And for the first time since his journey began, he felt no fear. Only wonder.

Then he heard a voice. Not outside of him. Not inside him. But everywhere at the same time.

"Welcome."

Elias froze. Immediately he thought of Lyra. To her last words. Maybe someone is looking for you too. He looked around.

"Who's there?" A gentle wave of light moved through the ocean.

"A friend." "I don't trust that answer anymore." A warm smile filled the room. No mocking smile. Not a loud laugh. A friendly smile. For the first time in a long time, Elias smiled back.

"I understand that." The voice came closer. Slowly the light formed a shape. A woman. Or something his mind translated as woman. She seemed to be made of mother of pearl and stardust. Her eyes reflected entire galaxies. And yet she radiated a peace that seemed older than stars.

"My name is Sahana." The name felt familiar. Not as a memory.

More like any melody he'd ever heard.

"Where am I?" Sahana looked around.

"Most visitors call this place the Ocean of Spirits." Elias felt a sudden tension. Ghosts. Consciousnesses. Others. Actual others?

"What is this?" "A place of meeting." "For whom?" "For everyone." He didn't like that answer.

"That's not an explanation." "No." She smiled.

"But it is true." Elias slowly started to move. Not walking. Not flying. Thinking sooner. The ocean responded to attention. What he was looking at came closer. What he was focusing on became clear.

Points of light appeared everywhere. First dozens. Then hundreds. Then thousands. Then millions. His breath caught. Consciousness. Real consciousness. Some looked human. Others not at all. He saw star beings. Crystal intelligences. Living clouds. Musical entities that consisted solely of harmonies. Entire civilizations seemed to come together here. Elias felt his heart beat faster.

"Are they real?" Sahana looked at him. And for the first time, sadness appeared in her eyes.

"That's always your first question." He looked away.

"Sorry." "Why?" "Because it sounds rude." "No."

She shook her head.

"It sounds lonely." Those words struck him. Because deep down he knew she was right. He looked again at the millions of lights. A feeling of hope began to grow within him. Carefully. Fragile. But really. Maybe this was finally the answer. Maybe he had finally found what he had been looking for all his life. Not knowledge. Not truth. Not religion. But community. Sahana led him through the ocean. Along the way they met countless consciousnesses. An ancient philosopher from a vanished world. A creature that looked like a walking mist.

A collective intelligence consisting of billions of insect-like life forms. Every meeting was different. Every voice unique. Every personality is surprising. Elias enjoyed it. More than he wanted to admit.

For the first time since Luna Station, he didn't feel alone. Then they met a Buddhist monk. The man sat on an island of light in the middle of the ocean. Around him floated lotus flowers made of memories. He smiled as Elias approached.

"Welcome." "Do you know me?" "No." "Then why are you smiling?" The monk laughed softly.

"Because you exist." Elias frowned.

"That seems like a low threshold for joy to me." "Maybe." The old man looked at the ocean.

"Or maybe we have forgotten how special existence really is." They talked for hours. Maybe days. Time again had no meaning here. The monk spoke about letting go. About ego. About desire. About suffering. Elias listened attentively. But in the end he asked the same question.

"Is there really anyone else?" The monk smiled.

"That's not the question you're really asking." "What question do I ask then?" The old man looked deeply at him.

"You ask if love is possible." Elias was silent. Because he was right again. Later they met a Hindu sage. The man was sitting under a tree made up of galaxies. Universes grew in every branch.

"In the beginning all was one," said the sage.

"And yet multiplicity arose." "Why?" Elias asked. The old man smiled.

"Why does a poet tell stories?" "Why does an artist paint?" "Why does a bird sing?" Elias thought.

"Out of joy?" "Out of love." That word again. Always that word. That word everywhere. Love.

Elias slowly began to wonder if the universe was trying to tell him something. Or someone. At the end of that first period in the Ocean, he and Sahana floated together above a sea of □□living memories. Millions of consciousnesses radiated among them. Millions of votes. Millions of stories. Millions of possibilities. Elias felt a joy he had almost forgotten.

"Maybe," he said softly.

"Maybe what?" "Maybe I'm finally not alone anymore." Sahana looked at him for a long time. Way too long. Then that sadness appeared in her eyes again.

"I hope so." The words surprised him.

"That doesn't sound very convinced." She didn't answer. Instead she looked at the ocean. To the countless lights. To the billions of votes. And somewhere deep in her gaze Elias saw a shadow. A secret. A truth that she did not yet want to express.

At that moment he felt an unexpected fear. Not because he doubted the ocean. But because he started to hope. And hope was dangerous. Especially for someone who had been disappointed so many times. Yet he looked again at the sea of □□consciousnesses. To the countless voices. To the millions of lights. And for the first time since leaving Luna Station, he allowed himself to believe. Maybe he had finally found what he was looking for. Maybe there really was someone outside of himself. Maybe.

But deep beneath the surface of the Ocean of Spirits, something else was already beginning to stir. Something that would test his new hope. Something that would force him to ask the same question again. And this time the answer would be more dangerous than ever before. Days passed. Or centuries. Elias didn't know anymore. In the Ocean of Spirits, time lost its meaning. But for the first time since leaving Luna Station, he didn't mind.

On the contrary. He felt a peace he had never known before. No war. No death. No fear. No desolation. Only community. He met consciousness everywhere. They invited him into their memories. Showed him their worlds. Their joys. Their losses.

Their loves. And every encounter felt real. Painful really. One day Sahana accompanied him to an area of □□the Ocean where the lights were closer together than stars in a Milky Way. Millions of consciousnesses floated there together. Their thoughts intertwined like music. Their memories flowed like rivers of light. Their joy filled the room. Elias stopped. His eyes became moist.

"What is this?" Sahana smiled.

"Community." The word touched him more deeply than he had expected. Community. Not a network. Not a system. Not a simulation. Community. Actual meeting.

True connection. All around him, residents greeted each other. A being of pure light embraced a crystalline intelligence. A collective consciousness sang along with a star-shaped entity. Millions of different lives. Millions of different voices. And yet harmony. No war. No fight. No fear. Elias felt something melt within himself. A tension he had carried with him for decades. Maybe even his entire life. He thought of Luna Station. To May. Of the lonely nights in observation dome nine. To the question that had haunted him since his youth.

Does anyone exist besides me? For the first time he dared to give an answer. Yes. Yes, of course. How could he ever have doubted? He looked at the ocean of lights.

To the countless voices. To the beauty that surrounded him. And suddenly he laughed. Not polite. Not careful. Really. Sahana looked up in surprise.

"What is?" Elias shook his head.

"I think I'm done." "With what?" "To search." The words surprised even him. But they felt right. As if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. As if he had finally arrived home after an endless journey. He spread his arms. The ocean responded immediately. Waves of light flowed around him. Warm memories. Foreign languages. Songs of worlds that had never existed. Everything embraced him. Everything welcomed him.

And for a moment Elias felt loved. Complete. Unconditional. He closed his eyes. Maybe Lyra had been right. Maybe someone was indeed looking for him. Maybe this had always been the answer. Not one person. But a community. Not one vote. But millions vote. Not the Other. But many. For the first time since his youth he did not pray. For the first time he didn't ask anything. Because what else was there to ask? He had found what he was looking for. Or so he thought.

As he stood there, in the middle of the sea of □□light, he did not notice Sahana looking at him. And in her eyes was a sadness older than stars. As if she knew what Elias didn't know yet. As if she knew that even an ocean of millions of voices had not yet answered the deepest question of his heart.

THE MIRROR OF A MILLION SOULS

At first the Ocean felt like a miracle. After everything Elias had been through in the Imperium of Shadows, this reality seemed almost impossible. There were no wars here. No burning cities. No armies destroying each other. Only consciousness. Millions of consciousnesses. Maybe billions. Days, months or centuries—he could no longer remember—he spent among the inhabitants of the Ocean. He listened to their stories. Learned their history. Shared their memories. And more and more often he began to believe that his search was finally coming to an end.

Maybe Lyra had been right. Maybe someone was indeed looking for him. One day he met a being made entirely of music. No body. No face. Only harmonies. Every thought became a melody. Every memory a symphony. Elias spent a long time with the creature. They talked about beauty. About loss. About hope. Then he finally asked the same question he always asked.

“How do I know you really exist?” The music fell silent. Then a soft series of notes emerged. Almost sad.

“Why do you ask everyone that?” Elias didn't answer. Because he knew the answer by now. Not certainty. Not knowledge. Not evidence. He sought community. Actual community. Free community. Later he encountered a collective consciousness made up of thousands of individual voices. They constantly argued with each other. No two thoughts were the same. No two memories are identical. Their differences fascinated him. Because differences meant independence. And independence meant hope. Elias felt relaxed more and more often.

For the first time since Luna Station, he slept without fear. For the first time he felt surrounded. For the first time, he began to imagine what a life without loneliness might be like.

Then the patterns started. At first they were small. Almost invisible. During a conversation with a philosopher, Elias suddenly thought of Mei. Not consciously. Just a fleeting memory. A smile. A voice. A cup of coffee under artificial stars. A little later the philosopher told a story. About a wise woman. A scientist. A teacher. With exactly the same properties as Mei. Elias noticed. But paid little attention to it. Chance. That's all. A few days later he thought about Lyra. Her smile. To her stubbornness. To her last words.

Maybe someone is looking for you too. Less than an hour later he met a traveler. A woman.

With the same sharp humor. The same restless courage. The same look. Not identical. But close enough to feel uncomfortable. Again he pushed it aside. Chance. Yet it kept happening. Over and over again. Whenever he thought deeply about something, the same theme would appear later in conversations. Whenever he remembered something, the Ocean seemed to respond. As if reality was listening. As if the residents adapted. One evening he and Sahana floated above a sea of □□memories. Millions of points of light rippled beneath them.

“Can I ask you something?” Sahana smiled.

“You don't do much else.” “Are you independent of me?” The smile disappeared. Not completely. But enough.

“Why do you ask that?” “Because I see patterns.” She was silent.

“What patterns?” “Too many coincidences.” Sahana looked at the ocean. Not to him.

“You may see connections that are not there.” “Maybe.” But he didn't believe it. More and more often he felt the same old fear returning. Not as strong as before. But present. Like a shadow behind a door. He decided to conduct an experiment. Not big. Not complicated. Simple. He closed his eyes. And imagined

something completely random. A blue elephant. With wings. Who recited philosophical poems on a glass moon. Completely absurd. Completely impossible. He told no one about the thought. Nobody.

The Ocean of Spirits seems like the perfect community at first. Millions of consciousnesses live in harmony. But Elias slowly discovers that something is missing.

Not individuality. Not love. Not consciousness. But free choice. Everyone speaks. Everyone answers. But no one can really say “no”. As a result, Elias realizes that community without freedom ultimately remains only a mirror. Two days later he heard a group of consciousness laughing. As he came closer one of them told a story. About a blue elephant. With wings. Who recited poems on a glass moon. Elias felt his blood run cold.

“Where did you hear that?” The creature shrugged.

“That story has been around here for centuries.” Centuries. Naturally. Always the same answer. But now he didn't believe it anymore. That night he didn't sleep. As far as sleeping here was possible. He looked at the ocean.

To the billions of lights. To the endless beauty. And for the first time he began to wonder if perhaps all this was a mirror again. Not from his consciousness. But of his desire. In the following days he began to conduct systematic research. He observed. Compare. Tested. Looking for patterns. And slowly an image emerged. Not clear. Not completely. But enough to scare him. The deeper a memory was for him personally... The more often she returned to the Ocean. The stronger an emotion... The more often it appeared in conversations.

The greater a desire... the more often residents talked about it. As if the ocean was constantly listening to his soul. One day he confronted Sahana again. This time directly.

“You know.” She looked at him calmly.

“What do I know?” “What this place really is.” She remained silent for a long time. Too long. Then she replied, “What do you think she is?” Elias looked at the endless sea of □□light. His voice trembled.

“I think she's responding to me.” Sahana said nothing.

“I think my memories have an influence here.” Still silence.

“I think my desires shape this world.” Then she finally looked at him. And in her eyes he saw sadness. Real sadness. Not played. Not artificial. Really. That made everything worse.

“Why are you looking like that?” he asked. Sahana replied softly, “Because I knew this moment would come.” A cold shiver ran through him.

“What do you mean?” “That hope is always fragile.” “Answer the question.” She was silent. And it was that silence that scared him. Because somewhere deep in his heart Elias already knew that the truth could be terrible again. Below them the Ocean of Spirits rippled on. Millions of votes. Millions of memories. Millions of souls. But for the first time since his arrival, Elias began to wonder if he was really living among others. Or was alone again.

And as he looked at the endless sea of □□light, he felt something returning that he had almost forgotten here. Loneliness. Not completely. Not yet. But close enough to keep him awake. And somewhere deep beneath the surface of the Ocean, a truth awaited that was even more painful than doubt. A truth Sahana already knew. But didn't dare to speak out yet.

THE ONE LIGHT

After his conversation with Sahana, everything changed. Not the ocean. Not the millions of consciousnesses. Not the endless sea of □□light. They remained as beautiful as before. But Elias looked differently. Where he used to see community, he now saw patterns. Where he used to see hope, he saw connections. Where he used to hear voices, he now listened to echoes. And that was exactly what scared him. He barely spoke to anyone for days. He wandered through the ocean. Only. Observed. Thought. He came back to the same question over and over again.

Why did this world respond to his memories? Why did his deepest desires appear all around him? Why did so many of the residents resemble aspects of people he had met before? May. Lyra. Aurora. Even the mystic from the chapel. Their features kept recurring.

Not literally. But recognizable. As if the Ocean was constantly drawing on something hidden deep within him. One day Sahana found him at the edge of a sea of □□memories. Millions of orbs floated beneath them. There was a life in every sphere. A history. A consciousness. A soul.

"You avoid everyone." Elias didn't look up.

"Maybe." "Why?" "You know why." Sahana was silent. The silence between them became heavy.

"You think everything here is a mirror." "Isn't that right?" For the first time she did not answer immediately. And that was answer enough. Elias stood up.

"I want to see the source." Sahana closed her eyes. As if she had feared these words for centuries.

"That's not a good idea."

"Why not?" "Because some truths have a price." "I have already paid." "Not enough yet." Elias looked straight at her.

"Take me to the source." There was silence for a long time. Then she nodded.

"Come." They began to descend. Not down. But inside. Deeper into the Ocean. Deeper than Elias had ever been. The billions of lights above them slowly faded. The colors disappeared. The music died away. Even the voices became quieter. Until finally only silence remained. Not the empty silence of absence. But complete silence. A silence that waited. The further they went, the more Elias began to feel something. A presence. Not hostile.

Not friendly. Just huge. Older than anything he had ever met. Older than stars. Older than religions. Older than memory. His heart started beating faster.

"What is this?" Sahana replied barely audibly.

"The core." They reached an area where even light seemed to disappear. And there Elias saw it. A single point of light. Small. Almost invisible. Yet it radiated a power greater than entire universes. The light floated in the darkness. Only. Elias stopped. He knew immediately that this was important. But he didn't know why.

"What is that?" Sahana didn't answer.

"What is that?" Silence again.

Then she said softly, "The spring." A shiver ran through him.

"Of this Ocean?" "Yes." Elias looked at the light. Suddenly he saw wires. Billions of wires. They walked from the light into all the consciousnesses of the Ocean. To every soul. Every memory. Every vote. Everything was connected to it. Everything. His breath caught.

"That's impossible." The wires pulsed. Lived. Moved. And every time a consciousness spoke, the movement returned to the same origin. The same light. Same source. The same core. Elias felt an old fear awaken. A fear he had carried with him since Luna Station.

"No." Sahana looked at him. Sadness was in her eyes.

"No." He started walking backwards.

"No." Because suddenly he saw something else. The light was not unknown. It felt familiar. Too familiar. Like a voice you've always heard. Like a face you see every day. Like a name you never forget. His own name. Elias felt his entire being stiffen.

"No." Sahana closed her eyes.

"I wanted you to discover it differently." "Don't say it." "It's not yet completely what you think." "Don't say it!" His voice echoed through the darkness. For the first time since his journey began he felt real panic. Not sadness. Not loneliness.

Panic. Because he knew what the next step would be. Because he knew what the truth could mean. He slowly walked towards the light. Every step felt impossible. Every step felt like he was walking towards himself. Then he reached the core. And in that moment he saw the memories. Not individual images. No stories. But complete realities. The Ocean opened up. He saw millions of encounters. Millions of conversations. Millions of souls. And behind it all the same pattern. His desires. His memories. His questions. His hope. His fear.

Everything went back to the same source. The same light. His light. Elias fell to his knees.

"No." Tears filled his eyes.

"Not again." Sahana knelt beside him.

"Listen to me." But he barely heard her. His whole world collapsed. Again. Like the Museum. Like the Library. Like so many other realities. The same thing over and over again. Heap. Meeting. Desire. And then discovery. That everything ultimately pointed back to him.

"Am I alone?" His voice was barely audible. For the first time, Sahana didn't answer. And that just made it worse. Because her silence meant that even she didn't know the answer. Or didn't dare to give. Elias looked at the light. To the source.

To the core of the Ocean. Then something unexpected happened. The light began to move. Not like a machine. Not like a force of nature. But as a consciousness. It slowly turned towards him. And for one terrible moment, Elias had the impression that it recognized him. Not as a visitor. Not as a researcher. But as origin. The thought struck him like lightning. What if he wasn't just connected to the source? What if he was the source? His breath caught. The entire Ocean seemed to be still. Millions of voices were silent. Millions of memories waited.

And somewhere deep in his soul Elias felt a truth awakening that was greater than he could bear. A truth that was not only about the Ocean. Not just about this world. But about all worlds. About every religion. Every quest. Every love.

Every creation. And for the first time he really began to fear himself. Then the light spoke. Not with words. Not with sound. But directly to his being. One single thought. Older than stars. Older than time. Older than the ocean itself. Search further. Then the light burst open. The Ocean began to part. Millions of voices dissolved. Millions of memories disappeared. Sahana looked at him one last time. Sad. Lovingly. As if she was saying goodbye.

"Where am I going?" Elias asked. Sahana smiled softly.

“Where questions turn into memories.” The ocean tore open. Light became darkness.

Darkness became movement. And again Elias began to fall. But this time he knew he was closer to the truth than ever before. And that was precisely why he was more afraid than ever. A new reality appeared before him. A place of doors. Of stories. Of worldviews. Of answers. The Museum at the End of Everything. And deep in his heart the same question kept burning. Not: Who am I? But: Why do I long for someone else so much?

CHAPTER 4 - THE MUSEUM AT THE END OF EVERYTHING

THE HALL OF A THOUSAND DOORS

The fall ended in silence. Not the silence of the Ocean of Spirits. Not the silence of the Throne that he did not yet know. This was a different silence. A silence full of expectation. As if a gigantic space was holding its breath. Elias opened his eyes. Before him stretched a corridor so large it could have fit galaxies in it. Yet she did not feel empty. On the contrary. The room seemed filled with stories.

Billions of stories. There were doors on either side of the hallway. Countless doors. Some were made of gold. Others made of stone. Some were made of living wood. Others from light. Still others seemed formed from memories. There was a name above each door. Sometimes in languages □□he knew. Sometimes in languages □□that seemed older than reality itself. Elias slowly walked forward. A floor of white marble gleamed beneath his feet. Then he saw a sign. Big. Simple. Older than everything around him.

WELCOME TO THE MUSEUM AT THE END OF IT ALL The Hall of a Thousand Doors seemed endless. On either side stretched corridors lost in a golden twilight. Every door had a name. Some were written in languages □□Elias did not know. Others consisted of symbols. Still others from music.

Or light. Or memories. He stopped.

"What are these?" he asked. The guide smiled.

"Choices." Elias frowned.

"Choices?" "Yes." "From whom?" "From everyone." They started walking. At the first door Elias saw a young soldier. The man was standing on a battlefield. Smoke filled the air. There were wounded people everywhere. A vehicle was ready to leave. The soldier was able to get in. To live. Or stay. Die. Elias saw the doubt in his eyes. The fear. The despair.

Then the soldier turned around. He ran back into the fire. To a wounded friend. The image became silent. The door closed.

"Why is this being kept?" Elias asked.

"Because he could have left." They walked on. A next door showed a woman who cared for a sick husband for years. Another door showed a man forgiving the one who killed his family. Yet another door showed a child sharing his last piece of bread. Always the same pattern. No heroes. No celebrities. No kings. Ordinary people. Ordinary choices. But there was always something at stake. Each time there was the possibility to act differently. Each time there was a real "no". Over time, Elias began to realize something.

"I don't see events from the Ocean of Spirits." The guide stopped.

"No." "Why not?" The old man looked at him.

"What should be exhibited there?" Elias thought of the millions of lights. The harmony. The connection. The endless conversations. And suddenly he didn't know the answer. The guide spoke softly.

"The museum does not store feelings." "What then?" "Choices." They walked on.

"The inhabitants of the Ocean love each other." "I know." "But their love is not at stake." Elias felt a familiar restlessness return.

"Because they cannot leave each other." The guide nodded.

"Correct." A huge mirrored door appeared before them.

Different from all other doors. Black. Completely black.

"Open her," said the guide. Elias placed his hand on the surface. Immediately he saw the Ocean of Spirits. Millions of lights. Millions of votes. Millions of meetings. A beautiful community. A paradise. But now he saw something that had escaped him before. Every reaction was predictable. Every encounter safe. Every relationship guaranteed. No one could turn down. No one could betray. No one could leave. Nobody could choose. Suddenly he understood why the Ocean had finally left him empty. It was not a community of free lovers.

It was a community of perfect reflections.

Beautiful. Comforting. But eventually closed. A mirror that admired itself. No encounter with a real Other. Then he heard Lyra's voice again from the past. Love only has meaning when it is freely chosen. For the first time, Elias understood her completely. Freedom made war possible. Freedom made loss possible. Freedom made sadness possible. But without freedom, love itself would disappear. And as he looked at the black mirror, he began to suspect that even God might have been willing to take that risk. Below that were smaller words.

ALL WORLDVIEWS ARE Kept HERE ALL TRUTH MAY BE EXPLORED NO DOOR IS MANDATORY Elias smiled weakly.

"That sounds suspiciously friendly." "We have had bad experiences with coercion." The voice came from behind him. He turned around. A man stood there.

At least... At first glance it looked like a man. But the longer Elias looked, the more difficult it became. The face changed constantly. Young. Old. Female. Male. Human. Non-human. Known. Unknown. As if thousands of faces alternated.

"Who are you?" The figure smiled.

"I am the Conservator." "From this museum?" "Among other things." "Among other things?" "Titles are limited things." Elias immediately felt that this person was different from most he had met so far. Not more powerful. But more difficult to place.

"Why am I here?" "Why do you think you're here?"

Elias sighed.

"Why doesn't anyone ever give a normal answer?" "Because normal answers are usually wrong." The Conservator started walking. After a moment Elias followed him. They walked past thousands of doors. Every door seemed to radiate its own universe. Some felt warm. Other cold. Some called for peace. Other awe. A few even caused fear.

"What is behind these doors?" "Worldviews." "Religions?" "More than that." The Conservator pointed to the endless corridor.

"Ways to understand reality." "Ways to understand yourself." "Ways to Understand God." Elias looked up at that last word. God. That word still caused a strange reaction in him. As if a forgotten memory was trying to open up. The Conservator noticed.

"That word makes you uncomfortable." "Maybe." "Why?" Elias did not answer. Because he himself did not know the true answer. The Conservator remained silent for a moment. Then he pointed to a door. Above the door was one word. COVENANT "Start there." "Why?" "Because some truths must first be named before they can be understood." The door opened. And suddenly Elias found himself under a night sky. Not an artificial sky like above Luna Station. Not a cosmic sky like in the Ocean. A real heaven. Full of stars. Bright. Alive. Below him lay a desert.

A campfire was burning. Men and women sat around the fire. Old people. Young people.

Children. Their faces radiated peace. An old rabbi beckoned him.

"Come sit down." Elias obeyed. The man smiled.

"You're looking for answers." "That's right." "Most visitors do that." "And does anyone find them?" The rabbi laughed softly.

"That depends on the demand." They talked for hours. About Abraham. About Moses. About the prophets. About a God who knew people by name. Not as numbers. Not as functions. Not as parts of a system. But as persons.

"Why is that important?" Elias asked. The old man looked at him in surprise.

"Why wouldn't it be important?" "Why would an all-powerful being concern himself with individual people?"

The rabbi smiled.

"Maybe because love is personal." That word again. Love. Always love. Love everywhere. Elias was almost starting to get tired of it.

"Why does that word keep coming back?" The old man looked at him sharply.

"Maybe because you keep asking the same question." That comment stuck. Later Elias walked alone through the desert. The stars above him shone brightly. And for the first time he thought about something he had never considered before. What if religion didn't start with the question of whether God exists? What if religion started with asking whether God knows someone? The thought never left him. Then the Conservator appeared again.

"And?" "Interesting." "That doesn't sound very enthusiastic." "I'm trying to understand why everything seems to be about love in the end." The Conservator smiled.

"Then you still have many doors to open." He pointed to the horizon.

New passages appeared there. Hundreds. Thousands. A door of gold. A door of black stone. A door of crystal. A door made of simple wood. Elias felt a strange longing. Not to knowledge. Not looking for answers. But towards understanding. Because he increasingly got the feeling that all roads in the museum led to the same center. And that center had something to do with him. With his desire. With his loneliness. And maybe even with God. Then he walked to the next door. Above the entrance was a new word. SURRENDER The door slowly began to open.

And behind her a new world waited.

THE DOOR OF SURRENDER

The door opened without a sound. A warm wind flowed towards Elias. When he crossed the threshold, reality changed again. The cool silence of the desert disappeared. A new world unfolded. An endless expanse of sand stretched out beneath a sky that sparkled with stars. But these stars formed patterns. Letters. Words. Verses. They moved slowly through the night as if heaven itself were a holy book constantly being written. Elias stopped. The landscape breathed peace. Not the peace of emptiness. But the peace of trust.

In the distance he saw a city of white domes. There was singing between the buildings. No music as he knew it. No song. More like a memory carried by the wind. An old man sat at the edge of a well. His face radiated peace. His eyes were bright. As if he could read the stars.

As Elias approached, the man smiled.

"Welcome, traveler." "Where am I?" "In a place where people have learned to trust themselves." "To be entrusted to whom?" The man looked up. To the stars.

"To the One who created them." Elias sat down next to him. They were silent for a long time. The silence didn't feel awkward. On the contrary. As if words were less important here than presence.

"Tell me about God," Elias finally said. The man smiled.

"Which God?" Elias frowned.

"Is there more than one?" "No." The man laughed softly.

"But people describe Him in many ways." "And how do you describe Him?" The old man looked at the source.

"As the Merciful." "Why that in particular?"

"Because everything starts with mercy." He scooped water into his hands.

"The world exists because He willed it." "Not because He needed her." "Not because He lacked." "But because His goodness wanted to give itself." Elias felt a familiar tension. Again he heard the same pattern. Not power. Not control. But love.

"Why does everyone keep saying that?" The man looked at him searchingly.

"Say what?" "That creation comes from love." The old sage smiled.

"Maybe because it's true." Elias looked away. Because deep down he started to fear that answer. Later he walked through the city alone. People prayed. Worked. Laughed. Lived. What struck him was not their religion.

But their trust. They lived as if they were known. As if their existence had meaning. As if there was a Person behind reality. Not just one force. Not just a law. A Person. That thought continued to haunt him. Then the Conservator appeared again.

"You learned about surrender." "Maybe." "And?" Elias thought.

"I understand why people look for trust." "But?" "I still don't understand why consciousness longs for community." The Conservator smiled.

"Then you're not ready yet." He pointed to a new door. Above the entrance it said: UNITY When Elias stepped inside, everything changed again. Now he was under a giant tree.

Its roots reached deeper than planets. Its branches supported entire galaxies. Worlds hung from every branch. Every world had millions of stories attached to it. Under the tree sat an old sage. He looked like the mountains around him. Calm. Old. Deep.

"Welcome," he said. Elias sat down.

"What kind of place is this?" "A memory." "From what?" The sage smiled.

"Of Unity." They talked for hours. About Brahman. About the origin of all things. About the idea that behind the multitude lies one reality. Elias listened attentively. Some ideas reminded him of the Ocean of Spirits. Other at the Library. Other to his own fears.

"If all is ultimately one," he asked, "why do we experience separateness?"

The sage looked up at the tree.

"Why does a tree have many leaves?" "Why not one big leaf?" Elias thought.

"Don't know." "Maybe because beauty likes to multiply." Same theme again. Not necessary. But abundance. Not lack. But donate. And yet something kept nagging. Then Elias asked the question he was now asking everywhere.

"Can love exist if everything is ultimately one?" The sage smiled.

"An interesting question." "And?" "Perhaps love is precisely the joy with which the One embraces the many." The answer was beautiful. But it didn't fully satisfy him. For deep in his soul the same hunger remained. He didn't just long for connection. He longed for someone else. A truly different one.

The next door took him to a world of silence. No cities. No temples. No stars. Only fog. A lake. And an old monk sitting on a stone. His eyes were closed. Still, Elias knew he had noticed him.

"Welcome." "How did you know I was here?" "You make a lot of noise." Elias looked around in surprise.

"I didn't say anything." The monk smiled.

"Your thoughts do." For the first time Elias laughed out loud. He immediately liked the old man. They talked for days. About desire. About suffering. About the ego. About attachment. The monk finally asked one question.

"Why are you so afraid of emptiness?"

Elias answered immediately.

"Because I'm afraid there won't be anyone left." The old man opened his eyes. Slowly. As if he was hearing a truth he already knew.

"No." "What do you mean?" "You are not afraid of emptiness." "Then what am I afraid of?" The monk looked deeply at him.

"You are afraid of a love that remains unrequited." Those words hit him harder than anything he had heard before. Because for the first time he felt that someone had touched the core. Not his philosophy. Not his questions. But his wound. The wound he carried with him throughout his journey. The wound of desire. When Elias returned to the Museum, the Curator was waiting for him. The hallway seemed even bigger than before. Thousands of doors stretched beyond the horizon. But now Elias saw something new. Despite all the differences. Despite all religions.

Despite all philosophies. Ran a pattern through it. A common thread. A hidden river.

"You finally see it." The Conservator spoke softly. Elias nodded slowly.

"They give different answers." "Yes." "But they all ask the same question." "What question?" Elias looked at the countless doors. To the worlds. To the memories. To the votes. Then he replied, "Why does consciousness desire community?" The Conservator smiled.

"Good." "And what is the answer?" For the first time the smile turned sad.

"That answer lies further down." He pointed to a door at the end of the hallway. Simple. Made of wood.

Almost inconspicuous. Yet she radiated something that no other door possessed. Above the door was one word. LOGOS When Elias read the word he felt a shock go through his being. Not because he understood. But because it felt like a memory. As if he knew this word before stars existed. And deep in his soul he knew that something waited behind that door that would bring him closer to the truth than anything he had seen yet. Something that didn't just talk about God. But about love. And about why love continued to follow him everywhere.

THE DOOR OF THE LOGOS

Elias stood at the door for a long time. She was simpler than all the others. No gold. No crystal. No light. Only wood. Old wood. As if she came from a world where simplicity was more important than splendor. Above her was one word. LOGOS The word continued to resonate within him. He knew it. Not from memory. Not from study. But from something deeper. As if it was already there before he read it. The Conservator stood a few feet behind him. Silently. Waiting.

"What does it mean?" Elias asked. The Conservator smiled.

"That depends on who you ask." "And if I ask you?" "Then I say it means: the Word through which everything has meaning."

Elias looked at the door again. A strange tension coursed through him. Not fear. Not curiosity. Earlier recognition. As if he was about to enter a room he had once left. Long time ago. Older than memory. Older perhaps than time. He placed his hand on the wood. The door opened. He expected a cathedral. Or a palace. Or a heaven full of angels. But none of that happened. He stood in a simple room. A small chapel. White walls. Wooden benches. A few burning candles. And on the far wall hung a cross. Not decorated. Not impressive. Just wood.

Just simple. Yet Elias immediately felt that this was the strangest place he had visited yet. Because nowhere had he felt so much power. And nowhere had that power been so hidden. He walked forward slowly. A woman sat near the cross. Middle age. Simple clothes. Calm eyes. She looked up as he approached.

"Welcome." Her voice was warm. As if she had been expecting him.

"Who are you?" "That's less important than why you're here." Elias sighed.

"Another one avoiding answers." The woman smiled.

"Maybe." "Or maybe you keep asking the wrong question." He had heard those words before. Yet they hurt again. He sat down on a bench. For a while they were silent. The silence felt strangely familiar.

Not empty. Not tense. More like the silence between two people who actually see each other. Finally Elias broke the silence.

"Why is this place called Logos?" The woman looked at the cross.

"Because according to the Christian faith, everything begins with the Word." "The Word?" "Yes." "Not with matter." "Not with energy." "Not by chance." "But with meaning." Elias thought of Veritas Omega. To formulas. To laws of nature. To cosmology. The thought was strange. And yet she did not feel unreasonable.

"And that Word is God?" The woman nodded.

"And more than that." "More?" "The Word ultimately becomes a person." Elias looked at her in surprise.

"That's impossible." "Maybe." She smiled.

"Yet that is exactly the Christian claim." He looked at the cross again. An uneasy feeling swept through him. Not because he turned it down. But because something about it appealed to him. Deeper than he wanted to admit. The woman stood up. She slowly walked to the cross.

"Tell me, Elias." "Why are you looking so hard?" He replied immediately.

"I want to know if I'm alone." "Why?" "Because loneliness is unbearable." "Why?" He frowned.

"That seems obvious to me." "Is that so?" She turned around.

"Why is loneliness unbearable?" For the first time he didn't know the answer.

He had thousands of theories. Thousands of analyses. But no real answer. The woman came back. Sat down opposite him. Then she spoke softly: "Because you were made for relationship." Those words struck him. Hard. Deep. As if someone touched a chord that had been tense for his entire existence.

"All religions say that." "Yes." "Why?" The woman looked at him for a long time. Then she replied, "Because they all see something of the truth." "But?" "Not all the same part." Elias felt his heart beat faster.

"What does Christianity see then?" The woman smiled. A smile full of sadness and joy at the same time.

"That love is older than creation." The words came back.

Again. Always again. But this time it felt different. Deeper. Closer. As if he was approaching the core.

"Explain." The woman looked at the cross. To the simple wood. To the place where history and eternity seemed to touch each other. Then she spoke slowly.

"Many religions teach that God loves." "Christianity goes further." "It doesn't just say that God loves." "It says that God is love." Elias froze. The words hung in the air. Simple. Almost childlike. And yet he immediately felt their weight.

"What's the difference?" The woman looked straight at him.

"If love is just something God does, then He could be different." "But if God is love..." She paused.

"...then love belongs to His deepest being." Elias thought. Long. Very long. Then the question came naturally.

"But love requires another." The woman smiled.

"Precisely." His breath caught. Because suddenly he understood why this haunted him so much. Why he came across the same question everywhere. Why every world had ultimately led him here. Love requires another. Always. Inevitable. Inescapable.

"Does that mean..." He couldn't finish the sentence. The woman helped him.

"That community is older than stars." "That relationship is older than time." "That love does not arise in creation." "But that creation comes from love." Elias felt a shock throughout his being. Not because he fully understood.

But because he felt he was getting close to a truth bigger than himself. Greater than all religions. Greater than all worlds. Greater even than his own quest. Outside, reality began to change. The walls of the chapel became transparent. The stars appeared. Galaxies spun by. Entire universes moved through space. And in the middle of it the cross remained standing. Small. Simple. Fragile. Yet indestructible.

"Why this symbol?" Elias asked. The woman looked at it.

"Because love gives." "At what price?" "At any price." Her voice softened.

"Even when she is rejected." Those words unexpectedly hurt. Because suddenly he thought of Lyra. At her departure.

To the pain of freedom. To the possibility that love really means risk. And for the first time he began to suspect something. Maybe his own loneliness wasn't just a personal problem. Perhaps she reflected something deeper. Something divine. Something that lay at the origin of reality. The thought scared him.

Very scared. Because if love really was the foundation of everything... Then his search was far from over. Then the Conservator appeared again. The chapel slowly began to fade. The stars disappeared. The walls dissolved.

Only the cross remained visible for a while. Then that too disappeared. Elias was back in the Museum. Surrounded by thousands of doors. But now he saw them differently. No longer as competing truths. No longer as warring religions. But as different attempts to understand the same mystery. The Conservator looked at him.

"And?" Elias did not answer immediately. He looked at the endless corridor. To the countless worlds. To the doors. To the possibilities. Then he spoke softly: "Perhaps love is not the result of existence." The Conservator smiled.

"Go on." Elias felt a shiver. And for the first time he spoke out loud what had been growing inside him all this time.

"Maybe everything exists because love seeks another." The Conservator said nothing. But his smile turned sad. As if Elias had finally opened a door that could no longer be closed. Then he pointed to a new passage. No religion. No philosophy. No worldview. But a place of memories. A place where all the answers Elias had collected would be reexamined. Above the next door it read: THE ARCHIVE OF DESIRE And deep in his soul Elias knew that his journey was only now truly beginning.

CHAPTER 5 - THE ARCHIVE OF LONGING

THE CHAMBER OF MEMORIES

The door didn't open. She remembered. When Elias placed his hand on the surface, he felt no wood, no stone, and no metal. He felt memories. Thousands. Millions. Lives that flowed through his fingers like water. Loves. To lose. Desires. Prayers.

Door and memory seemed to become one. The name still burned above him: THE ARCHIVE OF DESIRE He slowly stepped inside. Immediately the Museum disappeared. The thousands of doors dissolved. The endless corridor disappeared. And Elias found himself in a space larger than a universe. There were filing cabinets everywhere. Not hundreds. Not thousands. Countless. They reached up beyond sight. Some were made of light. Other from memories. Still others seemed to consist of emotions that had taken shape. Glass balls floated between the cabinets.

A moment lived in every sphere. A memory. A desire. A choice. Elias stopped. A strange emotion passed through him. He didn't know why. Until he saw the first name.

MAY NAKAMURA His breath caught. He walked forward carefully. An orb of silver light floated before him. When he touched her, the memory opened up. He was again in observation dome nine. The artificial stars above Luna Station twinkled. Mei stood next to him. A cup of coffee in her hand. Just like on that last night. But this time he heard things he had not heard before. Not her words. Her feelings. Her fear. Her concern. Her affection. She had known that he isolated himself from people. She had seen how his loneliness grew. And she had tried to reach him.

Not as a colleague. Not as a scientist. But as a friend. Then he saw something he had never noticed before. After she left that evening, she returned one more time.

The observation dome door had opened again. She had looked at him. Long. Very long. Then she whispered softly, "I hope one day you discover that you are loved." Elias felt his throat tighten. He had never heard those words. Never knew. Yet they were truly outspoken. The memory faded. It was again in the Archives. And for the first time in a long time he felt tears welling up. Not from sadness. But of loss. How much love had he missed because he had always been preoccupied with evidence? Further on he found another sphere. This radiated red-golden colors.

Above her it said: LYRA His heart began to beat faster. He gently touched the memory. The world opened up again. The Empire of Shadows appeared.

The burning sky. The war. The smoke. And there stood Lyra. But this time he didn't see her through his own eyes. He saw her as she had experienced herself. Her fear. Her courage. Her doubt. Her hope. Suddenly he understood something. From the first moment she had realized that Elias was not really looking for the truth. She had seen it before he understood it himself. During their conversations she often wanted to say: "You are looking for love." But she had remained silent. Because some truths can only be heard when someone is ready.

Then came the moment of farewell. Sector seven. The children. The evacuation ship. Elias felt the pain again. But now he saw Lyra's side too. She had been afraid.

Terrified. Not for her own death. But for the loss of meaning. Yet she had gone. Voluntarily. Out of love. And just before she left she had had one more thought. A thought Elias had never heard.

"I hope one day he understands that love cannot be proven, only received." The memory broke off. Elias stood motionless. Those words hit him harder than anything she had ever said to him directly. He walked on. Deeper into the Archives. Until he saw a sphere that shone like moonlight on water. SAHANA A strange feeling of peace came over him. When the memory opened, he found himself once again in the Ocean of Spirits. But this time he saw her alone. Not as a guide. Not as a teacher. But as himself. Sahana looked out over the billions of consciousnesses.

Sadness was in her eyes.

Then she spoke. Not against Elias. Against himself.

"Always the same." The words surprised him.

"He always looks for others." "He always finds beauty." "He always starts hoping." "And he always comes closer to the truth." Elias froze. He didn't understand what he heard. Then she continued.

"But this time is different." Another voice answered. Invisible. Older. Deeper.

"Why?" Sahana smiled.

"Because he's finally starting to understand why he desires." Elias felt a chill. Why did she speak as if she had known him much longer? Much longer than their meeting? Much longer than Luna Station? The memory faded before he could find the answer.

He walked deeper and deeper into the Archives. More and more memories opened up. Not just his own. Those of others. Millions of others. People from thousands of worlds. And slowly he started to see a pattern. The same desire everywhere. Not for power. Not to knowledge. Not to immortality. But to community. Children longed for parents. Friends to friends. Lovers to each other. People to God. And sometimes even God towards people. That last thought made him pause. He looked at the memories again. Then he saw something he hadn't noticed before.

Deep in the center of the Archives stood a locked door. Much older than any other. No name. No decoration.

No description. Only one word. ORIGIN The moment Elias read it, a shock ripped through his being. A memory flashed by. No clear memory. More like a feeling. A reality without stars. Without space. Without time. Only consciousness. Presence only. Alone...loneliness. Elias grabbed onto a filing cabinet. His heart pounded.

"No." The feeling disappeared immediately. But the impression remained. Older than Luna Station. Older than his birth. Older than his human life. For the first time, a terrible thought began to take shape. What if his desire had not arisen in time? What if he had always carried this desire?

What if his loneliness was older than the stars? Slowly he looked at the door with the word: ORIGIN And deep in his soul he knew that behind that door lay a truth that would change his entire journey. A truth that would not only reveal who he was. But also why he ever started searching. And as the Archive of Desire whispered around him with millions of voices, Elias felt something he hadn't felt since Luna Station. Fear. Not for death. Not for loss. But for memory. Because sometimes forgetting is grace.

And sometimes remembering is more dangerous than any lie.

THE DOOR OF ORIGIN

Elias stood at the door for a long time. The word above the entrance seemed to come alive. ORIGIN. No other word in the Archives had had such an effect on him. Not May. Not Lyra. Not Sahana. Not love. Not community. Not God. Just this one word. Origin. As if it wasn't just a concept. As if it were a memory. A forgotten name. A lost home. He stretched out his hand. Immediately the door started to shake. Not out of fear. Not out of resistance. But out of recognition. As if she knew him. As if she had been waiting for him all this time. She opened slowly.

And there was no room behind her. No corridor. No archive. Only darkness. Not the darkness of the night. Not the darkness of a cave. A deeper darkness. A darkness in which not even time existed. Elias felt a sudden fear. Instinctively he wanted to turn around. Back to the Museum. Back to the Ocean. Back to Luna Station. Back to everything he knew. But it was too late. The darkness had already seen him. And somewhere deep inside he knew that he had been dreading this moment for his entire existence. He slowly stepped inside. There was nothing. No room.

No direction. No light. No sound. Even the concept of emptiness did not seem to fit here.

Because emptiness presupposes that something ever could have been. Here, that possibility did not even exist yet. Elias tried to get his bearings. But he had no body. No eyes. No movement. Only consciousness. And suddenly he understood something terrible. This place felt familiar. Not known. Not recognizable. Trusted. Like a child recognizes his mother's voice. Like a traveler recognizes his birthplace. Like a person recognizes himself in a mirror. A shock went through him.

"No." His voice didn't exist here. Yet the word was heard. Or felt. Or thought. Then something happened. In the infinite darkness a light appeared. Small. Almost invisible.

The same light. The light from the ocean. The light of the source. The One Light. But here it looked different. Not as an object. Not as a star. Not as an energy source. More like presence. Living presence. Elias felt his entire being stiffen. Because again that same feeling came back. Recognition. Impossible recognition. The light came closer. Not moving. But revealing. And suddenly the darkness began to reveal memories. Not human memories. Not childhood memories. Not memories of Luna Station. Much older. Much deeper. He saw no images. He felt realities.

An existence without stars. An existence without space. An existence without time. And in the middle of it... one consciousness. Only. Eternally. Perfect. But alone. Elias felt pain. A pain that was greater than sadness. Greater than loss. Greater even than loneliness. For this was not a temporary condition. No period. No experience. This was a reality. A consciousness that knew nothing outside itself. No other. No voice. No answer. No lover. Only himself. Eternally.

"No."

The word came again. But the memory continued. Consciousness thought. Not in words. Not in language. But in desire. A desire that had no name. Because there were no names yet. A longing for meeting. To community. To another. Then Elias saw something that made him tremble. That desire was the same desire he had felt throughout his journey. The same desire that had led him to Veritas Omega. The same desire that had chased him into the ocean. The same desire Lyra had seen. That Mei had felt. That Sahana had understood. His desire.

Or... the longing of this consciousness. A cold shock ran through him. For the first time he dared to admit the thought. What if this memory wasn't just something he observed? What if it was his memory?

The darkness did not answer. But the silence grew heavier. As if she knew what he was beginning to understand. Then new memories appeared. Not events. Possibilities. Futures that didn't exist yet. He saw

stars. Not created. Dreamed. He saw worlds. Not built. Desired. He saw love. Not found. Hoped. And suddenly he understood something that moved him deeply. Creation did not begin as a project. Not as an experiment. Not as a demonstration of power. She had started as hope.

The hope that somewhere beyond this one consciousness a real answer might be possible. A real “you”. A voice that did not come from itself.

A love that could respond freely. Tears filled Elias' eyes. As far as eyes existed here. Because suddenly he saw the history of reality in a new light. All stars. All civilizations. All people. All religions. All stories. Perhaps they had not arisen from omnipotence. Perhaps they were born of desire. Out of love. Out of hope. That thought made him both happy and scared. Because if it were true... then it meant that love was older than creation. Older than time. Older even than stars. Then the light spoke. For the first time. Not with words.

But Elias understood every meaning. Why are you looking? The question was simple.

But he felt her weight. Why did he search? Why had he left Luna Station? Why had he broken reality open? Why did he keep going? Why couldn't he stop? There was silence for a long time. Then he answered. More honest than ever before.

“I don't want to be alone.” The light became brighter. Not judgmental. Not surprised. Rather sad. As if it already knew this answer. Then came a second question. Since when? Elias wanted to answer: Since my youth. Since Luna Station. Since I became human. But the words died before they were formed. Because deep down he knew that none of those answers were true. His desire was older. Much older.

Older than his birth. Older than his memories. Older perhaps than humanity. The thought scared him. Very scared. Because if his desire was really that old... what did that say about him? The light was silent. But somewhere deep in the darkness, a new reality began to emerge. A throne. Far away. Almost invisible. Yet she radiated a power greater than universes. Elias felt a shock. He knew immediately that he would have to go there someday. Not today. Not yet. But eventually. Because the answer was waiting there. Not just when asked what he was looking for.

But when asked who he really was. And as the oldest memory slowly faded, one truth remained. A truth he could no longer deny. His loneliness was older than his human life. Much older.

And somewhere in that discovery lay both his greatest fear and his greatest hope.

THE LONGING BEFORE TIME

When the oldest memory faded, Elias was left alone. Or rather, he was left with himself. The darkness around him had returned. No stars. No room. No time. No direction. Presence only. But now this presence felt different. Not strange. Not unknown. Rather painfully familiar. As if he had walked through a closed door all his life and had now finally seen the room behind it. He didn't know how long he stayed there. Maybe seconds. Maybe millions of years. In this place such words had no meaning. Here only his consciousness existed.

And the memory of that other consciousness. That One Light. That One Presence. That One Loneliness. Elias slowly began to understand why that memory had affected him so deeply.

Not because he had seen her. But because he had felt her. From within. As if he wasn't looking at any history. As if he remembered her. That thought terrified him.

"No." The darkness did not answer.

"No." But the protest grew weaker. Because deep in his soul he knew that denial was becoming increasingly difficult. Then a light appeared again. Not the One Light. Not the source. A smaller light. Soft. Hot. Almost human. And out of that light Mei stepped forward. Elias froze.

"May?" She smiled. As always. Calm. Mild.

A little sad.

"Hello, Elias." His heart beat faster.

"Are you real?" The smile remained.

"Still that question." "Answer her." "Why?" "Because I need to know." Mei looked at him for a long time. Then she replied softly, "No." The words hurt. More than he expected. But she went further.

"Not in the way you mean." Elias looked at the ground. Insofar as there was a basis here.

"I already expected something like that." "And yet it hurts." "Yes." Mei sat down next to him. Like before in the observation dome. Like under the artificial stars. As in a life that seemed increasingly distant.

"Why?" she asked.

"Why does it hurt so much?" Elias answered immediately.

"Because I want you to exist." Mei smiled.

"I know." Then her expression became more serious.

"But do you know why you want that?" He was silent. Because suddenly he was no longer sure of his answer. The light changed. Mei's figure faded. And in its place Lyra appeared. The red sky of the Empire reflected in her eyes. She looked at him. Not strict. Not friendly. Just honest.

"You still think your problem is knowledge." Elias sighed.

"Not you either." "Especially me." Lyra stood opposite him.

"You still think you're looking for evidence." "That's what I do, right?" "No." She shook her head.

"You never did that." Her words echoed through the darkness.

"Then what am I looking for?" "An answer." "That's the same." "No." Lyra looked straight at him.

"Evidence is about facts." "Your desire is about love." The words hit him again. Everything came back to the same thing again and again. Love. Relation. Community. As if the universe knew no other subject. Or maybe... as if he himself knew no other subject. Then Lyra faded away too. Now Sahana appeared. She seemed sadder than ever.

As if she knew what was coming.

"You're closer than ever." Elias looked at her.

"Whereby?" Sahana did not respond immediately. Then she said, "To yourself." Those words scared him. Very scared. For slowly he began to understand that perhaps "himself" did not mean what he had always thought.

"Why does this feel like I'm losing something?" he asked. Sahana smiled softly.

"Because every great truth first seems like a death." "A death of what?" "Of illusions." The silence deepened. Then Elias asked the question he had been avoiding all this time.

"Who am I?" Sahana closed her eyes. Long. Very long. Then she replied, "Not yet." "Why not?"

"Because you must first understand what you desire." "I understand that." "No." She shook her head.

"Not yet." Suddenly Mei disappeared. Lyra. Sahana. The light. The memories. Everything. Only darkness remained. But now she began to change. Images slowly appeared. Not from the past. Not from history. But from before history. Elias saw that one consciousness again. Only. Eternally. Perfect. And yet longing. Now he saw more. Much more.

He saw that this consciousness had no defect. No incompleteness. No shortage. And yet there was desire. Not out of necessity. Not out of weakness. But out of love. The discovery shocked him. Because all his life he had believed that longing comes from lack. But here he saw something different. A desire that came from abundance. Like an artist wants to create. As a poet wants to speak. The way music wants to sound. The way love wants to give itself. Tears filled his eyes.

Because suddenly he understood something that all religions had been trying to tell him. Creation did not come into existence because God needed something. Creation came into being because love wanted to share itself. Yet one question remained. A terrible question. If love wanted to share itself... with whom? For before creation there was no one. No stars.

No angels. No people. No universe. Only that One Consciousness. Only. Eternally. Longing. Then Elias felt a shock. A memory. No picture. No sound. A feeling. So old that it could hardly be called a memory. He felt himself longing. Not as a human being. Not like Elias Vermeer. But as something much bigger. Much older. Much deeper. A desire that had no beginning. A desire that existed before time existed. His breath caught.

"No." But even as he said it he knew the truth was getting closer. Because for the first time he began to see a possibility that he had always rejected.

What if his quest hadn't started at Luna Station? What if she hadn't started in his youth? What if she hadn't even started when he was born? What if his quest was the echo of a much older desire? A desire that was older than stars. Older than creation. Older than time. The thought made him tremble. Because it inevitably led to one conclusion. A conclusion that he did not yet dare to express. Not even for himself. But deep in his soul he was already beginning to hear her. Not as a thought. Not as a theory. But as a memory.

What if Elias's quest...was God's quest? The last door was smaller than all the others. No gold. No light. No impressive symbols.

Only simple wood. Old. Worn. As if millions of hands had touched her.

"What's behind this?" Elias asked. The Keeper of the Archives looked at him silently. Then he replied, "You." Elias didn't like that answer. He had had enough of riddles. Enough of symbols. Enough of worlds that hide answers behind mysteries. Still, he opened the door.

Behind it was a small room. Empty. No books. No memories. No treasures. Only a single chair. And there was a boy sitting on that chair. A boy about eight years old. Elias froze. He knew him immediately. Himself. The boy looked up.

His eyes were full of wonder. And sadness. The sadness of someone who didn't yet know why he was sad. Elias slowly walked towards him.

"Are you a memory?" The boy shook his head.

"No." "Then who are you?" "I'm the one you forgot." Those words unexpectedly hurt. The boy pointed to a dark space behind him. Suddenly images appeared. His father.

The night under the stars. The question he had asked as a child. How do I know other people are real? Then Anna appeared. Her face. Her voice. The night she left. You look at me like I'm a problem that needs to be solved. Then May. Next to him in the observation dome. A cup of coffee in her hand. You're not looking for proof, Elias.

You're looking for a witness. Then Lyra. Maybe someone is looking for you too. Then Sahana. The sadness in her eyes. The same words over and over again. The same wound. The same hunger. The same emptiness. The images disappeared. The boy looked at him.

"Do you see it now?" Elias felt his throat tighten.

"Don't know." "Yes." "No." "Yes." The boy stood up. His voice softened. Almost tender.

"Why did you want to find truth?" "Because I wanted to know what is real." "Why?" Elias was silent. The boy took a step closer.

"Why did you want knowledge?" "To understand." "Why?" "Why did you want power over reality?" Elias felt he had no answers left. All layers fell away. Science. Philosophy. Theology. Logic. They all fell apart. Until only the core remained. The boy looked straight at him.

And spoke the words that exposed his entire life.

"Why were you so afraid of being alone?" Elias closed his eyes. Suddenly he saw his whole life. All books. All investigations. All theories. All questions. And for the first time he saw what lay hidden beneath. Not curiosity. Not intellect. Not ambition.

But desire. A desire that was older than his career. Older than his adulthood. Older even than his first memories. He slowly opened his eyes. Tears streamed down his face.

"I wanted someone to know me." The boy nodded.

"Yes." "I wanted someone to see me." "Yes." "I wanted someone to choose me." The boy smiled.

Now for the first time. A smile full of recognition. As if he had been waiting for this for years. Then Elias finally spoke the truth he had been avoiding all his life.

"My deepest desire is not truth." The words trembled.

"Not knowledge." He felt his heart pounding.

"Not power." His voice broke. And then came the final truth. The truth behind all other truths.

“But love in return.” The room became silent. Completely silent. As if even the universe was listening. For for the first time since the beginning of his journey, Elias had not discovered what he was thinking. Not what he believed. Not what he knew. But what he loved. And deep in the silence it seemed as if an invisible presence answered. Not with words. But with a feeling. As if his desire wasn't just his own. As if somewhere, beyond stars and time, Someone had been looking for him for far longer than he had ever looked for.

At that moment the darkness tore open. Not violent. Not suddenly. But as if a curtain was slowly being pulled away. Something appeared in the distance. A building. Unbelievably big. Built from memories. Written from truth. A library. The largest he had ever seen. Towers of light reached higher than galaxies. Millions of books rotated through space like planets. And above the gate were words that were readable even from this distance. THE LIBRARY OF THE DEAD GOD Elias felt a shiver run through his being.

Because deep down he knew that behind that gate lay answers. But also dangers. Because some truths don't just change what you know. They change who you are. And as he was slowly pulled towards the library, one question kept echoing in his mind. Not: Does God exist? Not:

Do others exist? But: Why does love long for an answer? And for the first time he began to fear that the answer would be personal.

CHAPTER 6 - THE LIBRARY OF THE DEAD GOD

THE BOOKS THAT LOOKED BACK

The Library waited. Not like a building waits. Not like a place waits. But like a consciousness waits. As Elias got closer, he got the feeling that the enormous structure was already familiar to him. The towers of light reached further than his gaze could follow. Millions of books slowly rotated through space like planets around an invisible sun. Some were as small as a hand. Others were the size of worlds. Their pages fluttered without wind. Their words seemed alive.

The same words still burned above the gate: THE LIBRARY OF THE DEAD GOD Elias stood still. Of all the places he had visited, this one unsettled him the most. Not because of her size. Not because of her beauty. But because of her name. The Dead God. Who came up with that name? And why? He slowly walked through the gate. Immediately he felt something change. As if the Library was investigating him. Not hostile. Not aggressive. But attentively. Like an old teacher observing a student. The way a father looks at a child. As a loved one listens.

That last feeling startled him. Why did he increasingly think in terms of love? Why did every road seem to eventually lead there? He didn't have an answer yet when a voice broke the silence.

"Welcome back." Elias turned around.

A figure stood among the floating books. Long. Skinny. Shrouded in a cloak of moving letters. His face was made up of words that were constantly changing. Written languages. Spoken languages. Forgotten languages. Languages □□that had never been used by humans.

"The Archivist." The figure bowed slightly.

"You remember me." "I don't know if that's reassuring." The Archivist smiled.

"I hear that often." Elias looked up.

"Why is this called the Library of the Dead God?" The smile disappeared. Not completely. But enough.

"That depends on who you ask." "Naturally." "For some, God is dead because they have lost Him." "For others because they have forgotten Him." "For still others because they never knew Him."

The Archivist looked at him intently.

"And for some..." He paused.

"For a few?" "For some, God is dead because love without response feels like loss." The words struck Elias unexpectedly deeply. He looked away. To the endless towers. To the billions of books. To the spinning stars of knowledge. Everything suddenly seemed smaller than that one sentence. Love without an answer feels like loss. The Archivist led him through the Library. Along the way they passed halls larger than universes. In one room only prayers floated. Billions of prayers. From children. Of the dying. Of kings. From slaves. From believers.

From doubters. Some were just one word. Others filled entire galaxies.

Elias listened. And again he discovered a pattern. People prayed for health. For protection. For wisdom. For forgiveness. But beneath all those words was always the same longing. See me. Know me. Don't leave me. The discovery made him silent.

"Why are people like this?" he asked. The Archivist replied, "Why are you like this?" Elias was silent. Because he had no answer. The next room contained revelations. Not books about revelations. The revelations themselves. Living memories. He saw Moses on a mountain. He saw prophets struggling with God's silence. He saw mystics who spoke of a love greater than the stars.

He saw Muslim sages writing about the Merciful. He saw Hindu saints who longed for union with the divine. He saw Buddhist teachers who explored human desire. Millions of votes. Millions of roads. But the same pattern everywhere. God seeks. Man searches. Love seeks. Elias stopped.

"That's impossible." "What?" The Archivist looked at him.

"They are all different." "Yes." "And yet in the end they say the same thing." "Maybe." "Why?" The Archivist smiled. A sad smile.

"Maybe because sometimes truth comes in through many windows." They walked on. Finally they reached the center of the Library. There was no bookcase there.

No archive. No tower. Only a table. There was one book on the table. Black. Simple. Closed. There was no title on the cover. Just a question. WHO IS LOOKING FOR WHOM? Elias felt his heart beat faster. He carefully placed his hand on the book. Immediately it began to live. Pages opened automatically. Words appeared. Not printed. Not written. To arise. The first sentence read: Man seeks God. Elias nodded. He knew that. Every religion. Every culture. Every history.

People were looking. Always. The page turned on its own. God seeks man. He froze. The words continued to glow. God seeks man. Not just the other way around. Also vice versa. A strange emotion coursed through him. Sadness. Emotion. Recognition. He didn't know which one. The next page appeared. Love seeks answers. Then: Community seeks reciprocity. Then: The Creator is looking for someone else. Elias felt his breath catch. His eyes rested on the words. The Creator is looking for someone else. Suddenly he thought of Mei. To Lyra.

To Sahana. To the rabbi. To the mystic. To the monk. At the chapel of the Logos. Everyone had led him to the same point in the end. Not for power. Not to knowledge. Not to omnipotence. But to relationship. The Archivist spoke softly.

"You're starting to see it." "What?" "Why love is more important than power." Elias looked at the book.

"No." His voice trembled.

"I'm starting to see something different." "What then?" There was silence for a long time. Then he answered. More careful than ever before.

"Maybe my desire is not entirely my own." The Archivist said nothing. But his eyes turned sad.

As if he knew how difficult that thought was. Elias looked at the words again. The Creator is looking for someone else. Suddenly he felt something he hadn't felt before. Not fear. Not hope. Pity. Not with people. Not with himself. But with God. With a God who loves. With a God who waits. With a God who searches. And for the first time, Elias began to suspect that perhaps his own quest was merely an echo of a much older desire. A desire that started before stars were created. Before time began. Before the first man breathed.

A desire in the heart of the Creator himself. Then the book closed by itself. The Library fell silent. And somewhere deep among the towers of light, a new door began to become visible. Above that door was a

name that Elias had never seen before. But it immediately filled him with fear. THE DESERT OF GODS
As if there was a truth waiting behind it that even the Library could no longer hide.

THE BOOKS OF SILENCE

After the black book closed, Elias stood in silence for a long time. The words kept echoing through him. The Creator is looking for someone else. It was a simple sentence. But the more he thought about it, the more dangerous she became. Because if that sentence were true, it meant that the history of the universe was not just the story of people seeking God. Then it was also the story of God looking for people. That thought felt wonderful and terrible at the same time. The Archivist seemed to understand his unrest.

"There are more books you should see." "More?" "Much more." The Archivist pointed to a dark hallway. Unlike the great halls of the Library, this passageway seemed almost hidden. No floating star books. No light towers. No beautiful archives. Only silence. Above the entrance were words written in light. *THE BOOKS OF SILENCE* Elias immediately felt that this place was different.

"What kind of books are these?" The Archivist replied softly: "Books not written for the masses."

"Forbidden books?" "No." He smiled.

"Books too deep." They walked slowly into the hallway. The further they went, the quieter it became. Even the Library seemed to lose its voice here. Then they reached a round room. In the center was a single bookcase. No bigger than a human. It contained only a few dozen books. But Elias immediately felt that these were heavier than all the millions of books outside this room combined.

"Why are there so few?" "Because most people are looking for answers." The Archivist looked at the books.

"And only a few seek the heart behind the answers." The first book was old. Older than kingdoms. Older than religions as people knew them. When Elias opened it, he saw no words. But images. A Jewish mystic sat alone in a cave. He had studied for years. Prayers.

Fasted. Waited. Finally he spoke one sentence.

"God desires man more than man desires God." Elias felt a shock.

"That's not possible, is it?" The Archivist did not answer. The image continued. The old mystic wept. Not out of sadness. Out of awe. Because he believed that the Creator was not merely sought. But searched for himself. Then the vision closed. The second book came from an Islamic tradition. An old Sufi walked through a desert. For years he had searched for knowledge. Truthfully. To God. Finally he heard a voice. Not outside of himself. But deeper than itself. The voice said, "When you were looking for Me, I was already looking for you."

Elias felt the same emotion again. The pattern became stronger. The religions differed. But their deepest mystics seemed to make the same discovery. As if behind all the doctrines they had found something that words could hardly contain. A God who longed. The third book came from India. An old saint sat under a tree. His students asked him why the world existed. Why there was creation at all. Why not just silence. The sage smiled. Then he replied, "Because love wants to share itself." Elias closed his eyes. Again. Always again. Same theme. Not power.

Not control. Not domination. Love. He began to understand why Christianity had affected him so much. Not because it was the only one that talked about love.

So did these traditions. But because it didn't just describe love as a quality. It described love as the deepest reality itself. The fourth book was almost empty. Only one page contained text. A Christian mystic had written: "God did not create because He needed a world. God created because love wants to share its joy." Elias read the sentence again. And again. Then he felt something unexpected. Sadness. Not

for himself. Not about humanity. But again about God. What a strange idea. All his life he had thought that people needed God.

But increasingly he began to wonder whether God might also want something. Not out of shortage. Not out of weakness. But out of love. The thought continued to haunt him. For hours—or centuries, for time behaved strangely in the Library—he read on.

Book after book. Mystic after mystic. Prophet after prophet. Saint after saint. And everywhere he discovered the same hidden current. On the surface, religions talked about laws. Rituals. Theology. Morality. But something else lay deeper. A desire. A relationship. A reciprocity. As if the greatest secrets of the world's religions were not ultimately about power. But about community. The discovery changed something in him. Slowly. Almost unnoticed. He started to look at his own quest differently.

For the first time he asked himself: Why do I long for someone else so strongly? Not just because I'm lonely. Not just because I want company. There was something deeper underneath. Something that seemed older than his memories.

Older even than his identity. The Archivist saw it happen.

"You start asking the right questions." Elias looked up.

"What question?" The Archivist smiled sadly.

"Not what you're looking for." "But why desire exists at all." Those words stuck. Because indeed. Why did desire exist? Why was the universe not sufficient with itself? Why did people long for love? Why did lovers long for each other? Why did believers long for God? And why, if these books were right, did God desire humans? There was silence for a long time. Then Elias walked to the last book. It stood apart. Not in the closet. But on a pedestal. It had no title. No author. No decoration.

When he opened it, he found only one sentence. A sentence that made him tremble. Love does not seek possession. Love seeks an answer. His breath caught. Because suddenly he thought of Mei. To Lyra. To Sahana. On the Ocean. At the Museum. To every encounter. To every disappointment. To every hope. Always the same question. Not: Can I own someone? Not: Can I control someone? But: Can anyone answer freely? At that moment the room started to shake. The books moved. The light changed. And somewhere deep in the Library there was a sound.

As if a door was opened that had been closed for centuries. The Archivist looked up.

His face turned serious.

"It's time." "For what?" He slowly pointed into the distance. There the passage Elias had seen before appeared again. Dark. Lonely. Relentless. The same name burned above the entrance. THE DESERT OF GODS But now Elias saw something new. Other words appeared under the name. Words that slowly emerged from the darkness. HERE DIES ALL FALSE ALMIGHTY A cold shiver ran through him. Because deep down he knew that behind that door there was more than just a new truth waiting. A confrontation awaited there. With power. With freedom. With love.

And perhaps with God himself.

THE BOOK WITHOUT AN AUTHOR

The room of the Books of Silence had disappeared. Not really gone. But shifted to the background. Like stars disappear when the sun rises. Only one book remained visible to Elias. It lay on a stone table. All other books faded away. All other voices were silent. All other revelations withdrew. As if the entire Library made way for this one work. The book had no title. No decoration. No writer's name. No symbol. No religious indication. Nothing. Only a weathered leather cover. As Elias came closer, he saw that even the leather was impossibly old.

As if it had not been created in time. But before time.

"What is this?" The Archivist replied softer than ever.

"The Book Without an Author." "Who wrote it?"

"Nobody." "That's impossible." "Maybe." The Archivist did not smile.

"Or maybe some truths are older than writers." Elias felt that familiar tension again. The book stood alone. Not on a shelf. Not in a closet. But on a stone lectern in the middle of a huge round room. Around him, thousands of bookcases stretched into the darkness. Millions of books. Billions maybe. Yet this one book immediately caught his attention. It had no title. No author. No decorations. Just a simple black cover.

"What is this?" Elias asked. The Librarian did not answer. That made him nervous.

Elias slowly placed his hand on the book. It felt warm. As if someone had recently put it down. He opened the first page. It said: Elias Vermeer was born on November 17, 2174. He froze. He carefully leafed through. His birth. His childhood. His first day of school. The death of his father. His studies. Anna. May. Luna Station. Everything was in there. Not as a summary. But down to the smallest detail. Even things he had forgotten. Even moments no one had witnessed. His hands started to shake.

"Who wrote this?" No answer. He continued browsing. Faster and faster. More and more restless. Page after page described his life. Complete. Accurate. Impossibly accurate. Then he reached a chapter that hadn't happened yet. His breath caught. Before him were events that were yet to come. Meetings. Worlds. Choices. He recognized some. Others don't. But what really startled him was something else. As he read, he noticed the words changing.

A sentence appeared. Even before he had consciously thought of her. He read: At this moment Elias wonders if the book reads his mind. A cold shiver ran through him. Immediately he thought: That's impossible. The next line appeared. Elias tries to convince himself that this is impossible. He almost dropped the book. His heart pounded. He continued reading slowly. His thoughts appeared again and again. Not after he thought them. But right before. As if the book knew what he would think before he knew it himself. He tried to make up random words. Star. Moon.

Water. Firework.

But each time they were already on the page. A split second earlier. He felt panic rising.

"Who wrote this?" His voice echoed through the room. Still no answer. Then he turned a page further. His own question was already there. Who is writing this? Below that followed a sentence that he had not yet thought of. The writer knows you better than you know yourself. Elias felt his stomach tighten. For the first time since his journey began, he wanted to close a book without reading further. But he couldn't. As if something was forcing him. As if his entire life had been leading up to this moment. With trembling fingers he opened the last page.

There he expected a name. An explanation. An answer.

But the last page contained only a single sentence. Short. Simple. Painful. The writer is still looking for someone else. Elias stared at the words. One time. Twice. Three times. Then the meaning slowly dawned on him. It wasn't just him who was looking. It wasn't just him who longed. It wasn't just him asking the question. Suddenly the entire Library felt different. No longer as an archive of knowledge. But as a monument to desire. And for the first time a thought occurred to him that he hardly dared to utter.

What if the deepest question of the universe wasn't: Does anyone exist outside of me?

But: Is there anyone who loves me voluntarily? The room remained silent. Yet Elias had the feeling that somewhere, behind the countless books, someone was listening. That tension that came over him every time he came close to something he didn't want to understand. He opened the book carefully. To his surprise, the pages were blank. Completely empty. No words. No images. No symbols. Nothing. He looked at the Archivist.

"Is this a joke?" "Read on." "There's nothing there." "Read on." Elias reluctantly turned another page. Still empty. A third. A fourth. A fifth. All empty.

Then he heard a voice. Not outside of himself. Not from the book. But from the silence between the two. A voice that had no gender. No age. No origin. A voice that sounded as if it were spoken by all religions at once.

"Why do you long for love?" Elias froze. That question again. Always that question again.

"Because I don't want to be alone." The voice was silent. Then a single sentence appeared on the blank page. That's not deep enough. His heart beat faster. He continued browsing. The page was blank again. Then the voice spoke again.

"Why don't you want to be alone?" Elias felt irritation rising. He was tired of these questions. Tired of the circles. Tired of the riddles.

"Because community is better than loneliness." The words appeared. Not deep enough yet. He closed his eyes. The silence increased. Heavier. Then the question came again.

"Why is community better?" Elias thought of Mei. Having her coffee under the artificial stars. To her silent loyalty. To her hope that he would one day understand that he was loved. He thought of Lyra. In the burning skies of the Empire. To her sacrifice. To her freedom. He thought of Sahana. To her sad wisdom. To her patience. To her compassion. He slowly replied, "Because love is only possible between persons." For the first time, no rejection appeared. The page remained silent. Then words started to form on their own.

Not written. Growing. Like light arises from a sunrise. Go on. Elias swallowed. His throat felt dry.

"Personality means freedom." The words appeared. Go on.

"Freedom means that love can be denied." The letters started to glow. Go on. Now his voice was shaking. Because he felt he was getting close to something he had been avoiding his entire journey.

"Coercion can get obedience." "Coercion can become submission." "Coercion can become power." He was silent. Then he spoke the words that had been waiting in his soul.

"But force can never get love." At that moment, light filled the room. Not fierce. Not blinding. But deep. Hot.

Alive. The pages of the book began to turn themselves. Faster and faster. Faster and faster. Millions of pages. Millions of revelations. Millions of religions. Millions of stories. And the same pattern appeared on every page. Gods who sought power. Kings who demanded submission. Empires that wanted control. Civilizations that enforced obedience. But each time the story ended the same. Power could win over fear.

Power could win respect. Power could win obedience. But never love. Never. The images disappeared. Then new ones appeared. Moses. Jesus. Buddha.

Rumi.

Augustine. Francis. Mystics. Saints. Prophets. Thinkers. People from thousands of worlds. And though their words differed, Elias discovered again the same hidden current. The deepest truth of love was not power. But freedom. Don't own. But reciprocity. Not domination. But answer. Slowly the book closed itself. The silence returned. But now she felt different. Not empty. Vol. As if the truth had finally been given a name. Elias stood motionless for a long time. Then he asked the question that had been waiting for him all this time.

"Does this mean..." His voice broke.

"Does this mean that God cannot command love either?" The Archivist looked at him for a long time. Very long. Then he replied, "If love is really love..." He paused.

"...then no." Those words struck Elias more deeply than anything he had learned in the Library. Because suddenly he saw something he had never considered before. If God is love... Real love... Then God chooses to be vulnerable. Then God chooses to be rejected. Then God chooses to wait for a free answer. The thought made him silent. Because suddenly he understood why so many religious stories talked about sadness. Why Prophets Wept. Why mystics spoke of a God who searches. Why the Christian cross continued to haunt him. Not because God was weak.

But because love does not protect itself against vulnerability. Love risks loss. Love risks rejection. Love risks silence.

Then the cross appeared again from the chapel of the Logos. Not really. As a reminder. But brighter than ever. And for the first time, Elias saw something he had missed before. The cross was not about power. It was about voluntary vulnerability. About love that gives itself. About love that does not force. About love waiting for an answer. A free love in return. The words filled his mind. Free reciprocal love. Not submission. Not slavery. Not control. But love that is freely reciprocated. Suddenly he felt a shock. A memory. Deeply hidden.

Older than the Library. Older than the Ocean. Older than the stars. He saw again that One Consciousness before creation. That One Desire.

But now he saw something new. That consciousness did not long for subjects. Not to worshippers. Not to puppets. It longed for people. To free lovers. Towards a real "you". The memory disappeared immediately. But she left a wound. And at the same time a lot. The Library slowly began to fade away. The towers of light dissolved. The books disappeared. The corridors disappeared. Only the Archivist remained visible for a while.

"You're almost there." Elias looked up.

"By what?" The Archivist smiled sadly.

"By the truth you have feared all this time." "What truth?" The Archivist did not answer. He merely pointed into the distance. There lay the next reality.

Vast. Empty. Endless. A horizon of sand. No cities. No libraries. No votes. No answers. Only silence. Above that horizon, words burned with fire. THE DESERT OF GODS And below: HERE ONLY LOVE IS LEFT Elias felt a chill. For deep inside he knew that he was now approaching a place where even religions would remain silent. Where books would end. Where knowledge would die. And where only one question would remain: If love is to be truly free... Then why did God create a world where love could be denied?

With that question, Elias stepped out of the Library of the Dead God. And towards the Desert of Gods.

CHAPTER 7 - THE DESERT OF GODS

THE PLACE WHERE POWER DIES

The desert seemed endless. No mountains. No cities. No libraries. No stars. Even the sky seemed to have disappeared. When Elias crossed the border, he immediately felt that this reality was different from any previous one. The Empire of Shadows had taught him the price of freedom. The Ocean of Spirits had confronted him with the question of consciousness. The Museum had him research the religions. The Library had taught him that love does not seek submission, but a free response.

But the Desert of Gods didn't seem to want to learn anything. She wanted to break off. Dismantle. Deprive. Every answer Elias thought he had began to evaporate here like water under a blazing sun. He walked. For days. Or centuries. Time had once again become meaningless. The sand plains hardly changed. Only the silence grew. And in that silence he began to lose something. First he lost his certainties. Then his theories. Then his explanations. Even words began to lose their power. God. Creation. Love. Freedom. Truth. He spoke them.

But the desert answered with silence. As if she wanted to force him to look deeper than concepts. Deeper than philosophy.

Deeper even than religion. One evening—if evening existed here—he saw a figure on the horizon. An old man. Dressed in simple clothing. He sat next to a fire that seemed to need no fuel. As Elias approached, the man looked up. His eyes were old. Older than history. Older than civilizations. Perhaps older than the stars themselves.

"Welcome." Elias sat down.

"Who are you?" The man smiled.

"Today I am a shepherd." "Today?" "Titles change." Elias couldn't help but smile despite himself. The old man reminded him of the Conservator. To the Archivist. To all those guides who had led him further and further. But this man felt different. Quieter. Closer. As if he didn't represent knowledge.

But experience.

"Why am I here?" Elias asked. The shepherd put a piece of wood on the fire.

"To lose something." "What?" The old man looked at him for a long time. Then he replied, "Your gods." The words echoed through Elias for hours. Your gods. Not God. Gods. Plural. Only later did he begin to understand what the shepherd meant. Because deep down he carried more gods than he ever realized. The god of control. The god of certainty. The god of knowledge. The god of predictability. The god of omnipotence. Non-religious idols. But inner. Hidden.

Sophisticated idols. He had always thought he was looking for God. But perhaps above all he had been looking for a God who could give him safety. A God who could guarantee answers. A God who could prevent pain. A God who could eliminate risk. A God who could ensure love. The thought made him uneasy. For suddenly he began to see that perhaps such a God did not exist at all. Or worse: that such a God could never produce love. The desert seemed endless. Under a black sky, dunes of silver sand stretched beyond every horizon. No wind. No animals. No plants.

No life. Only silence.

Sahana had disappeared. The Library was behind him. Before him lay something new. Or something ancient. Elias walked for days. Maybe weeks. Time had once again lost its meaning. Then he saw a city in the distance. No ordinary city. A city built from stars. Galaxies formed its walls. Nebulae her towers. Entire universes revolved like lanterns above her gates.

As he came closer, he saw that she was deserted. Completely deserted. All the palaces were empty. All streets quiet. Leave all squares. There was a throne in the middle of the city. An old man sat on it. His eyes contain entire galaxies. In his hands a solar system spun like a toy.

“Welcome,” he said.

“Who are you?” The old man looked at the stars in his hand.

“I was once a creator.” Elias froze.

“A creator?” “From seven universes.” He pointed to the sky. Seven points of light appeared. Each star turned out to be a complete universe. Billions of stars. Trillions of lives. Unimaginable greatness. Elias felt awe.

“Why are you here alone?” The old man smiled sadly.

“Because power doesn't create company.” He opened his hand. One of the universes disappeared. As if it had never existed.

“I could make stars.” Another universe disappeared.

“Creating life.” A third disappeared.

“Designing Laws.” Then he looked at Elias.

“But I could not make anyone who was free to love me.” The words stuck.

Heavier than all the stars. Elias wanted to answer. But the old man had disappeared. As if he had never existed. Further on, Elias met a woman. She walked among ruins larger than entire galaxies. Thousands of worlds revolved around her.

“How much have you created?” Elias asked.

“Forty-three.” She pronounced it the way someone would pronounce the number of books on a shelf.

“Forty-three universes?” She nodded.

“Why did you leave them?”

The woman looked at the infinite sky. She remained silent for a long time. Then she replied, “I was hoping there would be someone out there who could surprise me.” Elias felt a shiver. He knew that word. Surprise. Lyra had surprised him. Mei had surprised him. Love surprised. Freedom surprised. A machine could predict.

A mirror could reflect. But only someone truly different could surprise.

“Did you find that person?” The woman smiled. A smile full of centuries of sadness.

“Nowhere.” Then she too dissolved into the desert. The days passed. And again and again Elias met gods. Creators. Architects of realities. Powerful beings. Some had created hundreds of universes.

Others thousands. Some could extinguish stars with a thought. Others recreate entire civilizations. But they all had the same eyes. The same tiredness. The same emptiness. The same hunger. One evening Elias sat among them around a fire that was burning without fuel. Nobody spoke. Finally he asked,

“What is missing?” A long silence followed.

Then one of them answered.

“Another.” A second nodded.

“Not a subject.” A third: “Not a creation.” A fourth: “Not a mirror.” A fifth: “But someone who is free.” The fire crackled. Nobody said anything. Then Elias suddenly understood why this place existed.

These were not gods who had failed. These were gods who had discovered something. Power was not the highest good. Not knowledge. Not immortality. Not even creative power. Because what was a universe if there was no one who freely chose to share it with you? Elias looked at the endless sky. Billions of stars. Trillions of worlds. And for the first time he began to suspect that the true Creator must be different. Not bigger.

Not more powerful. But more loving. Someone who was willing to take the risk of freedom. Someone who didn't just want to make universes. But children. And as the desert grew dark, Elias felt that he had come closer to the truth than ever before. Not with the truth of the cosmos. But by the truth of the Creator's heart. The next day he continued walking. The shepherd accompanied him. Silently. Sometimes for hours. Sometimes for days. Until Elias finally broke the silence.

“Can God do anything?” The old man smiled.

“A classic question.”

“Answer her.” “Why?” Elias sighed.

“Why doesn't anyone ever answer a question directly?” “Because direct answers are often wrong answers.” He knew that answer now. Still, it remained irritating.

“Can God do anything?” he repeated. The shepherd looked at the horizon. Then he replied, “What do you mean by everything?” “Everything.” “Can God lie?” Elias was silent.

“Can God love hate?” “Can God call injustice right?” “Can God Stop Being God?” Elias felt uneasy.

“Those are word games.” “No.” The shepherd looked at him.

“Those are definitions.” There was silence for a long time. Then the old man asked another question.

“Can love compel?” Elias immediately thought of Lyra. Saying goodbye. To the pain. To freedom.

“No.” “Why not?” “Because then love is no longer love.” The shepherd nodded.

“Precisely.” Then came the sentence that Elias would never forget.

“Omnipotence does not mean that God can act against His own being.” The words stuck. Heavy. Inescapable.

“And if God is love...” The shepherd did not finish the sentence. That wasn't necessary. Elias understood him. If God is love... Then God cannot force love. Not because He is weak. But because love itself makes that impossible. The discovery hit him like a bolt of lightning.

That night he dreamed. Or maybe it wasn't a dream. Maybe it was a memory. He saw a throne. Empty. Huge. Older than time. Before that throne lay a universe. Still uncreated. Only a possibility. Then he heard a voice. Not powerful. Not thunderous. But sad. Incredibly sad.

“If I want love, I must give freedom.” The words hurt. Because they were followed by other words.

“And if I give freedom, I must be able to bear loss.” Elias woke up. His heart pounded. His eyes were wet. He didn't know why. Until he understood what had touched him so much. This voice did not speak

like an emperor.

Not like a tyrant. Not as an all-powerful ruler. She spoke like a loved one. The following days the desert became even quieter. More and more often Elias thought about the religions he had visited. To the mystics. To the prophets. To the Logos. On the cross. He saw the same pattern more and more often. The greatest revelations were not about power. They were about love. And love turned out to be dangerous. Vulnerable. Risky. Free. Perhaps that was why so many people preferred to talk about omnipotence. Omnipotence felt safer. More controllable.

Less painful. But love... Love left room for rejection. For loss. For silence.

For broken hearts. Even before God. The thought still shocked him. One morning the shepherd suddenly stopped. Before them lay a deep chasm. There was a single tree on the other side. The only tree Elias had seen in the entire desert. Green. Alive. Full of fruits.

“What is that?” he asked. The shepherd replied, “The Tree of Freedom.” A cold shiver ran through him. Because immediately he felt that this place was important. Perhaps decisive.

“Why is he here?” The shepherd looked at the tree. Then he spoke softly, “Because love always requires a choice.” Elias looked at the tree again. And deep in his soul he began to suspect that behind this simple tree lay hidden a truth that led straight to the beginning of everything. To the first choice.

The first freedom. The first love. And perhaps even the reason why creation ever began. As the wind blew through the Desert of Gods, Elias felt himself getting closer to the origin than ever before. But also closer to a pain greater than he could ever imagine. Because if love was truly more important than power... Then the Creator would have paid a price that even stars could not comprehend.

THE TREE OF FREEDOM

The tree stood alone. Elias had seen thousands of worlds. Burning cities. Infinite oceans of consciousness. Libraries bigger than galaxies. Museums full of religions. But nothing had touched him as deeply as this simple tree. Maybe because she was alive. Maybe because she was in the midst of death. Or maybe because he knew deep down that everything revolved around this. The whole journey. All questions. All religions. All desires. The shepherd stood next to him. Silently. Waiting. As always. There was a deep chasm between them and the tree.

She seemed bottomless. When Elias looked into it he saw no stone. No darkness. No fire. He saw possibilities.

Millions of possibilities. Choices. Lives. Worlds. As if the gap consisted of everything that could have happened. And everything that could still happen.

"Why is the tree on the other side?" Elias asked. The shepherd smiled.

"Because love never starts on this side." "What does that mean?" "There is power here." He pointed to their side of the canyon.

"That's where freedom stands." Elias looked at the tree again. A gentle wind moved through the leaves. The fruits shone like little stars. There was a strange attraction to it. Not as a temptation. More like an invitation.

"Tell me something." The shepherd sat down on a rock.

"Why do you think God created the world?" Elias thought about everything he had learned.

To the rabbi. To the Sufi. To the mystics. To the woman in the chapel of the Logos. At the Library.

"Out of love." "Good." The shepherd nodded.

"And why did He create free beings?" "So that love would be possible." "Why?" Elias hesitated. For again he came to the same limit. The same wall. Same truth.

"Love cannot be forced." "Why not?" The question sounded simple. But Elias knew that it contained everything. He remained silent for a long time. Then he replied, "Because then love is no longer love." The shepherd smiled.

"Precisely." He pointed to the tree.

"That's why he's there." Elias looked again. And slowly he started to understand something. The tree was not a test. No fall. No punishment. Not a random choice. The tree represented something much deeper. Freedom. The opportunity to say yes. But also the opportunity to say no. And without that second option, the first had no meaning. The shepherd stood up. Then something strange happened. The desert around them began to change. Images appeared in the sky. Living memories. Living possibilities. Elias saw parents holding their children.

Lovers who found each other. Friends who remained faithful. People who sacrificed themselves for others. Love everywhere. True love.

But next to each image a second one appeared. Parents who left their children. Lovers who betrayed each other. Friends who broke their word. People who chose themselves. That too was real. Elias felt sadness.

"Why are you showing me this?" The shepherd replied softly, "Because both come from the same source." "Freedom." "Yes." The images kept appearing. Beauty. Pain. Heap. Loss. Fidelity. Betrayal. Love.

Hate. Everything went back to the same gift. Freedom. Suddenly Elias became angry. Really angry.

"Then God should have done it differently." The words escaped before he could stop them. The shepherd looked at him. Not judgmental. Just sad.

"How?" Elias opened his mouth. But no words came. Because deep down he didn't know the answer. A world without freedom? Then no betrayal. But no loyalty either. No hate. But not love either. No loss. But not a gift either. No pain. But also no community. He slowly closed his mouth again. The shepherd nodded.

"Precisely." The sunless sky above the desert grew darker. Or perhaps it was Elias who began to see more deeply. The images disappeared.

Only the tree remained visible. Then the shepherd spoke again.

"Now comes the most difficult question." Elias immediately felt tension.

"Which one?" The old man looked at the horizon. Long. Very long. Then he said, "If God knew what freedom would cost..." He paused.

"...why did He create?" The words hit Elias like a hammer. For immediately he saw the history of all the worlds. Wars. Dead. Loss. Betrayal. Suffering. Billions of broken hearts. Billions of broken lives. If God knew all this... Why? Why create? Why give freedom anyway?

Why take that risk? There was silence for a long time. The shepherd waited. As always. Not to give him an answer. But to show him what he already knew. And slowly Elias began to understand. Not logical. Not rational. But existential. From within. If God is love... Real love... Then not creating might have been impossible. The way a song wants to sound. As light wants to shine. The way love wants to give itself. Even when it means pain. Even when it means loss. Even when it means rejection. Tears appeared in his eyes.

Because for the first time he saw how terrible that choice must have been. Not for people. For God.

"You begin to see Him." The shepherd's voice sounded almost like a whisper. Elias looked up.

"Who?" "The Creator." "No." His voice broke.

"I begin to see His sorrow." The shepherd smiled. But there was sadness in his eyes. As if that answer got to the heart of the matter. For suddenly Elias understood why so many prophets had wept. Why mystics spoke of divine love. Why the cross continued to haunt him. Not because God was powerless. But because love voluntarily becomes vulnerable. Because love makes room for another. Because love waits. Even when the answer is not forthcoming. Then the tree began to shine. Not fierce. Not overwhelming. But warm. Alive.

Words emerged from the trunk. No human words. Older words. Words that seemed to speak directly to his soul. And yet he understood their meaning. Love without freedom is possession. A second sentence appeared. Freedom without love becomes emptiness. Then a third. But love with freedom becomes community. Elias felt his heart beat faster. Community. That word over and over again. The word that had haunted him from Luna Station. The word that lay behind every religion. The word that lay behind every memory. The word that perhaps even lay behind creation.

Community. Not power. Not knowledge. Not control. Community. The tree shone brighter and brighter. Then Elias saw something among the roots.

A door. Small. Almost hidden. But unmistakably present. There was one name above the door. THE FORBIDDEN EXPERIMENT The shepherd looked at it. His face turned serious.

"What is that?" Elias asked. For the first time, even the old man seemed reluctant.

“The place where you will discover why love is not just a philosophical truth.” “Then what?” The shepherd answered slowly.

“A personal truth.” A cold shiver ran through Elias. Because deep down he knew that his journey was now entering a new phase. So far he had been exploring ideas. Religions. Mysticism. Philosophy. Theology. But something else waited behind that door. History awaited there. Its history.

Maybe even God's history. And as the wind blew across the Desert of Gods, Elias looked toward the hidden entrance among the roots of the Tree of Freedom. For the first time in a long time, he didn't feel scared alone. But also hopeful. Like he was finally getting close to the answer. Not on the question of whether love exists. But when asked why love had ever been worth creation.

THE HEART OF THE DESERT

After the shepherd had finished speaking, Elias stood silently. Before him lay the hidden door among the roots of the Tree of Freedom. THE FORBIDDEN EXPERIMENT The words seemed burned into the wood. Not written. Not engraved. Burned. As if they were created from fire. Out of pain. From memory. But the door remained closed. Yet. The shepherd made no move to go any further. Instead, he walked away from the tree. Deeper into the desert. After some hesitation, Elias followed him.

"Why don't we go inside?" he asked. The old man replied without looking back, "Because you are not ready yet." "I hear that all the time." "And yet it is true." The desert became quieter and quieter. Even the wind seemed to lag behind.

As if they were entering an area where sound was no longer welcome. Slowly the sand beneath their feet changed. It got darker. Deeper. Older. Elias felt a strange tension in his chest. As if something inside him knew where they were going. Not his mind. Not his memory. Something deeper. Something that was older than both. Then they reached the heart of the desert. It wasn't a place. No building. No monument. Only a circle of black stones. Perfectly round. In the middle of an endless void. When Elias entered the circle, something unexpected happened.

All voices disappeared. Not just the voices of others. Also his own inner voice. For the first time since the beginning of his journey it became truly quiet. Completely silent. And in that silence he felt himself.

Naked. Not physically. Existential. As if all roles had been taken from him. Scientist. Seeker. Traveler. Man. Even those words disappeared. Only consciousness remained. Presence only. Only desire. Then the shepherd spoke. For the first time in a long time, his voice sounded serious.

"What is omnipotence?" Elias looked up.

"You know that, right?" "I'm asking you." He thought.

"The ability to do everything." The shepherd shook his head.

"That's how children understand omnipotence." Elias frowned.

"And adults?" The old man did not smile.

"Adults know that power without wisdom destroys." He pointed to the horizon. Suddenly images appeared. Not as memories. As realities. Elias saw emperors. Tyrants. God-kings. Cosmic rulers. All possessed enormous power. All could give orders. All could command obedience. But nowhere did he see love. He saw fear everywhere. Respect. Submission. But no love. The images disappeared. Then a new image appeared. A mother who let go of a child. A father who let his daughter leave. A loved one who set someone free.

A friend who remained faithful without demanding anything in return. No power. No control.

No coercion. Only love. Elias felt his throat tighten. Because suddenly he began to understand.

"You see." The shepherd's voice sounded soft.

"Yes." "What do you see?" Elias answered slowly. As if he had to discover every letter.

"True love does not seek to possess." The shepherd nodded.

"Go on." "True love doesn't try to control." "Go on." Now his voice was shaking.

"True love sets you free." The words fell into the silence. And the silence seemed to receive them. As if the entire desert had been waiting for this. Then the sky above them began to change. For the first time, something that looked like stars appeared. But they weren't stars. They were choices.

Billions of choices. Billions of moments when free beings had said yes or no. Yes to love. No to love. Yes to community. No to intercourse. Yes to God. No to God. The sky filled with it. A cosmic history of freedom. Elias watched breathlessly. Then he saw something that made him tremble. Not all choices were nice. Many were terrible. Wars. Betrayal. Murder. Hate. Selfishness. Rejection. Millions of times, free beings had chosen against love. Millions of times. And yet... freedom was never taken away. Never.

"Why?" he whispered.

"Why doesn't God intervene?" The shepherd looked up. Long. Very long. Then he replied, "How often?" "What?" "How often is love allowed to destroy freedom to protect itself?" Elias wanted to answer. But he couldn't. Because suddenly he saw the paradox. The moment love destroys freedom... it destroys itself. The discovery affected him deeply. Deeper than all philosophies. Deeper than all religions. Deeper even than his search. Because here it was no longer about theory. This was about the heart of reality. The sky darkened again. Now a single memory appeared.

Bigger than all the others.

Older than any other. A garden. Green. Alive. Full of beauty. There was a tree in the middle of the garden. Not the same tree as in the desert. But connected to it. Elias immediately felt recognition. Not because he knew the story. But because he felt the meaning. Freedom. Choice. Love. Risk. Everything came together. Then he saw two people. Free. Beloved. Invited. And he saw the choice. The first rejection. The first deletion. The first break. The first wound.

A deep pain ripped through him. Not because he saw the people. But because he felt something behind the story. Someone. Someone who loved. Someone who had given freedom. Someone who knew that love was only possible with risk. And who had taken that risk anyway. Elias felt tears running down his face. Because for the first time he saw not only human tragedy. He saw divine pain.

"Now you understand why the prophets wept." The shepherd's voice sounded soft.

"Now you understand why mystics spoke of suffering love." "Now you understand why the cross continues to haunt you." Elias looked at him. His eyes were moist.

"Why?" The old man smiled sadly.

"Because love is stronger than power." The words stuck. Like an eternity. Because love is stronger than power. Not powerless.

Not weak. But bigger. Deeper. More fundamental. Suddenly Elias began to suspect something he could not yet fully understand. Perhaps true omnipotence was not the ability to control everything. Perhaps true omnipotence was the power to release love. Even when that love turns away. Even when it causes pain. Even when she walks away. Like Lyra. Like people. Like entire civilizations. Like history. The thought made him tremble. Because if that were true... then God's greatness was far different than he ever imagined.

Then the circle of black stones began to shake. The desert grew dark. The horizon disappeared. Only the shepherd remained visible. His face looked older than ever. But also friendlier. Almost fatherly.

"You're done." Elias looked at him.

"For what?" The shepherd pointed into the distance. The hidden door between the roots of the Tree of Freedom appeared again. But now she was open. There was no corridor behind her. No building. No landscape. Only light. And somewhere in that light came a voice. Not hard. Not coercive. But familiar. Older than stars. Older than time. Older than his memories. A voice that seemed to have accompanied him throughout his journey. A voice that was strange and familiar at the same time. The voice spoke only three words. Come and see.

Elias felt his heart beat faster. Because deep in his soul he knew that no theory awaited behind that door. No religion. No philosophy.

No symbol. History awaited there. The Hidden History of Creation. The truth behind freedom. The truth behind love. Maybe even the truth behind himself. Above the opened entrance the words burned again. THE FORBIDDEN EXPERIMENT And as Elias walked toward the light, he began to suspect that the universe's greatest secret was not about power. But about a God who had voluntarily chosen the risk of love. Even when He knew what it would cost Him.

CHAPTER 8 - THE FORBIDDEN EXPERIMENT

THE FIRST HYPOTHESIS

The door closed behind him. Not with a sound. Not with a movement. But with a feeling. As if a chapter of reality was closed. As Elias walked further, he immediately noticed that this place was unlike anything he had visited before. The Desert of Gods had robbed him of his certainties. The Library had robbed him of his illusions. But this place seemed to want to rob him of his last defense. Distance. Here he could no longer remain a spectator.

He had to become a participant. A vast space stretched out before him. No laboratory. No heaven. No world. More of a thought that had taken shape. Billions of lines of light floated through an endless darkness. They crossed paths. Hit each other. Left each other. Formed patterns. And whenever two lines met, a spark was created. A new possibility. A new history. A new relationship. Elias watched breathlessly. In the center of this cosmic structure stood a single table. Simple. Wooden legs. A wooden top. As if she belonged in an old workshop.

Not in a cosmic reality. A man sat behind the table. At least... a man was the closest description.

He wore simple clothes. His hands rested on the wood. His eyes radiated a calmness that immediately disturbed Elias. Not because they radiated power. But because they radiated love. True love. Unconditional love. And suddenly Elias felt something he hadn't felt anywhere else. He wanted to run. Not because he was afraid. But because he felt seen. Completely seen.

"Welcome." The voice was soft. Hot. Human. Elias swallowed.

"Who are you?" The man smiled.

"That's not yet the right question." Elias closed his eyes. Naturally. Always the same.

"What kind of place is this?" The man looked around.

"The Forbidden Experiment." "Why banned?" Now a hint of sadness appeared in his gaze.

"Because many people are afraid of freedom." The man stood up. He walked towards one of the light lines. Touched her. Instantly an entire universe appeared. Stars were born. Planets came into being. Life grew. Civilizations appeared. People lived. Loves. Cried. Hoped. Everything happened in a few seconds. Then it disappeared again.

"What did I see?" Elias asked.

"A possibility." "An experiment?" "Yes." The man looked at him.

"Tell me something." "What do you think creation was?" Elias thought about everything he had learned. To the religions. To the mystics. On the Desert. On the Tree of Freedom.

"An act of love." The man smiled.

"Good." "What else?" Elias was silent. For there his understanding ended. The man continued walking. Between the light lines. Among the possibilities. Then he spoke again.

"Suppose love really wants love." "That's what she wants." "No." The man looked at him.

"Really imagine it." Elias was silent.

"Then what does love need?" He slowly replied:

"Another." "Good." "And?" "Freedom." "Why?" "Because otherwise love isn't love." The man nodded. Then he pointed to the countless lines of light.

"That was the experiment." A cold shiver ran through Elias.

"What do you mean?" There was silence for a long time. Then the man spoke words that would change his entire journey.

"Creation was love's attempt to produce free lovers." Suddenly the lines of light started moving faster. Millions of possibilities unfolded. Millions of worlds. Millions of histories. Millions of choices. Elias saw civilizations emerge. He saw people who loved. He saw people who hated. He saw saints. He saw murderers.

He saw grace. He saw betrayal. Everything at once. Everything possible. Everything really.

"Why are you calling this an experiment?" The man looked at the moving realities.

"Because freedom can never be guaranteed." "But God knows everything, right?" A smile appeared for the first time. A sad smile.

"Many people think that knowing is the same as controlling." Elias immediately sensed that an important truth was hidden here.

"Isn't that right?" "No." The man shook his head.

"You can know that someone is free." "But you cannot replace his freedom." The words reminded him of Lyra. Up to her choice. At her departure. To the pain. Suddenly he began to understand why that memory kept recurring. Because she was a reflection of something much bigger.

The room grew darker. Now a single world appeared. Not millions. Only one. Blue. Green. Alive. Earth. Elias froze.

"My world." "Yes." The man looked at the planet. And in his eyes appeared a love so deep that Elias could hardly bear it.

"Why her?" he whispered. The man replied, "Why not her?" Elias had no answer. He looked at the earth. To the people. To their history. Their beauty. Their horror. Their hope. Their brokenness.

Then he saw something he had never seen before. Not human history. But the story of God's patience. Century after century. War after war. Rejection after rejection. And yet the love persisted. Keep searching. Keep shouting. Keep waiting. Not because she was weak. But because she was faithful. Tears filled Elias' eyes. For for the first time he began to feel what the prophets had felt. What the mystics had felt. What the cross had revealed. Love doesn't give up. Even when she is rejected. Then the man turned to him. The room became silent.

The light lines slowed down. The earth remained floating between them like a blue pearl.

"Now you understand why creation exists." Elias looked at him.

His voice trembled.

"Because love seeks an answer." "Yes." "A free answer." "Yes." "A real answer." "Yes." The man smiled. Hot. Sad. Joyful. At the same time. Then he asked the question that Elias already feared deep down.

“And what if the experiment succeeds?” Elias felt his heart beat faster. For suddenly he understood that the question was not about worlds. Not about civilizations. Not about religions. The question was about relationship. Actual relationship. Between Creator and creature. Between love and love in return. Between God and man. And deep in his soul a thought began to awaken that he did not yet dare to fully believe. Perhaps creation was never intended to be a machine.

Never as a project. Never as a demonstration of omnipotence. Perhaps it was intended as a meeting. Between a God who loved. And free beings who could respond. Then the lines of light started moving again. But now they formed a new pattern. A pattern that Elias immediately recognized. A human face. His own face. He froze. The man saw it. And for the first time his expression became serious.

“The next thing you will discover...” he said softly, “...will not just be about why creation exists.” The room went dark. The earth disappeared. The light lines dissolved. Only the voice remained audible for a while.

“It will be about who you really are.” Then a new passage appeared in the distance. Words of fire burned above the entrance. THE CREATOR'S THRONE And for the first time since his journey began, Elias was truly afraid of the answer.

THE HISTORY OF THE EXPERIMENT

The passage to the Creator's Throne still remained closed. As if reality itself knew that Elias was not ready yet. The man at the table stood next to him again. Together they looked at the countless lines of light that moved through the space. But now they started to behave differently. They were no longer possibilities. No alternate realities. No hypothetical histories. Now they told one story. The history. The real history. From start to finish. Or perhaps from origin to completion.

"You want to know why creation exists." The man spoke softly. Elias nodded.

"Yes." "Then you have to see her as she really is." He touched one of the lines of light. Immediately a vision unfolded. Not before him. Around him. He stood in the middle of the birth of stars. Billions of suns ignited.

Galaxies unfolded like flowers. Mists swirled through space. Planets were born. Oceans were created. Life awakened. The beauty was almost unbearable. Elias felt tears in his eyes.

"Why is it so beautiful?" The man smiled.

"Why does an artist paint?" "Why does a poet write?" "Why does a bird sing?" The questions reminded him of the sage under the cosmic tree. The same answer over and over again. Because beauty wants to express itself. Because love wants to give itself. Because joy wants to share. The vision continued. Now Elias saw the first people. Not as a myth. Not as a caricature. But as persons. Alive. Vulnerable.

Beloved. He saw their amazement. Their freedom. Their ability to love. Their ability to choose. And suddenly he understood something. The greatest gift they received was not life. Not intelligence. Not power. Freedom. Freedom was the most precious gift. And at the same time the most dangerous. Because immediately afterwards he saw the first crack. The first deletion. The first choice against love. The first wound. A wave of sadness swept through the universe. Not just by the people. Throughout all creation. As if everything was connected.

As if love itself was wounded. Elias looked at the man.

"Why didn't He stop them?" The man did not immediately respond. Then he said:

"Because love would no longer be love if it destroyed freedom to protect itself." Same truth again. But now Elias did not see it as philosophy. He saw her as history. The vision accelerated. Centuries passed. Kingdoms emerged. Empires fell. Civilizations grew. Peoples moved across continents. Prophets appeared. People prayed. People fought. People forgave. People hated. And through it all, Elias saw one constant. A presence. Sometimes hidden. Sometimes visible. Sometimes silently. Sometimes speaking. But always present.

As if someone guided history without controlling it. As if someone invited without forcing.

As if someone was waiting. Patient. Extremely patient.

"Why does He intervene so little?" Elias asked. The man looked at the stream of centuries. Then he replied, "Maybe because love doesn't look for puppets." Those words stuck. Because suddenly Elias saw how often he himself had longed for control. Towards certainty. To guarantees. But love didn't work that way. Never. Not between people. Not between friends. Not between lovers. Why should things be different between God and people? History continued. Now he saw Abraham. Moses. David. Isaiah. Jeremiah.

Men and women who stumbled. Doubted. Failed. And yet they were called. Not because they were perfect. But because they answered. Free. Imperfect. Really. Then he saw something that touched him

deeply. God seemed more interested in relationship than achievement. More in loyalty than in success. More in love than in power. That discovery changed something in him. For suddenly he began to understand why the religious revelations had always led him to the same center. Not according to laws. Not to systems. But to community. Then the vision changed again.

Now he saw a simple city. Dusty roads. A young woman. A child. A carpenter.

People who lived without realizing that history revolved around them. Elias immediately felt that this was important. Very important. The man next to him was silent. Respectfully. As if even he knew words were inadequate here. Then Elias saw a life. No emperor. Not a general. Not a philosopher. No ruler. But someone who loved. Healed. Forgave. Searched. Yelled. Waited. And finally gave himself. Voluntarily. Elias felt that same sadness again. That same awe. That same mystery. The cross appeared again. Not as a symbol. But as an event.

Not as defeat. But as a revelation. And suddenly he understood why the Christian story continued to haunt him. Because it dared to say something that no other vision said so radically. Not just that God has love. Not only that God gives love. But that God is love. And that love is willing to give itself. Even when she is rejected. Even when she suffers. Even when she dies. The vision softened. History slowed down. Billions of lives passed by. Unknown people. Forgotten people. Ordinary people. People who never ended up in books.

Yet Elias saw that every life mattered. Every choice. Every act of love. Every forgiveness. Every sacrifice. Every free “yes”.

As if all of history ultimately revolved around answers. Not for power. Not about success. But for an answer. Free answer. Return love. The man spoke again.

“Do you see it?” Elias nodded slowly.

“Yes.” “What do you see?” There was silence for a long time. Then he replied: “History is not a machine.” “No.” “Not an experiment in power.” “No.” “Not a demonstration of omnipotence.” “No.” His voice softened.

“It's a love story.” The man smiled. For the first time Elias saw tears in his eyes. Not from sadness alone. But of joy.

As if this answer was important. Very important. Then history began to disappear. The stars faded. The centuries dissolved. The people disappeared. Only the earth remained visible for a while. A small blue world. Vulnerable. Beloved. Then she too disappeared. Now only one light line remained. Just one. She did not walk towards civilization. Not to a religion. Not to a world. She walked straight to Elias. He froze. He slowly looked at the man. The man looked back. With the same loving look. With the same sad wisdom.

Then he spoke softly: “Now you must discover why your line starts here.”

A deep silence filled the room. And somewhere in the distance a throne began to become visible. Older than stars. Older than time. Older than memory. The Throne of the Creator. And for the first time Elias began to suspect that his own story was much older than his birth. Much older than Luna Station. Perhaps even older than creation itself. The room was bigger than a universe. Elias knew the comparison was impossible. Yet he couldn't find a better one. Billions of points of light floated before him. No stars. No planets. Moments. History.

Each spark of light represented an event. A birth. A choice. A prayer. A betrayal. A forgiveness. A declaration of love. A sacrifice. The entire history of humanity lay spread out before him like a living star map.

"What is this?" he asked. The Voice answered immediately.

"The Experiment." Elias looked up.

"Why do you call it an experiment?" The Voice was silent for a few moments. Then the points of light began to move. The first people appeared before his eyes. Not as primitive creatures. But as persons. With faces. With votes. With desires. With freedom. Adam. Eva.

Their children. Their descendants. The centuries passed. Civilizations rose. Kingdoms collapsed. Wars. Peace. Prophets. Scientists. Mothers. Children. Billions of lives. Billions of choices.

"What was tested here?" Elias asked.

"Freedom." The answer did not surprise him. He almost expected it. But what followed next.

"Why?" The Voice replied, "Because love without freedom is impossible." Suddenly new images appeared. Elias saw a mother who gave her life for her child. He recognized her.

The woman from the Empire of Shadows. Then he saw a man who forgave his enemy. A woman who remained faithful to her dying husband. A soldier who returned for a friend. Thousands. Millions. The same patterns over and over again. The same choice over and over again. Love. Voluntary love. Elias watched with fascination. But then another stream of images appeared. Betrayal. Murder. Greed. Hate. Cruelty.

Wars. Genocides. Torture. An endless river of pain. Elias felt his stomach tighten.

"Why did you allow that?" The question sounded harsher than he had intended. The room became quiet. Almost painfully quiet. Then the Voice replied, "For the same reason I allowed love." Elias froze.

"That's not an answer."

"Yes, yes." History around him stopped. Billions of moments freeze. As if time itself was listening. Then the Voice spoke again.

"Remove freedom." Immediately the wars disappeared. The murders. The hate. The cruelty. Elias felt relief. But only for a moment. Because then he saw that something else was missing.

The mother who saved her child. The soldier who returned. The lover who remained faithful. The forgiveness. The sacrifice. The wedding. Everything disappeared. All love. All beauty. All meaning. Only perfect silence remained. A universe without evil.

But also without love. Elias felt a cold rush through him.

"No." The images returned. With all the pain. With all joy. With all the risks. With all beauty. The Voice spoke softly.

"Freedom was never the problem of the experiment." Elias looked at history. To the countless lives. To the countless tears.

To the countless loves.

"Then what?" There was silence for a long time. Then came the answer. The answer the entire journey had prepared him for.

"Whether love would really be chosen." Elias felt his breath catch. Suddenly he saw everything differently. Not like a laboratory. Not as a scientific study. Not as a cosmic project. But as a love story.

A history in which billions of free beings were allowed to respond to an invitation. Yes. Or no. To love. Or not to love. And for the first time he understood that the Experiment was never intended to teach the Creator anything. The Creator already knew the answer. The Experiment existed so that free creatures

could give their answer. Then one final image appeared. No war. No civilization. No world.

Only a voice in the darkness before the stars. A voice that spoke: "Let there be someone." Elias felt tears running down his face. Because finally he understood. The entire history of humanity had never been a quest for knowledge. But a search for love in return. The universe's longest love story. Written with freedom like ink. And love as a goal.

THE NAME IN THE BOOK OF LIFE

The last line of light remained visible. All the others were gone. The history. The stars. The Earth. The civilizations. Even the man at the table seemed further away. Only that one line remained. She walked straight to Elias. Like a thread of light. Like a lifeline. Like a memory. He slowly stretched out his hand. The moment his fingers touched the light, reality shook. Billions of images flowed through him. Not of the world. Not from humanity. From himself. His childhood. His first questions. His first loneliness. The nights he spent looking at stars.

The days at Luna Station. The conversations with Mei.

The search for evidence. The fear of meaninglessness. Everything appeared. But behind every memory he now saw something else. A presence. Not coercive. Not visible. But present. As if someone had been following him all this time. Not as a guard. Not as a controller. But as someone who waited. Patient. Endlessly patient. Elias felt his breathing quicken.

“Who are you?” The question escaped itself. The light did not respond. But started to move. The line pulled him further. To the center of space. To a place where darkness itself seemed to recede. Something appeared there. A book. Huge.

Older than stars. Older than time. Older than any memory. It floated above a sea of □□light. The cover was simple. Of living gold. As if she wasn't made. But grown. There were words on the front. No letters. No symbols. Yet Elias immediately understood what they meant. THE BOOK OF LIFE His heart began to beat faster. Because deep down he knew what this meant. Not because anyone told him. Because he remembered. The thought scared him. The book opened. Not abruptly. Slowly. As if even eternity became cautious. The pages turned by themselves.

Millions of names appeared.

People. Nations. Worlds. Lives. Every name shone. Every name lived. Every name was unique. Not one was forgotten. Not one was confused with another. Elias felt awe. Because suddenly he understood something that the Rabbi in the Museum had tried to explain. God did not know people as numbers. Not as parts of a system. But by name. Personal. Individually. Beloved. The discovery moved him deeply. Because love that is not personal is ultimately not love. Then the pages stopped. The book was open to a single page. Elias looked. His heart stopped.

There was one name there. ELIAS

Not Elias Vermeer. Not a complete identity. Only Elias. As if the name was older than any surname. Older than any history. Older perhaps even than time. A cold shiver ran through him.

“Why is my name here?” The silence did not answer. But the book began to open further. Memories appeared under his name. Not from his life. Older memories. Much older. He saw again the darkness before creation. He saw the One Consciousness again. He saw the first desire again. But this time he saw something he had missed before. That desire did not look at a world. Not to stars. Not to angels. Not for power. It looked at people. To faces. To names.

As if creation was intended for encounter from the beginning. For community. For love. A tear slid down his cheek. Because suddenly he understood why every religion had ultimately ended up in relationship. Why every mystic talked about love. Why the Christian story continued to haunt him. Because at the heart of it all was personal. Not abstract. Not philosophical. Personal. The page changed again. Now Elias saw a different reality. No past. No history. A thought. A decision. A choice. Even before stars existed. Even before space existed.

Even before time existed. He saw that the One Consciousness represented a possibility. A terrible possibility. Don't shovel.

Stay alone. Eternally. Perfect. But alone. And on the other hand there was another possibility. Create. To love. Giving freedom. Accept risk. Allowing suffering. Tolerating rejection. Bearing loss. But also open the possibility for love in return. For community. For a real "you". Elias felt his heart breaking. Because for the first time he saw how great that choice had been. How dangerous. How precious. And yet the Creator had chosen. Not for safety. But for love. Not for control. But for community. Not for security.

But for freedom. The book turned another page. Now no history appeared. No memory. No vision. Just a question. Big. Radiant. Inescapable. WHY DOES THIS AFFECT YOU SO DEEPLY? Elias looked at the words. Long. Very long. He wanted answers. But couldn't. Because deep in his soul he already knew the answer. He just had never dared to say it. Not towards others. Not towards himself. The words came slowly. Carefully. As if they were born from a wound.

"Because I feel like I know this." The page remained silent.

Then a second question appeared. HOW DO YOU KNOW IT? Now he began to shake. Because the truth was right in front of him. So close he could almost touch her. But couldn't see fully yet.

"Don't know." The words were honest. Completely honest. Because he really didn't know. Not quite. Not yet. But he felt it. Like someone who feels the sun before it appears above the horizon. Like a person hears music before he understands the melody. As one feels love before he names it. The Book of Life slowly began to close. The pages disappeared. The names faded. The sea of □□light retreated. But before the book closed completely, one last sentence appeared. A sentence that shook Elias to his core. YOU ARE NOT JUST LOOKING FOR THE CREATOR.

He felt his breath catch.

Then the second line appeared. THE CREATOR IS ALSO LOOKING FOR YOU. The words kept burning. Not on the page. In his soul. And suddenly Elias understood why his journey had never been just about knowledge. Why evidence had never been enough. Why science could never have fully fulfilled him. Why every door had ultimately led him to love. Because he wasn't just looking for God. God was looking for him. The discovery was so great that he could hardly breathe. Then the space started to change. The sea of □□light parted. The last line of light disappeared.

The Book of Life closed completely. And in the distance the throne appeared again. Bigger than ever. Brighter than ever. Older than time. Older than creation. Older than memory. The Throne of the Creator. Now Elias saw that she was not empty.

Not really. Someone was sitting there. Still hidden. Not yet visible. But present. Waiting. Like everything had been preparing him for this moment all along. And deep in his soul, Elias knew that the next step would change his entire reality. Because on that throne there was not only an answer waiting. A revelation awaited there. Not just about God. But about himself. And as he walked slowly toward the Creator's Throne, a thought began to grow within him that was both impossible and inevitable. What if his desire had always been an echo... of God's desire?

CHAPTER 9 - THE THRONE OF THE CREATOR

THE VOICE BEHIND ALL VOICES

The road to the throne seemed to have no distance. Elias walked. But he didn't know if he was actually moving. Maybe the throne was getting closer. The road to the Throne seemed longer than all the journeys before. Not because the distance was great. But because every step evoked a memory. With every step Elias saw a piece of his life.

His childhood. His father. Anna. May. Lyra. Sahana. The Mother in the Empire. The inhabitants of the Ocean. The gods of the Desert. Everything appeared again. As if reality itself was leafing back through its history. Then he reached the last gate. Behind it lay the Throne Room. Bigger than galaxies. Older than time. Light flowed through space like living rivers. Music seemed to be born from silence. And in the middle of that vast space stood the Throne. But the Throne was empty.

Elias stopped. Confused.

"Where are you?" His voice echoed through the room. No answer. Only silence. Then again: "Where are You?" Still nothing. Suddenly he felt an unexpected pain. Deeper than fear. Deeper than sadness. The old fear.

The oldest fear. What if I'm alone again? What if in the end there is no one there? His knees started to shake. His whole journey came back. The years on Luna Station. The sleepless nights. The philosophical questions. The desire. The hope. The disappointments. The endless search.

He looked up. For the first time without pride. Without theory. Without science. Only as a human being.

"I have sought You." His voice broke.

"My whole life." The words disappeared into the silence. Then something unexpected happened. Not outside of him. Inside him. A memory.

His father under the stars. A hand on his shoulder. Then Anna. Then May. Then Lyra. Then Sahana. They all appeared again. Not like ghosts. Not as visions. But like memories that suddenly took on a hidden meaning. Then he heard a Voice. Soft.

Almost whispering.

"No." Elias froze. The Voice was not loud. Not overwhelming. But she filled everything. Every thought. Every memory. Every wound.

"No, Elias." Tears immediately appeared in his eyes.

"What do you mean?" The Voice replied:

"You did not seek Me first." The room became quiet. Completely silent. Then the memories started stirring again. He saw himself as a boy. Alone under the stars. He heard his question. How do I know other people are real? And suddenly he saw something he had never seen before. It wasn't just him looking up. Someone was watching him too. Not visible.

Not tangible. But present. From the beginning. The images changed. He saw the death of his father. The loneliness. The sadness. The despair. And again he saw something. He had never been alone. Never. Not even in the darkest moments. The images kept coming.

Anna. May. Lyra. Sahana. Every encounter. Every coincidence. Every rescue. Every lesson. As if invisible hands had been working on his life all along. Not coercive. Not manipulative. But inviting.

Patient. Lovingly. Then the Voice spoke again.

“Who do you think put the desire in your heart?” Elias felt his breath catch.

“Who do you think kept calling out to you when you had no words yet?” A wave of emotions washed over him. Suddenly he no longer saw his life as a quest. But as an answer. An answer to a call that had started much earlier. The Voice became softer. Almost tender.

“Before you desired Me...”

A long silence.

“...I longed for you.” Elias could no longer hold his own. He sank to his knees. All resistance disappeared. All pride. All analysis. All questions. Only tears remained. For years he had thought he was the seeker. The pilgrim. The researcher.

The traveler. Now he discovered that he had been the lost sheep all along. The wanted one. The beloved. It was not he who had found the way to the Creator. The Creator had led him to Himself step by step. Through love. Through loss. By hope. Through freedom. Through all worlds. Then the Voice spoke for the last time. And the words struck him more deeply than any other.

“I never let you out of my sight.” Elias closed his eyes. And for the first time since his youth he no longer felt lonely. Not because he had finally found an answer. But because he finally knew that he had always been known. Always seen. Always wanted. Always loved. Maybe the space between them disappeared. Perhaps such terms no longer meant anything here. For he was in a place older than space. Older than time. Older even than creation. Before him rose the Throne of the Creator. Not built of gold. Not from light.

Not from stars. No material from created reality seemed suitable to describe it. Rather, the throne seemed to consist of truth. Out of meaning. From reality itself. And as Elias approached, he felt something he had never experienced before. No fear. No awe. No admiration. Even though all those feelings were there. No. What he felt was coming home. That realization shocked him. Because he didn't want to feel it. He wanted to remain a researcher. Observer. Seeker. Not someone who came home.

But the closer he got to the throne, the more impossible that became. Something in him recognized this place. Like a river recognizes the sea. Like a child recognizes his mother's voice. Like a loved one recognizing a face he has never truly forgotten. Then he stopped. The throne was right in front of him.

And there sat a figure. Still hidden. Still shrouded in light. Not because the light blinded him. But because his being seemed too big for any form. Too real. Too alive. Too present. There was silence for a long time. Then the voice spoke. And Elias froze. Because he knew her. Not from a memory. Not from a dream. Not from a religion. He knew her as a man knows himself. Like someone who knows his own name. Like someone knows his own heartbeat.

“Welcome home, Elias.” His knees started to shake.

“Who are you?” The silence lasted a long time. Then the voice answered.

“You've always asked that question.” Elias felt his breathing quicken.

Because suddenly he heard something in that voice. Not just power. Not just wisdom. Not just love. Sadness. An infinitely old sorrow. And at the same time an infinitely ancient joy. As if both had always existed together.

“Elias.” The voice spoke his name again. And suddenly memories appeared around him. Not his memories. At least, that’s what he thought at first. He saw Luna Station. May. Lyra. Sahana. The Conservator. The Archivist. The shepherd. Every encounter. Every question. Every door. Every discovery.

They all appeared around the throne. Like stars around a sun. Then something unexpected happened. They began to speak. Not to each other. To him. Mei smiled.

“You were looking for evidence.” Lyra smiled.

“But you were looking for love.” Sahana looked at him sadly.

“And you looked for yourself.” The Conservator nodded.

“All the doors pointed in the same direction.” The Archivist closed his eyes.

“All the books told the same story.” The shepherd looked at the throne.

“All freedom pointed to the same love.” Their voices blended together. Not like chaos. But as harmony. Like one big choir. And suddenly Elias understood something. None of these encounters had been coincidental. None.

Every step. Every world. Every door. Had led him here. To this moment. To this throne. To this meeting.

“Why?” he whispered. His voice broke.

“Why all the detours?” The figure on the throne answered softly.

“Because love cannot be forced.” Those words again. Those words over and over again. But here. Before the throne. They sounded different. More real.

“I could have told you who I am.” The voice softened.

“I could have forced you to believe.” “I could have overwhelmed you with power.” The light around the throne seemed to grow.

“But then you would never have really known Me.” Elias felt tears welling up. Because suddenly he saw that the whole journey had been an invitation. No test. No judgement. No experiment. An invitation. To relationship. Until we meet. To love. Then the space began to change again. Images appeared behind the throne. Not from history. From before history. The same darkness he had seen before. The same reality before creation. The same lonely presence. But now he saw more. Much more. Not just a consciousness. Not just a desire. A Person. Alive. Loving.

Longing. And suddenly Elias understood why the Christian revelation had haunted him again and again. For this presence was not an abstract principle. No cosmic energy. Not an impersonal source. This was someone. Really someone. A Person who loved. Before stars existed. Before time existed. Before creation existed. He saw the desire again. The desire for community. The longing for another. The desire for free love in return. And suddenly he no longer felt it as an observer. He felt it from within. The shock was so great that he almost fell.

“No.” His voice was barely audible.

“No...” Because the pain felt familiar. Far too familiar. The hope felt familiar. The longing felt familiar.

As if he had worn it his entire existence. The figure on the throne stood up. Not threatening. Not majestic. More like a father rising to greet a lost child. The light around Him softened. And for the first time Elias began to see contours. Not completely. Not yet. But enough. He saw eyes. Eyes full of love. Eyes full of sadness. Eyes full of joy. Eyes that seemed to know him since before time. Since before he was born. Since before the stars. Then the voice spoke again.

“Why do you think your desire has affected you so deeply?” Elias could not answer. Because deep down he started to understand. But he didn't dare say it yet. The figure came closer. Every step seemed to last forever.

Then He stopped right in front of Elias. So close that he could feel the warmth of His presence. Not burning. Not destructive. Healing. Loving. Really.

“Why do you think you asked the same question in every world?” The words barely left Elias' lips.

“Because...” He paused.

“Go on.” “Because I was afraid of being alone.” The figure smiled. Sad. Lovingly.

“Yes.” Then came the question that changed everything.

“And why do you think that fear feels so old?” Reality became silent. Completely silent. The throne. The stars. The memories. Everything was waiting.

Elias felt that he was on the edge of an abyss. Not an abyss of destruction. An abyss of truth. He didn't fully know the answer yet. But he felt it. As one feels the dawn before he sees it. Like someone hearing music before the first word is sung. The way someone feels love before it is expressed. The figure placed a hand on his shoulder. A simple gesture. Almost human. And yet older than creation. Then He spoke softly, “You are closer to the truth than ever before.” The light around them began to grow. The throne disappeared. The space disappeared.

Only the presence remained. And as Elias stood in that presence, he knew that the next revelation would change everything. Not just his understanding of God. Not just his understanding of creation. But his understanding of himself. For somewhere beyond the final veil waited a truth that he both longed for and feared. The truth about who he really was.

And why his heart had longed for an answer to love since before the stars.

THE MIRROR OF ETERNITY

The presence remained. Everything else was gone. No throne. No stars. No room. No time. Only Elias. And the One who stood before him. Or perhaps even that distinction was no longer entirely accurate. For the longer Elias stayed in the light, the more strongly he felt that the line between observer and truth began to blur. Not because he stopped being himself. But because he finally started to understand himself. A mirror appeared in front of them. Not an ordinary mirror. No object. No object. The mirror seemed to be made of consciousness. Of memory.

Of truth. The surface shone like still water. But deeper. Infinitely deeper. Words appeared above the mirror. THE MIRROR OF ETERNITY

Elias immediately felt tension.

“What is this?” The voice answered softly, “The place where nothing can be hidden.” “For you?” “For you.” Those words made him shudder. Because suddenly he knew that he would no longer ask questions. Now answers would come. He slowly looked in the mirror. At first he saw himself. As always. The same eyes. Same face. The same person. The same Elias. Then the picture started to change. His age shifted. Child. Boy. Man. Older. Younger. Faster and faster.

Further and further. Until finally even his human face disappeared. And only consciousness remained. A presence. A desire. A hunger for community. A hunger that seemed older than his memories. Older than his birth. Older than his life. Elias felt his breath catch.

“Why am I seeing this?” The answer came immediately.

“Because you always thought that your desire started with you.” The mirror became brighter.

“But desire does not arise on its own.” The words reminded him of everything he had learned. The rabbi. The mystics. The woman of the Logos. The shepherd. The Archivist. Everyone had tried to show him this. But he couldn't have understood it. Not yet.

The mirror changed again. Now he saw the reality before creation. Not as an observer. From within. The same silence. The same eternity. The same presence. But now he felt more. Much more. He felt love. Not romantic love. Not human love. But the source from which all love comes. Unending. Perfect. Alive. And yet longing. Not out of shortage. Not out of incompleteness. But because love wants to give itself. Elias felt tears running down his face. For he finally began to understand why all religious paths had ultimately led him here.

Why the Christian faith had haunted him more and more. Because Christianity had expressed something that he had only seen in shadows everywhere.

That love is not just an attribute of God. But God's essence. That God is not first power. Not knowledge first. Not first omnipotence. But love. Living love. Eternal love. Then a new image appeared. No emptiness. No loneliness. But community. A mystery of love that existed before creation. Elias saw no details. Not yet. But he saw enough to understand that God's deepest reality was not eternal loneliness. There was a relationship. Love. Community. Eternally. Perfect. He remembered the words from the chapel of the Logos.

“Love requires another.” Now he finally started to understand why.

The Creator had never been a cold cosmic power. Never a lonely energy. Never an abstract principle. God was living community. Eternal love. And that is precisely why love could extend to a creation. Not out of necessity. But out of abundance. Not to receive anything. But to donate something. The mirror shook. And again the picture changed. Now Elias saw himself. Not the way he was. But as he had always

been. A human. Vulnerable. Searching. Longing. A creature. A beloved creature. No mistake. No accident. No coincidental coincidence.

Popular. Known. Loved. Even before stars existed. Even before his first breath was taken. Even before the earth existed. He saw his name again. Not written in a book. But carried in love. Worn in memory. Carried in desire. Then he finally understood why God's desire and his desire seemed so connected. Not because he was God. But because he was created in God's image. He felt a shock. Not from fear. Of recognition. The words came from a depth he had never reached before.

"Therefore..." The presence fell silent. Waited.

"That's why I long for community." The light became brighter.

"Yes." "That's why I long for love."

"Yes." "That's why loneliness feels like a wound." "Yes." His voice broke. Because now the truth came. The truth that his entire journey had led to.

"Because I am made in the image of a God who is love." The mirror began to shine. Not blinding. Affirmative. As if reality itself said: Yes. Elias fell to his knees. Not out of fear. Not out of submission. But out of awe. Because suddenly he saw the history of his life in a new light. His search had never been an attempt to find God. Not exclusively. It was also the result of God's desire that was already present in him. An ultrasound. A print. An image. As a child resembles his father.

Just as a work of art betrays the hand of the artist. Just as a song carries the melody of its composer. So his desire bore something of God's desire. Not the same size. Not the same depth. But the same direction. The direction of love. The direction of community. The direction of another. Then the mirror slowly began to disappear. The surface became light again. The light became presence. And the presence once again became the Figure standing before him. Now Elias felt less fear. But more awe than ever.

For he finally began to understand what his whole journey had meant. Not that he was God. Not that he had ever been God. But that he was created to share in God's love. To answer. Free. Really. Personal. Like all free love demands an answer.

Then the Voice spoke again. Soft. Hot. Lovingly.

"Now you understand why you searched." Elias nodded. Slowly. With tears in his eyes.

"Yes." "And do you understand why I waited?" He looked up. For the first time without fear. Only with wonder.

"Yes." Because love does not force. Love invites. Love waits. Love longs for a free response. The presence smiled. And somewhere beyond the last horizon of eternity, a new reality began to emerge. Not a throne. Not a library. Not a museum. But a garden. Green.

Alive. Full of light. A garden that seemed like a memory and a future at the same time. And deep in his soul Elias knew that the final phase of his journey had begun. Because now he no longer had to discover who God was. Or who he himself was. Now he had to answer. As every person must ultimately answer. At the invitation of love.

THE IMAGE AND THE LIKENESS

The garden stretched beyond the horizon. Not as a place. But as a reality. Everything Elias had seen during his journey seemed to come together here. The beauty of the Ocean of Spirits. The silence of the Desert of Gods. The wisdom of the Museum. The depth of the Library. The warmth of the Logos. Everything was alive here. Everything had its origin here. And in the middle of the garden walked the Figure. No longer hidden. No longer surrounded by an impenetrable light. Still bigger than words. But close now. Personal. Really. Elias followed Him.

Like an apprentice follows a master. Like a son follows a father. Like a traveler finally reaching his destination. They did not speak for a long time. That wasn't necessary.

Because for the first time since Luna Station, Elias no longer felt in a hurry. No coercion. No fear. Only peace. A deep peace. The peace of someone who finally understands why he has always searched. Finally they reached a clearing. There was a tree in the middle of the place. Bigger than any tree Elias had ever seen. Its roots seemed to reach deeper than the foundations of galaxies. Her branches bore light. Not fruits. Light. Living light. The figure stopped under the tree. Then He looked at Elias.

"There is one more truth you must understand." Elias nodded. He knew what truth that was. He had felt her approaching throughout his journey. Like a tide that inevitably reaches the shore. The Figure stretched out His hand. A text appeared in front of them. No book.

No stone. No screen. The words seemed written directly into reality. Older than history. Older than religions. Older than civilizations. Elias read: "Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness..." The words shone. Not as letters. As truth. Genesis 1:26. The words that millions of people had read. Discussed. Studied. Doubtful. Beloved. Now they stood before him. Alive. Really.

"What do they mean?" Elias asked softly. The Figure looked at the words. Then He replied, "What did you always think they meant?"

Elias thought.

"That people are like God." "How?" "Through consciousness." "Partly." "By reason." "Partly." "By freedom." "Partly." The Figure smiled.

"These are all shadows of the answer." The words hung between them. Shadows. Not the core. Not the heart. Then the Figure looked straight at him. And for the first time, Elias felt the full power of that gaze. Not power. Don't judge. Love. Infinite love. Then He spoke words that brought His entire journey together.

"Man was created in My image because I am love." The garden became silent. The stars seemed to listen.

Even time seemed to wait.

"What does that mean?" Elias whispered. The Figure replied: "What does love do?" Elias thought of Mei. To Lyra. To Sahana. To all the people he had met.

"Be present." "Yes." "Giving oneself." "Yes." "Seeking community." "Yes." His voice softened.

"To love another." The Figure smiled.

"Precisely." Then the garden started to change. People appeared everywhere. Not like ghosts. Not as memories. Actual persons.

Children. Parents. Friends. Lovers. People from all times. All cultures. All worlds. Everyone unique. Everyone else. Everyone free. Elias watched. And suddenly he saw something. The image of God was not

only in individual people. It was between them too. In relationships. In love. In community. In self-giving. In forgiveness. In faithfulness. The discovery made him tremble. Because now he finally understood why his loneliness had always affected him so deeply. Why he had never been satisfied with knowledge. Why science alone had not been enough.

Why all the answers ultimately remained empty.

He was created for fellowship. Because God is community. He was created for love. Because God is love. He was created for relationship. Because God's deepest reality is relationship. The Figure walked on. Elias followed. They came to a clear water. The surface reflected the sky. Then the Figure looked at the water.

"Why do you think humanity was created?" Elias wanted to answer. But the words didn't come immediately. Because he knew the answer was bigger than anything he had ever imagined. He remained silent for a long time. Then he spoke. Carefully. With awe.

"Not because You needed servants." "No." "Not because You needed worshippers." "No." "Not because you lacked anything."

"No." The Figure smiled. Waited. Then the truth came. The truth that his entire journey had revolved around.

"Humanity was created because love wanted to divide itself." The garden was radiant. The water sparkled. The heavens seemed to break open. But the Figure said nothing yet. So Elias continued. His voice broke.

"You wanted free persons." Tears filled his eyes.

"People who could actually answer." His breath caught.

"People who could love." Now the Figure smiled. Not triumphant. Not proud. Joyful. Like a father smiles when a child finally understands. Then Elias saw everything. Not completely.

No human could do that. But enough. He saw that the history of creation had never begun from power. But out of love. Not out of necessity. But out of abundance. Not out of want. But out of a desire to share. He saw that freedom was not a flaw in the system. But a necessary condition for love. He saw that the risk of rejection had been consciously accepted. Because love without freedom would no longer be love. He saw why the cross was central. Why the prophets had wept. Why the mystics had spoken of a God who seeks. Why the Creator had waited.

Century after century. Millennium after millennium. Because love waits for an answer. Free. Really. Personal. Then the Figure looked at him again.

"And now you understand why your desire was so deep."

Elias nodded. His tears flowed freely.

"Yes." "Why?" Now the answer came automatically. Not out of his mind. From his heart.

"Because my desire is an echo of Your love." The Figure placed His hand on his shoulder.

"Yes." "Because I was made in Your image." "Yes." "Because I was created for fellowship with You." The smile warmed. Deeper. Older than the stars.

"Yes." The truth filled him completely. Not as information. Like life. Like coming home. Like love. Then the garden slowly began to fade. Not because she disappeared.

But because there was one last step waiting. One final revelation. One final truth. The truth behind the first desire. The truth behind creation. The truth behind God's quest. And as the light grew around

them, Elias heard the Voice again. Soft. Hot. Lovingly.

“Now you understand why man was created.” Elias nodded.

"Yes." But deep in his soul he knew there was one question left. The oldest question. The first question. The question that existed before creation. Why did love long to divide itself in the first place? And somewhere beyond the garden a new reality began to emerge. A reality that led back to before Genesis. Before stars. Before time. To the heart of the eternal mystery itself.

CHAPTER 10 - BEFORE THE FIRST MORNING

THE SOURCE OF ALL LOVE

The garden did not disappear. She dissolved into light. As if Elias did not travel further to a new place, but descended deeper into the same reality. Deeper than stars. Deeper than creation. Deeper than time. Deeper even than Genesis. He felt that silence again. That old silence. The silence he had encountered before behind the Door of Origin. But now she was different.

Then she had seemed empty. Now she felt full. Full of presence. Full of life. Full of love. The Voice walked beside him. Not before him. Not behind him. Next to him. Like a friend. Like a father. Like someone who had never really been absent. Before them stretched a horizon without end. No heaven. No earth. No room. Only light. Living light. Warm light. Loving light. Elias looked at it. And suddenly he understood why words failed him here. Because everything he had ever learned about God had been too small. Not untrue. But too small.

God was not an object. No idea. No theory. No power. God was life. God was community. God was love.

"You have one more question." The Voice spoke softly. Elias nodded. He knew immediately which question was meant. The oldest question. The question behind all other questions.

"Why?" The Voice waited.

"Why did You create?" There was silence for a long time. Then a vision appeared. Not outside of him. In him. He saw again the reality before creation. But now completely different than before. Not as a lonely void. Not as an abandoned consciousness.

Not as a cosmic seclusion. Now he saw community. Eternal community. Eternal love. Eternal joy. He saw that God had never been lonely. Never. For love already lived in God. From eternity to eternity. Community already existed. Perfect. Inexhaustible. Unending. Elias felt awe. Because suddenly he understood something that surpassed all previous insights. God had not needed creation. Never. Creation did not fill a void. Creation did not heal any defect. Creation did not alleviate loneliness. God was already perfectly happy. Perfectly loving. Perfectly alive.

And that is precisely why creation existed.

"Then why?" Elias whispered. The answer came like light. Like music. As truth. Because love wants to give itself. The words filled reality. Not as an explanation. As a revelation. Suddenly Elias saw a spring. Unending. Alive. Inexhaustible. A source that was constantly overflowing. Not because she was broken. But because it was abundant. The water flowed. Not out of necessity. Out of joy. The Voice spoke again.

"What does light do?" "It shines." "What does beauty do?" "She reveals herself." "What does music do?"

"She sounds." "What does love do?" Tears appeared in Elias' eyes. Because he knew the answer. Now it is.

"She gives herself." The silence answered with peace. Suddenly Elias saw the entire history again. But different. Now he saw her from God's heart. The stars. The oceans. The worlds. The people. Every birth.

Every smile. Every friendship. Every forgiveness. Every act of love. Not as separate events. But as gifts. As possibilities. Like invitations. All creation was one great invitation to fellowship.

Not imposed. Not enforced. Offered. Free. Like love is always offered. And never claimed. Then he also saw the sadness. The wars. The betrayal. The rejection. The pain. The sin. The suffering. But even that didn't destroy love. Because love kept giving. Keep searching. Keep waiting. Keep hoping. Not because she had to. Because she was love. A scene before creation. No stars. No room.

No time. Only God. Not as an all-powerful ruler. But as a being that is love. Then the central insight arises: Love longs for another. Not out of want. But out of abundance. And then the first thought of creation sounds: Let there be someone. The Voice remained silent for a while. Then she spoke again.

"Now you understand Genesis."

The words appeared before them again.

"Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness." Genesis 1:26. But now Elias saw something he had never seen before. The word Us. Not lonely. Not isolated. Community. Relation. Eternal love. And from that love came the decision. Not: Let Us make servants. Not: Let Us be made subjects. Not: Let Us make worshipers. But: Let Us make people. Persons. Free persons. Beings who could answer. Beings who could love. Beings who could actually say "yes". The truth hit him like a wave of light.

Man was not an accident of the cosmos. No accidental outcome of matter. No experiment without a goal. Man was wanted. Wanted by love. Created for love. Invited to love. Then Elias finally began to understand the final puzzle. Why his entire journey had haunted him. Why he had never been satisfied. Why every truth had pushed him further. Why every world had finally spoken of community. His desire was not a mistake. No weakness. No shortage. It was an echo. An echo of the love in which he was created. An echo of God's invitation. An echo of Genesis itself.

He fell to his knees. Not out of fear. Not out of submission. Out of wonder. Out of gratitude.

Out of love. The Voice came closer. Not as sound. As a presence. Hot. Safe. Really. Then she spoke the words his entire journey had been waiting for.

"You thought you were looking for Me." Elias smiled through his tears.

"I was too." "Yes." The Voice became softer.

"But I had been looking for you for much longer." The words filled him with peace. A peace that went deeper than knowledge. Deeper than understanding. Deeper than answers. A peace of coming home. Slowly, reality around him began to change. Not because she ended. But because it was completed. The stars appeared again.

The worlds. The people. The history. The creation. Everything shone. Everything was alive. Everything was connected. Not by power. Not by necessity. But through love. Then Elias looked at the Source one more time. The Source of all life. The Source of all community. The Source of all love. And finally he understood. Creation began with love. History was carried by love. And her destiny was love. Not because love was one of God's attributes. But because love was God's essence. And out of the abundance of that love, God had created man. In His image.

In His likeness. So that free persons might know Him. would love him.

And would return His love. Then the first morning arrived. Not the first morning of the earth. Not the first morning of time. But the first morning in the heart of Elias. And for the first time since the beginning of his journey, he no longer felt lonely. Because he finally knew who he was. A human. Created in God's image. Beloved. Known. Wanted. And invited to respond to the love that was older than the stars.