

BOOK 4

THE OTHER BEYOND THE STARS

THE SONG YET TO BE SUNG

A new journey through God's eternal creation



BOOK 4

The Song Yet to Be Sung

The Other Beyond the Stars



GERARD FELLER

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Book 4 - The Other Beyond the Stars

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Cover and design: author with AI-supported image generation
Release: 2026

PROFESSIONAL ENGLISH EDITION • 2026

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CHAPTER 1

The Silence in the Great Song



The party had already started before Elias knew there was something to celebrate. Lights were on all over the First City. Not the small lamps he remembered from Earth. These lights seemed to be alive. They floated among the trees, moved along the walls and sometimes gathered above the streets in shapes reminiscent of flowers, birds or stars. Children ran after it laughing. The lights were captured. They rested for a moment in open hands. Then they took off again. No one tried to hold them.

Perhaps that was one of the things Elias had learned here: those who were not afraid of losing something could enjoy it much more intensely. Music sounded from the distance. Trumpets. String instruments. Voices. But also sounds for which Elias had no name. Some were clear as water. Others sounded deep and warm, as if mountains had learned to sing. The streets filled with people. Men and women from all centuries walked side by side. Elias recognized some items of clothing from the history books. Others seemed to come from peoples and times of which hardly anything had been preserved on earth.

Yet no one felt strange. Differences were not walls here. They were colors. Each person carried something of God's beauty that no one else could quite show.

“Where is everyone going?”

Elias turned around. Mei came to him. Her eyes shone and her dark hair sparkled with small golden flowers.

"That's just what I wanted to ask you," she said."

"That reassures me."

"Why?"

"Because I thought I was the only one who didn't know what was happening."

Mei smiled.

"Maybe that is your new calling."

"What?"

"Not knowing what's happening."

Elias looked at her seriously.

"I already had a lot of experience with that on earth."

She laughed. Together they walked with the crowd. The streets became wider. Houses and gardens made way for a large open square. In the center was a tree that Elias had seen before, but which now seemed changed. Or perhaps he simply saw something that had escaped him before. The trunk was broad and silvery white. The branches stretched over almost the entire square. Fruits in dozens of colors hung between the leaves. Some shone like amber. Others were deep red, bright blue or almost transparent. There were long tables under the tree. Bread. Fruits. Cups.

Dishes whose smell awakened memories of meals from his youth. Not the painful memories. Not the loss. Only the warmth that had been hidden within. Elias saw his father across the square. He was talking to a group of children. Arion lay next to him, the great silver head on his paws. As soon as the wolf saw Elias, his ears perked up.

"You're late," Arion said as Elias approached."

"I didn't know I was expected anywhere."

"That's usually why people are late."

"And wolves?"

“Wolves are never late.”

“Of course not.”

“We appear when the right moment comes to us.”

Mei knelt next to Arion and stroked his fur.

“That sounds very wise.”

“It is.”

“Or it's a fancy way of saying you can't read a clock.”

Arion looked at her silently. Then he put his head back on his paws.

“I've decided to forgive you for that comment.”

Elias' father put an arm around his shoulder.

“Good to have you here.”

“What are we celebrating?”

“No one knows exactly.”

“Arion probably.”

“Of course,” said the wolf without looking up.

“And?”

“The party.”

Elias waited. Arion said no more.

“That was very enlightening.”

“I'm a wolf, not an announcer.”

A wave of laughter swept across the square. Not because Arion had spoken harshly. Many probably couldn't have even heard him. The laughter came from somewhere else.

The Festival of Light

Children had started dancing. They formed circles and pulled adults along. Some tried to remain serious at first, but no one could keep it up for long. Musicians took their places under the large tree. A woman raised her hands. Immediately it became quiet. Not empty. Expectant. Elias recognized her. Miriam, Moses' sister. She carried a simple drum and her face radiated a youthful vigor that seemed older than the mountains. She hit the drum once. The sound went across the square. A second blow followed. Then a third. Other instruments joined in. Carefully at first.

Then it gets fuller. A melody emerged. Elias didn't know her, but she still touched memories that lay deeper than his own past. It was as if the music carried stories of liberation, homecoming and joy. More and more voices began to sing. Words from many languages □□sounded next to each other. No one had to translate them. Elias heard the uniqueness of each language and at the same time understood its meaning. Gratitude. Salvation. Joy. The faithfulness of God. The song grew.

It moved through the streets, over the walls and along the rivers. Birds added their calls. In the distance, waterfalls responded with deep chords. Even the leaves of the big tree moved to the rhythm. Elias closed his eyes. He felt the song go through his body. On earth, music had sometimes helped him feel something for which he had no words. Here music seemed to express more than just feelings. She revealed connections. Every voice was completely itself. Yet not a single voice fought to be heard. No one disappeared at all. No one dominated it.

Unity here was not a loss of individuality. It was individuality that had found her home. The melody rose. Higher. Brighter. Until Elias thought she couldn't get any more beautiful. Then he heard it. A silence. In the middle of the song. At first he thought a musician had missed a beat. But it wasn't a mistake. The music continued. Thousands of voices sang. The instruments filled the square. And yet there was an empty space somewhere. A sound that was missing. A tone that didn't exist yet. Elias opened his eyes.

The people around him continued to sing. No one seemed alarmed. Mei stood next to him with her face lifted to the light. His father sang with a smile that Elias knew from his childhood. Only Arion looked at him. The silver wolf had raised its head.

“You hear it too,” Elias whispered.”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

Arion looked at the big tree.

“Silence.”

“I hear that.”

“Then why do you ask?”

“Arion.”

The wolf stood up. His attitude had changed. Not tense. Alert.

“Not every silence means something is gone,” he said.”

Elias listened again. The empty space was not between two notes. She moved. Sometimes she seemed close. Then far away again. She hid beneath the voices, slipped between the instruments and reappeared at the edge of the song. It was as if someone was listening without singing along. Or as if something was waiting. Elias looked around. On the other side of the square stood Jesus. He didn't sing. He looked at Elias. Between all the people, colors and movements, their eyes met. Jesus smiled. Then He turned and walked out of the square. Elias only hesitated for a moment.

“I think I have to go somewhere.”

Mei opened her eyes.

“Now?”

“Yes.”

She followed his gaze, but Jesus had already disappeared among the people.

“Go ahead,” she said.”

“Don't you want to know where to go?”

“You don't know that either.”

“No.”

“Then we can talk about that together later.”

Elias smiled. He pushed his way through the celebrating crowd. Arion walked next to him.

“Are you coming?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“I just happen to be walking in the same direction.”

“Naturally.”

At the edge of the square, Elias caught a glimpse of Jesus' cloak. He quickened his pace. They left the wide streets and entered a quieter part of the city. Here were small gardens between low houses. Water flowed through narrow channels along the path. The music remained audible. But softer. The strange silence remained as well. Jesus walked ahead of them without turning around. Elias tried to overtake Him, but the distance remained the same. Not big. Only a few tens of meters. Yet he was unable to get any closer.

“Why doesn't He wait?” Elias asked.”

“Maybe He will wait,” said Arion.”

“It doesn't look like that.”

“You still think that waiting is the same as standing still.”

Elias looked to the side.

“Since when do you speak in riddles?”

“Ever since people started finding simple answers too boring.”

The path went up. The city stayed behind them. They reached fields where blue flowers grew among the tall grass. Every flower turned towards them for a moment as they passed. Ahead of them lay a ridge. Jesus reached the top. There He stood. When Elias came to Him, the song of the city was but a distant stream of sounds. The landscape stretched in all directions. Mountains. Forests. Rivers. In the distance the Sea of □□Stars shone, along which the light sailors left for other worlds. But Jesus did not look at the familiar landscapes. He looked at a narrow strip on the horizon.

Elias followed His gaze. At first he saw nothing out of the ordinary. Then he noticed that there was no color there. No darkness. No light. No emptiness. It was an area for which his eyes seemed to have no capacity yet.

“That's where the silence comes from,” Elias said.”

Jesus nodded.

“What's there?”

“What do you hear?”

Elias listened. The music of the party reached the hill. Every chord was perfect. Except for that one open space.

“It sounds like something is missing.”

“Listen again.”

Elias closed his eyes. He didn't try to look. Not to explain. Only to receive. Slowly his perception changed. The silence no longer felt like absence. She carried expectations. Just as an empty canvas did not mourn because there was no painting on it yet. As a garden was not afraid of the seed that had not yet germinated. Like the breath just before the first word. Elias opened his eyes.

“It's not missing,” he said. “It's waiting.”

Jesus smiled.

“Yes.”

“For what?”

“To an answer.”

“From whom?”

Jesus looked at him. Elias immediately felt that he already knew the answer.

“From us?”

“Not from you alone.”

“Of course not.”

Footsteps sounded behind them. Mei came up the hill. Elias' father walked next to her. Behind them followed four more people that Elias only vaguely recognized. A young woman carried a roll of drawings under her arm. A dark man had a small stringed instrument on his back. An older woman walked next to him with dirt on her hands. The last was a boy who looked no older than twelve. On his shoulder sat a white bird with four golden feathers in its tail. Arion sat down.

“I knew I was walking in the same direction.”

Elias looked at Mei.

“I thought you were staying at the party.”

“Me, too.”

“What changed?”

“The song.”

“You heard the silence?”

Mei nodded.

“Not until after you left.”

Jesus looked at the group. In His eyes was the same joy that Elias had seen when they stood on the mountain at the end of their previous journey. But also something else. A secret that was not hidden, but invited to be discovered.

“You all heard something,” Jesus said.”

The woman with the drawings nodded.

“I saw a line that didn't connect to anything.”

The Call from the Horizon

The musician said, “I heard a peace that lasted longer than the beat allowed.” The older woman looked down at her hands.

“I felt ground that had never been touched.”

The boy stroked the feathers of his bird.

“I dreamed of an animal without a name.”

Mei looked at the colorless horizon.

“I felt someone was waiting for us.”

Elias looked at her.

“Someone?”

“I don't know,” she said. “Maybe it wasn't a person. But it didn't feel empty.”

Jesus turned to Elias.

“During your last trip you wanted to discover what lay beyond the horizon.”

Elias nodded.

“Now you'll have to learn something else.”

“What?”

“How to Listen to a Horizon Before Crossing It.”

The air above the colorless strip began to move. Not like wind. Not as light. More like a thought trying to take shape. A line slowly appeared. Thin and silvery. She walked from the distance through the landscape to the place where they stood. At their feet the line ended in a small sign. A circle.

Seven points within that. Elias counted the people. Himself. Mei. His father. The draftsman. The musician. The gardener. The boy. Seven.

“And Arion?” he asked.

The wolf snorted.

“I don't need a point.”

Jesus laughed. Then He stretched out His hand. Something that looked like a map appeared above His open hand. It was made of light, but contained no countries, roads or names. Just one silver lining. She started where they stood. And walked towards the horizon. There she ended abruptly.

“Is that all?” Elias asked.

“For now.”

“What lies at the end?”

“That's not on the map yet.”

“Because no one discovered it?”

Jesus looked again at the distant, colorless area.

“Because it hasn't yet become what it will be.”

Elias was silent. The words filled him with awe. Not because he fully understood them. Precisely because he didn't.

“Should we make it?”

“No,” Jesus replied. “Life never begins with you.”

Elias looked at the seven points.

“But we do have a task there.”

“Yes.”

“Which one?”

Jesus closed His hand. The light map did not disappear. She descended slowly and rested in the air before Elias.

“Receive what I give there,” He said. “And bring with you what I have put in each of you.”

The older woman looked at the horizon.

“Will there be a garden there?”

“Maybe.”

The musician smiled.

“A song?”

“Maybe.”

The woman with the drawings held her scroll tighter.

“A city?”

“Maybe.”

The boy asked, “Animals?” Jesus looked at the white bird on his shoulder.

“That wouldn't surprise me.”

Finally He looked at Elias.

“But none of that will show up when you try to give alone.”

“Then what should we do?”

“First learn to receive.”

“From You?”

“From Me. From creation. And from each other.”

Elias thought of the great song in the square. Thousands of voices. Perfectly different. Perfectly connected. And in the middle of it, the silence that no one individual could fill.

“When are we leaving?”

Jesus looked at the group.

“You already left.”

Behind them the music of the party sounded once more. All voices together reached one clear agreement. Then the song stopped. Not because it was over. All creation seemed to hold its breath. The horizon opened up for them. And from the colorless land sounded a single note. Fragile. Bright. New. The first beginning of a song that had never been sung.

CHAPTER 2

The Map Without Lines



The tone hung in the air. Not loud. Not overwhelming. Yet everything seemed to listen to it. The grass stopped moving. The blue flowers stood still. Even the white bird on the boy's shoulder tilted its head, as if trying to recognize a voice coming from far away. Elias looked at the horizon. The colorless strip was gone. There was now an opening in the same place. No gate. No door. More like a space between two thoughts. Behind it Elias saw no landscape. Just a soft glow in which something occasionally appeared and immediately disappeared again. A ridge.

A river. A city. Wings. Or perhaps they were just possibilities that had not yet taken shape. The light card floated before him. The silver line ran from the hill to the opening. But when Elias looked closer, he saw that the line was not actually on the map. It only came into being just before he looked at it. As soon as his gaze moved further, the part behind him disappeared again.

“That's not a particularly reliable map,” he said.”

The woman with the drawings came to stand next to him.

“Maybe it's not the map.”

“Then what?”

“To the traveler.”

Elias looked at her. She was tall and wore a bright blue cloak. Under her arm she held a scroll so thick it must have contained dozens of drawings.

“I'm Elias.”

“I know.”

“Naturally.”

She smiled and held out her hand.

“Liora.”

Elias shook her hand.

“Are you a mapmaker?”

“Architect.”

“Of buildings?”

“Sometimes.”

“More of what?”

“Of spaces in which community becomes possible.”

Elias thought about that.

“That sounds more complicated than buildings.”

“It is.”

Liora nodded at the light card.

“A regular map shows what already exists. This map seems to respond to what is happening between us.”

“What do you mean?”

“When you looked at the line alone, it was narrow and restless. When I came next to you, it became clearer.”

Elias looked again. She was right. The silver lining had widened. Not much. But clearly visible.

“Maybe because you are an architect.”

“Or because we watch together.”

The musician came to stand on their other side. He had taken his instrument off his back. It looked like a cross between a lute and a harp, with strings that changed color when he touched them.

“And what happens when three people are watching?” he asked.”

The line immediately brightened. He laughed.

“That's what I thought.”

“What's your name?” Elias asked.”

“Samir.”

“Are you a musician?”

“If I listen carefully, yes.”

“And when you don't listen well?”

“Then I am someone with an instrument.”

Mei joined us.

“This will be an interesting journey.”

Elias looked at the other members of the group. His father stood with the older woman. They knelt together in the grass and examined the place where the silver line touched the ground. The boy sat next to Arion. He whispered something to the white bird. Arion pretended not to listen, but his ears were turned towards them. Jesus was standing some distance away. He said nothing.

“Why doesn't He just introduce us to each other?” Elias asked.”

What Arises Between Us

Samir stroked a string with one finger.

“Maybe because names mean more when they are received than when they are announced.”

The string emitted a warm, low tone. A second line appeared on the map. This did not extend to the horizon, but connected the seven points in the

circle. Some connections were clear. Others barely visible. There was a strong golden line between Elias and Mei. There was also a permanent connection between Elias and his father. But between the people who did not yet know each other, thin threads of light vibrated.

“The map doesn't just show us where to go,” Mei said.”

“But also how we travel,” Liora replied.”

Samir shook his head.

“Even more.”

He played two notes. At first hearing they didn't match. One was bright and rising. The other dark and descending. Samir sounded them again. This time Elias did not listen to the individual notes, but to the space between them. Something new appeared there. A third sound that was not produced by any string individually. The lines on the map started moving.

“The map shows what could happen between us,” Samir said.”

Jesus looked at him and smiled. Elias understood that they were getting closer to the truth. He walked over to his father and the older woman.

“Did you find anything?”

His father pointed to the ground. A small plant grew where the light line touched the grass. She had seven leaves, each a different color.

“It wasn't here just now,” Elias said.”

“That's right,” the woman replied.”

She held her hand just above the plant without touching it.

“He's not ready yet.”

“Is there something wrong with it?”

“No.”

“Then why isn't he ready?”

She looked at Elias. Her face was veined with fine lines that spoke not of old age, but of a long life in which much had been seen, worn and loved.

“You still think that perfection means that nothing more can grow.”

Elias sat down next to her.

“That's what I thought indeed.”

“On Earth, things often grew because there was a lack. A child had to learn because he knew little. A wound had to be repaired because something was damaged. A plant had to grow because it was still small and vulnerable.”

She pointed to the seven leaves.

“But growth can also come from abundance.”

“Growth without shortage?”

“Yes. Not becoming what you should have been, but continuing to unfold what God has placed in you.”

“What's your name?”

“Nahla.”

“Are you a gardener?”

She smiled.

“I learn from gardens.”

The plant opened a small bud. A scent spread over the hill. Elias recognized honey, rain and freshly turned earth. But underneath there was something else. A memory. He saw himself as a child in his father's garden. His hands were dirty. In front of him was a row of seeds that he had planted far too close together. His father had stood behind him. Not angry. Not impatient. He had taken Elias' hands and taught him how much space each seed needed. Elias looked to the side. His father had apparently received the memory as well. Their eyes met.

“I forgot,” Elias said.

“I don't,” his father replied.

“Why did we plant carrots then? I didn't even like them.”

“You wanted to know if you could get food from the ground.”

“And?”

“You ate one.”

“Was it tasty?”

“You said you did.”

“But?”

“You never asked for carrots again after that.”

Nahla laughed. The plant opened completely. There was a small point of light in the heart of the flower. The connection between Elias, his father and Nahla became clear on the map.

“Memories are different here,” Elias said.”

“What do you mean?” Mei asked.”

“On Earth I looked at the past as if it had disappeared. Here it feels as if everything touched by love is still alive.”

His father put a hand on his shoulder.

“Perhaps nothing truly given to God has ever been lost.”

Elias looked at Jesus.

“Is that so?”

Jesus came closer.

“No good thing is forgotten in My kingdom.”

“And the evil?”

The others fell silent. Not out of fear. The question carried no threat, but it did carry weight. Jesus looked at the little plant.

“Evil cannot last forever,” He said. “But whatever was loved, carried, healed and entrusted to Me despite evil, bears fruit.”

Nahla let some dirt slide through her fingers.

“Even scars can become soil in which something new grows.”

Elias thought of the wounds in Jesus' hands. The victory had not denied the past. She had delivered it. The boy came towards them. The white bird was still perched on his shoulder.

“He won't tell me his name,” said the boy.”

“The bird?” Elias asked.”

“No, Arion.”

A deep sigh came from the grass.

“You didn't ask.”

“But everyone already knows you.”

“That's something else.”

The boy looked at Elias.

“My name is Joel.”

“And your bird?”

“I don't know yet.”

“Did you just meet him?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

Joël pointed to the open horizon.

“There.”

Elias looked at the bird.

“But we haven't been there yet.”

“Me neither.”

“Then how can he get from there?”

“That's what I try to ask him.”

The bird opened its wings. The four golden tail feathers glittered. Then he let out a short shout. Samir turned around abruptly.

“Do that again.”

The bird looked at him.

“Please,” Samir added.”

The bird sang again. Four notes. Samir repeated them on his instrument. The bird answered. This time with five tones. Samir also played the fifth. The animal jumped from Joel's shoulder and flew to the light card. Without touching the map it continued to float above it. The seven points moved. The lines between them formed a pattern. Liora hurriedly rolled out her drawings on the floor. Most showed buildings, gardens and squares that Elias had never seen before. Only one sheet was empty. The pattern of the map slowly appeared on the blank paper. Liora held her breath.

“I didn't sign this.”

“What is it?” Elias asked.”

“Don't know.”

She turned the sheet. The pattern resembled a flower. Or a city seen from above. Or a musical sign. When Joel held his hand over it, it turned into the outline of an animal. When Nahla touched it, roots appeared. With Samir it became an agreement. With Mei it looked like two hands almost touching. Elias placed his hand on the paper last. A door appeared. Not closed. Also not opened. A door that had yet to decide what opening meant.

“The map has no lines,” Liora said softly.”

Elias looked at the drawing.

“But we see lines, right?”

“Those are not roads.”

“What then?”

“Relationships.”

Jesus nodded.

“A road tells you how to get from one place to another,” He said. “But what lies ahead cannot be achieved by distance.”

“How so?” Joel asked.

“Through connection.”

Arion got to his feet.

“That will be difficult.”

Mei looked at him.

“Why?”

“Because when traveling, people always want to know first who is in charge.”

Everyone looked at Elias almost simultaneously. He felt something he hadn't felt in a long time. Shyness. Not the painful shyness of the past, in which he was afraid of not being good enough. This was easier. He honestly didn't know why everyone was looking at him.

“Why me?”

The Map Is Carried

His father smiled.

“Because you carry the map.”

Elias pointed to Liora.

“She understands her better.”

“Maybe,” said Liora. “But the map came to you.”

“Samir heard how she works.”

“Some of it,” the musician said.

“Nahla made her produce something.”

The gardener shook her head.

“The plant grew because of the memory between you and your father.”

Elias looked at Mei.

“Please tell me you have a better reason why I shouldn't take charge.”

“I don't think you should take charge.”

“Thank you.”

“I think you have to learn to receive guidance.”

That sounded considerably less reassuring.

“What does that mean?”

Mei looked at Jesus.

“He'll probably have to find that out along the way.”

Jesus did not answer. But His smile was enough. Elias took the map. The light felt warm in his hands. The seven points again formed a circle. The lines between them kept moving.

“Good,” he said. “If I have to receive guidance, where do we start?”

No one answered. He looked at Jesus. He too was silent. Elias looked at the map. No road. No clue. No direction. Only seven points. Then he understood. He had grabbed the map as if it were his. As if the others had to follow where he carried her. He slowly lowered her.

“Would you like to hold her together?”

The others gathered around him. Everyone placed one hand under the map. The moment the seventh hand touched the light, a soft tremor passed through the hill. The silver line to the horizon appeared again. This time wide enough to walk over. A path of light formed before them. The white bird shot forward. Arion followed.

“Wait,” said Elias. “Shouldn't we make preparations?”

The wolf looked over his shoulder.

“What do you want to prepare for?”

“On what is there.”

“You don't know what's there.”

“Precisely.”

“Then preparation becomes difficult.”

Samir hung his instrument on his back.

“Nahla has seeds.”

Liora lifted her drawings.

“I have designs.”

Joel pointed to the bird.

“I have it.”

Mei grabbed Elias's free hand.

“And we have each other.”

Elias looked at his father.

“Are you coming too?”

“Part of the road.”

“Why only part?”

“Because this is not my assignment.”

The words brought unexpected sadness to Elias. Not the old sadness of loss. Rather, the realization that even in eternity, love did not mean that everyone always followed the same path. His father saw it.

“We don't have to hold each other and never lose each other again,” he said.

Elias nodded slowly. That was freedom. No distance could separate here what was connected in love. He looked at Jesus.

“And you?”

“I’ll go ahead of you.”

“Will I be able to see you?”

“Not always.”

“Why not?”

“Because you must also learn to recognize Me when you are not looking at My face.”

“What about then?”

Jesus looked at the people carrying the map together.

“To what My love does between you.”

Then He took the first step on the path of light. The horizon opened further. On the other side appeared a sky without stars. A plain without form. A sea without water. And deep in that nameless distance, one clear tone waited. No longer alone. A second tone now sounded below her. Then a third. Seven notes. Seven voices calling them. Elias took a deep breath. Together they took their first step on the map without lines.

CHAPTER 3

The Seven Travelling Companions



The first step felt like the last step on solid ground. Elias set his foot on the path of light and expected resistance. Something sturdy. A surface that would support his weight. But the light didn't feel like stone. Not even like wood or earth. It felt like consent. As if the path carried him not because it was strong enough, but because it welcomed him. Next to him, Mei held his hand. She supported the map with her other hand. The five other traveling companions stood around them. Each person touched a different part of the light. As long as they moved together, the path remained visible.

As Elias quickened his pace, the light beneath his feet began to fade.

“Wait,” said Liora.”

Everyone stood still. The silver lining immediately became bright again. Elias looked down.

“The map doesn't want me to be ahead.”

“Or not that you are alone in the lead,” said Mei.”

“That's almost the same.”

“No,” his father replied. “That difference is probably exactly what you need to learn here.”

Jesus walked ahead of them. He didn't seem to have the problem. The light appeared under His feet without Him touching the map. Arion also walked ahead of the group.

"Why doesn't the path disappear under him?" Elias asked."

"Because I don't try to take charge," said the wolf."

"You are literally at the forefront."

"I walk where my legs take me."

"That sounds suspiciously like leading the way."

"Only for someone who makes a ranking of every position."

Samir laughed. Elias decided not to answer. They walked on. With every step the familiar world behind them became less clear. The hill faded away. The First City became a gleam on the horizon. The music from the party still sounded like a distant memory. Then that too disappeared. Not abruptly. The last sounds floated around them, slowly blending into the seven notes that came from the nameless distance. Each tone had its own character.

Elias heard a warm, low sound that reminded him of his father's voice. In addition, a light tone sounded that moved like Mei's laugh. A third had the clarity of glass. A fourth was dark as fertile earth. He couldn't identify the other notes yet.

"They belong to us," Samir said."

"The notes?" Joel asked."

Samir nodded.

"Not as if each person is one fixed note. It's not that simple. But the song responds to our presence."

He gently plucked a string. The tone that arose was answered by the distance. Samir's face lit up.

"There is something there that listens."

"Or someone," said Mei."

Joel looked at the white bird. It was still flying above the path and seemed to know exactly where they were going.

“He knows,” said the boy.”

“Ask him,” Elias suggested.”

“I always do that.”

“And what does he say?”

“That I use too many words.”

Arion looked approvingly at the bird.

“A sensible animal.”

The landscape around them changed. Insofar as it could be called a landscape. There was no heaven above them and no ground beneath the path of light. Yet they felt no emptiness. There were shapes everywhere that were not yet fully visible. When Elias looked to his left, he thought he saw an ocean. Waves rose, but before they could break they turned into hills. Behind those hills a forest briefly emerged, after which the trees dissolved into long bands of color. Thousands of points of light appeared on the right. Some grouped themselves into constellations. Others moved like living beings.

Nothing lasted long enough to receive a name.

“Is this an unfinished creation?” Elias asked.”

Nahla looked around.

“Unfinished sounds like something is missing.”

“But there is no fixed form yet.”

“A seed does not yet have the shape of a tree.”

“Is a seed perfect?”

“As a seed, yes.”

Elias looked again at the changing shapes.

“So this realm is no less real than the worlds we already know?”

Listening to Each Other

“No. It's just in a different mode of reality.”

“A possibility?”

“A promise,” Nahla said.”

At that word, a small green shoot appeared next to the path. Everyone stood still. The shoot grew without soil. Roots of soft golden light spread through the space. Two leaves opened. Nahla reached out her hand, but did not touch the plant.

“A promise,” she repeated.”

The shoot became firmer. A button appeared. Elias looked at the map. A green connection glowed between Nahla's tip and the silver line.

“The country doesn't just listen to our voices,” Mei said. “It also listens to the meaning of our words.”

“Then we must speak carefully,” said Liora.”

Samir shook his head.

“Not careful.”

“What then?”

“Truly.”

They looked at Jesus. He was further away than before. His figure was still visible, but the light around Him began to merge with the glow of the surroundings.

“He disappears,” said Joel.”

Elias felt the urge to walk faster. Immediately the path weakened. Mei squeezed his hand.

“Don't run forward.”

“But soon we will lose Him.”

“That's not possible.”

“I can hardly see Him now.”

“That's something else.”

Jesus reached an exaltation that had not existed a moment before. He turned around. Even at a great distance, Elias could see His eyes. Then He spoke. Not loud. Yet everyone heard Him.

“Tell each other who you are.”

Elias waited for more. But Jesus turned around again and continued.

“That's all?” he asked.”

“It seems like a clear assignment to me,” said Mei.”

“We hardly know each other and we find ourselves in a world without form. I had hoped for something practical.”

Liora raised one eyebrow.

“For a journey without roads, knowing who is going with you is quite practical.”

The path of light widened to form a circular place. What looked like a low table appeared in the center. The map rose from their hands and floated above the table. The seven points again formed a circle. One by one the travelers sat down. Arion chose a place between Elias and Joel. The white bird landed on the table and began to groom its feathers. Elias looked at the others.

“Who wants to start?”

Nobody spoke. Not because they didn't want to say anything. Elias felt that they were all listening. Not only to each other, but also to the space around them. His father broke the silence.

“My name is David.”

Elias looked up in surprise. Of course he knew his father's name. Yet it felt different to hear him say it here. On earth he had almost always been daddy to Elias. A familiar presence. Someone who had taught him how to cycle, garden and pray. Someone who had become ill. Someone he had lost. But David was more than the role he played in Elias' life.

"I grew up in a small town," he continued. "My father was a carpenter. My mother loved music, although almost everyone said she couldn't sing."

Samir smiled.

"I think so," said David. "And that was ultimately what counted."

He talked about his childhood. About his father's workshop. About the smell of sawdust. About his first job. About the woman he married and the child they had conceived after a long wait. He looked at Elias.

"That was you."

On the map, David's point began to radiate warm gold. But David also spoke about his mistakes. Not with shame. Not as if the mistakes still had power over him. He talked about it as someone might talk about a dangerous river he had once crossed. The water no longer flowed around him, but what he had learned there remained.

"I thought for a long time that being strong meant not showing my worries," he said. "As a result, I sometimes left people I loved outside."

Elias felt an old memory. His father at the kitchen table. Quiet. Tired. Elias had known something was wrong, but not what. Every question was answered with: "There is nothing." At the time, that sentence had felt like a closed door. David looked at him.

"I'm sorry."

The words bore no debt that needed to be repaid. That guilt had been borne, confessed and forgiven. Still, the recognition did something. The memory did not change. But the door in it opened. Elias now saw not only his father's distance. He also saw the fear behind it. The love that had not known how to express itself.

“Thank you,” said Elias.”

A wider line appeared between their two points. Trees grew around the round place. Still small. But really. Their trunks were the color of the wood of David's youth. A soft, slightly impure melody sounded in the leaves. David started laughing.

“My mother.”

Samir listened attentively.

“She sings beautifully.”

“She thought so too.”

Then Liora spoke.

“I was born in a city that no longer exists.”

Above her hands appeared the image of high walls, narrow streets and houses around sheltered courtyards. She talked about a people who had almost disappeared from history due to wars. About buildings that had been destroyed. About drawings she made in the sand as a child, because paper was too expensive.

“On Earth, I wanted to design places where people could feel safe,” she said. “But I discovered that walls could become both protection and imprisonment.”

Lines and arcs formed around her point.

“What did you build?” Joel asked.”

“Schools. Houses. A hospital. Later also a church.”

“Was that your most beautiful building?”

Liora thought.

“No.”

“Then what?”

“A bench.”

Joel looked surprised.

“A bench?”

“It stood between two apartment buildings where families lived who had not spoken to each other for years. An old woman asked me to make a place where she could sit in the evening sun. I built a simple bench.”

“And then?”

“At first she sat there alone. Then a child came to sit next to her. Later the mother of the child. After a few weeks, people brought food. Ultimately, two families celebrated a birthday there together.”

On the map, the lines around Liora's point turned into an open circle.

“It wasn't a special bench,” she said. “But it made meeting possible. Since then I know that a space is only successful when love can move there more easily.”

A bench was created next to the round place. Simple. Made of light-colored wood. Nobody sat on it. Still, it felt like it was waiting for someone. Samir then talked. He came from a coastal town where calls to prayer, market noises, church bells and music had mingled together. As a child he had learned that people often looked at the same sky while not understanding each other on the street.

“I wanted to make music that no one had to defend,” he said. “A song where people forgot for a moment which group they belonged to.”

“Did that work?” Mei asked.”

“Sometimes.”

“And the other times?”

“Then they argued about who could own the song.”

He smiled without bitterness.

“I learned that music can open hearts, but it cannot force them inside.”

He played a chord. The trees answered. Liora's bench took on a deeper color. Nahla's plant opened a second flower. The seven distant notes came

closer. Then Nahla spoke. She talked about fields, drought and seasons of plenty. About hands that knew when rain would fall before the clouds appeared. About a daughter who had died young and a garden that she had not been able to enter for years. Elias no longer saw pain in her eyes. Well depth.

“Those who have known sorrow,” said Nahla, “can make two mistakes. You can believe that nothing should ever grow again because you have lost. Or you can plant something new so quickly that you leave no room for what you are missing.”

“What did you do?” Joel asked.”

“Both.”

“And later?”

“I later learned that grief is not an enemy of fertility. Some tears are water for a ground that would otherwise remain hard.”

Where her hand touched the map, a small current formed. The water ran from her point to the center of the circle. Joel was next in line. He looked at the others and drew up his knees.

“I don't have much to say.”

“You have a whole life to tell,” David said.”

“My life was not long.”

“That's not the same as small.”

Joel looked at the white bird.

“I was often sick,” he began. “As a result, I couldn't always participate with other children. I looked out the window a lot.”

He told me about birds that came to sit on the windowsill. About the names he gave them. About his belief that animals understood much more than adults thought.

“People said I should grow up to be a biologist.”

“Did you want that?” Elias asked.”

“Maybe. I especially wanted to know how animals experience the world.”

He looked at Arion.

“That’s why I like it here so much. I don’t just have to learn about them. I can ask them.”

“And yet you still ask too many questions,” Arion said.”

Joel smiled. On the map the shape of a wing appeared above its point. Then came Mei. She didn’t talk about what she had done first. She talked about what she had been looking for.

Names Around the Map

“My whole life I wanted to completely belong somewhere,” she said.

“With people. In a community. With God. But every time I thought I was home, I became afraid that I would lose it again.”

Elias looked at her. He knew parts of her story. Not everything. He realized that now. Love did not mean that a person no longer had hidden rooms. Love meant that there was no room in which the other should never be welcome.

“I tried to become indispensable at times,” Mei continued. “I thought people wouldn’t leave me when they needed me.”

“Did that work?” Joel asked.”

“For a while. But being needed isn’t the same as being loved.”

Her point on the map began to glow a soft blue.

“I had to learn to receive without first proving my worth.”

She looked at Elias.

“I’m still learning that.”

Elias wanted to say that she had nothing to fear here anymore. But he held back. Maybe her story didn’t require a solution. Maybe it just asked to be received. He placed his hand over hers. The blue glow grew brighter. Then everyone looked at Elias. He breathed.

“I'm Elias.”

Arion sighed.

“We already knew that.”

“Thank you.”

Elias thought about his quest. To the stars. To his questions. Of the longing for the Other that had driven him through darkness and loss. He thought about his arrival in the Land Behind the Morning. At the Throne. To the King's wounds. Of the worlds he had visited.

“For a long time I thought I was looking for answers,” he said. “But actually I was looking for Someone.”

The map went silent. Even the seven notes were silent.

“When I found Him, I thought my search was over. Then I discovered that being found was just the beginning.”

He looked at Jesus. But the place where Christ had stood was empty. Elias felt no fear. Well, a loss. A pure loss that did not arise from abandonment, but from love.

“I want to follow Him,” he said. “I just try too often to understand where I'm going before I'm prepared to take the next step.”

His point on the map began to shine. The six other points replied. All connections became visible. Seven lives. Seven stories. Seven ways in which God's love had found, shaped and taken a person. The circular resting place trembled. The trees shot up. The stream of Nahla became a river. Liora's bench was placed under an arch of flowering branches. Samir's melody spread through the leaves. Birds that had never flown on earth circled above Joel. A house appeared in front of Mei. The door was open. A workshop full of uncomfortable wood was created for David.

And before Elias the door without a wall appeared again. This time it opened. Behind it stood Jesus. Not far away. Not disappeared. He had been waiting on the other side the whole time.

“Now you know each other's names,” He said.”

Elias looked at the world that had formed around them.

“Our names made this?”

“No.”

“Our stories?”

“Neither.”

“What then?”

Jesus stepped through the doorway.

“The love with which you gave them to each other.”

Behind Him a new landscape appeared. In the distance lay a valley, surrounded by high, colorless mountains. In the middle of the valley was a dark shape. No harm. No danger. But something old. Something that waited. The white bird flew through the door. Joel jumped up and ran after him.

“Guard!” Elias shouted.

Joel remained standing on the other side.

“He's going to the valley!”

Arion walked calmly through the opening.

“Then it looks like we're going to the valley too.”

The other travelers stood up. The map changed. The seven points disappeared. A single word appeared on the luminous surface: NAME. Elias looked at the dark shape in the distance.

“Should we give her a name?”

Jesus did not answer immediately. Then He said:

“First you have to find out if she already has a name.”

The seven traveling companions went through the door together. The resting place remained behind them. No longer as a possibility. But as their first shared memory in a world that was beginning to awaken.

CHAPTER 4

The Valley That Longed for a Name



The air on the other side of the door was still. Not dead quiet. Not threatening. The silence was like that of a room where someone had just woken up, but had not yet opened their eyes. Before them lay the valley. The mountains around it were high and smooth. They had no snow, vegetation or sharp rock walls. Their surface was almost colorless. Only where the light brushed the slopes did faint shades of blue, violet and gold appear. There was no path down.

Yet the white bird was already halfway up the slope. He flew in wide circles above the valley. Every now and then he sounded the four notes that Samir had played earlier. Joel stood at the edge.

“He is calling us.”

“Or he warns us,” said Liora.”

Arion snorted.

“He's not afraid.”

“How do you know that?”

“Animals hide fear differently than humans.”

“Do animals hide their fear?”

“Not for themselves.”

Elias looked at the dark shape in the center of the valley. From a distance, it looked like a huge stone. But every time he took his eyes away and looked again, her shape had changed. Sometimes he saw a house without windows. Then a sleeping animal. A moment later it looked like a closed flower. The map still had that one word: NAME.

“Maybe we should just get started,” Elias said.”

“With what?” Mei asked.”

“With descending.”

He put one foot over the edge. A step appeared under his shoe. A second one appeared as soon as he put his weight forward.

“That's handy.”

Elias descended a few steps. Then he looked back. The steps were gone.

“That is less convenient.”

Liora knelt at the edge and studied the place where the first step had become visible.

“Try again.”

Elias put his foot down. The step appeared again.

“Stand still,” said Liora.”

She walked around him, looked at the angle of his body, then looked at the map.

“The descent responds to your intention.”

“I plan to go down.”

“The valley apparently knows that. But it doesn't know yet whether you also plan to bring someone back with you.”

Elias looked at her.

“How can a staircase know that?”

“How can a song know that someone isn't singing along?”

Samir touched a chord. The tone rolled down the mountainside and came back fainter.

“She’s right,” he said.”

“You hear the meaning of a staircase?”

“I hear that the valley receives your step, but does not yet respond.”

Elias walked back upstairs.

“What do you propose?”

Liora pointed to the group.

“Not one after the other.”

“Next to each other?”

“Not exactly.”

She rolled out one of her drawings. The sheet was blank at first, but as they looked at it, seven thin lines appeared. The lines were not parallel. They moved towards each other, crossed each other and then parted again. Together they formed something that looked like a braided cord.

“A staircase of relationships,” said Mei.”

“A descent of attention,” Liora corrected.”

“What’s the difference?”

“A relationship can exist when no one is really paying attention.”

Elias thought back to the earth. Conversations in which people waited until the other person had finished so that they could speak themselves. Of prayers in which he addressed words to God without expecting God to answer. Closeness without meeting.

“So we have to look out for each other while descending?”

“Not just making sure no one falls,” Liora said. “We must see how each of us receives the way.”

Nahla was the first to stand at the edge. She placed her hand on the colorless mountainside. Where her fingers touched the stone, a soft green hue appeared.

“The mountain is not barren,” she said.”

“Nothing is growing,” Joël noted.”

“Not yet.”

She took a step. No stone steps appeared beneath her feet, but a plane of densely interwoven roots. David followed. A sturdy wooden step formed near him. Waves formed beneath Samir's feet and solidified as he put his weight on them. Liora walked across narrow arcs of light. Joel's steps resembled the prints of large animal paws. Below Mei, flat stones appeared with two lines meeting each other in each stone. Elias went last. His first step became visible. There was a small crack in it. He stopped.

“Is something wrong?” his father asked.”

“Don't know.”

He took a second step. This step was also broken. The parts didn't fall apart, but neither did they fit together completely. Elias looked at Jesus. Christ still stood at the top of the valley.

“Aren't you coming?”

“I am with you.”

“But you remain standing there.”

“You are confusing My place with My presence.”

Elias looked at the broken steps.

“Why do my steps look like this?”

“What do you think?”

He wanted to answer that he didn't know. But that wasn't entirely true.

The Descent

“I’m still trying to make the road whole before I dare to trust it.”

Jesus nodded.

“And can you stand on a broken step?”

Elias looked down. The step carried him.

“Apparently yes.”

“Then brokenness is not always the same as uselessness.”

The word touched an old place in him. Not as pain. More like light entering a room he hadn’t been in for a long time. On earth, Elias had often thought that God could only really use him when all his doubt, fear and uncertainty were gone. Even after he came to know grace, there was still the idea that wholeness meant leaving no trace of vulnerability. But Jesus’ hands still bore wounds. Not as a shortage. As a testimony. Elias took the next step. The step was broken again. This time golden light ran through the crack.

“Beautiful,” said Joel.”

Elias smiled. They descended further. None of them ran faster than the others. Their various steps weaved along the mountainside. Sometimes Nahla’s carrot path crossed David’s wooden trail. Then small branches grew out of the steps. When Samir’s waves touched Liora’s arcs of light, the arcs began to sing. Mei’s meeting lines formed rest areas where the group could wait for a while. Meanwhile, Joel’s animal tracks attracted more and more living figures.

First appeared a small, reddish-brown animal with long ears and a tail that ended in two points. It looked at them curiously and then disappeared between the rocks. Later they saw birds without wings that seemed to be swimming through the air. Arion tried to follow one. The animal turned in a circle around its head and hovered over him.

“I think he likes you,” Joel said.”

“He doesn’t know me.”

“Maybe that's why.”

Arion looked offended, but continued walking. Nahla suddenly stopped halfway up the valley. Her root step did not grow any further. The other roads also stopped.

“What's happening?” Elias asked.”

Nahla bent down and placed her hand on the mountainside.

“Something is keeping the ground closed.”

“Danger?”

“No.”

“Fear?”

She shook her head.

“Restraint.”

“Can soil be restrained?”

“Evidently.”

Nahla closed her eyes. She said nothing for a while. Elias felt the old urge to do something. To find a solution. Find another route. But he remembered Jesus' words. Listen before you cross the horizon. He sat down next to Nahla. One by one the others did the same. Samir put down his instrument. Joel let the white bird sit on his knee. Nobody spoke. Elias slowly heard something beneath the silence. No voice. A rhythm. A slow movement sounded deep within the mountain. As if the stone were breathing. In. Out. Then a long rest. Again. In. Out. Rest.

Elias tried to match his breathing to the rhythm. The others followed. Even Arion lay down and put his head between his forelegs. When they all found the same rhythm, the mountainside changed. Not in shape. In color. A deep blue hue spread through the stone. Nahla opened her eyes.

“She didn't want to be opened.”

“Why not?” Mei asked.”

“Because we approached her as if being closed off was a problem.”

“But we have to go down, right?”

“Yes. Just not at the expense of her peace and quiet.”

David looked toward the valley.

“Can we wait?”

At that moment, a new step appeared. Not under Nahla's foot. Between them. Wide enough for everyone. They stood up. The various steps converged into one gently sloping path that led to the bottom of the valley.

“The mountain didn't want to weigh seven,” Liora said. “She wanted us to find her rhythm.”

They walked on. The dark shape in the center grew larger. As they got closer, Elias saw that it was not a stone. The surface moved up and down almost imperceptibly.

“It breathes,” said Joël.

The white bird flew off his shoulder and landed on the shape. Four golden tail feathers stood out brightly against the dark surface. The object did not respond. Joel walked over.

“Careful,” Elias said.

The boy looked back.

“For what?”

Elias had no answer. There was no death here. No violence. No destruction. However, that did not mean that every meeting could take place without reverence.

“Don't go faster than it receives us,” he said.

Joel nodded. He took a few more steps and then stopped. The bird sounded its four notes. An answer came from the dark shape. One deep sound. So low that Elias not only heard her, but felt her through his feet. Samir picked up his instrument.

“Don't play,” said Joel.”

Samir looked surprised.

“Why not?”

“He doesn't want an answer from us.”

“How do you know that?”

Joel tilted his head.

“He's trying to say something himself.”

They waited. The deep tone sounded again. Then another. The two notes barely differed, but there was a movement between them. An attempt. As if a mouth that had never spoken sought its first word. The dark shape began to open. Lines appeared in the surface. No tears, just seams. They formed a pattern that resembled closed wings. Slowly those wings unfolded. Beneath it was a creature. Elias had never seen anything like it.

The body was large and low to the ground. Six sturdy legs were folded beneath a wide torso. The skin consisted of thousands of dark, shiny plates. Across its back were two wing-like structures, but they were too heavy to fly. The head remained bowed. Two long, silver protrusions ran from the crown to the back. No horns. They moved like branches in an invisible wind. Joel sat down. Not close to the animal. At the same height.

Thaël's First Answer

“Hello,” he said.”

The silver protrusions turned towards him. The creature raised its head. His eyes were large and translucent. Small points of light moved in each eyeball, as if a starry sky was hidden within it. Joel smiled. The white bird jumped from the animal's back to the ground and sat between them.

“Did you bring him here?” Joel asked.”

The bird made no answer. The great creature opened its mouth. The deep tone sounded again.

“He doesn't have words yet,” Mei said.”

Samir listened.

“Maybe these are his words.”

“What does he say?”

“Don't know.”

Nahla slowly walked forward. She knelt and touched the ground. A circle of small plants formed around the creature. They were dark blue and bore silver seed pods. The animal looked at it. One of the silver branches on its head brushed a plant. The seed pod opened. A cloud of light rose up. Everywhere the light particles touched the ground, images appeared. No real landscapes. Memories. Elias saw the creature alone in the valley. Not lonely. Loneliness existed where connection was missed. This animal did not yet know any loss because it had never met another.

It had listened to the mountains. To the slow moving earth. To opportunities that came and went. It had been waiting. Not with company. On recognition. Images followed each other. The animal that tried to name the colorless stones. The animal that searched for its reflection in a river that had no water yet. The animal that heard the four notes of the white bird and realized for the first time that something existed beyond the valley. Finally, they saw an image of themselves. Seven travelers descending several stairs. The animal had sensed them before they could see it.

The images disappeared. Joel had tears in his eyes. Not from sadness. Of wonder.

“You already knew us.”

The creature let out two deep tones. Then a third. The white bird answered.

“He wants a name,” Elias said.”

Joel shook his head.

“We don't know.”

“The map says 'name'.”

“Maybe that's not about him.”

Elias looked at the shining word.

“About what then?”

Joël stood up and walked to the map. As soon as he touched her, the letters changed. NAME? There was now a question mark. Liora came to stand next to him.

“We assumed we had to name something.”

“Because that was on the menu,” Elias said.

“No. Because we are used to an unknown thing needing a name from us.”

Mei looked at the large animal.

“But maybe it has a name we can't hear yet.”

Samir sat on the floor and tuned his instrument. He didn't hit the creature's deep notes. Instead he played the four notes of the bird. The bird answered. Samir added a fifth note. The creature raised its head. A low vibration sounded from his chest. Not the same as before. The note moved beneath Samir's melody, carrying her. Nahla tapped her fingers on the dirt. David beat a gentle rhythm on a piece of wood. Liora unrolled her blank sheet. The sounds appeared on it as lines. Mei started to sing. No words.

Just an open vowel that left room for the other voices. Joel looked at Elias.

“You too.”

“I'm not a singer.”

“That's not necessary.”

Elias wanted to say that his voice didn't match anything. Then he thought of David's mother. Of her impure song in the leaves. He sang. Carefully. His tone trembled. But he didn't disappear. The other sounds made room for him. The creature rose to its feet. Its six legs unfolded. The dark plates

on his skin caught the light. A color appeared under each plate. Red. Blue. Gold. Green. Shades for which Elias had no name. The wings on his back spread. They were not intended to carry the body through the air. They carried sound.

The music of the seven travelers was received, deepened and returned to the valley. The mountains responded. Thousands of notes flowed from the slopes. The colorless rock walls took on color. Grooves opened everywhere from which water began to flow. Plants sprouted from the earth. Birds appeared in the sky. The whole valley woke up. But in the middle of the music something sounded different. No separate tone. A name. Not pronounced. Received. Elias did not hear her with his ears. Yet he knew that the great being was making itself known. Thael. The others looked at each other.

“Thaël,” whispered Mei.”

The creature bowed its head. The word on the map changed again. KNOWN. Joël walked towards Thaël. This time the animal did not remain motionless. It extended one of the silver branches towards him. Joel raised his hand. The silver branch gently touched his forehead. A bright light passed through them both. The white bird flew up and landed among the branches on Thael's head. Arion came to stand next to Elias.

“Now we know why the bird had no name.”

Elias looked at him.

“Why?”

“He had a name that was not meant for him.”

The map started to move. The word KNOWN faded. New lines appeared. They formed the contours of the valley, the mountains and the rivers. For the first time, an actual area was on the map. But there was no name for the valley yet. Elias looked at Thael.

“Maybe he can give it.”

Joel placed his hand against the animal's head. Thaël let out a long, deep note. The mountains took her over. The rivers sang along. Words appeared

in the light above the map: THE VALLEY OF THE FIRST ANSWER. Liora smiled.

“Not because we provided the answer.”

“No,” said Mei. “Because we were finally quiet enough to receive it.”

Jesus stood at the edge of the valley. No one had seen Him coming. The light of the new rivers reflected in His eyes. Thael saw Him. The great animal did not bow out of fear. It collapsed on its six legs and rested its head on the ground. Jesus walked up to him and placed his hand among the silver branches.

“Thael,” He said.”

The name sounded different in His voice. Complete. As if Christ had already spoken it before the animal existed. Thaël closed his eyes. The valley filled with joy. Elias looked at Jesus.

“You already knew his name.”

“Naturally.”

“Why didn't you tell us about him?”

“Because knowing is different from controlling.”

Jesus looked at the seven travelers.

“He who receives the name of another does not receive property. He receives responsibility.”

“What responsibility?” Joel asked.”

“To see him as he is seen by Me.”

Elias looked at Thael. To the valley. To the world that had been waiting for their attention. The map rose. A new light appeared behind the mountains. It looked like the first glow of a sunless morning. High towers were visible in that glow. No city that already existed. A city that tried to be remembered before it was built. Liora froze. The roll of drawings slipped from her hands. One sheet rolled open. It showed the same city.

“That's impossible,” she whispered.”

Jesus looked at the distant towers.

“No, Liora.”

His voice was soft.

“It's an invitation.”

The ground beneath their feet shook. Not as a warning. Like a heartbeat. A second valley appeared in the distance. There was no music there. There was no colorless expectation there. Something was already there. Walls. Gates. Bridges. An entire city. Perfectly designed. Beautifully built. And completely empty. Liora looked at it. All joy did not disappear from her face, because sadness could no longer have any power over her. But seriousness did appear. Recognition.

“That city,” she said.

“What's wrong with it?” Elias asked.

Liora bent down and picked up her drawings.

“I designed her.”

“When?”

She looked at the empty towers.

“On Earth.”

Jesus turned toward the new path that opened between the mountains.

“Then it is time,” He said, “to find out why no one lives there.”

CHAPTER 5

The City No One Could Inhabit



The city lay behind the mountains as if it had always been there. High towers reached towards a sky that slowly took on color. Bridges connected the upper floors. Wide streets ran from seven gates to a circular square in the center. Everything was in balance. Every line had a purpose. Each arc connected perfectly to the next. Water flowed through narrow gutters along the roads and collected in basins exactly equidistant from each other. Trees stood in straight rows. Their crowns were the same shape and height. Not a single stone was misplaced anywhere. Nowhere did a branch grow outside the pattern.

There was no voice anywhere. Liora stood on the mountain pass and did not move. The others waited. Thael had followed them to the edge of his valley. His dark plates now shone in many colors. The white bird was sitting on its head among the silver branches. Arion looked at the city.

“I don't like it.”

“Why not?” Elias asked.”

“There is nowhere where a wolf can appear unexpectedly.”

“Is that necessary for a good city?”

“For a good wolf, yes.”

Liora didn't respond. Her eyes followed the streets, walls and towers.

“Every size is right,” she finally said.”

She spoke so softly that Elias had to come closer.

“The proportions are exactly as I calculated them. The water flows. The access roads. The height of the buildings. Even the shadows fall where I drew them.”

“When did you design this?” Mei asked.”

“During my last years on earth.”

“Was the city ever built?”

Liora shook her head.

“There was no money. Later the government changed and the project was terminated.”

“What was the purpose?”

“Safety.”

The word didn't sound wrong. Yet the silence around them deepened. Liora rolled out a drawing. It showed the same city seen from above. Seven sectors were located around a central square. Each neighborhood had homes, workshops, gardens and meeting spaces.

“After the war, thousands of people lived in temporary camps,” she said. “Families lived for years among mud, corrugated iron and barbed wire. I wanted to design a place where no one had to be afraid.”

“That sounds good,” said Joel.”

“It was.”

“Then why does it sound like you're no longer sure about that?”

Liora looked at the seven gates.

“Because fear became a silent collaborator at my drawing board.”

She pointed to the outer wall.

“One access road per neighborhood, so that everyone could be checked.”

To the high towers:

“Observation points from which almost every street was visible.”

To the main square:

“An open space without hidden corners.”

“Is that wrong?” David asked.”

“No. Not in itself. There were real dangers on Earth. People needed protection.”

She put her hand on the drawing.

“But slowly my question changed. First I asked: how do we make it easier for people to live together? Later I asked: how do we prevent people from doing something we don't want?”

“When did the city become empty?” Elias asked.”

Liora looked at him.

“Maybe that was her from the beginning.”

The words passed through the mountain pass. In the distance a gate opened. The sound rolled through the empty streets like metallic thunder. Jesus walked down. The others followed Him. Thaël stayed behind. He raised his head and let out a low note. The white bird flew up, circled once above the group, and then returned to Joel's shoulder.

“Isn't Thaël coming with us?” the boy asked.”

“This is not his place,” Nahla said.”

“How do you know that?”

“The ground beneath his feet asks him to stay.”

Joel walked back to the large animal and put his arms around its head. Thaël closed his eyes.

“Will I see you again?”

The animal responded with three deep tones. Joel smiled.

“That's what I thought too.”

He rejoined the group. As they approached the city, the walls grew higher. From afar they had seemed impressive. Up close they were overwhelming. The stones were light-colored and smooth. There were no guards on the towers. No weapons. No doors that kept anyone out. Still, the gate felt narrow. Elias could pass through it easily. Ten people could have passed through side by side. But something about the proportions made him hunch his shoulders. Mei felt it too.

“Why does an open gate feel closed?”

Liora studied the arch.

“Because I designed it to control who came in, not to welcome anyone.”

Above the gate was a word in a language Elias did not know. As soon as he looked at it, he understood the meaning: SAFETY. Arion walked under the arch. He stopped halfway.

“What is?” Elias asked.

“The gate asks why I want to enter.”

“Does she have a voice?”

“No.”

“Then how can she ask?”

“Like a face can ask something without speaking.”

“And what is your answer?”

Arion looked into the empty street.

“Curiosity.”

The word above the gate did not change. The wolf continued walking. Elias followed. As he crossed the threshold, a memory surfaced. Not war or danger. To a church building on earth. He had been there as a boy with his parents. At the entrance a man had looked at him, then at his worn shoes, then again at his face. The man hadn't said anything unkind. Yet from that moment on, Elias had felt like a visitor who had to prove that he could behave properly. The memory no longer bore any pain. Meaning. A building could say: you are welcome.

It could also say: first show that you belong here. They entered the main street. Houses with large windows stood on both sides. The doors were opened. Inside were tables, chairs and beds. Empty bowls lay on the shelves. Everything was ready.

Order Without Welcome

Nobody came. Joel ran into a house. His footsteps echoed off the walls.

“There are toys!” he shouted.”

Elias went after him. In a small room there were wooden animals, building blocks and musical instruments. Everything was carefully arranged. The blocks were arranged by color and size. The animals were listed from small to large. Joël picked up a wooden bird. Immediately a light outline appeared on the floor indicating where the toy was supposed to be.

“He wants to go back,” said Joel.”

“The bird?”

“The room.”

He placed the wooden animal outside the perimeter. The light on the floor grew brighter. Joel placed it on a shelf. The outline followed. Wherever he placed the animal, the room continued to indicate where it had originally stood.

“What happens if you don't listen to it?” Elias asked.”

Joel placed the bird on the windowsill. They waited. Nothing happened. Still, Joel looked unhappy.

“It feels like I'm doing something wrong.”

Liora stood in the doorway. Her face was serious.

“I designed storage spaces so that the homes would remain quiet and uncluttered.”

“But children make messes,” said Joël.”

“I know.”

“Not always on purpose.”

“I know that too.”

“Then why does the room feel angry?”

“The room is not angry.”

“What then?”

Liora walked towards the luminous perimeter.

“Intolerant.”

She touched the line. The light went out. Immediately the room changed. The furniture did not change. The walls remained standing. But the room seemed more spacious. Joel placed the wooden bird in the middle of the floor. In addition, he placed a lion, a fish and an animal with three legs.

“They're going on a journey,” he said.”

Arion looked in through the window.

“A fish on land?”

“This is the new creation.”

“Even there a fish needs water.”

Joël placed a blue building block under the fish.

“Not anymore.”

They continued. There was a fountain in the central square. The water rose in seven equal arcs and fell back into the pool without wasting a single drop. There were benches around the square. They were all pointed towards the center.

“A perfect meeting place,” said David.”

Liora looked around.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because everyone has to look at the same center.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Where do you sit when you want to speak to one person?”

David chose a bench and sat down. Elias took a seat next to him. They looked at the fountain. To look at each other they had to turn their bodies. Mei sat down on the couch across from them. The distance was too great for a quiet conversation. Samir stood under a gallery and clapped his hands once. The sound was amplified and bounced around the entire square.

“Everyone can hear what is being said here.”

“That was the intention,” Liora said.

“Why?”

“So no one could make plans in secret.”

Samir lowered his hand.

“But no one can speak in confidence either.”

Liora closed her eyes. Elias walked towards her.

“You wanted to protect people.”

“Yes.”

“You knew what war and mistrust could do to a community.”

“Yes.”

“Then it wasn't a bad design.”

“No,” she said. “But a good intention can still produce a poor imagination.”

She looked at the towers.

“I thought that safety meant that there was no room for danger. I did not yet understand that real safety must also make room for freedom, vulnerability and difference.”

Mei touched her arm.

“You designed what you could see at the time.”

“And now I see more.”

“Isn't that mercy?”

Liora looked at Jesus. He stood at the fountain and let the water flow over His hand.

“Why is this city here?” she asked.”

“Because she is yours,” He replied.”

“I don't want her anymore.”

“That's not true.”

Liora wanted to protest. But she was silent. Jesus walked towards her.

“You do not reject the city,” He said. “You reject the fear that has limited her form.”

“Can she be changed?”

“That's why you're here.”

Liora looked around.

“Then the walls have to be removed.”

Immediately the ground shook. A deep crack ran through one of the outer walls. Stones started to come loose.

“Guard!” Elias shouted.”

The movement stopped. Liora looked at him in surprise.

“What is?”

“I don't know. But maybe we shouldn't start over by deciding what should go.”

The city became silent. Jesus looked at Elias. Not corrective. Attentive. Elias walked to the wall and placed his hand against the stone.

“This wall was built out of fear,” Liora said.”

“Partially.”

“What else can he mean?”

David came to stand next to Elias.

“Shelter.”

Nahla joined them.

“A place where plants can grow against strong winds.”

Samir touched the stone.

“A surface that returns sound.”

Joel said, “A high place for animals to climb.” Arion looked at the wall.

“A shady place.”

Mei placed her hand next to Elias's.

“A border that does not say: stay outside, but: a garden begins here.”

Liora came last. She touched the stone. The wall began to move again. This time he didn't fall over. Openings appeared. Small at first. Then bigger. Windows without glass. Gates without checkpoints. Arches through which paths led outside. Climbing plants grew over the stones. Their branches formed nests. Water flowed from the towers into gardens on both sides of the wall. The border did not disappear. She changed meaning. Above the main gate the word SAFETY faded. New letters appeared: WELCOME. A gentle wind passed through the city.

For the first time, the trees moved outside their fixed shape. Branches touched each other. Leaves fell on the street and stayed there. Joel looked on with delight.

“It's going to be messy.”

Nahla smiled.

“It becomes alive.”

The change spread. The houses did not literally turn around, but their entrances widened. Some walls moved apart to make room for courtyards. The benches around the fountain moved. Some of them faced each other. Others formed small circles. Some remained facing the water for those who just wanted to watch and listen. In the children's toy house the luminous outlines disappeared. There was room for unexpected things everywhere. Yet the city remained empty. Elias waited.

"Why doesn't anyone come?"

Jesus did not answer. Liora walked to the center of the square.

"Maybe the city is still too much for me."

"What do you mean?" Mei asked.

"I designed her. We changed her. But no one has needed her yet."

"Does a place have to be necessary before someone can live there?"

"No. But it must be possible to receive it without the residents remaining just guests in my design."

Liora grabbed her drawings. One by one she laid the sheets on the floor. Maps. Facades. Calculations. Designing houses, squares, schools and gardens. A lifetime of imagination and labor.

"What are you going to do?" David asked.

"Making space."

She looked at the others.

"Not for what I came up with. For what I couldn't think of."

Liora did not tear the drawings. She didn't burn them. She placed them in the water of the fountain. The paper did not dissolve. The lines came loose from the pages and drifted through the basin like ink. The seven water arches took the lines up. There they disintegrated into thousands of light particles. The particles spread across the city. Where they landed, no new buildings were created. Questions appeared. Above an empty house: Who could relax here? Above a garden: What wants to grow here? In an open square: What joy needs space? Under a small arch:

Who wants to sit next to someone here? Liora looked at Jesus.

“Now she is no longer finished.”

“No,” He said.

“Is that okay?”

“Now it can be inhabited.”

A voice sounded in the distance. Then one more. People approached from the openings in the wall. Not one people. Many peoples. Children led the way. Behind them came men and women carrying tools, musical instruments, plants, books and unknown objects. Animals also moved between them. Nobody marched. No one was assigned to a district. They came from different directions and chose which opening they entered through. A girl was the first to reach the central square. She stopped in front of Liora.

“Did you create this city?”

Liora knelt.

“I was allowed to start it.”

“Where is our house?”

Liora did not point to a building. She asked:

“Where would you like to live?”

The girl looked around. Then she pointed to a small tower near the outer wall.

“There.”

“Why?”

“Because I can see the valley from the top window.”

“Then we will see what that tower needs to become your home.”

The girl took Liora's hand. They walked away together. Soon the city filled with voices. The sounds still bounced between the buildings, but Samir played a melody that softened the echoes. People hung fabric between the

galleries. Plants grew along the walls. Small corners appeared in the squares where conversations could not be heard by everyone. The architecture didn't change because the original design was worthless. It became more complete because others participated in it. David found an empty workshop. There was a long table inside.

A group of people brought in pieces of wood. Not one plank had the same shape.

"Can you work with this?" Elias asked."

His father stroked a crooked piece of wood.

"This is the most beautiful material I have ever seen."

"It's full of knots."

"That's why."

Nahla went to the gardens with residents. She did not pull the trees out of their straight rows. She planted smaller crops among them. Within a short time the neat avenues turned into opulent courtyards.

Space to Dwell

Joël was surrounded by children and animals. He tried to explain that the wooden fish could travel over land on a blue building block. Arion was nowhere to be seen. Until Elias looked up. The wolf stood on the outside wall, right where no one had built stairs.

"How did you get there?" Elias shouted."

Arion looked down.

"Unexpected."

Mei helped two women open a house that had only one door. They created a second entrance to the garden, so that the building no longer only had a front and a rear. Elias looked at Jesus.

"What should I do?"

"Why do you think I should decide that for you?"

“Because You brought me here.”

“I’ve done that with everyone.”

Elias looked at the bustling city. People had found a place everywhere. Not only to receive something, but also to give something.

“I don’t have a construction plan,” he said.”

“Good.”

“I can’t garden like Nahla.”

“No.”

“And my music isn’t particularly useful.”

Samir shouted from the other side of the square: “We can talk about that later.” Jesus smiled. Elias looked around again. Then he saw a man standing by the fountain. Everyone moved past him. He didn’t seem unhappy or lost. He just looked as if he didn’t know where to start. Elias walked towards him.

“Welcome.”

The man looked up.

“Thank you.”

“Are you looking for something?”

“Maybe.”

“What?”

“Someone who will sit with me for a moment before I decide where to go.”

Elias pointed to two chairs next to the water. They sat down. They said nothing for a while. The fountain made a soft sound. Children laughed. The rhythm of hammers sounded from the workshop. Samir’s instrument mixed with voices from dozens of languages.

“What’s your name?” Elias finally asked.”

The man smiled.

“That's a long story.”

“We have time.”

And as the city around them continued to awaken, Elias understood his task. Some people built doors. Others planted gardens. Still others made music, furniture or new roads. But sometimes someone simply had to sit down with another and say: Tell me. I listen. The light card appeared between Elias and the unknown man. There was no new destination. Just a small gold dot where they sat. Below it appeared the words: HERE SPACE BECOMES A HOME. Towards evening-if it could be called evening-the group gathered again at the fountain. Liora came last.

The girl from the tower walked next to her.

“The city needs a name,” said Joel.”

Everyone looked at Liora. But she shook her head.

“Not from me.”

The girl pulled her hand.

“I know a name.”

“Tell.”

“The Open City.”

Liora knelt.

“Why?”

“Because you can go in.”

Joel pointed to the new gates.

“That makes sense.”

“And,” the girl continued, “because she's not ready yet.”

The name appeared on the map: THE OPEN CITY. The residents echoed him. Not as an official announcement. As consent. The walls took over the words. The fountains sang them. The trees carried them whispering through the streets. Liora looked at her city. Tears shone in her eyes.

“She doesn't look like my design anymore.”

Jesus stood next to her.

“Yes.”

She looked at Him questioningly.

“She looks like what you really wanted to build.”

Liora closed her eyes. The bells in the seven towers began to ring. Not at the same time. Not according to a pre-calculated pattern. The first bell called. The second answered. Then the others followed. Together they formed a song that Liora could never have designed. As the last sound died away, a figure of light appeared above the city. Big. Winged. An angel descended into the square. He carried no sword. In his hands he held a sealed scroll. The conversations stopped. The angel did not look at Jesus first. He looked at Liora.

“The city is open,” he said.”

“Yes,” she replied.”

“Then the message can be received.”

He handed her the scroll. The seal bore the same sign as the first card: A circle with seven points. Liora accepted the role, but did not open it.

“Who is this message for?”

The angel looked at the seven companions.

“For those who must learn to speak to a world that does not yet know human words.”

Samir came closer.

“A new language?”

“An ancient language,” replied the angel. “Older than your people. Older than your music. Older even than the stars you have visited.”

“What language?” Elias asked.”

The angel folded his wings.

“The language in which creation gave its first response to God.”

Above them the bells stopped ringing. A voice came from the opened scroll. Not a human word. No melody. It was the sound of light hearing for the first time that it was good. The white bird spread its wings. Thaël answered from the distant valley. And deep beneath the Open City, something awoke that had been there since before the first stone had appeared.

CHAPTER 6

The Language of the First Answer



The sound from the opened scroll descended through the city. Not as sound. Sound moved through air, hit walls and was received by ears. This sound went deeper. He passed through stone, water, wood and light as if all those things recognized him. The fountain became silent. Not because the water stopped flowing. The drops still moved, but without audible falling. The hammers in David's workshop fell silent. The children put down their toys. All over the Open City, people and animals raised their heads. They listened. A tremor ran through the square under Elias' feet. One time. Then again. Slowly.

Regularly. Like a heartbeat. The girl who gave the city its name took Liora's hand.

“Is the city afraid?”

Liora knelt next to her.

“I don't think so.”

“Then why is she shaking?”

Liora placed her other hand on the stones.

“Because she recognizes something.”

The angel was still standing by the fountain. Its wings were closed and the seal hung broken from the scroll.

“What is under the city?” Elias asked.”

“A memory,” the angel replied.”

“From whom?”

“From creation.”

The stones shook again. This time thin lines appeared between the joints. Golden light flowed through it and spread across the square. The residents did not flinch. Nobody was afraid. Yet space was created around the fountain, as if everyone understood that something had to be given the opportunity to become visible. The light lines formed seven circles. Each circle was around one of the traveling companions. Elias looked at Mei. She too stood in the middle of a golden circle. Her hands lay open next to her body.

“Should we do something?” he asked.”

The angel looked at him.

“Why is that always your first question?”

Elias smiled somewhat embarrassedly.

“Because I like to be useful.”

“And if listening is useful?”

“Then I want to know how to listen well.”

“That's why you're here.”

The angel raised one hand. The sound of the role changed. Elias still didn't hear any words. Yet he received meaning. Not as a thought that entered his mind from outside. The meaning seemed to already lie somewhere within him and was awakened by the sound. He saw darkness. No evil darkness. No void in which God was absent. The deep, hidden darkness of a beginning that was not yet visible. Then a voice sounded. Let there be light. Elias knew the words. He had read them many times. But now he didn't just hear the command. He heard the love in it.

The light was not plucked from the darkness. It was called. Popular. Welcomed. And when the light appeared, it answered. Not with human

language. Not with an independent word. The answer was his shine. The light responded by being light. Elias saw water arising. The water responded by continuing to flow. He saw earth appear. The earth responded by bearing. Plants responded by growing. Stars shine through. Animals by moving, calling, flying and breathing. Every created thing spoke by fully receiving what God gave it and responding to it in its own individuality.

“The language of the first answer,” whispered Mei.”

The angel nodded.

“Creation spoke before men formed words.”

Samir held his instrument against his chest.

“Was it music?”

“Sometimes.”

“What was it the other times?”

“Color. Movement. Smell. Growth. Weight. Silence. Closeness.”

Nahla knelt in her circle. A plant grew from the golden line. Not from the ground, but from the light itself. The plant bore no flowers. She simply bowed to the fountain.

“Direction can also be language,” Nahla said.”

“Yes,” replied the angel.”

Joel looked at the white bird on his shoulder.

“And animals still speak to her?”

“All creatures speak it. But not everyone listens.”

Arion sat down.

“People usually only listen to an animal when it uses their words.”

“We would like to understand it,” Elias said.”

A Memory Beneath the City

“That's not the same as listening.”

“Then what's the difference?”

The wolf looked at the children gathered around him.

“Understanding often asks: what does this mean for me? Listening asks: who are you?”

One of the children touched his silver fur. Arion pretended not to notice. The pulse beneath the city grew stronger. The golden circles around the seven companions began to move towards each other. The lines touched each other in the middle of the square. The stones parted. Not by force. They slid aside as if they had never wanted it any other way. A staircase appeared beneath the square. This led downwards into a warm, golden light. Liora looked at the angel.

“Did I design that space?”

“No.”

“Then who?”

“None of you.”

“Was she here before the city came into being?”

The angel rolled up the message again.

“The city could only appear in this place because it was already here.”

Elias looked into the opening.

“A memory as a foundation.”

“More than a memory.”

The angel pointed to the stairs.

“An answer that is still being given.”

Jesus stood at the edge of the square. His gaze rested on Elias.

“Are you coming?” Elias asked.”

“See you at the door.”

“And after that?”

“Then you have to listen.”

“You could tell us what we will hear.”

“Yes.”

“But you don't do that.”

“No.”

“Why?”

Jesus smiled.

“Because My explanation should not take the place of your meeting.”

The seven traveling companions gathered at the stairs. David placed a hand on Elias' shoulder.

“I'm not coming down with you.”

Elias looked at him.

“Why not?”

“The workshop is waiting.”

“He can wait, right?”

“Naturally.”

“Then I don't understand.”

David looked at the opening.

“This part of the journey is not for me.”

Elias again felt that strange mixture of connection and farewell. Not painful like on earth. Yet there was a real movement of letting go.

“How do you know that?”

“Because I don't hear a shout.”

“Maybe you don't hear well enough.”

“Or you would like me to hear what you hear.”

Elias wanted to go against that. Then he saw the peace in his father's face. David pointed to the workshop. A group of people were waiting for him at the entrance. Between them lay a long, crooked beam that no one could carry alone.

“My path goes that way,” he said. “Not less far. Just different.”

The map appeared. The golden line between Elias and David remained bright, although their points slowly moved further apart. His father hugged him.

“You don't have to take me with you to stay connected to me.”

“I know.”

“You know it with your head.”

“And my heart learns it.”

“That's usually how it goes.”

David said goodbye to the others and walked to his workshop. Elias watched him go. The door remained open when he went inside. The group now consisted of six people. However, seven points remained visible on the map.

“Why doesn't his point disappear?” Elias asked.”

The angel looked at the white bird.

“Maybe you're counting your traveling companions wrong.”

Joel looked up.

“He still doesn't have a name.”

The bird brushed one of its golden tail feathers with its beak. Then he flew into the opening.

"That seems like an invitation to me," said Mei."

They started to descend. The stairs ran in a wide spiral under the city. The walls contained layers of stone, but also roots, water streams and paths of light. Elias thought they were going deeper and deeper. Yet it became lighter. At first he heard the city above him. Voices. Tools. Music. Gradually those sounds disappeared. The heartbeat continued. With every vibration the walls glowed. The white bird flew in front. Behind them walked Joël, followed by Nahla, Samir, Liora, Mei and Elias. Arion came last.

"Why are you trailing?" Elias asked."

"To see what you don't take with you."

"Are we leaving anything behind?"

"On every trip."

"What then?"

"You only know that when you look back."

Elias looked over his shoulder. The steps behind them had changed. On each step was something that a traveler had thought during the descent. Not all thoughts. Only the thoughts they no longer needed. Elias expected his father to accompany him everywhere. In another, Liora's need was to understand each space in advance. Samir left behind the belief that every meaning had to be translated into music. Mei left a little question: Am I still loved when I don't add anything? The question did not disappear. But she didn't have to carry her any longer.

Joel looked back. There was nothing on his step.

"Did I leave anything behind?"

Arion walked to the step in question and sniffed.

"You're rushing."

"I don't see her."

"That's why you trip over it so often."

Joel looked serious. Then he started walking slower. A small, flickering shadow appeared on the stone behind him. As soon as he saw her, she dissolved. The stairs ended at a round door. Jesus stood in front of it. Although He had not descended with them, He had apparently been waiting for them.

“You said you were going to the door,” Elias said.”

“I did that.”

“You weren't on the stairs.”

“Not visible.”

Jesus placed His hand on the door. There was no handle on it. No lock. Just seven small cavities, arranged in a circle. The map rose from Elias' hands and hung in front of the door. Six points glowed brightly. The seventh remained dark.

“The bird,” said Joel.”

The white bird landed on the map. Nothing happened.

“Maybe he's not the seventh,” Liora said.”

Arion came closer.

“Or he cannot yet take his place without his name.”

Joel looked at Jesus.

“Can you tell us his name?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to do that?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because he does not bear My answer to you.”

“From whom?”

Jesus knelt so that His face was level with Joel's.

“Yours.”

The boy looked at the bird.

“Should I name him?”

“What do you think?”

Joel shook his head.

“With Thaël we also thought we had to come up with a name. But he already had one.”

“You remembered that well.”

“So this bird already has a name.”

“Yes.”

“How do I discover it?”

Jesus stood up.

“Not by asking what his name is.”

Joel frowned.

“What question should I ask then?”

Jesus placed a hand on the round door.

“That's what you have to discover behind this door.”

He looked at the six adult travelers.

“What you receive there cannot be taken as knowledge alone. When you try to possess the language, you will no longer hear it.”

“Can we forget her?” Samir asked.

“Not in the way you forgot something on earth. But you can drown her out.”

“With what?”

“With yourself.”

Jesus took a step back. The door remained closed.

“You don't open it?” Elias asked.”

“I can do that.”

“But?”

“The door is already open.”

Elias looked at the seam around the stone. No opening was visible.

“She looks closed.”

“Then you still only see with your eyes.”

Jesus' figure softened. Not vague. More like the light began to receive Him.

“If you do not see Me,” He said, “do not seek My form first. Listen to what comes to life in My presence.”

Then He disappeared. Not suddenly. The light in the hallway simply became equally bright everywhere. The six travelers and the animals stopped at the door. Samir examined the seven cavities.

“Maybe we should touch them.”

He put his fingers in one of the openings. Nothing happened. The others tried the same. Six hands. Six cavities. The seventh remained empty. Joel brought the white bird to the last opening. The animal did not fit in and pecked at his fingers indignantly.

“Sorry.”

The boy put him on the ground.

“We're doing what we did at Thaël again,” Mei said.”

“We are trying to force the solution,” Nahla replied.”

Liora sat against the wall.

“Then we'll stop.”

“With what?” Elias asked.”

“Trying to get in.”

They sat in a circle in front of the door. No one knew how long. There was no sun moving. No clock. No fatigue drove them on. At first, Elias listened to the heartbeat in the walls. Then to his own breath.

Aven's Name

Then to the others. Samir's breathing was deep and steady. Mei breathed almost inaudibly. Joel stirred impatiently every now and then. Arion lay still. Nahla ran her fingers over the stone floor. Liora looked at the door without studying it. The white bird walked around the circle. First to Samir. He gently pecked a string on the instrument. There was a short tone. Then he walked over to Nahla and dropped a small seed from his feathers. At Liora he drew a line in the dust with his beak. He spread his wings in front of Mei and touched one of her hands with each wing.

He stopped near Elias. He looked up.

“What do you want to tell me?” Elias asked.”

The bird turned its head away. Elias understood. That was the wrong question again. Not: what do you want to give me? He tried to listen differently. The bird had given Samir a tone. Nahla a seed. Liora a line. Mei touch. Not random. With each of them he touched something that was already there. Elias looked at the animal.

“What do you receive from us?”

The bird focused its eyes on him. For the first time Elias actually saw its color. Not black. Not brown. In each pupil was a small reflection of the six people in the circle. The bird received their presence. He didn't just carry a message. He collected answers. Elias held his hand open. The bird jumped on it.

“You didn't travel with us because we had to discover your name,” Elias said. “You travel because your name is created in what you receive and bring back.”

The animal let out four tones. Samir acted them out. The bird added a fifth. Mei sang to her. A sixth sounded from the stones beneath Nahla's hand. Then everyone waited. The seventh tone did not come. Joel crawled closer. He put his face close to the bird.

"I've always wanted you to talk to me," he said. "Because on earth I longed to understand animals."

The bird looked at him.

"But maybe you don't have to look like me to be my friend."

The animal did not move. Joel continued:

"And I don't have to look like you to be known by you."

He placed his hand next to Elias's. The bird moved from Elias's hand to Joel's. Then he sang. Not four notes. Not sifting. A whole stream of sounds filled the hallway. Elias heard wings over oceans. Nests in unknown trees. The joy of air under feathers. The memory of Thaël. The valley. The Open City. And among all those sounds he heard a name. Ave. Joel smiled.

"Aven."

The bird pressed its head against his cheek. The seventh point on the map began to radiate. The seven cavities in the door filled with light. Six hands rested in it. Aven flew to the last opening and brushed one golden tail feather against the stone. The round door did not open in or out. She became transparent. There was no room behind it. There was a starry sky. Not above them. Around them. Thousands of lights moved in rhythms that seemed older than time. A crystal clear shape floated in the center. A seed. One word. A star. Everything at once. Samir stood up slowly.

"What is that?"

The angel appeared on the other side of the transparent door.

"The first letter," he replied.

"What language?"

"Of a language that does not consist of letters."

The door dissolved. The pulse beneath the city stopped. For a moment there was complete silence. Then the crystal form spoke. Not to their ears. To their being. And everyone heard something different. Nahla heard: growth. Liora heard: space. Samir heard: answer. Mei heard: receive. Joel heard: amazement. Elias heard a single word: We. Aven flew into star space. The seven companions followed him. The door didn't close behind them. They simply took her with them as a new ability to listen.

CHAPTER 7

The Words That Could Not Be Translated



There was no up and no down. Yet they did not fall. Starspace carried them as water carries a swimmer, but without pressure, cold or weight. With each movement, small waves of light appeared around their bodies. Aven flew in front of them. His wing beats were slow. Among the stars he seemed bigger than before. The four golden feathers in its tail left long trails of light.

“Can we walk here?” Joel asked.”

“There's nothing to walk on,” Liora said.”

Joël carefully stepped one foot forward. A small circle of light appeared under his shoe. He brought his other foot next to it. A second circle emerged.

“I think it's possible.”

Arion stepped into the room without hesitation. Nothing appeared under his paws. Yet he walked as if there was a solid road.

“How do you do that?” Elias asked.”

“I don't think about walking.”

“That doesn't help me.”

“That doesn't depend on the answer.”

Elias took a step. The stars moved. Not himself. The entire canopy of heaven shifted backwards, making it seem as if he had instantly covered an enormous distance. He looked back. The opening to the Open City had disappeared.

“The door is gone.”

“No,” said Mei. “I can still feel her.”

“Where?”

She put a hand to her chest.

“Here.”

Elias also felt something. No physical door. No memory of stone. An openness. As if the traveling companions could return from now on by listening again in the same way. Samir floated a few meters away from them. His instrument hung in the room in front of him. The strings moved without him touching them. Each star vibrated a different string. Some stars were far away and produced low, long tones. Others were closer and sounded clear. Together they did not form a melody that Elias could follow. It was too big. Too polyphonic. And yet not chaotic.

“Is this the language?” Elias asked.

“Some of it,” replied the angel.

He moved next to them without using his wings. Elias had not yet asked him his name. Maybe because angels still wore something impressive for him. They were not aloof creatures, but neither were they easy to approach. Their presence reminded him that God's reality was much greater than the human world.

“What's your name?” Elias asked.

The angel looked at him.

“Ithamar.”

“What does that name mean?”

“That depends on who pronounces it.”

“Do angel names have multiple meanings?”

“Don't people's names have that?”

Elias thought of his own name. On earth he was called Elias because his parents loved the Biblical prophet. For his mother, the name had also meant her child. A long-awaited son for his father. Elias meant something different to Mei than to Joël, Liora or Samir. The name was the same. The relationship determined what depth of it became audible.

“So a name doesn't just have a meaning,” Elias said. “He carries encounters.”

Ithamar nodded.

“You start listening.”

A group of lights appeared in front of them. At first Elias thought they were stars. But they moved too purposefully. They approached in seven long lines that intertwined. As the lights came closer, he saw figures. Angels. Hundreds. Maybe thousands. No two looked the same. Some had an almost human shape. Others consisted of wings, eyes and fire. There were beings that looked like tall pillars of light and angels small enough to rest in a human hand. None of them seemed strange. But Elias could not fully understand them either.

They formed an immense circle around the travelers. Joël looked around with his mouth open.

“Have they all come to meet us?”

“Not just you,” Ithamar said.

“Then who else?”

Ithamar pointed to the crystal shape in the center of the starry space. The first letter. The object floated silently. Up close, it looked even less like a letter than Elias had expected. It had no fixed shape. Sometimes it was a seed that radiated light. Then a sphere in which worlds moved. Then it became an open hand. The angels turned toward it. Nobody gave a sign. Yet they began to speak at the same time. Elias heard no choir. He heard it

arise. The first voices conjured up colors. Red, gold and deep blue flowed through the starry space.

Other voices brought movement. The colors began to rotate and form wide bands. Then a smell arose. Rain. Blossom. Earth. The fresh air above an unknown sea. Elias closed his eyes. He still saw the language. That surprised him. Apparently he wasn't blinking. The angels continued speaking. Not one message that was repeated by all. Each angel gave a unique response to the same divine reality. Their differences did not interfere with each other. They magnified what became visible. The crystal shape in the center began to open. Layer after layer folded outward.

In every layer there was a new possibility: A forest in which trees moved to show visitors the way. An ocean that held memories of God's faithfulness. A mountain that bore a different season on each side. A people who expressed themselves not with words, but through collectively formed colors. Elias saw all these things.

Everyone Hears a Different Word

And more. Much more. His heart filled with longing. Not to own everything. To go anywhere. Then the first letter spoke again. The six human travelers each heard their own words. Nahla heard: GROWTH. Liora: SPACE. Samir: ANSWER. Mei: RECEIVE. Joel: WONDER. Elias: WE. Aven let out one short call. No one knew what he had received. The angels were silent. The colors and images persisted around them. Ithamar turned to the travelers.

"What did the letter say?"

"That's simple," said Nahla. "Grow."

"Space," Liora said at the same time."

"Answer," said Samir."

"Receive," said Mei."

"Amazement," said Joel."

Elias waited. The others looked at him.

"I heard 'we'."

"Then she said different things," Liora concluded."

Ithamar did not answer. Samir examined the crystal form.

"Or we heard different parts."

"It amounts to the same thing," Liora said."

"No. A different message requires different actions. Parts of one message require coherence."

Nahla looked at the possibilities floating around them.

"Maybe we should grow something."

"Where?" Liora asked. "Without space, nothing can grow."

"But space without an answer remains empty," Samir said."

Mei shook her head.

"We must first receive before we do anything."

Joel pointed to one of the statues: a translucent animal walking among stars.

"Maybe we should just go and have a look."

The words crossed each other. Nobody got angry. No one wanted to beat the other. Yet distance arose. The travelers were still close together, but the starry space seemed to stretch between them. Nahla slowly drifted into an area full of growth opportunities. Liora moved towards empty shapes waiting for buildings. Samir followed the voices of the angels. Mei stuck with the crystal letter. Joël wanted to go after the transparent animal. Elias looked from one to the other.

"Guard."

They stopped.

"We shouldn't separate."

“Why not?” Liora asked. “Perhaps each of us has received our own assignment.”

“The map said ‘we’.”

“That’s what she said to you.”

“That means we have to stay together, right?”

“Or that you have to learn what ‘we’ means without expecting everyone to do the same.”

Elias was silent. She was right. Or maybe partially. He looked at Ithamar.

“What is the correct translation?”

“There is no translation.”

“But you understand the language.”

“Yes.”

“Then you can say what the letter means?”

“I can say what I hear.”

“And what do you hear?”

Ithamar turned to the first letter. His wings opened. Elias expected a word. Instead, something happened to the light around the angel. It flowed out, touched the other angels, and then returned to him richer.

“I hear reciprocity,” Ithamar said.

“That’s another word,” Joël noted.

“No,” Mei said softly.

She watched the movement of the light.

“Maybe it’s all our words at once.”

Nahla came closer.

“Growth is only possible when a living being receives space.”

“And space only becomes a home when someone receives it and responds to it,” Liora said.”

Samir played one note. The angels did not answer immediately. He waited. Then came a second tone from the other side of the circle.

“An answer only exists when something has first been received.”

Joel looked at the translucent animal.

“And wonder means that you do not determine in advance what the answer should be.”

All eyes turned to Elias. He looked at the others.

“We,” he said, “doesn't mean everyone hears the same thing.”

The star space became smaller. Not really. The distance between them disappeared.

“We are created when differences do not leave each other,” he continued. “When Nahla's growth is given space in Liora's design. When Samir responds to what Mei receives. When Joël marvels at something I hadn't even seen.”

The first letter began to shine brighter. Ithamar nodded.

“Now you are no longer trying to translate the language.”

“What do we do then?” Elias asked.”

“You let her speak between you.”

Aven flew towards the crystal form. He circled it three times and then disappeared into the light.

“Where is he going?” Joel asked.”

A small dark shadow appeared in the first letter. Aven moved through the layers of possibilities. They unfolded around him. He went deeper and deeper until he was just a point of gold. Joel wanted to follow him. Mei took his hand.

“Guard.”

“Maybe he needs us.”

“Or he needs us to let him go.”

Joel stopped. His eyes followed the golden point. Aven reached the center of the crystal form. There was something there that had remained hidden until then. An empty space. Small. Completely dark. The angels became silent. Ithamar closed his wings.

“What is that?” Elias asked.

“A possibility that has not yet received an answer.”

“Is she dangerous?”

“No.”

“Then why are the angels silent?”

“Because none of us can answer her.”

“Why not?”

Ithamar looked at the people.

“Because she doesn't wait for an angel.”

The golden point moved in the darkness. Aven sounded his four notes. There was no answer. He sang again. The empty space remained closed. Joel called his name.

“Aven!”

The bird turned around. Even at this immense distance their eyes met.

“Come back,” said Joel.

Aven didn't move. Joel looked at Ithamar.

“What is he supposed to do there?”

“He is looking for the person for whom the space is intended.”

“Who is that?”

“We don't know that.”

The crystal layers began to close again. Slowly at first. Then faster. Aven flew towards the opening, but the possibilities folded around him. Joel pulled his hand away and ran into starspace. The circles of light appeared beneath his feet, getting faster and further apart.

“Joel!” Elias shouted.”

The boy didn't listen. The first letter became smaller. Aven disappeared behind a translucent layer. Joel jumped. There was nothing to jump from. Yet the space carried him. He flew to the crystal and stretched out his arms. Just before the last layer closed, he reached Aven. Joel took the bird to his chest. Then the first letter closed around them both. The starry space became dark. Only the crystal remained visible. Joël and Aven were locked inside. Elias ran over and pressed his hands against the surface.

“Joel!”

The boy didn't hear him. Inside the letter, Joel stood in the dark space. Aven rested against his chest.

“Open her!” said Elias to Ithamar.”

“I can't do that.”

“You brought her here.”

“No. She was here before we came.”

“Then let the angels sing.”

“Their voices don't reach that place.”

“Why not?”

“Because this is not a space opened by power.”

Elias looked at Liora.

“Can you find an opening?”

She walked around the crystal form, examining each layer.

“There is no door.”

“Nahla?”

“Nothing grows.”

“Samir?”

The musician placed his hand against the crystal.

“I hear Joel’s heart. Nothing else.”

Mei came to stand next to Elias.

“The words.”

“What?”

“The six words. Maybe they are the way.”

Liora placed both hands on the surface.

“Room.”

A soft shine arose in the crystal around Joël. Nahla joined her.

“Grow.”

The glow increased. Samir played the four notes of Aven.

“Answer.”

The sound penetrated the crystal. Aven raised his head. Mei closed her eyes.

“Receive.”

Joel looked up. The fear that he could not really feel, because fear no longer had dominion here, was replaced by attention. He was no longer holding Aven tightly. His arms opened. The bird voluntarily stayed against him.

“Amazement,” said Joel from the crystal.”

The darkness around him filled with small stars. Everyone looked at Elias. The last word. We. He wanted to say it. But something stopped him. Don't doubt. Insight. If he said “we” while Joel was locked on the other side, the word would be incomplete. Elias couldn't speak it out on the boy's behalf. We were not a collection of people on one side of a border. We had to

include those they did not yet know. The unknown person for whom the empty space was intended. Elias rested his forehead against the crystal.

“Whoever you are,” he said, “we will not force you to appear.”

Nothing changed.

“We will not appoint you until you reveal yourself.”

The stars in the darkness grew brighter.

“And you don't have to look like us to belong to us.”

The empty space moved. Not outside. Toward Joel. Two eyes appeared in the darkness.

The Voice from the Darkness

Big. Soft. Old and young at the same time. Joel saw them. He stopped.

“Hello,” he said.”

The eyes closed. Opened again. Then a voice came. Very small. As if she was just learning to exist.

“Am I too late?”

Joel smiled.

“There is no lateness here.”

“Has the song started yet?”

“Yes.”

The voice became quieter.

“Then I missed it.”

Joel looked at Aven. The bird gave one short note.

“Maybe,” said Joel, “the song was waiting for your voice.”

A figure emerged from the darkness. Not human. Not animal. It consisted of translucent layers that changed color with every movement. Her shape

was not always the same. Sometimes she seemed like a child. Then a tall, slender tree. Then a cloud of light. The eyes remained the same.

“What am I?” the figure asked.”

Joel thought about Thaël. To the valley. To the responsibility of a name.

“I don't know,” he replied.”

“Is that wrong?”

“No.”

“Do you need to know?”

Joel smiled.

“No.”

The figure looked at the crystal walls.

“Why are they closed?”

“Because we thought you were a space.”

“Aren't I?”

“Maybe too. But you are more.”

Outside the crystal, Elias spoke again.

“We.”

This time the word was not a conclusion. It was an invitation. The crystal opened. Layer after layer folded outward. Joel emerged with Aven on his shoulder. Beside him, the new figure moved hesitantly into starry space. The angels bowed their heads. Not for power. For the miracle of a new answer. Ithamar looked at the figure.

“Welcome.”

“Where?”

“In the song.”

“Which voice should I sing?”

“Yours.”

“I don't know her yet.”

Ithamar opened his wings.

“That is why we are silent.”

Thousands of angels waited. Not a single voice filled the space before her. The figure looked at Elias, Mei, Liora, Nahla, Samir and Joel. Finally to Aven. The bird sang four notes. The figure responded with a color. A deep color between violet and gold, for which Elias had no name. Samir imitated the color. Nahla made a flower grow from it. Liora formed an open arc around it. Mei received the light in her hands. Joel laughed in amazement. Elias looked at them all. We. The figure changed again. This time she did not take a form that Elias recognized. That was good.

She didn't have to become recognizable to be known.

“Do I have a name?” she asked.”

There was no answer from the circle of angels. Ithamar looked at the six people. They too were silent. Joel stepped forward.

“Do you want one?”

The figure thought. Her colors moved slowly.

“Not yet.”

“Then we'll wait.”

For the first time the creature smiled. The smile didn't need a mouth. The entire starry space became brighter. Then she raised her arms-or what were arms at that moment-and spoke her first word. Not in the language of people. Not in the language of angels. In a language that began at that very moment. The stars answered. Far beyond the circle of angels, a new world opened up. Ithamar looked towards it.

“Now you understand why the language could not be translated.”

Elias nodded.

“Because it doesn't just describe what exists.”

“Then what does she do?”

Elias looked at the nameless creature.

“Is she inviting you to come out?”

Ithamar smiled.

“And every real answer makes the language bigger.”

In the distance, the new world grew from a single color. An ocean appeared. Above it floated islands of translucent stone. There was a garden on the largest island. But all the plants in it were closed. Not a leaf moved. Not a flower opened to the light. Nahla became serious.

“That garden doesn't sleep.”

“What then?” Mei asked.

Nahla listened. Then she said:

“He refuses to grow.”

The nameless creature turned to her.

“Why?”

Nahla looked into the distant garden.

“Because everything there seems to be perfect before it has lived.”

The first letter changed to a new character. A seed in a closed circle. The next assignment had begun.

CHAPTER 8

The Garden That Refused to Grow



The new world turned slowly before them. A blue ocean stretched out beneath a sky in which three broad arcs of light crossed each other. Islands of translucent rock floated on the water. Some were small enough for a single tree. Others bore hills, rivers and wide plains. The largest island was in the middle. That's where the garden was. From starry space it looked like a perfect pattern. Paths formed circles within circles. Watercourses ran in graceful spirals to a clear lake. Thousands of plants were placed in carefully selected places. Not a leaf moved.

Not a root grew. Not a flower opened.

“How do we get there?” Joel asked.”

The nameless figure raised her arms. Her body turned the same color she had opened the world with. The violet-golden light spread among the companions, forming a wide stream. Samir listened.

“That's no way.”

“Then what?” Elias asked.”

“An invitation.”

“What's the difference?”

“A road remains unused if no one takes it. An invitation only really exists when it is accepted.”

Mei was the first to take a step into the light. The color carried her to the new world. Not fast. Not slow. The stars moved sideways and the ocean came closer. The others followed. Aven flew above them. Arion walked across the color as if it were a mountain path. The nameless creature remained behind. Joel turned around.

“Aren't you coming?”

The colors of the figure softened.

“Is that allowed?”

“Naturally.”

“Why?”

Joel looked surprised.

“Because you belong to us.”

The creature briefly took the form of a child.

“But I don't have a name yet.”

“That doesn't matter.”

“Then how do you know who to invite?”

Joel thought.

“I don't know you completely yet. But I do know that I mean you.”

The figure looked at Ithamar. The angel nodded.

“A name makes recognition possible,” he said. “But love can already give space before it understands everything.”

The nameless creature stepped onto the color stream. Immediately the road widened. They descended to the island. When Elias saw the garden up close, its perfection became almost uncomfortable. Each tree was exactly the same height as the tree opposite it. Not a branch grew crooked. The leaves lay in even layers around the trunks. The flower beds contained thousands of closed buds. Each button was the same distance from the next. The grass was the same length everywhere. There were no fallen

leaves. No footprint. No churned up earth. The lake in the middle was so smooth it looked like a mirror.

“It's beautiful,” Liora said.”

Nahla knelt by a plant.

“Yes.”

“But?”

“He's not alive.”

Joel carefully touched a leaf. It was cool and firm.

“It feels real.”

“It is.”

“Then why isn't it alive?”

Nahla dug her fingers into the dirt. The ground gave way without resistance. Below the surface were roots. Perfectly formed. Beautiful. White. Motionless.

“The roots don't absorb anything,” she said.”

“Is the soil poor?” Elias asked.”

“No.”

“Too dry?”

“There is plenty of water.”

“No light?”

Nahla looked at the three arcs of light above them.

“More than enough.”

“Then what's missing?”

“Dependency.”

Elias looked at her.

“Can plants avoid dependence?”

“Everything that lives receives.”

Nahla let dirt slide through her fingers.

“A root says with its entire existence: I need what the ground gives. A leaf opens itself to light that it does not produce itself. A flower cannot pollinate itself without becoming part of a larger movement.”

She pointed to the rigid roots.

“These plants are shaped as if they don't need anything.”

“That sounds perfect, doesn't it?” Joel asked. “Nothing is wanting in heaven.”

“To have no lack is not the same as to receive nothing.”

Mei walked to the smooth lake. She put her hand in the water. No circles formed. When she withdrew her hand, her skin was dry.

“Even the water doesn't give itself,” she said.”

Liora looked at the paths.

“Who designed this garden?”

No one answered. The map appeared above the lake. The sign of the seed in the closed circle became larger. Lines appeared around it. Liora froze.

“I know those relationships.”

Elias looked at her.

“Is this another design of yours?”

“No.”

She followed one of the circular paths.

“But someone thinks like I used to think.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everything has a place. No element can hinder another. Every tree has exactly the area it needs. No roots cross each other.”

“That sounds orderly,” Samir said.

“It’s seclusion disguised as harmony.”

Liora pointed to the rows of trees.

“The trees are next to each other, but share nothing. No shade. No nutrients. No space.”

Nahla placed her hand against a trunk.

“In a living forest, roots touch each other. Fungal threads connect trees. Old trees nourish young ones. Weak plants receive shelter. Even what dies becomes food for new life.”

“But nothing dies here,” said Joel.

“No. Yet giving remains necessary.”

They walked to the center of the garden. There was a tree that was taller than all the others. Its branches formed a perfect sphere. Thousands of closed leaves lay on top of each other like scales.

Perfection Without Dependence

There was a door in the trunk. Above the door were words: THE GARDEN OF PERFECT INDEPENDENCE. Arion bared his teeth. Not threatening. As if he smelled something unpleasant.

“That’s a lie.”

“Can there be a lie here?” Elias asked.

“A wrong name does not necessarily have to be deliberately deceptive.”

“Then who gave her?”

The door in the tree opened. A woman came out. She was tall and wore a dress that shone like the inside of a shell. Her hair was silvery white. In her hands she held a sphere of clear glass. A small flower grew inside the bulb.

This flower was alive. Her stem moved. The leaves opened and closed. Small roots looked for water. The woman saw the travelers.

“Finally,” she said.”

Her voice sounded relieved. She walked over to Nahla and handed her the crystal ball.

“You know how growth works.”

Nahla did not accept the ball.

“Who are you?”

“Seren.”

“Did you create this garden?”

“I got her organized.”

“That wasn't my question.”

Seren looked at the rigid plants.

“I found it to be a collection of possibilities. Everything grew together. Trees bent over the paths. Water always took a different route. Some plants grew big while others stayed small.”

“Was anything damaged?” Elias asked.”

“No.”

“Was there danger?”

“No.”

“Then why did you change her?”

Seren looked at the flower in her hands.

“Because nothing reached its own perfection.”

Nahla pointed to the crystal ball.

“And this flower?”

“She was the first one I isolated. I gave her just the right amount of light, water and space. No other life could influence her growth.”

“Has she become perfect?”

“Almost.”

Nahla looked at the flower. The leaves were beautiful. But the stem was thin. The roots ran along the glass wall as if they wanted to grow further.

“How long has she been almost perfect?”

Seren was silent.

“How long?” Nahla asked again.

“Don't know.”

“Time has no power here,” said Elias, “but events do happen. Has the flower changed since you separated it?”

“Hardly.”

“And the garden?”

Seren looked away.

“The garden became silent.”

The nameless figure came closer. Seren saw her and tightened her grip on the crystal ball.

“What is that?”

The creature's colors darkened. Joël immediately stood next to her.

“She is our traveling companion.”

“What kind of creature is she?”

“We don't know that yet.”

“Doesn't it have a fixed shape?”

“No.”

“No name?”

“Not yet.”

Seren looked at the ever-changing figure.

“Then how can she know what to become?”

The creature itself replied:

“I don't know.”

“Doesn't that make you restless?”

“I haven't learned to be uneasy yet.”

Seren frowned.

“Every being needs its own nature.”

“Maybe I will receive it.”

“From whom?”

The figure did not point to one person. Her colors flowed to Joël, Aven, Nahla, Samir, Liora, Mei and Elias. Each of them took on a different shade. Then the colors returned to her.

“From God,” she said. “And in meeting.”

Seren looked at the crystal ball.

“Encounters can also distract a being from its individuality.”

“Only if individuality means that no one is allowed to touch you,” Mei said.”

Seren's hands tightened around the glass.

“On Earth, people have often damaged each other precisely because they gained too much influence over each other.”

“That's right,” Elias said.”

“Then you will understand why boundaries are necessary.”

“Yes.”

“Then why do you disapprove of my garden?”

Elias looked at the trees.

“I don't disapprove of her.”

“You don't call her alive.”

“That's not a condemnation. It's an invitation to see what she needs.”

Seren didn't answer. Liora walked to the tree with the door.

“You wanted to create a safe garden.”

“Yes.”

“A place where nothing could be repressed, overshadowed or deformed.”

“Precisely.”

“I understand that.”

Seren studied her face.

“Why?”

“Because I designed a city based on the same desire.”

“Has that city become perfect?”

Liora looked back towards the stars, although the Open City was not visible from this island.

“No.”

“What went wrong?”

“She only became habitable when others were allowed to change her.”

Seren shook her head.

“Then it was no longer your city.”

“That was when she really became our city for the first time.”

“But what remained of your design?”

“What love could serve.”

The words moved through the garden. Some leaves trembled. Seren saw it. She held the orb closer to her.

“What do you want me to do?”

Nahla stood in front of her.

“Nothing you don't want.”

“The garden is not growing.”

“No.”

“You know how to fix her.”

“Maybe.”

“Then why don't you do it?”

“Because this garden doesn't just need soil and water. It needs your permission to come alive.”

“Why my permission?”

“Because you closed her.”

Seren looked at the crystal ball.

“If I open it, the plants can influence each other.”

“Yes.”

“One tree can take up more space than another.”

“Then we will listen to what both need.”

“A root can open a path.”

“Then the path can change.”

“A flower can grow in a place where it was not planned.”

Joel smiled.

“Those are usually the most beautiful.”

Seren walked towards the smooth lake. Her reflection immediately appeared on the surface. Not one version of herself, but many. Seren

seeing the garden for the first time. Seren who arranged the plants. Seren loosening roots. Seren placing the last flower in glass. Seren who waited for perfection. None of the images condemned her. They only made visible.

“On earth,” she said, “I lost a garden.”

No one interrupted her.

“My family lived on the same land for generations. We knew every tree. Every watercourse. Then people came and said the land should be used differently.”

Machines appeared in the lake. Turbulent earth. Cut down trees. Broken irrigation canals.

“They called it progress. Everything became more efficient. Straighter. More productive.”

Seren looked at the rigid rows of her heavenly garden.

“And later I did the same thing here.”

“Not to destroy,” said Mei.”

“No. To never lose anything again.”

She looked at the crystal ball.

“But I protected her from life itself.”

Nahla stood next to her.

“Would you like to receive the flower as it really is?”

“I already have her, right?”

“You have her form. Her circumstances. Her possible future.”

“What's missing?”

“That she can surprise you.”

Seren started to cry. Her tears fell on the smooth lake. This time circles formed. Small at first. Then bigger. The circles reached the banks and

passed through the waterways. Wherever the water moved, the roots trembled. Seren looked at the orb.

“What should I do?”

“Ask her,” said Joel.

“A flower cannot speak.”

The nameless figure turned into a shape that resembled a flower. Her colors opened like leaves.

“Not with your words,” she said.”

Seren held the orb in front of her. She wasn't looking at the ideal shape. Not to the symmetry. She looked at the thin roots pressing against the glass.

“Do you want to go outside?”

The flower bent its stem towards the wall. Seren inhaled deeply. Then she let go of the ball. The glass fell. It hovered for a moment just above the ground. Then it turned into water. The flower descended softly into the wet earth. Her roots spread out. Not neat. Not evenly. They made their own way between stones, other roots and small openings in the ground. The flower grew. Not straight up. She leaned toward the nameless figure. One of her tendrils gently wrapped itself around the creature's changing arm. At that same moment a movement went through the entire garden.

The water started to flow. Leaves opened. The perfect rows were broken by roots that found each other. Branches grew over paths. Flowers appeared between stones. Grass grew tall in some places and stayed low elsewhere. Birds descended. Insects appeared like little flying jewels. From the ocean came a wind that carried scents through the garden. The trees made noise. Not just through their leaves. Their roots sang underground. Nahla knelt and placed both hands on the earth. Tears of joy streamed down her face.

“They pass on to each other what they receive.”

Seren looked around. Her garden was not destroyed. The original circles were still visible. The waterways still largely followed her design. The tree in the middle was still there. But everything moved. Everything answered.

Everything was alive. A large branch grew above Seren, providing shade. A fruit fell into her open hands. She looked at Nahla.

“This tree bore no fruit.”

“He had no one to give them to.”

Seren bit into the fruit. She closed her eyes. The flavor spread through the garden like a golden glow. Joel also picked a fruit.

“Is that allowed?”

The branch leaned towards him and placed another one in his hand.

“I think so.”

Aven picked a small piece from the fruit. Arion lay down under a tree.

“This is better.”

“Can you show up unexpectedly now?” Elias asked.”

“I never left.”

The nameless figure stood among the flowers. Plants grew not only around her, but also through her colors. She absorbed their hues without losing herself. Suddenly she spoke.

“I know something.”

Everyone became silent.

“What do you know?” Joel asked.”

“I know what I am not.”

Seren looked at her.

“You're not what?”

“I am not an opportunity that anyone has to complete.”

The Garden Comes Alive

The garden responded with a wave of blossoms.

“Then what are you?” Elias asked.”

The figure looked at the living world.

“Someone who becomes.”

Nahla smiled.

“That applies to all of us.”

“Here too?”

“Especially here.”

The creature looked at Jesus. He stood under the central tree. No one had seen Him appear. A white flower was in His hand.

“Isn't becoming the same as being imperfect?” the figure asked.”

“No,” Jesus replied. “A song is not imperfect because the next note has yet to be sounded.”

“And what if I don't know what tone that is yet?”

“Then you can listen.”

Jesus did not attach the white flower to her body. He told her simply.

“Would you like to receive this?”

The figure held out her hands. When she touched the flower, a movement went through its colors. For the first time, some shades lasted longer. Not fixed. Recognizable.

“This is not a name,” she said.”

“No.”

“What is it?”

“A memory of this moment.”

“Why do I need a reminder?”

“Because becoming does not mean leaving behind everything you have been.”

The figure held the flower to her chest. There she remained visible as a small white light. The map appeared above the lake. The sign of the seed in the closed circle did not break open. The circle turned into two hands. No hands capturing the seed. Hands that received it. Below it were words: PERFECT LIFE IS PERFECT RECEIVING AND GIVING. Seren read them.

“What should I do now?”

Jesus looked into the garden.

“What do you want to do?”

She thought for a long time.

“I want to learn how to garden.”

Nahla laughed.

“Then you must first learn how much you cannot control.”

“Will you teach me that?”

“I can practice it with you.”

Seren held out her hand. Nahla accepted her. The garden became their first lesson. Not everyone would travel further. Nahla looked at the plants as if she were hearing a conversation that would last for many years-or centuries-to come. Elias knew what she was going to say before she spoke.

“I’ll stay here.”

Joel looked disappointed.

“Aren't you going to the next world?”

“This is my next world.”

“But you are one of the seven traveling companions.”

Nahla put her hand on his head.

“I remain so.”

“Even when you're here?”

“Distance does not break our connection.”

Her point remained visible on the map. Just like David's. Two traveling companions were left behind. And yet we did not become smaller. It became more spacious. Nahla hugged Mei, Liora, Samir, Elias and Joel. She bowed her head to Aven and then knelt by Arion.

“Take care of them a little.”

The wolf looked at her.

“A little?”

“Not too noticeable.”

“I can do that.”

Seren and Nahla walked into the garden together. Where they passed, the plants did not bow in obedience. They grew towards them out of joy. The nameless figure watched them go.

“Why do people stay behind when they belong to us?”

Mei replied:

“Because belonging together does not mean that everyone has to follow the same path.”

“Doesn't saying goodbye hurt?”

“Not in this world as on earth.”

“Then what does it do?”

Mei searched for words.

“It makes visible how much a meeting has come to mean.”

The creature touched the white flower on her chest.

“Then I feel farewell.”

In the distance the ocean opened up. Not because the water dispersed. A long path of living waves appeared. Each wave carried an image. A star. A building. A face. A broken mirror. Samir became silent. The images came

closer and closer. Then he heard music. A perfect agreement. So pure that all other sounds in the garden began to disappear. The birds were silent. The leaves stopped rustling. Even the singing roots became silent. Samir pulled his instrument towards him.

“What is that?”

Ithamar appeared at the shore.

“A song without mistakes.”

“Who's playing it?”

“Nobody.”

Samir listened. The agreement remained perfect. Unchangeable. Beautiful. And the longer it sounded, the less room was left for anything else. The color disappeared from Samir's face.

“It receives no response.”

“No,” said Ithamar.”

“Why won't it stop?”

“Because it is made to drown out every imperfection.”

Samir looked at his instrument. One of his strings began to fade. Then another. The perfect agreement came closer. A new sign appeared on the map: A musical note in a closed mirror. Ithamar looked at the remaining travelers.

“The garden wouldn't grow.”

He turned to Samir.

“The next song doesn't want to let anything else live.”

CHAPTER 9

The Perfect Chord



The agreement did not come closer because it moved. It got bigger. At first it had sounded over the ocean. Then it was among the trees, underground, and even in Elias' breathing. Every other sound became fainter. The birds opened their beaks, but there was no sound. The water moved without rustling. Joel said something. Elias saw his lips move, but heard no voice. Just the agreement. Perfect. Bright. Unchangeable.

Samir grabbed his instrument with both hands. Of the many strings, three were still visible. The rest was not broken. They had become transparent, as if their own sound was no longer necessary. Samir stroked the first remaining string. No sound. The second was also silent. With the third, Elias felt a small tremor, but that too disappeared into the chord. Samir looked at Ithamar.

“Why can't I answer?”

The angel spoke. His mouth moved, but even his voice was drowned out. Elias did not understand his words with his ears. The meaning reached him like light: Because the chord leaves no space between the notes. The nameless figure changed shape. Her colors retreated. The violet and gold became paler. The white flower on her chest remained visible, but her light dimmed. Mei stood next to her and put an arm around her. The figure looked at her.

“Am I disappearing?”

Her voice was inaudible. Yet Mei understood her.

“Not for us.”

“I can't find my color anymore.”

“Then we'll keep her until you can see her again.”

The figure became calmer. Elias looked at the path of living waves. This ran from the island to a building floating on the ocean. It was round and completely reflective. There were no windows. No visible entrance. The perfect agreement came from there. The map appeared above the water. The musical note in the closed mirror pulsed to the rhythm of the sound.

“We have to go there,” Elias said.

He didn't hear himself. The others understood him anyway. They said goodbye to Nahla and Seren. Nahla placed her hand against the trunk of the central tree. Immediately a thin tendril grew towards Samir. A small seed pod hung from the end. Samir accepted her. As soon as he touched her, he felt a rhythm. Not regularly. Two quick pulses. A rest. One slow one. Another rest. Then three short ones.

“What is this?” he asked.

Nahla smiled. Life, formed her lips. Samir carefully tucked the seed pod into his clothes. The travelers boarded the first living wave. The water carried them. The agreement became even stronger. Not louder, because it didn't need any more volume. It simply filled any space in which another sound could emerge. Arion walked next to Elias. His paws touched the waves, but there was no splashing. The wolf looked visibly displeased.

“Do you miss your footsteps?” Elias asked.

Arion answered, but Elias heard nothing. Yet he read the words in his eyes: Without sound the ground does not know that I have touched it. Elias thought about that. The Accord wasn't just a song that didn't receive a response. It also left no trace of meeting. The reflective dome became larger. Elias saw their reflections in the surface. But they were wrong. His reflection walked exactly upright. Every movement was controlled. No hesitation. No searching look. Mei's reflection kept smiling. Not out of joy, but as if it were impossible to show anything else.

Liora wore a perfectly curled drawing in the mirror. No loose corners. No corrections. Joel walked quietly between them. He didn't look at the

animals, the waves or Aven. His wonder had been replaced by obedience. The nameless figure had one solid shape in the mirror. Human. Symmetrical. Understandable. Samir's reflection was not carrying an instrument. He didn't need it anymore.

"That's not us," said Mei."

No sound. The reflections continued to smile. Elias stood in front of the dome and looked for an entrance. There was no break in the surface anywhere. Liora placed her hand against the wall. Immediately lines appeared. They formed a door that fit so perfectly into the dome that it had been invisible. Liora pushed. The door didn't move. She pulled. Nothing. Then she stepped back and examined the proportions.

"The door won't open," she said."

"Why not?" Elias asked."

"An opening would break the perfect circle."

"Then why is there a door?"

"To complete the shape."

"But not to let anyone in?"

"No."

Joël walked to the mirror wall.

Music Without Space

Aven sat on his shoulder. The bird tried to sing, but its throat made no sound. Joël touched the spot where his reflection stood with one finger. The reflected boy looked at him. Then he moved his lips. You don't have to ask anything more here. Joel shook his head. His reflection continued: Everything is already perfect here. Joel pointed to Aven.

"But I can't hear him."

That's not necessary.

"Why not?"

Because his song may contain mistakes. Joel looked indignant.

“Aven doesn't make mistakes.”

His reflection smiled. Every unexpected note is a mistake. Aven pecked at the wall. A small crack appeared. The agreement faltered. Just a fraction of a moment. But in that opening they heard the ocean. One drop. One wing beat. One breath. Then the mirror recovered. The agreement was struck again. Samir came closer. He didn't look at his reflection. He put his ear to the wall.

“Someone's in there.”

“How do you know that?” Elias asked.”

“I don't hear a voice.”

“No one hears anything.”

“That's not what I mean. There is a silence that is not part of the agreement.”

He walked past the dome and stopped a few meters away.

“Here.”

Liora examined the surface.

“There is nothing.”

“Precisely.”

Samir placed his instrument on the waves. It floated. Then he took out Nahla's seed pod. The irregular rhythm still pulsed in his hand. Two short ones. Rest. One long one. Rest. Three short ones. Samir held the seed against the mirror. The chord tried to record the rhythm. The two short pulses were equalized. The long one became shorter. The rests disappeared. Within moments, only an even measure remained. Samir withdrew his hand. The original rhythm returned.

“The agreement cannot tolerate any difference,” Mei said.”

“More than that,” Samir replied. “It only recognizes difference as something that needs to be corrected.”

He looked at the dome.

“I know this.”

“From where?” Elias asked.

“From myself.”

The mirror wall changed. A room appeared on Earth. A young Samir sat with his instrument in front of a group of evaluators. He played a complicated piece. Every tone was correct. Afterwards, the assessors wrote down marks on forms. One of them said:

“Technically perfect.”

Another added:

“But we didn’t hear you.”

Young Samir looked confused.

“Isn’t the piece written exactly like that?”

“Yes.”

“Then I played well.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then what’s missing?”

The evaluator searched for words.

“You.”

The picture changed. Samir sat alone in a room. He played the same music again. With every little deviation he stopped and started all over again. For hours. The mistakes became fewer. The music too.

“I was afraid,” Samir said, “that my own voice would damage the song.”

“And later?” Mei asked.

“Later I learned to improvise. But even then, sometimes I only wanted to receive answers that matched what I was already playing.”

He put his hand against the mirror.

“This agreement was not created by one wrong intention.”

The dome showed new images. Musicians from many eras. Composers. Singers. Communities that longed for a perfect song of praise. People who sought purity. Order. Unit. Beauty without disruption. Their desires were not bad. But somewhere they had come to believe that harmony could only exist when difference was resolved. That hesitant voices must first remain silent. That sadness did not fit into a song of joy. That questions disturbed faith. That silence only had value as preparation for the next prescribed tone. All those desires had found a form. The dome.

The agreement.

“Who's inside?” Elias asked.”

Samir closed his eyes.

“The one who sang the first different note.”

He placed his instrument against the wall again. Although the strings had become invisible, he placed his fingers where they had been. He played. There was no sound. Yet one string moved. Not visible. Tangible. Samir didn't play a melody. He sought the silence in the agreement. With each repetition he stopped in a different place. None of the rests remained. She immediately filled the deal. Then Mei understood.

“You don't have to make silence.”

“What then?”

“You must receive the silence that is already there.”

Samir rested both hands on his instrument. He didn't try to produce anything anymore. The agreement went further. Perfect. Unchangeable. But beneath the sound Samir heard something. A breath. Very fast. As if someone had been trying for a long time to take up as little space as possible. Samir breathed. Not to change the rhythm. Only so that the other no longer breathed alone. Mei followed. Then Elias. Liora. Joel.

The Uncertain Note

Even Arion slowed his breathing down to the same pace. The nameless figure looked at them. She didn't need solid lungs, but her form began to expand and contract with the rhythm. Aven rested against Joel's neck. His small chest moved with it. Seven breaths outside the dome. One breath in there. The perfect chord sounded on. But for the first time there was a connection that it had not produced. Samir waited. Then he whispered:

“You don't have to sing in tune.”

The dome shook.

“You don't have to sing at all.”

A small discoloration appeared in the mirror.

“We keep listening.”

A tone came from the dome. False. Sharp. Insecure. The chord immediately grabbed her and tried to pull her to the right height. Samir added his own voice. He sang the same uncertain tone. Not to mock her. Not to make the mistake bigger. To not leave her alone. Mei added her voice. Then Elias. Liora sang lower. Joel higher. The nameless figure responded with her violet-gold color. It wasn't a nice deal. Not yet. The tones grated. They searched. Some came together and parted again. But every voice remained audible.

The perfect chord tried to drown them out. Samir didn't sing louder. He listened more deeply. A second uncertain tone came from the dome. Then a third. A melody emerged. Fragile. Simple. Alive. The mirror wall cracked. Thousands of thin lines spread across the surface. In each piece of mirror a different reflection of the travelers appeared. Elias laughing. Elias listening. Elias hesitantly. Elias silently. No image was complete. Together they showed that a person did not fit into one perfect mold. The cracks widened. The agreement began to fall apart. Not in chaos.

To agree. What had seemed one unchanging sound turned out to be countless notes captured in perfection. They were released. Some sounded clear. Other rough. Some carried joy. Different seriousness, longing or

quiet wonder. The mirror dome opened like a flower. A young woman sat inside. She had her knees up and her hands pressed to her ears. Her clothes were made of layers of musical notes. Every note was written at exactly the same height. Samir sat down some distance away. The woman looked up.

“Is it over?”

“The agreement is.”

“Did I damage it?”

“No.”

“I sang wrong.”

“You sang differently.”

“That's the same.”

“Not here.”

She looked at the opened dome. The released voices moved like birds above the ocean.

“Then who broke the song?”

Samir smiled.

“It broke open when it finally received an answer it couldn't control.”

The young woman rose to her feet.

“Are you a musician?”

“Sometimes.”

“Are you playing without mistakes?”

“No.”

“Then why does anyone listen to you?”

“Because music is not an exam.”

She looked at his instrument. The strings slowly became visible again.

“What is music then?”

Samir held it out to her.

“A place where one freedom can meet another.”

The woman reached out her hand, but did not yet touch the strings.

“My name is Caelia.”

“I'm Samir.”

“I don't know your music.”

“Fine.”

“Why?”

“Then we can still surprise each other.”

Caelia touched one chord. The tone was clear. She played a second one. It collided with the first. Caelia withdrew her hand. Samir waited.

“Do I have to do it again?” she asked.”

“Do you want that?”

“Yes.”

“Then don't do it the same.”

She played again. The second note still clashed, but then moved into an unexpected harmony. Samir replied. Caelia played back. A conversation slowly arose. The garden behind them began to sound again. The leaves rustled. The water found its voice. Birds added short calls without waiting for permission. The nameless figure regained its colors. Stronger than before. She sat next to Caelia and let violet light flow over the strings. Caelia looked surprised.

“What tone is that?”

“I don't know,” the figure replied.”

“Can we give him a name?”

“Maybe later.”

Caelia smiled.

“Good.”

The map appeared above the open dome. The closed mirror around the musical note was gone. Instead, many different notes were arranged around an open space. Below it appeared words: HARMONY IS NOT THAT NO VOICE DIFFERENT.

HARMONY IS THAT LOVE LEARNS TO RECEIVE EVERY VOICE.
Ithamar looked at Samir.

“Your assignment here is not yet completed.”

Samir stopped playing.

“I’ll stay.”

Elias expected it. Yet it felt like goodbye again.

“Are you going to help Caelia?”

Samir looked at the countless vacant votes.

“Not just her. This chord contains music from many worlds. Some voices never learned to be heard.”

“How long will that take?”

Samir laughed.

“Hopefully for a very long time.”

He gave Elias his instrument. Elias accepted it in surprise.

“What should I do with this?”

“Listen.”

“I can barely play it.”

“That might be an advantage in this case.”

Samir pointed to Nahla's seed pod, which was still in his clothing.

“I keep the rhythm. You carry the space.”

“What room?”

“The space for an answer you don't expect.”

Elias slung the instrument over his shoulder. Samir hugged him. Then he said goodbye to Mei, Liora and Joël. Aven stroked his hand with a golden feather. Arion looked at Samir.

“Your music got better when you stopped trying to impress.”

“Thank you, I guess.”

“It wasn't a compliment.”

“Then I will receive it as one.”

Samir joined Caelia and the gathered votes. Music spread across the ocean. Not one song. Many songs that listened to each other. The remaining travelers stood on the living waves. Four more people. Elias. Mei. Liora. Joel. With Aven, Arion and the nameless figure. Seven points remained on the map. David, Nahla and Samir's points were further away, but as clear as ever. The following route appeared. No road over the water. A line went straight up, to a place behind the three arcs of light. There was a broken mirror there. Not closed like the dome.

Truly broken. A different past became visible in each piece. Elias saw a child. An old woman. A soldier. A mother. A king. A stranger walking alone through a dark room. Thousands of stories. One golden thread ran between the shards. Mei touched the map. All statues turned towards her. Ithamar spoke:

“The perfect song admitted no dissenting voice.”

He pointed to the mirror above them.

“This world knows every voice, but not a single complete story.”

“What happened there?” Elias asked.

Ithamar looked at Mei.

“There they learned to remember everything.”

“Is that wrong?”

“No.”

“Then what's missing?”

The mirror pieces started moving faster. Memories flowed together. Joy next to sadness. Fact next to interpretation. Own experience next to someone else's story. Mei heard thousands of voices saying: This is how it happened. But every voice said something different. Ithamar continued:

“They have not yet learned how different memories can dwell together in the truth.”

The golden thread broke. All the shards fell at once. Mei stretched out her hands. And the sky filled with stories that no one could tell apart anymore.

CHAPTER 10

The Mirror of a Thousand Memories



The shards fell without hitting the ocean. They lingered around the travelers. Thousands of mirror pieces. Big enough to show a face. Small enough to hold only part of it. A memory stirred in each fragment. Elias saw a child sitting under a table while adults argued above him. In another sherd, a woman stood by an open grave. Farther away, a crowd cheered at the homecoming of someone who had been away for years. Joy. Loss. Meeting. Misunderstanding. Stories from all centuries moved next to and through each other. The voices grew louder. That's how it happened. No, like that.

You left me. I thought you wanted to be alone. You never listened to me. I didn't know you were trying to say something. None of the voices sounded hostile. Yet they didn't fit together. Every memory was clear. Every experience really. But no single shard contained the whole story. Mei held her hands out. The golden thread that had connected the fragments lay broken before her. The two ends moved through the room like thin ropes of light. She tried to grab them. As soon as her fingers touched one end, a memory appeared. A kitchen on earth.

A rainy afternoon. Mei stood at the counter. Her mother sat opposite her at the table. Between them lay an opened letter.

"Why didn't you tell me?" asked young Mei."

Her mother looked at her hands.

"I wanted to protect you."

"By pretending like nothing happened?"

"You were already having such a hard time."

"That's why I wanted to know what happened."

"I thought you were going to collapse."

"You thought I was weak."

"No."

"That's exactly what you thought."

The reflection froze. Mei withdrew her hand. The image did not disappear.

"What happened?" Elias asked cautiously."

Mei continued to look at the shard.

"My mother was sick. She knew it months before she told me."

"Why did she keep it a secret?"

"She said she wanted to protect me."

"Did you believe her?"

"Not then."

"And now?"

Mei did not immediately respond.

"I think she actually thought that."

"But?"

"Protection wasn't the only thing."

The shard turned. Now they saw the same kitchen from a different place. Not through Mei's eyes. By her mother's. Young Mei stood at the counter. Her face was pale. Her hands were shaking, though she tried to hide it. The mother looked at her daughter. In her memory she saw not only the grown woman, but also the little girl who used to run to her when there was a

thunderstorm. She thought about past losses. Of nights where Mei hadn't been able to sleep. Of the fear that her daughter would break again. But beneath that concern lay something else. Shame.

The mother didn't want to be sick. She didn't want to become dependent. She didn't want her daughter to see her weakness.

"I wanted to protect you," she said."

And in her experience that was true. Not the whole truth. A real one indeed. Mei touched the second shard. The two statues were hung next to each other.

"My memory says she shut me out," she said. "Her memory says she tried to hold me."

"Which one is correct?" Joel asked."

"Both."

"But that's not possible, is it?"

Liora stood next to him.

"A building can look different from two streets and still be the same building."

"But one street can't say there is a door while the other says there is no door?"

"Maybe the door is only on one side."

Joel thought about that.

"Then one person sees more."

"On that point, yes. On another point, perhaps less so."

Around them the shards continued to speak. The votes didn't want to win. They longed to be fully seen. Elias looked at the broken golden thread.

"Can't we simply put the memories next to each other?"

"They've already tried that," Ithamar said."

The angel stood among the shards. Hundreds of images were reflected in his wings, but none remained trapped within them.

“What went wrong?” Elias asked.

Two Memories

“They collected every perspective, but that did not mean they found the coherence.”

“More information did not bring unity.”

“No. Anyone who owns all the loose stones does not yet have a house.”

Liora looked at the fragments.

“Then we need a design.”

Ithamar shook his head.

“A story is not a building.”

“But it does need coherence.”

“Yes.”

“What's the difference?”

“In a building, the architect can determine in advance where each brick will go. In a shared story, no one is allowed to make the other a building material.”

The nameless figure moved between the mirrors. With each shard she briefly took a different shape. A child. A father. An old woman. A bird. A tree. Then she returned to her changing colors.

“Why do the memories make me change?” she asked.

“Because you don't yet have your own past that determines how you look,” said Mei.

“Is that okay?”

“It makes you receptive.”

“And dangerous,” said Arion.”

The creature looked at the wolf.

“Why dangerous?”

“Because you can forget that receiving is not the same as becoming.”

The figure became silent.

“If I receive your memory, don't I become a little bit like you?”

“No,” Arion replied. “You get to know me. That's something different.”

“How do I know the difference?”

“By returning to the one who knows you before you receive anything from us.”

The creature looked at Jesus. But He was nowhere visible. The colors in her body began to move restlessly. Too many faces appeared at once. Her own variability was swamped by the thousands of memories. Joel walked towards her.

“Stick to my vote.”

“I hear thousands of voices.”

“Then you don't have to wear them all at once.”

“But if I don't listen, I'm leaving someone out.”

Mei came to stand next to her.

“Listening doesn't mean taking everything in.”

“Then what?”

“That you give the other person space without leaving your own place.”

“Where is my seat?”

The question passed through the mirror world. All the shards turned towards the nameless creature. Thousands of stories were reflected in her translucent body. Her colors almost completely disappeared. Mei took her hand.

“Here.”

“Where?”

“With us.”

“But who am I if I don't reflect anything of you?”

Mei looked into her eyes.

“Someone whom Christ loved before we met her.”

The white flower on the creature's chest lit up. The memory of the living garden. Not a definition of who she was. An encounter that had truly become hers. Her colors returned. First violet. Then gold. Then shades that no one knew a name for. The thousands of reflections left her body. They continued to move around her, but no longer took her over.

“Thank you,” she said.”

Mei squeezed her hand gently. The travelers also had to learn to listen without disappearing. A large shard floated towards Elias. In it he saw a day from his youth. He was sitting in the living room with a school report on his lap. The grades were good, except for math. His father stood by the window.

“I know you can do better,” David said.”

Elias had remembered the words as disappointment. For years he had believed that his father mainly saw what was not good enough. The shard turned. Now Elias saw that same afternoon through David's eyes. His father looked at the report and thought about his own childhood. Of opportunities he didn't get. To his desire for Elias to use his abilities. But there was also pride in him. Lots of pride. He'd just never learned to say it without immediately adding an exhortation.

“I know you can do better.”

What he meant was: I believe in you. What Elias heard was: You are not yet enough. Both memories were true. Not because both meanings were the same. Because words could cause more than the person who spoke them intended. Elias touched the shard.

“My father wanted to encourage me.”

A second image appeared. Young Elias who looked at his report card and seemed to grow smaller.

“And I felt rejected.”

The two statues moved towards each other. They did not merge. Space opened up between them. An open place in which both intention and elaboration could exist. Mei saw it.

“That's it.”

“What?”

“The truth is not that we have to choose one of the two memories, nor that we mix them until the difference disappears.”

“Then what?”

“Truth makes room for what was intended and for what was received.”

Liora looked at the golden thread.

“Then the connection should not pass through the mirrors.”

“Why not?”

“Because we try to connect the memories to each other.”

“Where should she walk then?”

Mei looked at the open space between Elias' two statues.

“In between.”

She took the two broken ends of the gold thread. This time she didn't try to tie them directly together. She placed one end next to Elias's memory and the other to David's. She left an open loop in between. The wire started to glow. A third image appeared in the open space. Jesus. Not as someone who had been visibly present in the original room. And yet He was there. He was not on Elias' side against David. Not even on David's side versus Elias. He stood between them with his hands open.

In one hand He carried the love that David had not been able to fully express. In the other, the sadness that Elias had actually felt. He denied neither. He received both. The golden thread ran through His hands.

Truth Between the Stories

The two memories were connected without losing their individuality. Elias felt something open. Not forgiveness-that had already happened. Not restoration-that had also taken place. It was fuller insight. He saw that God's truth was greater than pointing out the correct version. Truth was reality seen in the light of perfect love. The shards around them began to move more slowly. Mei stood in the middle of the stories.

"You don't have to become the same," she said."

The voices fell silent.

"No memory has to disappear to make way for another."

The shards came closer.

"But no single memory is the whole story."

A man appeared in a mirror piece.

"I know what I saw."

"Yes," said Mei."

A woman in another shard replied:

"And I know what was done to me."

"That is not denied either."

"Then who decides what is true?"

Mei looked at the open space where Jesus stood.

"The One who knows every heart completely and does not separate truth from love."

"And our memories?"

“They may come to Him as they are.”

The shards began to group together. Not one big mirror. Pairs, circles and open patterns emerged. There was space between the different perspectives in each story. The same golden light always appeared in that space. Sometimes it became clear that someone had made a mistake. Sometimes a good intention actually caused damage. Sometimes two people experienced the same event from a different place. Sometimes a long-held belief simply turned out to be untrue. None of these discoveries humbled anyone. Truth here did not feel like exposure by an enemy.

She was coming home from too small a story. Joel looked at a shard in which two brothers fought over a wooden boat as children. One remembered that the boat had been taken from him. The other that he just wanted to borrow it.

“Who was right?” Joel asked.”

Mei looked at both images.

“The boat belonged to the first brother.”

“So the second one was wrong.”

“Yes. He took something without permission.”

“Then why do we need his memory?”

“Because truth not only tells what someone did. It also shows why he came to understand himself differently.”

In the memory of the second brother they saw a child who wanted to play with the other so badly that he could not tolerate his refusal.

“His desire did not make his action right,” Mei said. “But if we only see his action, we do not know him fully.”

“What if we only see his desire?”

“Then we don't take his brother's experience seriously.”

Joel nodded.

“So love does not choose one half.”

“Love chooses the whole truth.”

The golden thread grew. It no longer ran as a single line between the shards. A network of open connections emerged. Every memory kept its own place. Yet no story stood alone anymore. The nameless figure stretched out her hands. The colors from her body moved through the network. Not to change the memories, but to make the open spaces visible.

“That's your gift,” Mei said.”

The figure looked at her questioningly.

“You don't have to take the form of every story. You can make visible where meeting is still possible.”

“Is that who I am?”

“It's something you can give.”

“Is a gift the same as a name?”

“No. But sometimes a gift helps you discover which name suits you.”

The figure thought.

“I still want to wait.”

“That's allowed.”

The mirror world changed. The shards became windows. No windows into the past into which people remained trapped. They were openings through which light from different stories entered a larger space. A landscape appeared below them. A vast library without walls. The books were not on shelves. They grew on trees, floated on water and moved through the air like birds. In the center was an open square. People from the memories met there. Not everyone spoke. Some simply sat next to each other and watched together what they had previously seen separately.

One mother explained why she had remained silent. A daughter told what that silence had done to her. A leader heard how his good decision in front of a large group had injured one invisible person. A child discovered that he had not been responsible for his parents' grief. No truth was lost. No man was reduced to his worst moment. Ithamar stood next to Mei.

“What's this place called?”

She looked at the open library.

“The Garden of Shared Memory.”

“Why a garden?”

“Because memories don't just have to be kept. They can bear fruit.”

The name appeared on the map: THE GARDEN OF SHARED MEMORY. Below it were words: TRUTH DOES NOT DESTROY THE OTHER'S STORY.

SHE BRINGS EVERY STORY INTO THE LIGHT OF CHRIST. Mei inhaled deeply. Elias knew what was coming.

“You stay here.”

She looked at him.

“Yes.”

Even though he expected it, her answer felt different than saying goodbye to David, Nahla, or Samir. Mei had been by his side from the beginning. Her hand had been holding his when the first path of light appeared. She had slowed him down when he wanted to run forward. She had reminded him of connection when he looked alone at the assignment.

“He asked.”

Mei smiled.

“There is no 'already' here.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes.”

They walked together to the edge of the open square. New conversations started around them. The golden threads moved like sunlight between the trees.

“I thought we would complete this journey together,” Elias said.

“We are.”

“But you're not coming to the next place.”

“Maybe this is my next place.”

“Nahla said that too.”

“She was right.”

Elias was looking at the map. Mayus' point remained visible, but moved to the Garden of Shared Memory.

“We're getting stretched out.”

“And yet it doesn't break.”

“How do you know that?”

Mei put her hand against his chest.

“Because connectedness is not just the same direction. Sometimes it consists of a love that gives space to different vocations.”

“What if I miss you?”

“This does not mean that anything is wrong.”

“What does it mean?”

“That my presence has been given a place in you.”

Elias felt tears in his eyes. No tears of loss. Gratitude too great to remain alone inside. Mei embraced him.

“You don't have to take everyone to the end of the same journey.”

“Am I still the carrier of the map?”

“Maybe you're wearing her just by letting people come to their place.”

She said goodbye to Liora and Joel. Aven sang softly to her. The nameless figure laid the white flower in Meiün's hands and then received it back. Arion sat down before Mei.

“You listened better than most people.”

“Thank you.”

"That wasn't a compliment either."

"What was it?"

"An observation."

Mei bent over and put her arms around his neck.

"Then I receive her as a compliment."

Arion allowed it. Then Mei walked to the people who waited among the memories. An older woman saw her and held out a hand. Mei sat next to her. She was listening. The map changed again. Three more people travelled: Elias. With Aven, Arion and the nameless stature. But seven points remained on the map. Ithamar looked at the new pattern.

"You are beginning to understand that a journey does not get smaller when someone reaches his destination."

"Why exactly do seven points remain? asked Joel."

"Maybe it's not just people anymore."

"What then?"

"Gave." Connections. Testimonials. The ways you carry each other."

Liora pointed to one point that constantly changed color.

"Is that her?"

The nameless stature came closer. The changing point moved with her.

"Probably," said ithamar."

"And the other six?"

The angel didn't answer. A new opening appeared above the Garden of Shared Memory. There was no landscape behind that. A single table was in a white room. On the table were seven objects: A piece of raw wood. A seed box. A string. A golden wire. A roll of drawings. A white feather. And an empty place. Liora looked at her drawings.

"That role is mine."

Joel pointed to the feather.

“- And that's from Aven.”

Elias recognized the wood of David's workshop, the seed of Nahla, the string of Samir, and the thread of Mei.

“What should be in the empty place?”

Ithamar looked at him.

“That's what you need to discover.”

The travellers entered the white room. As soon as the last of them passed the threshold, a throne appeared behind the table. Not the Throne of God. A human seat. Beautifully decorated. Empty. Above the seat were words: **FOR THOSE WHO CAN OVERVIEW THE WHOLE**. Elias looked at the objects of his friends. Then to the empty place. The map in his hands became heavy. For the first time since the beginning of the journey she did not feel like an invitation. She felt like power. And from the empty throne a voice sounded:

“Elias, have a seat. Then you will finally understand where all roads lead.”

The Empty Throne



The voice sounded friendly. Not tempting. Not threatening. She spoke as if she offered Elias something he had always wanted to receive. Overview. Coherence. An answer to the question of how all roads were connected. Elias looked at the throne. The seat was made of material he didn't recognize. Sometimes it looked like wood. Then stone. Then clear glass in which galaxies moved. In the armrests were images cut out. The First City, the Valley of the First Answer. The Open City. The living garden. The open mirror dome. The Garden of Shared Memory.

All the places they had visited. The remaining companions were also visible. David in his workshop. Nahla among growing plants. Samir next to Caelia and the free voices. Mei by the trees full of memories. Elias felt desire. Not to rule them. To keep understanding them. On the map, their points had been further and further apart. He knew that connection was not broken by distance. Yet something in him wanted to hold the lines. Make sure no one was lost. That every assignment fit the bigger picture. That he didn't miss anything.

"Take place," "Turned the voice."

Joel walked around the throne.

"Who's talking?"

The seat didn't answer him.

The nameless form moved closer to the throne. Her colours reflected in the shiny surface. This time they were not reduced to one solid form. Hundreds of possible forms appeared. A child. A woman. A winged

creature. A bright tree. A cloud. An unknown form without any resemblance to anything Elias knew.

“He's showing me what I can be, she said.”

“Is that all right?” asked Joel.”

“Don't know.”

Liora studied the table with the seven objects. Her scroll drawings were still between the string and the white feather.

“The throne is not the center of this space, she said.”

Elias was watching the setup.

“He's behind the table, isn't he?”

“Yes. But look at the floor.”

Thin lines ran through white space. They formed circles around the table. Each line came together at the seven objects. No line went to the throne.

“Then he was added later, Elias said.”

“Or it's become visible because of something we brought.”

“What?”

Liora looked at the map in his hands.

“The need for overview.”

The map felt even heavier. Elias put her on the table. Immediately images appeared above the seven objects. Above the wood he saw David. Not only in his workshop, but in many possible workshops. In some he taught children. Elsewhere he built bridges, tables or musical instruments. Nahla appeared above the seed box. Thousands of gardens grew around her. Above the string Elias saw Samir in conversation with music from unknown worlds. The golden thread showed Mei among countless memories. Elias moved his hand over the footage. They reacted. He could look closer. Further away.

Comparing the possibilities. Make connections visible.

“With the throne, you can follow them all, ”Said the voice.”

Elias was watching David. His father raised a piece of wood. A group of students gathered around him.

“Can I talk to them too?”

“Take place.”

“Can they hear me?”

“Take place.”

The throne answered no questions. He only offered himself. Arion walked to the seat and sniffed at the lower step. Then he ran away.

“What do you smell? asked Joel.”

“Nothing.”

The Promise of Perspective

“Is that weird?”

“Everything that really exists carries traces of encounter. This throne smells like no one.”

Liora kneeled at the foot of the seat. There was no dust. No wear and tear. No sign anyone had ever been there.

“Who's it made for? She asked.”

The voice answered:

“For the person who can oversee the whole.”

“Who made it?”

“Take your seat, Elias.”

Liora got up.

“He doesn't know.”

“A throne cannot know anything, Joel said.”

“Precisely.”

The nameless figure touched an armrest. Immediately her colors stopped moving. One of the possible forms became stronger than the other. Human. High, radiant. A crown appeared around her head. She pulled her hand back. The crown disappeared.

“He's not just showing me what I can become, she said. He's choosing.”

“On what basis? asked Elias.”

“From what seems most complete.”

Joel stood next to her.

“However, you do not have to choose the most complete form.”

“Which one is it?”

“The form in which you can actually be present.”

The stature looked at the throne.

“Is completeness wrong?”

“No,” said Liora. “But no creature is the whole.”

The voice sounded again.

“Elias, take a seat.”

This time more images appeared. Not just from their journey. Elias saw worlds they had not yet visited. A plain of living crystals. A library in which questions like lights moved through the sky. A sea in which unknown peoples built songs. A mountain where thousands of roads came together. He also saw the destination of the map. A place behind all the other places. A source of light. A stature. Christ? Elias took one step to the throne. The images became clearer.

“What do you see?” asked Joel.”

“The end of the journey.”

“Is there an end?”

"A destination then."

"God is the destination," said the boy. You told me yourself."

"Maybe the throne will show us how to get to Him."

Arion stood between Elias and the seat.

"Do you want to come to God or do you want to understand how everyone comes to God?"

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"I didn't ask."

Elias was watching the wolf.

"I want to know how everything is connected."

"Why?"

"So I don't leave anyone behind."

"They're not left behind."

"So I know their roads are good."

"Who asked you to judge that?"

Elias was silent. The throne seemed to grow. The voice remained warm.

"You can't carry the map without an overview."

Elias looked at the bright surface on the table. Maybe that was true. From the beginning, he had carried the map. People had looked at him when a direction had to be chosen. First David. Then Nahla. Mei, Elias did not order them to stay behind. Each had received his or her calling. But what if he missed something? What if their separate paths didn't come together later? What if it turned us into just a memory? He walked past Arion. The wolf didn't stop him.

"You're not gonna do anything?" asked Joel."

"He can only choose the throne himself."

Elias reached the first step. The map began to change. The seven points moved towards each other. The lines between them became right, clearer and more even. David's point came apart from the workshop. Nahla's point left the garden. Samir's point pulled away from Caelia. Maya's golden wire got shorter. Everything came together around Elias' own position. He saw it. And yet he set foot on the step. Immediately he heard the voices of his friends. David:

“What do you want me to build?”

Nahla:

“Where to plant”

Samir:

“Which song fits the whole?”

Mei:

“Which memory is important?”

They didn't sound like themselves. Their voices were waiting for his direction. Elias put his foot back on the floor. The points stopped moving.

“He said I'm not.”

The voice of the throne replied:

“You only need to be what the journey needs.”

“The journey does not need me as the center.”

“The whole is falling apart without a center.”

Elias looked at the seven objects.

“There's already a center.”

“Where?”

He didn't know that. The table was round. The objects were found along the edge. There was nothing in the middle. An empty space. Like in the song. Like between memories. Like inside the first letter. Elias walked to the table. He put his hand in the empty middle.

“Christ.”

Nothing happened. The throne stood. The voice said:

“It's not visible.”

“That's not necessary.”

“How do you know? He's here?”

Elias thought of Jesus' words: When do you Don't see me, don't look for me first My form. Listen to what comes alive in My presence. He looked at David's wood. What had come to life there? Service. Craftsmanship, patience. In the case of Nahla... Growth. Fertility. By Samir's string, answer. Freedom. Harmony without deletion. For Maya wire: Truth. Reception. Space for the other's story. In the case of Liora's drawings: A place where community became possible. At Avens spring: Amazement and recognition without possession. All the gifts didn't point to Elias.

Not only to the people they wore. They pointed to the love they came from.

“The center is not empty,” said Elias. It can't be occupied alone.”

The throne was shaking.

“Take place.”

“No.”

“Then you'll never see the whole thing.”

“That's not my calling.”

“You won't know how all roads come together.”

“No.”

“You will not be able to guarantee that no one is forgotten.”

Elias looked at the bright spots of his friends.

“I don't have to hold them. Christ holds us.”

The voice didn't get angry. She got softer. Almost sad.

“Then you stay finitely.”

“Yes.”

“You're still dependent.”

“Yes.”

“You'll always have to receive what you don't know.”

Elias smiled.

“That's not a deficit.”

The throne began to become transparent.

“You'll never be the centerpiece.”

“Thank God.”

The seat disappeared. Not destroyed. Unmasked as a form without a resident. Where the throne had stood, a seventh chair appeared. No royal seat. A simple chair at the round table. Now there were seven chairs. Elias. Joel. A smaller seat for Aven. A wide low place for Arion.

The Empty Place at the Table

A chair whose shape constantly changed for the nameless form. And one empty chair.

“Who is it for?” asked Joel.

Elias looked at the empty middle of the table.

“Not before Christ.”

“Why not?”

“Because He is not one of the participants who needs a place next to the others. The table exists through Him.”

“Who's sitting there?”

“The person who hasn't arrived.”

At the same time, a movement went through space. The white walls retreated. The table was now on a high plateau under an open sky. On all

sides, roads ran towards them. On each road a figure moved. Not one person. Many. Every time Elias looked at another road, the one for whom the empty chair seemed to be meant changed. A stranger. A child. An angel. A people. An animal. One question. The empty chair didn't mean anyone was missing. He meant that their community never had to be closed. Liora sat down. The scroll drawings were in front of her.

"This is not a command center."

"No," said Elias."

"Then what?"

"A council table."

Joel took next Aven place.

"What are we discussing?"

Ithamar appeared across the street.

"This depends on who sits on the empty seat."

One of the roads became clearer. Footsteps sounded. A man approached the plateau. He was wearing a simple cloak. His face was friendly, but serious. In his hands he held a broken bowl. Elias didn't recognize him. The man reached the table.

"Can I sit?"

"That's what the chair is for," said Joel."

The man took his place. He put the broken bowl in front of him.

"My name is Oren."

"What happened to the bowl? asked Elias."

"It's not broken."

Joel was watching the crack.

"It looks like it."

Oren lifted the bowl. The two halves stayed together, but there was a clear opening between them.

“She's made with space in between.”

“Why?” asked Liora.

“Since she must receive something that cannot carry a closed vessel.”

“What then?”

Oren looked at the nameless form.

“A new name.”

The colors of the creature moved quickly.

“My name?”

“Maybe.”

“Who sent you?”

“The Source of Names.”

Elias thought of Thael. To Aven. To the responsibility that came with receiving a name.

“Where is that source located?”

Ears pointed to one of the roads. In the distance were mountains of clear crystal. A river flowed up between the summits, towards a light that disappeared behind the sky.

“Oren said there are no names. They are answered there.”

The nameless figure touched the white flower on her chest.

“Are I ready to receive a name?”

“Nobody at this table can determine that for you.”

“How do I know?”

Ears put the broken bowl in her hands.

“If you no longer ask which name can explain you completely.”

The shape looked at the opening between the two halves.

“Why isn't the bowl whole?”

“She's whole.”

“But there's a breach through it.”

“This is the place where the river enters.”

Liora looked at the crystal mountains.

“Can we all come?”

Ears nodded.

“You can go with me to the place where the river begins to speak.”

“And then? asked Elias.”

“After that, only those who are called can continue.”

Joel took Aven's feather. Arion got up. The council table didn't disappear. She kept waiting on the plateau for next travelers, new questions and unknown voices. The seven objects turned into small light signs on the map. The wood. The seed. The string. The wire. The feather. And an open bowl in the middle. The travelers began the climb to the Source of Namur. But when they left the plateau, Elias looked back one more time. Someone was sitting in the empty chair. A figure in white. Jesus. He smiled. Not because Elias had finally given Him the right place.

Because Elias had learned that the place of Christ could never be occupied by human power. When Elias looked again, the chair was empty. But the table was glowing. And all roads remained open.

The Source of Names



The road to the crystal mountains began wide. So wide that the travellers could easily walk side by side. On both sides were fields of low silver grass. When the wind crossed over, patterns similar to words arose. But before Elias could read them, they changed again. Ears came first. The broken bowl was carried by the nameless shape. She held her gently, as if there was something precious in it. Joel walked next to her.

“Are you nervous?”

The stature looked at him. Her face changed. At first, it looked like a child's. Then it got older. Finally, it chose no recognizable age.

“What does nervous mean?”

“That you want something and at the same time don't know if you still want it when it actually happens.”

The colors in her body moved faster.

“Then I'm nervous.”

“That's okay.”

“How do you know that?”

“I've been there a lot.”

“Here?”

“Not in the same way as on Earth.”

“What's the difference?”

Joel thought.

“On Earth, I was sometimes afraid something bad would happen. Here I know there's nothing bad waiting for me. But I still can't know how a meeting will change me.”

The stature looked at the bowl.

“And that feels almost the same?”

“A little. Except you don't have to run away from it.”

Arion walked on her other side.

“You can walk away from it.”

Joel looked at him with reproach.

“That's not helping.”

“Truth also helps when it doesn't sound reassuring.”

The shape looked at the wolf.

“Would you run away?”

“Only when staying was not true.”

“How do I know if I really want to go to the Source?”

“By not only asking what you hope to receive.”

“What else should I ask?”

“What you don't want to let go.”

The shape became silent. The crystal mountains came closer. Their peaks were not under heaven. They seemed to be carrying heaven. In every mountain moving paths of light that sometimes assumed the form of letters. Elias saw names. Not just words that were addressed. He saw lives. Abraham, Sara, Jacob, Israel. Peter. Maria. Names that received, changed, confirmed or repronounced. Memories of Earth appeared with some names. In others he saw possibilities that had only become fully visible in the new creation.

"Are these all the names? He asked."

Oren wasn't looking back.

"No."

"Which one then?"

"The names that someone had to learn to hear in a different way."

"Why are they in the mountains?"

"They're not in there. The mountains remember being pronounced."

Elias looked at a light orbit in which the name Peter became visible. Back there he saw a fisherman. A student. A man who spoke big words and then fled. A man who cried. A shepherd. None of those shapes were obliterated by the others. The name wore them all.

"A name is greater than one property," said Elias."

"Yes."

"Oh, but smaller than a full human being."

"That too."

"Why do we need names if they never fully explain us?"

Oren stopped. He turned around.

"Because a name is not meant to explain someone."

"For what?"

"To call someone."

The nameless shape held the bowl closer to her chest. The silver grass around her became silent.

"When someone knows my name, can he always call me?"

"He can pronounce her," Oren said. However, not every verdict is a real call."

"What's the difference?"

"An actual call invites you to appear as you are. Another statement is trying to make you appear as the speaker needs you."

Liora looked at the scroll of drawings that were on the map as a sign of light.

"As a building can carry a name that determines how people use it."

"Yes."

"The Garden of Complete Independence."

"That wasn't a name the garden received, Oren said. It was a destination that was imposed on her."

"And the Open City?"

"This name arose when the city and its inhabitants began to receive each other."

Joel looked at his bird.

"Aven had his name before I knew him."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Who gave him that name?"

Ears smiled.

"The person who knows every bird before it flies."

Aven spread his wings. His four golden tail feathers caught the light of the mountains. For a moment thousands of other colours appeared in his feathers. Then he flew forward. The road got narrower. The silver fields made way for rocks. From every crevice grew small white flowers. The nameless figure touched the flower on her chest.

"This one looks like mine."

"The same species," said Liora.

"Does that mean I'm from here?"

"Maybe the flower came from here."

“And me?”

Liora shook her head.

“You're not a flower.”

“But she helped me remember.”

“A gift can be connected to a place without that place being your origin.”

The stature looked at Elias.

“Where are you from?”

“From the earth.”

“Is that your origin?”

“Partially.”

“Where are you really from?”

Elias was thinking about his parents.

The River That Carries Names

To the earth from which the human body was formed. God's breath. To Christ, by Whom all things were created.

“I come from the love and purpose of God, he said. But I have received it through places, people and events.”

“Then you're out of God and out of meeting?”

“Not in the same way. God is my Creator. Meetings have formed me.”

“Can an encounter be made me what God did not mean?”

On Earth, Elias would have answered that question differently. There, people could injure, limit and malform each other. Lies could lock themselves in an identity. A child could bear a name that was never spoken by God: tricky, unwanted, failed, weak. But evil had no future here. Yet meetings remained real.

"I think, he said slowly, that every good encounter makes something visible of what God has put in you. Not everything. Sometimes something that would never have become visible in that way without that encounter."

"So my form changes because of you, but my existence does not begin with you."

"Yes."

The stature looked at her moving hands.

"That feels true."

They moved on. The river appeared before they saw water. Elias heard her. Not as a current. Like yelling. From the mountains came voices. Some were deep and powerful. Others hardly more than a whisper. Each voice spoke a name. Every name changed the environment. When a name was called, a path lit up somewhere. A flower opened. A bird answered. A man raised his head. No one responded to a name that wasn't his. Yet all listened with joy when someone else was called.

"Why does every name sound different?" asked Joel.

"Because she travels through different relationships, Oren said."

"But God's voice speaks them all, right?"

"Yes."

"Then they should all sound as beautiful?"

"They do."

"They don't sound the same."

"That's not the same as uneven in beauty."

They reached a rift. A river flowed up between two crystal walls. The water came from a deep well beneath them, climbed against gravity and disappeared high above the mountains in the light. There were no fish or leaves floating in the stream. There's been some moving names. Some were visible as letters. Others like colours, melodies, smells or shapes. Elias recognized his own name. Not because he saw the letters. The river

spoke to him. Elias. He heard his mother's voice. From his father. From Mei, from friends. From people he'd only met briefly. Everyone had said their name differently.

But underneath all those votes was one voice that didn't change. Christ. In His voice there was no expectation that Elias had to meet first. No summary of his past. No limitation of his future. Only full knowledge and complete love. Elias bowed his head. For a moment he longed only to listen to that voice.

Jesus was not visible by the river. Yet He was closer than the others. Elias knew again what his name meant. Not only: my God is the Lord. Also: I've been called. I'm known. I'm not the centerpiece. I don't have to carry the map alone. When the name died, the love that had pronounced her remained. Liora also heard her name. The crystal walls showed no buildings. They showed openings. Spaces where people met.

"Liora, it sounded."

Her name didn't just mean someone who designed shapes. She was someone who recognized space where others only saw boundaries. Joel was called. Aven answered before the boy himself could say anything. His name moved through the sky like laughter and wonder. Arion raised his head when the river approached him. He answered with a deep cry returned by the mountains. Ears also heard his name. He smiled and touched the river. Only the nameless figure remained silent. The colors in her body slowed down.

"The river doesn't know me."

Oren stood next to her.

"Why do you think that?"

"Everyone is called except me."

"Maybe the river's waiting."

"For what?"

"So you can get closer."

She was looking at the upstream river. There was no bridge. The path ended at the edge.

“Shall I go in the water?”

“So far we could go with you.”

Joel took her hand.

“Then I’ll continue.”

Ears shook his head.

“The river will call you by your own name.”

“But I don’t want to leave her alone.”

“That’s loving.”

“Why shouldn’t it be?”

“Because proximity sometimes means that you do not enter into a meeting that the other person himself must receive.”

Joel didn’t let go of her hand immediately. The stature looked at him.

“I want you to stay here.”

“I’ll stay.”

“However, not in the water.”

“No.”

“Are you still there when I get back?”

Joel nodded.

“What if I’ve changed?”

“Then I’ll get to know you again.”

The shape touched Aven’s feathers. The bird wanted to go with her, but he also stayed with Joel. Elias felt the tension in her colors. Not fear of evil. The uncertainty of someone who had to take a step for the first time without the immediate reflection of others.

“What am I supposed to let go of?”

The wolf came closer.

“The thought that a name will imprison you.”

“And if she chooses one form?”

“If so, it is not a real name.”

“How do I know?”

“A real name does not close a door. It opens the possibility to reply effectively.”

The stature looked at the broken bowl in her hands. The opening between the two halves shone. She took one step in the river. The water didn't flow past her body. It went through. Her colors were taken. Violet, gold, blue, white and unknown shades moved up. Her shape became transparent. Joel took a step forward. Elias put a hand on his shoulder.

“It does not disappear.”

“How do you know that?”

“Don't know.”

“Then why are you saying it?”

“Because it does not consist of its colours.”

The creature went deeper. The water reached her chest. The white flower let go and drove up. She tried to grab her. Then she stopped. The flower was a memory. Precious. Really.

The Voice from the River

But not her name. She let her go. The water also took its forms. The child. The woman. The tree. The Light Being. The cloud. Every form she had assumed during meetings appeared briefly in the river and then flowed up. Not destroyed. Released. Eventually, almost nothing remained visible. Just two eyes. And the open bowl in her hands.

“Who am I? She asked.”

The river didn't answer.

“Am I the one who saw Joel?”

Silence!

“Am I the color that opened the new world?”

Silence!

“Am I the space between stories?”

The river kept flowing.

“Am I someone who will be?”

Still no name. The stature looked at the open bowl. The two halves were held together by her hands. She understood that she was even trying to preserve this image. A brokenness that had become an opening. That was also true. But not everything. She let go of the bowl. Joel held his breath. The two halves didn't fall. They drifted apart. The opening between them became wider. The water flowed through it. Then the halves disappeared, too. Only space remained. The nameless figure stood without shape, colour, flower or bowl in the river. Not empty. Responsive.

“You know me, she said.”

Not Oren. Not to the travelers. Against the Invisible.

“Even if I can't name myself yet.”

The river became quiet. The water kept rising, but every sound disappeared. Then the voice sounded. Soft. So soft that only the one for whom the name was intended could hear her completely. Sela. The shape moved. Not because she was forced. Because she recognized herself. The name was repeated. Sela. In the river appeared a color that no one had seen before. No mix of violet and gold. No reflection of the people she'd met. Her own color. There were also traces of the garden, Aven, Thael, the starry room, music and shared memories.

Not as a borrowed identity. As received history. Sela took shape. She wasn't committed forever. Her form remained alive and mobile. But Elias could recognize her from now on, even when she changed. The name didn't make her smaller. He gave continuity to her change. Joel smiled through his tears.

She was looking at him. In his voice, her name sounded different than in the river. Younger, lighter. Full of friendship. Aven sang her. Four golden tones and then a fifth that seemed to arise especially for her. Arion spoke her name. Short. Like a path under her feet. Liora said:

In her voice, the name became an open space. Elias was the last to speak to her.

The name reminded him of a rest in music. Not a void where nothing happened. An open moment in which the previous tone could be received and the next one was not yet enforced. Sela came from the river. Her feet hit the ground. Joel ran to her and hugged her. This time it did not automatically take its form. She remained recognizable herself. Yet her colour changed due to his proximity.

“You're different, he said.”

“Yes.”

“The same thing.”

“Yes.”

“How can that be?”

Sela smiled.

“Maybe a name doesn't mean I don't change anymore. Maybe she means you know who you meet again.”

Ears nodded.

“The Source has spoken.”

Sela was looking at him.

“What does my name mean?”

“What did you hear?”

“A rest.”

“Only rest?”

“A space in which someone can answer.”

“Then that's what the name is for you today.”

“And tomorrow?”

“Maybe you'll hear a new depth.”

“Can a name grow?”

“A name does not grow because it becomes something else. It grows because love discovers more and more reality in it.”

The river began to speak again. Not just Sela's name. The names of the others also sounded. Elias. Joel. Arion, ears, and Sela. Seven names. Seven answers. The map appeared above the water. The seven objects were gone. Instead, seven names were around an open center. But one name slowly began to fade. Joel saw it.

“Are you leaving?”

“My job was to take you to the Source.”

“Are you not part of the trip?”

“For this part, yes.”

“And after that?”

Oren looked at the rising river.

“I carry the bowl to others who think that wholeness means that there can be no more opening.”

“But the bowl is gone.”

Oren kept his hands open. There she was again. Two halves. One whole. Space in between.

“A gift does not run out when someone receives it.”

He gave Joel a small shard of the same material.

“Is this broken, too?”

“That depends on how you look.”

Joel held her against the light. In the shard he saw no reflection of himself. He saw an unknown face. Someone he was supposed to meet. Oren said goodbye and walked down the river. Soon he disappeared among the crystal rocks. His point on the map didn't go out. It moved to another road. A new point appeared. Christ. Not in the middle. Not as one traveling companion next to the others. His name was under the whole map, as the foundation upon which all lines rested. Then the river changed. The water no longer flowed up alone.

A second stream moved down from the light. Both directions went through each other without colliding. Roger that. Answers. Give it back. In the descending river a boat appeared. Small. Simple. Made from different woods. Elias recognized David's work. On the sides, vines grew from Nahla's garden. In the mast were strings tense that Samir's music wore. Golden threads from Mei's Garden of Shared Memory formed the sail. Liora walked to the vessel.

“I didn't design this.”

“No one single,” said Sela.”

On the bow was Aven. Arion jumped first on board.

“Where's the river going? asked Joel.”

Ithamar suddenly stood on the opposite bank.

“To the place where all gifts received must work together for the first time.”

“What place is that?” asked Elias.”

The angel pointed to the valley below. There was a world they had never seen before. No empty world. No sleeping garden. Not a city waiting for residents. A people lived. Thousands of people stood on the banks of a dark sea. Behind them lights burned in beautiful houses and gardens. No

one was in danger. No one suffered. Yet everyone looked across the street. On the horizon stood a second people. Waiting, too. Between them was the sea. No bridge. No ship. No enmity. But both nations believed that the other had to cross first.

“Why don't they go together?” asked Joel.”

Ithamar replied:

“Because both peoples are hospitable.”

Joel frowned.

“That doesn't sound like a problem.”

“They want to receive the other.”

“Then one of them can go, right?”

“If you leave, you cannot be the one who welcomes you at home.”

Liora understood.

“They wait for each other out of respect.”

“Why doesn't anyone tell them what to do?” asked Elias.”

“Because there is no wrong answer.”

“What is the assignment?”

Ithamar looked at their boat.

“Find a form of meeting in which no one only has to be host and no one only guest.”

Sela boarded. Her new name lit up above the mast.

“A place between both shores, she said.”

The river picked up the boat. Elias, Liorah, and Joel followed her. Aven spread his wings. Arion went to the bow. The vessel began to descend. To the dark sea. To the two nations waiting. To a meeting for which neither language had a word.

CHAPTER 13

The Table on the Water



The boat descended with the river. Not down like a rock falls. More like a thought from the invisible slowly becomes understandable. The crystal mountains disappeared behind them. The light of the Source remained visible above the mast for some time to come. Then it went up into the heavens of the world below. Before them lay the dark sea. The water wasn't black. It had a deep color that changed constantly between blue, purple and silver. On both sides were green banks with cities, gardens and harbors. On one bank stood a people dressed in bright tones.

On the other, people wore deep, warm colours. Both peoples had music. On the left side sounded high voices and light instruments. On the right side, drums, low strings and broad choirs responded. The songs didn't collide. But neither did they reach each other. Above the middle of the sea the sounds dissolved.

"Why does the music disappear there? asked Joel."

Liora was watching the water.

"Because nobody designed the middle as their destination."

"Can a sea have a destination?"

"A bridge connects two banks because it spans the space between them. But the middle then only remains a passage."

"And these nations need no passage," said Elias."

"No. They need a place where both can actually arrive."

Sela was at the mast. The golden threads from the Garden of Shared Reminder moved in the sail. Sometimes faces became visible. People who had learned that a shared story did not mean that one perspective had to disappear.

"Maybe they should meet on the water," she said."

Arion looked at the empty sea.

"Where?"

"That's what we need to make."

"With one small boat? asked Elias."

The wolf looked around.

"It's a very small boat."

Joel pointed to the banks.

"The people there can build ships?"

"They did, ithamar said."

The angel didn't appear on board. His voice came with the wind. On both shores large warehouses opened. Ships became visible. On the left were large vessels with white sails. Their bows were shaped like birds. On the water of the right harbor, wide ships floated of dark wood, decorated with golden signs.

"Why aren't they using them? asked Joel."

"Because every ship is made to bring guests back to its own shore."

Liora studied the vessels.

"No ship is designed as a place to stay."

"Why should they stay? asked Elias."

"Because otherwise one people always determines where the meeting takes place."

"Isn't hospitality good?"

“Yes. But even hospitality can unintentionally say: come to our place, receive our customs, eat at our table and learn our way of welcoming.”

Sela looked at both shores.

“If you receive a guest, stay at home.”

“Yes,” said Liora.”

“And who is a guest must move.”

“Yes.”

“Then the guest gives something the host does not give.”

“What?”

“Leave the security of the place.”

Elias thought of his earlier travels. He had always seen hospitality as the active gift. Open a door. Set a table. Make room. But a guest also gave something. Trust. Vulnerability. The willingness to enter an unknown space.

“Both roles have their own love,” he said.”

“Therefore neither of the two nations wants to take the other host role, "Ithamar said." Nor does it want to force the other to become the first guest.”

Joel looked at the people on the banks.

“Did they ask each other?”

“.....”

“What are they saying?”

From the left bank a voice came across the water:

“We have prepared everything. Come and eat with us.”

On the other hand, a choir replied:

“We honor your invitation. But our table is also waiting for you.”

“Come and let us serve you.”

“No, come so we may honor you.”

The invitations were warm. Fair. But every invitation was answered with a new invitation. Arion lay down.

“This may take a long time.”

“It's been a long time, Ithamar said.”

“Why doesn't one person just start swimming?” asked Joel.

“Someone tried.”

“And?”

“Both peoples carry out at the same time to welcome him. They brought him back to his own shore and organized a party together.”

Joel started laughing.

“That sounds good, right?”

“It was.”

“What's the problem?”

“After the feast, every people invited the other.”

Joel laughed even harder. Even Elias had to smile. This was not a conflict of selfishness. It was love that had not yet found a form to become reciprocal. The boat reached the middle of the sea. Immediately the wind disappeared. The sails stopped. The music of both shores dissolved around them. The water got smooth. Liora walked from the bow to the stern. She counted her steps.

“How big is the boat? She asked.”

“Too small for two nations,” said Elias.”

Two Invitations

“That's not what I mean.”

She walked again. This time she took more steps. The boat had gotten longer. Joel noticed, too.

“He's growing.”

Liora walked to the side. The distance to the mast increased. The deck got wider.

“Whereby?” asked Elias.”

Liora looked at the materials. The wood of David. The living vines from Nahla's garden. Samir's strings. Maybe gold threads.

“The boat is made from gifts that have not remained separate.”

She rolled out her drawings. The paper was empty.

“I can design a meeting place.”

“A floating building?”

“Maybe.”

She drew a circle. At the same time, the deck bowed. Wood grew outwards and formed a round platform. Liora drew two berths opposite each other. There were scaffolding on both sides. Then she stopped.

“What is?” Elias asked.”

“I'm doing it again.”

“What?”

“I determine the shape before the people who need her are present.”

She dropped the drawing instrument. The circle on the paper remained unfinished.

“Then we ask them, said Joel.”

“How?” asked Elias. Our music doesn't reach the banks.”

Aven took off. He flew to the left bank. Joel checked him out.

“He doesn't know what to ask.”

"Maybe he doesn't have to say words," said Sela."

Aven reached the people in clear clothing. He circled above them and made his four tones heard. Then he pulled out one golden tail feather. The feather fell into the hands of a woman at the harbor. Aven turned and flew to the other bank. There he pulled a second gold feather. A man in a dark blue cloak caught her. The bird returned to the boat with two golden feathers.

"Doesn't that hurt?" asked Joel."

Aven tricked his cheek with his head. On both shores the woman and the man held up their feather. Golden lines of light ran from the feathers to the center of the sea. Not like roads one had to travel on. As a shared invitation. The woman on the left bank said:

"What do you want us to bring?"

The man on the right replied:

"What do you need?"

Both questions reached the boat. Liora smiled.

"That's the beginning."

She yelled at the woman:

"What would you like to give that can only be received as a guest?"

The woman consulted with her people. After a while, she replied:

"Our stories."

Liora addressed the other bank.

"And you?"

The man in the blue cloak said:

"Our blessing."

Elias looked at Liora.

"Why can they only give them as guests?"

The woman herself answered:

“A story becomes a gift only when someone not only hears it, but carries it in his own home.”

The man on the other side added:

“A blessing is not the property of the one who pronounces it. She rests on the other and goes with him.”

Sela walked to the left pier of the floating platform.

“Bring your stories.”

Then she went to the other side.

“Bring your blessings.”

The peoples moved. Not all at once. From the left bank, one white ship left. On board were tellers, children and elders. They wore books, musical instruments and small objects that contain memories. From the right bank came one dark ship. The sailors carried bowls with fragrant oil, cloaks and shining signs. Both ships were approaching the center. When they were almost at the platform, they slowed down. Who would be the first to dock? The white ship was waiting. The dark ship as well.

“They're doing it again,” said Arion.”

Liora was watching the two docks.

“The docks are the problem.”

“You made one for every people,” said Elias.”

“Exactly. This leaves each on his own side.”

She rolled out her drawing again. The two berths were opposite each other. Liora drew a third line. Not to a new side of the platform. The line ran around the circle. The wood moved. The two separate scaffolding became one wide ring around the entire meeting place. Now there was no left or right angle. The ships could have docked anywhere. Yet they waited.

“What now?” asked Joel.”

Sela looked at the open space between both vessels.

“They do not need to arrive separately.”

She raised her hands. Her colour flowed over the water and did not form a fixed bridge. She made the space between the ships visible. The crews understood. Ropes were prepared on both vessels. Not to pull the other ship to its own side. The ropes were thrown over and over again and connected in the middle. The ships lead side by side to the platform. Neither arrived first. The passengers boarded simultaneously. A woman dressed in gold and white put her foot on the deck at the same time as the man with the dark blue cloak. They looked at each other.

“Welcome,” they said.”

Then they started laughing.

“The woman asked who.”

The man looked around.

“Get together.”

The platform grew. Not just because Liora signed it. Every new arrival brought something that changed space. Where someone put a story, a seat appeared. Where a blessing was spoken, light arose. Children from both nations began to play with each other. They made no distinction between guest and host. They ran all over the circle and turned the neat seats into an irregular pattern. Arion looked happy.

“Now it's a good place.”

“Why?” asked Joel.”

A Table Without a Head Seat

“There are unexpected passages.”

There was nothing in the middle of the platform. Liora was watching Elias.

“A meeting place needs a table.”

Elias thought of the council table. On the empty chair. To his tendency to determine the right form in advance.

“Let's ask them.”

The representatives of both nations came to the middle.

“What kind of table do you use? asked Liora.”

The woman from the light people described a low, round table where people sat on pillows. The man from the other people told of a long table with high chairs and a place of honor at the head.

“These forms do not fit together, Joel said.”

“Then we have to choose one, ”One of the white ships said.”

“Or two tables...”

The conversations started. Everyone tried to honor the ways of the other people. The light people wanted to sit at the long table. The other people insisted on using the round table. Once again, everyone gave priority to the other. Liora looked at the empty paper. Then she ripped the skin in many strips. Not out of frustration. She gave each one piece to each one present.

“Don't draw the table you're used to, she said. Sign the place you need next to someone from the other shore.”

People started drawing. A child drew two chairs with a small table in between. An older woman drew a big couch. A musician drew an open space for instruments. Someone who liked to walk, drew a path where conversations could take place. A cook drew a fire with people around it. A silent man drew a window that looked out across the sea. Liora put all the strips together. They weren't furniture. They formed a landscape. The platform responded. In the middle there was a garden with low and high tables, benches, open spaces, hiking trails and small sheltered areas.

There was no capital. Someone could have been there anywhere. Someone could be a guest anywhere. People brought food from both sides. The dishes were not put on one central table. They traveled all over the garden. Whoever received something gave the scale further and got back something he had never tasted. Stories were told. Blessings pronounced.

Songs started on one side and continued on the other. Some uses remained different. No one tried to merge them into one new tradition. The differences were visited. Elias sat next to the man in the dark blue cloak.

“What's your people's name?”

“We call ourselves the Keepers of the Blessings.”

“And the other people?”

“The Carriers of Stories.”

“Have you always known each other?”

“Yes.”

“But never met?”

“Not really.”

“Why not?”

The man looked across the street.

“We admired each other from a distance. Perhaps that was also a form of safety.”

“How can admiration avoid insecurity?”

“When someone stays far away, you never have to discover that your image of him was too small.”

On the other side of the fire a woman from the light people told a story. Halfway through, a child from the other people interrupted her.

“Why did the hero do that?”

The narrator smiled.

“I don't really know.”

“But it's your story.”

“Maybe I thought I knew it completely because nobody asked me that question.”

She didn't change the ending. But from that moment on, she told the story wider. The man next to Elias continued:

“Real encounter can deepen admiration. But she can also break our representations.”

“Is that painful here?”

“Not like on Earth. But humility remains a movement.”

Elias looked at the meeting place.

“So also in the perfect world we must learn that the other is greater than our image of him.”

“Right there, we can learn without fear.”

In the middle of the garden stood Liora. People brought her drawings. Not to ask permission. To share possibilities. A path was shifted. A couch turned to the sea. A high table got a lower part so children could easily reach it. Space constantly changed. Yet she didn't lose her connection. Liora was glowing. Elias knew again what was going to happen. He walked towards her.

“You've found your place.”

She looked at both peoples.

“Not yet.”

“That sounds like you want to stay.”

“I want that.”

“Why do you say you haven't found your place yet?”

“Because this place will never be finished.”

“Isn't that exactly your place?”

Liora smiled.

“Yes.”

Sela stood next to them.

“What's this place called?”

People from both nations gathered together. There were many suggestions. Middle Town, Mutual Haven, Water Garden. The House of Both Oevers. No name felt complete. The girl who gave the Open City her name was not present. Yet Liora remembered her simple insight: Because you can go in there. And because she's not ready. Liora looked at the sea.

“The table between the Oevers.”

“But it's not a table,” said Joel.

“Not alone.”

“Why do you call her that?”

“Because a table is not a shape. It's a promise to make room.”

The representatives of both peoples repeated the name: The Table Between the Oevers. The words spread over the water. On the map appeared a circle that was open on both sides. Among them were words: MUTUAL GASTVRINESS WILL GO WHERE NO ONLY RESERVER OR ONLY STAYS. Liora rolled up her old drawings. She gave them to Elias.

“Why me?”

“Not to build with it.”

“For what?”

“To remind you that each card must leave room for those who have not yet thought along.”

Elias took the part.

“Thank you.”

Liora embraced him. Then Joel and Selah. She knelt with Arion.

“This place has many unexpected passages.”

“It can always be better.”

“I'll miss your advice.”

“I understand that.”

She touched Aven's golden feathers. The bird sang to her. Then Liora stood among the representatives of both nations. Not the only architect. If someone could draw and shape those questions from meeting. Two more human travelers continued. Elias and Joel. It's Sela. The map still had seven light points. The remaining friends did not form a straight line behind them, but a growing network of living places. The wood. The seed. The string. The wire. Open space. Everything traveled in a different form.

The Table Between the Oevers no longer floated without steering. From its edges, roots grew of light that reached both coasts without closing the sea. The two nations could now travel to one another. But no one had to leave their own bank to receive the other only there. Joel looked at Elias.

"Are we going to stay behind?"

"Probably"

"Who's going to go on?"

Elias was watching Sela.

"Maybe this isn't a journey where one person reaches the end."

"But someone has to carry the map, right?"

The map rose from Elias' hands. She floated to Joel. The boy put his hands out. The bright surface became smaller until it fit exactly between its palms.

"Why does he come to me?"

Arion got up.

"Because you asked the question."

"Which one?"

"Whoever goes on."

A new image appeared on the map. No city. No garden. No world. A group of children walked through a vast field. Everyone wore a lamp. But the lights didn't seem to themselves. Each lamp only lit the path of another.

For the children lay a forest in which all the trees constantly changed places. No route remained. No adult went first. Joel looked at Elias.

“I don't know how to lead them.”

“Maybe that's why the map came to you.”

“What do you mean?”

Elias remembered the throne. The need for overview. The discovery that leadership didn't mean he had to know all paths.

“You don't have to see their path, he said. You have to help them carry each other's light.”

The music on the Table Between the Shores became softer. A new path appeared across the sea. Not wood or light. It consisted of questions. Each step had one question: Who do you see? Who do you wear light for? Who enlightens your way? Can you follow without disappearing? Can you lead without running ahead? Joël held the map firmly. Aven landed on his shoulder. Together they started the road to the moving forest.

CHAPTER 14

The Forest of Borrowed Light



The first question lay like a clear stone on the water: WHO DO YOU SEE? Joel put his foot on it. The surface carried him, but the letters changed immediately. WHO SEES YOU? He looked back. Elias was still on the table between the Oevers. Next to him, Sela waited. Arion had already stepped on the question path. Aven sat on Joel's shoulder.

"You see me," said Joel.

The letters lit up. Then the next step appeared. Elias stood next to him.

"I thought the question was who you saw."

"That's what I thought too."

"What did you say?"

"You guys."

"And why did the demand change?"

Joel thought.

"Because seeing someone is not the same as being seen themselves."

"Can you do one without the other?"

"On Earth, yes."

"And here?"

Joel looked at Selah. Its shape was slightly altered by the light of the two banks. Yet the white glow of her name remained recognizable.

“Maybe you can only really see another when you're not trying to stay invisible.”

The second question appeared: FOR WHO DO YOU LIGHT? Joel looked at the children's lamps in the distance.

“I don't know yet.”

The stone stayed dark.

“Do you have to mention a name? asked Elias.”

“Maybe.”

Joel was watching Aven.

“For him?”

Nothing happened.

“For the children?”

Still no light. Arion sat on the stone.

“Maybe he's not asking who you want to help.”

“Then what?”

“For whom you wear light.”

“That's the same thing, right?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Helping can mean you decide what the other person needs. Carrying light means keeping something available that the other person should use himself.”

Joel looked at the children again. Their lamps did not shine on their own feet. Every light fell for someone else.

“For the one next to me, he said.”

The letters started to glow. A new step appeared. Joel answered faster.

“The one next to me.”

The Question Path extended further. They walked across the sea. Behind them the Table Between the Shores became smaller. The voices of both nations remained audible. Their music now came to the middle of the sea and no longer disappeared. For them, the moving forest grew. The trees were high and slim. Their tribes had different colors. Some were deep brown or silver. Other translucent, like rivers flowing through. No tree remained in the same place.

Roots came loose from the earth, moved like long legs and found new soil elsewhere. Branches bowed to each other and formed passages that disappeared a few moments later. The children were on the edge. Joel counted twelve. Everyone wore a lamp. The lamps had different shapes. A glass ball. A little lantern. A bowl of fire. A shining stone. A flower that shone. No light shined for the carrier itself. Yet every child was alone. The beams of light fell along each other and disappeared between the trees. Joel stepped off the Question Path on land.

The map in his hands got warm. A girl with a long braid came to him. Her lamp was shaped like a white shell.

“Are you the guide?”

Joel looked back at Elias.

“I don't know.”

“The map is with you.”

“Yes.”

“Then you are the guide.”

“I'm Joel.”

“My name is Tirza.”

“Why don't you go into the woods?”

Tirza pointed to her lamp.

“Because my light doesn't show my own path.”

“Can't you go after someone else?”

“We tried.”

“What happened?”

“The first one couldn't see anything.”

“The second must hold its lamp for the first.”

“But then the second one doesn't see where it's going.”

“The third may shine for her.”

“And who lights up the last?”

Joel looked at the twelve children.

“The first.”

“If so, it must be at the rear.”

“Yes.”

“But who's gonna take the lead?”

Joel wanted answers that no one had to go first. Then he looked at the forest. The trees kept moving. A path that was now opened was closed a few seconds later. Someone had to choose the direction.

“Why do you want to go through the forest?”

Tirza looked surprised.

“The Tree of Faces is in the middle.”

“What is that?”

“A tree in which you can see who you are for another.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“To discover our abilities.”

Joel understood her desire. The children wore light for others, but did not yet know the form in which their presence helped someone.

“Is there anyone who knows the forest?”

Tirza shook her head.

“The trees know themselves.”

“Can we ask them?”

“They don't speak.”

Light for the Other

Arion stood next to them.

“They do.”

Tirza was watching him.

“Are you a wolf?”

“Roughly.”

“Can you understand the trees?”

“Trees rarely tell you where to go. They tell us where they make room.”

Arion walked to the edge of the forest. A silver tree moved its roots and let it pass. A red-brown tree just moved for him.

“Why is that tree blocking you? asked Tirza.”

“Because I look too much to the left.”

“Why is that a problem?”

“Because my body wants to go right.”

Joel saw it. Arion's head was turned to the left, but his front legs were already pointed to the right. The tree prevented him from making a movement in which his attention and direction did not fit.

“The forest responds to what you really do,” Joel said.”

"More on what you do together," Elias replied."

He stood by two trees that changed places all the time. As soon as Sela stood next to him, they split up and formed an opening.

"Why did they open for you? asked Joel."

Sela looked at their feet.

"Elias wanted to wait. I wanted to keep going."

"That's not a unit, is it?"

"No," said Elias. But we saw that we were different."

"Oh, and that's what created a path?"

"Maybe the forest closes roads when differences remain invisible."

Tirza called the other children. They gathered around Joel.

"The guide knows how the forest works, she said."

Joel immediately raised his hands.

"A little bit."

"What should we do?"

Twelve faces looked at him. He felt the weight of the map. Not like the power of the empty throne. Different. Trust could also be hard when others expected an answer you didn't have yet.

"We have to wear the lamps differently first, he said."

"How?" asked a boy with a bright stone."

Joel left the children in a circle.

"Everyone focuses his lamp on the one on the right."

They did it. Twelve beams of light formed a circle. Every child was enlightened by someone else.

"Now everyone can see," said Tirza."

"Only in the circle, "but another boy noticed. Not when we're walking."

“Then we don't make a solid circuit.”

Joel placed the children in two curved rows. Each lamp shone forward, so that the light fell in front of another's feet.

“Tirza asked.”

Joel was at the beginning of the group. His lamp was missing. He just wore the map.

“Oh, my God.”

The first child pointed her light at his feet. Behind her, there was another child before her. The line continued to the last child. But the latter received no light. Tirza pointed it out.

“The problem remains.”

“I can carry my light backwards,” said Sela.”

“Then you are part of the group,” said Tirza.”

“That's the point.”

Sela stood next to the last child. Her color bowed along the entire row and illuminated the feet of the one at the back.

“And who wears light for you? asked Joel.”

Sela was looking at him.

“I don't know yet.”

The trees before them did not move. The path remained closed. Joel understood why. They had once again formed a circle in which one person was outside reciprocity. First the last one. Now Sela.

“I can shine for her,” said Elias.”

“But you don't have a lamp.”

Elias thought of Samir's instrument that he was still carrying. The strings had become visible again. He was poking over one of them. A warm tone sounded. Sela's color reacted. Her feet were surrounded by golden music.

"Sound may also be light," Joel said."

"When one sees where he stands, Elias answered."

Now each member of the group was carried by something from another. Aven flew above them. His feathers caught all the lights and reflected them to places that otherwise remained dark. Arion wasn't in the front or back. He moved past the group and watched where attention and direction threatened to disintegrate. Joel looked at the map. There was no route on it. Only twelve lights and the seven signs of the travelers.

"Are we ready?" asked Tirza."

"Not likely."

"Are we going?"

Joel smiled.

"Yes."

They walked into the woods. The first trees split apart. Not far. Just enough for the next step. Joel tried to look forward. Between the trees he thought he saw an open space. He sent the group there. Immediately a blue tree moved for him. Joel went left. A tree with golden leaves also blocked that direction.

"Why doesn't the forest let you go?" asked Tirza."

"Don't know."

Arion stood next to him.

"Who are you wearing the map for?"

"For the group."

"That's not an answer."

"Of course I do."

"You are now using the map to find the path that you think is suitable for everyone."

"- Isn't there a guide for that?"

"That's what Elias thought."

Joel looked back. Elias smiled.

"He's right."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Maybe ask what the others see."

Joel addressed the first child. A boy with a lamp in the shape of a flower.

"What do you see?"

"A dark spot between those two trees."

"That doesn't sound like a path."

"My light is shining toward it."

Joel was watching Tirzah.

"I see a branch bending aside, she said."

Another child saw roots forming some kind of staircase. Everyone saw something else. None of them saw a full route. Joel looked at the map. The observations appeared as small signs. A dark opening. A curved branch. A root staircase. A shine on the ground. They seemed to lead nowhere individually. Together they formed a movement.

"Don't go straight," said Joel. We go between the two trees, under the branch, over the roots and then to the place where the light hits the ground."

The trees were scattered. The path appeared.

"You found it, Tirza said."

"We found it."

They moved on. The forest got closer. Sometimes they had to stop because two kids couldn't look the same way. Then they changed places, so another light fell at their feet. Sometimes a child wanted too fast. The light carrier behind him could not follow the pace and the path became dark. Sometimes one only looked at the one for whom he wore light and forgot

to receive the light that appeared to himself. The forest then closed no punishment around them. It made visible where connection was broken. Joel began to understand. Leadership didn't mean he had the best view.

His job was to make sure that everyone could see and be seen. That every light gave and received. That no one got so far ahead that the light of the other did not reach him. After a long time they came to a wide river.

The River as a Road

There was no bridge. Across the street, Joel saw a clearing. In the middle of it stood a huge tree. Faces moved in the leaves.

"The Tree of Faces," said Tirza."

The kids got excited. They walked to the bank. The river was clear, but the bottom was so deep that it was not visible. The water was running fast.

"Can we go through it?"

Arion put one leg in the water. The current carried its leg sideways.

"Not separately."

"Can we build a bridge? asked Joel."

Elias looked at the instrument on his back.

"Maybe with sound."

Liora's drawings were left with her. David was far away in his workshop. But their gifts traveled. Elias played a tone. A thin golden line appeared above the water. He played a second. The line became wider, but not firm enough. The kids turned their lights on. The light didn't stay down. It flowed with the water. Sela stepped forward.

"The river does not want to be stretched."

"How do you know? asked Joel."

"She wears away our shapes before they become fixed."

"What does she want?"

Sela was listening.

"That we receive her movement."

Joel looked at the current.

"Should we be taken?"

"Then we drive past the Tree of Faces, so Tirza said."

"Maybe we don't have to cross directly."

"The tree is there."

"The tree keeps moving," said Arion."

Joel looked better. The clearing across the street was no longer in front of them. While they were talking, the whole forest had shifted. Only the river seemed to retain its own direction.

"Maybe the river will take us where we need to be."

"Not where the tree is now?" asked Tirza."

"Maybe where he'll be when we get there."

The children hesitated. They had come to find the Tree of Faces. The current meant letting go of their chosen route.

"How do we stay together?" someone asked."

Joel looked at the lights.

"By not holding your own light."

He left the kids in pairs. Each one gave his lamp to the one for whom it had already shone. Tirza received the bright stone from a boy behind her. She herself gave her shell lamp to a little girl.

"But this is my lamp, the girl with the flower said."

"Joel said you'd get her back."

"What if it gets wet?"

"Then we discover how her light shines in water."

The children stepped into the river. The water lifted them up. They were taken immediately. No one swam against the current. They didn't hold each other cramped, but they kept watching for the one whose light they were wearing. When someone drove off, another lamp moved towards him. The group stretched. Came back together. Turned in the current. Aven flew above them and pointed with golden orbits where the river split. Arion swam on the outside. Sela became almost one with the water, but her recognizable color kept moving between the children. Joel was wearing Tirzah's shell lamp. Tirza kept the map.

"Why do I have the map? She asked."

"Because I'm wearing your light."

"What should I do with it?"

"Tell me what you see."

The river made a sharp turn. Tirza looked at the map.

"The Tree of Faces is no longer on the other side."

"Where' then?"

She looked up. The huge tree moved along the shore. His roots stepped through the forest. The faces in the leaves turned towards the river.

"He's coming to us!"

The tree reached the water. His roots bowed over the current. Not like a fixed bridge. They descended between the children and formed resting places. One by one they climbed out of the water. They didn't come the other way. They were found on an island of living roots in the middle of the river. The Tree of Faces was above them. His tribe was so wide that all the children could not stand by it with their arms stretched out. In each magazine a face appeared. Not their own reflection. The faces of those for whom they had carried light. Tirza looked in a leaf.

She saw the little girl who got her shell lamp. Not like Tirza saw her. She saw herself through the girl's eyes. Patience, sometimes serious. Someone who pretended to know everything, but kept waiting when someone else was behind.

"That's not me," said Tirza."

"No," said Sela. It's who you became in her meeting."

A boy looked in another leaf. He saw how his humor had given courage to a scared child. A girl discovered that her quiet presence helped someone listen better. No magazine gave a complete identity. The tree showed no definitive answer to the question of who they were. He showed what brought their presence to life in another. Joel was looking for his own face. He didn't find it. All the leaves showed the children.

"Why can't I see anything about myself?"

The map in Tirza's hands lit up.

"Maybe because you're the guide."

"Does that mean nobody saw me?"

A leaf moved above him. Elias appeared in it. Joel saw himself through Elias' eyes. Not as a child that needed protection. As someone who dared to ask questions that adults thought up too quickly. A second leaf opened. Arion. In his eyes Joel saw someone who had yet to learn to walk slowly, but who gave living beings space to be more than people thought they knew. A third magazine showed Sela. For her, Joel was the first to say, You don't need a name to be with us. Then Aven appeared. The magazine didn't contain any words.

Joel saw himself as the bird knew him: An open hand. No cage. No owner. A place to return. Joel cried. Aven landed on his shoulder.

"Thank you, he whispered."

The Tree of Faces moved. A fruit descended to Joel at a long stem. The fruit looked like a lamp, but there was no fire inside. There was a small window in it. Joel looked through it. He didn't see himself. He saw the one who at that time threatened to get out of the light of the group. A boy stood on the edge of the root island. Everyone was working on the leaves. No one noticed that his lamp had fallen into the river. Joel walked up to him.

"Your light."

The boy looked at the water.

“I’ve lost the light of someone else.”

“From whom?”

Tirza heard her name and came in. She didn’t look angry.

“My shell lamp?”

The boy nodded.

“I wanted to keep her higher. Then she slipped out of my hands.”

“Can we find her?”

The lamp fruit in Joel’s hands became clear. In the window appeared the shell lamp. She drove under the roots, caught between two stones. Become Joel. Arion jumped into the water. A little later he came back with the lamp between his teeth. Tirza hired her. There was a small crack in the shell. The light shone through and formed a new pattern on the ground.

“She’s prettier. The little girl who had worn Tirza’s lamp.”

Tirza gave the shell back to the boy.

“Do you want to wear her for a while?”

“Even after what happened?”

“Now you know something about her I didn’t know about.”

He held the lamp gently. The Tree of Faces rustled all his leaves. On the map appeared a circle of lamps. Every lamp shone for the next one. Among them were words: LEARNING IS NOT THE LIGHT.

IT IS CAREFUL THAT LIGHT IS ADOPTED, RECOMMENDED AND TRANSITED. Joel looked at Elias.

“Do I have to stay here?”

“What do you think?”

The children gathered around him. They wanted to explore the forest further. No longer as twelve separate light carriers, but as a moving circle. Tirza gave the map back to Joel. He didn’t hire her immediately.

"You behaved well."

"I didn't know where to go."

"You didn't have to."

"Is that what a guide does?"

"Sometimes."

Tirza looked at the other kids.

"We still have many paths to discover."

Joel smiled.

"Then you need each other."

He took the map. But the lamp fruit he gave to Tirza.

"Here you can see who hits outside the light."

"Are you coming back?"

"Yes."

"When?"

Joel looked at Elias.

"There is no lateness here."

Tirza smiled. They embraced each other. The children once again formed their circle of light. Together they walked from the root island into the moving forest. The trees split before them. Not because one child knew the direction. Because every child was paying attention to another's path. Joel checked them out.

"I thought I should stay here."

"Why don't you do that?" asked Sela."

"Because my gift is not only for these children."

"How do you know that?"

He looked at the map. A new sign appeared. No lamp. An open hand with a question in it.

“I think I need to learn how wonder is passed on.”

Elias nodded.

“Then we'll continue.”

At that moment, the Tree of Faces began to move. Its roots raised the island and carried it to an unknown part of the river. Between the leaves one face appeared that none of them knew. A young man stood alone in a large hall. Around him were thousands of answers. Every question that could ever be asked already had an answer. Yet he looked unhappy. Joel touched the leaf.

“Who is he?”

The map replied: THE VALUER OF THE LAST QUESTION.

“What's the last question? asked Elias.”

The image changed. The young man looked right at them. Like he could see them through the leaf. Then he said:

“What remains to discover when each answer is true?”

The Tree of Faces took another step. The moving forest disappeared behind them. For them, a huge library rose. Not the library of stories or memories. A library of perfect answers. All the doors were open. But nowhere did Elias see a window.

The Keeper of the Last Question



The library had no walls Elias could overlook. Rooms stretched out in a row. High arches rested on columns of white rock. Between the columns were cabinets full of books, rolls, cards, orbs and objects for which he knew no name. Every door was open. No opening led out. There were no windows. Still, the building wasn't dark. The answers themselves gave light. Some books were hot gold. Others spread blue, green or silver light. Above the maps moved images of galaxies, landscapes and living beings.

"It's beautiful," said Joel."

His voice reflected through the halls. Immediately a book appeared on a desk. The cover said: WHY SCHOONITY WAS JOYING Joel walking towards it.

"I didn't ask."

"You said it was beautiful, and Elias answered."

Joel opened the book. The pages described how form, colour, proportion, recognition and surprise worked together. It said how beauty lay not only in an object, but also in the admissibility of the one who looked. Everything was true. Joël read some rules. Then he closed the book.

"Was the answer wrong? Asked Sela."

"Yes."

"Why don't you read on?"

Joel looked at the endless halls.

“I just wanted to say it was beautiful.”

A second book appeared. THE DISCLOSURE BETWEEN A CALL AND A QUESTION Joel took a step back.

“He thinks I want to know something again.”

Arion walked to a closet. Above his head appeared a small role. THE COGNITIVE AND VOLUNTARY CAPACITIES OF WOLVES IN THE NEW CREATION The wolf watched the title.

“Why?” asked Elias.”

“Because it's about wolves without asking a wolf.”

The role unfolded. A voice began to read the content. Arion ran away. The role followed him.

“How do I make this stop?”

The voice immediately replied:

“The reading ends as soon as the information is fully transferred, the recipient indicates that he is sufficiently informed, or chooses another presentation form.”

The roll rolled up and returned to the closet.

“Handy,” said Elias.”

Above him appeared a book: The pre- and ex-parts of a complete re-sponsive knowledge system Elias looked at it.

“I didn't ask a question.”

The book opened itself up.

“An implicit information requirement can be derived from debt instruments.”

The book disappeared. Sela moved through the hall. With every object, her colors changed. The library tried to recognize her. Above its published titles: WITHOUT FIXED PHYSIQUE FORM, THE UNDOGY OF A

RECOGNITION NAME IDENTITY AND CHANGE THE POSSIBLE EVENTS OF THE NAME SELA More and more books flew out of the closets. They circled around her. Sela stopped.

“They're trying to explain me.”

“Can they do that? asked Joel.”

“They contain true things.”

“But?”

“They don't know me.”

One of the books opened.

“Description: knowing is to have correct and sufficient information on debt securities”

“Sela said, "Following.”

The book closed. The others kept floating around her.

“.”

All the books returned. Aven flew to the ceiling. There were no lights. Only a large round plane in which luminous signs moved. A description appeared for each wing stroke. Move upward. Left wing angle: thirty-seven degrees. Purpose: to explore the upper space. Aven suddenly changed direction. The signs adapted. He made an unexpected dive, circled around a column and landed backwards on Arion's back. A new answer appeared: Play behavior with a social-exploratory function. Arion looked up.

“Even fun is explained here before anyone can laugh at it.”

Joel laughed. A text appeared above him: LAUGHING AS A REACTION TO CONGRUENCE AND RECOGNITION He laughed even harder. A second text began to explain the difference between the two laugh reactions.

“He called out.”

The hall became quiet. At the end of space the young man appeared from the Tree of Faces. He was wearing a dark robe with silver marks. In his

hands he held a book with no title. His face was young, but his eyes seemed to have read countless answers.

“You're disturbing the order, he said.”

“Sorry, Joel answered.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

Joel waited. No book appeared.

“It wasn't a request for information, the young man said. I'm asking why you think you're responsible for the disturbance.”

“Because we came in here.”

“The doors are open.”

“Because we were talking out loud.”

“The library is designed to answer.”

“Because we do not want to hear all the answers.”

The young man looked at him carefully.

“That is indeed unusual.”

Answers Without a View

“Are you the keeper?”

“Yes.”

“What's your name?”

Joel pointed to the book in his hands.

“Is that the last question?”

Mika held the book tighter.

“Yes.”

“What's in it?”

“Question.”

“Which one?”

“If I pronounce her, the library will try to answer.”

“That's what a library is for, right?”

“Not every question wants to be solved immediately.”

Joel smiled.

“I understand that.”

Mika looked surprised.

“The others didn't understand.”

“Which others?”

“Visitors. Scientists. Angels. Explorers. Everyone asked me why I kept the book closed.”

“What did you say?”

“That the question is still alive.”

“And then?”

“Then they explained that a question is not a living being.”

A book appeared on a desk: The philosopher's metaphor of the living question Mika took one look at it.

The book disappeared. Elias came closer.

“Why does this library exist?”

“To preserve true answers.”

“Who built her?”

“It has grown out of the desire to let nothing of God's truth be lost.”

“That sounds good.”

“It is.”

“When did she become a problem?”

Mika looked at the windowless walls.

“When we thought truth was safe only when each question was answered as soon as possible.”

Sela touched one of the columns.

“Why doesn't the library have windows?”

“A window is an opening to something not controlled by the building.”

“Doors?”

“They let visitors in.”

“But nothing unknown.”

“Nothing for which there is no category yet,” said Mika.”

Joel looked at the book without title.

“Where did you find the last question?”

“She found me.”

“How?”

“I worked in the Hall of Origins. There answers to questions like: Where does this come from, where did it come from, what was the first beginning of a particular form?”

“And then?”

“I found an empty place.”

“A missing book?”

“That's what I thought.”

Mika opened the book a little bit. The pages gave no light.

“I asked what answer was there. The library showed thousands of possibilities. None of them fit.”

“Why not?”

“Because the empty place didn't miss an answer.”

“Then what?”

“A view.”

Sela looked at the closed walls.

“A window.”

Mika nodded.

“I began to suspect that the library could tell everything about what it had already received, but could not look forward to what God still wanted to make visible.”

“So you wrote the question?”

“I didn't write her. When I put my hand in the empty place, this book appeared.”

“And the question?”

Mika was watching Elias.

“You heard her in the Tree of Faces.”

Elias repeated her:

“What remains to discover when each answer is true?”

The library responded. Thousands of books flew out of the closets. Rolls unrolled. Cards opened. Voices spoke at the same time:

“The new applications of existing knowledge remain.”

“There are still combinations of known truths.”

“There are still experience-based forms of known facts.”

“There are still perspectives that have not been systematically established.”

The answers got faster. Lighter. Overwhelming. Mika closed the book.

“Enough!”

The books stopped. Some fell to the ground. Others stayed open in the air. The library had answered. But the question was still alive.

"The answers are not wrong," said Elias."

"No."

"What's missing?"

Mika was looking at the book.

"Wonder."

Joel stood next to him.

"Amazing is also a reaction to something you know?"

"Partially."

"What else?"

"The recognition that reality is greater than your understanding of it."

A book started moving out of the closet. Mika raised one finger warningly. The book stopped. Joel looked at the closed wall at the end of the hall.

"Then we make a window."

Liora wasn't around to design it anymore. David not to build the frame. Yet their gifts still carried with them. Elias took Liora's scroll drawings. He rolled her open on the floor. The paper was empty.

"He asked."

"Sela said no window."

"Why not?"

"Then we determine all the shape the view takes."

"Then what?"

"The possibility of something reaching outside of us."

Elias put the part against the wall. Nothing happened. Joel kept the map next to it. There was no sign either.

"Maybe the library can't make an opening for which it has no answer," Mika said."

"Then we must do something she cannot do, Joel said."

"What can't this place do?"

Joel thought of all the books that appeared as soon as someone said anything.

"Leave a question."

He sat in front of the wall.

"What are you doing?" asked Elias."

"I'm asking a question."

"Which one?"

Joel looked at the white stone.

"What do you want to show us what we can't ask for?"

The library was waiting. No book appeared. No role. No voice. The question had no identifiable category. Elias sat down next to Joel. Sela sat on his other side. Arion lay down. Aven landed on the map. Mika stopped first. Then he sat down. They waited. Not to an answer that was already on a shelf somewhere. To someone. The silence lasted long enough not to be a technique.

The First Window

Elias noticed how strong his desire for an answer was. Not just out of curiosity. An answer would confirm that they were doing the right thing. But maybe that was even a way to control the meeting. He didn't make the desire disappear. He opened it.

"We don't know what to expect, he said."

The wall remained closed.

"We don't even know if anything will appear," said Mika."

Nothing changed. Sela touched the stone.

“But we're available.”

A gentle wind drew through the hall. Not from a visible opening. The pages of thousands of books began to move. Not fast. Like the library was breathing for the first time. The wind carried a scent. Rain on unknown earth. Joel got up.

“Outside it rains.”

Mika closed his eyes.

“The library has never had outside.”

A thin line appeared in the wall. Not a crack. A horizon. The line got wider. Blue light flowed in. The stones didn't disappear. They turned into a big window. There was no fixed landscape behind it. Elias saw a world that didn't exist yet. Then a memory that no one had experienced. A color for which Sela had not yet found a shape. An animal that surprised Aven to whistle. A garden that would ever help Nahla grow. A meeting place for which Liora had not yet signed a question. A song Samir couldn't hear yet. A story Mei would wait for with an unknown.

The window showed no information about these things. Just the reality that there was more. Mika came up slowly.

“This cannot be done in one book.”

“No,” said Joel.

“Not all books.”

“No.”

“Is the library incomplete?”

Joel looked at the endless cabinets.

“Maybe she's complete as a library.”

“But not as the whole reality.”

“Precisely.”

Mika walked to the window. He put his hand out. Raindrops fell on his skin. Immediately a book appeared behind him: THE PHYSIC, SYMBOLIC AND EXPERIENCE-FUL KNOWLEDGE OF REGEN Mika looked at it.

“Later, he said.”

The book stayed down. For the first time, an answer should have waited. Mika started laughing. No text appeared to explain his laugh. The library had learned to be quiet. The change spread through the halls. Windows appeared everywhere. Not all the same size. Some were narrow openings which made only one star visible. Others offered views of oceans, cities or unknown skies. In between the cabinets came empty shelves. Not for missing knowledge. In recognition that God's reality could never be fully stored in answers.

On the map an open book appeared with a horizon above it. Among them were words: TRUTH DOES NOT ALWAYS CLOSE THE QUESTION. SOMES MAKE TRUTH THE QUESTION BIGGER. Mika put the book of the last question on a desk near the largest window. This time he completely opened it. On the first page was the question. All the next pages were empty. Joel looked at him asking.

“Should nothing be written in it?”

“Yes.”

“Discovery. New questions. Meetings. Things we don't have words for yet.”

“Then the book is never finished.”

Mika smiled.

“That's the point.”

He gave Joel a little empty book. There was no title on the cover.

“What is this for?”

“For questions you don't want to lose too quickly.”

Joel opened the first page. He didn't write. He looked at the window.

“Can I draw something?”

“Anything that helps to stay attentive.”

Joel drew the circumference of the Tree of Faces. Under the tree he made twelve small lamps and one fruit with a window.

“Are you staying here? He asked.”

Mika looked at the many visitors who discovered the new windows. Some still read. Others alternated a book with a look outside. Some were simply in wonder at a view that had no description yet.

“I'm a keeper.”

“From the answers?”

“Other”

“And from the last question?”

Mika looked at the open book.

“(a) In particular:”

Joel embraced him. Then the travelers walked through the library to the largest window. It wasn't on the ground floor. Yet there was a path on the other side. The library didn't have to explain how that was possible. They stepped through the opening. Outside lay a vast plain beneath a sky full of slowly moving stars. The grass was dark and soft. In the distance was one house. Out of the chimney came smoke. Behind the windows was warm light. In front of the house was an old woman sitting on a couch. There was an empty place next to her. She looked at the horizon like she'd been expecting them for a long time.

Joel looked at the map. No name appeared. No assignment. No question.

“What are we going to do there?”

The map was empty. Elias smiled.

“Maybe we don't need to know that yet.”

They walked to the house. Halfway through, the old woman got up. She didn't lean on a stick and her body was strong, but her movement carried the rest of someone who had learned to receive a lot of time. When they came closer, Elias recognized her. Not from his own life. From the thousands of memories in the garden of Maya. This was the woman who had always been on the edge of the stories. She had been present in every memory. Never in the middle. Always listening. The woman was watching Sela. Then to Joel. Finally, to Elias.

"You're later than I expected, she said."

Joel wanted to explain that there was no late here. But the woman started laughing.

"That was a joke."

Arion sat in front of her.

"I liked it."

"Thank you."

"That was a compliment."

The woman pointed to the bank.

"Which one of you wants to sit next to me?"

There was only room for one. Elias looked at Joel. Joel to Selah. Sela to Arion. Aven flew straight to the empty place and sat down. The old woman nodded.

"The bird has understood."

"What?" asked Joel.

"That an invitation is not always a mystery."

She opened the door to her house. Inside stood a table with bread, fruits and six cups. Just enough for them.

"Who are you? asked Elias."

The woman looked at him.

"That's the wrong first question."

"Which question should I ask?"

"Whether you come in."

Elias smiled.

"Please."

They went into the house. It wasn't until everyone was at the table that the woman spoke again.

"My name is Hanna."

"Why did you expect us? asked Joel."

"Because every great adventure needs someone at some point who asks if the travellers have already eaten."

She broke the bread. The smell filled the house. Suddenly Elias realized that he had received much since the beginning of the journey, but had rarely stood still to enjoy easily. No assignment. No problem. No world waiting for them. Just a meal. Hanna passed the bread.

"You have learned about names, memories, hospitality, growth, music, truth and leadership."

"How do you know? asked Joel."

"The stories travel faster than travelers."

"Do we have to tell you what happened?"

"If you like."

"Oh, and if we want to eat alone?"

"Then we'll eat."

They ate. Nobody asked what was next. The map was empty. For the first time, that didn't feel like a missing clue. It felt like rest. After dinner, Hanna looked at Elias.

"And now for the second question."

“Which one?”

“Can you stay anywhere without that place becoming your assignment?”

Elias looked around. The warm house. The simple table. The people and animals he had traveled with.

“Don't know.”

“You'll stay tonight.”

“Is there a night here?”

Hanna pointed to the windows. Outside, the stars began to become brighter one by one.

“Here it is.”

“Why?”

“Because sometimes light is only seen as a gift when you do not try to keep everything constantly visible.”

She took them to rooms. Elias sat by the window. In the distance was the library with its new openings. Light shone out everywhere. Joel stood next to him.

“Do you think this is our next assignment?”

“Sleeping?”

Elias thought of Hannah's question. Could he have been somewhere without looking immediately for what to do? He put the map on the table. The surface remained empty. Then one word appeared very slowly: RUST. But under the word there was a second line: Not as a journey break. AS THE PLACE WHERE THE TRAVEL YOU COULD GO. Elias lay down. For the first time since the silence in the great song he closed his eyes without looking at the next horizon. And in the night he didn't dream about what was to come. He dreamed of everything that had already been received.

CHAPTER 16

The Day Without an Assignment



Elias woke up from the sound of rain. Not the hard rain that hit windows. A gentle rain. Drops slipped along the glass and drew winding roads through the light of the stars. The night wasn't over. Yet Elias felt fully rested. He stayed down. On Earth, he would have immediately asked what time it was. He would have calculated how many hours he had slept, what had to happen that day, and whether he was threatening to come for something too late. There was no clock here. No deal. No job. Just rain. He listened.

One drop followed an almost straight way down. Another one stuck halfway to the glass. Two small drops touched each other and became big enough to continue flowing. Elias smiled. Even rain told me about meeting. Immediately he wanted to remember that thought. Maybe he should write her down. Maybe she was part of the meaning of this place. Maybe the map would be He stopped. Hanna asked: Can you stay somewhere without that place becoming your assignment? Apparently even rest at Elias was quickly a subject for investigation. He sat up.

The map was on the table. The word RUST was gone. The surface was empty. Elias walked there. He didn't touch her.

"Good," he said. You don't have to tell me anything today."

The map remained silent. He washed himself and went down the hall. The smell of bread came from the kitchen. Hanna was standing by a large

worksheet and kneaded dough. Her hands moved slowly and powerfully. She didn't look up.

"Good morning."

"Good morning."

"Did you sleep?"

"Yes."

"Beautiful."

Elias waited. Hanna kneaded on.

"Are you not asking what I dreamed?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you tell it when it wants to be shared."

"Maybe I want you to ask."

Hanna looked at him now.

"What have you been dreaming?"

Elias laughed.

"Now it sounds like you're only asking because I asked for it."

"That's right."

"Isn't that less sincere?"

"Why? You let me know what you needed. I am happy to answer that."

Elias sat down at the table.

"Are you always that simple?"

"Sometimes I make things too complicated."

"When?"

"When someone tries to turn a simple question into a spiritual mystery."

Elias suspected she was teasing him. He was starting to like her.

“Where are the others?”

“Joel's outside.”

“In the rain?”

“He wanted to know where the moths were hiding.”

“And Sela? .”

“With him.”

“Arion?”

“On the bench.”

“Outside?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Dogs are not allowed in the bedrooms.”

From the adjoining room sounded an indignant voice:

“I'm not a dog.”

Hanna smiled.

“I know.”

Arion came into the kitchen. His silver fur was crushed on one side.

“The bank is too small.”

“You're too big,” said Hanna.

“The ratio is wrong.”

“That sounds like something Liora would say.”

“Liora would make a better bank.”

“Then you should invite her.”

Arion lay by the fire. Elias looked at Hannah's hands.

"Where did you learn how to bake?"

"On Earth."

"Where did you live?"

"In many places."

"When?"

"*Also in different times."

Elias frowned.

"How could one man have lived on earth in different times? ."

Hanna sprinkled flour on the dough.

"I didn't say I lived in different centuries. I said I lived in different times."

"What's the difference?"

"A person can live in the time of trouble, even when the calendar indicates a normal Tuesday. He can live in the time of waiting. Of mourning. Of hope. From coming home."

She made the dough into a round bread.

"I've lived long in the time of waiting."

"What were you waiting for?"

"To humans."

"Who?"

"My husband, when he was traveling. My children, as they grew older and went their own ways. Friends who promised to come back. A war that had to end. A letter. A cure that didn't come to Earth."

Hanna put the bread under a cloth.

"Later I waited for death."

"were you scared?"

“Sometimes.”

“And when you came here?”

Waiting Without Hurry

“Then I found out that God was not alone at the end of my wait. He waited with me.”

Elias looked at the covered bread.

“Waiting seems different here.”

“It is.”

“Because nothing bad can happen?”

“Partially.”

“What else?”

Hanna sat across from him.

“Cause waiting here doesn't mean your life can't start.”

The front door opened. Joel came in with wet hair and mud on his knees. Aven was on his head. Sela followed him. Her color wore little luminous raindrops.

“We found them,” said Joel.

“Who?” asked Elias.

“The moths of the night.”

“Where were they hiding?”

“Nowhere.”

Joel kept his hands open. There was a little dark bug in there. The wings looked black, but when the animal opened them, a starry sky appeared.

“They drink the rain.”

The butterfly flew up and landed on Selao's white flower. Sela smiled.

“He doesn't call me Sela.”

“What does he call you? asked Elias.”

“With smell.”

“What smell?”

Sela came closer. Elias smelled the earth from the living garden, rain in the forest and something fresh he didn't know.

“Is that your name in his language?”

“Maybe the way he recognizes me.”

Joel put Aven in a chair and looked at the dough.

“Is the bread ready yet?”

“No,” said Hanna.

“How long does it take?”

“Until it has arisen.”

“Can we make it go faster?”

“Probably”

“Why don't we do that?”

“Because the bread doesn't have to wait the way you wait. It's becoming bread.”

Joël lifted the cloth a bit. Hanna tapped his hand softly.

“Leave it alone.”

“But I just want to watch.”

“You looked three breaths ago, too.”

“It was smaller then.”

“Oh, that's usually what rising means.”

Sela sat next to the bread.

“It grows because no one touches it.”

“Hanna said not only that. But our contribution now consists of space.”

Elias thought of the many places they had visited. Almost everywhere they should have let go: Control. Perfection. The need to treat one truth as the whole story. The urge to receive any response immediately. Maybe peace wasn't nothing. Perhaps it was recognition that God's life went on without being constantly ruled by them.

“What are we going to do today?” asked Joel.

“Breakfast,” said Hanna.

“And after that?”

“We'll see after that.”

“What is our mission?”

“You have no orders today.”

Joel looked at Elias.

“Can you do that?”

“Evidently.”

Arion opened one eye.

“You can always sleep.”

“I've already slept.”

“Then you haven't practiced enough.”

After breakfast Elias walked out. The rain had stopped. A soft morning light appeared above the plain. Not from a sun. It rose from the grass, the trees and the distant mountains. He expected the map to call him. She stayed in his room. Elias ran without her. At first he stayed close to the house. Then he followed a narrow path between the grass. There was no sign that the path led to an important place. That felt weird. He had become accustomed to roads that appeared in response to a calling. Light paths. Question paths. Rivers. Cards.

This was just a trail through the grass. Maybe Hanna made it. Maybe by animals. Maybe it didn't have a purpose. After some time Elias reached a small hill. On top was a tree. The trunk was low and wide. The branches grew almost to the ground. Elias went under it. He was watching the plain. Nothing happened. No voice. No sign. No new world. He waited. Not paying attention. Not with the expectation that the silence would reveal a message. He was there easy. Slowly he noticed things that he otherwise passed by. A bug that ran over his shoe.

Grass wearing different shades of green. A distant bird call that didn't belong to Aven. The warmth of the earth under his hand. After some time Jesus sat next to him. Elias wasn't scared. It felt like Christ was already there before he saw him.

"Good morning," said Jesus."

"Is this actually a morning?"

Jesus smiled. Elias recognized the call. Their journey had begun with the same question.

"Not really," said Jesus."

"Then I say it because I still don't know a better word."

"That's still enough."

They looked over the plain together. Elias was waiting for an assignment. Jesus didn't give one.

"Did you come to tell me something?"

"# Maybe it came # Me to sit with you."

"Just that"?"

"Is that too little?"

Elias looked at his hands. The scars were visible.

"You're always with us."

"Yes."

“Why does your visible presence feel different?”

“Because you were created to meet. Not only for the idea that I am present.”

“Do we therefore need physical proximity?”

“You are not thoughts, Elias.”

Jesus picked a long blade of grass.

“The Father has not delivered you to eventually exist only as consciousness or memory. You look, listen, walk, eat, touch and are touched.”

“Therefore, after the resurrection, you kept a body.”

“Yes.”

Elias thought of the bread in Hannah's house. Arion's footsteps. On the kids' lights.

“Is rest also physical?”

“Everything that is truly human touches the body.”

“But we're not getting tired here.”

“No.”

“Why should we need rest?”

Jesus looked at him.

“As rest is not only recovery from fatigue.”

“What else?”

“Get it without adding anything.”

The words entered deeper than Elias expected.

Enjoying Without Adding

“Isn't scooping good?”

“Very good.”

“Other”

“Other”

Jesus smiled.

“You know my answer.”

“Why do I find it difficult not to add anything?”

“Because sometimes your love still confuses with utility.”

Elias looked at his hands. On Earth, he had often tried to mean something. For his parents. For friends. Even in the new creation, that desire had not disappeared. It was purified, but not fully understood.

“Am I equally loved when I do nothing?”

“You were loved before you could do anything.”

“I know.”

“It is not always the same movement.”

Elias looked at Jesus.

“How do I receive it?”

Christ pointed to the plain.

“Enjoy.”

“That sounds too simple.”

“This is why many people find it difficult.”

A group of small animals appeared in the grass. They looked like hares, but had long, colored feathers along their backs. They jumped over each other and then disappeared behind the hill. Elias laughed. No explanation appeared. No card named their kind. He didn't know why they had feathers. You didn't have to.

“Don't I need to know their names? He asked.”

“Do you want to know?”

“Yes.”

“Then you can ask them later.”

“And now?”

“Now you've seen them.”

They stayed put. The silence between them did not need to be filled. After some time Elias asked:

“Did I carry the journey well?”

Jesus looked at him.

“Do you really want an assessment?”

Elias was thinking.

“Maybe I want to hear that you're satisfied.”

“I'm happy with you.”

The answer came without a list of achievements. No reason. No condition. Just joy. Elias closed his eyes. He let the words in. Not as a reward after a completed assignment. As a reality. When he opened his eyes, the tree was in bloom. Not because Elias did something. Not as confirmation that he learned the right lesson. It was simply the moment when the tree bloomed. And Elias could be there. Jesus got up.

“Are you leaving?”

“I'm going to Hannah's house.”

“Why?”

“The bread is almost ready.”

They walked back together. Joel, Sela, Arion and Aven were already sitting around the table. Hanna took the bread out of the oven. When she saw Jesus, she nodded like He was an expected guest.

“You're right on time.”

“That's what I like to hear.”

“Do you want to break the bread?”

Jesus sat down. He held the bread in His hands. For a moment, Elias saw another table. An upper room on Earth. Friends who haven't understood what would happen. Bread. A cup. A body that was given. Then he saw a meal at a lake. Fire. Fish. Disciples received again. Then the great table in the new creation. People of all peoples. Christ in their midst. Jesus broke the bread.

“Thank You, Father,” said He, “for what is received without being deserved, for what grows without being controlled by us and for the joy that needs no other reason than Your goodness.”

He handed out the bread. It tasted different from the bread from the other night. Not better. Hanna was watching Elias.

“Can you eat it without giving it any meaning?”

Elias took another bite.

“I can try.”

“That also sounds like work.”

He laughed.

“It's delicious.”

“That's enough for now.”

After the meal the map appeared on the table. No one had made it to her. The surface was no longer empty. All places of their journey became visible. David's workshop. The living garden of Nahla and Seren. The open world of Samir and Caelia. The Garden of Shared Memory where Mei listened. The Table Between the Oevers where Liora built with both peoples. The moving forest with Tirza and the light carriers. Mika's library full of windows. All the friends were busy. Not in a hurry. Not because their value depended on it. Their work flowed out of joy received.

Gold lines ran from every place to the map. The lines came together. Not Elias. Not by a throne. By the simple bread in the middle of Hannah's table. Jesus put his hand next to it.

“Now the journey has overtaken you.”

“What does that mean?” asked Joel.

“That you don't only see where everyone has gone. You receive what was created by their calling.”

The map opened. No paper. No lights. She became a space in which the gifts of all traveling companions came together. David had made an object. A wooden bowl, wide and low. Nahla had put seeds in it. Samir had put a tune around the edge. Mei had woven golden memories between the veins. Liora had designed a standard on which the bowl could rest without being secured. Tirza and the children had placed small lamps around the bowl. Mika had put one empty page under the standard. Something grew in the wooden bowl. A small point of light. Sela was looking at it.

“Is that a star?”

“Not only,” said Jesus.”

“A seed?”

“Other”

“A song?”

“Yes.”

Joel bent over it.

“Is this the song that hasn't been sung?”

Jesus looked at him.

“It's the place where it can start.”

Elias felt expectation. Not the restless expectation that wanted to leave immediately. A quiet willingness.

“What is it intended for?” He asked.”

The walls of Hannah's house became transparent. Outside a dark sky appeared. In it was an area without stars. No evil darkness. No emptiness asking for recovery. An unopened space in creation.

“For that place?” asked Joel.”

Jesus nodded.

“Do we have to go?”

“Yes.”

“Today?”

Hanna put a canvas on the rest of the bread.

“After dishwashing.”

Joel looked surprised.

“The new creation can wait?”

Hanna gave him a bowl.

“It will not be less new.”

Together they cleared the table. Jesus helped. The Son by Those who existed galaxies dried the cups. Nobody thought that was weird. Maybe this was the very heart of His glory. Big enough to carry worlds. Humble enough to serve at a simple table. When everything was ready, Elias took the wooden bowl. Joel wore the map. Sela loved the empty book of questions. Aven sat down on her shoulder. Arion was waiting at the door. Hanna hugged them one by one.

“You're not coming?” asked Joel.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“There's gonna be new travellers.”

“How do you know?”

Hanna looked at the freshly baked bread.

“I made more than we needed.”

Outside the day was clear. On the horizon was Jesus. Not for them. He waited beside the beginning of a new path. Elias looked at Hannah's house

one more time. A place without a job. And thereby a place that had given him something that could not bring any effort. He turned around. Together they walked to Christ. Above them appeared the dark, starless space. The wooden bowl in Elias' hand began to sing softly. First he heard David's tools. Then Nahla... Samir's strings. Mayan stories. Open spaces. The kids' lights. The questions from Mikao's library.

All the powers were present. But the song didn't start yet. There was one voice missing. Elias was watching Jesus.

“From whom?”

Christ replied:

“From the world it will receive.”

“But there's no world there yet.”

Jesus smiled.

“Then you must first learn to listen to someone who does not yet exist.”

The new path opened. Not to a place. To a possibility in God's heart. And for the first time Elias understood that even an unborn world could already be known by love.

The World That Did Not Yet Exist



The path wasn't colored. No surface. No direction Elias could follow with his eyes. Still, he knew where it started. By Christ. Jesus stood on the edge of starless space. Behind Him was no landscape, no sea of light, no hidden city. There was only possibility. Elias held the wooden bowl against his chest. The little light point in it pulsed softly.

“How can we listen to someone who doesn't yet exist?” asked Joel.”

Jesus looked at the dark room.

“You do not listen to an independent existence waiting to be found somewhere outside God.”

“To what?”

“To My love for what I will call.”

Joel thought.

“You already know the world?”

“Yes.”

“Does it exist?”

“In my mind.”

“Is an intention the same as existence?”

“No.”

“But you can already love her?”

Jesus knelt by him.

“Do you think the Father only began to love you when you were born?”

Joel shook his head.

“So I was someone before I existed?”

“You weren't a hidden person waiting for his body somewhere. But you were wanted, known and meant.”

Joel looked at the darkness.

“Then we listen to Your intention.”

“Yes.”

“Why do you need us?”

“I don't need you like someone needs tools because they can't do a job otherwise.”

“Why are we here?”

“Because love shares joy.”

Jesus stood up.

“What I can do alone, will Just me. Only God calls out real life from non-existence. But what arises will not exist alone. It will be received.”

Sela touched the white flower on her chest.

“As I was received before I knew my name.”

“Yes.”

“Do we have to name this world?”

“No.”

“A shape?”

“No.”

“What then?”

“Room.”

Liora's gift. Elias understood. No design. Prepare a place in which God's new work could unfold itself as an answer.

“How do we make room for something we don't know about? He asked.”

Jesus looked at the wooden bowl.

“By giving what you have received without determining what it is to produce.”

They stepped on the colourless path. The starless space surrounded them. Hannah's house disappeared behind them. Also the fields, the library and the distant mountains were no longer visible. There was no light. Yet they could see each other. Elias saw Joel. Sela. Arion. Not because their bodies emit light. They were visible because they were known. The map was floating out of Joel's hands. All lines and signs disappeared. Only seven points remained. Elias was watching the bowl.

“What do we do first?”

Jesus didn't answer. They waited. The silence was different from all the silences Elias had heard before. Not the silence in the big song. Not the listening silence of the valley. Not the peace in Hannah's house. This silence had no memory yet. Nothing happened. No voice had spoken. No answer was given. Elias felt how his thoughts were trying to make shapes. A world with mountains. Rivers. Forests. Maybe a sky with multiple arches. Animals never seen before. But every show was too much like something he already knew. He let the footage go. Joel whispered:

“Do we have to close our eyes?”

“Why?” asked Elias.”

“Because I'm trying to see what's coming.”

Sela closed her eyes. Her shape became softer. Aven put his head under his wing. Arion kept watching.

“Don't you close your eyes? asked Joel.”

“Listening does not only happen with closed eyes.”

“But you're not trying to look ahead, are you?”

Room for a New Voice

“I'm looking at you.”

Joel smiled and closed his eyes. Elias followed. In the darkness he heard the wooden bowl. First, the sound of David's workshop. Not one hammer. Many hands working together. He heard wood that kept his own grain while it took shape. Elias put his hand on the edge of the bowl.

“We receive what is made, he said, not as property, but as a gift.”

A light line appeared. Very thin. She traveled through starless space and stayed there. Then Elias heard Nahla's seed. Roots weren't looking for soil. They were waiting for what God would give. Joel put his hand next to Elias's.

“We give room for growth that can surprise us.”

A second line appeared. Not next to the first. Around. Then Samir's string sounded. One tone. Then a rest. Sela replied:

“We do not fill the silence until the new voice itself can answer.”

A third line emerged. She moved like a wave through the first two. Maya's golden thread lit up. Elias heard voices from different memories. No story had the whole truth.

“We will listen to what this world tells us about itself, he said, even when its reality is greater than our first understanding.”

A golden circle appeared. Liora's gift followed. No building. No solid form. Openings. Places where meeting could become possible. Joel said:

“We will not decide that everything should look like us.”

Space was expanding. Not measurable. Responsive. The lights of the children appeared as twelve small lights. Each lamp didn't shine on itself, but on another. Sela said:

“What lives here does not have to carry its light alone.”

Finally, Mika's empty page opened. No answer. One question. Joel pulled out his little book. He saved the first empty page.

"We leave room for questions that cannot yet be asked."

The seven points on the map began to shine. But the small light in the wooden bowl remained closed. Elias opened his eyes. Jesus stood before them.

"You have made room, He said."

"Is it enough? asked Elias."

"For your gift, yes."

"What's missing?"

"No technique."

Joel looked at the light.

"The voice of the world."

"Yes."

"However, it does not yet exist."

"No."

"Then she can't answer, can she?"

"Not before it is called."

Jesus stretched His hands out. The scars in His palms became visible. Elias had seen them a lot. Yet he understood something again. The same hands that carried the new creation were the hands that had been pierced on the cross. God's creative power was not to separate from His self-giving love. Christ did not call out to make Himself bigger. He gave birth. Space. Joy. Life. The wooden bowl rose from Elias' hands. She was floating between Jesus and starless space. Christ spoke. Not a human word. No language of angels.

The voice bore the same love Elias had heard at first light: Wild. Good.

"Come out."

The darkness didn't change immediately. No explosion. No sudden sea of stars. First there was depth. Starless space was no longer a flat absence. It became a reality in which distance was possible. Then there was time. Not as a clock. If the possibility that something could start, answers and move on. Then light appeared. One small point. Not in the bowl. Far out. The light wasn't white, gold or blue. The colour didn't look like any shade Elias knew. Even Sela had never worn her. The point grew. No star. An origin.

From the light, orbits did not form straight or curved lines. They moved according to a pattern that constantly changed and remained recognizable. Space folded. Time started singing. The song had no melody Elias could remember. As soon as he thought he heard a repeat, it answered with something new.

“Is this the world? asked Joel.”

Jesus looked at the growing light.

“The beginning.”

Small forms appeared in the open space. No planets. No stars. They looked like buttons in a network of light. Each knot existed only in connection with the other. When one form moved, the whole thing changed.

“There's nothing separate,” said Sela.”

“Elias said no center, neither.”

Arion looked carefully.

“Heading”

“Where to?”

“Not to a place. To meeting.”

The light buttons came together and split up again. Where two touched, a sound arose. Where three connected, colour appeared. In larger encounters, fields of movement formed. The world didn't build itself. She responded to God's call by unfolding the possibilities that He gave her. Then came her first voice.

Welcome

Soft. New, unfinished. The sound reached the wooden bowl. David's wood was shaking. Nahla's seed opened. Samir's string answered. Mei's thread captured the memory of the first sound. Liora's space gave it space. The lamps carried it further. Mika's empty page received a sign. But the song remained incomplete. The world was silent again.

"Why does it stop?" asked Joel."

Jesus looked at the bowl.

"She heard you."

"Shall we sing now?"

"Only when you really have something to answer."

Elias listened to the world. He didn't feel a message. No assignment. Just a question that didn't exist in words. The world didn't ask: What am I supposed to be? Not even: Am I good enough? Her question was simpler: Am I received? Sela also understood. She stepped forward. Her own colour moved to the new shade of the world. They didn't mix. They remained different and together formed something that neither of them could show separately.

"I see you," said Sela."

The world responded with light. Joel opened his hands.

"I want to learn who you are."

New sounds appeared. Arion sat down.

"I won't assume you need legs to move."

Joel looked at him.

"That's surprisingly open-minded."

"I'm growing."

Aven flew to the new world. Not to enter her. He circled at the edge and sang his four tones. The world responded with a fifth tone. Aven added a sixth. The world gave back a seventh. Elias felt tears.

"Welcome," he said."

The word wasn't big enough. But the love in it was received. The new world sang. Not just one voice. Countless possibilities began to answer each other. Light reacted to movement. Time to meet. There were structures that Elias didn't understand. Some seemed alive, but not biologically. Others carried a form of consciousness that did not seem to reside separately in one being. Joel looked surprised.

"Are those persons?"

"You're trying to pick words too quickly," said Arion."

"Sorry."

"Not against me."

Joel addressed the world.

"I don't know what to call you yet."

The light fields moved. They seemed to receive his words with joy. The non-knowing was not a rejection. It was respect. Christ looked at the world.

"It's okay."

The words went through every bright spot. The new creation responded with its first full agreement. It wasn't the perfect chord from the mirror dome. This harmony moved. There was rest. Unexpected sounds. Different rhythms. Space for answers that would come. The song that had not yet been sung began. And immediately something happened that Elias didn't expect. Far lights appeared on the edge of the new world. Known voices. David. Samir. Tirza, Mika, Hanna, Thael. Caelia. The two peoples of the Table between the Oevers. The angels around Ithamar.

Not everyone left their own place. Yet their votes were present. The map network connected them. David beat a rhythm with his tools. Nahla had

flowers open. Samir answered with music. Mei carried memories of everything that had been received. Liora created new spaces between the sounds. Tirza and the children passed the light to each other. Mika didn't write an answer. He opened a window. Hanna put bread on the table for those on the way. Every gift became part of the song. Not one traveling companion was really left behind. Their vocations had become votes.

Thewespread over worlds, gardens, cities, libraries and seas. Elias was watching Jesus.

“Was this your intention from the beginning?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn't you tell me?”

“Because a destination explained alone is not yet a shared discovery.”

“Did we make this world?”

“No.”

“But our answer has meant something.”

“Many.”

“How can you if you didn't need us?”

Jesus put a hand on his shoulder.

“Love does not give any meaningful task because it itself is insufficient. It gives because participation is joy.”

Elias looked at the singing world.

“What's happening now?”

“Now she's learning answers.”

“And us?”

“You're teaching her to receive.”

Sela was on the edge of the new light. Her name sounded in the song. Not as a centerpiece. As a rest. Whenever the music threatened to flow without room for another voice, Sela's colour appeared. An open moment. An

expectation. A welcome. Joel wrote on the first page of his empty book: What forms of life can exist without being alone and yet remain completely self? He was watching the world.

“Do you think she’ll answer?”

Elias smiled.

“With more questions, probably.”

“Beautiful.”

The wooden bowl changed. The wood became transparent. The seeds grew through the edge. The string moved. Gold wires ran to all worlds. Small lights became stars. The empty page remained open. A new card appeared in the middle. Not for Elias. Not for Joel. For the newborn world. The map showed no route. Only connections to places she was welcome. The new world touched her. The light grid got bigger. Then sounded from an area that had not yet opened an unexpected voice. Not from the new world. Not from any of their friends.

A call from very far away. Ithamar raised his head. The angels became silent. Jesus looked at the horizon behind the newborn creation. An old star appeared there. Older than all the worlds Elias had visited. Her light was weak, but not dying. There was something sealed inside her.

“What is that?” Elias asked.

Ithamar replied:

“A promise from the first morning of creation.”

“Why is it now becoming visible?”

“Because the new song has awakened an answer.”

The old star opened. In her light a door appeared. Not to a new place. To a depth in God’s reality that none of them had seen before. Above the door were words: NOT EVERYTHING OLD LIES BEHIND YOU. Joel closed his book.

“Are we going there?”

Elias was watching Jesus. Christ smiled. The same smile in which galaxies seemed hidden.

Joel looked disappointed.

“Why not?”

Jesus pointed to the newborn world.

“A genuine welcome does not leave immediately after the guest has arrived.”

The old star remained open. The door didn't disappear. She'd wait. For the first time, Elias didn't feel a rush to go through. There was something new here. A world that sang her first song. A voice that wanted to be heard. A meeting that didn't have to be a next destination. Elias sat down at the edge of the light. Joel next to him. Sela on the other side. Aven rested on her shoulder. Arion lay at their feet. Jesus stayed in their midst. Together they listened. And the new world began to tell them who she was.

The Song That Had Not Yet Been Sung



The new world didn't speak with one voice. She spoke in relationships. When two forms of light approached each other, a colour emerged. When that color met a third movement, music sounded. The music then changed the space in which the forms of light moved. Cause and answer were not easy to separate. All received. Give it all. Everything got richer by meeting without stopping being itself. Elias looked at it and understood almost nothing. That made him happy.

In the past, he would have tried to detect patterns. He would have asked questions, sought explanations and consulted the map. Now he listened. Sometimes a thought appeared. Then he sent for her. When she disappeared again, he didn't try to hold her. Next to him, Joel wrote in his empty book.

“What are you writing? asked Elias.”

“No answers.”

“What then?”

“Things I don't want to forget to ask.”

“Like?”

Joël read to me:

“Can a colour be missed?”

He turned a page.

“Can a world remember how it started before it has words?”

One more page:

“When two living forms together make a new sound, who is that sound?”

Elias smiled.

“Good questions.”

“I don't know yet.”

“When do you know if a question is right?”

Joel looked at the world.

“Maybe when she helps to stay more attentive.”

Sela had eyes closed. Her colour moved on the rhythm of the new song. Sometimes she answered. Sometimes she stayed quiet. Her silences weren't all the same. One silence gave room. Another one received. Some silences carried wonder. Others simply said: I'm here. The world learned her name. Not as a word. Every time Sela gave her open presence, a rest arose in the fields of light. Then a new movement followed that would not have been possible without that rest.

“Sela, "the world finally sang.”

Not with letters. With an open space between two tones. Sela opened her eyes.

“She knows me.”

“How does that feel? asked Joel.”

“It's like my name gets bigger without changing.”

Arion was at their feet. His eyes were closed, but his ears moved constantly.

“What do you hear?” asked Elias.”

“Footsteps.”

“This world has no feet yet.”

“That's why they're interesting.”

Elias listened. At first, he didn't hear anything. Then he noticed a rhythm moving between the light forms. Step. Step. Two quick moves. A longer rest.

“Is that walking?”

“Not as we walk.”

“Where's it going?”

Arion opened his eyes.

“To us.”

A group of light forms came closer. They had no faces. No bodies that Elias recognized as human or animal. Yet he felt attention. The shapes held still at some distance. One of them moved forward. The light became smaller and assumed a more limited form. Not because the creature wanted to appear human. Because it wanted to get close enough to actually be met. Elias got up. The light shape made the same movement. Elias raised his hand. The creature changed, but did not form a hand. From the light came a narrow orbit approaching Elias' fingers. They hit each other.

Heat went through him. No information. Presence. Elias received an impression of the new world. Not a complete picture. A first sense of self. The world didn't know its own boundaries yet. She discovered herself by noticing what happened when she answered something that was not herself. Elias realized he wasn't just looking at the world. The world was watching him. Not with eyes. Meeting. The light creature showed a short movement. Elias didn't understand the question. Sela stood next to him. The creature repeated the movement. Sela replied with a color. The world reacted.

Joel looked carefully.

“What is she asking?”

Sela was thinking.

“Not who we are.”

“What then?”

“Why we stayed.”

Elias was watching Jesus. Christ was a few meters away. The light of the world moved toward Him, but did not touch in the same way as the others. As if in Him she recognized something of her origin that she could not yet comprehend. Elias addressed the creature.

“Because welcome is more than opening the door.”

The light form waited.

“Because we want to learn who you are.”

The answer did not seem complete. Joel took a step forward.

“Because you're not just another discovery.”

The world became clearer. Sela added:

“Because your presence has meaning not only because of what we can learn from you.”

The World Answers

The light creature came closer. Arion got up.

“Because leaving before receiving is a form of haste.”

The creature moved towards him. Arion remained standing when the light passed his silver coat. His hair lit up one by one. He was watching Elias.

“I'm visible now.”

“You were before that.”

“Not like this.”

Aven flew over the group. The light being stretched out to him. The bird answered them with its four original tones. The world sang back. Aven gave a fifth. The world a sixth. That's how it went on. Neither seemed to

want to end the song. Whenever Aven thought he understood the form, a new possibility appeared. Sometimes the world repeated its tune. Then she changed one small movement, so everything had to be heard again. Joel started laughing.

“They're playing.”

Elias saw it now. This was not a transfer of knowledge. No official first encounter between species. Play. Freedom that did not use the other's presence, but celebrated it. More and more light forms were added. They formed circles. Divorced. Turned back. Sela added colors. Joel moved between them. Arion discovered that the light beings were following his unexpected directional changes and began to run more complicated patterns.

“You're playing, too, Elias said.”

“I'm investigating their ability to follow a wolf.”

“It's called playing.”

“According to people.”

Jesus stood beside Elias.

“Why don't you join us? asked Elias.”

“I'm in.”

“You're standing right here.”

“Do you think that game only consists of movement?”

Elias looked again. He saw how the light forms always returned to Jesus. Not because He determined their movements. His joy carried the whole game. Like music not only consisted of loose tones, but was carried by a rhythm that gave every tone freedom. Christ wasn't a participant taking room from others. He was the living space in which every answer became possible.

“They rejoice in Your joy,” said Elias.”

“And I in theirs.”

"Did you know exactly how they would play?"

"Yes."

"Is surprise possible for you?"

Jesus looked at him.

"I don't need to know something to I'm delighted."

Elias thought of parents who saw their child take a well-known step and were truly happy. God's knowledge made the meeting no less alive. His love was not a response to unexpected information. She was the source from which life was always received new. The game continued. After some time, as far as time could be measured here, the world changed its movement. All the light forms withdrew. They formed a large circle around the travellers. The first form with which Elias had made contact came up again. An image appeared in her light. The First City. The square. The big tree.

Musicians. Thousands of people sang together. The party that started their journey. Then the silence appeared in the song. The open space that called them.

"How does she know about that?" asked Joel."

Sela replied:

"The song that welcomed her carried the memory."

The world showed a second image. Not the old party. A new party. The First City was connected to the Open City, the living garden, the music world, the Garden of Shared Memory, the Table Between the Shores, the moving forest and the library with windows. People were waiting everywhere.

"She's inviting us," said Elias."

"For what?" asked Joel."

The form of light made a movement towards itself and then towards the many worlds.

“To introduce her, Sela replied.”

“To everyone?”

“Yes.”

Joel looked surprised at Jesus.

“Can a world come to a party?”

“Why not?”

“She's very big.”

Jesus smiled.

“Then maybe the party should get bigger.”

The map appeared. For the first time it did not carry a route for the travellers. She became an invitation. Gold lines went to every place that was created during the journey. David received the invitation in his workshop. He lay down his tools and laughed. Nahla felt her in the roots of the garden. Samir heard her as a new melody. Mei saw her light up between the memories. Liora discovered her in an empty space on her drawings. Tirza's lamp fruit started to shine. Mika found her on a page he deliberately left blank. Hanna saw the dough for her next bread rose faster.

Answers were given everywhere. Not everyone had to complete their work. Some came physically. Others allowed their gift to be present from the place where they were called. The new world moved. Not through space like a planet or a ship. Her network of light forms connected to the invitation. Part of her presence became visible in the large square of the First City without the world ending where she was born. The journey back began. But this time Christ didn't lead the way. He walked in between them. Elias wasn't wearing a card.

Joel was wearing his book. Sela's name. Aven's song. Arion's unexplained wisdom. And the new world bore its first gift: A sound that could only arise when many different lives received each other. When the First City became visible, the streets were already full. The large tree in the square bore new fruits. Colours moved between the leaves of the newborn world. The tables were set. Hanna was standing by the bread. Liora had no fixed places

designed. There were open spaces everywhere where new forms of togetherness could emerge. David came to Elias first.

His father put both arms around him.

“You're back.”

“And you too.”

“I never left.”

“I know.”

This time Elias didn't only know with his head. Nahla came with earth on her hands. Seren walked next to her. On Seren's shoulder, a small branch grew that moved freely around her. Samir wore a new instrument. Caelia walked next to him. She deliberately played an unexpected tone and then looked at Samir challengingly. He answered with an even stranger. Mei came out of the crowd. Elias saw her before she saw him. Or maybe she saw him before. They were walking towards each other. No rush. No fear the other would disappear again. Mei embraced him.

“You have a lot to tell me.”

“You too.”

“Where do we start?”

Elias looked at the big tree.

“Not at the beginning.”

“Why not?”

“Because then we have to wait too long for the parts in which you appear.”

Mei smiled.

“You've learned.”

Liora joined them. Behind her came representatives of both nations. They were carrying food from their banks, but no one knew who was guest or host.

The Feast of Voices

Tirza and the children appeared with their lamps. Every light shone for another. Mika brought the book of the last question. He opened it at the edge of the square, where everyone could add new questions. Thaël came from the Dal of the First Answer. The earth trembled beneath its six legs. The white bird who had ever worn his name flew alongside Aven for a while. Ithamar and the angels appeared above the city. Their wings filled the sky. The new world looked at them all. Not as one eye. Like a network of attention. Elias felt her wonder. So many forms of life.

So many ways to answer. So many names. The music started. Miriam hit her drum. The instruments of the First City responded. Then came Samir's new melody. The children added their lights. Nahla's plants moved on the rhythm. But everyone was waiting for the voice of the new world. One moment there was silence. The same silence that started everything. This time Elias didn't feel her missing. He knew her. This wasn't an empty place that needed to be filled quickly. It was Sela. Reception. The possibility of a truly new answer.

Sela walked to the center of the square. She raised her hands. Her color spread through the silence. Then the new world sang. The first sound was small. Not impressive. Not overwhelming. A simple greeting. Everyone in the square heard her in their own language. Here I am. No one answered immediately. Not from uncertainty. They gave the words time to be received. Then the whole crowd spoke. People. Angels. Animals. Trees. Rivers. Worlds. Welcome. The new world sang again.

Her light forms spread over the square. They touched the music of Samir, the colors of Sela and the golden threads of Mei. The song grew. David beat a rhythm on the wood from his workbench. Nahla cracked open seed boxes. Liora's open spaces became places where unknown voices could appear. Joel didn't write any more questions. He danced with the kids. Aven flew above them and constantly added new notes to his original song. Arion ran between the light forms. No one could predict where he would appear. He clearly thought that was an important contribution.

Elias was standing next to Jesus.

"This was the silence I heard."

"Yes."

"The world didn't exist then."

"No."

"But you already loved her."

"Yes."

"And her future voice already made room in our song."

"You're starting to understand."

"A little bit."

"That's enough for today."

The song got bigger. Not louder. Deeper. Elias recognized every encounter of the journey. Thael's name. The open gates of Liora's city. The living roots in Serens garden. Caelia's uncertain first tone. The golden space between different memories. The hospitality between the two banks. The lights in the moving forest. The windows in Mika's library. The bread in Hannah's house. Nothing would have been just an intermediate station. Everything had a voice in this song. The journey did not consist of problems that could then be left behind. Each meeting had become part of a larger answer.

Elias looked at the old star. She was still on the far horizon. The door in her light remained open. NOT EVERYTHING OLD LIES BEHIND YOU. Joel stood beside him panting.

"Now we can go look, right?"

"Now?"

"The new world has been received."

Elias was watching the party.

"A real welcome lasts longer than one song."

"How long then?"

“Until the guest himself knows that he is not only celebrated because of the new.”

Joel thought.

“So we're staying.”

“Yes.”

“But after that?”

Elias was watching Jesus. Christ looked at the old star. His eyes shone with the same infinite kindness Elias had seen at their first encounter.

“Behind that door, Jesus said, is a memory older than human history.”

“From the angels? asked Joel.”

“Also older than their songs as you know them.”

“From before creation?”

Jesus did not answer directly.

“There is none before God. But in My eternal love lie depths that no creature will ever fully comprehend.”

Joel looked at Elias.

“That sounds like a new adventure.”

“It is.”

“When are we leaving?”

Jesus pointed to the tables.

“After the party.”

Hanna came to them with a bowl of bread.

“Dinner and after the dishes are done.”

Joel sighed.

“Why is there so much dishes in eternity?”

“Because there are so many parties,” Hanna said.”

Joel thought that was an acceptable answer. They went back to the table. Elias was between his father and Mei. Selah and Joel sat opposite him. Arion was lying under the table awaiting something that might fall down. Aven took pieces of fruit from Joel's hand. Jesus took place among people. Not on a throne. Dinner. He broke the bread. The new world saw it. She didn't understand what bread was. Not even what breaking, sharing or eating meant. But she recognized the movement. One whole that gave itself without stopping being whole.

A gift that multiplied because it was shared. The light forms responded with their own motion. One colour divided all over the world and then returned richer.

“She learns quickly,” said Elias.”

Jesus smiled.

“She has good examples.”

The party went on. Maybe hours. Maybe years. Time bore the joy without pushing her forward. Eventually Elias stood again on the hill above the First City. Mei stood next to him. Downstairs still sounded music.

“You're looking at the horizon again, she said.”

“That seems to be a habit.”

“What do you see?”

“An old star.”

“And back there?”

“Something I don't understand.”

“Do you want to go?”

“Yes.”

“Now?”

Elias looked at the square. To his father. His friends. The newborn world. Christ speaking to children.

“Not yet.”

Mei smiled.

“Then you've really learned something.”

“Don't say too much. I'm gonna get expectations.”

They kept quiet. The horizon still called. But the call didn't feel like unrest. She did not fight with the joy of the present moment. Elias could long for what came and be fully present at the same time where he was. Maybe that was one of the secrets of eternity. No future made the present unimportant. No present excluded the future. Heaven was not an endless repetition of perfect moments. She was a living connection in which every moment could be fully received and yet left room for something new. Jesus came up the hill.

“Are you ready? He asked.”

Elias looked at the old star. Then to the party.

“For which of the two?”

Jesus smiled.

“That's a good question.”

Joel ran after him. Sela and Arion followed. Aven flew above them.

“Are we going? asked Joel.”

Jesus looked at Elias. Elias listened. To the song. To the silence in it. To the new world that began to find her own voice. To the old star who waited patiently. Then he answered:

“Yes.”

Not because the party was over. Not because this world was completely discovered. Not because he knew what was behind the new door. But because going with Christ never meant leaving the gift received. Everything traveled along. The names. The stories. The gifts. The peace. The questions. Love. Elias took Mei. Joel held the map. Sela wore the open space. Arion chose a direction that probably wasn't the official route. Aven

sang. Together they walked to the horizon. Behind them the feast remained visible. In front of them stood the old star.

And above all, the song that had never been sung. It wouldn't have ended. Just new voices. New answers all the time. Ever new rest in which unknown beauty could be welcomed. Elias looked at Christ. Then again he understood the truth with which each journey began and no journey would ever be completed: The greatest discovery of eternity was not a new world. Not a new language. Not a name, a song or a star. The greatest discovery was Christ Himself. And because He was infinite, love would never stop becoming new.

The old star opened her door. Light was flowing out. Jesus took the first step. And this time no one went after him. They walked with him. To the next beginning.

END

Or rather: