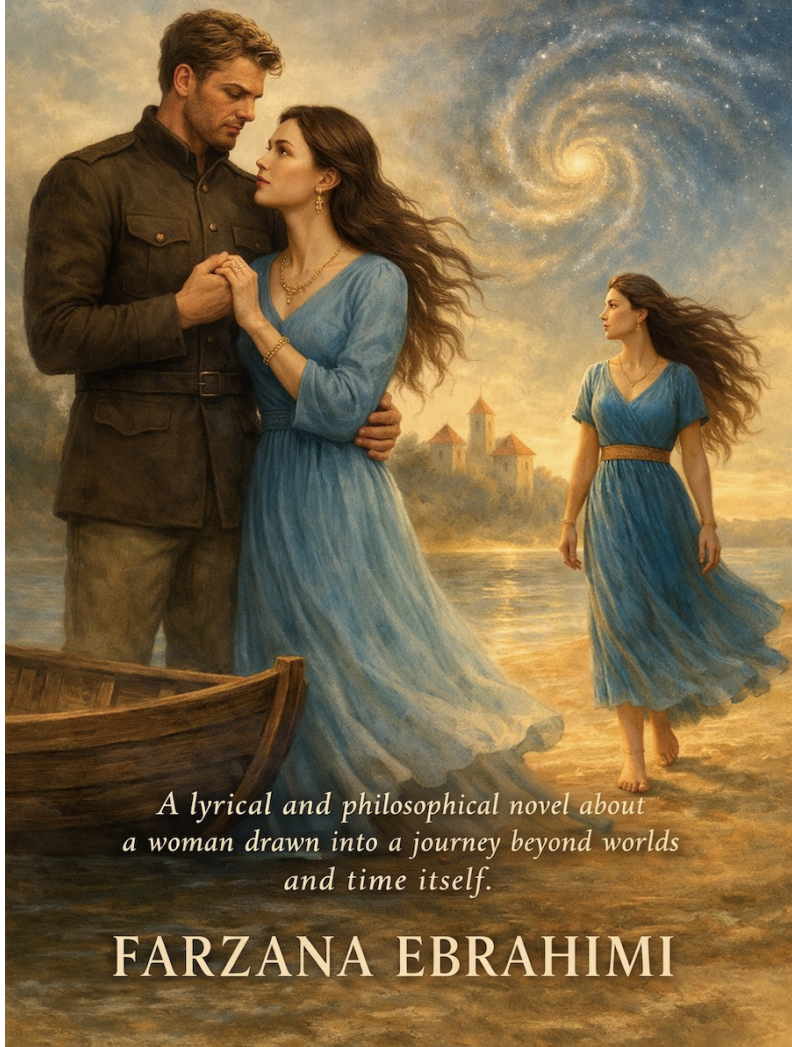


# BEYOND TIME



*A lyrical and philosophical novel about  
a woman drawn into a journey beyond worlds  
and time itself.*

FARZANA EBRAHIMI

# Beyond Time

A Mystery Reç ÜèÝBOf Cosmic Origin

*I offer my deepest gratitude to my family, friends,  
and teachers, whose love, guidance, and unwavering  
support have carried me through both the trials and  
the quiet joys of life. This book exists because of you  
—on every page, your presence endures.*

# Beyond Time

*A STORY ABOUT LOVE, MEMORY, AND HIDDEN WORLDS*

Farzana Ebrahimi

Beyond Time

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Connect with the author:

Instagram: [@beyond\\_time\\_book\\_2](https://www.instagram.com/beyond_time_book_2)

Email the author: [ebrahimifarzana@gmail.com](mailto:ebrahimifarzana@gmail.com)

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*To the spirit of my inner self, who lingered  
quietly by my side through every unfolding  
of this story.*

نه که هر چه در جهان است، نه که عشق جانِ آن است

جُزِ عشقِ هر چه بینی، همه جاودان نماند

ره آسمان درون است، پَرِ عشقِ را بجنبان

پَرِ عشقِ چون قوی شد، غم نردبان نماند

*Not all in this world, not even its soul, will last—*

*Only love endures.*

*The path to the heavens lies within; awaken  
the wing of love.*

*When love's wings grow strong, no sorrow can remain.*

*Rumi*

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Connect with the author on Instagram above and explore human complexity, spirituality, and justice across multiple genres that advocate for humanity of lived experience.

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## Chapter 1

# The Mysterious Hotel

*“An entryway into a world steeped in mystery, where experience stretches beyond time and space. Step into shifting dimensions, called forth by time itself.”*

Rain fell gently, without intent to cleanse, settling on my shoulders—not as an intrusive dampness, but soft as fingers yearning for a simple caress. Touching upon a hidden, silent layer of the soul, a spirit lost for years in the fog of forgetfulness, now slowly, quietly awakening under this delicate drizzle. Each drop seemed to carry a message from some untouched corner of the past. The air, rich with a living, damp scent of wet earth, spoke to me in fragrances resembling unnamed memories. The memories pass through my chest without ever reaching the mind. With every breath I drew, a thin veil of ancient anxiety seemed to gently lift from my heart. Yet that same scent, that tender touch, stirred another unease within me—an anonymous, strange, unfamiliar anxiety, one that did not seek escape but beckoned a return. A return that felt obscure, lost, perhaps to something before birth, before words existed. The soft ground yielding beneath me, seemed

to know exactly where I stepped, welcoming each footfall like a mother embracing a child. Leaves along the path, wet and brown, rested in a reverent silence. The air felt like an open but wordless embrace, wrapping around me entirely. Then, just at the moment when the breath of the world hung frozen in heavy silence, a white building emerged from the mist. The roof is warm, red brick gradually revealing itself—as a lost memory stirring from a distant dream, on the verge of returning. It was neither faint nor fully clear, but seemed suspended in doubt, as if uncertain whether to endure or collapse. The stone walls, cold and silent, stood as ancient witnesses in a millennium of quiet. Tall windows, with their half-matte glass, reflected my image only as a trembling shadow, quivering and fading within the fog. Emerging a hotel. Scents of wet stone hung in the air, while tiny raindrops slid down the glass. A faint premonition, a whisper of electricity, ran through my fingertips. The silence there was so dense and alive that it felt as though centuries had waited only to hear my voice—a voice now poised, after countless days of absence, at the threshold of rebirth.

Whenever the city outside grows unbearably loud, I come here. The hotel does not ask who I am—it simply holds me, perhaps tonight it will teach me why I have kept my breath trapped in my chest for so long. This place, with its heavy silence and ancient walls, belongs to someone who has wandered for years between presence and absence. Someone still in search of something that cannot be captured in words or sound, but only in a long-forgotten feeling and memory. That someone is me—seeking to rediscover myself, and perhaps to return to something or someone I have lost, finding refuge in this hotel. Now, in the same silence and solitude, I wait for him. The one who promised he would come, just to be—walking beside

me, quietly and without disturbance, among these breathing walls and wooden staircases. My eyes linger on the doors, the windows, the shadows. With every soft patter of rain against the glass, my longing rises—not for his absence, but for his arrival. I know that when he comes, all the long silences and hidden memories will breathe anew. This hotel, with all its past, does not merely hold me; it promises his presence. As I approached the door, the sudden chill of its metal handle sank into my fingers—a cold not born of the air, but of memory. Touching things once alive that now held only the echoes of lost presences. My palm traced the cold, unspoiled surface, and a sense of immediacy arose within me. A feeling one experiences only on the threshold of places that have been lived in more than they have been built.

When I pressed the door open, its heavy hinge groaned with a faint, feeble sound, like someone calling your name in sleep, nameless and faceless. My first step inside, the old floorboards beneath my feet responded with a sound not of weakness, but of awareness. As if they remembered my steps, or imagined someone had returned who was always meant to come back. I pause, for a few moments, without knowing why—not from hesitation, but from a vague respect for a space that had seen me before I entered.

The air inside was thick, still, carrying a scent of aged dampness and dried leaves. A fragrance that sank deep into my chest, compressing something within me, like a knot in the throat, not of sorrow, but of seeing something intensely familiar yet impossibly distant.

The walls, silent but awake, seemed to know my story in advance. With their half-worn surfaces, suspended between restoration and memory, similar to an old woman who keeps

her wedding dress hidden in a chest, unwilling to forget it. Everything there—from the dim light filtering through dust-laden air, to the faint chill on my hand, to the rain drumming on the courtyard stones—signaled something. Not return. Not beginning. A moment where presence and memory quietly recognized one another.

A warmth pulsed through the walls—not from the hidden breaths of a dead hearth in the corner, but of a different kind—of memory itself. A warmth buried in layers of ash, in the depths of faded walls that seemed to hold not only the flames of that night, but also that lost moment, that unfinished touch, and the half-spoken word it had burned into being.

Within that dense silence—born not of emptiness, but of compressed unspoken things—whispers stirring. Whispers that did not travel through the ears, but through other paths: through the skin, along the spine, along invisible threads stretched between now and the past.

A thin, trembling veil hung between the two times. With every step I took, it quivered softly, whispering something silent, something left behind, and something still alive, to pulse once more.

A faceless presence breathed in a corner of the shadows. Behind a half-transparent veil, somewhere between light and darkness, something hid—not someone to be seen, but a presence sensed from the corner of the eye, just before it vanished.

Instead of seeking the source of that presence, my gaze settled deep within the closed windows—windows that opened not outward, but inward. Inward to the heart of expectation, a place that still believed someday, in a moment neither predicted nor invited, someone would arrive and break this silence.

My eyes fell on the walls—on wooden frames coated with the dust of quiet years, yet within their depths, life still breathed. Faces lingered there. Faces whose eyes could not be passed by, for they followed you—not with questions, not with accusation, but with a kind of deep, unspoken recognition. Some bore half-smiles, neither joyful nor sad smiles belonging only to those who know a truth and remain silent. Among them, a young woman in a light cloak rested her hand gently on the shoulder of a stern-faced man. Their gazes cast toward a distance beyond the frame. Their eyes held a feeling not for the camera, but for something beyond the image. As if they both knew that one day, someone would pass by—someone who neither knew them nor their story. Yet in that passing, something nameless within would break, something coming from their own forgotten self.

I was so absorbed by the paintings, the silent windows, and the wet bricks that time ceased to exist. Standing at the threshold of a damp twilight, I felt as if at any moment the veil might lift, and he—the one whose promise had been whispered—would appear behind one of the dust-laden panes. Bearing a gaze in his eyes holding not words, but a long breath of air from the past.

The hotel, with its stone walls and wooden staircases, was still alive. Neither ruined nor abandoned. But full of hidden breaths, full of the warm exhalations of those who had come before yet never fully left. Its silence was not of absence, but of listening. Listening to footsteps, hesitations, sounds others might not hear. Yet the walls had an ancient memory and a softness akin to aged wood, remembering everything.

In the long corridors, imperceptible shadows flowed—not from darkness, but from a faint light that seemed to emanate

from the very structure itself. A man in a white golf coat passed slowly and deliberately at the far end of the hall—not a ghost, but similar to a memory that still bore footprints. A woman stood beside one of the tall windows, her figure luminous against the dusty light, her eyes fixed on a distance visible only to her; as if waiting still for a voice, a word, or a hand that was meant to return.

Every now and then, a faint sound arose from the depths of the hotel—a laughter long past, quiet yet resonant. As if someone sat in a room listening to another unfinished tale, chuckling at a bitter joke of human fate. From cracks in the doors infused the scent of warm, aged tea and a trace of old perfume. Intermittently a subtle sound of a foot gliding across wooden floors, or a half-formed cry that was felt more than heard. The cry was like someone dreaming a nightmare yet trapped within that same moment of the dream, unable to awaken.

Through the fogged glass, I glimpsed a garden that now seemed more a silent memory than a real place. A place amid twisted, dead ivy and gnarled branches. A path appeared in the distance, an invisible passage that with each crossing, silently erases a memory from the hotel's own recollection, like a yellowed page slipping from a book without a sound.

Deep within that garden, three-night guardians moved. Their footsteps left the earth untouched, gliding softly among the shadows. The indistinct figures were sensed more than seen—like a wordless warning. As if they were custodians of a hidden door. A door whose opening was not only forbidden but catastrophic.

In the stone basin of the hotel courtyard, a trembling reflection emerged. A child standing across the pool, eyes

fixed upon the water, as if to reclaim something lost. A name, a voice, or a feeling that no one else remembered. Perhaps the child saw only themselves, in the water that once held their final breath.

The heavy, damp velvet of a red curtain covered the window, separating the hotel's inner world from the outside. I gripped it and released it gently; the window vanished behind the drape, while a faint light flickered from a silent wooden shelf. Displaying a clay cup, hidden under dust. The cup, still warm, held a familiar aroma—a coffee whose taste preserved the essence of a particular night. With each sip awoke a slumbering memory, letting long-forgotten moments flow slowly through the veins, reviving that night.

At the end of the narrow corridor, a black-and-white photograph leaned against the wall. A group of young pilots, their gazes cast to the sky, standing before a misty backdrop. Their faces were motionless, yet one—just one—sent a shiver through me. I could not tell which, but I knew, one of them resembled him, the one who was meant to arrive tonight.

Gentle cracks in the walls and their colorless streaks seemed to harbor dreams, from skies touched only in sleep, from falls that never truly ended, but continued within the very heart of these walls.

The stairway carried an odor of old metal, like the hull of a forgotten airplane left behind in the warehouse of time filled the room. Whispers curled through the atmosphere—emulating a rush of adrenaline before a peak, or the sound of wings that had never fully opened. The stairs, with their dark metal railings, still remembered the weight of footsteps that had once passed, boots and determined gazes that had traveled these stairs.

It was as if this place were a lodging—or perhaps a refuge—for those who had seen the sky not through a window, but from within it. People bearing dreams heavy with ascent and fall, hands always suspended mid-air, never fully reaching. At the end of a narrow corridor, a soft wind blew from some unknown source. The sound unfolds in my ear like an invisible descent; neither violent nor swift but settling within you quietly, slowly.

The scent of old metal, mingled with the dampness of the old walls, filled the air. A sense though the place, for a fleeting moment, remembered a time when it had breathed. And the walls—ah, the walls—seemed to hold still something alive; something shapeless, nameless, yet familiar. A half-conscious presence suspended between past and present, a presence that stirred more fully with each gust of wind. I laid my hand on the wall's surface—cold, slightly damp, rough as the wounded skin of some ancient memory. At that moment, a shiver rose from the depths of my legs, as if something still there, within the walls, within myself, had been quietly, endlessly falling.

A brown worn carpet lay beneath my feet seemingly alive, its fibers carrying hidden breaths. Something within me called wordlessly but insistently. As I stepped, I felt the carpet speak—faint whispers from long ago. As if someone had once stood here, touched this same rug; perhaps it had been me, or someone I was yet to become. I bent over its floral patterns, my hands brushing the designs, when suddenly a scent wavered up. A smell of cold earth, freshly fallen rain on parched ground, a silent land that had no more words to speak. The carpet was alive. It seemed to carry something from a forgotten woman, or from another self, still lodged within its threads—not merely a voice, but a living presence, silent, and waking.

Gradually, the light dimmed. From the corner of a large window, I looked out. Streetlights scattered faintly, moonlike glows across the asphalt. The distant hum of cars resembled the murmurs of those who had no business left in this world. My hand lingered on my phone, though I did not truly know what I was seeking. It was seven o'clock in the evening. Strange how slowly time passed—or perhaps time simply was irrelevant around the hotel.

I did not want to send a message—not a single word. I did not want to type that familiar, weary sentence, *Where are you?*—a phrase that always does more to sink something quietly into the heart than to summon a reply. I did not want to remind him he was meant to come, nor to scold, nor to tie myself to hope. I simply sat, in a silence neither empty nor full, but something in between—something like a half-shadow sliding along a wall, unnoticed.

Our photo still lingered on my phone—the faint, simple image I had once sent him, in which he had said he loved me—not for its clarity or beauty, but for the way it held something. A fragment of what had been lost, vanished, yet still, in all its absence, part of me remained. A strange truth, lying beside a memory no longer alive. I studied it again, with the obsessive care of someone seeking a sign in a dead photograph. Pixel by pixel, corner by corner—hoping the faint smile on his face might speak, something only I could hear. A confirmation, a signal, a presence approaching—perhaps now, perhaps through a back door of the hotel, through silent corridors, or among shadows thickening with each moment, quiet as a breath passing through fogged glass.

Room seven's door stood ajar— from neglect, or as if someone had left it so for me, silently, unseen. My feet did not

move forward, not from fear, but from an invisible respect. The room, with its dim, flickering light, its air transported from another season, neither cold nor warm, poised at the edge of touch and imagination, held something reserved only for me. A gift from the past, or a voice left lingering upon the pillow.

A strange, familiar scent hung in the room—not perfume, not smoke, not wood—but the smell of someone whose presence you have not felt for years. Liken to the feeling of a person suddenly passing beside you in the dark, and you know they are there only by their scent. Something warmed in my chest—steadily, undeniably. A warmth like fingers sinking slowly into lukewarm water, the gentle lick of a fire that burns without consuming. Simply reminding you that life still flows, somewhere, quietly, in the depths of the night.

The weight that had rested on my shoulders for days, perhaps years, loosened slightly. Not enough to fall, but enough to breathe again. Enough to notice the dim light of the room, the sound of rain sliding down the glass, the presence of someone who had not yet arrived. Yet somehow, in a way, already was.

I had been waiting for a long time. Not an exhausting, wearing kind of waiting. But a waiting flame left burning in the corner of my heart—silent, yet alive. Burning so that if he ever returned, the darkness would not surprise him.

My gaze drifted back to the ceiling. With a glance that seemed to pass through layers of fresh paint and reach the charred bones of the building. A faint scent of fire still lingered in the air, as if a memory tucked into the mind's corner, awakening occasionally by the invisible sparks. No matter how much they had restored the ceiling, painted the walls, or washed the windows, something remained in the

living fibers of this place. A scent of burnt hair from some distant party, the rasp of splintering old wood, muffled screams trapped within the walls. This hotel had once burned, flames devoured everything. Only to be rebuilt atop the ashes, breathing once more—between memory and forgetting, destruction and return.

I thought: perhaps I should leave. Perhaps he will not come. Perhaps this waiting, like all others, was only to bring me to my knees. But no—not when our promise was here, in this hotel, on this very worn wooden floor that still sighed beneath my feet. I had to stay; we had promised. In this building that had survived, not unscathed, but with wounds that seemed healed yet still burned deep within. A place whose scent was a blend of fresh oil paint and lingering traces of what had burned, like someone whose laughter was new but whose eyes were sorrowful.

The light from the window had dimmed further, the only sound from outside was the rain. Steady and patient, as if someone spoke to me in water, tapping softly on the glass: Stay. Wait. Do not go...He is coming.

My eyes drifted again over the hotel's inhabitants from a deep familiarity rooted in my chest. I studied them one by one. A man with a brimmed hat, his gaze fixed on the place I had always fled. A woman with a distant look as one who knows something and does not speak. A steward with a practiced, dry smile, hiding pain beneath its surface. I had seen them before, or perhaps fragments of me had lived in their dreams. Perhaps I was the dream they had forgotten, yet they still remembered.

I leaned against the tepid wall and it felt like a hand placed on my shoulder—not for comfort, but as a reminder. A reminder that it was not yet time to leave. That more still

remained. That a sound was on its way...The walls seemed to say the same: Do not go...Stay. He is coming.

I do not know why I chose this hotel. Perhaps because, within these silent, aged, burned walls, with memories both dormant and alive, there was no sound, no gaze, no judgment. No one asked why I had not risen. Why I had not left this empty hall. Why was I still waiting for him to arrive. I remained because something in these walls, in the deep exhalation of its nights, in the forgotten scent of the dry wooden stairs, told me that a promise still hung in the air. A promise hidden not in words, but in the pause between them. In the imperceptible tremor of fingers never touched. And I, like a distant echo, waited for the sound of his steps to fill the space once more. Waited for his voice to rise, not from the wooden floor, but from within me.

The hall slowly emptied, and the gray light of the lamps, a faded glow, crept in through the half-open window, illuminating the corners of the chairs, the faded wallpaper, and the red rug at the center of the room. Yet its light was cold—not warmth, but the coolness of waiting. The shadows, resembling unfinished memories, danced on the walls—silent, faceless, yet alive.

Everything around me had stretched, drawn out in the fibers of a single extended moment. That neither passed nor remained—the ticking of the wall clock scattered the scent of time's dust into the air, each tick a step deeper into the past. The dry wooden floor beneath my feet, with its silent roughness, felt less like a simple surface than a layer of aged, cracked memory underfoot. A bitter, acrid taste lingered on my tongue from the words I had left unspoken. The words lodged in my throat, turning into a vague, stinging flavor. The weighty scent that hung in the still air was a mixture of the walls' lingering

dampness, a solitude that spread like mist across the room, and a faint distant perfume. Perhaps once rising from his shoulders, still circling silently in this suspended air...

Moments did not pass. They stretched, as if threads were pulling from the depths of my chest, one by one, unhurried, merciless. And I drew them in, swallowed them, broke them—waiting just for the instant he would enter. The moment when his gaze, his warmth, even the sound of his breath, would bring this place alive.

Everything here had grown accustomed to stillness. Walls that do not breathe, yet listen. Photographs that do not tremble, yet frame dreams. And I, at the center of this stillness, with ears attuned only to a single sound, skin waiting for a single touch, a mouth open for only one question: “Have you come?”

I told myself *no*—*I would not leave*. Not until that sound, that step, that vibration in the air arrived... I would not leave.

He said he would come. Not to explain, not to bring closure to what had begun years ago, but to go with me. Not returning after years, carrying suitcases of regret and waterlogged memories, but someone who had always been here—in the walls, in the paintings, in the folds of the sheets, in the faint steam of mirrors. And now, only now, had decided to take my hand and leave this hotel with me. Not in haste, not with fanfare, but quietly, as if walking on fresh snow with no footprints.

I had lived nights like this for years. Nights that came and went with the same darkness, the same silence, the same familiar void—but tonight was different. Not just because of time or place, but because of the weight of words I had yet to speak. Words that had lingered as pebbles beneath my tongue for years, swallowed and buried among the moments I had

wanted to speak and never did. And now, tonight, it was time to bring them forth—not in words, but in every moment I had breathed without him. The unwilling moments in which my body, with its own memory, had preserved the sound of him, the warmth of his gaze, the quietness when he sat beside me. He would sit with me, without plea, without supplication; but with a glance, a silent, unmarked glance. He would promise to leave, to escape, to exist, always exist, to remain, and to flee from something—not as a fleeting dream, but as a reality finally brave enough to be touched, like drinking a cool sip of water after a long, burning day in an endless desert. And if he came, if this time he stayed, if he never left again, I would need no words. I would simply go with him, in this new silence, a silence born not of loneliness but of presence, with him, wordless, fearless, and without asking.

## Chapter 2

# The Red Velvet Chair

*Serving as a threshold—linking reality, the mind, and parallel worlds where thoughts and emotions merge in a delicate, transformative dance.*

Without even knowing why, I found myself moving toward a forgotten chair in the corner of the hall. A chair resting in the quivering shadow of the fireplace. Its tall, curved back draped in dark velvet that seemed to have swallowed centuries of dust. And when I sat—gently, silently—a muffled, fractured sound rose from within it; not a moan, not a whisper, but something between, a shadow of a voice that somewhere, at some time, perhaps once carried meaning.

The wooden arms were cold and smooth, accepting my fingers without question. Faint carvings traced their surfaces, neither springing to life nor mourned in decay—silent, nameless leaves, holding unspoken secrets.

Within that still quiet, something stirred inside me—a hidden, unnamed sensation, a delicate mist at some distant dawn. In that very instant, it felt as though, at another time, in some far-off place—or perhaps right here, in this familiar

curve, with this strange sense of waiting—I had sat in this very spot before. Yet a peculiar certainty whispered to me: “*You have been here before.*” Why? I could not say.

It was a moment suspended between moments—a trembling border between parallel worlds. Between now and what has yet to come, or perhaps between what has already passed and now. Here amidst the folds of the old velvet, I heard a passing sound, threading through a distant layer of memory. Wordless, yet brimming with familiarity. Perhaps an echo of another life, a shadow that had once been mine.

The fireplace burned slowly, silently. Keeping something unseen alight in the flames that rose languidly, without haste, spinning around distant memories, scattering vibrating shadows across the still walls with each twist and turn.

Everything seemed to recede into a faded background. The clatter of plates, the tinkling of glasses, whispers from far away, footsteps sliding across the hall, and the mingled scent of coffee, alcohol, and cooking that crept upward from the hotel’s basement as a drowsy vapor. All dissolving, layer by layer, in the thick haze of distance and forgetting, slowly fading before my eyes.

I could not tell whether it was all those things receding, or if I was gradually sliding through them, disappearing into the heart of the flames. Only I remained—and the warmth of the fire. A living warmth rising through the cracks of the wood, carrying a half-burnt scent—an amalgam of resin and ash. Something near the smell of an old cloth left in a wooden chest, or a forgotten fragrance sensed years ago in a dark, deserted hallway, without a soul in sight.

That smell, that warmth, that slow flickering of light upon the faded, threadbare carpet—all of it unraveled the rhythm

of existence. Sounds gradually slowed. My own breathing, my heartbeat, even the murmur of my inner self relaxed. Time folded in upon itself, poised on the brink of an endless pause. I closed my eyes and removed my shoes to become whole. To sink fully into that weightless, nameless moment. A moment with neither beginning nor end, only pure being. And there, between presence and disappearance, I hovered—quiet, lost, and yet detached from everything.

When I opened my eyes, there was neither ceiling nor wall—no blue, polished stones beneath the hotel floor, no faint whisper of the fireplace’s breath, no chair with its curved back. Even the lingering scents of the hotel had dissolved into an unfamiliar air—an air whose trace still clung to my skin, though its image had vanished. The only thing surrounding me was a delicate, living layer of damp coolness, thick with shimmering blue particles that settled on my cheek; neither cold nor warm—but something between touch and memory, between caress and recollection.

In this directionless space, silent shapes slowly emerged from the heart of reality, as if slipping from hidden fissures of the past into the present moment. Without uttering a word, they stood there, clothed in garments that enveloped not just their bodies but their silence as well—heavy clothes woven from straw, wool, and dust, in colors that had not felt the sun for centuries: dim, cracked white, pale, fading blue, and damp folds that carried the scent of distant rains, locked warehouse stores at the harbor, rotting ropes of ships, and the dust of faraway paths.

With every movement of my hands, the texture of the air brushed against my skin, an invisible thread connecting me to those silent beings. Women whispered through the swish

of layered skirts, their lace veils casting shadows over their eyes without concealing their gaze. Men with neatly groomed beards and hats bent at the edge of time, watched my passage through a transparent veil—silent, yet aware.

In the distance, a metallic, drawn-out sound rang—not a bell to be heard, but a heavy, resonant voice that ran straight through bone. Slowly returning an unnamed memory from some faraway, ancient place. The air was thick with the smell of half-burnt wood, streaked with rain-soaked earth and an old perfume, perhaps rising from the folds of skirts. A taste of iron and soil lingered in my mouth; bitter, muted, yet familiar—as if the earth itself had sprouted from within my tongue.

There were no words in the air, no clear purpose; only a flowing presence drawing me inward—without revealing from where I had come or to where I would go. A transparent beingness in which I saw myself.

I asked one of the men that was wafering around the atmosphere, “Excuse me, sir...I think I’m lost. I don’t exactly know where I am, and my phone isn’t with me...Could you please call this number? Tell them where I am...if I am anywhere at all.”

But the truth was, I wished I knew where I stood. I wished I could explain, yet I was alone, weighed down by a hesitation that had rooted itself in my legs. I looked at him—wordless, defenseless. Suddenly, without knowing how, all those fleeting figures who had earlier brushed past me in haste and disregard stopped, one by one. As if time itself had realized something, they formed a ring around me—silent, dense, motionless.

As I remained standing; a slip of paper clutched in my hand—his number written on it—and a heart that did not know which way to beat.

For a moment, the man met my gaze. Then—not suddenly, not like a storm, but as though an underground gate were opening—every figure encircling me, like a quiet barrier, laughed in unison. Yet this laughter was not of lightness. It was not the kind that rises from the throat and sparkles in the eye. It was a dark, drawn-out sound, as though it emerged from the throats of stones, from the deep cracks in the earth, from the bones of skulls still warm in the soil. Mouths opened wider than they should, yellowed and broken teeth, cracked lips, voices that had long been forgotten now returned to memory. The laughter sounded like coarse cloth tearing suddenly—it twisted in the air, crawled along the skin, and resonated in my brain. An unrelenting echo, through which no silence could pass.

The hotel, and every trace of what had been, receded and dissolved—as a scent passing between two heavy curtains, leaving only a faint trace in the air. All that remained was the sound of that laughter, bitter—like rusted metal mistakenly touched by the tongue—a taste of knowing. Yet a knowing that strips bare, one that peels the skin not with force, but with the slow, merciless patience of truth.

At that moment, I understood: their laughter was not joy. It was recognition. Knowledge that erases boundaries, demolishes bridges, and renders return meaningless—irrelevant. Something within me opened. Something that could not be closed again. I felt the lostness of a child in a bustling market, without a path home, unaware even of where it had come from.

From somewhere in the darkness, a sound arose—harsh, guttural, drawn-out, like the scraping of wood across the frozen crust of the earth. A sound that was felt within the body, in the bones, in the chest, behind the ears.

And again, all at once, they laughed. “Hey, you...black-haired wizard, from which land have you come?”

The words did not emerge from their mouths. They slid forth from somewhere farther off, creeping between the walls, passing through the cracks of stones, dragging along the cobblestones, curling around corners, and returning—settling as a cold breath in the hollow of my neck.

Suddenly, something stopped; not only the air, but the very texture of the world. Time knotted itself. The wind gathered in on itself. Birds fell from the sky. My thoughts unraveled like their wings’ mid-flight, forgetting how to flap their wings.

Everything froze in a gaze. Eyes, like heavy weights, descended upon from behind the black veils of women, from the edges of tall, tattered hats worn by men, from the fissures of old garments, from the seams of doors long sealed for centuries. Something soft, yet cutting, fell from above—invisible, absolute. A chill slithered into the last vertebra of my neck—the very place where intuition blossoms into awareness, right at the point where a person feels a memory before remembering it.

I did not ask a question—not of the magic, not of the wizard, not of why I was addressed. My mind lagged, but my legs... my legs knew. Like a wild animal, they had sensed danger before it appeared. And before I realized, I was running—not to escape, but to return. To return to something lost, to a place I did not know. I simply ran.

Then another sound rose—dry, sharp, like a piece of torn leather snapping in the stillness of night: “Seize her! She is the witch!”

At the same time, my heart pounded—its rhythm unstable, fractured, like a foot on a worn staircase. Behind

me came the sound of footsteps; hurried, erratic, interwoven with ragged breaths that twisted through the alleys. The walls came alive, advancing toward me; their texture stretched, the stones arched and leaned, and the windows—blind and shuttered—watched with a dull, inscrutable gaze—or perhaps they pretended not to.

I ran to escape the illusion that had gripped every fiber of my being. Their sounds pursued me; like a faceless bird, a nameless shadow, fragments of the night that had taken shape.

The alleys narrowed. The walls smelled of dampness, of mold, of charred wood, of wet cloth forgotten for years in a corner. The sharp scent of soap, moldy bread, horse sweat, earth, and a hidden layer of fear twisted around me as colorless smoke, brushing my face—as if an invisible hand sought to erase something from me, yet could not.

Eyes were everywhere—between the folds of heavy, dust-laden curtains, in the shadows of deserted porches, in the trembling lamps dangling from rusted hooks, in the broken glass of display windows long avoided by anyone daring to look.

They saw yet said nothing. They pursued only the man who had called me “wizard.” Their mouths were not merely closed. They were locked as if their tongues, like damp paper, had adhered to the roofs of their mouths. And what moved through the air was not silence—something heavier than silence; something oppressive, pressing down on shoulders, sinking into chests, shattering the inner self.

Only the sound of footsteps behind me persisted: sharp, dry, resolute. Not aimless, not blind, but carrying a latent wrath and an ancient judgment—a knowledge of a past I may have forgotten. Yet, as an old shadow, lay in ambush in the darkness, ready to merge with me in a preordained moment.

Without asking or knowing why, my legs carried me into an alley that seemed never to have existed and yet had always lurked at the edge of my mind—a narrow, suffocating passage. The smell of trampled earth, untouched by sun, thick with sticky dampness, coursed through it. A scent embedded in the memory of the stones, awakening with every step—a smell that seemed to seek not my senses, but my very soul.

Then, a hand settled on my arm—not with force, not with hesitation, but with a calm weight. I turned—

An old man stood there silent, his face resembled a weathered tablet, time carved into its grooves. His gaze was direct. His smile faint, like a trembling light at the bottom of a dry well that had not seen water for centuries.

With a tone more felt than heard, he said: “Come with me...I know who you are.”

There was something suspended in his eyes—not entirely warm, not entirely cold—a quiver between invitation and threat, between recognition and forgetting. As if a scent rising from an old garment in the corner of a wardrobe, suddenly awakening a nameless memory.

I followed him—without a single word passing my lips. My steps seemed to know him, moving ahead on their own accord.

The ground beneath me held its breath. No sound rose from my feet. No shadow fell. Perhaps the mist had grown so dense and alive that it had swallowed every shadow into itself.

A faint trace of smoke lingered in the air from a flame long extinguished; the scent of half-burnt wood, mingled with a thin streak of meat. It was as though a city lay behind us, not consumed by fire, but by the certainty of flame—dried blood,

the cold damp of walls, the sharp sweat of something unseen prowled through the alleys.

At each turn, a fresh yet familiar air brushed against my face—sometimes as the touch of a silent hand, sometimes the soft press of an old memory along the hollow of my cheek. The walls slowly drew closer, wrapped in layers of moss and moisture, resembling the body of an elder who has watched for centuries without ever speaking.

My shoulder occasionally brushed sharp daggers jutting from the narrow alley walls, and the damp cold ran through me like a dull knife, threading through my bones.

The doors, with rusted hinges, clung to the alley sides. Some half-open, as if waiting for someone who never came. Some nailed shut, as though something inside had to be forgotten. And some on the verge of collapse, with no breath left to scream.

From afar, a muffled, rough-edged sound circled through the air—not a shout, not a whisper. Something in between, just a faceless judgment lost in the wind, leaving only its echo in the hidden corners of the space. I turned instinctively, but behind me there was nothing but darkness—a darkness of a silent, a waiting presence, one I knew was near, in another layer of the same air.

My mouth was dry from thirst, and from a metallic, bitter, familiar taste—one left by a timeless past in my mouth. My tongue was glued to the roof of my mouth and I could not move it. My throat burned and shivered from the repeated, nameless cry that echoed endlessly within me.

Then, without warning, the alley ended at a stone staircase. Worn, grooved steps, equivalent to old veins of memory, led

to a half-open door buried in the earth—a door that simply existed—like a silent destiny.

The old man, who had walked in silence until that moment, paused. He turned slowly and looked at me—not with a question, not with an answer, but with a quiet opening within the silence, on the brink of something that still had no name. In that instant, all I could hear was the rhythm of my own heart, striving to synchronize with a past that no longer belonged to me.

We descended the steps. I followed him with trembling yet determined steps—not to hide, but to sink further into something that had already begun. We arrived at a small house, nestled among the folds of stone and the silent breathing of the mountain. A house that seemed not built by hands, but grown from the earth's forgotten memory. Moss did not merely cover the walls—it embraced them. The beams of the roof carried the weight of time, its whisper—slowly, like lines in a nameless book read only by the wind.

The windows were narrow and tight, their dark panes appearing to have listened for years rather than seen. And when the wooden door swung open, it sounded neither “creak” nor “clang,” but a prolonged pause; an ancient conversation between wood and breath of the wind.

We entered. He closed the door with a slow, deliberate motion, as if he had closed the doors of the world many times before. With an ancient knowledge, as if versed in the rites of passage between two worlds.

At that very moment, a rough, fractured voice rose from the darkness beyond the door, from an uneasy heart, “Hey, old Edgar! Give us this witch! She must not return—just like all those who came before her and never came back, still trapped here, like us...I’m with you, Edgar, you foolish old man...!”

And again, all of them laughed together.

Then came the pounding on the wooden door—fists or feet—impatient blows, brimming with a rage that reverberated through the space outside.

Finally, I knew: Edgar. That was the old man's name.

Without a glance at the tumult outside, Edgar lit a lamp with smoked glass. He adjusted the flame up and down with meticulous care, as if tuning a heartbeat long forgotten. In a soft, yet caution-laden voice, he said: "These wicked spirits will leave on their own if you don't answer them. But the moment you speak to them—give weight to their voices—they cling to you, like sticky resin caught beneath your foot. They won't let go."

He paused, casting a sidelong glance at me. "You did well not to speak. Not to answer them."

I wanted to speak, my tongue heavy and sticky, my throat weighed down as though by stone—but I could not. Silence was not my choice, I simply had no strength for words—not from fear, nor prudence—but from that peculiar state in which words die in the throat before they take shape. So I remained silent, and Edgar, as if aware of the stirrings within me, regarded me knowingly, wisely, while I remained trapped in a cage of unspoken words.

A singed wood scent hung in the air, —not harsh, not bitter, but with a mournful gentleness, an old embrace, the scent of a distant evening, of an oven on a snowy night. Beneath it, hints of thyme and lavender, perhaps a trace of porridge, overlaid with a thin veil of dried orange peel and the faintest scratch of ginger. Each note touched a memory that was neither fully mine nor entirely foreign, suspended between who I had been and who I was.

Yet there was another scent—ancient, nameless, for which no word in any language had been crafted—not soil, not smoke, not plant, but something like the first breath of the world. Before the hand of a clock moved, before the first word, before lips knew the taste of speech. That scent pulled me backward—not into memory, but to a moment before time was born; a perfect pause, a threshold dividing worlds. It was a scent indescribable, unrenderable—only to be felt. The walls were of wood and stone, yet as I stepped into the room, I felt them breathing. Each plank, each vein of stone seemed aware of my presence. With a muted, subterranean voice, more sensed than heard, they spoke to me.

Shadows slid across the walls, occasionally disappearing among faint patterns that shifted slightly each time I looked—creatures feigning lifelessness, moving only in the negligence of my gaze. From slender nails hung tiny beads, their thin threads trembling with every breath of the room, like a rosary suspended mid-prayer. Occasionally, one seemed to turn slowly—not from any wind, but from my attention, as if aware that I was watching.

In a corner, nameless books were arranged on a shelf. As I passed, the scent of old paper and sweet dust rose and settled in my nose, as a memory returning uninvited. The edges of their pages were cold and slightly damp beneath my fingers, a sensation akin to touching a fish freshly pulled from the water. And the shelf...it was more than a mere rack—it was a shrine, aware of my presence. I felt that if I lingered a moment longer, perhaps the books would sigh one by one, or the beads of the suspended rosary would begin to whisper.

This room was not merely alive—it had eyes. Eyes without form, scattered in everything—and I knew that from the instant I entered, it saw me.

Edgar beckoned silently, lamp in hand, and moved toward another door in the corner of the house, with such calm assurance that I followed without question or hesitation. His shadow, as it passed along the wall, resembled a memory slipping through light. Not distinct enough to touch, not faint enough to forget, something between the two, something that remains, silent and weightless.

I stood there between the chill that slowly receded behind me and a warmth that seemed to emanate from within. Feeling the soft brush of skin, a sudden taste on the tongue; a bitter flavor, like unripe fruit, or the tip of a tongue pausing before speaking a word.

In that precise moment, I felt I had passed the threshold of knowing. Across the unseen boundary between being and understanding. Past the wall of unspoken language, where neither question nor answer holds meaning. Only presence, only silence.

I stepped forward, slow and nameless, without borders, without sound.

He sat silently, calmly, as if he had known in advance the place his body would occupy. I remained standing, motionless, like an old columnar lamp that has stood in silence for years—not to illuminate, but to witness.

His voice spread through the space—soft and drawn-out, similar to the wooden timbre of a flame licking at dry timber, unhurried, unforced. The words that passed from his lips were more than words; they carried layers of time, hidden and weighty meanings, resembling an old scent that rises unexpectedly from the folds of a forgotten cloth. Edgar said, “Time is short... They think you are a witch... If you speak, you fall into their trap... and if you fall, there will be no return...” His sentence

lingered, unfinished, suspended in the air like a speck of ash caught in its descent, hovering before it could settle.

I remained standing feeling a vague sensation that arises only at the threshold of the unseen. A presence without beginning or end, a being in a nameless moment that intertwines past, future, and now—a moment in which one can only stand and hold the breath gently.

Something churned within me—not a question formed in words, but a vague presence, an unnamed pressure in my chest whose origin I could not identify. Yet I felt it throughout my body: in the pulse of my temples, in the gentle burn behind my eyes. My tongue was dry, powerless, like paper folded too many times, leaving no space to write. Only my gaze remained, fixed on his dark, serene eyes—eyes that seemed to trace the faintest residue of light hidden in the depths of a long-forgotten well.

Another sound arose from within, spiraling through my bones. It crept into me, circled the walls, seeped into my ears, and settled in my heart.

My breaths grew sharp and shallow. My throat tightened, as if a stone had lodged in a narrow passage. I did not know whether that voice carried nameless knowledge or a sudden presence, but it whispered in my ear: *“You are no longer here.”*

In that dense, bewildering moment, nothing of me remained—neither mind nor voice—just a faint, fragile warmth. A heat slowly seeping into me from Edgar’s half-burning fireplace. Not hot, not alive, but something between two worlds, analogous to a steam of a half-empty cup of tea whose taste lingers on the lips even after years. A warmth that did not end the silence but made it bearable. A quiet breath from a flame that, in the deepest layer of ash, had not yet extinguished.

## Silent Memory

*A meditation on the power of the unconscious memory  
and unconscious identity.*

Edgar placed his trembling hand—one that seemed to hold an untold story—upon a wooden table with solemn gravity. A table worn smooth by years of touch and gaze, its intricate knots glimmering beneath the weak, flickering candlelight. Draped across it lay a crimson velvet cloth—the same cloth that, in my memory, burned as an inextinguishable flame. Not of the ordinary kind, but deep and alive in the soul. Whispering faintly of tangled nights, soundless yet resonant, carrying a familiar, subtle yet weighty fragrance, and a rhythm that synchronized with my heartbeat, as the distant echo of footsteps in shadowed alleyways.

Edgar drew his long fingers slowly over the fabric, as though awakening a memory from a deep slumber. He cast a meaningful glance at me and exhaled—a sigh of ancient and heavy, not of fatigue, but a cold wind passing through the depths, igniting a dormant fire within me. He said softly, “You are safe here, but first, you must understand where you

have come.” My chest tightened, and he rose quietly, his steps silent, leaving only his shadow moving along the walls—a silent dance with the light. He lifted a lantern from a corner of the cabin, its flame trembling yet warm, like a bright memory in absolute darkness, and beckoned me toward the back of the cabin.

There, a rusted wooden door creaked open slowly, the rasp of its hinges released a gentle scream echoing through time. The smell of old, damp sawdust mingled with the faint bitterness of resin, earthy and alive, evoking the first rain—cold, damp, familiar, tangible to the skin. Behind the door, hidden within Edgar’s house, lay a small workshop nestled in oak walls, asleep in deep silence. Old, rusted tools hung on the walls, forgotten memories etched into their forms.

Among all these silent objects, a chair stood out—the chair. With polished wooden arms covered in a thin layer of discarded sawdust, it occupied the heart of the workshop. Yet it held a resolute, unspoken presence, one impossible to ignore. It was as if the very wood still held a sound—the memory of my past self sitting there, my hands brushing its curves, the arch of my back. The crimson velvet seemed an embrace of memory itself, a fragment of time—silent yet alive, breathing.

Edgar, with a solemnity all his own, stroked his gray beard and stood behind that cursed chair—the very one that had, without warning, hurled me into this mysterious world. His voice was calm but penetrating, as if beginning a sacred narrative, “Years ago, when the vigor of youth was still mine, I carved this chair—from the trunk of a solitary tree, in the farthest corner of a silent beach. Not just any tree, but an ancient eucalyptus, its bark smelling of salt, its vessels humming with winds that had passed through the mouth of the sea.”

He paused, eyes fixed on the chair, and continued, “The wood was warm, as if it had retained the memory of sunlight. And the velvet? I tore it from the curtains of a decaying church—curtains that had hung for years under the echoes of unanswered prayers and candle smoke. Everything about this chair is of time itself—a time neither past nor complete.”

My eyes were locked on the chair—not merely an object, not simply a union of wood and fabric, but a tangible memory. The scent of age, the touch of something lost, the shadow of nameless sittings; as if each who sat upon it stepped into a world that, from the very beginning, they had been seeking unknowingly. I ran my hands over the chair’s back. Its wood was neither cold nor warm as fire, but held a hidden warmth—a quiet, dormant breath of someone no longer present. A fleeting tremor ran under my fingers, a spark, equivalent to the nameless flame of a memory awakening within me. I blinked, and the world folded inward for a moment saturated with silent presence. Something stirred within me—not a narratable memory, but the taste of first rain on skin, the scent of a forgotten garment still holding the essence of a body.

Edgar’s voice emerged from a deeper fabric of his being, “Whoever touches it, goes somewhere their feet have not reached, but have always sought—without knowing it.”

Time paused—no, it did not stop, it folded inward, like the moment before awakening. The air smelled faintly of rain—a familiar scent, the scent of that hotel. Something shifted inside me, neither sorrow nor joy, but a pure, unnamed shiver, finding something that was never lost, only waiting to awaken.

Edgar, who had observed me in all those timeless minutes from between the flickering lantern light and the lingering scent of wood—without blinking or moving his shadow—tilted his

head just enough to make his voice clearer. Then, with a slow whisper, as if rising from beneath a soft layer of sawdust, he said; “The one who rises is no longer the same as the one who sat upon this chair. The chair not only preserves memory; it takes something along, something even you do not know...”

I wanted to speak but could not. My tongue was bound. I wanted to shout: *Was this your spell, Edgar? Was it this chair, crafted by your hands, that had drawn me into unrest and decay?* Yet no words emerged. The air subtly shifted. The smell of damp wood and dust yielded to a muted scent—a fragrance of freshly turned earth, as if rising from a distant, forgotten land. Something stirred in my chest, between heart and soul—a soft, painless movement, like touching something lost that had always accompanied me. With a trembling voice, not for hearing but as if the words emerged from within themselves, I said, “But I must return, Edgar... He is there, still there, in that hotel, waiting for me...”

Edgar nodded—not in surprise or doubt, but with the serenity of one who has seen this scene a thousand times and never grown weary of it. Before I could fully taste the words, he spoke in a tone softer than cotton, “I know... I have known from the start. But sometimes, the one who stays arrives before the one who returns.”

A shadow crossed his face, as if something within him illuminated for a moment, then darkened again. His voice lowered, intimate, as though speaking to himself or to the cracks in the old wood. “Not everyone can...but you must return. For he is still there, in that hotel, waiting for you—and this time, it is you who must reach him.”

I could not ask how he knew him, or from where he had knowledge. The question lodged in my throat, tangled with fear

and wonder. But his small, piercing eyes, needing no answer, said it all—those eyes revealed that Edgar had known of him for years, perhaps even before I had met him.

At that moment, from nowhere, from somewhere no one occupied, the sound of a bell arose—not a ring, not an alarm, but three heavy, deep strikes that sank gently into my bones, pressing upon my body and laying a subtle cold upon my cheeks, as the footprint of a deer crossing snow. It was not a sound; it was a presence—unseen footsteps concealing their noise. Edgar's gaze, those two luminous eyes in the darkness, fixed upon me, not as a bright lantern, but a dark lake that had forgotten the sky. A gaze neither warning nor compassionate, but somewhere between passing and staying. Then, in a quiet tone, as if drawing words from the old wooden surface itself, he said: "You must hurry...this world does not joke with anyone. If you do not find the way and return, you will remain here—somewhere you do not know...forever."

Amidst the scent of soaked oak, the sudden breath of wind behind the window, and the living chill settling softly on my neck, a truth ignited within me. Not as a word, but like a faint spark running through the depths of my being. I realized: the nightmare...is not yet over.

A continuous, soft, cracking sound—the slow burning of damp wood seemingly igniting by itself, the crackle of flames in the corner of the workshop—was neither warning nor warmth, but between whisper and murmur of gray spirits still clinging to their bodies. The lantern's light flickered upon a stone ledge, animating shadows of reflections of movement within time, as if the workshop itself were alive—aware, breathing, observing this dense moment suspended between me and the world.

Edgar sat across from me so still that even the air between us seemed to pause. Behind him, a wooden shelf filled with objects in a deep, long sleep: jars cracked with hairline fractures, retaining the scent of sunbaked clay; opaque bottles coated in dust and mist, murmuring silently; and books, pages wavy and yellow, resemble aged skin remembering and forgetting something under the interplay of light and humidity. My gaze settled on a cover, and in the soft darkness of that corner, a name appeared—not new, not engraved, but like smoke settled between leather and time.

Edgar said, “You have not fully arrived here...part of you stands beyond the border, somewhere between beginning and oblivion. You can return, but first, you must understand why you have come. This place is not for everyone...only those who have lost something; something forgotten, or perhaps never realized they had.”

My mouth was dry; words stuck like unripe fruit. With a hesitation that surprised even me, I whispered, “But...I have not forgotten anything...”

Upon saying this, fleeting, unstable images—like shattered mirror fragments—emerged in my mind: wet, slippery, lost. The harder I tried to assemble them, the less sense they made. Each attempt to recall drove me further away. It was as if my memory, like wet cloth, slipped through my fingers. What had I forgotten? And is forgetting always paired with loss? Or perhaps forgetting is a way to preserve something whose time has not yet come?

I asked—my voice neither trembling nor loud, something between plea and exhaustion, “Edgar...am I dead? Or am I still alive? Just tell me this. If this is the end of my life, let

me accept it. But if even a trace of life remains...tell me how to find a way back.”

Edgar, turning away from the dim flickering flame that danced along the walls, moved slowly, the edges of his eyes carrying the weariness of a thousand years. His gaze was steady yet unassuming, neither reproachful nor tender. A weight of presence born only from knowing knowledge needing no words. His voice, as if from afar, from a place where the air tastes of metal and words must pass through dust to be heard, said, “No...you are still alive. Do you not hear it?”

I did not understand until something within me, beneath the sternum, began to insist upon recognition—a pulse of awareness itself, vibrating through the bones, the palms on the wood, even my throat tasting iron and dust. Edgar continued, unchanged in tone, “When time finds you—not the time on calendars or clocks, but the time that silently creeps behind glass at night—then, you will find a way to return.”

He fell silent, but his silence was not an end—it was the opening of something yet unspoken. The light traced the contours of his face, while I, inhaling the scent of damp earth, tasting bitterness and vagueness on my tongue, feeling my body resonate from within, could no longer tell who of us remained in this workshop and who was on the path of return.

Edgar slowly retrieved a small bottle from the wooden shelf, as if awakening a living being from sleep. The candlelight danced over the glass, and its contents glowed a deep, dense red, like dried blood on the edge of an old blade. Without looking away, he said, “Drink. What you have left behind will return—not through words, but through sensation—through something that has always been within you yet overlooked.”

I took the bottle; it was cool, but its chill did not cling to my skin—it slid across me, a memory of unknown origin overturning everything. I sipped—the taste metallic, earthy, raw and bitter, streaked with fresh blood and the scent of tools abandoned in the sun. Neither sweet nor unpleasant, but alive. Immediately, a soft, acrid tremor coursed through my ribs.

Suddenly, an unnamed image fractured in my mind; one I did not know the origin of, but seemed always present within me. A trembling voice echoed in my ear—a familiar word never spoken, yet lodged in my being from the beginning. That voice arose not from outside, but as if from silent earth. Or perhaps from behind the wall I had once wept behind, years ago.

At that moment, a scent reached me, half-burned charcoal mixed with the perfume of a forgotten coat, lingering in a dark wardrobe for years. A scent of distance, of the past, of something still awaiting. My dormant senses, buried in the layers of my mind for years, awakened without warning. Everything collapsed within me with the weight of a memory never formed, enveloping me entirely.

...I came to myself and whispered again, “Show me the way...how must I return?”

Edgar’s reply was slow but heavy, “Until you are complete, there is no return; if you remain half-finished, every path leads to repetition.”

I understood—not through logic, but an instinctive sense that I was midway along a path neither begun by me nor ending by my will. I breathed and took a second sip. In that breath, something within me unfolded, and the night air crept in through the open window carrying a quietness: the scent of wet earth, of rain that had once fallen and left only memory, of aged leather, old wood, and an embrace never reached.

No words existed, only a gentle shiver, a release of old pain within my body. I breathed—not to continue, but to begin, to return. Edgar stood by the window, hands hanging, gaze fixed. I was no longer in the workshop, but within myself—for the first time, not as an observer, but returned to my own being. Still tasting that cold metal, with its quiet, hidden bitterness, drinking it with a silent sensation, awakening from a nameless sleep, knowing neither beginning nor end.

Edgar whispered, without meeting my eyes, “You did not come to see...you came to close something—a past unfinished, still alive within you and walking with you. You must complete it to be able to return.”

I rose, as if a hidden force compelled me—like a leaf separating from a branch, unaware why.

The flickering candlelight fell on Edgar’s face. His gaze remained the same, calm, but this time not merely observing, but reflecting what flowed within me.

I drank drop by drop, each one loosening a binding inside me, an old forgotten chain wrapped around my heart. And then Edgar—with a calm, precise movement, like a surgeon delicately removing fine threads from the heart—took the bottle from my fingers. His hands were not cold, yet the touch felt as if calling out to me without returning me. His eyes held mine, neither anxious nor kind, but aware that unceasing drinking burns. Softly, he said, while the liquid still glimmered and trembled in the candlelight, “That is enough...from here, your liberation begins. But what lies ahead is no longer of this liquid. This helped you remember and find a way back—not only to where you came from, but to who you originally were. Other memories will gradually return, and you will release them too—but not here, not in this workshop, not under this light...”

## Chapter 4

# Breaths Beneath the Soil

*“A confrontation with death, loss,  
and the buried force of life.”*

When we stepped out of the workshop, the cold, damp air of the forest settled over my face like a thin, clinging veil. There was no wind, no rain—only a quiet moisture rising from the earth itself, nesting in the folds of the atmosphere. The scent of freshly hewn wood lingered in my nose, mingling with the sharp tang of metallic fluid and the faint, smoldering warmth of a half-burned fire we had left behind.

A narrow path began to thread its way through towering, intertwined trees. Their branches arched overhead as the gnarled arms of beings unwilling to let us pass. Between them, trembling patches of daylight, like fading memories, fell across the damp earth. Beneath our feet, moss-covered stones yielded softly—as if walking upon an old carpet long abandoned. The squelch of wet leaves underfoot whispered through the trees, a muted rustle that seemed to reach the ears of the forest itself, which listened but said nothing.

At uneven intervals, small bridges spanned the thin streams that crossed the path. The water flowed clear and quiet, yet cold and uncompromising, threading between stones and bare roots. Its sound was sharp, tremulous—as the breath of someone still caught between sleep and wakefulness. Ropes hung from the sides of the bridges, frayed and slack, swaying gently in the air, as if remembering the hands that once gripped them, yet powerless now to hold anything at all.

Along the trail, iron lanterns—blackened and rusted—stood atop short, crooked posts. None burned; within each, a remnant of ash or a shriveled candle remained, dead to light. Still, the scent of scorched oil and cold, rain-soaked metal lingered in the air. No birds sang, no animals stirred—only the rhythm of our breaths, our footsteps, and occasionally, the sharp snap of a branch underfoot, filling the forest with a silent, watchful presence.

And then, when we rounded the final bend, a monastery rose from the earth, its walls tall and shrouded in the dust of the air—not suddenly, but with such gradual insistence that it seemed to have always been there, and we were only now awakening to its presence. Its ancient stones exhaled the scent of dampness and something heavy and earthy—the fragrance of something long buried, like a servant’s uniform left forgotten in a locked drawer.

At the monastery’s highest point stood a wooden bell tower. From it hung a broken bell, still, yet within its stillness lingered a presence—as if the echo of its last toll had seeped into the bones of the walls and now trembled through an invisible layer of air with every step we took.

Here, time seemed not to breathe. Or perhaps it only drew its slow, silent breaths beneath the soil.

The monastery offered no welcoming door, no threshold inviting entry. Only a dark cavity in a wall of cold, ancient stones, sunk so deep in silence that I doubted a door had ever existed at all. Yet there, the instant my hand brushed the rough edge of the stone, a soft sound rippled through the air, resembling someone exhaling just beyond the wall.

Slowly, without push or command, the stone door with its rusted hinges swung open. Opening quietly, emitting a muffled moan, akin a coffin left underground for centuries being pried ajar. Silver mist slithered through the crack, touching the space beyond. Into that vague halo, I stepped.

The air was thick and ancient, as the breath of forgotten centuries pressing against my face. A familiar, yet unpleasant scent clung to it, mingled with the stale dampness that hung in the atmosphere; a heavy, contained odor, mimicking curdled milk abandoned in a clay jar and left to memory. The mist rose, slow and deliberate, through broken windows and gaping corridors, as if the monastery itself smoldered from within, exhaling the smoke of its solitude. And within that fog, a muffled, lost voice murmured things—short, trembling, endless names. The names of infants never baptized, never inscribed in any ledger.

Edgar, who had accompanied me in silence, spoke not a word, even as we entered the monastery. He simply pressed the heavy, decayed church door closed with his shoulder. It shut with a raw, agonized groan, a sound that seemed to rise from the very bones of the crumbling structure—the belated cry of wood gnawed in silence for centuries.

My gaze fell upon a pale-yellow cross, swaying slowly under the archway, entangled in cobwebs. Edgar said, “If you wish to return, you must listen here—to the voices still breathing

beneath the soil, voices that have not been silenced, only hidden. You must hear them...to be freed from them.”

He was calm, yet something quivered in the depths of his eyes—an ancient awareness, felt only in distant dreams.

I cannot say how long we stood there. Time had stretched and lost its meaning, and fear had long since surrendered its hold. In this enchanted world, every boundary had dissolved—even fear itself had faded, rendered powerless by these silent, nameless presences.

I laid my hand gently, without hurry, upon the moss-covered wall of the monastery. Its chill was unlike marble; it seemed alive, breathing. Moisture ran through it, as if after centuries it still drew breath from within. And then I felt it. A hidden movement, a soft, imperceptible tremor—something stirring among stone, wood, and earth, moving slowly, almost shyly. It was neither illusion, nor figment, nor a spectral presence—but a quiet, fragmented breath, alive. That had long ago been left in the soil, still seeking a path upward, still striving toward light. From the narrow cracks in the flagstones, from the depths of walls whose memory had long since grown silent, that breath searched for its way—and though the walls no longer remembered, they retained its trace, like the lingering flavor of a shadow on the tongue.

Edgar, without meeting my eyes, murmured, “Some things...are not even erased from the memory of the earth.”

The rough, uneven steps of the monastery’s crypt trembled beneath my feet with every step, as the bones of the stairs had rotted from within. The scent of rusted metal and soil, thick with trapped moisture, grew heavier with each breath—like air that had not found its way out for centuries. The small lantern in my hand cast a trembling yellow light across the

narrow, bowed walls, and my shadow stretched behind me—elongated and restless—shaped as a weary woman, her back bent, as if severed from myself and wandering in pursuit of a silent memory.

Deeper down, the crypt twisted into a labyrinthine tunnel—an unmapped path drawn beneath the church, full of bends, low arches, and walls bearing faint imprints of claws—neither clear nor certain. One could not tell if they were the marks of a child's hand or of some creature grown in the dark.

Every few steps, a droplet fell from the ceiling; its soft, steady sound echoed of something enduring, something that would not let the space remain still. And then, without a shift in the air or a stir in the shadows, a sound emerged. Not from a mouth, not a cry or moan—but a long, moist breath—the breath of something nameless, still alive beneath layers of soil. Perhaps not out of hope, but simply to be seen, to be touched, to be remembered, even for a moment.

Somewhere along the wall, the ground had cracked. I knelt and placed my palms upon the earth. Contrary to expectation, the soil was warm, yet with a peculiar heat, like a body running a fever. From the fissures between the stones rose a scent both familiar and uncanny—a mixture of dampness, blood, flesh, and skin.

There was something in the air, like decay, but not of the kind that repels. Instead, it carried a mysterious aroma that involuntarily awakened a sense of embrace within me—a feverish, distant, long-lost embrace, resembling a mother who had died years ago yet had not left her bed; an ancient presence, yet alive.

Edgar, without moving forward, remained in place, and softly, as if speaking not to be heard but to be remembered, he

said, “You hear their voices...because one of those breaths is still connected to you. A thin, hidden, yet living thread flows between you and that breath. And if you remember, and then free yourself from that link, the path back will open.”

I sat, astonished and alone. Something like a creeping liquid, like the sap left at the bottom of a rotted shell, rose from the fissures in the ground. Slowly, without reason, weightless and silent, it coiled around my legs, then climbed my thighs, and somehow, without my understanding, reached my chest—light yet insistent, akin a boneless serpent winding tighter with each moment.

I did not know where my body ended, or whether I still stood within myself, or had sunk into something else. In the instant when this unknowing—the hesitation—shifted into a quiet acceptance. I saw something—not from outside, not from the darkness, but from a point precisely at the center of my being—something direct and nameless began to take shape.

It all began within me—a silent pressure, not of limbs, but from the depths of the soul. A contraction without name or time, recognizing no boundary. It was as if the entire cosmos, with all its galaxies, had gathered within me, and now, in a soundless tremor, sought to release itself.

The ground beneath my feet felt like an ancient refuge, buried deep in oblivion. My legs spread, my knees bent involuntarily, and my trembling arms fell to my sides. My body burned—not from pain, but from an unknown presence striving to pass through me, leaving me powerless to resist. My mouth opened, yet no sound emerged; only short, stifled breaths struck the stone walls and returned like the echo of a wounded animal.

Then, a sudden pull arose within me, as if an invisible shell had cracked. My muscles cried out wordlessly, and between my

thighs, a warm, sticky drop fell. A beginning from which there was no return. A nameless infant slid from my body—not as a tangible form, but as a hidden secret.

It came into my arms silently, without movement. Its skin was thin and damp, eyes closed, mouth still unformed. Its body resembled a mirror of something invisible rather than a living being. Its scent was familiar—not of this world, but from somewhere that had existed before me, before birth itself.

The silent infant trembled in my embrace—not from cold, but from an unnamed shiver whose origin even it did not know. Its small, restless body beat softly, to a rhythm bound neither to life nor to death.

Half-open eyes held a gaze suspended between wakefulness and oblivion—a gaze that carried neither desire nor denial. It seemed only to witness something whose meaning even it did not understand.

Its cry did not emerge from the mouth, but from deeper within, passing through its closed eyelids. The sound could not be heard—only felt—like the drop of a liquid against the skin, sensed without ear or eye.

Without a single word spoken, a complete conversation unfolded between us. No silence was broken, no language used, yet all meanings passed between us without need for words. At that moment, something soft but potent, like a gentle wave, crawled up from the back of my neck, through my chest, and I began—without will or understanding—to remember something. Not a memory of the past, but an eternal presence that had always lived within me. Not a thought formed in the mind, but a direct contact of another kind. A contact that was neither touch nor sight, but a recognition of something lost in the deepest layers of my being.

I knelt—not from fatigue, nor for prayer or tears, but from an unnamed necessity, to close the distance. It was a movement like surrender to a presence that no words could describe. In that moment, I felt the atmosphere of worship, yet without God; an urgency akin to pleading, yet without request—only presence. My mouth opened involuntarily, and a sound emerged from deep within me. *I do not know your name...but if you wish, you may remain within me; you may come with me—not to be forgotten, but to endure. Your voice, your presence, the breath that still comes and goes—will be with me.*

The infant moved slowly, without hesitation—as a leaf that chooses to fall before it falls. Its tiny hand rose toward something dwelling within me. I placed the tip of my finger against it and shivered—not from cold, but from a warmth transmitted from that nameless skin. A warmth not of human origin, but primordial, like the first light that ever touched the first soil.

At that moment, something settled upon my shoulder—not a physical weight, but an unnamed heaviness, like a thousand silent whispers, silences that countless women had carried to the grave, unheard. Yet this weight had not come to crush, but to rise—to bear something true that had remained hidden.

A soft, purposeless light, similar to a breath of twilight, spreads through space. I rose. I held the child—not in my hands, perhaps, but within my chest, right behind my sternum. The infant was the same—the same small existence I had lost, long ago, in the second month of its formation, in the silence of a windowless room, without will, without knowledge. The burden of that grief had lain buried in my unconscious for years, nameless.

But this time, not with shame, not with fear, but with open arms and a gaze that could not turn away, I embraced it—in a place outside the calendar, beyond the need for time. And then, I let it go—not with a name upon my lips, but with a tear in my eye and the same hidden trembling that still rose and fell within my chest.

Then, from somewhere behind me—not in the darkness, nor from a distance, but from the deepest layer of a presence that had always been within me—a voice spoke. “Give me the child.”

Not because I knew death—I did not—but simply because I could not hold onto its life. And before its mouth could open to suck, before the warmth of my skin could mean anything to it, before the rhythm of my breaths could imprint upon its memory, I surrendered the premature body to that voice. I closed my eyes, and the infant, like pure energy, slipped from my embrace.

My whole being trembled, drenched in tears and cold sweat that clung to me like a gentle mountain rain. Suddenly, a warm, steady hand settled on my shoulder—a touch soft, yet so familiar it felt as though I had waited for it for years. It was Edgar, his voice quiet, carrying a hidden warmth, “It is enough...do not cry any longer. You have remembered. You have passed through this stage. You are released—just as you were always meant to be.”

## The Mountain of Time

*“Ascend into a symbolic realm where time takes on new shapes and new meanings.”*

I found myself beside a spring that bubbled forth from the heart of the mountain—its water clear and cold, sending up a gentle steam that drifted into the air. Everything felt familiar: the mountains standing shoulder to shoulder on the horizon, the small green shrubs sprouting between the rocks, the large gray stones that resembled the land where I was born. The very mountains where I had played as a child, where I had run, and at night had listened to the wind. Edgar was there too, silent and serene, seated upon the wet stones by the spring, as if he had always been there. His hands sank into the water, searching the gentle current for something, and his face held the calm of one not seeking answers, but simply listening—listening to the voice of the earth.

Something emerged in his hands. Slowly, he lifted it from the water. A small green stone streaked with gold that gleamed in the sunlight. He turned it in his palms, wet and alive, like a creature awakening from a thousand-year slumber. Then,

with a look that offered no explanation, only the quiet of his presence, he placed the stone in my fingers.

It was cool. Its texture was neither rough nor slippery, something between the two, as if it were the skin of something neither plant nor metal. It weighed almost nothing, yet the instant I touched it, something shifted in my chest—not pain, not joy, but a wordless recognition, like a flavor that suddenly carries you to a distant place without you knowing what you’ve tasted.

Edgar spoke, his voice softer than the flowing water, as if his words had risen from a distant spring, scattering gently into the air and mingling with the breath of the earth, “Comes from the heart of a meteor...perhaps from beyond the star systems. Not life itself, but the possibility of life. Perhaps that is what made you come from there...”

In that moment, green light flickered in the hollow of my fingers, and its reflection on the water’s surface stilled like a dream glimpsed only once, never to return. I stared at the stone, unsure why, only sensing something stir within me—a distant sound, like two ancient objects colliding in the basement of my mind. A muted, indistinct sound, of a door long closed in silence, now opening again without a whisper, carrying the scent of dust and night dew.

I asked, “How can something from beyond space...be inside me?”

Edgar lifted his head slowly. His voice did not come from his mouth, but seemed to emerge from the depths of the stones or from the electric veins of the blue rocks themselves. Calm, without need for emphasis, he said, “No, you are not an earthly particle. You have come from a journey that left the boundaries of the earth behind—a wandering particle. Perhaps from the

clouds of Venus, or farther still, from a place where neither light nor darkness has meaning. Where only being exists—nameless, shapeless, boundless, timeless.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, as if traversing the distant landscape in his mind, then continued softly, “Some particles brought only water—droplets without history or home. Others planted seeds, not to grow, but to know; silent seeds, yet alive with memory. And one of them... is you.”

In that instant, a thick silence settled over the spring—a presence heavier than words. I breathed, yet even my breath was no longer as it had been. The air tinged with the scent of burnt metal. A sharp, lingering aroma that clung like a blade at the edge of the nostrils and slowly unfolded on the tongue, tasting like water drawn from a rusted vessel long buried in the earth.

Edgar smiled—not at me, but at something he alone understood—a faint smile, like morning light passing through a dusty window, casting only a fleeting, trembling pattern on the wall. Then he murmured, “No, you did not sleep inside the meteor...not in that way.”

His words were no longer for the ear, but for the skin, and he continued gently, “That first particle, that silent matter, may have formed long before words existed for humans, deep within a vast glaciation, among mute and motionless masses; a place where silence powders the skin, and the cry, before it is heard, vanishes within itself and dies.”

I stared at his face, my mind turning like the rusty blades of a forgotten mill, caught in a slow, distant wind that swirled through his words—not to find an answer, but to gather scattered fragments of a broken, lost mirror, one that still held the warmth of a distant gaze.

The stone in my hand was no longer merely a cold, lifeless object, it radiated a silent warmth, as if my skin had merged with it, a drop of molten iron seeping quietly into my flesh, awakening something deep within. It pulsed—but not like my heartbeat—rather, an echo of an ancient memory, a rhythm older than blood, older than flesh itself, woven from forgotten layers of tears, tears that had once fallen long ago on foreign soil and now lay hidden within this voiceless stone. A scent of damp metal rose from it, sharp and bitter, as the residue of rusted history, like the edge of an old knife buried for years beneath the earth.

And in that moment, without opening my lips, a question arose from within—not voiced, but trembling gently yet with deep roots. The same tremor that stirs when one touches something for the first time, yet somehow knows in the heart that it has been waiting decades to be touched, “*Could it be... us?*”

Edgar looked at me, yet his gaze passed through me, moving elsewhere—perhaps behind me, perhaps deep within himself. His lips moved, revealing the essence of old wine lingering in the bottom of a forgotten bottle; a smile without warmth, yet with a sudden, bitter undertone that burned the tongue and evoked a taste of a distant past. Then, without meeting my eyes, he spoke softly, “You must ask your question anew.”

His voice rippled through the space like a whisper—precise and penetrating, like a droplet falling from the limestone roof of an ancient cave; a drop that does not create time but compresses it, holding it within itself. He continued, “How could anything from the cosmos not be within you? Is it not true that all things—from silent stones to the final breath of a human—are nothing but compressed memories of the stars?”

His gaze lingered on the green stone in my hand—not for its color or shape, but as if he saw within it something that belonged to no measure of time. Then, in a slow, assured tone, not speaking directly to me but as if conversing with time itself, he murmured, “Do you know? Beyond time, beyond the turning of day and night, there is something that flows more gently than light, deeper than darkness. Something that, before the first blink of the oceans, before the first cell dreamed of division in the head of the universe, rested as a silent particle in the heart of a cold, lonely meteor—silent, yet brimming with possibility. Not guided by a plan, nor driven by a desire, only by the spark of beginning; a spark that simply could be—just that simple, and just that enigmatic.”

His voice, soft and trembling, passed over me like warm vapor on frozen skin and settled deep within. The air suddenly smelled of earth; earth that had seen no rain for years, yet had not forgotten the memory of it. And as he tilted his head slightly, as if seeing something in a mirror that I could only perceive as shadow, he continued, “Some of those particles were lost in the soil, like a dream no one remembers, and others dissolved in the depths of the seas, embraced by the waves and vanished into darkness. But one of them—perhaps the only one—at a precise point, somewhere between pressure and light, in just the right warmth and shade, whispered the first note of life. A note that flows in our breath even now, without our knowing from where it came, or why it continues.”

“You are of that whisper, and so am I. All of us, without knowing, are children of endless journeys—not born of earth alone, but of the dust of stars that burned before us. We are heirs to a darkness that once became light and now sleeps within the threads of our being.”

His words, like a soft, silent wave, passed through my skin and bone, and suddenly a strange illusion overtook me. It felt as though this body I now inhabited was no longer solely mine, but a continuation of thousands of bodies, thousands of forms, thousands of memories that came before me, and still flow through me.

At that very moment, the taste of cold metal spread across my mouth, like rain falling from a sky beyond time—not unpleasant, not harsh, simply familiar; a strange, nameless familiarity. His voice, soft and unhurried, spoke, “We come from a place we do not know ourselves, yet this stone—this small stone in your hand—is a fragment of that lost beginning. And when you look at it, you think you hold something insignificant, but it is the essence of the first ‘if,’ the memory of the first whisper.”

Instinctively, I drew my thumb across the green surface, and a faint, rasping sound rose, like scratching a dormant memory. In that instant, something stirred deep in my mind: a shifting image of formless light, of cold that held a hidden warmth at its core. Then a voice rose from within me, from a place where words exist before being spoken, *“And you, are its continuation.”*

Something awoke inside me—not new knowledge, but an ancient feeling that had always been there, waiting for a touch to recall it. I drew a deep breath, and the scent of the stone penetrated to the very depths of my being—a nameless familiarity beyond description. A forgotten aperture opened within me, and a quiet warmth flowed from my palm into my chest. My eyes were closed—or perhaps they had closed themselves—and the world fell into profound silence; no mountains, no spring—only the journey itself, immersed in an unknown light.

In an ocean between cold and warmth, whose droplets danced the image of existence—cellular division, light unfolding in a silent cave, a hand stretching from earth to sky—a voice, neither gendered nor temporal, whispered, *“Remember.”*

The stone’s pulse now throbbed through my veins, and a silent melody, like the moan of a newborn galaxy, crept along my spine. A green, liquid light surged from my chest, a sprout emerging from the stone; gentle warmth spread across my palm, and the taste of dew lingered on my tongue.

In that instant, I saw a lonely child on a nameless plain, a stone in hand and a boundless sky above—I was that child, and I was that sky. And the voice rose again, *“You are a fragment of the beginning of being every beginning longs to return.”*

There were no more questions, only presence, only a pulse that had always been composed within me.

The mountain air hung suspended, caught between everything and nothing. With each breath, a bitter, familiar taste of some distant past coursed through me—as if I were drinking a memory that had not yet occurred. And then, from the very heart of the air, Edgar’s voice arose, echoing softly within me, “Now you understand...you and he did not come from the soil of this world; you, the daughter of the moon, with a heart that pulses like the ebb and flow of love, and he, from a silent planet. You came from the moon, and your particle of the cosmos is from there; he comes from a distant world, where even the winds move in silence. The love between you is the repetition of that first moment—the instant two particles were cast from the primordial explosion. But this time, it is neither random nor forgotten. It is conscious; with return, you meet again.”

Edgar spoke as though he knew him—not just knew him, but held a hidden, profound bond with him, as if he

even knew his place in the cosmos. He looked into my eyes with penetrating calm and smiled—not a smile of pity, but of deep comprehension. Then he continued, “Perhaps, in truth, you are waiting for a return... a return to yourself. When you return—not seeking, not questioning, not yearning—but in a pure silence and complete presence, the moment you become one with yourself, he will return. For love is not the union of two souls; it is the reconciliation of the soul with itself. He will not return unless you reclaim yourself. And when you have found yourself, you will see that he never truly left.”

By the edge of the spring, while the warm steam clung to my face, I leaned toward Edgar and spoke of the man who had lived in my memory for years, without presence in my world. I told him that he was the one I had waited for in the hotel, sitting on the red chair, and that for years I had spoken to him in the silence of night, as though the beat of my heart echoed the rhythm of his breath.

Yet the truth was, I did not know if he would ever stay with me. I had known him for years without knowing if a bond existed between us or if he was only a wild imagination dwelling in my soul. An invisible force, a profound feeling, drew me to him, yet I could not discern if he was a man of this earth or a fragment of the sky, fallen mistakenly into a mortal form. I only knew that he had left me in a purgatory of waiting. Still, I could not let him go, for deep within me I knew he was no distant stranger but the silent half of myself—the half that had separated from me in the first explosion, and only through return could I reclaim my lost self.

I dipped my face into the spring. Its gentle steam embraced me, and I remembered him. The man who had left me waiting

all these years, the one with whom I had whispered in the solitude of night, in silences that held only the sound of my heart and the echo of his breath. The last time, I had waited for him in that hotel, upon that chair, which still held the warmth of his presence.

Softly, I asked, “Edgar, tell me—why must so much waiting be the price of union? Why must love cast me outside of time and into a nameless, boundless world? Why is there no sign of him? Is being hurled into this timeless realm the cost of loving him? No matter what I have done—every sound, every gaze, every unfinished touch—I am left once again in a purgatory of waiting.”

I did not know why, but my forehead bent to the clear, warm spring. The touch of water on my skin, the scent of stone, the salty taste of tears on my lips—all blended: bitter and pure, awakening. My tears dissolved silently into the water, as if released from some ancient sorrow. And in that release, a quiet joy of understanding rose within me, something words could never capture.

Then Edgar, soft and near—as though seated beside me—whispered, “Know this... the end of love between the daughter of the moon and the son of the cold planet is neither return nor beginning; it is only passage. Passage beyond form, beyond time—until there is neither you nor him, but one, in the heart of infinity.”

And I understood, neither he had been lost, nor I. We had come from two stars, and now, in the embrace of these mountains, in the land of my birth, among lapis and emerald stones, we were reunited—not in body, not in name, but in a luminous, ancient presence. A presence woven into us before birth, before time, before the first ray of light.

Then Edgar's voice, soft and close, like a breeze carried through centuries, whispered in my ear, "It is time...wipe your tears. You are free, and closer to returning. He waits for you—your destinies were written among the galaxies, before you ever knew each other. Neither of you can be separated from the other."

At that moment, the image of the spring faded, leaving only depth—depth that drew me in without drowning me...

## Chapter 6

# Ario

*“Once Beloved”*

When I came to myself, it felt as though a heavy veil from a half-forgotten world had lifted from my mind. I found myself once more in that wooden hut—an old, weary hut whose walls lingered in a hesitant stillness, holding time captive within them.

The air still carried the mingled scent of damp earth, rotting wood, and dried herbs—a scent that did not remain confined to the nose but settled on the tongue as well, a sharp, faintly bitter taste, like licking the rim of a clay vessel abandoned for years in a cellar.

Edgar was gone.

Slowly, I leaned back against the stone hearth. A weak warmth pulsed from it, the frail remainder of a sick man’s breath in the cold of winter nights. Its meager orange flames quivered along the cracked walls, releasing shapeless shadows into the room—silent, blind creatures loosed into the gloom. The muted crackle of burning wood rustled like the peeling of an old memory, so faint that one had to breathe just to hear it.

Then a draft of cold slipped through the gap in the window—not in a rush, but creeping, like a hand brushing lightly against the back of the neck. Within that subtle breath of air, a sound unfurled; indistinct, cavernous, not wholly human, as though from the depths of some far-off well someone was trying to recall a word—one that escaped the mind even as it was heard.

From a dust-laden, long-forgotten shelf, a yellowed paper drifted forth until it settled softly upon my knees. Gently, I opened it. The page bore a wavering, heavily crossed-out handwriting—faded, yet strangely familiar. The words moved with a slow but deliberate rhythm, seeping gradually into me, as if slipping through a hidden layer of memory, rousing something that had long lain dormant. *“Now you are freed from every cage. You may return to your own world, yet still a shadow of enchantment clings to you; you wander within a timeless cycle, among days that endlessly repeat and nights that forget nothing. To break this spell and reach complete release, you must endure the final trial: seek out a black turtle—not anywhere, but at the threshold where water meets the golden sands—and bathe upon its back, with water and with your whole presence. Only then will the spell depart your body, and you shall return, not merely to the place from which you came, but to the time where you began, and the time you remember.”*  
—Edgar

A weary, roughened wind passed through the cabin’s cracks, like the scrape of a long-forgotten bell against bone. Its sound reverberated not in my ears but in the cage of my chest, as though something ancient and dormant had stirred awake within me. The air carried a damp, bitter taste, similar to sucking a wet finger that was drawn along the stone wall of a cavern. And that same scent of soaked earth and rotting leaves

returned, summoning in me the memory of being lost, of the first taste of directionless existence.

I clenched the paper, still warm from the touch of my fingers. A delicate crumpling sound rose from it, like the muffled cry of something ancient. Without turning back, without casting a single glance behind me, I crossed the threshold out of the hut. My steps were slow and uncertain, yet within me—where no ear could hear and no mind could grasp—a voice pressed me forward. It was like the faint shiver of bones in the cold: not words, only a nameless rhythm that whispered, “*You shall return.*”

The air itself was breathing—heavy and saturated with some hidden presence, resembling the exhalation of an unknown beast slipping through the forest trunks. A scent drifted in the air—woven of the forest’s damp decay, the residue of rotted wood, and a faint invisible trace of worn metal. It did not pass; it clung to skin, to hair, to memory.

Each step awakened a dry, brittle rustle—the fractured voices of leaves that had lain centuries in silence. My feet, bare and wet, sank into the soil and mud—cold, alive, yielding—until it seemed the very earth beneath me was breathing. In my mind, the black turtle had neither form nor size. It was only a vague presence, with eyes that seemed to have swallowed every darkness. I did not see its skin with my eyes but with the sense of touch—smooth and slippery, slick with the damp of night, like mountain stones after rain. It moved slowly, heavily, with a motion that tore at time—not by traversing it, but by dragging each moment quietly behind itself.

The mist was not soft; it was a cold, weightless substance threading through the air settling on my cheek. Around me

swelled formless sounds—something between a sigh and a howl, like a name heard in dreams that waking can never recall. With every step, the boundary between what I had once known and what now formed beneath my feet dissolved, as though even the ground itself had abandoned any intention of stability.

The skin of my hand felt a chill that came from the very fabric of space itself—a cold that crept beneath the nails and made its dwelling in the joints. The wind, now and then lifting a strand of hair from my forehead, carried a movement delicate, precise, and merciless. My mouth had dried, leaving on my tongue a sharp, metallic, faintly salty taste—like the kiss of a knife's blade that had long lain buried in the soil.

And I, clothed in a long garment woven from the threads of moments that were neither past nor yet to come. I stepped into the heart of the darkness in search of that heavy, unhurried form—a darkness of a substance like the sealed interior of a box whose scent has already escaped into the air before it is opened. I did not know where I was going. Yet within my chest a single burning point remained alive of a trembling certainty. Emitting a hidden, pulsing presence that drew me inward, into my own depths—toward return, toward release, toward the crossing of this faceless world, toward the touch of a self that had never wholly belonged to me.

The city's narrow, twisting streets stretched like veins of stone, aimless yet alive, winding among houses damp with age. Walls were draped in dark-green moss, roofs bowed, eaves dripping with the vapor that had risen from the depths of the sea. That vapor now seeped without permission into every crack and crevice of the city's body, sinking it, like some forgotten creature, into a sleep of moisture and silence.

Fish, long dried beneath a sun that no longer shone carried the aroma of cold smoke, settled slowly in my throat. The lanterns, rusted and swaying from trembling walls, cast shadows upon the stones. Shadows that seemed to point the way, yet knew no way themselves. Their yellow light flickered, broken and distrustful, like a half-living memory hiding in the cracks of the walls, flaring now and again before sinking back into silence.

My bare feet pressed against the wet paving stones. They held a living chill, like the skin of a reptile still breathing. With each step a stone released a sound—the muted resonance of something waking from an ancient sleep, still unable to remember its own name.

In the distance came the toll of a ship's bell—a sound that never crossed the fog, but drifted in and out, fading, returning, resembling a memory rising and sinking in the mind. My tongue still held the bitter taste of the sea, threaded with the soot of coal and the trace of something burnt. A taste that was less flavor than a deep sensation in the core of being.

As my toes brushed the dampness of the shoreline, it felt alive, as though I were touching the skin of someone whose name I did not yet know. Someone who came from a past already familiar. The wind, torn and scattered, lifted my hair, and something—perhaps a forgotten name, perhaps only a summons—whispered into my ear, so softly I could not tell whether it came from outside or from within. The fog carried the sound of a wave, long-drawn and unbroken—not near, not far, only present, like the echo of a dream overheard in another's sleep.

At last I reached the shore. The sands shifted beneath my bare feet—cold, wet. Feeling as if each step buried

something, or drew it up again from the earth. Then, in the distance, where the fog was no longer white but a darker gray, something stirred. A faint tremor, perhaps the ghost of a vanished light, or a gaze watching me in silence from beyond the edge of the world.

From within the tangled, heavy layers of fog, a boat emerged—not with haste, not with sound, but with a steady, hidden motion, so slow and even it seemed to glide not through water but through some distant memory. The dip of the oar, each time the wet wood sank and rose again, was like the breath of one long asleep and only just awakening—soft, undulating, caught in a muffled repetition that blurred the boundary between time and waiting.

There was no sail, no rudder. Only the boat, the sea, and the man seated within. His figure at first appeared vague, indistinct, yet something within me—before my eyes could make him out—already recognized him. A silent stirring rose inside me, a voiceless sound rising through bone, a nameless murmur strangely familiar, like a taste forgotten for years and suddenly returned with a single deep breath.

The nearer he drew, the less defined he became. A film of sea-mist clung to his face, as though he were an old photograph fallen into water and not yet dried—softened lines adrift between presence and absence. His hair shifted gently in the breeze rising from the sea, and his gaze did not rest on me but passed through me, toward some point beyond. The boat settled onto the wet sand without a jolt, without the rasp of earth or the pressure of water—only the quiet resting of something that had done this many times before. The man rose slowly. His posture was upright, but in the simplicity of that movement was something that belonged only to those who have crossed

the threshold of death and returned. He had an un-searching gaze, no longer seeking meaning, only bearing presence.

His clothing, worn in its details, carried remnants of another time. A leather strap flaking with age, a button whose absence still pressed its shape into the fabric, the shadowed impression of a lost medal that lingered like a memory upon his shoulder. He drew a rope from the boat; with careful, measured movement, he tied it around the root of a wooden stump protruding from the sand, and paused—as though awaiting the earth's reply.

Then he stepped into the water. The wave rose to his knees, yet his garments did not grow wet. It was not sorcery—rather, as if the water knew him and made way. Each step sent a quiet tremor across the surface, but there was no urgency in his movement.

I stepped forward without knowing why. The ground beneath my feet was slippery, yet my knees did not tremble from fear. Instead, a deeper shiver rose, born of sudden recognition—the feeling that stirs when you touch the wall of an abandoned house in a forgotten city, a place whose name you cannot recall but whose scent you remember.

When I drew near, he lifted his head. His eyes—not dark, but weary, with the kind of weariness that comes not from sleepless nights but from knowing—met mine. It was a gaze without question, without demand, steeped in a quiet acceptance that could only be born from passing through the same moment repeatedly across the layered folds of time.

He smiled then, gently, without pretense, as if offering a wordless affirmation of a presence that required no proof—a smile that knew this moment had come before and would return again with the resonant familiarity of a destiny already inscribed.

He was tall and lean, his shoulders broad, his face marked by the silent endurance of an unseen pain—a weight woven from nameless, endless threads at the core of time. He stood in the space as though he were part of the landscape itself. Presenting a shadow between two rays of light, an intrinsic fragment of the moment unfolding.

His pale hair, loose in the damp breeze, drifted across his forehead like cold smoke that had lost its way, settling and escaping again. His eyes shone with a brightness that was unsteady, their hue suspended somewhere between earth and water, trembling softly, noiselessly—as the surface of a sea on a moonless night, where only faint and vanishing reflections waver among the waves.

In that gaze, I sensed both an earthly estrangement and a hidden awareness. A quiet warning of something vast and easily overlooked—not to frighten, but to remind, to whisper of what had been chosen for forgetting. An ancient secret, without beginning or end, that endures in silence, needing no explanation.

His face was weathered by sun and time, etched with deep lines, as if each groove were a record of endless awakenings or of dreams that had never reached their end. His skin was alive yet subdued. His clothing resembled worn leather, with rusted buttons, dangling straps, and salt-stains that traced the memory of forgotten journeys—journeys that seemed to have taken place less in this world than in another.

He stepped forward, quietly, without claim—with a presence both familiar and beyond explanation. A presence you had always known was there, like a shadow preceding its own form.

At this moment his gaze, bare and without judgment, settled into me; a look that neither asked nor sought an answer, but simply was—and that was enough. Almost against my will, my own eyes followed his, drawn toward the same indistinct point to which he had been fixed from the beginning. A place on the edge of the world, between the last line of land and the first breath of sea. Illustrating a suspended fissure, neither wholly one nor the other, like a narrow seam in the weave of existence.

A cold breeze rose, not in one sweep but in broken waves, carrying with it a heavy air laced with the scent of wet moss, fish, and rotting wood. Gently releasing from the folds of an ancient memory, as the opening of a forgotten chest left closed for years in the corner of a silent room. In that same breath, the scent of his body reached me, mingled with something unknown yet uncannily familiar. A fragrance of a place I had never set foot in, and yet longed for.

Faint stains trailed his sleeve, a map of a vanished land, etched into a fabric that resembled less a garment than a wearable memory. His steps fell soft and soundless on the damp stone, as though born from this space itself. The sediment of the very air around us, not an intrusion from beyond. His nearness was not felt in touch but in the fine vibration it stirred along my skin. An invisible tremor that did not cross my body's boundary but passed around it, unsettling me from within.

And yet, what rooted my feet to the ground was neither his voice nor the gravity of his presence, but a face that seemed almost too familiar. It wasn't bound to any one precise memory, but of another kind, dream-like. As if I had seen him before, in some nameless place, perhaps in a deep sleep—where you can

not recall where, nor when. A face untouched by time or place, holding something unnamed behind its surface.

In that long pause, a wordless suspension opened between us—without language, without interpretation, without need of explanation. And then, in the silence that was more breath than sound, he spoke, “My name...is Ario.”

The word that slipped from his lips was like a drop suspended in air heavy with mist—lingering in the borderland between hearing and feeling. A name that seemed to rise from the depths of some forgotten dream, from before language, even before beginning itself. A sound that spread through the air like the murmur of silent trees in a forest without a map, mingled with the dust of ages. A bodiless yet alive. An echo of a man who bore a weapon not for conquest, but to rend the tattered veils of time. A guardian without claim, protecting a hidden light in endless darkness—not like a torch, but a quiet pulse deep in the heart of shadows.

And that name—Ario. Was not merely a word spoken, but a cipher, a key that reverberated through the marrow of my being. Its meaning I somehow already knew, without reason or thought: a warrior armed with silence, wounded from journeys without return, heavy with love that had no end, wearied by fields where victory itself was the only salvation. Though I was seeing his face for the first time, the voice and the name were not unfamiliar. In some hidden stratum of my existence, I had been awaiting them all along.

I tried to free myself from that clinging sense of recognition. As though I knew my whole being was already absorbing the truth of this mysterious world. Without a word, he suddenly halted. He did not blink. His gaze pierced into mine. The piercing was neither wholly doubtful nor wholly knowing.

But a look of before my arrival, he had already read something within me, a missing fragment of my past.

Then, in a voice low and frayed, born from the depth of an old, dust-covered wound in his soul, he whispered, “You too... are searching for the Black Turtle?”

His smile was faint and bitter, more a distant reflection than a smile—neither joy nor playfulness, but the shadow of some long-forgotten curve of the lips, an echo of silence more than of light. Then, in a tone wavering between gravity and jest, he released his words slowly, “Tell me—do you too believe you’ve been enchanted? Do you truly believe in magic?”

His voice quivered softly—not from fear, but like the sudden brush of a long-buried memory, a fragment of something that had slept for years beneath cold ashes, now trembling awake. The sentence dragged with a strange weight, as though it had been spoken long ago to someone else, or muttered in solitude to a fractured mirror. His gaze held mine, carrying a faint, elusive familiarity—not a clear image, but the reminder of half-finished dreams, uncertain whether they were dreams or memories.

I only nodded, slowly in a quiet assent for which language had no shape. Without question, and without intention, I heard myself say, “Perhaps magic is nothing but that nameless heaviness creeping quietly into my chest, stealing my breath without warning—like a distant sound you only hear when everything else falls silent. A bitter energy some send forth so that I may not live, nor be happy.”

The taste of salt lingered in my mouth, sharp and old—resembling the memory of a kiss that no longer belonged to me. The air was thick with the scent of wet wood and fish not yet caught. The wind brushed my hair aside with cold,

slow fingers, as if it too were listening for the words hidden between words.

He sighed then—a long, heavy sigh, carrying the smell of smoke, of rain on cold earth, of a sorrow that had crossed the borders of time itself, bearing centuries of fatigue in a single breath. In his eyes a shadow flickered—thin but alive, like a fish gliding through the depths of black water. Then he spoke with a sorrowful recognition, “Then I too... must be enchanted...”

Beyond the mist, beyond the measure of time, came the toll of a ship’s bell drifting, unmoored from any source or destination.

His eyes glimmered with a muted brightness—with a hidden moisture at the corners of his gaze, as though something deep within him had slowly risen to the surface. Without looking at me, he lifted his hand and moved it through the air in a slow gesture, like the passage of a dry leaf across still water. With a voice trembling between fear and strange knowledge, he said, “If you find it...you will never return.”

At that moment, a cold wind drifted through the mist. A wind that did not merely touch the skin, but seemed to pass through bone itself, awakening a silent memory deep within. Ario’s voice, like smoke lost in a breeze, dissolved into that wind—a whisper slipping through the damp sands of a timeless shore, never arriving anywhere.

Yet his gaze was still on me. A stare at once piercing and unseen, as though it passed through me toward something farther away, toward a horizon veiled in mist, toward a forgotten distance, toward a time older than memory. And before I could stop myself, I asked, “Where is it I will not return to? Here? Or the world I was cast out from?”

He said, “The turtle will carry you with it—but not where you expect...You may think you are returning, but the return, if it exists, is to another you, to another face. The one you see when you look into a mirror...If you pass through that water, if you bathe upon the back of that creature, you will never again be who you were before.”

I could not make sense of his words. All I wanted was to be free of this accursed world.

He paused, then spoke again. His voice was slower, softer, darker, as though it came from far away, from somewhere between dream and death. “I was once someone—lover, fighter, broken. In a world that still had meaning, in moments when time was still taking shape...But now...now I am only a voice in the mist, a voice sometimes heard, sometimes lost, a fading and uncertain guide for those who may never return to themselves...”

His gaze remained fixed on the distance, on the place where sea and mist had blurred together, where the horizon dissolved like a half-remembered memory into the pale whiteness of the world. And as his voice swayed between a dream’s murmur and the whisper of prayer, he said, “The Black Turtle...on those nights when the fog grows heavier, it emerges from beyond...”

He fell silent for a moment—not in doubt, but in reverence, as if before something unseen and sacred. Then, reaching into the pocket of his worn coat, he drew out a fragment of leather—rotted, yet somehow alive, its faint trembling lines more like the trace of a dream than a map, as though even his own memory had lost it long ago.

With careful hesitation, his trembling finger traced a narrow line, one that dissolved into a tangle of uncertain

curves. “Here...if you follow this line through the eucalyptus trees, past the bones hidden beneath the sand, you will find it. The creature waits upon a shore where yellow sands blur into the sea; borderless, endless. Look here, this abandoned house holds a doorway onto that yellow shore. If you follow the path, not with fear but with awareness, you will find the way. And the turtle, with eyes that know your past more clearly than you ever could, will be waiting for you.”

I reached out, my fingertips brushing against the leather surface. It was warm, soft, damp—as though beneath that weathered skin, a slow pulse still beat, like the heart of an animal half-alive, trapped in another dream. I asked quietly, without lifting my gaze from the wavering lines, “Did you... ever go? Did you cross that shore?”

He lowered his head slightly, with a motion so deliberate, so pensive, it seemed to carry the weight of a memory rising from a wound. And in a voice that trembled despite his effort to steady it he said, “Each time I drew near, something within me pulled back...Perhaps it was fear. Perhaps an invisible tether binding me to the soil. Or that mute desire to remain, rooted in me for reasons I cannot name. I do not know. But you are not like me. In your eyes there is something...a sign of return—or perhaps, no, the sign of an ending. You are resolved to go on, and I am still caught in hesitation, suspended between two times, two beginnings...”

As though the burden of those words pressed heavier than he could bear, he stepped back, slowly, like a man trying to free himself from the weight of a moment that had grown too real. In a voice that trembled despite my effort to steady it, I said, “I...I cannot make sense of this map. Everything is tangled, uncertain. Will you come with me? Will you walk beside me?”

His gaze held mine. Time between us froze; the mist seemed to draw back; silence settled—dense, whole, like the pause before a drop breaks the surface of water. Then, softly, as if the answer came from somewhere farther than his tongue, he said, “The path is yours... Yet if you wish, I will come. Sometimes, being alone is more dangerous than being lost.”

Ario inclined his head with a peculiar calm, as though long practiced in the art of yielding. His look carried something between invitation and command. The hand that had until then hung motionless at his side lifted toward me—slowly, without haste, yet with unshakable resolve. “Step aboard,” he said.

Slowly, he lifted the long blue hem of my dress—not with the haste of a practical gesture, but with the careful solemnity of one enacting a silent rite. The thin, wet fabric clung to my thighs, slipping like water beneath my fingers.

A sudden flame of inescapable nakedness rose within me—not of the body, but of the heart, as though I stood before a secret I had been fleeing for years. I could hear my own breath, deep and trembling, and with every step toward the boat I felt something fall away, even as something new began to take form.

My feet sank into the water. The soft sand shifted beneath them. Without a word, Ario extended his hand. His fingers, warm and alive, closed around mine—not tightly, not loosely, but with just enough weight to say: *Come with me...*

For a moment I met his gaze, and the world with all its questions and memories receded. Only the faint murmur of water and the throb of my heart remained.

He stepped into the boat first. It swayed once, then seemed to steady beneath his presence. With a slow, unhurried motion he drew me aboard. For an instant I was in his arms—a strange

current stirred beneath my skin, a sensation like reclaiming a part of myself lost long ago in some distant storm.

I settled in the corner of the boat, gathering the folds of my dress. Droplets slipped from the fabric's edge, vanishing soundlessly into the wood.

We said nothing.

The mist devoured everything, and with each stroke of the oar the shore grew fainter, more remote. The steady rhythm of the paddles reverberated through that boundless, opaque veil, enclosing us in a space suspended between two worlds. There was no shore, no sky—only the mist, Ario, me, and the small boat, cleaving to what felt like a fracture through the body of time.

He rowed without pause, never once glancing back, as though he knew the way—or perhaps because the destination itself no longer mattered. I sat watching him in heavy silence, carried toward some place unknown and without return, a place that allowed no questions.

It was then, with his back still turned to me, his strokes calm and steady, that he spoke, “Listen to everything you hear along the way. All of it is a sign. But there is one condition—ask me nothing.”

For a moment I hesitated—not out of fear, but from the weight of that final command. Questions surged within me, restless and unanswered. Yet when he turned, and his eyes locked on mine, their unwavering gaze compelled me into silence.

The boat glided steadily toward the unknown. The mist thickened, drawing the world into a shroud of gray mystery. Out of its depths, a small city emerged, its only landmark a tall building with red-tiled roofs that flickered faintly in the distance, like the last glimmer of an extinguished flame.

With quiet composure, Ario slipped his hand gently beneath my arm, helping me as the boat touched sand. He seemed to be a knight that came at last to the end of a long journey—firm, steadfast, yet kind and wordless.

The boat jolted suddenly, throwing me off balance. Aryo caught my wrist at once. His fingers brushed against my golden bracelet—not in curiosity, not in suspicion, but as though recalling a moment, a memory. That touch stirred a silent warning within me, but he released me at once.

He then guided me to the shore, and we stepped from the boat. My feet sank into the cool, damp sand; a simultaneous current of freshness and strangeness coursed from my soles into my being. At that moment I realized I had been barefoot throughout the entire journey.

Ario did not release my hand. Supporting me, he turned his gaze toward the city, as if seeking to glimpse a vanished memory in the distant skyline.

My eyes caught an old brown hat atop a fisherman in the horizon—a solitary, fading figure, as if part of the mist itself. From beneath that leather brim, he looked at us, as though he recognized us both. But suddenly, with a sudden fear, he tossed his fishing net into the boat and vanished.

More than ever, I felt that in this fog-bound land, every sign and every touch spoke an unvoiced language, a bridge to pasts that were still waiting to be told. I fixed my gaze on Ario's eyes—eyes that were both invitation and warning—and his words echoed in my mind, *“Remember, everything you see and hear is a sign.”* Without fully understanding why, I felt more ready than ever to step into this unknown city. To search for the sign that might lead back, to reach him—the one who, I could not tell if for hours, days, months, years, or perhaps

centuries—had waited for me in that cursed hotel. “*Oh, God, release me from this timeless world.*” A quiet prayer rose in my heart as I followed Ario.

There was a sense within me that I had experienced this moment before, something vague yet profound. Equivalent to tracing a finger over a fogged mirror that erases the image but not the presence.

I do not know why, but something within me knew—not through memory or intellect, but through another hidden invisible way. Perhaps rooted in a distant, forgotten time, or born from dreams that no longer linger in consciousness but quietly persist in the depths of the soul. I think some meetings are never first encounters, but return to a secret knot within me. A place long forgotten yet still breathing in the depth of being. A realm where time is not linear, understanding flows unconditionally, and recollection transcends clock and calendar. A journey repeated countless times before its beginning. Perhaps what I now call the *beginning* is but a continuation, its original name and identity lost, yet still flowing persistently beneath the skin of time.

## Chapter 7

# The Black Turtle

*“Wisdom, time’s passage, and inner voyage of transformation and the rediscovery of self.”*

A rio spoke in a calm voice, as if rising from the depths of a distant memory, “I want to take you to a house I built...a structure beneath the sky of this city. It is taller, wider than any house you’ve known. Once, when I returned from the war, I carried a dream in my heart— turning this vast house into an inn for weary travelers from afar...Yet it seems you are the first, perhaps the only, guest of this inn.” He paused for a moment, then added, “No one has ever stepped into my world, into my house...into my time—except you.”

A soft, cold wind, unseen yet palpable, slipped through hidden layers of time. Its invisible hands traced the crevices of the stones and brushed against my skin. A light but profound shiver settled into my being. It was not from fear, but from a recognition rooted deep in the soul. I stood in a twisted, rain-slicked street, amid the trembling shadows of rusted lanterns. The damp cobblestones beneath my bare feet whispered a silent murmur, one only weary hearts could hear.

Aryo's eyes were luminous and yet strange. They reflected a vast absence, an infinite distance—not the alienation born of separation, but the estrangement that detaches a person from themselves. An estrangement anchored in lost times and voices, in a space that breathes yet remains untouchable.

A fear coursed through me, but not the ordinary trembling kind. It was the fear of crossing an invisible boundary. A boundary where ordinary senses fade and a quiet, profound awareness glows within like a living flame. The awareness reminded me I was alive. Alive not merely because of my heartbeat or rising and falling breath, but because I could taste the mist on my tongue, feel the wet earth beneath my feet, hear the waves both near and far through moss-covered walls, and see the fractured lantern light play upon my hair...And see Aryo—this unknown man, this warrior lost amid the folds of time—just as I felt myself.

Yet, a voice deep within me, wordless, whispered that he must be waiting for me at that hotel now. I had to return—not for a new word, not for the answer to a question I sought, but for that silent instant, that serene gaze, that presence which might have been a farewell. Although I knew words, in the face of this depth I felt for him, the words always seem too small, too inadequate.

A quiet lump settled in my throat. Yet I swallowed back the tears, not out of fear of crying, but because I did not want Ario—with those eyes worn by wounds and travel—to witness my unraveling. For in his gaze too, there lay a secret that, without tears, understood every sorrow and silently heard every pain.

I held a strange, inexplicable trust in Ario, beyond understanding or reason. In that moment, it mattered not who

he was. All I wished was liberation—from this endless time, from this drawn-out purgatory.

And Ario was the only one I believed could find that black, heavy turtle—the silent, forgotten creature carrying my last key to salvation upon its back. Ario was the only one who could save me.

At the end of a narrow, confined alley, an old building emerged. Its red-tiled roof scarred with deep fissures like wounds carved into the earth's skin. Its weathered walls were buried beneath layers of green and gray moss and algae. The dense, heavy air, thick with dampness, slowly pressed upon each breath.

The air carried a sharp, familiar scent—the bitter, pungent aroma of eucalyptus. Analogous to an old wound still burning, or a forgotten medicine in the drawer of an abandoned hospital. A fragrance at once resinous and cool, at once healing and reopening old scars.

The ancient eucalyptus trees, bent and twisted, rose like decaying pillars from soil and stone, encircling the house in a tight embrace. Their heavy, tangled branches cast a dense, cold shadow over the ground so oppressive it seemed to stifle every movement.

The house was more than a silent structure. It was a living entity, breathing slowly and secretly, born from the depths of time—where the boundaries of years and the distances between places had twisted and vanished.

Ario advanced toward the heavy wooden gate with slow, assured steps. The door opened with a drawn, almost breathless creak. I followed without uttering a single question, though the desire to ask coiled within me—similarly to a flame long extinguished yet still smoldering.

The house's high ceiling, once crowned with magnificent vaults and gilded motifs that gleamed like a diadem upon the structure, was now cracked and collapsed. Dry, withered roots hung from the crevices like exhausted, decaying veins, draping the space in a web of dead life. Red velvet curtains had remained motionless over the windows for years, tattered, dust-covered, and mottled with mold. They resembled mourning banners, lamenting the ruins of long-forgotten days.

When the door closed behind us, darkness surged through the hall like a heavy, silent wave. Only a faint, cold light struggled through the broken, cracked panes—light that seemed to carry messages from forgotten times, yet held no life of its own. A soft, quiet dust drifted through the corridors, like a breath belonging to the house itself; part of an ancient, fragile spirit stubbornly resisting decay.

At the far end of the hall stood a large, ancient mirror. Its golden frame was broken and scratched, its corners cracked, its gilding faded. Yet within this ruin, a trembling, ghostly light lingered, as if a forgotten memory had risen from the depths of darkness, refusing to vanish.

Ario paused before the mirror, his expression calm and resolute. His voice, low and hushed, rippled through the hall like a guiding echo in a deserted house, "I drew the plans of all these rooms myself. No corner of this house is unknown to me...and I know there is a hidden path—an underground passage that leads to the yellow sands of the shore, where I last saw the turtle."

Silence fell in place of words, as though each sentence had lifted a veil from time itself. My body trembled—not from fear, but from confronting something beyond human comprehension, something meant to transform me, perhaps

forever. This place recalled everything to me—memory deeper, wider than the span of a human life. Walls, mirrors, even the dust settled on tables—they each held fragments of me; a hidden bond between myself and this inn. As if the building itself recognized something in us that we had yet to acknowledge.

Everything was familiar and bitter. I had either fled from here or once been exiled to it. In a quiet corner of the hall stood a chair, its red velvet cover faintly glowing even in the dimness, like a dying ember. Its color resembled dried blood on a cold, silent surface. My heart shivered; a memory flared from the depths of the past. A chair I had once sat upon in a timeless, indeterminate moment—the world had turned silently, swallowing me into itself.

Ario stood before the chair. He gazed at the red velvet for long, patient moments. Traced his fingers along its back—not out of curiosity, but as one might caress a sacred relic, with reverence. His eyes held recognition, not the simple regard of a bystander. The chair was alive to him, not merely an object, but a silent, eternal witness to days gone by. He spoke reverently, “Innkeeper Edgar—my grandfather—made this chair for me. For this inn, many years ago... before he passed from this world.”

The name “Edgar” struck my mind like a sudden, weighty blow. My mouth opened, yet no sound came. I knew asking was impossible. The conditions of this journey demanded silent accompaniment of Ario, an absolute quiet in which any question might end the path.

Yet within me, a cold, heavy question rested like a dormant stone: Why was this chair here, in this moss-covered, decayed house? Moments ago, I had been beside Edgar—the chair had been in his workshop. Yet Ario spoke as though years had passed since Edgar’s death. Then where was I now? In what time? In which world? In what dimension?

A familiar metallic scent swirled once again in my nostrils—the same scent that lingered from Edgar’s workshop in my memory. My mouth turned bitter. I wanted to vomit, but there was nothing in my stomach. I could not even remember when I had last eaten. What surfaced was my lost self—the sensation of being swallowed among times. Why had time not dissolved within my blood? Why did some fragments of me remain, afraid to pass?

Yet in that moment, only one thought came: Ario’s pact. His quiet, unassuming companionship, meaningful only in silence. A presence without question, without answer, without doubt. I looked at him—not to ask, not to know, but simply to be. To breathe the assurance that resided in his stillness.

Then he stepped forward. His gaze fell upon a familiar red carpet, worn and dust-laden, spread before a cold, silent fireplace. He bent down, letting his fingers trace the rough yet living weave, and spoke in a soft voice, “I brought this carpet from a land I once set foot in, without any clear reason, from war. A silent, mountainous place, with pale sunlight and narrow rivers whose night-song sounded like prayer. There were girls there who wove carpets—not for bread, not for display. They wove because they had no choice. The thread was their language, the knot their breath. And the patterns in the carpet were memories, to be preserved so it would not fade...”

His fingers slid over the floral lines with meticulous care, as if he were not touching ordinary threads but brushing against the dormant memories still alive deep within—a secret buried, a whisper lost in the darkness of years. Then he looked at me—a gaze distant, enigmatic—and murmured, “In that land, amid the dust of war and the scent of scorched earth, I saw a girl...”

eyes in which something shone, eyes neither of this world nor entirely belonging to it. Eyes just like yours...”

A brief silence stretched between us. Then he returned his gaze to the carpet and continued, “She never spoke to me—not out of cruelty, but because no words were needed. Every day, from behind the clay walls of her house, she would bring me a vessel of water, without saying a word. I would just watch her. For long hours, the way one stands alone before a secret or a dream. Not with the eyes, but with the soul.”

“She would sit beside the loom, hands steady and practiced, knotting—knot upon knot—with such patience and precision that each knot was a cry in the silence. A cry of life, of suffering, of the unnamed courage of silent women whose voices are heard only in the shapes of flowers and vines. Her voice emerged from the darkness—not in words, but in the rhythm of her hands, in the twists of thread, in the breathing of the carpet.”

He paused, closing his eyes as though the sound of those threads still echoed in his ears. Then, softly explained, “On the last day, at the hour when everything hung between leaving and staying, she brought this carpet to me—without a word. Just as she had brought water every day, unassuming, expectant of nothing. She looked at me for a moment, yet deeper than any farewell spoken with words.”

“I brought nothing else from that land—no coin, no keepsake, no proof of my being—except this carpet. And it is more than just colored threads. It carries a weight; a weight of yarn, soil, and memory, woven from suffering and endurance. The hands of that woman still breathed within its fibers. I have no name for her, no face to remember—but her presence, silent yet overflowing, still flows through every corner of this house.

Like an old perfume, a forgotten melody, a prayer never spoken but repeated each night in the heart of darkness.”

As Ario rose slowly, with a movement careful and reverent, as if stepping upon a sacred tomb, he murmured, “Truthfully... this is not just a carpet. It is the voice of a woman the world has heard, without her ever speaking. A keepsake from silent hands yet brimming with life.”

And I—this carpet I had seen before Ario; I had touched it, another time, in that cursed hotel. Perhaps I had even woven it myself, in my homeland, in that distant mountain. Without a word, I simply nodded, as the world throbbed within me like a tangled skein of threads.

Silence became our unbreakable bond. He opened paths through silence, and I accompanied him in the calm of it. Questions lodged in my throat—heavy and alive, like a memory without language, yet flowing in our breath at every moment.

A worn, rusted lamp, its globe cracked and fragile, hung gently from the high ceiling of the hall. In a silence that seemed breathless, it rotated slowly, untouched by any hand—as if a hidden, colorless, soundless breeze, or a trembling memory from long ago, set it in motion. The soft rasp of chains echoed like the scattered breathing of the sleepy through the empty, cold hall.

The air was thick with the smell of the sea: bitter and sharp, layered with decaying seaweed carrying the scent of death, with the taste of damp salt on old wood and a briny memory that rippled through the air. Dull, dust-covered glasses sat motionless on the tables. Their cracked rims like dry, broken lips, their bottoms filled with deposits that barely recalled a distant memory. On a table against the wall, white chipped plates lay cold and lifeless, stacked with frozen precision.

Among them, silver spoons and forks, their heads gleaming through yellowed, wrinkled napkins, as though metal bones had risen from the ashes of time.

At the end of the hall, blue-tiled stairs yawned open into a small kitchen, with half-open cabinets and a misted window. A scene of an unspoken feast abandoned—or a forsaken nightmare still breathing in the dark corners of the inn.

We descended those slippery, algae-covered stairs; each step felt like a gentle fall into the depths of forgetfulness, the cold dampness pressing against my bare feet. A drop of water fell from the ceiling. Its chill, like a sudden sting, penetrated to the core of my spine. Each step produced a muffled, intricate sound from trickling water and hidden whispers within the walls—sounds that seemed to rise from the very depths of darkness.

In the corner of the basement, behind shadow-draped arches and shelves layered with ancient dust, Ario let his hand glide gently along the wall; his fingertips traced a narrow line across the cold stone, as though the wall itself had exhaled a hidden breath in that very moment. His hand paused, slid again, until suddenly it struck something hard and concealed. Beneath a veil of dry earth, a small, rusted handle surfaced—a piece of metal that seemed to have remained silent and motionless for decades.

Ario brushed away the clinging dust with his palm. The handle glimmered faintly in the basement's dim light, like a damp bone. He turned it slowly. From deep within the wood, a muted, faded sound rose—a sound like a forgotten complaint returning to the world after years of imprisonment. The door quivered lightly and opened a thin crack. From within, the old scent of dampness and air trapped over long years slipped

outward. A spiral staircase coated with algae ascended into the darkness, as if a passage had opened toward a forgotten place, somewhere outside the reach of time.

Ario said, “Come... there’s still something you must see. A hidden path to the highest point of the hotel; a place known only to you and me.”

With slow, measured steps, we climbed the spiral stairs. The cracked turquoise tiles were cold and slick beneath my bare feet; the scent of dampness and algae curled around my ankles like a thin mist. The heavy silence broke only with our breaths and the faint creak of the aged wooden railing. The higher we climbed, the narrower and steeper the steps became; a subtle tremor ran beneath my feet, my heartbeat echoed within my ears, and the cold in the air stung my sides like invisible needles.

Ario pushed the small rooftop door with his shoulder and opened it softly. A gust of damp air and the smell of wet metal rushed out. Suddenly, a red light spilled across the rooftop tiles, and the roof before us unfolded like a page from another world. The rain-soaked, mossy tiles glimmered with a cold sheen, like the scales of a fish. With each step, the muffled crunch of worn clay and the sliding hiss of moisture whispered through the air.

Seagulls, their wings wet and feathers ruffled, burst upward from the roof’s edge in fright. Their sharp cries twisted in the wind, and the taste of salt settled on my lips. The sudden gust lifted my collar and carried with it the scent of algae, rain, and something like a lost memory. The mingling of height, light, and sound sent a wave of vertigo rippling through my chest.

Ario took my hand. His eyes shone—alive, bright, full. Something stirred in their depths; a light of discovery, of wonder—the very same light I had once seen in Edgar’s eyes, a light that pointed toward a distant and unseen world. He

leaned over the edge of the roof like the guardian of a forgotten fortress and said, “Come look... the whole city lies beneath your feet.”

A tremor passed through me. He asked, “Are you afraid of heights?”

But my fear was not of heights. In that moment, all I could see was his face—radiant, alive—bathed in a light that seemed to exist outside of time; and his gaze... that gaze so utterly like Edgar’s.

Ario took my hand again. We stood beside the small rooftop door. The city spread out below us; a moment in which even time seemed to hold its breath. The wind, the rain, and the scent of algae intertwined, and a deep silence enveloped us. For a few brief breaths, we simply stood there—two shadows suspended between earth and sky—a moment in which time had shed its skin and watched us, motionless.

Ario closed the rooftop door gently, with the care of someone sealing not just a door for us, but for another world as well—a world that, if opened again, might cast us into another moment entirely. The sound of the door’s closing trembled through the damp silence like an unfinished wave.

Then we descended the stairs again—back to the same basement from which we had come. The shadows stretched, the faint light on the walls shifted, and the smell of dampness and algae now carried the color of a “passageway,” as though some part of us had remained above, or some quiet part of that rooftop had descended with us.

I could still feel it—somewhere behind us—the stubborn, lingering wind of the rooftop, following us softly and insistently.

Ario whispered, his voice low and trembling, as if afraid of being heard: “From this basement...there is a path...to

that shore. The place we must reach, and only I know of this hidden way.”

Carrying ... Carrying the last breath off the rooftop down into the darkness, we moved through the narrowing corridor until finally we arrived at its end, where a rusted, decayed metal door, half-sunken into the damp wall, stared at us. Yellow sands, assimilating a sedimented memory, had crept through its cracks, scattered across the cold, soft floor.

Ario stepped forward, placing his hand on the cold, rough metal. Without looking at me, he whispered a prayer, “Tonight, the fourteenth night of the month...the waters will rise...and bring the turtle with them.”

He paused. His fingers traced the rust, producing a soft, husky sound that became a mysterious murmur. Then, with a tone threaded with both secrecy and expectation, he added: “May it emerge from the water tonight...”

A strange sensation overtook me, as though I had stepped into a place beyond existence; beyond path, beyond sign, beyond even the memory of return. Around me, silence pressed so heavily that it felt as though the world extended only this far—and beyond, an endless stillness waited.

I whispered to myself, *“This must be the end...the end of my liberation. From here on, there is no return from past or present. Every step I take is a step into the unknown, into something from which no one comes back...”*

## Crossing the Darkness

*“Into new light and awakened perception.”*

I held my breath deeply, as if that instant, lost somewhere in the pulse of time, had lodged itself in a fissure between now and forever, suspended and motionless. Here—right here—was the point where everything began. Not merely a journey into dreams or memories swallowed by darkness, but the first shore, the threshold that embraced me and would carry me back to the world I had come from.

The air I breathed carried the damp scent of the shore and the eucalyptus trees. A cold, gentle breeze swept across the blue waves, threading through my hair by an invisible, ancient hand—familiar yet distant—seeking to awaken something hidden behind the veil of memory. My spine shivered in response to this touch of wind and water. A subtle, enigmatic tremor that seemed to have traveled from the depths of time itself.

Ario stood beside me, silent and wordless. Yet his silence was far from empty—it was laden with meaning, a profound interpretation of old wounds and unspoken sorrows. An

understanding only those know who have rebuilt themselves amidst the ruins of the past. My steps faltered for a moment, perhaps from stifled excitement, perhaps from a nameless fear rising from an unknown corner.

I took Ario's hands—not from fear, but from the longing to cross. His palms locked with mine, and the quiet warmth of his touch flowed through me like a soundless current. A feeling as though a hand from the shadows of dreams and distant memories, after years, had reached back to me. My hands settled in his, and for the first time, that world—so utterly unfamiliar—became just a little bearable.

Our gazes intertwined, brief yet unyielding. In Ario's eyes, I glimpsed what only mirrors hold—not a definite answer, not an unanswerable question, but a silent echo of a vague feeling yet unnamed within the depths of my soul. There was no pity, no compassion, no resignation in that look. Only a presence, pure and unadorned, comes not to stay or accompany, but to save me.

Ario's head bent close to my ear, so near that the warmth of his breath brushed my cheek. His soft, low voice drifted into me like a leisurely breeze, halting the world for a moment, "You will be safe here with me, in the heart of these passages..."

His voice, gentle as the wind passing over a childhood shore, carried a hidden secret only the familiar could sense. My mouth opened, yet no words fell. What could I say to a feeling that spoke on its own, without language? I simply nodded, understanding without speech.

In that instant, all doubt dissolved. I realized this journey was not merely a return, but a confrontation with forgotten corners of myself. Hidden fragments behind cold mirrors, behind the red velvet chair that now existed only as a memory, fading in the ashes of time.

We seated ourselves on the broken trunk of a tree washed ashore. Our breaths drew near, and in the sharp chill of dusk, their warmth stretched between us like a living thread. Subtle yet unbreakable, each pulse felt through the skin without doubt or word. His fingers wrapped gently yet firmly around my wrist. In his clear gaze flowed a current of something ancient and silent—a secret shared in darkness for years, needing neither name nor recounting. The sunset light trembled through thin clouds, cold and faint, reflecting on his pale skin and hair.

Time, once again, curved around us silently, not to pass but to swallow us whole. As we were meant to dissolve into the moment. Perhaps forever apart. Ario whispered, “Tonight, we must remain here...when darkness falls, it will come...the Turtle...” His voice, soft and toneless, rang faintly across the wide shore, stirring a subtle vibration deep within me. The cold, damp sands beneath my feet seemed to swallow the whisper, and with a quiet rustle—like sleepers awakening—they began to shift.

Yet at that very moment, an unusual pressure settled in my chest. It was not only anticipation for a legendary creature but an unfamiliar, faceless presence, ancient and dark, pulsing ceaselessly from the depths of the cold coastal air. An unseen being that breathed quietly in the darkness.

Ario gathered driftwood and lit a fire. I sat beside its flickering flames, waiting for the creature. I drew the damp, sharp air into my lungs—the scent of the wet shore, of rotten wood long soaked by rain, and of damp ash, smelling faintly of buried memory or hidden corpses. Darkness, heavy and alive, expanded around us like deep, hidden breaths.

I looked at Ario. His eyes—silent mirrors of sleepless nights—reflected a cold, alien light under the trembling

moon. In that gaze, a subtle shiver pulsed, not of fear, but from contact with a deep, invisible truth. A presence that penetrated the unseen layers of existence without words. I knew he, too, felt the approach of the creeping, formless being.

A soft, quivering whisper escaped my lips, as if rising unbidden from the depths of my being, “This place...all of it seems like a mask, a veil hiding another truth. Behind it, something lies—something visible even in the darkest hour.”

Ario did not answer. The flames flickered, casting shadows across his features, fragmenting them, absorbing him into darkness. His gaze became opaque. His silence is strange, heavy, unfamiliar. For a moment, he was no longer who I knew, or perhaps he teetered on the brink of becoming something long buried within him, never allowed to surface.

Finally, in a broken, hesitant voice, as if each word were drawn from the heart of silence, he said: “The path you’ve stepped upon...may take you somewhere...yet perhaps you can return. Perhaps another meeting lies ahead...”

His words fell like stones into water—no waves roused in my soul, no turbulence stirred, only a quiet weight settled deep in me. I took a hesitant step closer and held his gaze—eyes like a dusty mirror of years’ silence, guarding a hidden secret. With a soft, almost wordless plea, I spoke: “This spell...tonight, it will break.”

Ario murmured, words trembling and obscure—perhaps a forgotten incantation, perhaps a long-held confession now daring to surface at the edge of night. A gentle, cold breeze brushed past, coaxing the flames to dance, their shadows flickering restlessly over gray sands, breathing life into the night.

Then, the presence of the creature shattered the silence. Its footsteps were firm, deliberate, rustling over the yellow sands. Its eyes shone in the dark, twin distant stars scattering a cold, vital light.

Ario said softly, “To undo the spell...you must release all that you hold dear.”

His words, a silent enchantment, filled the space, sinking into my bones—not as heard speech, but as the vibration of truth resonating in my soul. His gaze held a light unshaken by doubt. Time seemed to pause, a world bending before this singular truth.

I knew this path was irreversible, nameless, endless. Only crossing this unknown threshold could open a new way. There was no choice, only an innate response, unquestioned and unhesitant.

Slowly, I removed the jewels adorning my neck, ears, hands, and feet. Each piece carried away a fragment of the past. Fragments of entangled memories, obscure attachments, dreams whose time had passed. Ario reached silently toward me, hands offering warmth without demand or judgment—only acceptance and quiet. I placed the jewelry in his palms. They belonged neither to him nor to me. That night, I had worn them for someone waiting at the hotel—a gaze never met.

A profound sorrow rose within me, mingled with the muted joy of reunion, the feeling that the bitter spell might finally break. Tears welled in my eyes, but I turned my face to hide them. Ario, without questioning, read my gaze. He understood the meaning of the jewels, sensing my memories within. With quiet care, he pressed them into his hands, keeping his eyes upon mine.

I slowly removed my clothes. The night's chill fell gently on my skin, pure and transparent, resembling a thin thread weaving silently through space. Ario turned away, his voice trembling between compassion and certainty: "I will keep your clothes and jewels... I do not know when, but perhaps one day we will meet again..."

I could not ask how, where, or when. The condition was silence—and it was enough.

A heavy phenomenon of silence fell between us. The familiar hush of crossing, when worlds intertwine and time halts. Cold, silver light spilled through cracks in ancient rocks. Naked and weightless, I stood at the cliff's edge—irreverably exposed. Every garment shed revealed a veiled truth, bare and unshielded, visible only in this timeless moment.

I was a blank canvas, vast and unmarked, adorned solely with the raw hue of truth I had never touched. My nakedness extended beyond skin—rooted in the depths of my soul, unmasked before a light casting no shadow.

All desires, fears, old bindings, memories, shattered and scattered like yellowed leaves torn from autumn branches. What remained was me—simple, unmediated, standing at the threshold of passage into realms I had never believed existed.

And then, everything ruptured. Released from all I clung to, I was ready for a nameless, unseen crossing—a journey born of silence and nakedness, leading to a place where the past no longer existed.

Ario, wordlessly stepped back, eyes stretching toward the calm vast horizon. Beneath the trembling moonlight, his face carried a deep serenity and an ancient grief. The kind that etched only in those who have borne burdens beyond words, the weight of silent, enduring suffering.

I stood still—light, unbound, unsupported. Amid shedding the past, only that charged silence between us held me, the same sense I had glimpsed when he pressed the jewels in his hands. Not possession, but the keeping of a forgotten memory, alive for itself.

I fixed my gaze on him. A shiver ran through me—not love, not fear, but something between memory and premonition. An unfamiliar feeling returned from a distant time. It had come to take my hand and lead me to an untraveled place.

Ario stepped forward, glance brief yet loaded—not in affirmation, but in accompaniment. Wordless, he took my hand, and together we approached the Turtle. In that half-light, amidst dying flames and murmuring waves, I felt my ties to the former world loosen. Each breath drew them farther, slipping slowly from grasp into the horizon.

As my foot rested on the Turtle's cold, slick shell, a strange sensation rose from within me—as though passing through the layers of the earth. A distant, muted call emanated from the shell, from beneath the water, from the veins of time. Its surface was cold yet alive, breathing softly, steadily, a pulse heard only in silence.

I raised my head to the vast sky opened above, thin clouds dancing like veils between two worlds. A light, cold mist from the water swirled around me, carrying the scent of the sea and decayed seaweed. Ario stood a few steps behind, silent and solemn, a shadow paying respect to stillness.

I lifted my hands, closed my eyes, and breathed. An eastern breeze brought the sea's scent, damp seaweed, and an older, more distant aroma—reviving forgotten memories. Water reached the shell, a soft wave full of presence and meaning. I submerged my hands, face, chest, legs, and damp hair, washing them slowly.

The cleansing had begun—a baptism of purity, of silent rebirth. Each drop dripping from my body onto the ancient shell stirred something within—a return to the sea, to the source. Everything I had been, surrendered itself quietly to the water.

Moonlight danced upon my skin, each droplet scattering a spell of silence through the air. The Turtle remained still, yet its presence was profound, tethering me to this moment and this shore. Ario's footsteps echoed behind, then faded, leaving a tender warmth lingering in the air, as if life itself flowed unseen.

The ritual was only the beginning—a doorway to an unfamiliar land. Nameless, pastless, I crossed it. Silver moonlight leapt from the water, time paused. The world held its breath, watching me upon the ancient creature's back.

My body, in contact with the water, transformed—soft and translucent, like marble in deep slumber. I poured water over my shoulders. The scent of sea, earth, and age seeped into me. An inner voice whispered: *“This water is not mere cleansing; it carries the memory of the Earth passing through you.”*

I closed my eyes. Fleeting images danced—childhood in the rain, a woman gazing in a mirror, a trembling hand, an infant who knew me. Sounds I had never heard, yet recognized, whispered in my ear.

I laid my hand on the shell; a gentle rhythm pulsed, like a forgotten heartbeat, or drums long silent. The Turtle carried secrets that were part of me.

Ario had withdrawn along the shore, a ghost among moisture and shadow. His calm yet sorrowful gaze lingered in my mind. He raised a hand from afar—I could not tell if in farewell or blessing. Gradually, he vanished into the cool

sea. The last drop from my skin fell, and something within me broke—not from pain, but from release.

A voice arose from the depths within, *“You have returned, but you are no longer the same. You must choose—to remain or to go.”*

The full moon hung still and silent, a quiet witness. The world shifted. The sky tore like worn fabric, its colors blending—blue to gray, gray to violet, then into absolute blackness, devouring the eye. The ground trembled beneath me, slow, like the breathing of a hidden, immense being. A distant, unknown bird called, then fell silent. Trees, absent moments before, sprang around me—bare, damp, leaning as if they had waited centuries. The bitter scent of rotting wood and crushed leaves filled the air. Yet I no longer saw the shore.

The droplets on my naked skin were no longer cold. They were warm, heavy, like tears from a distant world. My hands remained raised, but time had frozen, even the wind felt softened—the touch of a distant memory brushing through the body of existence.

The air had changed. The scent of the sea deepened. A damp breeze caressed my face. The clothes and jewelry I had entrusted to Ario returned to me, though my feet remained bare. The wet sand beneath my steps throbbed softly; the rhythm of waves resonated, like a heartbeat of a lost past in my ear.

I looked to the horizon. A mist rose, moving toward me. Neither flame, nor Ario, nor the ash, nor the ancient Turtle—only I remained in a space filled with words still unspoken, hanging in the air, waiting to be heard.

## Chapter 9

# Return to the Beginning

*“The intertwining of past, present, and future”*

With my long blue dress drenched and heavy, I ran across the far side of that shore, its sands gleaming gold. My breathing came fast and shallow, as if my lungs hadn't yet understood that I was no longer underwater. My body trembled, not just from the cold, but from that invisible shock that had sunk into my core. I felt like a corpse once drowned in the sea, left drifting for ages in its salted depths, only to be spit out suddenly, without warning or reason—indifferently, thoughtlessly, as if the sea had grown tired of carrying the weight. But I wasn't sure... Was I alive? Or a dead thing that hadn't yet realized it was supposed to return? Perhaps what now lay sprawled on the sand was nothing more than a lifeless shell, heavy with wet memories, and the one who had remained behind in the water—that was the true me.

The beach beneath my feet felt hard and unfamiliar. The sand was like the skin of someone you once loved—familiar yet estranged. My skirt clung to my legs like an old burden I no longer wanted but couldn't let go of. Breathing hurt, as

each inhale had to force life out from somewhere distant and unseen.

I looked back to where I had come from—the sea's surface seemed calm, far too calm for what had just wrestled in me. There were no waves bearing the marks of a struggle, as if it didn't remember me at all. Maybe the sea hadn't rejected me; maybe I was the one who could no longer stay.

Then I saw the familiar building of the hotel, leaning slightly toward the shore. I recognized it by the red brick roof—a roof that, in my memory, held the scent of the sea and the long, suffocating hours of waiting. That façade, with its tall windows and old white frames, appeared through the mist and twilight like a familiar face. A silent memory still waiting for my return.

Without thinking any further, I ran. My feet were heavy with salt and sand, my skirt clinging to my calves, it felt as if some unseen force was pushing me from within. Afraid someone might see me in this state—barefoot with drenched clothes and hair plastered to my forehead—I didn't dare enter through the main door. A quiet shame surged through me, not just because of my disheveled appearance, but from that deeper sense of exposure, of defenselessness under the gaze of others. It was as if, should someone meet my eyes, everything I had been through would be laid bare—naked, unguarded, without veil or shield.

I circled around the building and slipped in through the back entrance of the hotel—the one that opened into its old, damp kitchen. The air still carried the scent of fried onions and toasted bread, mingled with the greasy tang of metal and the tired steam of unwashed dishes. The kitchen floor was cold and slick, but to me, it felt like sacred ground—safe and unquestioning.

I stood there for a while, pressed against the wall, hidden in the half-dark, gasping for breath. No one saw me at that moment. From somewhere farther off came the clink of a spoon against a plate, and the faint voice of a radio, left drifting on an old frequency.

Maybe it was just me—a soaked, disoriented woman with bare feet, and memories still surfacing from the water.

I took refuge in the kitchen's small, dim bathroom. The one with white tiles fine-lined with cracks. And a fogged, aged mirror that showed a blurred, trembling reflection of me—like a memory that had forgotten itself.

My hair—tangled and knotted, wet and clinging to my neck—fell messily over my shoulders. With cold, restless fingers, I clawed through it, loosening a few knots, trying to restore some trace of order or control, though it was mostly in vain. The grains of sand lodged between fabric, skin, and strands of hair began to fall, one by one, with each hurried motion. Each grain felt like a memory clinging to my body, now releasing itself—reluctantly.

My face was pale and dazed, as if something within me hadn't yet made it out of the water. I splashed a handful of cold water on my cheeks—not to cleanse, but to wake myself, to be sure I was still here. Droplets trickled down from my chin and disappeared into the hollow of my neck.

I took a deep breath and opened the door without a sound. I passed through the narrow hallway, thick with the lingering smell of food, and headed toward the spiral stone staircase that led from the kitchen to the main part of the hotel. My feet were still bare and cold, but it felt as though my presence in this place had finally begun to make sense. Each step gave off a faint, hollow sound, like whispers rising from the ground

below. I ran my hand along the iron railing, slick with moisture still clinging to it from the air.

I climbed the stairs slowly, my heart still suspended somewhere between the beach and the room. I reached the glazed, flickering floor of the hotel—the one where light poured through the tall windows, scattering golden and blue stains across the stone floor, while silence settled like a soft mist in the corners of the space. A place both familiar and strange, like dreams you've had again, but never truly lived.

I looked around the hotel lobby, breathless, as droplets of water still dripped from the ends of my hair onto my neck. Everything was just as it had been that night—that silent dusk, when I was released from one world...or perhaps more truthfully: when I was hurled into another. That strange, nameless moment when the crimson light of the sun fell through the tall windows. Spreading light across the rugs and chairs. The distant sound of a piano drifted in from somewhere unseen as a melody from a forgotten memory.

I didn't know how many times I'd stood in this place. A sense of repetition enveloped through me, like the echo of a familiar taste once dreamed. The first time...I remembered that twilight clearly: when I was waiting for him, sitting on that very chair, with a weary, fogged heart—and then suddenly—without warning or reason—everything around me dissolved. And I, like a shadow, slipped out of time.

That cursed chair...The one that was enchanted. Or maybe I was the one under a spell, and the chair was only a mirror—reflecting something that had already taken root inside me.

The second time, I had moved alongside the ancient Ario, in a nameless, boundless world beyond time, where mountains breathed and springs spoke. Was that world a dream or a reality?

I had been there, barefoot and unclothed, with hands that had been tested in fire and water.

That memory, now, in this empty lobby, burned quietly in my chest like a flame already extinguished—without smoke, without sound.

But now...I no longer knew which world was real and which was the dream.I couldn't tell if this lobby, with its dead yellow light, was the truth—or if it was that mist-drenched mountain, with its visions of past and future. My mind was split in two, and between those two times. A hot current surged through my chest. I felt something spilling inside me—something born of awareness. An awareness of repetition, of an endless cycle of arrival and disappearance.

And the third time...

*(Here, I paused. My breath caught. My throat went dry.)*

The third time might be now. Perhaps this very moment—my return to this lobby once more, with a drenched body, a trembling heart, and a mind layered with time. Maybe this time is the last.

Or maybe, each return is only another layer of that first moment, repeating endlessly, until I—or he—or we—find our way back to something we've forgotten.

It was the same chair in the lobby—with that same familiar curve in its backrest and the leather texture that had, over the years, absorbed the memory of countless hands. There beside the fireplace whose orange flames still danced quietly in the stillness of the room. The hotel was the same, or at least it seemed to be. But the air held something different now—a strange taste, a scent like freshly cut, damp wood, and a warmth that rose from a silent presence seeping through the walls.

The dim ceiling lights slid across the tables and faded rugs in such a way that it felt as if time had closed its eyes, and no one had dared to make it blink. Amid that hush, something could be sensed—not quite a sound, but a kind of vibration in the air, a drawn-out breath of someone unseen, or perhaps the unstable echo of a heartbeat rising from deep within the bones.

I sat down. My legs still bore the weight of all the paths they had walked. And yet the space encircled me so completely. It was as if I had returned to a closed circle, a place where the past had nowhere to go, and the future had nothing left to wait for.

I looked around. Everything was as it should be—the chair, the tall columns, the faint steam rising from the glasses—but something inside me was stirring, shifting. A dream that, when you wake, appears accurate in detail, and yet something in its depth whispers, *This, this is where you belong.*

In the shadows beyond the columns, it seemed someone was standing. No sound. No movement. Only a presence that burned the skin on the back of my neck, like a gaze whose warmth had no cause. I couldn't see them, but their nearness was as real as my own breath.

And then, without warning, a memory bloomed in my mind—Ario. That night. That wordless point in the sea, where the skin of my feet had brushed against the warm, slick shell of the turtle, and time, just for a moment, had forgotten to breathe.

Were those moments real—the salty taste on my lips, the chill of the waves silently devouring the body—or were they just illusions, reflected in the mirror of the mind with closed eyes?

But a quiet voice from somewhere within my mind, whispering through the layers of memory—kept telling me he was still here. Not with eyes, but with his presence. A hidden presence, dwelling in folds of existence untouched by time, yet where everything remains alive.

The image of the black turtle reappeared in my mind—not as a memory from the past, but as a living, silent creature, waiting deep within my gaze. Perhaps even now, in the basement of this hotel, somewhere behind those damp, secretive walls, it lies there quietly—its eyes never fully closed.

Maybe the turtle never left. Maybe it, too, is one of those nameless, formless forces that, with just a single moment of presence, pull back the veil of reality and, without us realizing, carry us from one world into another.

And yet, I still didn't know—this hotel, this dimly lit lobby, this warmth from the fireplace—was this a return, or merely a continuation of the same wandering? Had I truly arrived this time, or had I fallen into yet another loop?

My eyes searched for Ario, involuntarily—among the faces casting brief glances from behind glasses, over phone screens, newspapers, or teacups—only to vanish again. None of them were him. Or perhaps Ario had remained behind... in that other world.

Suddenly, a doubt settled in my mouth, like the taste of metal—bitter, uninvited—a waking from a dream in which everything was calm, yet your heart pounds for no reason. It felt as though something cracked inside me—not just memory, but *me*. As if the boundary between being and not being, between seeing and feeling, had thinned to the finest possible thread. Just one moment, one breath, was enough for me to slip under

again—not downward, but inward, to a place within myself where other worlds were silently waiting.

In those slow heavy moments, in a silence that had settled like damp vapor on the empty walls of the hotel and seeped beneath my skin. I sat completely still. My breathing rose slowly, heavily—like a swimmer held underwater, waiting for the moment to rise and breathe again.

From the depths of the dark corridor that led to the basement, a shadow emerged as if the realm of darkness had not concealed him, but nurtured him. And now, in a time that was neither night nor day, had returned him once again to the world of light.

The moment I saw him, something stirred within me. Not the heart, not the mind—but an ancient, nameless layer buried deeper than memory. Like a breeze lifting the dust-heavy curtain of an abandoned room. Allowing a faint but honest light to cast a forgotten image upon the walls of the soul.

At that moment, I knew I recognized him—not by name or face, but by a kind of presence. A presence that lingered like a vague taste in the throat. Familiar, yet beyond recall. I no longer trusted my recollections. It was as if my senses had been trying for ages to bring something to the surface of my awareness without success. All my perceptions had collided in a silent struggle, dragging me into a nameless vortex. And yet, one thing I knew for certain, whatever I was feeling was real—though it had no name, no logic, no place in time.

He stood there in profile, his shoulders damp, his hair shimmering faintly with moisture—not fully wet, not quite dry, but suspended in between, simulating the moment just after stepping out of a warm bath.

Trickles of dampness had gently slid along the strands of his hair, and with him rose the faint scent of cold earth—a quiet, living smell. A scent of a book drawn from an old wooden chest after years in darkness.

But what rooted me to the spot were his eyes. Two still hollows, free of anxiety, yet carrying a light that belonged neither to this brightness nor to the darkness below. They held a glow reminiscent of a familiar radiance, a reflection from a distant place, from another world, where language crumbles and only presence remains. In that gaze, there was something of return—not to a place, but to a moment that had never quite ended, yet no longer truly began.

And at that silent encounter, I felt the boundaries—between him and me, between now and that other time—dissolving gently, like breath fading on a pane of glass.

He seemed so calm, so natural, as if he had been on his way for centuries just to arrive at this very moment—right now, right here, to meet me. Or perhaps it had only been a single second, a stretched-out aimless second suspended in the heart of time, and now, in the wet, dim stillness, he stood before me.

His steps were unhurried, effortless—not like someone returning from a journey, but one emerging from within something—from a depth without name, without direction, without sign. A place no map could reach, yet the heart, if quiet enough, would know.

As he drew closer, a faint smile played on his lips—a smile that came from somewhere distant, somewhere warm yet long forgotten. His voice floated into the space, like steam rising from a still-warm cup, “Where were you? When did you get

here? You're late...This city, it's always like this—rainy, damp, full of fog...I've been waiting for two hours. The rain hasn't stopped...It's still falling, gently, like always."

He lifted his hand, slowly, without haste, and ran his fingers over his rain-drenched face. The moisture clung to his fingertips. Then, in a soft and passing tone, he said, "Let me see—did you stay dry?"

His voice slipped through the air like a delicate wave brushing against the shore, erasing the footprints left before, without violence, without warning.

The scent of salt and moss lingered, fine and constant, blending with the smell of old dock wood and the invisible mist of rain rising from the stones. Droplets still dripped from his hair—sometimes suddenly, sometimes with a pause—leaving faint trails across the curve of his cheek that caught the light just so. His eyes shone from something in between wakefulness and a dream that still doesn't dare to end.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't recognize him.

He tilted his head slightly, took a deep breath, and said, "Well...while I was waiting for you, I went down to the shore..."

He paused for a few seconds. Then he fixed his gaze into mine, his smile tilting ever so slightly, and added, "By the way...did you know the hotel you picked has a little door in the basement? A door that leads straight to the beach?"

There was something in his voice—something that carried the thrill of a secret, but a lighthearted, childlike kind. The thrill of someone who's found the key to an old chest, yet isn't ready to reveal everything at once—only hints, in hopes you'll follow the trail yourself.

I searched my mind, like a hand groping through darkness for something it can't name, but I couldn't remember his name. I didn't know *who* he was—but I knew him deeply.. As if that name, that combination of sounds that should have been his name, had never existed in my language.

And still—I knew him. Not through memory, but through a vague pulse somewhere in my chest, a place where logic is silent and only the soul breathes. The way one remembers a land they've never walked, stirred by a mysterious feeling like the taste of rain on dry lips—with a longing that needs no explanation, and a sorrow without a name, yet felt as a weight lodged in the throat.

Then—a sound broke through. Suddenly. The sharp crash of a glass cup shattering on the stone floor of the hotel. A voice behind me—the hotel clerk, “Mr. Ario! Here you are—two keycards for room seven.”

I turned. I saw him. It was him—not someone who resembled him, not someone close to the image in my mind—*him*. The very man I had been waiting for in that dim hotel lobby, just before I was flung into another world, before the red chair had opened a passage into the unknown. He was the one I had intended, that night, to end everything with—or to ask him, once and for all, to stay forever...or go forever.

But I hadn't known that he had been with me—even in that other realm—walking beside me without realizing it, without even the faintest awareness that I had become his fellow traveler. And still, I struggled to place his name, for in that world, *Ario* had sounded like something new to me. And yet, *Ario* was the same—*the same one I had known before*. It was I who had forgotten his name—in that world, and now again

in this one. It was all part of a strange and wondrous game that my memory had played on me. Or perhaps it was the world itself that had carried me from one dimension to another, placing him—*that same man*—in my path again, unchanged in essence though cloaked in a different face, carrying the same name, appearing silently along the way. Someone who had journeyed with me through that mapless land, on that voyage beyond time—without me ever knowing, without me even remembering his name.

He was the same young Ario who had flickered like a line of light at the edge of my vision.

He was Edgar—the one who had spoken in the voice of a wise old man, echoing in my ear from across a vast night.

He was the one who arrived with the breath of wind and vanished into the darkness behind my eyelids.

He was the silent guide in the boat.

The one to whom I'd handed my clothes by the fire, without even asking who he was or where he had come from. Without ever asking myself why his presence felt so known, so intimate. As if he had been with me from the beginning of all things, in every form, in every moment I thought I was alone. He had always been there—hidden or revealed, distant or near, always the same. No distance between us, even when unseen. Always seen. Always felt. Always known. Though I could never quite say *how* I knew him, or *why* I trusted him. Why his voice quieted something in me, or why his presence made the endless nights feel somehow safe.

And now, standing just a few steps away, in the air heavy with the damp scent of the hotel's worn carpets, I understood—not with reason, not even with feeling, but with something closer to revelation—that he, in all those faces, across all the

hidden corridors of my conscious and unconscious mind, had always been one and the same: **Ario**.

My mouth parted slightly, but the words—like startled birds—beat against my chest and wouldn't rise through my ribs. The only sound that managed to pass through that breathless labyrinth was a trembling whisper, soft and wavering, something between a murmur and a prayer—like a breeze brushing across the rim of a half-warm cup of tea, awakening in the heart the memory of a past never fully seen.

It brings the unseen to life within the heart...

I said, "You're here... Ario?"

My voice was hoarse, as if it had traveled from far away—through the folds of hours that had never truly passed. The words trembled with a half-life; unsteady, soaked in something invisible, like the condensation on a windowpane at dawn, quietly gathering.

Ario smiled. Not the kind of smile that only lifts the corners of the lips, but a deeper one—beginning in the soft creases beside his eyes and extending gently to the curve of his brows—somewhere between a pause and a memory. His smile had a scent. The faint aroma of half-burnt wood in Edgar's house... The scent of Ario's old military uniform, the one he returned in from the war, still holding the warmth of his body. I could feel it—just like the delicate touch of a warm hand through misted glass, on skin that remembered something forgotten.

His gazelike breeze moving through strands of hair—settled on my face and then, silently, descended into my depths. And with a voice that carried the faint scent of salt, of something returned from a long journey, he said, "I'm glad to see you again..."

Then his eyes—more than eyes, more like a colorless mirror that doesn't reflect but remembers the image—searched me, longer than the moment required, as though looking for something even I had forgotten.

With a voice like someone laughing in their sleep, he asked, “Why did you take off your shoes?”

My gaze slowly dropped—to my feet, to the bare skin that wasn't foreign to the ground. To my toes, where grains of sand clung—not sand that smelled of the sea anymore, but crystalline particles gleaming like timeless gems in the flickering glow of the hearth. And the cold of the stone floor rose through my soles, up to my knees, and into the bottom of my heart.

He asked, “Why is the hem of your dress wet? Did you go to the shore too? Why are you looking at me like that? Why is your face so pale? Are you okay?”

And then—without preamble, without distance, with a motion that was both familiar and jarring—he took my hands in his, and the warmth of his touch was something between the heat that rises from a hearth and the softness of an old fabric that smells like home. It felt as though all the cold that had nested inside me suddenly receded—not with pain, but with wonder, with a kind of inner trembling I had never experienced before.

He spoke, his eyes returning to my face, his voice calm yet resolute, “Your hands are freezing... Come. Let's go over there, by the fireplace. That red chair—I swear it's been waiting for you.”

But my tongue—my tongue had grown heavy. Words clogged in my throat like birds who had long been asleep in a cage, and now that the door was open, no longer remembered how to fly. My voice didn't rise—only breath escaped me,

breath laced with the scent of dampness and memory...*No... no...not that chair... I will never go near it—Not because of its appearance, with its dark wood and bowed velvet, but because of something within it that couldn't be seen, only felt; like a scent trapped in the threads of a garment for years, waking with the lightest breeze. That chair was a gateway—not to another room, but to another time, to the other side of the mirrors where light bends in reverse and time loses itself in the folds of shadow. And I—I still tasted that world on my tongue; its dust was still under my fingernails, its waters scented my hair, and its strange rhythm still echoed in my heartbeat. Even the warmth of Ario's gaze from that place—I could still recall it.*

But my shoes...They were left right there beneath the chair, half-hidden, as if they had concealed themselves so no one would find them—as if some part of me were still sitting there, silent, nameless, barefoot, and perhaps without self—a part that still waited, for return, or for an ending. A silence settled between us—but not the hollow, empty kind. It was a different silence, like the steam that clings to a bathroom mirror after you've just stepped out of the shower, the gentle hiss of fat melting in a small pan, the touch of a palm against a frozen windowpane. A silence full and brimming, a silence you could read with your eyes, taste with the tip of your tongue, feel on your skin with your fingertips; not emptiness, but something rich, made of all that happens between two breaths.

And he said nothing, as if he had known everything about my shoes all along. With a soft, unjudging movement, he bent down, picked them up, placed them in front of my feet. And the warmth of that moment coursed up from my soles to my chest—as if something inside those shoes had been waiting for years for me to return.

When his hand brushed the wet fabric of my shirt, a faint, damp sound rose from it—just as alive as the sound of Ario’s breathing on the shoreline during our final meeting. He said, “Once you’re warm, let’s go downstairs. There’s a small restaurant in this hotel... a dinner for two. Just you and me.” And his voice was like the scent of fresh bread—comforting—but something inside me still wasn’t ready to swallow that calm.

The grains of sand, the same ones I’d brought from the beach, had now settled between my toes, and as if in protest, they tickled my skin out of remembrance—like memories peeking out one by one from behind the curtain of the mind, knocking gently at the walls of memory, whispering, “*We’re still here...*”

And Ario stood before me—motionless, wordless, as though his presence alone held meaning in that moment. He didn’t speak. The air around him, giving the warmth a midnight breeze drifting through an open window in summer, thick with presence—a presence that seemed to carry some magnetic field, one that stirred my mind and silently twisted the threads of my thoughts.

And I... I could only gaze into his eyes—those two silent circles where something turned within them—not my reflection, but a version of myself I had long forgotten.

In his gaze, I saw things I could never name—resembling leaves turning silver under moonlight, like the shadow of a bird skimming across water, it’s gone before you can name it.

I didn’t want to speak—because every word carried the scent of logic, and this moment was far too enchanted to be touched by logic. I didn’t want to shatter the memory of this moment, this nameless perfume suspended in the air, by breaking it with speech.

Ario, to me, was like a book with no pages and no cover—written not in ink, but in a script invisible to the eye—inscribed not on paper, but on skin, on stone, in sound, in soil—somewhere beyond the reach of time.

I knew I had lived with him before I was ever born—before he was born—in another world, a world of unfamiliar colors, different scents, and a time that bears no meaning here. I knew him—in a sunlight that has never touched this land, in a language now forgotten, in a silence so deep its echo still resounds in my ears.

And without a single question, I walked with him. Not out of trust, nor out of fear, but like someone bound by a promise made in a distant layer of dreams—somewhere between the fever of childhood and the darkness before birth—a silent promise whose time had now come in this uncertain moment.

My feet moved on their own, without asking permission. As if tracing a forgotten memory etched into every fiber of my body. The hotel hall breathed, dimly lit and quiet, its air heavy with the scent of ash and damp wood.

The flickering fireplace light danced on the faded walls in amber-yellow strands. The shadows of the flames slid across the ceiling, touching the corners of the room with a warm yet fleeting glow. The smell of half-burned wood mingled softly with the sweet trace of moist earth.

The gentle crackling of the fire whispered like an ancient murmur in my ear—not a sound exactly, but the presence of one—like the breath of someone behind me.

Our footsteps fell steady and calm on the cold, polished stone floor of the hall. Each step a soft pulse on the clock within me—a clock whose hands did not mark minutes or hours, but measured distance in the heartbeat of presence. Not calendar

time, nor paper days and nights—but a time of the body, of the skin, a time that flows only in the company of those who have transcended themselves.

We passed through a narrow corridor. The walls gleamed beneath the flickering amber lamps—not like stone or plaster, but like human skin kindled by candlelight.

The air in the corridor smelled of life in fragments, here and there. Somewhere the scent of lime peel lingered, a few steps ahead the smell of fresh bread, and then a faint fragrance, of a withered flower still dreaming of blossoms in its memory.

I felt that if I brushed my fingertip against the wall, I would feel warmth—from the things that had once passed this way.

Sounds rose from the depths of the building—a soft, ancient melody, a forgotten song emerging from an old chest in a dark, dust-filled corner. It could neither be spoken nor banished from the mind; it simply rested in the ear, like a source-less memory.

And then, at the end of the corridor, damp stone stairs appeared, leading downward...The very same stairs I had descended in that purposeless world, in a maple's realm, alongside another Ario—an ancient Ario.

A sense of repetition stirred within me—not repetition in time, but in the body. My feet knew those stairs, even if my mind recalled nothing.

At the bottom of the steps stood a wooden door, with a bronze handle whose surface resembled the weathered skin of an old man, marked by patches of light and dark. Fingerprints remained on the door—traces of time, scratches from years no longer recorded in any calendar.

Ario raised his hand and opened the door—slowly, without a sound, without hesitation. A scent drifted from beyond—an

indistinct aroma, neither of food, nor earth, nor rain; yet somehow containing all of them, without belonging to any.

The restaurant lay deep within the hotel's basement, like a warm hollow in the heart of the night. But this time it was alive—bathed in soft lights and gentle shadows that danced quietly on the walls, like a refuge for lost memories, a sanctuary within parallel worlds.

The tables were small and scattered, each enclosed within a circle of candlelight; and the flickering flames, with their subtle, restless movements, seemed to murmur silent whispers into the space.

The air was familiar—a blend of freshly ground cinnamon, aged pomegranate wine, and damp wood that seemed to have breathed humid air for years. These scents did not merely fill the room; they settled on the skin, nestled in the nostrils, awakening a faintly bitter taste of memory on my tongue.

Ario, with slow steps, chose a small table in the corner of the hall—a place where a window opened onto the silent shore, a beach whose outlines were barely visible in the dark night; lines of golden, shifting sand.

I sat down, silently, without question. The chair beneath me was cold. Its chill passed through the fabric and climbed up my back. My hands still rested in his giving a living warmth, feeling of a blanket, a breath, a light radiating from the center of the body.

And in his hands, a calm pulse flowed—as if something were beginning anew...

I looked into his eyes. Within those two eyes, something calm and unhurried was turning—not merely the flickering reflection of candlelight, but traces of distant, forgotten lives, layered experiences we might have passed through a thousand times, each time unknowingly leaving them behind.

That gaze was not of a single night or year; it was the gaze amassed over centuries—a long journey traveled not by footsteps, but by losing and reclaiming.

It felt as if it wasn't Ario who looked at me, but something beyond him, through centuries, staring from within his eyes.

A feeling twisted inside me, as though if I stayed in those eyes a moment longer, I would hear the cold mountain winds, the tolling of bells in an abandoned church, or the rasp of a saw in Edgar's woodworking shop.

I tore my gaze away before those sounds could awaken. My lips trembled—not from fear, nor from cold, but from a familiar pain rising from the depths of the past to the surface.

A salty taste settled on my tongue—not the salt of food, nor real tears, but the taste of a kiss never given a word stuck in the throat, never voiced.

Ario, with that quiet suddenness only timeless beings possess, tilted his head slightly and squeezed my hand a little tighter. His skin grew warm—or perhaps I had grown colder. And in a voice neither loud nor soft, just right, he said, "It doesn't matter where you are... what matters is that you are no longer alone."

And suddenly, the moment you hold your breath and then, without reason, release it, something paused in the air.

The world, with all its complexities, its weary rotations, all its traps and repetitions, stilled for a few seconds. Not a stillness like death, but like an embrace. Time stopped moving—not by force, but because even it understood there was no reason left to run anymore. Time had stopped moving...

In a distant, half-dark corner of the underground restaurant, where dim, yellow lights hung like weary lanterns on cracked, aged walls, long, tangled shadows took shape. I

shifted my gaze from Ario's hands to the hotel guests. The soft, drawn-out sound of someone sipping hot soup floated through the heavy, humid air. A melody rising like a breeze from forgotten memories deep in the darkness, settling gently on skin and bone.

The fisherman sat right there, on a worn wooden chair, its edges bearing years of moisture and dust. He wore the same brimmed leather hat, its brown faded and cracked like old earth under a weak autumn sun. A hat like the cover of an ancient book, holding untold stories of sea, wind, and storm. His tall boots were damp and heavy, as if they carried the tales of thousands of steps on wet, cold cobblestones. Steps without end, softly whispering ancient, invisible murmurs beneath layers of darkness.

Each time he brought the spoon to his lips and slowly inhaled the warm, fragrant steam, a gentle, drawn-out sound echoed like a familiar song in my ears. Sending a melody flowing from behind the veils of time and memory, carrying the scent of lost spices and old recollections. The aroma of fresh rain on warm, dry earth melting into the heat of the soup, touching every particle of air.

Something inside me shattered—I had seen this man before.

At the very moment Ario and I stepped off the boat, he was there in a corner, gathering his fishing net. I wanted to shout, to wake everyone, or to wake myself from the world I had returned from.

The warm scent of fresh food, a heavy blend of half-burned wood, soft, colorless soil, and a faint trace of cheap soap filled the air. The smell suddenly transported me to an old cabin. To Edgar's woodworking shop and the scent of dried leather

suspended in the air, the smell of sawdust and memories left abandoned at the edges of forgetting. That scent, like a gentle breeze, rested on the skin of my hand.

It was as if I were squeezing the very air itself—cool and drawn out. A weight that penetrated deep into my soul, and a moisture that breathed beneath the skin, yet could never be fully captured in words.

My eyes involuntarily slid across the faces around me—men and women wrapped in a halo of time, like images framed in the shattered glass of the past, familiar yet now dressed in modern clothes, their cold, numb hands clutching small, gleaming phones.

They lived in that small restaurant unaware—a life as fleeting as a breeze, fragile and insignificant, yet filled with silences as vast as all memory. None of them knew that I had seen them, or their ancestors, in another world.

Suddenly, my gaze landed on a face—another man speaking on his phone. It was him. The same hooked nose, same small, sharp eyes hidden in the dark corners of my memories, same thin, clenched teeth, as if silently smiling at me through a ghostly hush. His voice—this time trembling and full of fear—repeated strangely in my ear, as if penetrating through the cold, rusty walls of the restaurant straight into my soul hearing, *“Seize him... he is a sorcerer.”*

Those words slipped slowly and vaguely through the restaurant air, like an invisible wave sliding across my skin, spreading dread with every breath I took. An air tinged with dampness and fear, a scent that left a salty taste in my mouth and sent shivers through my skin.

And that man—the living shadow from a world beyond time—was still beside me. The one I had seen before. The one

who, in a boundless and placeless realm, wrapped in a veil of legend and mystery, reminded me of days when past and present intertwined. Days when nothing was as it seemed, and nothing was not as it had always been.

I did not want to unlock the twisted lock of times. That endless game of escape like a snake creeping in the dark, relentlessly advancing, shedding its skin every time you thought you were near it, vanishing behind a curtain of memories and shadows.

No—what was real and tangible to me were Ario's steady, calm breaths—the Ario sitting before me. His eyes glowing with silent light. His lips curled in a half-smile, half born of living warmth, half a shadow cast by distant memories. And a voice that, when it reached my ear, seemed to echo back from behind wet, stone walls of a distant past, woven between the trembling breeze that silently played with the curtains.

But within me, something unspoken and trembling—like an insect trapped between glass walls—struggled to grasp meaning. Ability to connect that vague, indistinct image of Ario abandoned by that distant shore, his feet sunk into soft, wet seaweed, his gaze endlessly fixed on silent horizons, with the man now sitting before me—simple and unadorned, a warm hand, a presence like cracked earth that holds every drop of rain and gently returns it to the soul of the soil.

In a soft, weary voice, as if just roused from a midnight sleep, I asked, "Ario...did any of your ancestors—like your great-great-grandfather—work as a carpenter?"

For a moment, his face remained still, like calm water suddenly stirred by a slow wave rising from its depths. His eyes fixed on the window, where a gentle breeze silently danced with the curtains, and the morning light traced pale colors along the

edges of the glass. Then he bowed his head slightly and said, “I don’t know exactly...but once, long ago, my grandfather, when he was alive, told me that his great-grandfather was a carpenter. He had a small workshop, right here in this city—maybe just around here...His name...was Edgar.”

The name “*Edgar*” fell like a pebble into the still water of my mind, stirring unknown rings of memory. The slow rasp of a saw echoing in the damp air of a workshop. The scent of sawdust soaked by rain. Wounded, dry hands etched deeply with the cracks of Edgar’s skin. Wood that, when touched, quivered under his fingers like the fresh bark of trees.

I asked, “Do you know when this was?”

His gaze drifted back from the window, his voice softened, and the steps of his memory slowed, as if walking down a long corridor deep within time, “Maybe late seventeenth or eighteenth century...I’m not sure exactly—only his name remains clear in my mind. Well, it must have been almost three hundred years ago...”

In that moment, I took his hand—not hesitantly, but with a quiet, hidden eagerness, as if drawn from the depths of a distant century, from a place where time was no longer a straight line.

The warmth of his hand—neither hot enough to burn the skin, nor cold enough to freeze it—was just enough to tell you: this hand is human. But somehow, not just one soul, but many souls flowed within it. A sense of trust and calm ran beneath my skin.

And that scent... that aroma, like a thin thread of time rising from beneath the stairs, clawed at my nostrils. The smell of fresh dough, butter slowly melting on bread, cumin and sesame blooming in the heat of the oven. Suddenly, I found myself elsewhere, not in this cold, damp hotel, but in a room

with mud-plastered walls, where a bent old man—*Edgar*—pulled hot bread from the oven. With Edgar’s hoarse voice, told a story of a distant, dust-covered war to a grandchild—perhaps one of Ario’s ancestors.

A silence spread between two deep breaths, a gap spanning a century.

Again, I asked, “Ario... did one of your ancestors fight in a war? I don’t know where or when, I just wanted to know if anyone in your family was a soldier.”

Ario smiled—a soft, silent smile that danced more in his eyes than on his lips. He said, “Yes... on my mother’s side, I think there was one, a long time ago... maybe the nineteenth century. On my father’s side, there were a few more. They said my name should be Ario; it means guide, guardian, or a bridge between past and present. I don’t know... it’s not just a name, is it?”

He laughed and added, “That’s probably why they named me Ario too—maybe in memory of him. He must have been a good man for his name to live on until now.”

And in that moment, I understood that names are more than words—they are fingerprints on soil that was still wet a thousand years ago. Footsteps in the snow of history’s earliest days, or the echo of a lost melody still resonating in human bones.

I held my breath.

The room was no longer cold, nor warm; it floated suspended between being and not-being.

The only thing I saw was Ario’s face—the same face that had settled in my mind from the very first moment, but now no longer a simple image. It was a mirror reflecting thousands of intertwined faces, a light within which memories danced

like raindrops on freshly cleaned glass. Akin to a camera lens opening and shifting focus, a forgotten subject suddenly shone with a silent grandeur.

Ario was no longer just the man sitting before me—he was a voice coming from the depths of ages, a whisper saying, “*We have always been here. You just arrived late.*”

Ario was the same. The same in distant voice through centuries, in the faint bells of monasteries, in the cold wind twisting through the branches of ancient trees, in the dry, cracked grain of doors opening to other worlds, in the salt of the sea, in the silver dust resting on remote mountains, in the quiet chill of an unnamed, forgotten planet—and now, in the reflection of my eyes. A presence that had left its trace everywhere—not in stone or soil, but as a shiver beneath the skin, in the thin lines of a vague memory not yet entered, but whose footsteps had already been felt.

I hold a warm cup of tea between my fingers. Its gentle heat crawled up my fingertips like a light shining through a narrow crack into a cold cave. I took the first sip; the tea flowed quietly and steadily down my dry forgotten throat, as if awakening from a thousand-year sleep.

My mouth was a mummified body, empty and lifeless. And now this hot drop had awakened not only my thirst but the quietest part of my being.

A gentle moisture spread through my throat, like a tear falling without reason. For a moment I felt a hollow inside me—in my mind, in my chest, perhaps even in my memory—break free from silence.

I glanced briefly at the steam rising above the cup, and in those fading waves, I saw something of life reborn...

I asked softly, “Look... do you know who built this hotel?”

Ario turned his head toward the plastered arch above, his gaze searching slowly through the silent sounds that perhaps, many years ago, had emerged from the walls amid the hammer's blows and the stonecutters' sighs. A moment passed, then with a look caught somewhere between thought and discovery, he said, "No... I don't know. But before you came, I walked the corners of the hall. In one of the paintings—where the hotel's builder was introduced—my family name was inscribed, strangely resembling mine. Of course, these similarities always exist, and there is no reason to assume any connection to me..."

He gave a gentle smile; a smile that held neither sarcasm nor shallow laughter, but a kind of release—just like the smile of that other Ario from that other world, full of freedom from the burden of secrets. A smile that seemed to wear stillness and acceptance. Comparable to someone who has passed through all complexities and now looks at everything without needing an answer.

Then he continued, "Do you still want to dig into my past? But later, you'll have to tell me why your feet were bare when I saw you.?"

"Your memory is sharper than mine. You remember everything in detail, but I... everything slips from my mind quickly."

"Still, tonight I have a strange feeling; an invisible feeling no word can describe. It can only be felt with the skin, with the body, with the heartbeat. You...you have always understood these things better than I have."

He slowly extended his hand, not hurriedly, but with a softness that felt less like a movement and more like an invitation—an invitation to open a door, not in time, but in

the heart. He gently said, “Come. Let the past remain in its sleep. Let the questions remain unanswered. I am very hungry.”

Hand in hand we sat; before me—Edgar, Ario, and the other—Ario’s second face—three yet not separate, all watching me as one presence, one unseen form. It was as if the full weight of three centuries of silence and endurance had gathered in their gaze, and now, right there before me, they joined hands to take mine.

The weary yellow light of the lamps hung like a thin, heated thread from above—not to illuminate, but to embrace all that is invisible—like a memory slipping between the eyelids.

A scent rose from the depths of the kitchen—not merely fresh bread, but something more complex. A mixed aroma of warm dough and crushed cumin, the smell of seeds ground in a stone mortar and now awakened by the fire’s heat. A fragrance that does not linger in the nostrils but hides its trace deep within the unseen layers of the mind, like a scent you feel comes from a past that never was, yet you have always known.

Warm steam rose gently from copper kettles and settled softly on my face—not scorching, but an imagined touch of a hand once loved, now only remembered.

The sound of a knife slicing bread was slow but decisive, spreading through the air with an instinctive rhythm—not sharp, not harsh, but a steady beat of an ancient heart yet unyielding to silence.

In that moment, a taste settled on my tongue—a dual taste, bitter and sweet. Simulating a word never spoken, lingering at the back of the throat and blooming in its own time.

It was neither past nor future—only that moment, opened like warm bread in hands you could not tell whom they belonged to, yet none felt strange.

There, among tables that seemed to have waited centuries for our return, amid sounds softly circling the high ceilings, in light pouring through stained glass onto the floor, I felt the world pause for a moment. Feeling as if a feast had been laid not just for tonight but for an eternal night—one where love needed no words, only presence—a presence to be tasted, smelled, touched, seen, and heard.

Ario's voice was soft and low, yet beneath each tone lay a hidden tremor—an echo that seemed still to resonate deep within his soul. He said, "To be honest...Before you came, without any plan or intent, I came to this kitchen—at first just for a sip of something; a hot tea, or perhaps water, something to refresh the spirit. But then, a deep and unspoken feeling, like an invisible hand, pulled me from within—not from outside, from some unknown place behind the sternum, where sometimes you feel a thin, unseen thread connecting to another world."

With a calm voice, he continued, "Unaware of myself, I suddenly found myself in front of a small, old door that led to the shore."

A thick, heavy silence spread over me like a heavy blanket. Then, in the blink of an eye, I found myself on a beach—not an ordinary beach, nor the image we imagine in our minds, but somewhere else.

The full moon, soft and expansive, like a thin cloth of light, washed and renewed everything; the yellow sands, uniform and radiant, shone as if the extinguished sun hid within each grain, and they trembled, sparkled, alive and awake.

Even the sands were alive—not lifeless, but vibrant and full of hidden melodies.

And then the old turtle appeared before my eyes...His eyes shone in that moment, full of eagerness and a delicate feeling that involuntarily made you believe—that truth is not found only in words, but in the light that ripples within his pupils; a clear and childlike light, the light found in a child's eyes when discovering a small but mysterious treasure buried in damp earth.

When he spoke of those shining sands, of that restless breeze dancing through the air, of that deep and mysterious calm that no familiar language could capture—my mind could no longer follow his words. Not from distraction, but because my gaze had, without will, fixed itself on his lips.

His mouth moved slowly and silently, like a small fish freshly flung from the water, struggling on the shore's sand. He parted his lips not to speak, but to draw another breath—and all I could see was that gentle trembling of his mouth—and no sound reached me anymore.

Yet inside me, a sound stirred—not the kind of sound formed by words upon the ear, but a texture of feeling. A thick, soft layer of warmth carrying the scent of a long-extinguished hearth—not one burning now, but one flickering in a half-lit memory.

That sound was an essence—moist, warm, and rough. Atmosphere like a distant flute's melody winding through misty air, or the faint rustle of a needle's tip on skin, or a drop of dark honey slowly spilling from a spoon's edge onto the tongue.

In that absolute moment of immersion, I felt something akin to that slow, childlike wonder I once experienced when I held a large seashell to my ear—not to hear a specific word, but to catch the trace of a lost sound from the world, a sound that

did not come from outside, but from the deepest layers of the shell itself.

Now, looking at his mouth, I felt something from the farthest point of existence approaching me—without being spoken—an invisible voice...the voice of the world...a sound beyond time, rising from within his mouth.

Perhaps it was only in that very moment that I realized all I had ever remembered of life were but footprints—scattered signs hidden in the faint glow of a dim light shining through a dampened window. The peculiar scent of the dry, uneven skin of a book I had never turned the pages of. In the cold, rough touch of the iron railing on stairs I had always thought I'd only dreamed of. In a salty taste that had inexplicably settled on my lips. Life memories fragmented, shadowy pieces that slowly, quietly prepared me to understand something greater. Something now revealed not through words, but through his presence, through his being, through the warmth of his breath that gently slid across my skin.

My entire being began to pulse—not with sudden anxiety, but with a soft and profound awakening. A feeling that gradually crept up from within me like an invisible hand. A distant but real trace of warmth, like a caress that once passed over your skin and left its imprint behind. The moonlight, pouring from a faraway window onto worn, faded wooden floors, found new meaning—it was no longer a cold and distant light, but a soft and hidden whisper descending from the depths of the sky, touching my skin with the gentle warmth of a kind, lost embrace.

In his gaze, in the warmth of his breath, in the way his eyes held me close, there lay a force that stripped time of all meaning. In that moment, everything was severed from past and future;

only “being” remained—boundless, needing no explanation, rich with a texture both familiar and tangible. I found myself whole; no longer needing validation, no longer entangled in the past, no longer staring toward the future. Just him standing before me, his gaze penetrating the depths of my soul—that alone was enough to know that all paths, unbeknownst to me, had led me here.

A sudden question, uninvited and without warning, slid softly like a creeping breeze through my thoughts: Was he the one who, all these years, silently stood behind the veils of time waiting for me? Or was I the one who, unknowingly, had sat in wait for him for centuries and years, my eyes fixed on shadows quietly passing behind mirrors, on vague reflections appearing on misted glasses, on echoes coming from the upper floors that never reached an end?

Was I not the one who, long before his arrival, had wandered for hours in this thousand-faced hotel—this place of a thousand voices and a thousand memories? In silent corridors, amidst the twisting spiral of staircases, in a solitude steeped with the scent of old earth and burnt wood smoke, I wandered aimlessly. And something within me—perhaps a faint memory of him—held me back; made me stay, to wait, to listen to the unseen pulse beating deep within the walls, just before I sat upon that red velvet chair and, without warning or sign, was thrown into a world without rules. A world where logic held no sway, yet meaning did. A place where words were powerless, but a heavy, pure presence was woven into everything. An environment where all senses felt amplified, even far beyond those of this world. A place where the soil tasted like dreams, a light glowed within it, and every breath carried the scent of the past deep into my lungs...

I fixed my gaze on his eyes; that look, like a shard of ice suddenly melting beneath a warm drop of water, stirred delicate, profound waves within me—a brief tremor full of meaning, a quiet sign of awakening in the hidden layers of my soul. In that moment, a fleeting fear passed. It was gentle and tinged with curiosity and wonder. Posing a silent doubt, a question. Perhaps he was not who I thought he was. Perhaps some mistake had been made. Just then, a breeze came—a light, playful breeze carrying a strange scent. A scent neither of this world nor the next, but from somewhere in between. Smells of the salt of the sea mingled with damp moss and the odor of old shipyard timber; the smoke of a dormant hearth whose warmth had lingered in the walls for years. The essence of wet, musty cloth from a uniform once worn by Ario. All these fragrances were now resting in an abandoned cabin by the shore.

That scent had no words, no sound, no whisper—only a gentle vibration, like a breeze passing through the worn layers of memory and lingering in the air. A tremor that settled deeply within me: “Ario...”

That very instant I understood through a calm, focused pressure, resembling a warm hand resting on your shoulder on a cold night—that he had been with me from the very beginning, even before my birth into this world. Not only here in this present moment, but before the start of this journey. A journey I had never known I was on. A wandering in the gentle sway of night waves, in the silent sound of a black turtle gliding softly on the water, in the damp and uncertain air beyond the valley, in the strange, curved reflection of the silent, forgotten church, in the soft murmur of a small mountain spring, in the shadow of a tall eucalyptus tree whose roots sank deep into the depths of my memories. Even in the half-hidden, quiet smile

of Edgar—the wise one who opened the door for me with his silence. Yes, he was the same—he was Ario.

Miracle—that complex and mysterious force—does not arrive with a loud cry, nor with a sharp, blazing light. Instead, it comes with a calm and certain presence, like a soft breeze passing through the depths of existence, quietly enfolding all the threads of time and space in a silent embrace. After a time that could neither be measured nor clearly felt—centuries, or perhaps merely moments lost within time’s winding corridors—Ario and I were once again sitting side by side in that very hotel, the place from which we had once fled. A spot where everything settled into a natural and unpretentious calm. Serene not by the decree of rigid logic, nor by the command of unspoken laws, but in the heart of scattered light and vague memories, from which a wordless revelation arose.

In that absolute stillness and openness, I felt no need for any journey—not the kind that carries the body across endless distances, nor even the invisible, unmarked voyage that spins the soul through realms of dreams. Here, right here, between a cool, misty shore where the earth is soaked with sea salt and the scent of damp leaves. Where truth and fantasy intertwine. There is neither beginning nor end. Only a place where questions rest quietly without uttering a sound. A place between forgetting and remembering. Where borders have melted, and time has taken on a new color and flavor—a flavor that does not pass the tongue but touches the skin, a gentle kiss of sea breeze in the silence of dawn.

Ario, with a calm and resonant voice as if risen from the depths of timeless layers, said, “We must come to this hotel more often—though this is the first time we have set foot in this coastal town.” A town whose every alley, every wall,

every corner felt so familiar to me, as if years ago I had left my footprints in its dusty streets. A town whose soil was known to me. In the air there stirred a cool taste, as though memories hidden within every stone and every leaf were whispering and speaking with Ario.

Then, with a soft laugh like the rustling of dry leaves beneath one's feet, and a whisper full of wonder, he added, "It's curious...I even know those hidden corners of the hotel, without anyone ever having shown them to me...Isn't that curious?"

He was there. I was there. In that gentle, translucent light dancing and shimmering between our fingers—no flame to burn the soul, but a calm, enduring glow. Eliciting an ancient, endless truth that had risen beyond the veil of words, beyond the borders of history and imagination. Flowing into the very air I breathed. In that profound moment, in a stillness not empty but full of awareness, I understood. Recognizing what Ario marveled at—his knowledge of the city, the hidden paths of the hotel, the routes no guide had ever shown him—was nothing new to me.

Years ago, or perhaps centuries before, in another journey, I had traveled three hundred years back, to a dusty, distant time long past. A place where not only had I seen Ario himself. His roots, his first home, even the moment when Edgar, his distant ancestor, entrusted me to him to one day set me free. I had accompanied him before his birth. Even this rusty, hidden kitchen was the first place he had shown me. And now, as I look upon the hotel's guests, I ask myself: *Who would believe that I am the very guest who first stepped into this hotel three centuries ago?*

I knew everything—the secrets, the paths, the invisible, deep bond that Ario was not yet aware of, yet which was woven into the fabric of his fate. Still, I spoke no words. I wished this secret, like my journey through time, to remain silent. A secret meant only for me, for that part of my being that no longer needed to speak. Nor did I harbor any fear—not of his leaving, nor of losing his touch, nor of his vanishing into the mist. The angst I felt that night before I disappeared into the hotel was no longer there.

For in that sojourn, among ruins and cabins, amid signs only the heart could read. I had seen that the end of this story was written before its beginning. He and I were bound together at that point in time that is neither start nor end. A bond quiet, invisible, yet unbreakable. And now, this soft touch, this quiet light between our fingers, was but a confirmation of a truth I already knew—a truth needing neither language nor reason.

## Chapter 10

# The Timeless Mirror

*“The merging of times, the unraveling of mysteries, the dissolution of boundaries”*

A rio was calm. A calm that resembled a wave pausing just before it rises to split the sea whispering to the depths of the ocean. In that suspended, lingering moment, I rested my head against his chest and listened to the rhythm of his heart. A beat not of flesh and blood, but of time itself. An echo of drumming from invisible halls long forgotten. His warm, slow breaths wove through my hair and settled along the nape of my neck as a wind sweeping in from distant plains. I felt my own heart no longer beating alone, it had synchronized with his. Perhaps we had always been one, and I had merely forgotten. As humans repeatedly forget that their roots lie somewhere beyond the present.

The room was silent like sinking into the depths of water, where all things dissolve and sounds filter through bubbles. The window stood open, carrying a cool breeze infused with burned wood, dry earth, lingering herbs, and the faint trace of eucalyptus. The very scent of Edgar’s cabin; old, sweet, and

faintly bitter. A fragrance that, if I closed my eyes, could reveal the cracks in the stone walls and the trembling shadows of candlelight dancing across his ancient home.

Ario spoke in a soft, gentle voice, without even needing to look at me: “This room—number seven—has only one window, yet see how bright it is...Tonight, the moon is full.” There was something in his tone; something like a child’s wonder, or perhaps a distant memory now awakened among the lights.

I had felt, from the very moment I stepped into this room, that the truth lay beyond the light. Something was in the air—hidden, alive—almost as if the room itself were breathing. The moonlight spilling across the wooden floor traced invisible, intertwined lines across the fabric of time. Fissures in the weave of reality, gradually erasing boundaries: between being and that which lies beyond, between now and forever, between body and spirit, between touch and knowing.

Everything in the room was awake—even the dust settled along the windowsill seemed to watch us. The thin curtain trembled with the breeze, carrying the scent of an ancient perfume into the air. Ario’s warm hands flowed across my skin, leaving a bitter-sweet taste in my mouth, nameless yet returned from the depths of time.

I knew this moment was a return. A return to a point that had never truly released me. The moonlight, both faint and clear, felt like a hidden hand rewriting the past upon the page of my inner self.

My eyes were half-open, hovering in the narrow space between sleep and waking. A place where the eyes no longer see, but the soul beholds. My mind, restless, drifted like a boat untethered between two shores. Neither the past embraced me,

nor did the future summoned me. Only a thin veil of awareness remained—a place where time dissolves and truth appears.

In the mirror before me, my earrings gleamed with their golden hoops in the trembling night light, like fish scales shimmering in dark waters. Their purple stones regarded me as if through eyes from a distant past. Ario's breathing was soft, like a silent lullaby weaving through the darkness.

His hands slid gently through my hair—a simple, unassuming gesture, as if they had always been there. The touch of his skin against mine, where my slender bracelet glimmered in the moonlight, sent a shiver through me. A shiver akin to cool water over hot sand. A sensation without beginning or end, like a memory lived before birth.

The delicate chain around my ankle shifted with every subtle movement of my body, its quivering sound echoing through the night, a whisper from a hidden world.

In that moment, every small thing—from the sparkle of my earrings to the sliding chain—became a silent witness. A testament to a connection that transcended flesh and language. What had once been mere ornament now spoke wordlessly of another realm, a world that had always breathed alongside us, revealing itself in this instant.

And suddenly I remembered with an instinctive clarity, like the wisp of a childhood home or the taste of summer grapes lingering in the soul. I remembered that these chains and stones had once been held in the hands of that other Ario, long before time collapsed and the world changed. Now, in this nameless moment, that world had returned with a gentle light on the skin, a familiar breath, a hand that was no stranger, but a fragment of my own past, centuries old.

It was only a moment—a clear, mysterious—moment for which time itself seemed to pause. In that instant, all boundaries fell; neither between bodies nor even between souls did distance remain. Something of pure presence bloomed in the silence. Quiet, like a night-blooming jasmine unfurling without sound in the dim light of dawn. I was no longer a spectator. I was the moment itself, the blossom, the touch. It was as if I had passed through thousands of births and deaths only to recognize him here, in this delicate pause—and, in turn, to recognize myself.

In the depth of that contact, a hidden light flowed. Illuminating not only skin but veins and bones. Its invisible resonance spread through the scent of breaths, the taste of night-mingled air, the white, mysterious sheets, and the subtle vibration of the throat. If one listened closely, sounds from before birth could be perceived—not to be heard, but to be felt; sounds that lived on the blurred border between memory and presence.

And in that stretched moment, full of the echoes of silent sounds, I knew only one thing: what flowed between us was neither beginning nor end. It was something that had always been, always is, and only now, in the silence of this instant, unveiled its face.

In that same instant, a luminous truth rose within me—soundless, like a fish suddenly appearing from behind a cloud. I realized that time, with all its grandeur, is nothing before this pure presence. Neither motion nor stillness, only a presence that is felt with the tip of a finger on the skin, read with the eyes, and heard in a quiet pulse without sound.

My gaze fell on the tall mirror. Its golden frame resembled clusters of dried wheat. Our reflected forms vibrated faintly

within it, as if showing a glimpse of another future, or a forgotten dimension. Not a reflection of who we are, but of who we had been. A memory perhaps never experienced in the material world yet lived a thousand times by our souls.

Ario's warm breath still lingered in my hair. I whispered, "Ario... have you ever had the feeling that we've been here before? This room, this moonlight, the scent of dry earth and thyme...?"

He stared into the darkness, and in a soft voice said, "Perhaps we are the original... and what they call life is only a shadow of us. A quivering reflection on another wall."

A heavy silence settled between us—a living silence, full of presence, sliding over our skin and within our breaths. It had a taste like something old and earthy, something that had come before us and would drift far beyond.

Ario slowly turned his head toward me, as if to touch something unseen, and murmured, "Perhaps this is the truth—this silence, this smell of earth, this moonlight. And what lies outside this room... is only a dream still in motion; a dream in which we walk—not asleep, but awake."

I felt joy. A deep serenity carrying within it a noble sorrow. A gentle sorrow, a forgotten tune in the memory of the world, or the fragrance of night-blooming jasmine carried on the damp air of dawn. A sorrow not of grief, but a reminder of something near and familiar. A presence that had long stood at the edges of perception, like the scent of old wood from a long-forgotten closet.

I asked softly, "Then why do I sometimes feel that time is trying to kill me?"

His gaze rested on me, unhurried, like the reflection of a foggy sky on the surface of an endless, calm river. In a gentle

voice, he said, “Because you’ve forgotten who you are... forgotten that this body, this room, even these words, are nothing but reflections of yourself. Images in a mirror in which you no longer reside.”

He spoke so much like Edgar...yet he himself did not know that the words spilling from his lips, unbidden, had once run in Edgar’s blood. A blood that had traveled through generations, carrying stories its bearers never understood. Ario was the same. A living reflection of memories buried in his veins.

I slowly placed my hand upon his chest to seek a lost truth, somewhere between bone and presence. His heartbeat was not merely the pulse of blood; it played the rhythm of being itself. From that point arose a warmth—an invisible warmth, like the first sip of tea on a winter evening, the distant tolling of bells over a snowy mountain, or the earthy scent that rises from the soil after rain.

“Are you really here, Ario?” I whispered. His hands gently held my earring, and his fingers slid through my hair— with a solemnity drawn from memory and time. I asked, “Do you feel it too? Those moments when our hands have yet to meet, yet our souls have already kissed?”

He only looked at me—eyes that seemed to peer through the tunnels of time. The same eyes of the old carpenter, Edgar, or that other-worldly Ario. His silence was like a drop of honey, thickening and deepening time. Movement, breath, even the heartbeat dissolved within its weave. A light shone from within him—colorless yet burning—a light that compelled understanding rather than sight.

His mouth rested against the nape of my neck—not from need, but from a desire to dissolve into a calm, endless

presence. A presence that dissolved every anxiety. I realized that touch was not merely skin upon skin; it was a pathway back to essence, a remembrance of the primal bond that had flowed between us before names, before the concept of “I” and “you.”

A nameless, tender sensation arose from my chest and throat, the place where words die and only feeling remains—the taste of the first fruit from a childhood garden, the smell of freshly baked bread at dawn, the sound of a mother’s heart at midnight. The world vanished. Walls fell away, sounds disappeared, colors lost their shape. Only two presences remained. Ario and I—intertwined in pure awareness, in a silent coexistence understood not by mind, nor heart, but by the soul itself.

In that moment, it was neither speakable nor visible; simply remaining was enough for all of existence to take shape—a bright point, beyond time, beyond name, yet infinitely real.

I closed my eyes and saw Edgar, seated by the same spring in the distant, silent mountains, quietly immersed in the warm waves, as if searching for something lost. I heard his voice, soft and distant: *“I told you that you would reach him... Your destiny is written among the stars.”* His presence bloomed within me—a presence felt through the deeper layers of perception. An ancient, eternal connection recognized only by the soul.

His gray eyes glimmered with a gentle light, like the reflection of sunlight on water. He dipped his hand into the spring and splashed water across his face. A faint mist rose from his beard and drifted into the air. Again, he drank, as if drinking from water beyond the ordinary—a water in which life surged, and vitality pulsed. Some springs, it seemed, held the water of immortality; whoever drank from them would never die. Edgar had drunk

from that water, and beyond the bounds of time, he had lived for centuries.

He smiled softly and said, *“Ario is my child. . . . He knows that love does not dwell in the obvious heartbeat, nor in familiar scents, nor in the warmth of breaths exchanged between foreheads, but in a deeper silence, and a hidden light. A light that does not shine from outside, but wells from the depths of the unconscious. A place beyond time and form, a place where presence itself is existence. And the only thing that remains is to remain—in a moment that consumes everything and creates an endless serenity.”*

Only two presences remained: breath against breath and being against being.

Ario’s eyes were closed, his hands resting beneath his head. I watched his face softly, as though he had drifted into sleep—peaceful, untroubled, with a faint smile lingering on his lips. The dim light of dusk filtered through the curtain, tracing his features in silver shadows upon the pillow.

I don’t know why, but my gaze was drawn once more to the large mirror in the corner of the room—the old timeless mirror with a silver frame, etched with the passage of years. A light flickered within it, like the reflection of water on stone. And suddenly, from within its frame, Edgar emerged—silent, unhurried, as if born from mist or dream.

He was neither in the room nor in imagination; something in between, a presence only, I could perceive. His gaze settled upon me—calm, ancient, filled with quiet knowing and a timeless radiance.

Edgar stood, wearing a long robe of rough, heavy fabric that had absorbed the sun of many years, with bronze buttons rising beneath his collar. The collar was stiffened and slightly

worn, sleeves wide and rolled halfway. His leather boots carried the dust of the road. The scent of aged wood, the gentle steam of the spring, and a trace of pine resin rose quietly from his garment. While the night breeze stirred the hem; a soft sound, like leaves rustling under a late-autumn rain.

My eyes fell to his hands—rough yet calm, preserving the touch of everything with an ancient care. His steps were soft but audible, like someone carrying history with them. Even the taste of the air had changed—sweet and hushed, akin to the steam of morning tea in the mountain.

He spoke softly, his voice seeming to come from deep within the earth: “All becomes easy when the children of the seeds of the heavens remember that they belong somewhere else; somewhere beyond time.”

“For years, you sought signs—touch, gaze, something shining from without to illuminate within. Now understand: what you have always been within you—not in the body, not in the face, not in the name, but in the subtle essence that reflects everything placed upon it. If it is bright, even a barren land becomes a garden; and if it is dark, even a thousand blossoms will leave nothing but ash.”

“Unity is not in an embrace, nor in a vow between two bodies. It is a quiet return to the truth placed within you before birth, now blooming in a timeless moment. Hear the sound that comes before words. See the light that shines from the depths of your soul. There is no need to be seen or to prove yourself. Just simply be—as you are, as you have always been.”

Edgar gradually disappeared into the mountain light, leaving only a glow within my soul—a light to remind me of who we have always been. I realized that the end of this journey

was never an end. It was a hidden beginning, flowing in every step, every touch, every gaze, every breath.

In the heart of that bright, nameless moment, serenity poured forth. A recognition and unconditional acceptance of all that is and has always been. Everything and everyone—I, Ario, Edgar, and the children of the seeds of the heavens—were once more united in that eternal place, beyond time and world. Neither past nor future, but in pure, wordless, timeless presence.

A place where the only law is love, the only language is presence, and the only truth is timelessness.

**The End.**

