

ALLIN KAWSAY

Mosoq Paqariy

The New Dawn — The Complete Trilogy

Three Books · One Long Dawn

Contents

Book One · The New Dawn	3
Book Two · The Door in the Story	55
Book Three · The Coming Home	103

The complete trilogy in one volume: Remembering, Crossing Over, and Coming Home.

ALLIN KAWSAY

Stories from the Sacred Valley



THE STORY THAT STARTS IT ALL

Mosoq Paqariy

The New Dawn

AMISTAD SAGRADA · YACHAY WASICHA · PISAQ · VALLE SAGRADO



CHAPTER One

The Children Who Could Not Sleep

the quiet sadness

High in the mountains of Peru, where the rivers run cold and clear and the highest peaks wear the last gold of the sun long after the valleys have gone blue, there is a place called Písaq.

It sits in the Sacred Valley, cupped in the great hands of the mountains — the *Apus*, the old ones call them, the guardians who have watched over the people since before there were words for things. Below the town, the river sings its endless silver song. Above it, the terraces climb the mountainside like green stairways built for giants — the very same steps the ancestors carved a thousand years ago, and a thousand years before that.

It is a beautiful place. Everyone who comes to it says so.

And in Písaq there lived a girl named Kusi, whose name means *joy*.

Kusi had a laugh that started in her belly and a way of running everywhere instead of walking. Her dearest friend was a girl named Illa, whose name means *light* — quieter than Kusi, but with eyes that missed nothing, and a gift for making anyone who stood near her feel like they belonged. And where the two of them went, there went Mallki too — the boy who had come from far across the sea when he was small, and stayed, until the valley grew around his heart and became his home. His name meant *little tree*, and the

valley had given it to him, and he loved it more than the name he was born with.

Every evening, when the day's work was done and the cooking smoke rose blue from the rooftops, the children of Písaq gathered in the plaza. They always had. It was where the games were played and the secrets were told and the whole long story of growing up went on, evening after evening, under the watching mountains.

But this evening was different.

This evening, nobody was playing.

They sat together on the worn stone steps as the sky turned from gold to rose to a deep and deeper blue, and none of them wanted to go home, and none of them could quite have told you why. There was a heaviness in the air that had nothing to do with the coming night. It had been growing for a long time, so slowly that no one had noticed it arrive — the way you don't notice the cold creeping into a room until you are already shivering.

It was Kusi who finally said it out loud.

"Have you noticed," she said quietly, turning a small stone over and over in her hands, "that things are going quiet?"

Nobody answered, so she went on, gently, as if naming something she was almost afraid to name. She spoke of the older cousins who boarded the buses to the city one by one and did not come back. Of the little glowing screens that pulled everyone's eyes down and away now, even at the supper table, even in the middle of a grandmother's story. Of the food that came in crinkling bags from the store, sweet and empty, while the fields lay right there under the same sun. Of the medicines bought in bright boxes from the pharmacy in town, when the healing plants still grew wild on the very hills above their heads. And of the *abuelos* — the grandmothers and the grandfathers — sitting on their benches in the last of the afternoon light with the most beautiful stories in the world folded up inside them, and no one, anymore, stopping to sit down and listen.

When she finished, no one argued. Because every one of them had felt it too.

"I don't want it to go quiet," said Illa. Her voice was very small. "It's the most beautiful place in the world. And it feels like it's... falling asleep."

They sat with that for a while. Above them the first stars pricked through the blue, the same stars the ancestors had named, and far off a single dog

barked and went still. Kusi looked up at the dark shapes of the mountains, the Apus, huge and patient against the sky, and she felt something she did not have a word for — a love so big it hurt, and underneath it, a fear.

They should have gone home. Their mothers would be calling soon. But not one of them stood up. They stayed on the cold stones in the gathering dark, close together, as if by staying they could hold something that was slipping away.

And then — though not one of them could ever afterward say the exact moment it began — the darkness around them began, very softly, to grow warm.

. . .



CHAPTER Two

The Night the Grandparents Came

the visit and the mission

The warmth grew, and with it came a light — but not a light like fire, and not a light like the moon. It was gold, and it was gentle, and it seemed to rise from everywhere and nowhere at once, as though the dusk itself had decided to glow.

The children did not run. That was the strange thing, the thing Kusi would wonder about for the rest of her life. By every rule they knew, they should have been afraid. But the light did not feel like something to fear. It felt like the moment you step through your own doorway after a long, cold journey — the feeling of *home*, made into light.

High above them, a great dark bird turned a slow circle against the stars. **Kuntur** — the condor of the heights, the one the old stories said carried messages between the mountains and the sky. It did not fly away. It circled, and watched.

And out of the gold, without hurry, stepped two figures.

A grandmother, and a grandfather.

They were old — older than anyone the children had ever seen — and yet they stood straight and easy, and the light came off them softly, the way warmth comes off a stone that has held the sun all day. The grandmother

wore a shawl the color of the sunset. The grandfather leaned on no staff, though he looked as though he had walked a very long way. Their faces were kind, and deeply lined, and somehow familiar — as if each child were looking at their own grandparents, and everyone's grandparents, and the grandparents of a thousand years, all at the same time.

Kusi's heart was pounding, but not with fear. "Are you..." she began, and could not finish.

"We heard you," said the grandmother. Her voice was like a hand laid gently on your hair. "We heard your sadness, little ones. All the way from where we are. Do you know — your sadness is a kind of love? Only those who truly love a thing grieve to see it sleep."

The grandfather nodded slowly. "You have seen something true," he said. "We will not tell you that you are wrong. The valley is growing quiet. The old ways are being forgotten, one small forgetting at a time." He paused, and his eyes were very kind. "But you have only seen the half of it. And it is time someone told you the rest."

He lowered himself down onto the steps among them, as easily as any old man sitting with his grandchildren, and the children drew close without deciding to.

"Listen," he said. "What looks to you like an ending is not an ending. It is a turning." He took a seed from somewhere in his hand and held it up in the golden light so they could all see it, small and brown and unremarkable. "Every seed must go down into the dark before it can rise. It must be buried. From the outside, my children, being planted and being buried look exactly the same." He smiled. "The valley is not dying. The valley is a seed. And you —" he looked around at each of their faces, one by one — "you are the ones who were born to help it rise."

"This is the great turning," said the grandmother softly. "**Pachakuti**. It has come before, and it comes again, and always it is the children who turn it. Not with armies. Not with gold. With their hands, and their remembering, and each other."

"But we're just children," said Illa. "We don't know how."

"You will not do it alone," said the grandfather. "That is the first thing to remember, and the most important. **Mana pi sapallanchu** — no one is ever left alone. You will gather the others. You will go to the **abuelos** who are waiting on their benches, and you will ask them to teach you, and you will

see their faces wake up like the dawn. You will call the ones who went away, and one by one they will come home. You will plant the gardens and raise the houses and make the medicine and sing the old songs, together, for one another — *ayni*, the giving that returns. And the valley will wake. And then —" his eyes shone — "then you will not stop at waking it. You will lift it higher than it has ever been. A valley of light. A place the whole tired world will look to and remember what it, too, had forgotten."

The gold was beginning, very slowly, to thin. Away over the eastern peaks, the first pale line of true morning was beginning to show. The grandmother rose, and drew her sunset shawl around her, and looked at them with a love so plain it made Kusi's throat ache.

"Every story of this valley ends with the same two words," she said. "*Mosoq Paqariy*. The new dawn. And there is a secret in those words that the old ones save for the very end." She smiled, and the last of the gold gathered in her face. "The new dawn is not a time, little ones. The new dawn is a *who*."

Mosoq Paqariy.
The new dawn is you.

"Begin small," said the grandfather, already growing faint, already becoming light again. "Tomorrow, plant one thing. That is all. The rest will follow, the way the whole harvest follows the first seed. We will be closer than you think. We are always closer than you think."

And then they were gone — not vanished, exactly, but gone back into the ordinary gold of the sunrise now spilling over the mountains, as if they had never been anything but that. High above, *Kuntur* tipped one wing, and slid away east into the morning.

For a long moment none of the children moved or spoke. The sun came up over the terraces the ancestors had carved, and lit them green and shining, step after step after step, all the way up the mountain.

Then Kusi stood. Her heart was no longer heavy. In its place was something small and bright and certain, like a coal you carry cupped in your hands to start another fire.

"Well," she said, and the old belly-laugh was coming back into her voice, "you heard him." She looked at her friends, at Illa whose name was light and Mallki the little tree, at all of them lit gold by the new day. "Tomorrow, we plant."



CHAPTER Three

The First Seed

the promise kept

Kusi woke the next morning before the sun, with the small bright coal still burning in her chest, exactly where the grandfather had left it. For one heartbeat she wondered if she had dreamed the whole thing. Then she saw that Illa and Mallki, who had stayed the night, were already awake in the grey light, sitting up and looking at her — and she knew, from their faces, that no one dreams the same dream.

"Tomorrow, we plant," Illa said softly. "Kusi. It's tomorrow."

They did not know how to begin, so they began the only way anyone ever can: with what was right in front of them. Behind Kusi's house lay a strip of ground gone hard and forgotten, choked with weeds, where nothing had grown for years. It was not much to look at. But the grandfather's words came back to her — *begin small; from the outside, being planted and being buried look exactly the same* — and Kusi picked up a hoe.

They cleared the weeds and broke the hard brown earth, and it was slow, and their hands blistered, and more than once one of them sat back and laughed and said, "What are we even doing? It's a patch of dirt." But they kept on. Because the only other choice was to go back to the way it had felt on the steps, before the light came — and blisters were far better than that.

By mid-morning, other children had drifted over to watch. And then, one by one and half-shy about it, to help. Nobody had asked them to. That was the

first small miracle, though none of them noticed it yet: *when a thing is done with love, people come.*

They had almost no seeds — a handful of beans from Kusi's mother's jar, a few potato eyes, some grains an aunt had forgotten in a cupboard. It was a poor, mismatched little treasure. They planted every one, and pressed the earth down gently, the way you tuck a blanket around someone you love, and carried water from the channel until the dark ground drank its fill.

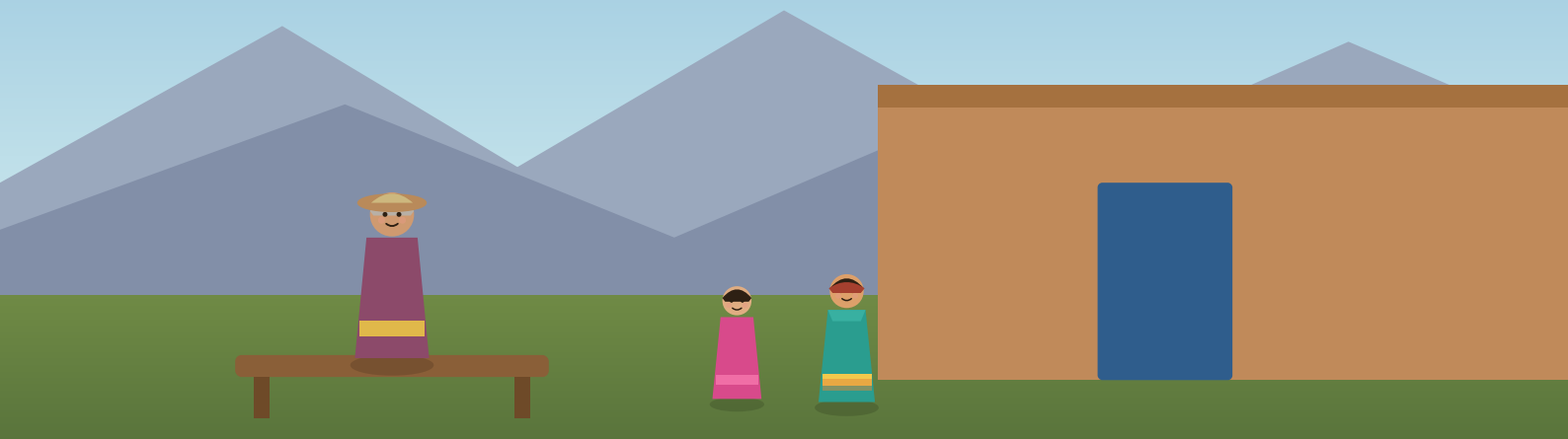
When they finished it was afternoon, and the little plot lay there — brown and wet and utterly unremarkable. To look at it, you would never have guessed that anything at all had changed in the whole wide world.

But something had.

That evening, for the first time in a long while, the children of Pisaq went home tired in the good way — the way you are tired when your hands have done something true. And though not one grown-up in the town yet knew what was coming, a few had seen the children working in the forgotten plot, and had slowed, and watched a moment, and walked on wondering.

The seed was in the ground now. In the dark. Which, as the grandfather had promised, is exactly where every new dawn begins.

. . .



CHAPTER Four

The Elder Who Was Remembered

the treasure that waited

The trouble was, none of them really knew how to grow things — not the true way, the old way. Their little plot had been planted more with hope than with skill, and hope alone does not fill a storehouse. If the valley was truly going to wake, Kusi thought, they would first have to learn what their own people had once known by heart. And there was only one place left to find it.

"The abuelos," said Illa. "They remember. They remember everything."

So the next morning they went looking for the oldest person any of them knew — Mama Rosa, who lived alone behind a faded blue door at the edge of town, and whom nobody had gone to visit in longer than Kusi had been alive.

When she opened the door and found three children on her step, Mama Rosa's face filled first with confusion, and then with a flicker of fear — for who comes to an old woman's door unless something has gone wrong? "What is it?" she said. "What has happened?"

"Nothing, Mama Rosa," said Kusi. "We came to ask you to teach us."

For a long moment the old woman only stared. And then something moved across her face that Kusi would remember for the rest of her life: the look of a person who has waited so long for a thing that she had quietly stopped

letting herself hope for it at all. Her eyes filled. "To teach you," she repeated, so softly the words seemed to tremble. "No one has asked me to teach them anything in twenty years."

She sat them down, and she began to talk, and it was as if a dam had broken after a very long drought. She told them when to plant and when to wait; how to read the soil with your fingers and the weather in the shape of the clouds over the **Apus**; how the moon pulls at a seed the way it pulls at the sea. Things her grandmother had told her. Things her grandmother's grandmother had known. The children listened the way you drink when you had not known, until that moment, how thirsty you were.

And then Mama Rosa rose, and went to a wooden chest in the corner, and lifted out something wrapped in a cloth so old its colors had gone soft as dusk. She unfolded it across her lap. Inside, in dozens of little woven pouches, were seeds — hundreds of them, more kinds than the children had ever seen in their lives: potatoes black and red and violet and gold, corn of a dozen colors, grains and beans whose names half the valley had forgotten. A thousand years of harvests, kept alive in one old woman's chest.

"These," she said, and her voice shook, "my grandmothers kept for me, and their grandmothers for them, all the way back to the beginning of the beginning." She lifted a small handful and poured them, warm, into Kusi's cupped hands. **"Kaykuna manan noqapchu,"** she said. **"Qatiqkunapaqmi."** *These are not mine. They are for the ones who come.*

And Kusi understood, holding that impossible treasure in her two hands, something that made her eyes sting: the knowledge had never been lost. The seeds had never been lost. They had only been *waiting* — patient as seeds are patient — in the hands of the ones that nobody was asking anymore.

They stayed with Mama Rosa until the light turned gold in her little window. When at last they rose to leave, she caught Kusi gently by the sleeve. "Come back," she said — and it was not a command, it was almost a plea, and she was smiling, and she looked ten years younger than she had that morning. "Come back tomorrow. There is so much. There is so much still that I can give you."

"We will," said Kusi. "We promise."

And they did.



CHAPTER Five

The Grandparents' Table

no one left alone

Mama Rosa, it turned out, was not the only one.

Once the children had eyes to see it, they saw them everywhere: the old ones of Písac, sitting alone in doorways and on sunny benches, each of them a chest full of treasure that no one was opening. There was Don Feliciano, who could name every plant on the mountain and tell you which leaf mended a fever and which one closed a wound. There was Mama Benita, whose fingers still remembered how to make the loom sing, though no one had asked her to weave in years. There was old Don Emilio, who carried more songs in his head than there were stars over the valley, and who sang them now only to himself.

So the children made a decision, and it grew into the sweetest habit the town had seen in a generation. They began to visit.

They came with warm food and with company — a bowl of soup, a hand to hold, an afternoon of simply sitting near. They came because it was kind, and because no one ought to be left alone. And every single time, without fail, something happened that they came to expect and never stopped marveling at: the gift they carried in came back to them doubled.

They brought Mama Benita a plate of food, and she taught Illa to read the whole story woven into a belt — the rivers and the mountains and the ancestors, all of them speaking in colored thread. They brought Don

Feliciano some company on his step, and he walked them up the hill and showed them the small grey-green leaf that takes the ache from a stomach, and the flower that quiets a crying child, and a hundred green secrets more. They sat with Don Emilio through one long afternoon, and he taught them a song so old that when he sang it, the very air in the room seemed to lean in to listen.

This was *ayni* — the giving that returns, the law that lies beneath all the other laws of the valley. You give, and it comes back to you changed and multiplied, and nobody keeps a count, because keeping count was never the point. *Mana pi sapallanchu*, the old ones murmured, pressing the children's hands between their own. *No one is ever left alone*. And the children were learning that it ran in both directions at once: that by refusing to leave the elders alone, they had quietly made certain they would never be alone themselves.

Little by little — so slowly you could almost have missed it — the town began to change. There was more music in the evenings now. The abuelos sat a little straighter. Children ran up the hillsides with old people's wisdom in their heads and old people's seeds in their pockets. And the elders, listened to at last, needed once more, seemed to bloom — like the little plot behind Kusi's house, which had begun, ever so quietly, to green.

And word of it drifted out of Písaq the way woodsmoke drifts — without anyone meaning to send it. It went down the road and along the singing river, and travelled farther than the children could have dreamed, until at last it reached the ear of someone far away in the grey noise of the city. Someone who had left the valley years before, chasing a brighter dream. Someone who had lately begun to feel a hollowness they could not name.

But that is the next part of the story.

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CHAPTER Six

The One Who Came Home

Rafael returns

The someone far away in the city had a name. It was Rafael.

He had left Písaq at seventeen, the way so many did, on a dawn bus with a cardboard suitcase and a head full of the bright pictures the screens had shown him — the city, the lights, the money, the whole shining life that was supposed to be waiting there for the taking. And for a while he had chased it. He worked long grey hours in a loud place, and slept in a room with no window, and sent photographs home of himself smiling in front of things that did not belong to him.

And slowly, without ever being able to say quite when it began, a hollowness had opened up inside him. He had gotten the thing he went for, more or less — and found that it did not feed him. He was surrounded by more people than the whole valley held, and he had never in his life been so alone. At night, in the windowless room, he would remember the smell of the earth after rain, and his grandfather's voice, and the taste of a soup his mother used to make, and he would not let himself cry, because he did not understand why he wanted to.

Then one day word reached him — passed hand to hand, the way news travels among people far from home — that something was happening back in Písaq. That the children had planted the old seeds. That the abuelos were teaching again. That the plaza had music in it in the evenings.

He did not decide to go home, exactly. He simply found himself, a few mornings later, on a dawn bus climbing back up into the mountains, his heart beating strangely, telling himself the whole way that he was only going to visit.

He arrived in the late gold of afternoon, and Písaq was the same, and not the same. The mountains stood where they had always stood. But there was a green plot behind a house where he remembered only weeds. There were children coming down a hillside with bundles of plants in their arms, laughing, and an old woman walking among them who he could have sworn had not left her house in years. And there was, from somewhere across the rooftops, the thread of a song he knew in his bones though he had not heard it in ten years.

He stood in the plaza with his bag on his shoulder, and something in his chest — the hollow thing — cracked open. And what came up through the crack was not sadness. It was a small, bright, certain warmth, the very same the children carried. He understood, standing there, that he had not come to visit. He had come *home*.

That evening he found his grandfather on the old bench, and sat down beside him without a word. The old man did not act the least bit surprised. He only reached over and patted Rafael's knee, once, as though he had been expecting him all along. "You're back," he said. "Good. There's work to do. Beautiful work."

Rafael stayed. He was the first of the ones who came home.

He would not be the last.

. . .



CHAPTER Seven

Today for You, Tomorrow for Me

the mink'a

Now that there were strong young hands in the valley again, there were hands enough to build. And the first thing they built was a roof.

Mama Benita's house had been letting the rain in for two winters — a corner of the roof caved and rotted, and no money to mend it, and she too proud, and too alone, to ask a soul. In the old days such a thing would have been set right in a single morning, by everyone, without anyone ever needing to be asked. That was simply how the valley had always worked. It had only, like so much else, been forgotten.

So the children remembered it, for everyone.

Kusi went from door to door — the way, long ago, another child had once run door to door for another old woman — and by the next morning half of Písaq had gathered in Mama Benita's yard. Men came with beams over their shoulders. Women came with wet adobe and with steaming pots of food. The young ones who had come home brought their strong backs, and the children brought armfuls of straw, and the abuelos came to sit in the sun and explain to absolutely everyone, with great authority and enormous joy, exactly how the thing ought to be done.

They called it what it had always been called — a *mink'a*: the work a whole people do together, for one of their own, as though the one were all of them. Which, in the valley's oldest way of seeing, is precisely true.

By the time the sun stood high they were laughing. By afternoon the new roof rose straight and strong and golden with fresh straw, better than the old one had ever been. And no one asked to be paid, because payment was not the shape of the thing. The shape of the thing was older and simpler than money, and the elders said it aloud so the children would carry it forever: "**Kunan qanpaq, paqarin noqapaq.**" *Today for you; tomorrow for me.*

Mama Benita stood beneath her new roof and pressed both hands to her heart and, for a while, could not speak at all. And when at last she could, what she said was the oldest truth in the valley, the one that lies beneath all the others: "**Manan sapallaychu kasqani.**" *I was not alone after all. The ayllu holds me up.*

That night there was a feast in her yard — small, and bright, and joyful — food carried from many houses into many shared bowls. Rafael looked around at the firelit faces, old and young, the ones who had left and the ones who had stayed, and he understood at last, all at once, the thing the city had never once been able to give him. The thing no amount of money can ever buy — because it is not bought. It is only built, together.

He had travelled a very long way to find it. And it had been here the whole time.

. . .



CHAPTER Eight

Word Travels on the Wind

the plaza fills again

After that, it was as though something had been let loose that could not be gathered back in.

Rafael wrote to the friends he had left behind in the city — the other young ones of the valley who had gone away chasing the same bright pictures and found the same grey hollowness at the end of them. He did not try to argue them home. He only told them, plainly, what was happening. And he told them the truth about himself: that he had been empty, and now he was not.

And one by one, they began to come.

They came on the dawn buses with their cardboard suitcases and their tired eyes, half-ashamed and half-hoping, telling themselves — just as Rafael had — that they were only coming to visit. And one by one the valley did to them exactly what it had done to him. It did not lecture them, or shame them, or ask them where they had been. It simply put a tool in their hands, and a place at the table, and a song in the evening air, and let the hollowness fill quietly back up with the very thing it had been starving for all along.

Every one who came made the next one easier to come. A brother wrote to a brother. A girl sent word to the friend she had shared the windowless room with. And the road that had carried the young away for so long began, for the first time in a whole generation, to carry them home.

And in the evenings, the plaza filled.

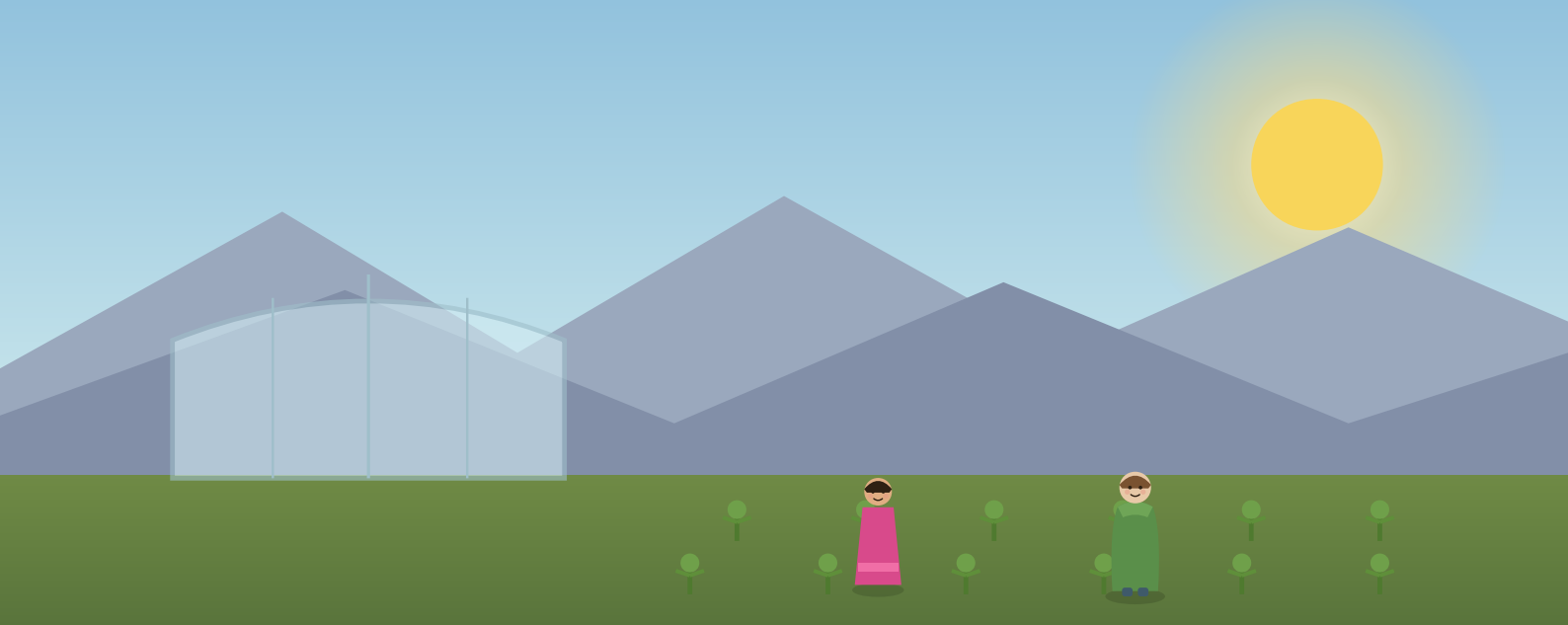
It filled the way it had when the abuelos themselves were young — with people, all the ages of them together, and with music. Don Emilio's songs came up out of his head at last and out into the open air, and it turned out the young ones remembered them after all, somewhere down beneath everything the city had piled on top; the old melodies rose in them like water finding a channel it had not forgotten. Someone brought out a drum. Someone found a flute. And the children who had sat sad and small on the cold stone steps not so many months before could not now have found a spare moment to sit if they had wanted one.

The valley was waking. You could feel it in the air, the way you feel the morning coming before ever the sun is up — a lightening, a stirring, a long-held breath about to be let go.

The seed the children had planted in the dark had done the thing that seeds do. It had broken open. It had sent its first green shoot up into the light.

And it was only, only the beginning.

. . .



CHAPTER Nine

The Greenhouse and the Gardens

the valley feeds itself

The little plot behind Kusi's house was not so little anymore.

Through the season it had grown — first a green fuzz, then leaves, then the heavy secret swelling underground — until the morning came when they dug their very first harvest, and out of the dark earth came potatoes of every colour: red and gold and deep violet and one so dark it was nearly blue. The children held them up, dirt to their elbows, laughing, as though they had pulled treasure out of the ground. Which, of course, they had.

But one plot could not feed a valley. So they thought bigger.

With Mama Rosa's ancient seeds and the knowing of a dozen abuelos, gardens began to open all over Písac — in yards, and on the terraces the ancestors had carved and everyone had let go to weeds. The old crops came home: the hundred potatoes, the rainbow corn, the strong small grains that had fed the valley for a thousand years and that the store-bought life had very nearly let slip into forgetting.

And here the young ones who had come home brought a gift of their own.

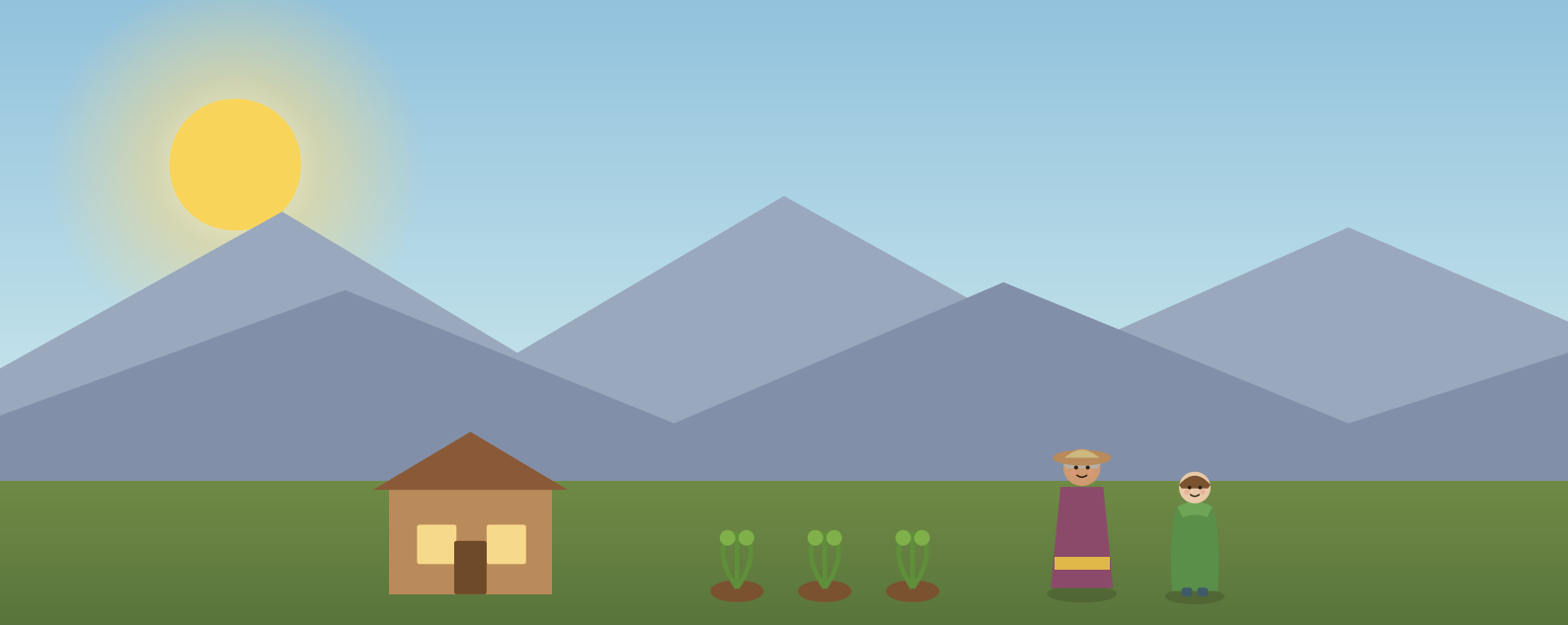
For the city had not been *only* empty. Rafael, in his grey years there, had learned things — how to build, how to fix, how to make a stubborn thing work — and now he turned all of it to good. He and the returned youth built

greenhouses: clever warm rooms of glass and light where green things could grow even through the cold clear nights of the high mountains, when the frost would once have killed them. It was new. It was not the old way. And the abuelos, far from minding, were delighted — for this too was the valley's oldest law, only wearing new clothes. *Ayni*, the giving that goes both ways. The mountains had given Rafael his roots; the city had given him a skill; and now he laid the two down together in the same soil, and everyone ate.

The food that had come, not so long before, in crinkling bags from the store — bright and sweet and empty — came now once more from the ground, where all food had always truly come from. And it tasted, the children all agreed, of something the bags had never once held. It tasted of the hands that grew it. It tasted of home.

By the year's end, Písaq was feeding itself. Not because anyone had bought it the means, but because they had grown it — together, out of the earth and the old knowledge and one another. The abundance the city had promised Rafael and never delivered was here at last, warm and real and shared in his own two hands. And no one had paid a single coin for it.

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CHAPTER Ten

Sumaq Kawsay — The Healing House

the valley grows well

Of all the things the quiet years had taken from the valley, the heaviest was this: the people had not been well.

It had crept in slowly, the way all of it had. The old foods that kept a body strong had given way to the bright, empty ones. The healing plants that grew on the very hills had been traded for costly boxes from the pharmacy in town, bought with money that was always short. And a sickness that has no name — the quiet ache of people who have half-forgotten who they are — had settled over the valley like a low grey cloud. Bodies hurt. Hearts were heavy. And too many, like Mama Benita before her roof was raised, had simply learned to bear it alone.

The children had seen it in the faces of the elders they visited. And now, with the gardens green and the plaza singing, they turned to it.

Don Feliciano led the way, of course — the old man who knew every plant on the mountain. He walked the high hills again, though his knees complained the whole way, and this time a dozen children walked beside him, and they learned: the grey-green leaf for the aching stomach, the flower that brings down a fever, the root that quiets a cough, the herb that unknots a worried mind. A hundred green medicines, growing free on the slopes above their heads, that the valley had all but forgotten it owned.

And they built a house for it — a place where the plants could be gathered and dried and made ready, where the sick could come and be tended, where an old healer's knowledge and a young one's willing hands could meet. They raised it with a *mink'a*, the whole town lending a shoulder; and when it was finished they gave it the truest name they knew.

They called it *Sumaq Kawsay*. *The beautiful life*.

But the deepest medicine in that house was not any leaf or root, and the children discovered it almost by accident — while the abuelos smiled to watch them find what they themselves had known all along. It was this: that so much of the sickness had been *loneliness*. That a great part of what ailed the valley was simply that people had come to feel unseen, and unneeded, and alone. And so the house healed that first. No one who came to Sumaq Kawsay was ever left alone with their pain. *Mana pi sapallanchu*. There was always a hand to hold, a warm cup, a face that was truly glad to see them.

And so the valley began, quietly, to grow well.

The sick began to thrive. The sad began to laugh again. Colour came back into faces that had been grey a long, long time. It did not happen all at once, and it did not happen by any magic — it happened by good food, and green medicine, and care, and belonging, which are (the abuelos said) the only medicines that have ever truly worked. People came from farther and farther to sit a while in the healing house, and they left carrying not only a remedy in their hand but something warmer in their chest: the remembered feeling of being well, and held, and home.

Sumaq Kawsay. It was not the name of the house alone. It was becoming, once again, the name of the whole valley.

. . .



CHAPTER Eleven

Caring for Pachamama

the giving that returns

There was one patient left, and it was the greatest of them all. It was the valley itself.

The children had been so busy tending the people that it took Illa, one clear morning, to stop and see the whole of it. The hillsides that in the old stories had stood dark with forest were bare now, their trees long since cut and never replaced, the naked earth sliding away a little more with every season's rain. The stream that ran through the town — that ought to have run silver and singing — carried instead the bright, sad drift of plastic and the town's forgotten waste. The Earth that fed them all had been taken from, harvest after harvest, and given almost nothing back.

And to give nothing back, as every child in the valley now understood in their bones, is the one thing the old law does not allow.

"Pachamama feeds us," Illa said quietly, looking up at the bare brown hills. "Every single day of our lives. And what have we ever given her?"

So they turned, at last, to the Earth herself.

They began with the hills. The children carried seedlings up the bare slopes — the native trees, the ones that truly belonged there, raised from seed in the new greenhouses — and they planted them by the hundred, and then by the thousand: little green promises dotting the brown hillside, trees that would still be standing, tall and full of birds, long after the children were

grandparents themselves. The elders walked with them and showed them where the old springs had once risen, and how the roots of a forest call the lost water home.

They cleaned the stream next, wading in to lift the waste from the water until it ran clear once more over the stones, the way it had when the abuelos were small. And they made a place for the town's leavings, so that what could go back to the earth did — becoming dark, rich food for the very gardens — and what could not was gathered up and kept away from the water and the fields.

It was slow, and it was not glamorous, and there was no one anywhere to pay them a coin for a moment of it. But little by little, the valley answered them. The hillsides softened with green. The water ran clear and cold again, and the birds came back to drink from it. And *Pachamama*, tended at last by the very hands she had fed for so long, began — like the people, like everything in that valley now — to heal.

For this was the thing the children understood now, all the way down: the thing the long grey forgetting had made the whole world forget. That you cannot only take. That everything alive is bound to everything else by the same old law — the giving that returns, *ayni* — the people to the elders, the elders to the children, the valley to the Earth, and the Earth, endlessly and without being asked, back to them all.

The seed had become a garden. The garden was becoming a whole living valley. And still — still — it was only beginning.

. . .



CHAPTER Twelve

The House of Culture

the valley remembers its song

A people is not only a body to be fed and healed. A people is also a song. And the valley's songs, like everything else, had been going quiet.

So once the gardens were green and the healing house was full of life, the children turned to the last and deepest thing — the part you cannot eat and cannot cure, and cannot live without: the culture itself. The music. The stories. The weaving. The dances that the feet of the ancestors had worn into the earth of the plaza a thousand years before.

They built a house for it, as they had built a house for healing — a House of Culture, a warm place to gather the old instruments, to set up the looms, to light a fire and tell the old stories into the dark. And into it came the elders, carrying the treasure that only they still held.

Don Emilio came with his songs — the hundreds of them, the ones he had sung so long only to himself — and now he taught them to anyone who would learn, and it turned out that everyone would. Mama Benita came with her loom and taught the children to weave the whole valley into cloth: the rivers and the mountains, the ancestors and the stars, all of it speaking in coloured thread — a whole library written in wool. And every elder in Písaq, it seemed, carried a story — of how the world was made, of the mountains that were once people, of the clever fox and the patient condor — and by the fire, in the evenings, they gave them all away.

This was *willakuy* — the oldest way of teaching there is, grandmother to grandchild, story poured into an open heart. It was how the valley had carried a thousand years without ever writing a word of it down. And now, at last, it had a home again.

The children learned the dances, stumbling and laughing, while the old ones clapped and corrected and remembered their own young feet. They learned the songs until the melodies lived in them the way they lived in Don Emilio. And slowly the valley filled back up with the sound of itself — not the tinny sound that had leaked so long from the little glowing screens, but the real sound, the deep one, the one made by living hands and living voices in a living place.

A stranger passing through Písaq now, of an evening, might have stopped in the plaza and wondered aloud what grand festival they had stumbled into. And they would have been astonished to learn that it was no festival at all. It was only an ordinary Tuesday. It was only a valley, remembering its own song.

. . .



CHAPTER Thirteen

The Academy of the Ancestors

so it is never lost again

There was a fear the children carried quietly, underneath all the joy. It was Kusi who finally named it, one night by the fire.

"It woke once," she said. "The forgetting. It could wake again." She looked around at the firelit faces. "When Mama Rosa is gone — when all of them are gone — where does it live then? All of it. The seeds, the plants, the songs, the weaving, the way to raise a roof in a single day. How do we make certain it is never almost-lost again?"

And the grandfather's voice came back to her, out of that first golden night: *You will not do it alone.* And she understood what they had to build next.

Not a house this time. A school.

But not a school of desks and screens and children made to sit still and silent — the valley had seen quite enough of what that kind of teaching did. This would be a school of *hands*. A place where the whole of the valley's knowing could be handed on, deliberately, so that it could never again slip through the years and nearly vanish. They called it the Academy of the Ancestors. Every elder in Písac was a teacher there. Every child was a student — and, soon enough, a teacher too.

In its gardens the children learned to grow — every crop, every season, the reading of soil and cloud and moon. In its workshops they learned to build — the old way, with adobe and beam, and the new way Rafael had carried

home from the city, the two set side by side. At Sumaq Kawsay they learned to heal, walking the high hills with Don Feliciano until the hundred green medicines were their own. At the looms and the fireside they learned to weave, and to sing, and to tell. And the young ones who had come back from the city taught as well — their letters and their numbers and their strange, useful city-skills — because *ayni* goes both ways, and every kind of knowing has its place at the table.

And there was one more thing the Academy taught, though it was never written on any wall. It was taught only by the way the elders were, and the way Kusi and Illa and Rafael were: that the ones who lead, in this valley, are simply the ones who serve the most. That to be trusted with much is not to be handed a throne, but a heavier load, and to carry it gladly. The children learned it without a single lesson — the way you learn the shape of your own home, by living inside it.

Now the knowing was safe. Not locked away in one old woman's chest, or fading in one old man's memory, but alive and moving — hand to hand, elder to child, year to year — the way a river is safe: not by being held still, but by being kept flowing.

The forgetting would not come again. The children had seen to that. They had built the one thing that makes a people truly unforgettable to itself: they had taught the next ones how to teach.

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CHAPTER Fourteen

The Feast of the New Dawn

they had become it

And then, one year to the season since three sad children had sat on the cold steps and a warm light had come out of the dusk, the valley threw a feast.

Not a small one. The biggest that anyone could remember — even the oldest abuelo, even Mama Rosa, who was older than anyone. A feast to hold up to the light everything that had grown.

They set the tables the whole length of the plaza, there in the town of Písaq, high in the Sacred Valley of Peru, where the great mountains lean in close to watch. And they filled the tables from the gardens — the hundred potatoes and the rainbow corn and all the food that came from the earth and tasted of home. Don Emilio's songs poured out over everything. The children danced the dances they had once stumbled through and now knew by heart. The healed came, walking easy and laughing. The ones who had come home came, no longer hollow, their arms around the friends they had brought back after them. And the abuelos sat in the place of honour — listened to, needed, loved — and lit up, every one of them, like lamps.

Kusi stood at the edge of it all for a moment, just to look. And she thought of the two who had stepped out of the golden light that first night and told her the valley was only a seed. She looked at the plaza now — full, and singing, and shining — and she thought: *it rose. Grandmother. Grandfather. It rose.*

And though she could never afterward have said quite why, she was suddenly and completely certain that they were there — that they had never really gone far at all, just as they had promised. *Closer than you think*. High above the plaza, unnoticed by nearly everyone, a great dark bird turned one slow circle against the evening sky, tipped a single wing, and was gone. *Kuntur* — carrying word, perhaps, to wherever the old ones wait, that the children had done the very thing they were born to do.

Every story in the valley ends with the same two words, and that night the whole valley *was* the story. *Mosoq Paqariy*. The new dawn. And the secret the grandmother had saved for the very end — that the new dawn is not a time, but a *who* — was no longer a secret at all. You could read it in every face around those long, bright tables. The children had not waited for a new dawn to arrive.

They had become it.

Late in the night, when the little ones had fallen asleep in warm laps and the great fire had burned down to embers, Rafael said the thing that was quietly in all their hearts. He was looking out past the firelight, down the dark valley, toward the other villages where the lights were few.

"They don't have this yet," he said softly. "Taray. Coya. Lamay. All of them — our neighbours." He was not sad when he said it. He was something else, something with a fire in it. "They're still sitting on the cold steps. The way we were."

Kusi followed his gaze down the long dark valley, and felt the coal in her own chest flare up bright and certain.

"Then," she said, "we had better go and tell them."

And that is the next part of the story.

. . .



CHAPTER Fifteen

The Spark That Travels

offered, never pushed

The trouble was, you cannot give someone a new dawn.

The children learned this quickly, and it humbled them. You cannot walk into a neighbour's village and announce that you have found the secret of the good life and they had better start living it at once. That is not how the valley works. It is not how anything true works. A thing like this cannot be pushed. It can only be offered — and caught, the way one candle catches its flame from another: only if the second candle is willing.

So they did not go down to Taray, the nearest village along the river, as teachers. They went as friends.

A small band of them walked the river road one morning — Illa, because no one alive was better at making a stranger feel like family; Rafael, because he had once been the very one who needed catching; and a handful of others, carrying a bundle of Mama Rosa's seeds and nothing else at all. They did not bring a speech. They brought themselves.

Taray eyed them warily at first. Why had the young ones of Písaq come? What did they want? But Illa did not want anything. She only asked questions — about Taray's own gardens, its own elders, its own songs — and listened to the answers as though they were the most fascinating things she had ever heard. Which, to her, they truly were. And slowly the wariness

melted, the way it always does in the warmth of someone who is genuinely, gladly curious about you.

They never said: *do what we did*. They said: come and see what has been growing in Písaq — the elders teaching again, the plaza singing, the sick growing well. Come and see, and if any of it is good to you, it is yours. And they meant every word. They were careful, always, of one thing above all else: they never once said their way was *better*. Only that it was theirs, and it had made them happy, and there was more than enough to go around. A garden, Illa said — she had it from her own abuela — is beautiful because of its many flowers. Not because they are all the same.

And before they left, a few of Taray's children — the curious ones, the ones with the same quiet ache that Kusi had once carried on the cold steps — took a small handful of the seeds. That very evening, in a forgotten corner of Taray, a patch of hard ground was cleared and broken and planted. Exactly as another patch had been cleared and broken and planted, one village and one year away.

It was such a small thing. Just a few seeds in the dark.

But by now, the children of Písaq knew exactly what a few seeds in the dark could do.

. . .



CHAPTER Sixteen

Neighbor Helps Neighbor

no village rises alone

Here is the thing that made it spread like a sunrise, and not like a fire: no village was ever left to rise alone.

When Taray's first gardens came up green, the people of Písac did not simply nod from across the river and go back to their own affairs. They came. They brought their strong backs and their hard-won knowing, and they helped Taray raise its own greenhouse, its own healing house, its own House of Culture — not doing it *for* them, but doing it *with* them, shoulder to shoulder, the way the whole town had once raised Mama Benita's roof in a single day.

And then something happened that was more beautiful than anything the children had planned.

Taray, risen, turned around and did the very same for the next village.

The people of Taray — who only a season before had been the wary ones, the ones sitting on their own cold steps — walked up the valley to Coya, glowing with the particular joy of those who have just been handed something precious and cannot wait to give it away. And beside them walked the people of Písac. And together they helped Coya wake. And then Písac and Taray and Coya, all three, went on to Lamay. And Lamay, risen, joined the growing crowd that climbed the road to San Salvador, and to Calca, and onward down the shining valley.

It was *ayni* — but grown enormous now, ayni between whole villages: today for you, tomorrow for me, pueblo to pueblo, up and down the length of the valley. *Kunan qanpaq, paqarin noqapaq*. No one built alone. No one was left on the cold steps a single season longer than it took the others to reach them.

And each village, as it woke, woke as *itself*. Taray was no copy of Písaq, and Coya no copy of Taray. Each had its own songs, its own dances, its own particular corn, its own way of doing the same deep things. The children had held so faithfully to their one rule that it had become the whole valley's rule: never that one way was better — only that each was a flower, and the valley was growing into a garden, beautiful precisely because of its many different blooms.

And a person standing high on the mountainside in the evening now, looking down, would have seen something they had not seen in a very long time. Lights. Warm lights, coming on one after another down the whole length of the valley — in villages that had sat dark and quiet for years — as though the valley itself were slowly, deliberately, opening its eyes.

. . .



CHAPTER Seventeen

The Valley Woven Together

one ayllu of villages

By the time two more years had turned, you could no longer really say that Písac had awakened, or that Taray had, or Coya. It had grown truer, and far larger, to say something else altogether: the valley was awake.

From Písac at the one end to Ollantaytambo at the other — past Coya and Lamay and Calca and Urubamba, and up to Chinchero on its high wind-swept plain — village after village had lit its gardens and raised its healing houses and remembered its own old songs, each in its own way and its own time, and all of them now joined by the same warm current running between them like the river itself.

And so, one season, they held a gathering such as the Sacred Valley had not seen in living memory. Not one village's feast, but all of them at once: a great meeting of the whole valley, where every pueblo sent its people, its music, its finest food, and its seeds to trade.

It was a wonder to stand in. Taray's weavers traded patterns with the weavers of Urubamba. Calca's healers walked the hills beside Písac's, comparing the green medicines each had saved. Old songs that one village had kept and another had lost were given freely across the fires, so that nothing true could ever be wholly lost again while a single village still remembered it. And the seeds Mama Rosa had folded into Kusi's hands, that long-ago golden afternoon, had multiplied into a hundred hands and travelled the length of the valley and come back richer than they went — for

that is what seeds do, and songs, and love, and every other thing that is only made greater by being given away.

This was the *ayllu* — the ancient word for the community, the family beyond blood — but grown now to a size the ancestors themselves might scarcely have dreamed: a whole valley become a single ayllu, dozens of villages beating as one great heart, while every one of them kept its own beloved face.

Kusi — not quite a child any longer now — stood in the middle of that enormous, joyful crowd and remembered a seed held up in the golden light, and a voice that had said: *you will lift it higher than it has ever been*. She thought the grandfather would be pleased. She was somehow quite sure that he was.

But that evening, as the great gathering wound down and the fires burned low, Kusi found herself looking not *down* the valley — which was full of light now — but *up*. Up past the terraces and the tree line, up to where the great mountains stood dark and silent against the stars. And she knew that up there, in the high places the roads did not reach, were other communities still. The forgotten ones. The ones even the waking valley had not yet climbed to reach — the ones who had been waiting longest of all.

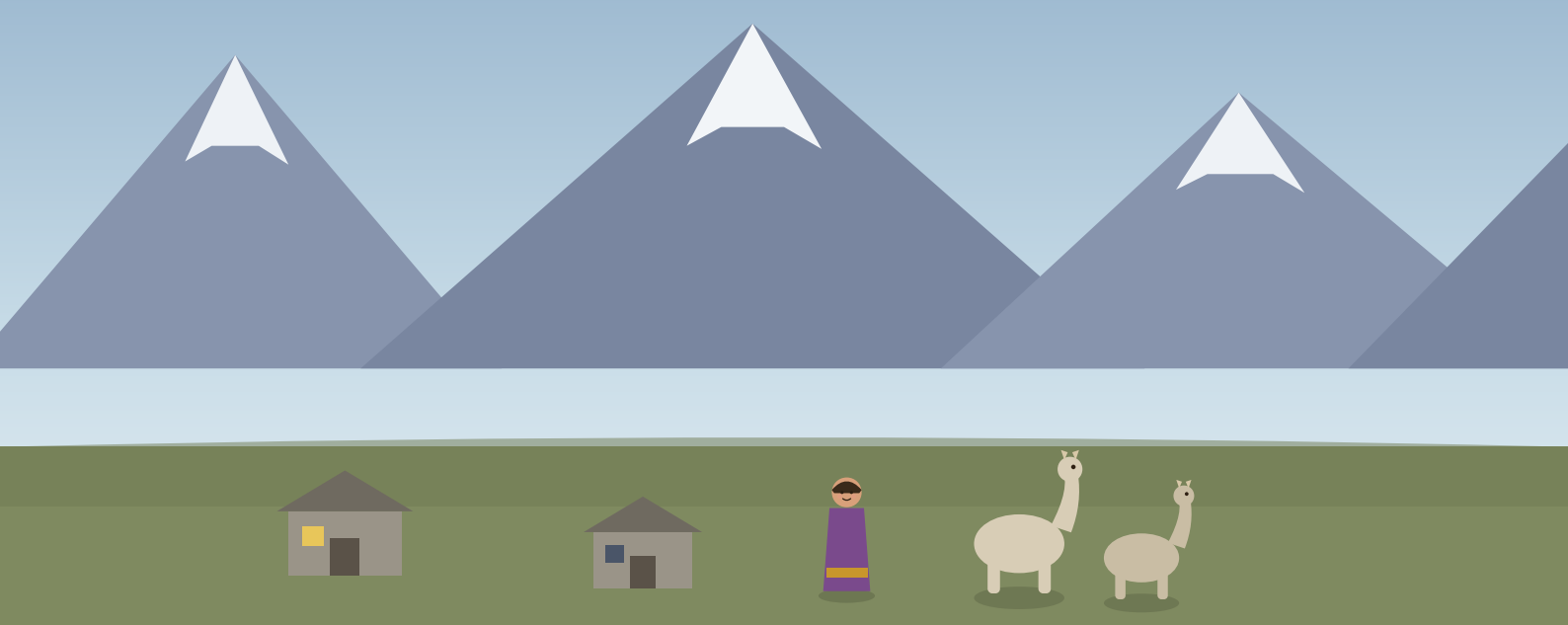
She caught Illa's eye across the firelight and saw that her friend was gazing up at the same dark mountains, thinking the very same thought.

"We're not finished, are we," said Illa softly.

"No," said Kusi. "Not nearly."

And that is the next part of the story.

. . .



CHAPTER Eighteen

The Ones the World Left Behind

the high communities

There is a Peru that the maps show, and there is a Peru that they do not.

Above the Sacred Valley — higher than the terraces climb, higher than the roads dare to go, up where the air grows thin and cold and the clouds walk along the ground — there are villages. They have stood there longer than the valley towns, longer than almost anything. And the modern world, in all its rushing, had simply forgotten they were there at all.

The children knew their names, the way you know the names of distant relatives you have never met: Chahuaytiri. Pampallacta. Amaru. Paru Paru. Cuyo Grande. Communities of stone houses and llama herds and potato fields tilted against the very sky, where people still lived much as their great-great-grandparents had — because no one had ever come up to tell them there was another way, and, it must be said, because no one had ever come up to help them, either.

They had the least of anyone. No greenhouse had ever warmed their brutal nights; no healing house had ever eased their sick; no road had ever carried a doctor or a teacher up to their doors. If the long grey forgetting had been unkind to the valley, it had been unkind still to the heights — for the heights it had not so much forgotten as never troubled to remember in the first place.

And so, of all the places that needed the new dawn, these needed it most of all. The children knew they had to climb.

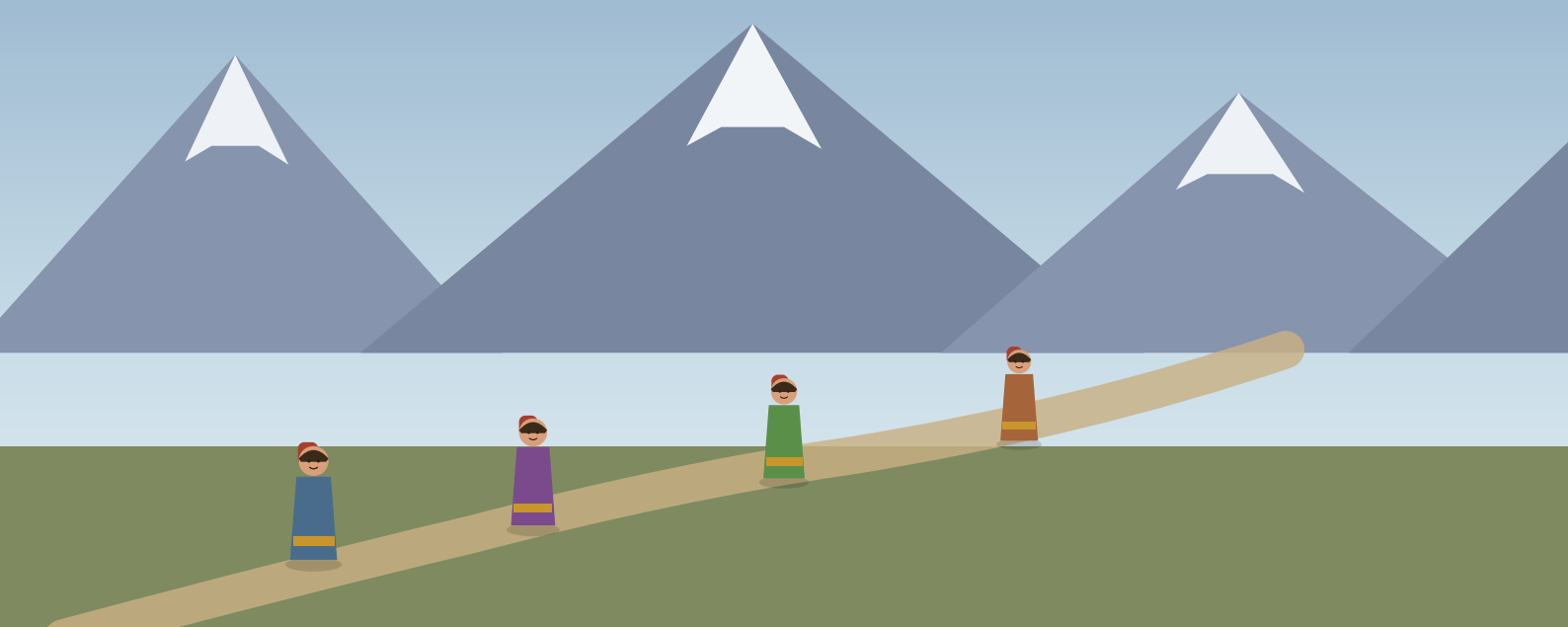
But before they went, Mama Rosa called Kusi to her — Mama Rosa, very old now, who did not leave her chair much anymore, though her eyes had lost none of their light. She took the girl's hand.

"Listen to me," she said. "You are going up to help them. Good. But you go up to *listen* more than you speak. Those people up there —" and she pointed a bent finger toward the ceiling, toward the peaks beyond it — "when the world came and changed everything down here, it never reached them. Do you understand what that means, child? It means they *kept* things. Things we lost. Things I myself only half remember now. They are not behind us." Her grip tightened. "In the oldest way there is, they are ahead of us. You are not climbing up to teach your grandparents. You are climbing up to *find* them."

Kusi did not entirely understand her, that day.

She would.

. . .



CHAPTER Nineteen

The Long Climb

the seed runs downhill

The climb was hard.

The road gave out early, and after that it was only a thread of a path, switching back and forth up slopes so steep the children were often looking not at the ground ahead but at the ground *above*. The air thinned until every breath had to be worked for. The valley shrank behind and below them until the whole shining length of it — all those villages they had helped to wake — was just a green ribbon far down in the world, and the great peaks that had always stood so high above Písaq now stood level with them, and then, at last, below.

They carried seeds, and tools, and medicines from Sumaq Kawsay, and warm woven things, and their strong young hope. They were ready to give it all away. They were ready, they thought, to find people who had nothing.

And then they came over the final rise, into the village of Amaru, and stopped, and stared.

It was poor — there was no denying that. The houses were stone and small, the wind was a knife, and life up here asked more of a body in one day than the valley asked in a week. But the children had come expecting emptiness, and what they found instead struck them silent.

For the people of the heights had never forgotten.

Because the world had never come to make them forget, they had kept it all — whole, and unbroken, and alive. The old ceremonies the valley was only now painstakingly relearning, these people had never once stopped performing. The songs Don Emilio had guarded like the last coals of a dying fire, up here whole villages sang without thinking, the way other people breathe. And their seeds — when an old woman of Amaru opened her store to show them, Kusi's breath caught in her throat, for it made even Mama Rosa's precious bundle look small: potatoes in colours and kinds the valley had lost the very names of, seeds that had grown in that thin cold air for four thousand years without a single break in the chain.

They had come to bring the mountain the seed. And the mountain, it turned out, was where the seed had been kept safest all along.

Kusi understood Mama Rosa at last. *You are not climbing up to teach your grandparents. You are climbing up to find them.*

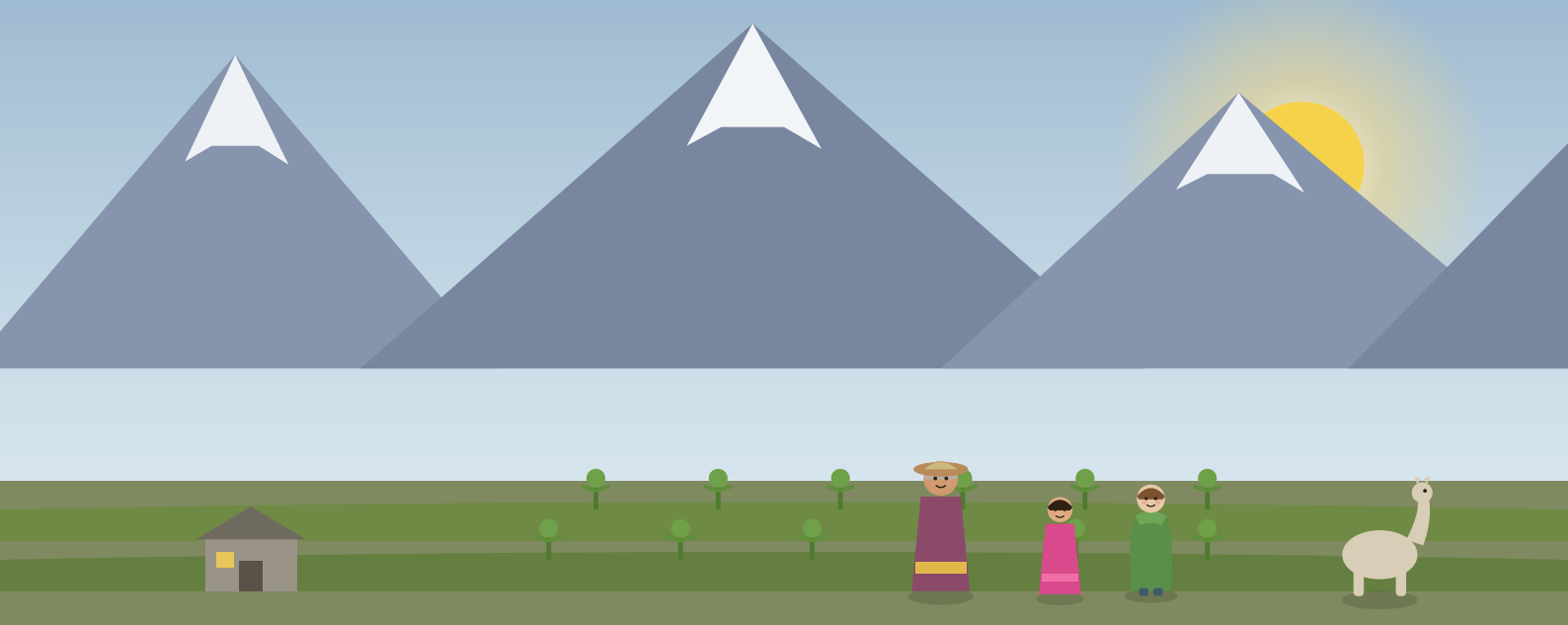
And yet the giving still ran both ways, as it always must — for that is the law. Because though the people of Amaru were rich in the old soul, they were weary in the body, and terribly alone, and had long believed the world below had forgotten them forever. And now here were the valley's children, come up the terrible path with warm blankets and medicine and, most of all, with the simple staggering fact of having come at all. Of having remembered. Of having *climbed*.

An old man of Amaru wept, and was not ashamed of it. "We thought," he said, "that no one would ever come again."

"We came," said Kusi. "And we will keep coming. You are part of the valley. You always were. We only forgot the way up. We will not forget it again."

That night, high above the world, valley and mountain sat together around one fire — the ones who had gained the body's new skills, and the ones who had guarded the soul's old ones — and each gave the other what they carried, and neither counted, and both grew rich. **Ayni**. Always, in the end, ayni.

. . .



CHAPTER Twenty

The Highest Gardens

Waqaychaq, the guardians

They stayed a long while in the heights that season, and came again the next, and the next, until the path up to Amaru and Chahuaytiri and Pampallacta and Paru Paru was no longer a forgotten thread but a road walked so often it wore smooth.

And between the valley and the mountain a great exchange began — the richest of all the exchanges yet.

Up went the things the heights had been too alone and too cold to build for themselves: the clever greenhouses, so that even at the roof of the world green things could grow through the killing nights; the medicines of Sumaq Kawsay; strong young hands for the hardest of the work. And down came the treasure of the heights: the four-thousand-year seeds, the unbroken songs, the ceremonies kept whole, the deep old way of living with the mountain that the valley had held only in pieces. The oldest potatoes of Paru Paru were planted once more in the gardens of Písaq. The songs of Amaru were sung again in the House of Culture. The seed did not only climb. The seed came *down*.

For this was the secret the mountain taught the valley — the one Mama Rosa had tried to give Kusi at the very beginning: that the ones the world calls "behind" are so often, in the things that matter most, the furthest ahead. That the poorest-looking people can be the richest keepers. That

progress is not always forward, and treasure is not always shiny, and the future of a whole people can be safest of all in the hands the present forgot.

The elders of the heights had a name for what they were, and for what they had done through all the long forgotten years — guarding a thousand years of life in the hardest place on earth, while the world below rushed past and never once looked up. They were *Waqaychaq* — the guardians. The keepers. And now, at last, they were not keeping it alone. The whole valley, floor to peak, had become one single thing: the high and the low, the old and the new, each holding what the other had nearly lost — the way two hands hold one bowl of water, so that not a single drop is spilled.

Kusi stood one evening in the highest garden of all, up at Amaru, among rows of potatoes older than any kingdom, with the whole living valley spread out green and shining far below and the great peaks burning gold above — and she felt the two grandparents so near that she almost turned to look for them. *You will lift it higher than it has ever been.* Higher, she thought, and had to laugh at the word, standing as she was at the very top of the world. Higher than it had ever been. In every single way there was.

The valley was whole now. Truly whole — from the river to the snow, from the newest greenhouse to the oldest song — one *ayllu* at last, one family from the valley floor all the way to the roof of the sky.

And a thing that whole, and that alight, does not stay hidden for long.

Down in the valley, the travelers had begun to come. Not many, at first. But they came from far away, from across the seas — and they were beginning to notice that something here was different. Something here was *awake*.

And that is the next part of the story.

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CHAPTER Twenty-One

The Valley That Shone

a light lit to be seen

Years passed, the way years do — quickly, when they are full.

And there came an evening, though no one could ever have told you exactly which one, when the valley was simply, wholly, *well*.

Every village had its gardens now, and its greenhouses, and its healing house, and its House of Culture, and its Academy where the elders taught and the children learned and, in their own turn, taught. Every high community had been climbed to and welcomed home. The seeds were safe, in a thousand hands. The songs were safe, in a thousand throats. The forgetting was over.

But it was so much more than the sum of the things they had built. It was the way the people themselves had become. The sick had grown well, and stayed well — for now they ate from the earth, and were healed by the plants, and were held by the *ayllu*. The sad had grown joyful, and stayed joyful — for no one, anymore, was left alone. The young had come home and found the very thing the city had promised and never given. And the old had been given back the two things the modern world had quietly taken from them: to be needed, and to be heard. Farmers and weavers, healers and singers, teachers and builders and grandmothers and children — every kind of person had a place, and a gift, and a part in the whole.

And here is the strangest and most beautiful part — the part that visitors could never quite believe when they first heard it. No one had done it for money. There had been no rich man to pay for it, no government to fund it, no one at all to *buy* the valley its new life. The people had simply decided, together, to build with their own hands and their own love the very things that money is only ever a way of chasing: enough to eat, a warm dry home, medicine for the sick, beauty, music, and the company of people who will not leave you alone in the dark. They had wanted the harvest, so they had planted it. They had wanted the song, so they had sung it. And it turned out that almost everything a human heart truly needs cannot be bought at all. It can only be grown, and shared — and it grows the more it is shared.

So on that evening — and on every evening after it — if you had stood high on the mountainside and looked down, you would have seen the whole valley shining. Warm light in every window, up and down its whole length, from the river to the snow. A valley of light, in a world that had grown very dark, and very tired.

And a light like that, the old ones always said, is not lit in order to be hidden. A light like that is lit to be seen.

. . .



CHAPTER Twenty-Two

The Travelers Who Carried It Home

the dawn crosses the ocean

Travelers had always come to the Sacred Valley.

For as long as anyone could remember they had come — from every country in the world — to walk among the old stones of the ancestors, to climb to the ruined temples in the clouds, to search for the mystery they had heard lived in these mountains. They came seeking something. Most of them could not have told you quite what.

But now they found something they had not come looking for at all.

They came for the ruins — the silent stones — and found instead a people gloriously, riotously alive. They had expected the ghost of a great culture, kept safe behind ropes in the past. And they walked straight into the middle of one that was awake, and building, and singing, right now, in the present tense: children carrying seeds up green terraces, grandmothers teaching at the loom, a whole valley of light. It stopped them where they stood. It was not what the guidebooks had promised. It was so very much more.

And it did something to them.

Because when a traveler sat down at one of those long feast tables, and was welcomed like family, and watched an old man weep for joy at being listened to, and tasted food a child had grown with her own two hands — something

would stir in them, far down: a memory that was not quite their own. They would think of their own country, so far away. Of their own grandmother's village, going quiet. Of their own old songs, half-forgotten. Of the good and true things their own ancestors had known, that their own rushing world had let slip through its fingers. And they would feel, sometimes for the first time in their whole lives, a homesickness for a home they had never known they had lost.

The valley never once told them to become *like* the valley. That was never the gift. Illa said as much to them, and so did Mallki — who understood both worlds better than anyone — again and again, to every traveler who asked how they might carry this home: *Don't copy us. We are one flower; you are another. Go home and find your own roots — your own seeds, your own elders, your own songs. The good life does not only grow here. It can grow anywhere. It is already sleeping, right now, in the soil of wherever you come from. Go home, and wake it.*

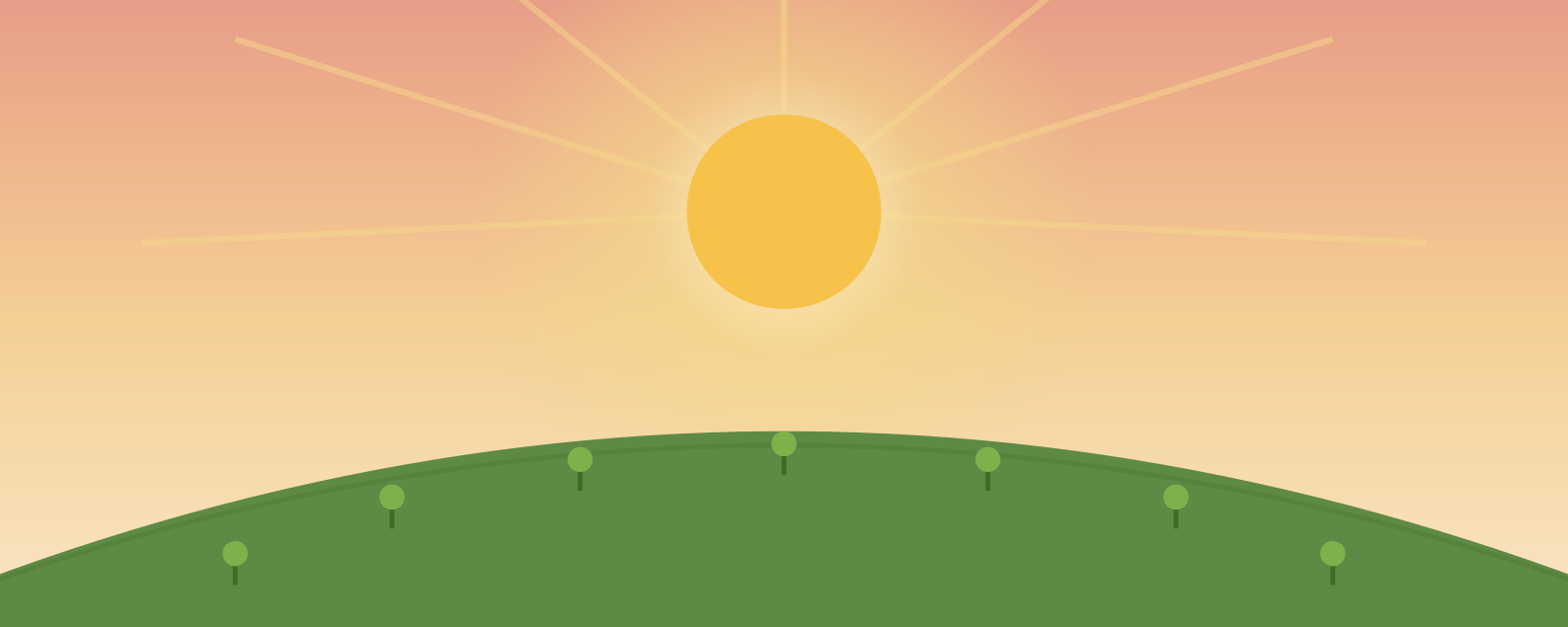
A garden is beautiful because of its many flowers. Not because they are all the same.

And so they went home — to a hundred countries, across every sea — carrying no souvenir that would fit inside a suitcase, but something far larger, and far lighter: a seed. And here and there, in lands the children of Písaq would never see, gardens began to be planted. Elders began to be visited. And villages that had been going quiet, in valleys with other names under other skies, began — very softly, one small seed at a time — to wake.

The new dawn was no longer only the valley's.

It had crossed the ocean.

. . .



CHAPTER Twenty-Three

Mosoq Paqariy — The New Dawn

the great turning

The ancestors had a word for it. They had known this would come — had known it, and named it, and waited for it, across a thousand years.

They called it *Pachakuti*. The great turning. The overturning of a world grown old and unwell, and the birth, up out of its own ground, of a new one. The old ones had always said it would come again. What they had perhaps not said — what maybe even they had not known — was *how* it would begin.

Not with an army. Not with a king, or a fortune, or a great and terrible event.

It began with three children who could not sleep, on a set of cold stone steps, and a warm light that came out of the dusk, and a single seed pressed into the dark ground the next morning by a few small hands.

That is how the largest things begin. It is how they have always begun. The greatest tree in the whole forest was once a seed small enough to lose in the palm of your hand — and it did not become the tree by force, or by hurry, or by being bought. It became the tree by being planted, and by not giving up, through all the long dark patient work of the roots that no one ever sees.

And now the turning was moving across the whole face of the earth. Not as one valley conquering the world — that is the old, tired way, and it was exactly the way that was now ending — but as valley after valley, land after land, people after people, each one waking to itself, each remembering its own good life, each becoming its own flower in the one great garden of the world. Dawn does not break in a single place and stop. It rolls on around the turning earth, and touches every land in its turn, and leaves none in the dark.

Mosoq Paqariy. The new dawn. The ancestors' promise, kept at last — and kept, as it turned out, by the smallest and the least likely and the most overlooked of all: by children, and by grandmothers, and by the forgotten people of the heights. By exactly the ones the tired old world had counted for nothing.

They had turned it. The children had turned the age.

And the sun rose, that morning, on a world that was — very quietly, and everywhere at once — beginning to remember itself.

. . .



CHAPTER Twenty-Four

This Is Real — And It Is You

the door opens

And now the story must tell you one last thing — the most important thing of all. And to tell it, the story has to do something that stories almost never do. It has to look up, off the page, straight at you: the one who is reading it.

Because here is the secret that was hidden inside this whole book from the very beginning, saved — the way the grandmother saved hers — for the very last page.

This is not only a story.

Pisac is a real place. You could go there. The Sacred Valley is real — the river, the terraces, the great watching mountains, the high forgotten communities with their true names: Amaru, Chahuaytiri, Pampallacta, Paru Paru. They are real. They are there right now, as you read this.

And **Allin Kawsay** — the good life, the beautiful life, the valley of light — is real too. It is being born. Not once upon a time, but *now*, in your own lifetime, in the very same world in which you are holding this book. The children in this story are the children of that valley. And the seed they planted in the dark is real, and it is growing, and the dawn they became is really, truly, at this very moment, beginning to rise.

You were not only reading about it. By reading it — by letting it in — you have already become, a little, a part of it.

Do you remember what the grandfather said, that first golden night, when the children asked how they could ever do so enormous a thing? He said: *Begin small. Tomorrow, plant one thing. The rest will follow.*

He was not only speaking to them.

Wherever you are — whatever country, whatever valley, whatever kind of home — there is a garden near you waiting to be planted. There is an elder near you, on a bench in the sun, with a whole world inside them and no one stopping to listen. There is something old and good and true, in the place that you come from, that is quietly going quiet. You do not have to wait until you are grown. You do not have to wait for money, or for permission, or for someone else to go first. You can begin exactly the way they began — small, and today, and with love. Plant one thing. Visit one elder. Gather one friend. That is how every new dawn in the whole history of the world has ever begun. And it is how this one will begin, too, wherever you are.

Because the grandmother told the children the secret — and now the story tells it to you, plainly, one last time, the truest thing that it knows.

The new dawn is not a time. It is not a someday. It is not a somewhere else.

Mosoq Paqariy.
*The new dawn is **you**.*

High in the mountains of Peru, where the rivers run cold and clear, the valley is waking. And it is waiting — with its gardens, and its songs, and its long table set — for all the other valleys of the world to wake up too.

Including yours.

Including you.

Kausachun Allin Kawsay · Mosoq Paqariy.
Long live the good life. And the new dawn — which is you.



MOSOQ PAQARIY • BOOK TWO

The Chronicles of the Sacred Valley

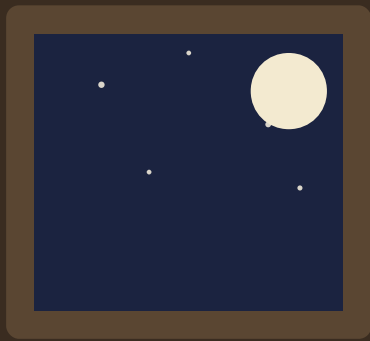


THE STORY BECOMES REAL

The Door in the Story

where the tale becomes a life

AMISTAD SAGRADA • YACHAY WASICHA • ANCIENT APUS • PISAQ



CHAPTER One

The Book That Read You Back

the recursion begins

High in the mountains of Peru, in the town of Písaq, in a small house with a warm lamp burning, a girl named Nina was reading a book.

It was late. Outside her window the great mountains stood black against the stars, and the town had gone quiet, and everyone else in her house was long asleep. But Nina could not sleep. She had reached the very last pages of her book, and she could not have put it down if the roof had blown clean off the house.

It was a book about her valley. About children much like her, in a town much like hers, who had grown sad one evening because the world was slowly going quiet — and who had been visited, on a sleepless night, by two grandparents made of golden light. It was a book about a seed planted in the dark, and a valley that woke, and a dawn that spread from one small town all the way to the whole wide world.

And now Nina had come to its very last page. And on that page were four words, set apart, all alone — the way the most important things sometimes are.

She read them slowly.

The new dawn is you.

And Nina looked up from the book.

Now — here is where something strange happens, and I must tell you about it carefully, because it is the truest thing in this whole book.

When Nina looked up from her book, she was doing the very same thing that *you* are doing, this very moment, holding *this* one.

She was reading. You are reading. She was holding a book about the valley. You are holding a book about the valley. And when she read those four words — *the new dawn is you* — and felt something turn over quietly in her chest, some small door she had never known was there swing open, just a crack... well. Perhaps you felt it too, a moment ago. That little turn. That quiet opening.

Because there is a doorway inside each of us — a small, still place of silence and knowing — and certain words, read on certain nights, have a way of finding it, and knocking.

Nina sat very still, and listened to the knocking.

The book had said the new dawn was *her*. But that was only a story... wasn't it? A beautiful story. Kusi and Illa and the little tree named Mallki, the golden grandparents, the whole valley of light — surely they were made only of words and wishes. Weren't they?

And yet.

The longer Nina sat with it, the less certain she felt. Because the valley in the book was *her* valley. The mountains in the book were the very mountains outside her window. The market, the river, the terraces climbing the hillside — she knew them all; she had walked them that very day. And if the places were real... then how much else might be?

She could not sleep. She climbed out of bed and padded to her window, and looked out at the dark shapes of the mountains — the *Apus*, the book had called them, the old ones who watch over the valley — and she felt exactly the way the children in the story had felt, on that first sleepless night, before the light came. As though she were waiting for something. As though something were about to begin.

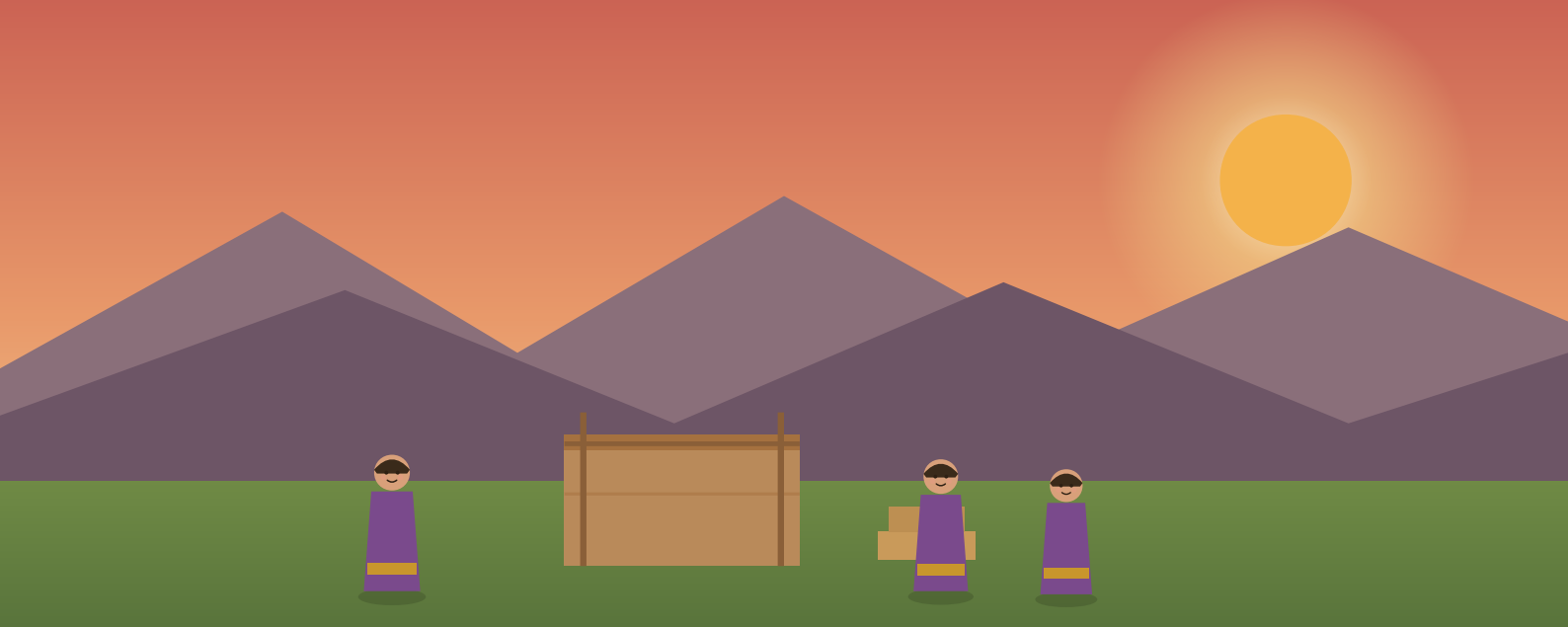
She did not know it yet. But she was right.

Because the book in Nina's hands was not quite finished with her. In fact — and this is the secret the whole story has been keeping, saved until now, the way a grandmother saves the sweetest thing for last — the book was only just beginning to tell her the truth.

And the truth was this: it was all real. And it had been real, and quietly growing, in the dark, the entire time she was reading.

Let me show you how.

. . .



CHAPTER Two

The Builders No One Saw

the scaffolding of grace

Here is the secret.

All the while that the story was being told — all the while the children in a hundred houses were reading it by their lamps, and the great world outside was rushing on about its loud and busy business — something was being built in the valley. Quietly. So quietly that almost no one noticed it at all.

Not built by magic. That is the part people find hardest to believe, and it is the most wonderful part of all. It was built by *hands*. Real hands, ordinary hands — the hands of people who loved the valley and loved its children — working, year after patient year, while everyone else was looking the other way.

They bought a small piece of land. They laid a foundation, stone by stone. They raised walls of adobe, the old way, from the very mud and straw of the valley itself. They gathered teachers, and tools, and seeds, and books. They mended and prepared and made ready — the way a gardener turns and waters a bed of soil long before there is a single green thing to show for it. The way a mother makes a warm and waiting home in the quiet months before her baby is born.

For fifteen years they did this. Fifteen years — longer than Nina had been alive.

And they did it quietly, on purpose. Not to hide, but because the truest and deepest things are almost always built that way. Not with trumpets and announcements and crowds — but quietly, steadily, daily, by a few faithful hands, off to the side of wherever everyone else is looking. A seed, after all, does its most important work underground, in the dark, where no one can see. No one ever claps for a seed. It simply grows, because growing is what it was made to do.

But here is the most beautiful reason of all that they built it so quietly. They were building it *for the children*. They wanted it to be ready — truly ready, finished and warm and waiting — so that one day the children could simply walk in, and find it done. The way you sometimes wake on a cold morning to discover that someone who loves you rose before you in the dark, and lit the fire, and made the breakfast, and warmed the whole room — so that all you had to do was open your eyes, and be welcomed.

That is what love does, when no one is watching. It rises early. It gets everything ready. And then it steps quietly back, and lets you think you found the morning all by yourself.

In the story — do you remember? — the golden grandparents promised the children that they were *closer than you think*. Well. So were the builders. All through the story, just on the other side of its pages, in the very same valley where Nina now lay awake, real people were raising something real, stone by patient stone, so that the story would have somewhere to come true.

And the heart of everything they built — the first stone, the warm center, the reason for all the rest — was a house.

A very particular kind of house. A house built not for sleeping, nor for storing grain, but for something the valley had almost forgotten how to do.

A house for *remembering*.

And it had a name.

. . .



CHAPTER Three

Yachay Wasicha — The House of Learning

story and life become one

They called it Yachay Wasicha.

In the old tongue of the valley, *yachay* means *to know* — not the cold knowing of facts drilled at a desk, but the warm knowing of the heart and the hands. And *wasi* means *home*. So Yachay Wasicha is the little house where knowing is made. The home of learning. The place where the children of the valley come to remember who they are.

But you must not picture the sort of school you might be imagining — the kind with rows of hard desks, and children made to sit still and silent, and a clock on the wall dragging its hands toward the moment they can finally run outside. Yachay Wasicha is nothing like that. The valley had seen quite enough of that kind of learning, and of what it does to the light in a child's eyes.

No — Yachay Wasicha is a house of gardens, where the children learn to grow. It is a house of looms and drums and songs, where the elders come to teach the old ways with their own hands. It is a house of stories told by the fire, of seeds counted into open palms, of bread still warm from the earth. It is a house where you learn with your *whole self* — your hands in the soil, your voice in the song, your heart wide open — and where no one, not once,

is made to feel that their own valley is something to be corrected, or grown out of, or left behind.

It is a bridge. That is the truest word for it. Not a wall, built to keep the great rushing modern world out — but a *bridge*, so that the children can one day walk into that world whole, and rooted, and unafraid, carrying the valley safe inside them, and offering the world a gentler, truer way to live.

And now I will tell you the thing that made Nina sit straight up in her bed, the moment she finally understood it.

The children in Yachay Wasicha — the *real* children, laughing in its real courtyard, in the real morning sun, this very day — are the children of the story.

Kusi, whose name means joy. Illa, whose name means light. Mallki, the little tree carried across the sea. They were never *only* made of words. They were drawn from real children — children with real names and real laughter, who really do go to a real house of learning, in a real town called Pisaq, high in the real Sacred Valley of Peru.

And the book that told their story? It was written from inside that very house. About that very house. For the children of that very house.

Which meant — and this was the moment the little door swung all the way open in Nina's chest — that the book she was holding was not a story about someone far away, and long ago.

It was a story about *her*. About her friends. About her valley, and her life.

She was not reading a book.

She was reading a mirror.

Nina looked down at the book in her hands, and then out at the dark mountains, and then back down at the book — and she understood, for the very first time, that the two were the same. That the pages and the valley were one single thing. That she had been living inside the story all along, and had only just now looked up, and noticed.

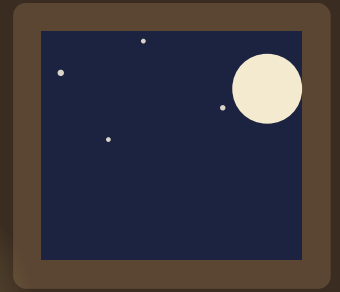
Somewhere out in the dark and sleeping town — though Nina could not see it from her window — the door of Yachay Wasicha stood quietly waiting for the morning. Waiting, as it had waited through fifteen patient years, for the children to come and walk in.

And the only question left in all the world — the question this book was written to ask her, and, if you have come this far, to ask you too — was no longer *is it real?*

It was: *will you come in?*

And that question has an answer. The answer is the rest of this book. So turn the page, my friend, and let us go on together.

• • •



CHAPTER Four

The Prayer in the Cradle

what was whispered into you

Nina did not sleep that night. And in the morning — though her feet seemed to decide it a little before her head did — she found herself walking down through the waking town, past the market stalls being set out for the day, toward a small house at the very edge of Písaq, behind a faded blue door.

She knew the house. Everyone knew it. A very old woman lived there — alone, or she had, before the children of the valley began coming to sit with her, years ago. Nina had passed that blue door a thousand times without a second thought.

But she had never, until last night, known the old woman's name.

Now she did. Because she had read it, in the book. The forgotten grandmother with the woven bundle of thousand-year seeds — the one the children remembered. **Mama Rosa.**

Nina's hand was shaking a little as she knocked. And when the blue door opened, and the old woman stood there — small, and bent, and impossibly old, with eyes that had not lost a single drop of their light — Nina's breath caught in her throat. Because it was *her*. The woman from the pages, standing in her own doorway, in the real morning, in the real world.

Mama Rosa looked at Nina for a long moment. And then she smiled, as though she had been expecting her all along.

"You finished the book," she said. It was not a question.

Nina could only nod.

"Come in, then, child," said Mama Rosa, stepping aside. "There is a fire, and there is tea, and there is a great deal that a book cannot tell you. Only an old woman can."

Inside, by the small warm fire, Mama Rosa settled into her chair, folded her ancient hands, and began.

"You want to know if it is real. You would not have come otherwise, so I will not waste your time or mine. Yes. It is real, all of it. But that is not the question truly keeping you awake, is it?" Her eyes twinkled. "The question keeping you awake is the one the book asked you on its very last page. Whether the new dawn is truly... *you*."

Nina swallowed. "Yes," she whispered.

"Then let me tell you a secret older than the book. Older than me — and I am very old." Mama Rosa leaned forward. "When you were born, child — on the very day you first opened your eyes in this world — someone bent over you, close, and whispered something into your ear."

Nina frowned. "I don't remember that."

"Of course you don't. You were a baby. But it happened. It has happened to every child of this valley, in an unbroken chain, for a thousand years and more. Your mother did it — or your grandmother, or an aunt, or whoever first held you. They leaned down close, and they whispered — not always in words; sometimes only in the way they held you — a kind of prayer."

"And what did they whisper?" Nina asked.

"The oldest hope there is," said Mama Rosa softly. "That you are loved. That you belong here. That you carry something precious inside you — a gift, a light, a seed — that one day the world will need. And that when the time is right, you will remember it, and you will give it away." She smiled. "That is the prayer in the cradle, little one. It is whispered into every one of us before we can even understand the words. And then we grow up, and forget we ever heard it. But it does not leave. It waits — curled small and patient in the deepest part of us, like a seed in the dark."

Nina sat very still. Because she could feel it — she was almost certain she could feel it — that small, curled, patient thing, somewhere beneath her ribs, that she had never had a word for until this very moment.

"It's... in me?" she said. "The prayer? It's been in me the whole time?"

"In you," said Mama Rosa. "In every child who ever slept in this valley. In the children of the book — and in the children reading it." She reached out and laid one papery hand very gently over Nina's heart. "The new dawn the book spoke of is not a thing that happens far away, out in the world. It is *that seed*, in there, waking up. That is all a new dawn has ever been, child. A prayer, remembered."

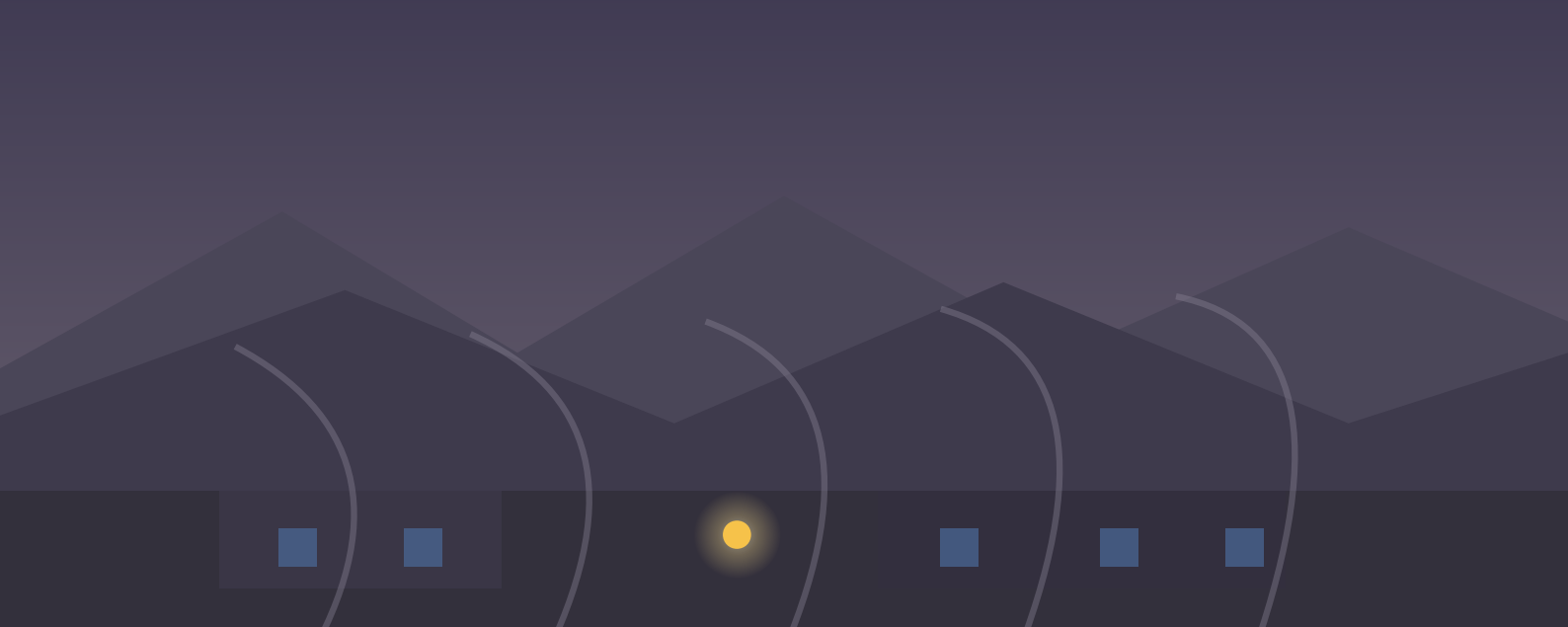
Nina looked down at the old hand over her heart, and up at the ancient shining eyes, and felt something she could not name begin, very quietly, to stir.

"But if it's in all of us," she said slowly, "the prayer... then how did the valley ever nearly lose it? How does anyone forget something whispered right into their own heart?"

Mama Rosa's smile faded, just a little, into something older and sadder.

"Ah," she said. "That. That is the next thing you must understand — and it is the hardest part of the whole story. Drink your tea, child. I will tell you how a whole valley very nearly forgot its own name."

. . .



CHAPTER Five

Almost Lost in the Whirlwind

the quiet thing, nearly unheard

It was not one great thing that nearly took it," Mama Rosa began. "That is what people always expect — a war, a flood, some terrible enemy at the gate. But that is not how the most precious things are usually lost. They are not stolen. They are simply... set down. And forgotten. A little at a time."

"There came a great whirlwind into the world," she said. "Not a wind you could feel on your face. A whirlwind of *hurry*. Of noise. Of a thousand small, shiny, urgent things, all calling for our eyes and our hands and our hours at once, all day long. Little glowing screens that pulled every gaze downward. Food that came in bright bags, quick and easy and empty. A hundred reasons, every single day, to be somewhere else, thinking of something else, rushing toward something else."

"And in all that rushing, the quiet things could no longer be heard. And the prayer in the cradle — child, it is the quietest thing of all. It does not shout. It does not fight for your attention. It only waits, and whispers, so softly that in a loud enough world a person can live their whole life and never once hear it."

"So, slowly — so slowly that no one noticed it happening — the valley began to forget. The young looked at their screens and saw a bigger, brighter life somewhere far away, and off they went to find it. The old sat on their benches with a thousand years of remembering inside them, and no one stopped, anymore, to listen. The songs grew fainter. The gardens grew

smaller. The old ways became something you heard about, once, from a grandmother — a nice old story, nothing more. And a prayer that becomes 'just a nice old story,' child, is a prayer that is very nearly gone."

And here Nina's skin went cold — because she was no longer hearing about a faraway time in a book. She was hearing about her *own town*. She thought of her cousins who had boarded the buses to the city and not come back. She thought of the supper tables where everyone stared down into little glowing screens. She thought of the old man on his bench in the plaza, whom she passed every single day and had never once stopped for. It was not history. It was happening. Now. All around her. Maybe even, a little, inside her.

"Do not look so frightened," said Mama Rosa gently, for she had seen Nina's face. "I do not tell you this to make you sad. I tell you because you cannot understand how bright a light truly is until you know how close it came to going out. The forgetting was never wicked, child. It was only... *sleepy*. The whole world grew tired, and distracted, and lay down for a little nap — and very nearly did not wake up."

She reached over and stirred the fire, and it flared warm and gold.

"But here is the thing about that little curled-up seed of a prayer. It is patient beyond all understanding. It can wait in the dark, forgotten, for a very, very long time. It does not die. It only waits. For someone. To remember."

"And how close did it come?" Nina asked, almost afraid of the answer. "To being lost for good?"

Mama Rosa was quiet a long moment, looking into the fire.

"Closer than you would ever want to know," she said at last. "There is a road the valley was walking, child — all of us were walking it, half-asleep — and in my long life I have seen where that road ends. I have seen it clearly." She looked up, and her eyes were very serious now. "Would you like me to show you? It is not a happy thing to look upon. But I think you are old enough, and brave enough. And I think you need to see it — so that you understand what your whole generation was born to turn away from."

Nina's mouth was dry. But she nodded.

"Then look into the fire," said Mama Rosa, "and I will show you the valley that almost was."



CHAPTER Six

The Museum That Almost Was

the road we did not take

Nina looked into the fire. And the strangest thing happened. Whether it was Mama Rosa's soft old voice, or the dance of the flames, or something older still, Nina could never afterward have said — but as the old woman spoke, Nina began to *see* it. Not quite with her eyes. With some deeper place. As though she were looking down a long grey corridor of years, into a valley that might have been.

It was still Písaq. That was the terrible part. The mountains still stood. The river still ran. But the *life* had gone out of it — the way the warmth goes out of a room when the fire dies.

The gardens were gone; the food came now only in bright bags from far away. The looms stood still, gathering dust behind glass in a little museum, with a small printed card explaining what the valley had once, long ago, known how to do. The old songs played from a tinny speaker for the tourists who came by the busload, took their photographs, bought a trinket made in some distant factory, and left. The children sat in rows, staring down at their screens, learning nothing their hearts could ever use. And the old ones — the last few who still remembered the old tongue, the old ways, the whispered prayer — sat alone, and unheard, and one by one they died, and took a thousand years with them, down into the silence.

It was not a ruin. That was somehow worse. It was *pretty*. The tourists said so. "What a beautiful place," they said, and meant it, and never once knew

that they were standing in the middle of something that had died with its eyes open — a valley become a museum of itself, a lovely painted shell with nothing living left inside.

Nina felt tears standing in her eyes, and did not know when they had come. "It's so sad," she whispered. "It's the saddest thing I've ever seen."

"Yes," said Mama Rosa — and gently, with a single word, the fire was only a fire again, and the long grey corridor was gone. "It is. Now — look away from it, child. You have seen enough. One does not need to stare into the dark. One needs only to know it is there, so that one knows which way to walk."

She took Nina's chin softly in her old fingers and turned her face back toward the warm and living room — the crackling fire, the morning light coming gold through the little window.

"That is the road we did *not* take," she said. "You understand? That valley, in the fire — it is not real. It never happened. And do you know *why* it never happened?" Her whole ancient face began, slowly, to shine. "Because someone remembered. Right at the very last moment — when the prayer had grown so faint that it was almost gone — a few children, on a sleepless night, remembered. And they woke. And they woke the others. And the road turned."

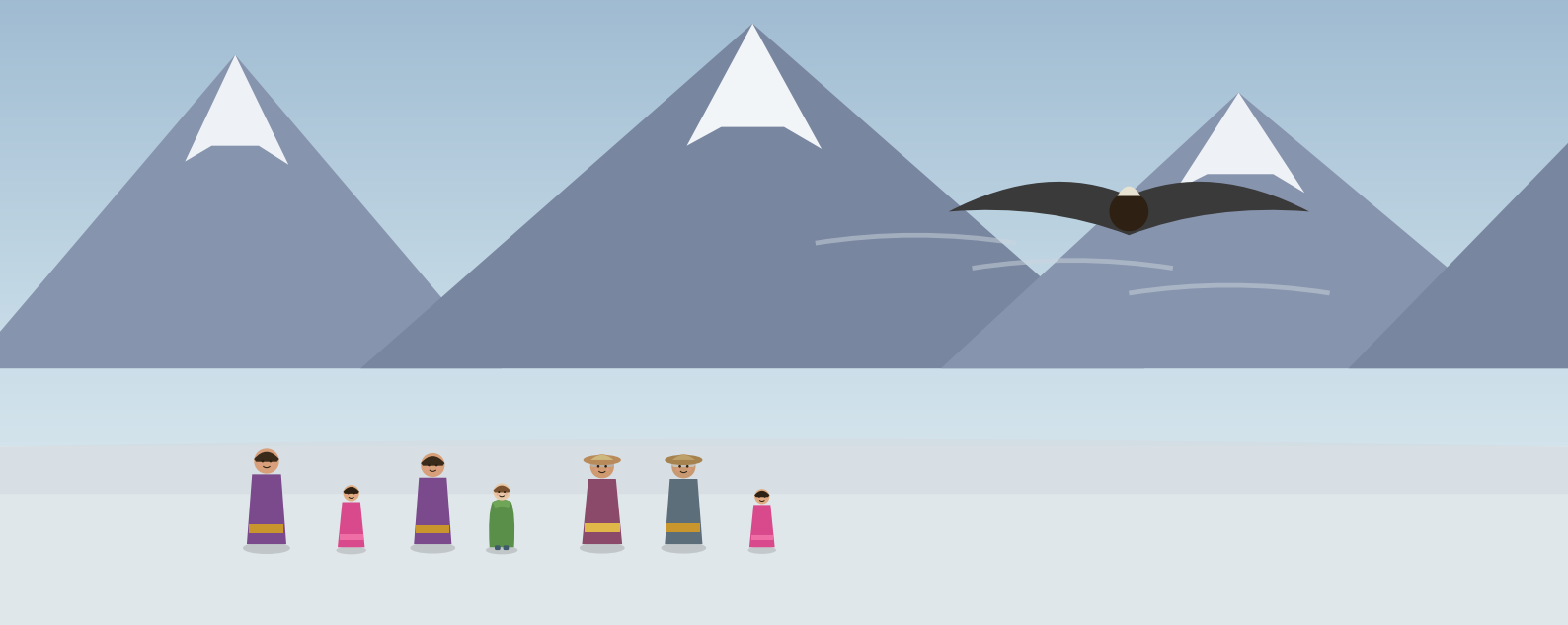
Nina wiped her eyes. And what she felt now, underneath the sadness, was something fierce, and bright, and altogether new — the same small curled seed, she realized, but uncurling now. Reaching. Waking.

"How?" she said. "How did they know to turn? How did anyone see it coming, if the whole world was asleep?"

Mama Rosa smiled, and rose slowly from her chair, and reached out a hand to Nina.

"Ah," she said. "Now you are asking the right question. And that is a question for my husband — for he has spent his whole long life learning to listen for exactly the sort of quiet thing that turns a road in time. Come. He is at the other fire. And he has a story to tell you — an old, old story, about a people crossing a great frozen plain, and the ones among them who knew how to feel a change coming on the wind."

And she led Nina by the hand through the little house, toward the sound of a second, deeper fire — and a low, kind voice, already beginning, somewhere, to speak.



CHAPTER Seven

The Story of the Tundra

told by the fire

The second fire was deeper in the little house, in a warm back room where dried herbs hung from the beams and the light was low and gold. And beside it, in a chair worn smooth by many long years, sat an old man.

He was as old as Mama Rosa, and he looked, somehow, as though he were *listening* — his head tilted, his eyes half-closed, as if to a music no one else could quite hear. When Nina came in, he opened his eyes, and they were kind, and very deep.

"This is my husband," said Mama Rosa. "Don Emilio. He has been listening to something his whole life long. Ask him your question, child."

Nina hesitated. Then: "How did the children *know*?" she said. "How did anyone know the road needed turning, if the whole world was asleep?"

Don Emilio smiled slowly, and gestured to a small stool by the fire. "Sit," he said. "And I will tell you an old, old story. Older than this valley. It belongs to all the wandering peoples of the earth."

"Long ago," he began, "before there were towns, or roads, or maps, the peoples of the world *walked*. They crossed great frozen plains together, whole tribes of them, moving with the seasons toward the next good place. And oh, it was a beautiful thing to see. The children ran ahead, playing. The mothers walked in the middle, carrying the babies, laughing as they went.

And the old ones came behind, quietly, watching, and listening. There was laughter, and there was silence, and everyone simply walked on together, toward the next place."

"But among them, in every tribe, there were always a few — the wisdom keepers — who walked with a different kind of attention. And every now and then, one of them would feel something. On the wind." Don Emilio lifted one weathered hand, as if feeling for it now. "A bird passing over with a message in the way it flew. A change in a far-off scent. Some small, quiet sign that another tribe, a thousand miles away, was walking a path that would one day cross their own — and that if both kept on exactly as they were, the two would meet badly, in a hard and hungry place, and there would be sorrow."

"And so the wisdom keeper would speak softly to the others, and the whole tribe would make a small change of course. Only a small one — so small that on the first day you could barely see it. But over a hundred miles, over two hundred, it made all the difference in the world. The hard meeting never came. The sorrow was quietly avoided. And here is the most beautiful part, child, so listen closely."

He leaned toward her.

"The children never stopped playing. The mothers never stopped laughing. Almost no one in the whole tribe ever even knew that a danger had been near, or that the road had been turned. They simply trusted the ones who were listening, and walked on together, happy, never knowing what might have been." He sat back. "That is how the deepest dangers are turned away. Not with panic. Not with everyone stopping to shout and argue about the wind. But with a few who are listening — who feel the change early, and make one small, quiet correction, in time."

Nina sat very still. "That's what the children did," she said slowly. "Isn't it. They were the ones listening."

"They were," said Don Emilio softly. "The whole valley was walking a road toward that grey and lifeless place my wife showed you in the fire — walking it half-asleep, all of us. And a few children, on one quiet night, felt the change on the wind, and made the correction. Small, at first. A single garden. One old woman remembered. But over the years... it made all the difference in the world."

"But *how*?" said Nina. "How do you learn to feel it — the wind, the change? How do you hear something that quiet?"

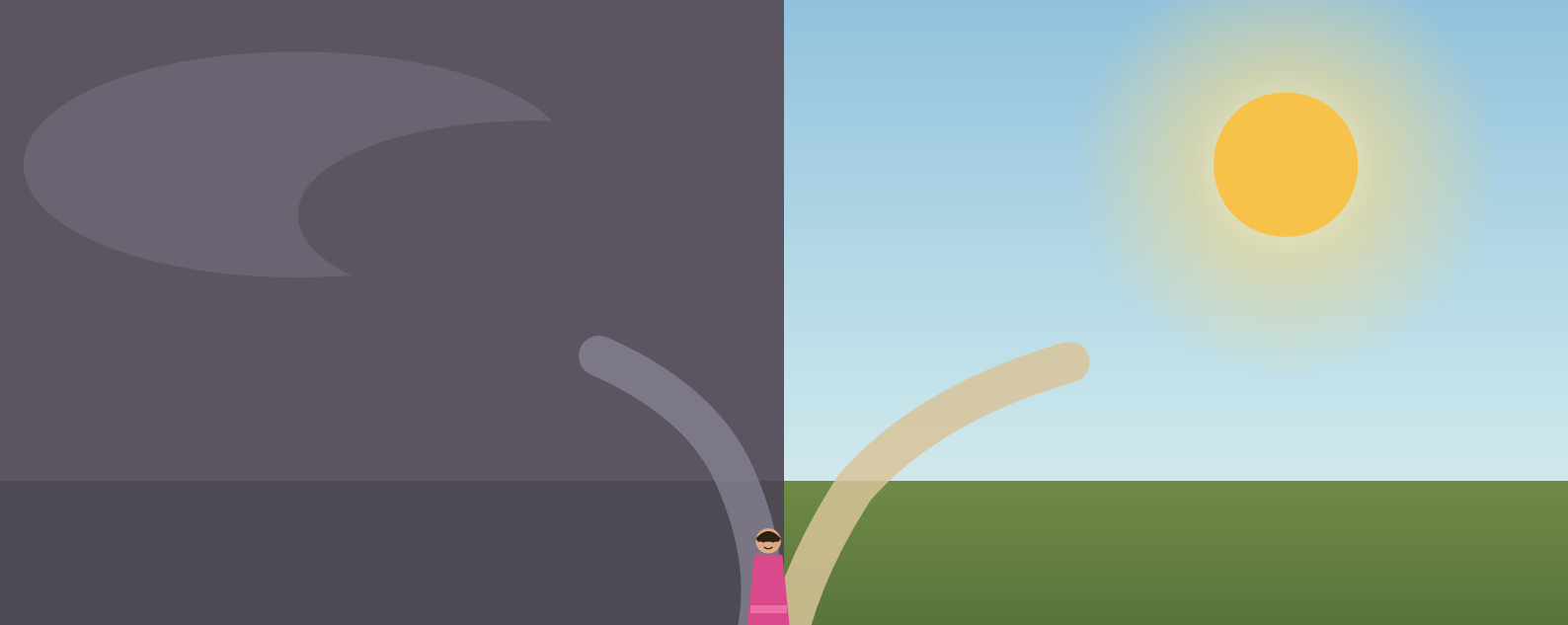
"Ah," said Don Emilio, and his eyes twinkled exactly like his wife's. "Now *that* — that is the real question. And the answer is simpler, and harder, than you would think." He tapped the side of his head, and then, gently, his own chest. "You get quiet. You stop letting the loud things fill you all the way up. You learn to listen to the voice down *here*" — his hand over his heart — "and not only the voice out there, on everyone's lips and everyone's screens. Because the wind does not shout, child. It whispers. Just like the prayer. And a whisper can only be heard in a quiet enough room."

"There are two ways to walk through a time like this one," he went on. "And nearly everything depends on which you choose. Shall I tell you about them?"

Nina nodded.

"Good," said Don Emilio, settling deeper into his chair. "Then let me tell you about the two roads that are always, always open beneath your feet."

. . .



CHAPTER Eight

The Two Timelines

the loud road and the quiet

There are two roads," said Don Emilio, "always running side by side, and you get to choose, every single day, which one you walk. Most people never even notice they are choosing. But you will, now — because I am about to tell you, and once you know a thing, you cannot un-know it."

"The first road is the loud one. It is the road of reaction. Something goes wrong in the world — and something is always going wrong, somewhere — and the loud road grabs you by the collar and pulls you in. It fills you with worry, and anger, and the need to argue, and to pick a side and fight for it. And here is the tricky part, child: often you are *right*. Often the thing you are upset about truly is wrong, and truly does deserve your upset. The loud road is not made of lies. That is exactly what makes it so hard to step off of."

"But watch what it does. It takes your attention, and your energy, and your hours, and your peace — and it pours them all out, into things far away that you cannot change, while it slowly empties you. And an empty person," he said, "cannot build anything. Cannot plant anything. Cannot warm anyone. A whole world full of good people, shouting on the loud road — and meanwhile the garden goes unplanted, and the lonely old man on the bench goes unvisited, one more day, and one more."

"The second road is the quiet one. And do not mistake me, child. The quiet road is not the road of *pretending*. It does not ask you to shut your eyes to the hard things, or to say they do not matter, or to float above the suffering

of the world with a calm little smile. That is only the loud road wearing softer clothes." He shook his head slowly. "No. The quiet road asks something harder. It asks you to see the hard things clearly, and feel them fully — and *then* to answer from a place of peace instead of panic. To ask, not 'who can I blame?' but 'what can I build?' To pour your one short, precious life not into fighting the darkness, but into growing the light."

"Because — and the valley learned this, and it cost us dearly to learn it — you cannot leave a darkness by fighting it. Fighting it only ties you to it, and keeps you standing in it. You leave it by building something so good, and so alive, and so warm, that one day you look up and find you are simply not standing in the dark anymore at all. You are standing in a garden. And you can barely even remember when the dark went away."

"And you choose one road or the other," he said, "not in great grand moments, but in a hundred tiny choices that no one else will ever see. Which conversations you step into, and which you let pass by. What you fill your eyes with the moment you wake, and what you let be the last thing in your mind before you sleep. Whether you let the storm outside decide the weather inside your own chest." He smiled. "Small corrections. Made early. Just like the tundra. That is all the quiet road has ever been."

And Nina understood, then, something that made the whole book fall quietly into place. "That's why it was so quiet," she said. "The awakening. Nobody fought anybody. They just... built. Garden by garden."

"Garden by garden," Don Emilio agreed. "Song by song. One old woman remembered at a time. The loudest thing that ever happened in this valley's whole awakening was a feast." He chuckled. "That is the great secret the loud world will never believe: that the quiet road is the one that changes everything."

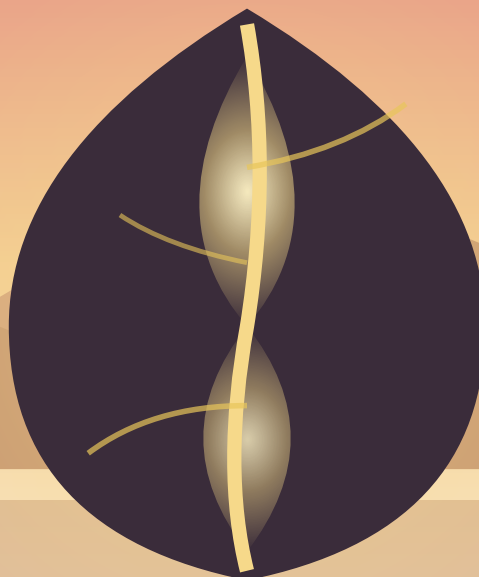
Nina watched the fire a long while. But something was still troubling her, and at last she said it aloud.

"But when I looked into the fire, and saw the sad grey valley... I cried. It hurt. Are you saying I shouldn't have? That I should have stayed peaceful, and not felt it?"

And at that, both old ones — Mama Rosa in the doorway, and Don Emilio by the fire — went very still, and looked at her with a new and shining seriousness, as though she had, without knowing it, arrived at the most important door of all.

"No, child," said Don Emilio, very gently. "Not at all. Those tears you cried are the most important thing that has happened to you yet. Come closer. For now I must tell you the deepest secret in this whole house — deeper than the prayer, deeper than the wind." He lowered his voice. "I must tell you what a wound is really *for*."

• • •



CHAPTER Nine

The Wound Is the Door

grace finds the cracks

When you feel a great sadness," said Don Emilio, "or a great fear, or a great ache — most people do one of two things with it. Some run from it, as fast as they can, and fill their lives with noise so they never have to feel it at all. And some do the very opposite: they move into it, and build a house there, and live inside their sadness for years and years, until it becomes the only room they know."

"But there is a third thing you can do. It is the hardest of the three, and it is the doorway to everything." He looked at her steadily. "You can *feel* it. All the way. All the way down to the very bottom — without running, and without moving in to stay. You let it move through you, like weather. Like a storm passing over the mountains and gone. And you feel it so completely, so honestly, that something cracks."

"Cracks?" said Nina.

"Here." Don Emilio touched his own chest. "The heart. When you feel a true thing all the way to the bottom, the heart cracks open. And a cracked-open heart, child, feels at first like breaking. That is why we are all so afraid of it. But it is not breaking." His old eyes were shining now. "It is *opening*. Because a heart that has never once cracked is a closed door. And a heart that has cracked is a door that has swung open. And do you know what comes through an opened door?"

Nina shook her head.

"*Everything*," he said softly. "The light. The love. The whole living valley you have been reading about — it all comes pouring in, through the crack. There is a saying in this valley older than I am: *grace has a way of finding the cracks*. It cannot get into a heart that is sealed up tight, and whole, and defended. It can only get in where we have been broken open. So the very wound you are so afraid of — the sadness, the ache, the tears you cried into my wife's fire — that is not the thing standing in your way, child. It *is* the way. It is the door."

Mama Rosa crossed the room then, and knelt — slowly, on her old knees — beside Nina, and put something into her hands. It was a small clay bowl. And Nina saw, turning it in the firelight, that it had once been broken — broken clean in two — and mended. But not hidden. *Mended*. Along the whole length of the break ran a bright, shining seam of gold.

"When a thing we love breaks," said Mama Rosa, "we do not throw it away. And we do not glue it back in secret and hide the wound and pretend it never happened. We mend it with *gold*. We fill the very crack with gold, so that anyone can see exactly where it broke — and so that it is more beautiful now than it ever was before it broke at all." She closed Nina's fingers gently around the little bowl. "That is what your sorrows are, child. That is what your scars are. Not ugly things to hide away. Gold seams. The places where the light got in. The places where you became more beautiful. Every last one of them."

And Nina held the little golden-veined bowl in her two hands, by the warm fire, between the two ancient shining faces — and she felt the small door in her chest, the one that had swung open a crack when she read the last page of her book, open now a little wider. And through it something began to pour — warm, and enormous, and alive — and she understood, all at once, that she had been carrying that door her whole life. Curled up, and waiting. Exactly where the prayer had been whispered, on the day that she was born.

"The door in the story," she whispered. "It's... it's not in the book at all, is it?" She pressed one hand to her chest. "It's in *me*."

Don Emilio and Mama Rosa looked at each other, over her head, and smiled — the smile of two people who have waited a very long time for someone to say exactly that.

"Now," said Don Emilio gently, "she is ready."

"Ready for what?" said Nina.

"To be told," said Mama Rosa, "where all of this truly came from. Not the builders. Not even the children. Something older, that moved quietly through them all." She rose, and held out her hand. "Come, child. There is one more fire to sit beside tonight. And this one is not in any house."

. . .



CHAPTER Ten

From Within, Not Without

the valley answers its own prayer

Outside, the night was cold, and enormous, and blazing with stars.

Mama Rosa and Don Emilio led Nina out past the last of the houses, to a flat place where the ground fell away and the whole valley opened below — and the great mountains rose all around, huge and black and near, holding up a sky so thick with stars that it looked less like a sky than like a field of seed, scattered by some vast and generous hand.

"This," said Mama Rosa quietly, lifting her old face to the light, "is the oldest fire. The one that never goes out."

They stood a while in the silence. And then Nina asked the question that was, in truth, the deepest question in the whole book — the one lying underneath all the others.

"Where did it come from?" she said. "All of it. The awakening. Who *saved* the valley? Was it the builders? The children? Somebody must have started it. Somebody must have come."

"Ah," said Don Emilio. "Now you have asked the last question. The one at the very bottom. And the answer is the most important thing I will ever tell you — so hold it carefully." He was quiet a moment. "No one came."

Nina turned to look at him. "No one?"

"No one came from outside," said Mama Rosa. "That is what the whole tired world always waits for, child — someone to come from far away and save them. A hero. A king. A stranger with gold, or with power, or with all the answers. The world waits, and waits, for the rescue to come from somewhere else." She shook her head slowly. "But it never came. Not here. No one crossed the sea to save this valley. No one arrived. The help did not come from *without*."

"Then where—" Nina began.

"From *within*," said Don Emilio — and he said it as though it were the most sacred thing in all the world, which perhaps it is. "It rose up from within. From three places at once — all of them right here, all of them closer than close."

"First," he said, and laid his hand upon the cold earth, "from the mountains themselves." He gestured up at the huge dark shapes all around them. "The **Apus**. You have been taught, perhaps, that a mountain is only stone. It is not so. The Apus are alive, child — old beyond all telling, and awake, and watching. And when the valley began to go quiet, the mountains grieved. They felt it, the way you feel a loved one growing cold in your arms. And they began to call — in their slow, patient, mountain way — for someone to wake."

"Second," said Mama Rosa, pressing one hand to her own heart, then lifting it toward the stars, "from the ancestors. The grandmothers and grandfathers of a thousand years — the ones who whispered the prayers into all the cradles, and then went on ahead of us, to the other side. They never stopped watching, child. They never stopped loving this valley, or hoping for it. They have been leaning close, from just beyond the edge of things, this whole long time."

Nina's breath caught. "The golden grandparents," she whispered. "In the book. The ones who came to the children on the first night. They were... the ancestors?"

"They were," said Mama Rosa softly. "All the grandmothers and grandfathers who ever loved a child of this valley, gathered into two shining faces, come back for one night to remind the children of what they had let themselves forget." She smiled, and there were tears in her ancient eyes, and they caught the starlight. "And one day, child — not soon, I hope, but one day — Don Emilio and I will go to join them. And we will be among the golden ones, watching over you, and over your children, and over the children reading

this very book, from the other side of that thin, thin veil. That is why he and I are here now, on *this* side. We are only the same love — standing where you can still reach us."

"And the third place it rose from," said Don Emilio, "you already know. Because you found it tonight, in your own chest." He touched, very gently, the place over Nina's heart, where the little door had opened. "From the children. From the seed. From the prayer, waking up. The mountains called, and the ancestors leaned close and whispered — but it was the children who had to remember. Who had to say yes."

"So you see," said Mama Rosa, "no one saved the valley. The valley saved *itself*. The mountains, the ancestors, and the children — which are not three things, child, but one thing. One love, wearing three faces. The valley heard its own thousand-year prayer, at long last... and answered it."

And Nina looked up at the mountains then — *really* looked — with the door in her chest wide open now. And for the first time in her whole life, she *saw* them. Not as stone. As beings. Vast, and patient, and unbearably kind, leaning in around the little valley the way grandparents lean in around a cradle. She felt the stars watching. And she felt, just at the very edge of feeling, a great warm crowd of love pressing close from somewhere she could not point to — all the grandmothers and grandfathers, all the way back to the beginning, holding their breath, and smiling.

Nothing had changed. The mountains had always been there. The stars had always been there. The love had always been there.

The only thing that had changed was that Nina could finally see it. Because the door was open now. And an open door lets the seeing in.

"It's all alive," she whispered. "It was alive the whole time. I just... couldn't see it."

"Yes," said Don Emilio, and his voice was full of joy. "Now — there is more. For once the children remembered, once that one small spark was struck, a most wonderful thing began. Watch the valley, child. Watch the lights."

And he turned her, gently, to look out over the valley spread below them in the dark.

. . .



CHAPTER Eleven

The Spark Becomes a Flame

one candle lights the next

Nina looked out over the valley. And there, scattered through the dark below her, were the lights.

Warm lights. In windows, up and down the whole long valley, from the river far below to the high dark folds of the mountains. Hundreds of them. She had seen them a thousand times and never once given them a thought. But now, seeing with the open door, she understood at last what she was looking at.

Every one of those lights was a heart that had caught the flame.

"When the children struck the first spark," said Don Emilio, "it did not stay one spark for long. That is not the way of fire, nor of love. They carried it to one old woman, and she remembered, and her heart lit up like a lamp. And she carried it to another. The young ones came home from the city, one telling the next, and the next; and each heart that caught it passed it on to the heart beside it. Friend to friend. Neighbor to neighbor. House to house. Pueblo to pueblo, all down the valley — and then up into the mountains — and then, though the children never saw it, across the sea, to lands they will never know."

"With no fanfare," said Mama Rosa. "No announcements. No armies. Just one candle, quietly touched to the next, and the next, and the next. That is how the deepest fires spread, child. So quietly that the loud world never

even notices — until one night it looks up, and finds the whole valley shining."

And Nina stood there in the cold and the starlight, looking at all those warm and living lights, and she felt the strangest thing. She felt her own heart — kindled tonight, by the fire and the little bowl of gold and the opened door — she felt it *join* them. As though some invisible thread had been lit between her small warm chest and every one of those far bright windows. As though she were not standing apart, watching the lights, at all.

As though she were one of them.

"I'm in it," she said slowly. "Aren't I? I'm not reading about it anymore. I'm... in it."

"You were always in it," said Mama Rosa gently. "You only just now looked up."

"And here is a thing so wonderful," said Don Emilio, "that even I still marvel at it, old as I am. The book you read — the story of the awakening — do you know what it truly is? It is a candle. A candle made of words. Someone lit it from their own flame, and set it loose upon the world, so that it might touch its small fire to the heart of whoever should open it. That is what a true story is, child. Not a report of something that happened, far away and long ago. A candle — passed from hand to hand, kindling one reader at a time."

"You caught your flame tonight, from the book. Just as the children caught theirs from the golden grandparents, and the old woman caught hers from the children. And one day, you will touch your candle to someone else's. That is how it goes. On, and on. One by one by one." He smiled. "For that is the last secret, and the deepest — that when even one of us truly wakes, and remembers, we all move a little closer to the morning, all together. Beyond time. Beyond space. Beyond even the pages of a book."

Nina looked at the lights, and at the stars, and at the two ancient shining faces beside her, and felt something enormous and quiet settle into place inside her — a knowing older than herself, that she had been carrying all along, and had only tonight remembered.

"Then the book wasn't really about Kusi," she said slowly, working it out. "Or Illa, or Mallki. Was it?"

Mama Rosa smiled the widest smile of the whole long night.

"No, child," she said. "It never was. Shall I tell you who the book was *really* about? Who it has been about, all along, from its very first word?"



CHAPTER Twelve

You Were Always in the Story

the mirror

Tell me," said Nina. "Who was the book really about?"

Mama Rosa took Nina's face in her two old hands, and looked at her for a long, long moment, with all the love of a thousand years in her eyes.

"You," she said. "It was about you."

"The book was always about you, child. About every child who ever opened it. Kusi's joy was only a mirror, held up to the joy that is already in you. Illa's light was your own light. The little tree carried across the sea and made welcome — that was you too, and every child who ever felt far from home. When you read about the children on the cold steps who could not sleep, you were reading about yourself, on this very night. When you read about the seed planted in the dark — that was the seed the prayer left in your own chest, on the day that you were born. The whole book was a mirror, from the first word to the last. And when you reached that final page, and it told you, *the new dawn is you* — child, it was not being poetic. It was telling you a plain and simple fact. It meant exactly what it said."

And Nina understood. All at once, and completely — the way you understand a thing you have somehow always known.

She had not been reading a story about someone else, in some other place, in some other time. She had been reading the true account of her *own* awakening — an awakening that the very reading had begun. The book had

told her she was the new dawn, and in the telling, it had woken the new dawn inside her. The story and the girl were one single thing. They always had been.

And now — gently, quietly, the way the most important things are always said — I must tell you the very same thing the old woman told Nina. Because it is every bit as true for you.

This book is a mirror, too.

If you have read this far — if something in you has been quietly turning over, and opening, page by page, the way it opened in Nina — then it is because the very same seed is in you. The very same prayer was whispered over you, on the day that you were born, whoever you are, wherever you live, in whatever valley or vast city on this wide and hungry earth. You are Kusi. You are Illa. You are Nina. And when this story tells you the new dawn is you, it is not being poetic with you, either.

It means exactly what it says.

For this is the last and deepest secret of the whole book — the one the old ones have been carrying toward you all along. That there are not really many of us, waking one at a time, each alone. There is one great sleeping thing — call it the human heart, call it the world's own soul, call it the One who breathes inside all of us — slowly, slowly remembering itself, through every child and every elder and every lonely, forgotten person who ever caught the flame and passed it on. So that when even one of us truly wakes — when even one heart cracks open and lets the light come pouring in — we all move, together, a little closer to the morning. Nina, on her cold mountain night. And you, holding this book. And a thousand thousand others you will never meet. All one flame. All one family. *Huk ayllulla kanchis* — we are one.

When Nina finally looked up from the two old faces, she saw that the sky over the eastern peaks had begun, very faintly, to pale. They had been awake the whole long night, by one fire and then another — and now the true dawn, the ordinary, everyday, altogether miraculous dawn, was coming, gold and rose, over the mountains of the real and waking world.

"It's morning," Nina whispered.

"It is," said Don Emilio. "And there is only one thing left now for you to do. The book asked you a question, at the end of Yachay Wasicha's story — do you remember? Not *is it real*, but *will you come in*." He rose, slowly, and

Mama Rosa rose beside him, and together the two ancient guides turned toward the paling light, and held out their hands to her. "The door is open, child. It has been open all along. And the morning is here. Come. Let us show you what it looks like to walk through."

. . .



CHAPTER Thirteen

The Door in the Story

the merge

So Nina rose, in the pale gold light, and walked with the two old ones back through the waking town — past the market stalls being set out, past the blue door, and up a winding path she had never once thought to climb, to a place at the very edge of Písac where a low stone building stood facing the dawn.

Over its wide doorway, carved deep into the lintel and worn smooth by many hands, was a shape Nina knew — the same stepped cross she had seen a thousand times, on weavings and on stones and pressed into the bottom of clay bowls. Three steps rising on every side, and a small round hole cut clean through the very center. And the morning sun, just now cresting the eastern peaks, was pouring straight through that little round hole, so that the whole doorway seemed to hold a coin of pure light.

"This," said Don Emilio, "is Yachay Wasicha. The House of Learning. The one you read about, in the book. It is real. It is here. And this—" he laid his hand upon the carved stone cross above the door — "is the oldest door of all. The *chakana*. The one your grandmothers pressed into every weaving, and never told you was a door."

Nina looked up at it. "A door to where?"

"Ah." Don Emilio smiled. "That is the whole secret, child. Listen well, for I will tell it to you plainly, the way the old ones told it to me. The *chakana* is a

bridge. That is what the word means — a crossing, a ladder, a stair. And it joins the three worlds that are always here, all three at once, stacked close as the pages of a book." He touched the topmost step. "Up here, *hanan pacha* — the world above. The stars, the mountaintops, the ancestors, all that is high and shining." He touched the center, where the light poured through. "Here, *kay pacha* — this world. The one your two feet stand upon. The market, the garden, the supper table, the old man on his bench." And he touched the lowest step. "And down here, *ukhu pacha* — the world within. The deep places. The roots. The seed in the dark. The prayer curled up in your own chest."

"And the chakana," said Mama Rosa, "is the stair that runs through all three. It is how the light from above comes down into this world — and how the seed from below comes up. It is how they touch. That is why we carve it on everything, child. To remember that the three are one. That the high and the deep meet *here* — in the middle world — in the small and ordinary place where you are standing."

Nina looked at the little round hole, full of morning. "And it's a door I can walk through?"

"You have been walking toward it all night long," said Don Emilio gently. "But here is the thing you must understand before you step across — and it is the most important thing of all, so I will say it slowly." He took her by the shoulders and turned her to face the light. "This door does not lead *away*. It is not like the doors in the old tales, the wardrobe or the painted picture or the tornado, that carry a child off to some far and magical country, and leave the dull grey world behind." He shook his head. "No. This door leads *in*. Deeper *in*. Straight into the middle of the very world you already live in — the real one, the ordinary one — but with the door in your chest thrown open, so that at last you can see it as it truly is. Alive. Shining. Holy from edge to edge. The magic was never somewhere else, child. The magic is *here* — and it always was — and the only thing the door changes is *you*."

Nina stood a long moment on the threshold. Behind her, the town she had lived in her whole life — the same roofs, the same river, the same blue morning. In front of her, the little House of Learning, and the coin of light. They were not two different places. She understood that now. They were the same place. She had simply never, until this night, had eyes to see it.

She took a breath. And she stepped through the door.

And nothing happened — and everything happened. She did not fall through into another land. She did not tumble down a rabbit-hole or ride a storm to somewhere new. She simply walked forward, into the warm coin of morning light — into the House of Learning, into the ordinary miraculous day, into her own real life — and found that all of it, every last plain and common thing, was blazing quietly with a light she had walked past ten thousand times and never once seen.

"I'm through," she whispered. "But I'm... still here."

"Yes," said Mama Rosa, coming through behind her, her old face full of joy. "That is how you know it was the true door. The false doors take you away. The true one brings you *home* — to the very place you started — and lets you see it, for the first time, with your eyes wide open."

The door does not lead out of the world. It leads all the way in.

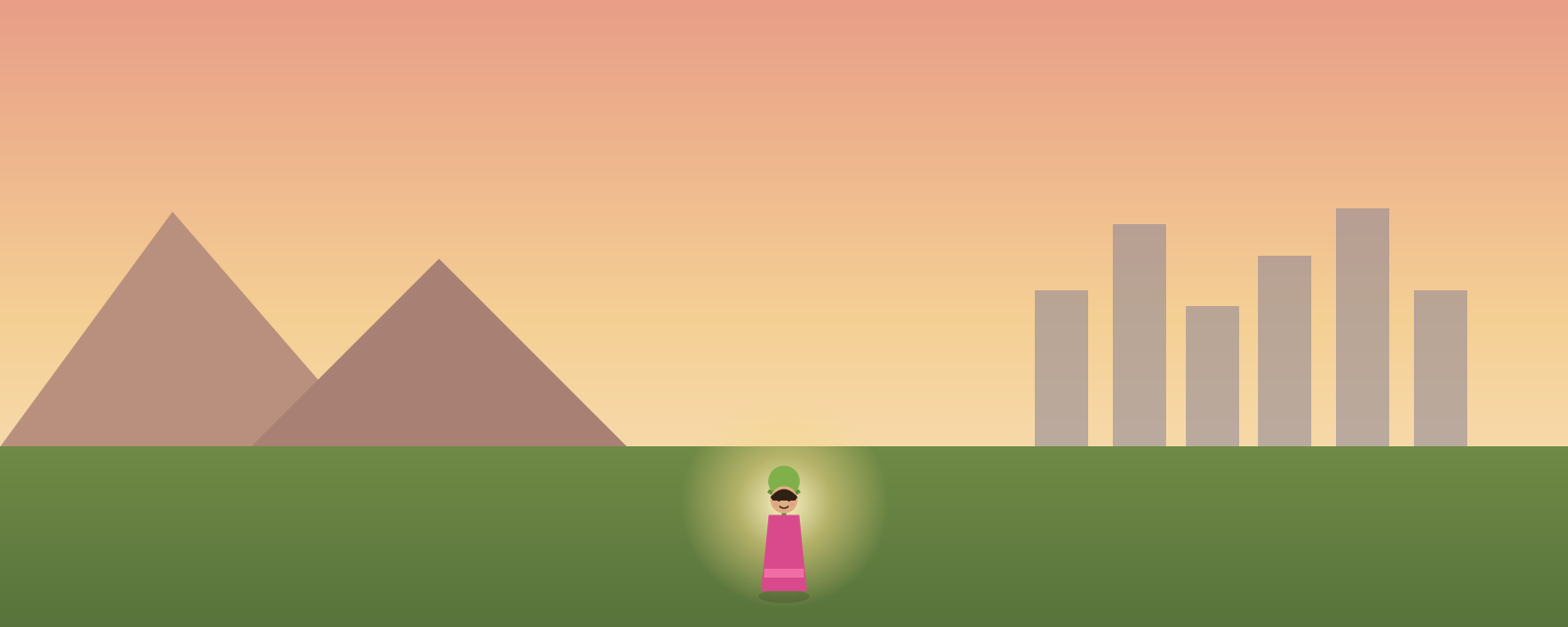
And Nina stood in the House of Learning, in the pouring gold, and laughed out loud for the pure wonder of it. And then, at once, a new question rose in her — for she was that kind of child — and she turned to the two old ones with her eyes shining.

"But it can't only be here," she said. "It can't only be this one valley. What about everyone else? What about all the other children, in all the other places, who never had a Pisaq, or a chakana, or a book? Is there no door for them?"

And at that, the two old ones looked at each other, and smiled the deepest smile of all.

"Now," said Don Emilio, "you have asked the question that opens the whole world. Come and sit in the sun, child. And I will tell you the last and widest secret — the one that reaches far past this little valley, all the way to wherever *you* are standing."

. . .



CHAPTER Fourteen

Wherever You Are Standing

the good life can grow anywhere

They sat together on the warm stone step of Yachay Wasicha, in the first full sun of the morning, and Don Emilio was quiet for a while, gathering the words the way an old man gathers kindling — carefully, and with love.

"You are worried," he said at last, "that this door is only for the children of the Andes. That the light we have been speaking of all night belongs to this valley alone — to our mountains, our tongue, our chakana, our particular grandmothers. And so you fear that a child far away, in a city of glass, or on a flat green farm, or by some cold northern sea, is shut out of it. Is that the shape of your worry?"

Nina nodded.

"Then let me set your heart at rest, for it is the easiest of all your questions to answer." He swept his old hand out toward the whole wide morning. "Every land on this earth has its own valley. Every people has its own prayer, whispered over its own cradles, in its own tongue, since the very beginning. Ours is called *Allin Kawsay* — the good and beautiful living. But it wears a thousand names. Far to the north there are peoples who call it by other words that mean *we are all relatives*, or *we all belong to one another*. In the great deserts, and the green islands, and the cold forests, the grandmothers have their own word for it — a word that always, always means the same thing underneath: *be good to one another. Care for the land. Remember the*

ones who came before, and live for the ones not yet born. Give away your gift."

"It is one secret," said Mama Rosa, "wearing a hundred coats. We call the giving-back *ayni* — that when you help your neighbor raise his roof today, he helps you raise yours tomorrow, and so the whole village is held up by everyone at once. But there is no valley on earth that has not known this in its own way, and given it its own dear name. It was never *ours*. It only grew, here, in our particular soil, with our particular flowers. Just as it grew, elsewhere, in theirs."

"So when a child far away reads this very book," said Don Emilio, "and feels the door begin to open in her chest — she must not think she has to become one of us. She does not have to move to the mountains, or learn our words, or trade her own grandmothers for ours. Not at all." He smiled. "She has only to go and look — with her newly opened eyes — into her *own* tradition. Her own valley. And there, waiting for her, older than she ever guessed, she will find the very same secret, in her own tongue, kept warm all this time by her own people. She does not need our door. She needs only to discover that she was standing in front of her own, the whole time."

Nina thought of the children she had read about — the tree carried across the sea and planted in strange soil, and made welcome. "And what about the ones who *are* far from home?" she asked. "The ones who were carried away, like a little tree pulled up and planted somewhere new? Do they have a door?"

"Especially them," said Mama Rosa warmly. "A seed does not stop being alive because the wind carried it over the wall into the next garden. It puts down its roots wherever it lands, and it blooms — and often it blooms all the brighter, for having to reach a little harder for the light. The child far from home carries her valley *inside* her. She is a bridge between two lands. That is not a wound, child. That is a gift the rooted ones do not have."

"Different," said Don Emilio, "is the word to hold onto. Not *better*. Never *better*. Our valley is not better than any other valley, and our door is not the only door, and the child of the Andes is not more beloved than the child of the city. That was the old sickness — the one that made whole peoples believe their own way was the only true way, and everyone else's a darkness to be fixed. No." He shook his head firmly. "A garden is not more beautiful for having only one kind of flower. It is more beautiful for having a thousand kinds, each one exactly, gloriously itself. That is what the waking world looks

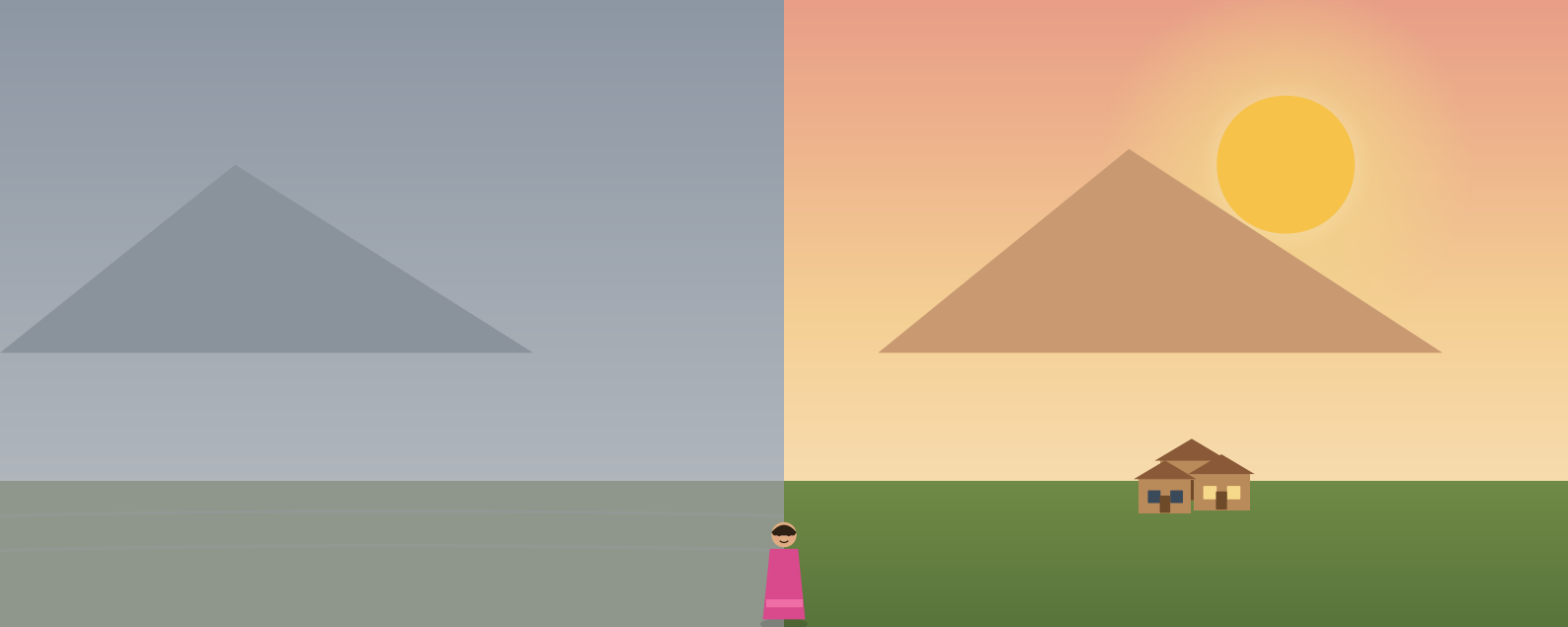
like, child — not everyone becoming the same, but everyone becoming, at last, fully and freely *themselves* — and delighting in one another."

One secret, a hundred names. One garden, a thousand flowers.

Nina let out a long breath, and something in her that had been anxious went quiet and glad. "So there's a door everywhere," she said. "For everyone. In their own way."

"A door everywhere," Don Emilio agreed. "For everyone. In their own way. And every single one of them leads to the same place — not away from the world, but deeper into it. Home." He looked at her then, and his face grew, very gently, more serious. "But I must tell you one hard thing before this morning is done. Because a door you can walk through is also a door you can walk past. And the grey valley in the fire — the one that made you weep — it is not gone, child. It is still one of the roads. It is still open, every day, beneath everyone's feet." He rose, and held out his hand. "Come. There is one more thing you must see, before you go back down the mountain. You must see the two roads — clearly — with your own two eyes. So that you may choose."

. . .



CHAPTER Fifteen

The Two Roads

chosen in wisdom, not fear

Don Emilio led Nina a little way up the hillside above the House of Learning, to a place where the path itself divided — one branch bending down and to the left, one climbing on to the right — and there he stopped, and had her stand in the fork of it, with one road running away beneath each foot.

"I will not show you the grey valley again," he said. "You have seen it once, and once is enough; one does not need to stare into the dark. But I want you to feel, standing here, that both roads are truly open. Not one. Both. Every single day, for the rest of your life, you will stand at a fork exactly like this one — a hundred times a day, in ways so small you will hardly notice — and you will choose which road your foot comes down upon."

He pointed down the left-hand path, where it fell away into shadow. "That road is the easy one to take. It does not even feel like choosing. It is the road of the whirlwind — of letting the loud world decide your day for you, of drifting where the noise pulls, of setting the little prayer down, one more time, because you are tired, and there is always something shinier and more urgent calling. No one walks that road on purpose, child. That is the terrible thing about it. It is simply the road you end up on when you do not choose the other. It is the road of *drift*."

"And the fear-road runs alongside it," said Mama Rosa quietly, "which looks like its opposite but is really its twin. For some, the whirlwind pulls them to

sleep; for others it whips them into fear — into rushing and dreading and bracing against a hundred dangers, real and unreal, until there is no peace left in them to build anything at all. Sleep or panic — they are the two faces of the same loud road. And both of them, child, are chosen out of *fear*. The fear that says: it is too late. It is too big. You are too small. Lie down, or run — but do not dare to *build*."

Then Don Emilio turned her, gently, to face the right-hand path, where it climbed on toward the House of Learning and the warm lit windows and, beyond them, the whole waking valley in the morning sun.

"And this," he said, "is the other road. And I will not tell you it is the easy one, because it is not. It is the road you must choose *on purpose*, every single day, often against the whole weight of the world leaning the other way. But hear me, child — it is not chosen out of fear. It is chosen out of something far stronger and far quieter. It is chosen in *wisdom*. And it is chosen in *love*."

"The people on the loud road will tell you that you are hiding. That the wise thing, the awakened thing, is to rise above it all — to close your eyes to the hard world and float off somewhere serene and leave the mess behind." He shook his head slowly. "But that is not the quiet road. That is only the fear-road, wearing a peaceful mask. The true road does not ask you to *rise above*. It asks you to *come down* — to roll up your sleeves, and kneel in the real dirt of the real world, and plant something. It is not yet time to float up to the heavens, child. It is time to *act*. Right here. With your two hands. In this valley, on this morning."

"And how you spend this one short life," said Mama Rosa, taking both of Nina's hands in her old ones, "is the truest thing you will ever say about what you believe. Not the words you speak. Not the things you feel. The *life* you actually live — where you put your hours, your love, your attention, your one small strength. That is your real vote, cast fresh each day, for which valley shall come to be. You do not choose the golden road by wishing for it, child. You choose it by *living* it. By voting for it — with your very life."

And Nina stood there in the fork of the path, with the whole valley below her and the two roads open beneath her feet, and she felt the choice settle into her — not as a heavy thing, a duty or a burden, but as something almost unbearably glad. Because she saw, at last, that the golden road was not the hard road pretending to be worth it. It was simply the road that was *alive*.

The dark road is walked in fear. The golden road is chosen in love.

"I choose this one," she said. And she said it quietly, and simply, the way the deepest things are always said — not as a grand vow shouted at the sky, but as a small true fact, laid down like the first stone of a house. "I choose the golden road. Not because I'm not afraid. Because I'd rather build than drift. I'd rather plant than panic. I choose it. And I'll go on choosing it. Every day."

And the two old ones looked at each other over her head — and their eyes were full, and shining — for they knew that they had just heard the sound that the whole long night, and the whole long book, and the whole long thousand-year prayer, had been waiting for. The sound of a child, awake, choosing the light on purpose.

"Then it is done," Don Emilio whispered. "Or rather — child — it is only now, this morning, truly begun."

. . .



CHAPTER Sixteen

Now It Lives

the door opens all the way

Nina did not go home to the valley below, in the end. Or — she did, many times, in all the ordinary days that followed; but she did not go back to being who she had been. She stayed close to the House of Learning. She came each morning to the low stone building with the chakana carved above its door, and she learned the old songs, and the old ways with the seeds, and the old tongue that her own grandmother had half-forgotten. And more than any of that, she learned the thing that Mama Rosa and Don Emilio had spent their whole long lives learning — how to keep the little door in her chest thrown open, and how to help throw open the doors in others.

For that, in the end, was the work. Not to be a hero. Not to save the valley single-handed, in one bright blaze of glory. The valley did not need another hero; the loud road is full of heroes. What the valley needed — what every valley needs — was simply one more heart kept warm and open, quietly touching its small flame to the next cold heart, and the next.

And so Nina became one of the candle-passers. When a new child came to the blue door, sleepless and troubled, having just finished a certain book — and they did come, one by one, all through the years — it was often Nina now who sat with them by the fire, and poured the tea, and said, *Yes. It is real. All of it. Come in.* The old ones grew older. And one bright cold morning, years on, they went at last to join the shining ancestors on the

other side of the thin, thin veil — and Nina wept for them, the good gold tears that fill the cracks; and then she dried her eyes, and lit her candle at the flame they had left her, and carried on. Because that is how it goes. On, and on. One by one by one.

And now — gently, in the way the most important things are always said — I must turn, one last time, from Nina, and speak to you. Yes: *you*. The one holding this book. For we have come all the way to the last page now, and I would not let you close it without telling you the one thing this whole story has been carrying toward you, from its very first word.

It is real.

Not the every-detail-exactly-so — Nina is a made-up name, and some of the fire in these pages is the fire of story. But underneath the story, holding it up the way the mountains hold up the sky, there is a true thing, and it is this: there is a real valley, in the real Andes, where real people are quietly waking a real light — building a real House of Learning, keeping real gardens, sitting with real lonely elders, remembering a real thousand-year prayer. It is happening now, as you hold this book. And it is only one valley among a thousand — for the same waking is stirring, quietly, in every land on earth, wherever even one heart has thrown open its door.

And there is a place in it for you.

Not someday. Not once you are bigger, or braver, or more finished, or more sure. *Now*. Exactly as you are, exactly where you are standing. You do not have to come to the mountains. You do not have to be anyone but yourself. You have only to go and find the door that is already there, in your own chest and your own valley, and throw it open — and then begin. And begin *small*, child. That is the last secret, and the kindest. Do not try to save the world by Thursday. Plant one thing, and tend it. Visit one lonely elder, and truly listen. Gather one friend, and remember together something worth remembering. Choose, one time today, the golden road over the grey.

For no love is ever too small. That is the great lie of the loud world — that unless you can do something enormous, you may as well do nothing at all. It is not true. It was never true. The whole waking of the whole wide world is made of nothing but small loves, quietly chosen, one after another, by ordinary people who decided not to wait. One candle, touched to the next. That is all it has ever been. That is all it will ever need to be.

So here, on the last page, the book asks you the same thing the old man asked Nina — not *is it real*, but *will you come in*. The door is open. It has

been open all along. It was open before you ever picked up this book; the book was only ever a candle, carried a long way, to help you find it in the dark.

*Mosoq Paqariy. The new dawn is you.
And it is now. And the door is open —
and you are already inside.*

Go, then, child of whatever valley. Throw open your door. Choose the golden road. Plant your one small thing, and keep your one heart warm, and pass your one small flame to the next cold hand you find. And know, as you do it, that you are not alone — that a great warm crowd of us, the living and the ancestors, the near and the far, all the thousand valleys at once, are doing the very same thing beside you, this very morning, moving all together, a little closer to the light.

Kausachun Allin Kawsay. Long live the good and beautiful living. Together — you, and I, and Nina, and the mountains, and all the shining ones who have gone ahead — together, we will remember.

And how the valley kept its promise — how the little House of Learning grew, and who else came at last through the door, and what the waking world looks like once the morning is truly up — ah. That is the next book. And the next dawn.

And it is already beginning.

. . .

MOSOQ PAQARIY · BOOK THREE

The Chronicles of the Sacred Valley



THE LONG WAY HOME

The Coming Home

back to where we always were

AMISTAD SAGRADA · YACHAY WASICHA · ANCIENT APUS · PISAQ



CHAPTER One

The Morning of the Whole Valley

years on, and every window lit

Years went by, the way years do — quietly, and all at once — and the little girl named Nina, who had once walked through a door at dawn, grew up.

She was a young woman now. And she had kept the promise she made that morning in the fork of the mountain path: she had stayed. She lived in Písac still, in the Sacred Valley, beneath the same great mountains that had watched over her since the day she was born. And every morning — for the old ones had taught her this, and she had found it to be true — she rose before the light, wrapped herself in a warm woven blanket against the cold, and climbed to the flat place above the town to watch the valley wake.

And oh — what a thing it had become to watch.

For the valley Nina looked down upon now was not the sleepy, half-forgetting place of her childhood. It was awake. Truly, wholly awake. In the grey light before the sun, she could see the gardens terraced up the hillsides — hundreds of them, green and generous, where before there had been only weeds and waiting. She could see the little glasshouses breathing their morning mist, and the long rows of the old grains and the old potatoes, a thousand kinds, coming back from the very edge of being forgotten. She could see the looms already set out on the terraces, their bright threads

catching the first light, and she knew that by mid-morning the whole valley would be humming with the old songs — sung now not by a last few trembling voices, but by the young, who had learned them, and loved them, and made them their own again.

And she could see the lights. In the town below, and scattered up and up the dark folds of the mountains, warm windows glowing gold — one going dark, now, and now another, as the families inside blew out their lamps and stepped into the dawn. Nina never tired of those lights. She remembered a night, long ago, when two ancient shining faces had stood beside her in this very spot and taught her what each of those far windows truly was: a heart that had caught the flame.

There were so many of them now. So very many more than there had been.

She thought — as she often did, up here in the cold and the quiet — of the other valley. The grey one. The one old Mama Rosa had shown her, all those years ago, in the dancing of a fire: the pretty, empty, dying place, the valley become a museum of itself, lovely and hollow, with the old ways behind glass and the old songs playing tinny from a speaker for the tourists who came and photographed and left. That valley had felt so near, that night. So terribly, breathably near — the road they had all been walking, half-asleep.

And it had never come.

That was the thing that could still stop Nina's breath, some mornings, standing here. Not that something wonderful had been built — though it had — but that something terrible had been *turned away*. The grey valley had not happened. The road had bent, in time, by a hair's breadth and then by a mile, and here instead was *this* — the living, breathing, singing morning spread out gold below her. It was not a small thing, to have turned a whole people away from the edge of forgetting. It was, Nina thought, very nearly the largest thing there was.

And she had a part in keeping it, now. For Nina had become a guide.

It had happened slowly, the way the best things do. She had begun by simply being present — helping at Yachay Wasicha, the House of Learning, with the smallest children; sitting with the elders; learning, and learning, and learning. And then, one day, a child had come to the blue door of Mama Rosa's house — sleepless, and troubled, and clutching a certain book — exactly as Nina herself had once come. And it had been Nina, that day, who set the kettle on, and poured the tea, and said the words she had once been so hungry to hear: *Yes. It is real. All of it. Come in.*

She was one of the candle-passers now. That was the truest name for what she did. She took the small flame that had been touched to her own heart, on a cold mountain night, by two old people and a golden-veined bowl — and she touched it, patiently, to the next heart, and the next.

The sun broke then over the eastern peaks, all at once, gold and rose, and the whole valley leapt into color beneath her — the green of the terraces, the red of the rooftops, the silver flash of the river far below. And from somewhere down the path, Nina heard the first bright voices of the morning: children, climbing up to the House of Learning, laughing as they came, the way children have climbed toward the next good place since the very beginning of the world.

She smiled, and drew her blanket close, and turned to go down and meet them.

But she paused, one moment more, at the top of the path — and looked back over it all: the valley, the mountains, the rising smoke, the going-dark windows, the whole warm miracle of it. And a thought came to her that she could not yet have put into words, though she would spend the rest of this book learning how. It was a thought about how *far* they had all come. And about the strange and lovely secret hidden inside that distance — a secret she was only, that golden morning, beginning to guess at.

*They had come such a long way.
And it would take the whole rest of the story
to see just how far — and to where.*

. . .



CHAPTER Two

The Children Who Grew

joy, light, and the welcoming tree

Down in the town, the morning was already full of the people Nina loved — and three of them, that day as most days, were near the heart of it.

You may remember their names. For they were the very children the first book was written about — the ones whose story Nina had read, on the night that changed her, never dreaming she would one day walk the same streets as them, and call them friends. They had been small children then, in the book. But books take time to travel out into the world, and hearts take time to grow. And so, by the time Nina came along, Kusi and Illa and Mallki were older than her — grown, now, into their gifts, the way a seed grows into exactly the plant it was always folded up inside of.

Kusi had been the joyful one — the child whose very name meant joy, and who could no more stop laughing than the river could stop running. And Kusi was still exactly that; only now the joy had a job to do. It was Kusi who kept the festivals of the valley — the plantings and the harvests, the naming-days and the namings of the mountains, the feasts that marked the turning of the year. When a whole valley wakes up, you see, it does not only need gardens and schools. It needs *celebration* — it needs the drum and the dance and the shared table — for a people is held together not only by its work but by its joy. And Kusi, laughing, saw to the joy.

Illa had been the one full of light — quiet, and watchful, with a lamp lit somewhere behind the eyes. And Illa had become a teacher. Not the frowning kind, who fills a child up with facts the way you fill a sack with stones, but the other kind — the rare and precious kind — who kneels down beside a child and helps them find the lamp already burning inside their *own* chest, and then simply keeps them company while it grows bright. It was Illa, more than anyone, who had made Yachay Wasicha into what it now was: not a place where children were made the same, but a place where each one was helped to become, at last, gloriously and fully themselves.

And Mallki — ah, Mallki. Mallki's name meant a young tree, a sapling; and there was a reason for that name, and it was a tender one. For Mallki was the child who had come from far away — carried across the sea as a little one, planted in the strange new soil of the valley, and made welcome. Mallki knew, in a way the others never could, what it was to be far from home, and to be taken in, and to put down roots in ground that was not the ground of one's birth. And so Mallki had become the bridge — the one who welcomed the ones who came from elsewhere, who sat with the lonely and the newly-arrived, who understood without being told what it is to belong to two places at once, or to feel one belongs, for a while, to none. A sapling carried over the wall, grown now into a tree wide enough to shelter others. There is no more beautiful thing for a transplanted seed to become.

Three children of one valley. Joy, and light, and the welcoming tree. They had been small and frightened once, on a sleepless night, at the very beginning of everything. And they had grown into the three strong branches on which a great deal of the valley's new life was now, quietly, held up.

Nina found them that morning in the plaza — Kusi hanging the bright woven banners for a planting-feast three days off, Illa surrounded as always by a small tangle of children, Mallki deep in gentle talk with a family newly come up from the city, helping them feel, already, a little less like strangers. And Nina stood a moment at the edge of the square and simply watched them, these grown children of the book, doing the ordinary work of a waking world, and felt her heart go warm and full.

"You are staring, guide," said a voice at her elbow, laughing. It was Kusi, of course, come round with an armful of banners. "You get that look, and then you stand there like a stone. What is it this time?"

"I was only thinking," said Nina slowly, "about how far it's all come. About everything that's grown. Sometimes I can hardly believe it's real."

Kusi's laughing face went, for a moment, unexpectedly soft and serious — the way even the most joyful faces do, when someone speaks a true thing.

"I know," Kusi said quietly. "I was there at the very start of it, you know — cold, and afraid, and certain we were too small to matter. And now look." A gesture at the whole bright square. "But do you want to know the strangest part, Nina? The part almost no one talks about?"

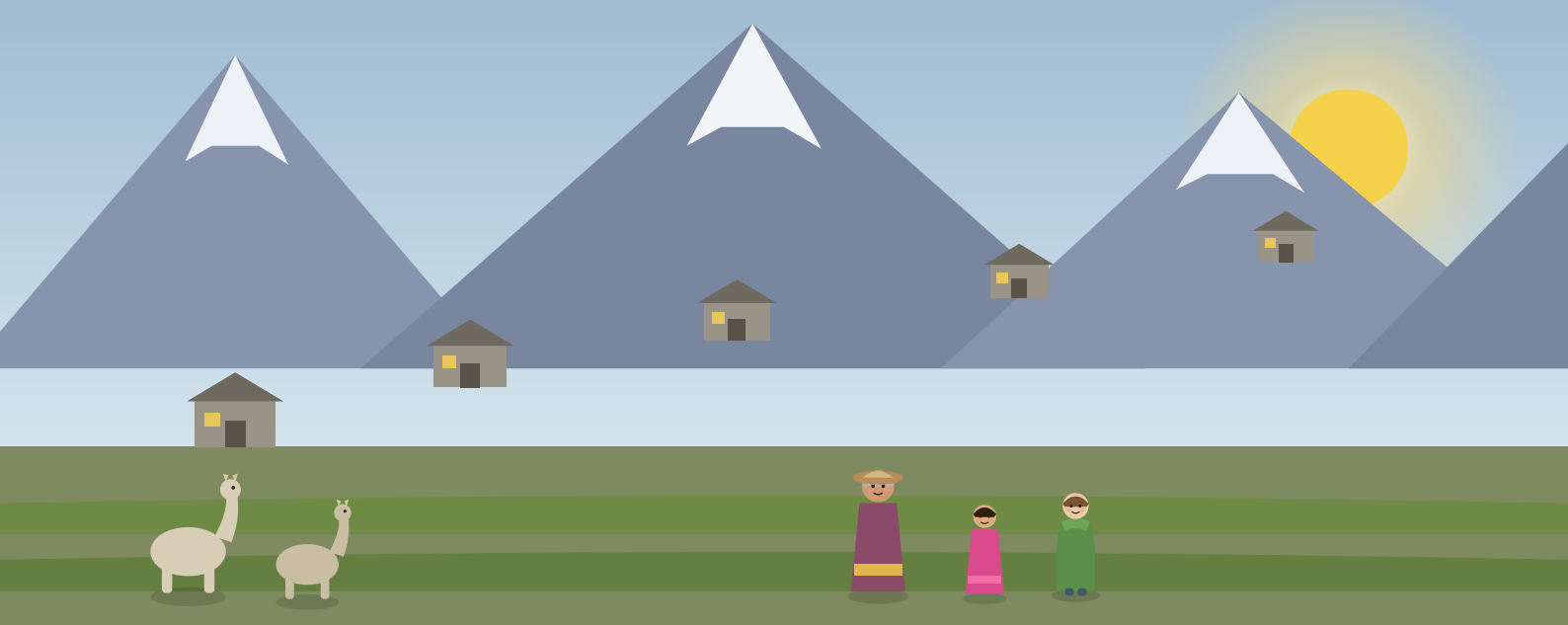
"Tell me," said Nina.

"We didn't build anything *new*," said Kusi. "Not really. Everything you see here — the gardens, the songs, the ways of the seed and the loom and the caring for one another — the grandmothers had all of it, all along. We didn't invent the good life. We only..." Kusi paused, searching. "We only came back to it. We went a very long way around. And we ended up exactly where we started."

And there it was again — that thought. The one that had brushed past Nina on the mountaintop at dawn. She opened her mouth to ask Kusi more; but just then Illa called across the square, and a child tugged at Kusi's sleeve, and the morning swept them all up into its bright ordinary business, and the thought slipped away once more — though it did not go far.

It was waiting for her, as it happened, higher up the mountain. Where, that very afternoon, Nina was bound.

. . .



CHAPTER Three

Up the Mountain, House by House

the highest places, alight again

For the valley floor, with its market and its plaza and its House of Learning, was only the beginning of the story — only the doorstep of it. The true reach of what had wakened could not be seen from the town at all. To see it, you had to climb.

And so that afternoon Nina climbed — up the old stone paths that switch-backed into the high country, up past the last of the terraced gardens, up to where the air grew thin and cold and clean and the great peaks stood so near you felt you could lay your hand upon them. This was where the mountain communities lived: the high pueblos, scattered up the folds of the *Apus* like seeds flung by a generous hand — small clusters of stone houses, each one older than memory, each one home to families who had kept the high places since long before the towns below were dreamed of.

Once, not so long ago, these had been the loneliest places of all. When the great whirlwind of hurry and forgetting had swept through the world, it had emptied the high pueblos first and worst. The young had gone down the mountain and not come back. The old had been left alone with the llamas and the wind and a silence that grew, year by year, wider and colder. Nina had heard the stories. A whole community, once, of forty families — dwindled to three old widows and a boy. Houses standing empty, their roofs

falling in. The high terraces, built by a hundred patient generations, going back to grass.

But that was the old story. And Nina had climbed all afternoon to stand, now, in the middle of the new one.

For the high pueblos were *alive* again. As she came over the last rise, breathing hard in the thin bright air, she saw it spread before her: the community of Willka Orqo, and it was thriving. The empty houses had been mended, their roofs new-thatched, their little windows — she counted them, and her heart lifted — every one of them lit. The high terraces climbed the slopes once more in tidy green steps, planted with the hardy grains that only grow well up here, near the sky. There were llamas and alpacas on the upland pastures, more than she could count, their wool the wealth of the community. There were children — *children*, up here, where for a while there had been almost none — running between the houses, chasing a ball, exactly as children ran in the town below.

And there was a school. A small one, of stone, with a chakana carved above its door, just like the great House of Learning in the valley — for the awakening, when it came, had not stayed down in the comfortable town. It had *climbed*. House by house, pueblo by pueblo, up and up the mountainside, the flame had been carried into the highest and loneliest places, and had been kindled there, and had caught, and had held.

An old herder named Don Teofilo met her on the path, his face a wrinkled map of ninety mountain winters, and walked her up into the community. And as they went he told her, in the slow way of the high people, how it had come to pass.

"They did not come to save us," he said — and Nina smiled, for she knew this song, and loved it. "No one came from the town with a plan for the poor mountain people. That is not how it was. Some of our own young ones came home, is all. Came back up the mountain, with a light in them they had caught below. And they sat with us. And they listened — truly listened, to the old ones, to what we still remembered up here that even the valley had forgotten. And we found we had something to give *them*, as much as they had to give us." His old eyes crinkled. "That is the secret of it, child. It did not come from above, and it did not come from below. It came from *between*. From people turning to face one another again, up and down the whole mountain, and remembering they were one people. One *ayllu*. One family, from the river to the snow."

Nina stood with the old man at the very top of Willka Orqo, and looked down — down the whole vast sweep of the mountainside, all the way to the valley floor far below, silver river gleaming, and then up again the far slope on the other side, where more high pueblos she could barely see caught the late gold light. And she understood, seeing it whole like that, what had truly been built here. Not one awakened town. A whole awakened *mountain* — a living ladder of communities, from the highest herders in the snow to the market traders by the river, each one different, each one wholly itself, and all of them, now, lit.

"How far," she murmured — the third time that thought had come to her that day, and now it would not leave. "How far it's all reached."

"Aye," said Don Teofilo. "A long, long way." He was quiet a moment, looking out over his mountains. "And do you know the joke of it, the beautiful joke? For all that reaching — up here, we live now almost exactly as my great-grandmother lived. The same seeds. The same songs. The same caring for one another against the cold." He chuckled, deep in his old chest. "We went out to the very edge of losing everything. And we came all the way back home. And home was here the whole time, waiting. That is the whole story, child. If you understand that, you understand everything."

Nina did not yet understand everything. But standing there, in the high gold light, with the whole living mountain spread below her, she felt herself come one long step closer.

*From the river to the snow, one family.
They went to the edge of losing it all —
and found the way home had been beneath their feet.*

. . .



CHAPTER Four

The House of Healing

Sumaq Kawsay — the beautiful living

There was a house in the valley that Nina loved above all the others, and it was the house where the broken came to be made whole.

It stood a little apart, among gardens, with a wide warm door that was never locked, and over that door were carved two words in the old tongue: *Sumaq Kawsay* — the beautiful living. Some called it the house of healing, but Nina had learned that this was not quite right, and that the not-quite of it mattered. For it was not a house where sick bodies were mended, though sometimes they were. It was a house where *sick hearts* came to remember how to live.

They came from everywhere, the wounded ones. Some came down from the high pueblos, hollowed out by too many winters alone. Some came home from the great cities, where they had gone chasing the bright promise and found instead a loneliness so vast it had scooped them empty. There were the grieving, who had lost someone and could not find the way back to the morning. There were the young ones whom the whirlwind had filled with a restless, gnawing ache they had no name for. And there were the ones who had simply forgotten — forgotten that they were loved, that they belonged, that they carried anything inside them worth the carrying.

And at the wide warm door of Sumaq Kawsay, more often than not, it was Mallki who met them.

Mallki — the sapling carried across the sea, grown now into the welcoming tree — had made this house a life's work. And Nina, who came often to help, had watched Mallki do a thing that looked, at first, like no healing at all. For when a broken person arrived at Sumaq Kawsay, Mallki did not sit them down and fix them. Mallki did not fill them with advice, or with clever words, or even, at first, with comfort. Instead — and this was the strange secret of the house — Mallki gave them something to *do*.

"Here," Mallki would say gently, to the hollow-eyed young man just home from the city. "The goats need feeding, and old Serafina cannot manage them anymore. Would you help her?" Or, to the widow gray with grief: "There is a child here whose mother is unwell, and no one to teach her the weaving. You know the weaving. Would you sit with her?"

And Nina had seen it happen, again and again, the small daily miracle of it. The hollow young man, who had come convinced he was worthless and beyond all help — three weeks later Nina would find him laughing in the goat-pen, gray old Serafina leaning on his arm, and something lit again behind his eyes. The gray widow, who had wanted only to lie down and follow her husband into the dark — Nina would find her bent over a loom beside a small rapt girl, her ruined face soft with a purpose she had thought was gone forever.

"I don't understand it," Nina said to Mallki once, watching this. "They come here broken. And you put them straight to work caring for someone *else*, someone even more broken than they are. It seems almost cruel. And instead it's the very thing that heals them. How?"

Mallki looked at her for a long moment, with the deep kind eyes of one who has been far from home and found the way back.

"Because that is where the medicine *is*, Nina," Mallki said. "We have it backwards, all of us, our whole lives. We think that to be healed, we must be filled up — cared for, attended to, poured into. And sometimes, yes, a person needs to be held first, and we hold them. But it does not *heal* them. Do you know what heals them?" Mallki nodded toward the young man in the goat-pen, toward the widow at the loom. "Being *needed*. Discovering that even in their brokenness — *especially* in their brokenness — they have something someone else requires. The lonely one is not healed by being visited. The lonely one is healed by becoming someone who visits. The empty one is not filled by being given to. The empty one is filled by finding they still have something to give."

Nina turned this over slowly. "So the giving..." she began.

"The giving *is* the getting," said Mallki. "The serving *is* the medicine. That is the whole secret of this house, and it is the deepest secret of the beautiful living. We do not heal, here. We only reintroduce a person to the one thing that was always going to heal them — which is a chance to love someone. There is no other medicine, Nina. In all the world, there is no other medicine but that."

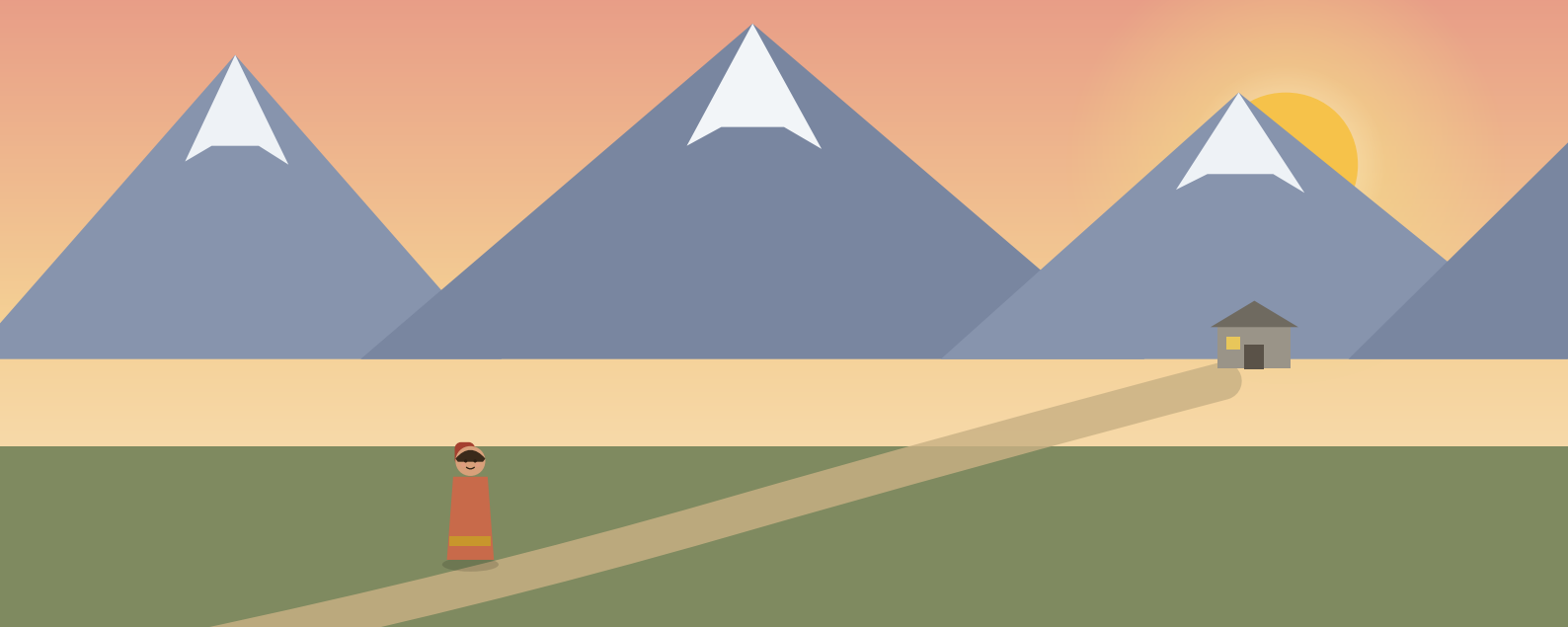
And Nina stood in the doorway of Sumaq Kawsay, under the two carved words, and watched the broken caring for the broken in the gold afternoon light — and felt the truth of it settle into her, warm and enormous and simple.

*The serving is the medicine.
We are not healed by being poured into,
but by finding we still have something to pour.*

"I think," Nina said slowly, "I only really learned that once. High up the mountain. With a woman who did not want me there at all." She smiled, a little ruefully, at the memory. "Shall I tell you? It is not a flattering story. I come out of it looking rather foolish."

"Those," said Mallki, settling onto the warm step, "are always the best kind. Tell me."

. . .



CHAPTER Five

The One Who Went Up to Give

and was given more in return

It was in my second year as a guide," Nina began. "I thought a great deal of myself, back then. I had walked through the door, you see. I had caught the flame. And now I wished, very badly, to go and be *helpful* — to carry my bright new light up the mountain and pour it into some poor dark corner that needed me."

"Pride," said Mallki mildly, "wearing the coat of kindness."

"Exactly that. Though I couldn't see it then." Nina laughed at herself. "So they sent me up to Willka Orqo, to sit with an old woman named Doña Feliciana. She lived alone at the very top of the pueblo, in a cold stone house, and she was — how shall I say it — she was famous for being difficult. Bitter. Sharp-tongued. She had lost her husband and both her sons, one after another, over hard mountain years, and she had shut her door on the whole world and dared it to knock. The others had rather given up on her. And I, in my great wisdom, was certain that I — I! — would be the one to reach her. I would bring her comfort. I would heal her loneliness. I could already picture how grateful she would be."

Mallki was smiling now. "And how did Doña Feliciana receive her young healer?"

"She would not even look at me," said Nina. "The first day, she left me standing in the cold outside her door for an hour, and then let me in only to

ignore me entirely while she worked. The second day, she told me — quite clearly, and using words I will not repeat — exactly what she thought of soft valley children who came up the mountain to feel good about themselves. She saw straight through me, you understand. She saw the pride under the kindness, plain as day. And it made her furious."

"I went home that night," Nina went on, quieter now, "and I wept. Not out of pity for her — out of wounded pride, if I am honest. I had come to give, and been refused. My beautiful light had been thrown back in my face. I very nearly did not go back at all."

"But you went back."

"I went back. And this time — because I had run clean out of cleverness, and had nothing left to offer — I did not try to heal her, or comfort her, or fix her, or shine my light into her at all. I simply asked if I might sit by her fire, because I was cold. And I was quiet. And after a long while, for something to do with my useless hands, I asked if she would show me how she spun her wool — because it was finer than any I had ever seen, and this was true, and she heard that it was true."

Nina's eyes were far away now, up the mountain, in a cold stone room years gone.

"And something changed. Because now, you see, *she* was the one with something to give. She was not a poor dark corner to be pitied and filled. She was a master of a craft I did not know, and I was a girl who wished to learn it. And that — that she could do. Her hands remembered what her heart had forgotten. She began to teach me. Gruffly, and correcting me sharply, and pretending the whole time that she found me a great nuisance. But she taught me. Day after day, all that winter, up in the cold, her old hands guiding my clumsy ones."

"And here is the thing, Mallki. Here is the whole thing." Nina's voice went low. "I had gone up that mountain to heal *her* loneliness. But I was lonely too — I had never once admitted it, so busy was I being the strong young guide with the bright light. And sitting there, week after week, needing her, learning from her, receiving from her — it was *my* loneliness that quietly melted. It was *my* heart that was healed. She gave me something no one else ever had: she let me be small, and clumsy, and in need of her. And by the spring, without either of us ever once speaking of loneliness or healing or light, we were simply two friends. Two friends who missed each other on the days between."

"She died three winters later," Nina said softly. "Peacefully, in her sleep, with half the pueblo who had 'given up on her' crowded into that little house, because by then she had let them back in, one by one. And at the end she was not the bitter old woman of Willka Orqo anymore. She was Feliciana, who taught the young ones to spin, and whose fire was always warm, and whose door — the very door she had once dared the world to knock upon — was never shut again."

Nina wiped her eyes, and laughed a little, unashamed.

"I went to give," she said, "and I was the one who received. I climbed the mountain to be the healer, and I came down the one who'd been healed. That is the secret you were speaking of, isn't it? That is the medicine. It ran *backward* the whole time — up the very mountain I thought I was carrying it down."

"It always does," said Mallki gently. "There is no giver and no getter, Nina. There is only love, moving between two people, healing them both at once, so that afterward you cannot even say which one was the wound and which one was the cure." Mallki looked out over the gardens. "You went looking for someone to save. And what you found was a friend. That is what everyone finds, in the end, who goes out truly to serve. Not someone to save. A friend they had not met yet."

. . .



CHAPTER Six

The Cracked Bowl, Made Golden

the wound becomes the gift

They sat a while in the warm quiet after Nina's story. And then Mallki rose, and went into the house, and came back carrying something wrapped in a soft cloth, and placed it in Nina's hands.

She unwrapped it. And she smiled, because she knew it — or knew its kind. It was a bowl, an old clay bowl, that had once been broken clean through and mended along the break with a bright seam of gold. She had held its twin, once, by a fire, on the night that changed her life.

"We keep it here, in the house of healing," said Mallki. "It is the truest teacher in the whole place. More than me. More than any of us." Mallki sat back down beside her. "You know already what it says — that a thing which has broken and been mended in gold is more beautiful, not less, for having broken. That our wounds, mended with love and not hidden, become the very places we shine. You learned that from Mama Rosa, long ago. But there is a deeper turn of it, Nina, that only this house has taught me. Shall I tell you?"

Nina nodded, turning the golden-veined bowl in the light.

"It is not only that the wound becomes beautiful," said Mallki. "It is that the wound becomes *useful*. It becomes the gift. Think — who is it, in this house, who can truly reach the grieving widow? Not the one who has never lost

anything. It is another widow, who has walked that dark valley herself and come out the far side. Who can reach the young man hollowed out by the city? Not the one who never left the safe green valley. It is someone who went, and was hollowed, and found the way home. We do not heal people *in spite* of our old wounds, Nina. We heal them *with* our old wounds. The very place where you were broken is the exact place you can meet another's breaking. Your scar is not just gold to look at. It is gold to *give*."

Nina thought of Doña Feliciana — of how it was precisely because she, Nina, had known a hidden loneliness that she could finally, wordlessly, meet the old woman's. Her wound had been the doorway to another's. She had not known, at the time, that this was what was happening.

"So the loneliness I was so ashamed of," she said slowly, "the crack in me I was hiding under all that brightness — that was the very thing that let me reach her. If I'd truly been the whole, shining, unbroken guide I was pretending to be, I could never have healed her at all."

"You could not have come near her," said Mallki. "The whole and shining and unbroken cannot heal anyone. They have no door for grace to enter by, and no door to offer another soul. It is the cracked ones — the mended ones, the ones with the gold showing — who do all the real healing in this world. Always has been. The ones who lead are the ones who have been most broken, and let it make them tender instead of hard."

And then Mallki said a thing that Nina would carry for the rest of her life, and that reached, though she did not yet grasp how far, past the little house and the little valley altogether.

"And it is not only true of a person, Nina. It is true of our whole valley." Mallki's voice grew quiet and full. "Think of what we *are*, now — a people who can help others wake, because we ourselves so nearly slept forever. Our great wound — the whirlwind, the forgetting, the grey valley we came within a breath of becoming — that is not our shame. It is becoming our gift. Because we went to the very edge of losing everything, and remembered just in time, we now know the way back in a way that a people who never nearly fell could never know. Our near-death is our medicine — for ourselves, and, one day, for others. The whole valley is a cracked bowl, mended in gold. And the gold is beginning to show."

Nina looked down at the little bowl in her hands, and then out over the valley — the awakened, thriving, hard-won valley — and for the first time she saw it as Mallki had named it: not as something that had simply grown

good, but as something that had broken, and been mended, and was more beautiful now for the breaking. A cracked bowl the size of a whole world, its golden seams catching the light.

*The wound is not the shame. The wound is the gift.
We heal others not in spite of where we broke,
but with it. The scar is the gold — to give away.*

"For others, you said." Nina looked up. "One day, for others. You mean beyond the valley. You mean the gold showing to... someone from outside."

Mallki smiled — the particular smile of one who knows a good thing is coming.

"As it happens," Mallki said, "someone from very far outside arrived at the blue door this very week. And I think, Nina, that this part of the story belongs to you — for you were the one who met her."

. . .



CHAPTER Seven

The Traveler at the Blue Door

our small valley, a light to the world

She had come to the blue door on a grey morning, and Nina had been the one to answer it.

A young woman stood there — perhaps Nina's own age — travel-worn, and weary to the bone, with a heavy pack on her back and a look in her eyes that Nina knew at once, because she had once worn it herself. It was the look of someone who has finished a certain book, and cannot sleep, and has come a very long way to find out if it is true.

Only this young woman had come a much longer way than most. For she was not from the valley, nor from the city down the river, nor from anywhere in all the wide land of the mountains. She had come from across the sea — from a distant country of grey cities and green flat farms, a country with its own tongue and its own sky and its own long winters, half a world away. Her name was Wren. And she had crossed that whole half a world, spending very nearly all she had, to stand at last at a faded blue door in a small town in the Sacred Valley, and ask a question.

"Is it real?" said Wren, when Nina had brought her in, and set the kettle on, and wrapped her cold hands around a warm cup. She had a book in her pack — Nina saw its worn corner — the very book, carried across the sea, its pages soft with reading. "The valley in the story. The awakening. The... the life you all found here. I have to know. I read it, and something in me — I

couldn't — I had to see if it was real, or if I'd just made it up out of wanting it so badly."

And Nina, pouring the tea, felt the strangest wave of tenderness and wonder pass through her. For she was watching herself. Here was another Nina, from the other side of the earth, sleepless over the same book, arriving at the same blue door with the same desperate hope. The candle made of words — the story someone had set loose upon the world so long ago — had drifted all the way across the sea, and touched its small flame to a heart in a grey far country, and drawn that heart all this way home.

"It's real," Nina said softly. "Yes. All of it. You didn't make it up." And she watched the tears come to Wren's eyes — the same tears, she thought, that must have stood in her own, that first morning by Mama Rosa's fire.

Nina kept Wren with them for many days. She showed her everything — the gardens and the glasshouses, the looms and the House of Learning, the market alive with real things made by real hands. She took her up the mountain to Willka Orqo, to see the high pueblos lit again. She sat her by the fires of the elders. And Wren drank it all in the way a parched traveler drinks water, with a kind of aching, disbelieving joy — for it was true, it was all true, the thing she had crossed the world hoping was true.

But as the days went on, Nina began to see something else growing in Wren, underneath the joy, and it troubled her, though she could not at first have said why. It was a kind of hunger that the beauty of the valley did not fill, but only sharpened. Wren began to speak of staying. Of never going back to her grey far country at all. Of selling the last of what she had, and building a little house here in the valley, and becoming — she said the word with such longing — becoming *one of them*.

"There's nothing for me back there," Wren said, on the seventh evening, with a fierceness that startled Nina. "You don't understand. Where I come from, it's all... it's the grey valley, Nina. The whole country is the museum-that-almost-was, except it isn't *almost*, it already happened. No one remembers anything. No one belongs to anything. It's all hurry and screens and loneliness and things in bright bags. There's no awakening there. There's no blue door. There's nothing." Her voice broke. "But here — here it's *real*. Please. Let me stay. Let me belong to this. I can't go back to the emptiness. I won't."

And Nina did not know what to say. For her whole heart went out to Wren, and she wanted nothing more than to say *yes, stay, belong to us, be one of us*. It seemed the kindest thing. It seemed the only loving answer.

But something stopped her. Some quiet voice, far down, that she had learned by now to listen to. It told her that the kind and loving answer and the *true* answer were not, this time, the same — and that she was not wise enough yet to know why.

"Come with me tomorrow," Nina said at last. "To the blue door's oldest fire. There are two people you should meet before you decide anything. They met me, once, when I was as lost as you are now. Let them meet you."

. . .



CHAPTER Eight

Go Tend Your Own Valley

different, not better

Mama Rosa and Don Emilio were very old now — older than seemed quite possible — but their eyes had lost not one drop of their light, and when Wren was brought before them, they looked at her the long, kind, seeing way they had once looked at Nina, and at a thousand troubled hearts before her.

Wren poured out her whole longing to them — the grey country, the emptiness, the aching wish to stay, to belong, to become one of the valley people and never go home. And the two old ones listened, and nodded, and let her speak herself all the way out. And then, for a long while, they were quiet.

"You want to stay," said Mama Rosa at last, "because you believe the light is *here*. In this valley. In our songs, our mountains, our particular ways. You believe that if you could only belong to *us*, you would have it." She smiled, very gently. "And so I must tell you the hardest and most loving thing, child, and I need you to hear it all the way down. It is not here."

Wren stared at her.

"Oh, it is here," said Mama Rosa. "But not *only* here. And not *because* it is here. The light you are so hungry for was never Andean, child. It does not live in these mountains, or belong to this tongue, or grow only in this soil. It is not ours to give you, and it is not ours to keep from you. What you saw in

our valley — the belonging, the caring, the remembering, the good and beautiful living — that is not a thing our people invented. It is a thing our people *remembered*. It was always in us, waiting, under the forgetting. And here is what you must hear: it is in *your* people too. It is waiting under the forgetting of your grey far country, exactly as it waited under ours."

"No," said Wren, and her voice shook. "No, you don't understand. There's nothing back there. I told you. It's all grey. It's all forgotten. There's no—"

"There was nothing here, once, too," said Don Emilio quietly. "That is what you do not yet understand, child, because you have only seen us awake. You did not see us sleeping. You did not see this valley when the gardens were dead and the songs were behind glass and the old ones died alone and unheard. It looked, then, exactly as your country looks to you now: grey, and empty, and past all hope. Anyone who came here in those years would have said, as you say of your home, *there is nothing here, nothing to build on, nothing to wake*. And they would have been as wrong as you are now."

"Your country is not empty, child," said Mama Rosa. "It is *asleep*. And those are not the same thing at all. Somewhere back in your grey far country, there were grandmothers — your grandmothers, and theirs — who knew how to belong to a place, and to one another, and to the turning of the year. Your people had their own songs, their own ways with the soil, their own name — in your own tongue — for the good and beautiful living. It has been set down and half-forgotten, yes. Covered over by the whirlwind. But it is not *gone*. Nothing so old and so deep is ever truly gone. It is a seed in the dark, waiting, under the frost of your homeland, for someone to remember it."

And now Nina began to understand the quiet voice that had stopped her tongue, seven evenings ago, from saying *stay*.

"So if I let you stay here," said Mama Rosa, "and become 'one of us' — I would be doing you a great wrong, dressed up as a kindness. I would be letting you pick our flowers instead of growing your own. I would be letting you warm yourself at our fire for the rest of your life, and never once go home to light your own hearth, that has been waiting cold for you all this time. And worse — far worse — I would be robbing your own people of the one thing they most need."

"Which is?" Wren whispered.

"*You*," said Don Emilio. "Awake. Come home. Do you not see it, child? Your grey country is not waiting for the valley to save it. No valley from far away

is ever going to cross the sea and wake your homeland. The help will not come from without. It never does. Your country is waiting — has been waiting all this time — for one of its *own* to remember, and to wake, and to begin. And here you are. The very one. You crossed the whole world looking for the light, and found it — only to learn that the reason you were given it was so that you could carry it *home*."

"You are not meant to become one of us, Wren," said Mama Rosa, and she took the young woman's face in her two ancient hands, exactly as she had once taken Nina's. "You are meant to become, fully and at last, one of your *own*. Go home. Find your grandmother's grandmother's ways, the ones under the frost. Sit with your own lonely elders. Plant your own valley's seeds. Sing whatever songs your own land half-remembers. It will not look like ours — it must not look like ours! Yours will have its own soil, its own sky, its own shape and sound and savor. Different, child. Not better, not worse. *Different*. A whole garden of many flowers, and yours a bloom that has never grown here and never could. That is not a lesser thing than belonging to us. It is a far, far greater one."

Wren wept then — but they were different tears than before; Nina could see it. Not the tears of the shut-out, but of one who has been handed something enormous, and frightening, and true.

"I'm afraid," Wren said. "To go back. To be the only one awake in all that grey. To begin something so huge, alone."

"You will not be the only one for long," said Don Emilio, smiling. "You never are. You will remember, and you will wake — and then you will sit with one lonely person, and they will wake, and they will sit with another. One candle, touched to the next. It is the same everywhere, child, in every land under the sun. It is the only way anything true has ever spread." He reached out and pressed something into her hand — a single seed, a common bean, from the valley's own gardens. "Not to plant here. To carry home. To remind you, on the grey days, that a whole living valley fits inside one small forgotten seed — yours, as much as ours — and waits only to be put back in its own good ground."

Wren left three days later, to begin the long journey home. Nina walked her to the edge of the town, to where the road bent away toward the wide world, and they stood a moment, two young women who might, in another story, have been the same person.

"Will I ever see the valley again?" Wren asked.

"I hope so," said Nina. "But Wren — if you do your work well, you won't need to. Because you'll have built your own. And one grey morning, years from now, some sleepless traveler will come to *your* door, clutching a book, or a story, or just a rumor of something real — and it will be you who sets the kettle on, and says: *yes. It's real. All of it. Come in.* And then you'll know you truly came home. Not here. There. Where you were always meant to."

And Wren turned, and set her face toward the wide world and the long way home, and walked away down the bending road — carrying one small seed, and one small flame, back to a grey far country that did not yet know it was only sleeping.

The light is not here. It is not there. It is everywhere, sleeping.

You did not come to belong to us.

You came to be sent home — to wake your own.

. . .



CHAPTER Nine

How Far We Came

the long way round to here

After Wren had gone, Nina could not stop thinking about the strange shape of it all — the shape of the whole long story.

For here was a young woman who had crossed half the world to find the light, only to be sent all the way home to find it where she had started. And here was the valley itself, which had gone to the very edge of losing everything, only to come back around to the simple life the grandmothers had lived all along. And here was Nina, who had climbed a mountain to be a healer, and been healed instead. Round and round, out and back, the whole story kept making the same strange shape — a great long journey that ended exactly where it began.

She went to Don Emilio with it, one evening, by his fire. "I don't understand the shape of it," she confessed. "If home was here the whole time — if the good life was what the grandmothers always had — then why the great journey at all? Why did the valley have to nearly die, and cross over, and wake, and struggle for years, only to arrive back at exactly what our great-grandmothers were doing without any struggle at all? It seems such a terrible waste. Why not simply... stay home in the first place?"

The old man smiled, and poked the fire, and was quiet a while.

"Let me ask you a thing," he said. "This valley — the one the grandmothers lived in, long ago, before the forgetting. And this valley — the one we live in now, awake. Are they the same valley?"

"Yes," said Nina. "That's just what troubles me. The same gardens, the same songs, the same ways. We went all that way around just to come back to the same—"

"No," said Don Emilio gently. "They are not the same. They look identical, child. Every stone, every seed, every song — the same. And yet they are as different as sleeping and waking. For the grandmothers had the good life the way a child has a treasure it has never lost — without knowing its worth, because it has never known its absence. They lived in the light, but they did not *see* it, any more than a fish sees the water it swims in. It was simply there. And because they never saw it, never knew what it was worth — that is exactly how it slipped, so quietly, through our fingers. You cannot hold tight to a treasure you do not know you are holding."

He leaned toward her.

"But we — we who went to the very edge and saw the grey valley waiting, we who so nearly lost it all and remembered just in time — we do not hold the good life the way a child holds a treasure it never lost. We hold it the way you hold something you have grieved, and given up for dead, and then, by grace, been given back. We *see* it now, child. We know exactly what it is worth, down to the last seed and song, because we know precisely what it is to be without it. And a thing seen — a thing truly known and treasured — is held in a way a thing never-lost can never be held. That is why it will not slip away from us again. The grandmothers' light was innocent. Ours is *awake*. And that is the whole difference in the world."

Nina sat very still, the fire warm on her face.

"So the journey wasn't a waste," she said slowly. "We didn't go all that way around for nothing. We went all that way around so that we could come home *awake*. So we could finally see the treasure we'd been standing in the whole time."

"That is the secret of every true homecoming," said Don Emilio. "You cannot see your home until you have left it. You cannot know your treasure until you have nearly lost it. The whole long journey — out to the edge and back — it changes nothing at all about the home you return to. Not one stone. It changes only *you*. It gives you the eyes to see, at last, where you always were. That is why the traveler must go, and why the traveler must come

home, and why the coming home is the best part of the whole tale. Not because home has changed. Because now, finally, you can *see* it."

"We went out to the far edge of losing everything," Nina murmured, "and we came all the way home. And home was here the whole time. Only now we know it."

"Now we know it," Don Emilio agreed. "And a people who *knows* what it has — truly knows it, the way you know a thing you nearly buried — that is a people who will keep it, and tend it, and pass it on, for a thousand years. That is what the whole great journey was *for*. Not to find something new. To come home, at last, with open eyes."

*You cannot see your home until you have left it.
We went the whole long way round —
not to change our home, but to change our eyes.*

. . .



CHAPTER Ten

Nothing Special, Everything Sacred

the ordinary made holy

But there was one more turn of it that Nina had not yet grasped — and it was Illa, the teacher, who gave it to her, a few days later, in the most ordinary moment imaginable.

They were carrying water. That was all. A pipe had broken up at the House of Learning, and until it was mended someone had to carry water from the spring, jug by jug, the old way — and Nina and Illa had taken the task between them, walking the worn path to the spring and back, the path to the spring and back, all through the long gold afternoon. It was plain, dull, aching work. Nina's arms burned. And somewhere in the middle of it, a little sourly, she said so.

"You know," she said, shifting the heavy jug, "when I imagined the awakened life, back when I was small — I pictured something rather grander than this. Visions. Great deeds. Something... shining. Not carrying water up a hill until my arms fall off."

Illa laughed — the quiet laugh of someone who has thought a great deal about exactly this.

"Ah," said Illa. "You have arrived at the last trap, then. The final one, and the sneakiest. Shall I tell you its name?" Illa set down her jug for a moment, there on the path. "It is the wish to be *special*. To be extraordinary. To rise

up, above the plain dull world, into something higher and finer and more shining. It is the last thing that keeps a person from being truly awake — and it is the trickiest, because it wears the clothes of holiness itself."

"But isn't that what all of it was for?" said Nina. "The awakening — the door — becoming something more?"

"That is what everyone thinks, at first," said Illa. "They think waking up means rising above the ordinary world — floating off into visions, becoming special, holy, set apart. Climbing onto some high shining pedestal, above the water-carrying and the goat-feeding and the plain dull work of being alive." Illa picked her jug back up. "But that is exactly backwards, Nina. That is not waking up. That is just falling asleep in a prettier dream. The truly awake do not rise *above* the ordinary world. They come all the way *down* into it — down into the water and the wood and the weaving and the washing — and they discover, kneeling there in the plainest work of all, that it was never ordinary in the first place. That it was holy the whole time. Every drop of it."

They walked a few steps in silence, the water sloshing.

"This water," said Illa. "Carried to a school, so children can drink, and wash, and learn. Is that a small thing? Or is it, when you truly look at it, one of the largest and most sacred things there is? The grain we grind. The wool we spin. The fire we feed. The old one we help to the table. Nothing could be more ordinary. And nothing — *nothing* — could be more holy, once your eyes are open. There is no higher, shining, special life hiding somewhere above this one, Nina. *This* is the shining life. The carrying of the water *is* the awakened thing. We just could not see it, because we were always looking up and away, for something grander — and it was under our feet, and in our aching arms, the whole time."

And Nina stopped on the path, the heavy jug in her arms, and felt the whole world turn very gently over and settle right way up.

For she had been waiting — she saw it now — waiting all this time for the *real* awakened life to begin. The special one. The shining one. The one grander than carrying water. And there had never been one coming. This was it. This had always been it. The ordinary, plain, aching, precious work of caring for one another and the land — done with open eyes and a full heart — this was the whole of it. There was nothing else, and nothing more, and nothing higher. And that was not a disappointment. It was the most freeing thing she had ever heard.

"Nothing special," Nina said slowly, wonderingly.

"Nothing special," Illa agreed, smiling. "And everything — *everything* — sacred. That is where the whole long road was always leading. Not up onto a pedestal. Down onto this path, with these jugs, in this plain gold afternoon. Welcome home, Nina. It looks exactly like carrying water. Because that is what it is."

And the two of them walked on to the spring and back, the spring and back, carrying the water in the ordinary holy light — and Nina's arms still burned, and it was still dull, aching work, and it had become, somehow, without anything at all having changed, the most beautiful afternoon of her life.

*The awakened do not rise above the world.
They come all the way down into it —
and find the plainest work was holy all along.*

. . .



CHAPTER Eleven

The Feast of the Whole Valley

river to snow, at one table

And then came the feast.

It was the great planting-feast that Kusi had been preparing for — the largest of the whole year — and on the appointed day the entire valley came down, and up, and together, to one enormous table spread the length of the plaza and out along the terraces beyond.

They came from everywhere. The traders and gardeners of the valley floor. The families from the town, in their brightest woven finery. And down from the high country they came too — the herders and weavers of the mountain communities, of Willka Orqo and all the high pueblos, walking the long stone paths since before dawn to be there, bringing their upland cheeses and their dried meats and their high, hardy grains. Down from the snow and up from the river, the whole living mountain gathered itself into one place, at one table, for one afternoon — and Nina, moving among them, thought she had never in her life seen anything so beautiful.

For it was not only a feast of food, though the food was wonderful — the long tables groaning with the abundance of a valley that had remembered how to feed itself, dish after dish of the old foods grown in the old ways, more than all of them together could ever eat. It was a feast of *belonging*. Everywhere Nina looked, she saw the thing the whole long story had been about. She saw Kusi, of course, at the very heart of it, laughing, drumming, pulling shy children into the dance. She saw Illa surrounded by a knot of the

young, telling some tale that had them wide-eyed. She saw Mallki moving quietly among the newest arrivals, the shy and the lonely, making each one feel, within a moment, that they had always belonged here. She saw old Don Teofilo from the high pueblo, honored at the head of a table, telling the valley children about the ways of the snow. She saw the healed of Sumaq Kawsay — the once-hollow young man, the once-gray widow — laughing now, and full, and whole, and serving others.

And she saw Mama Rosa and Don Emilio, the two ancient ones, seated together in the warm middle of it all, holding hands beneath the table as they had for seventy years, their faces shining with a joy almost too large to look at directly — the joy of two people who had lived long enough to see the thing they had hardly dared to pray for, come true, and spread, and fill a whole valley to overflowing.

The bright woven banners snapped in the mountain wind. The drums began, and then the flutes, high and sweet as the wind through the peaks. Someone set out the great steaming pots. And the whole valley — river to snow, floor to summit, the newest child and the oldest elder — sat down together and ate, and sang, and danced, and was, for one long gold afternoon, entirely and simply happy.

Nina remembered, then, a thing she had read once, in a certain book, about the awakening of the valley: that in all its long, quiet, world-changing years, the loudest thing that ever happened was a feast. She had not understood it, when she read it. She understood it now. For here was the loud part — the only loud part there had ever been or ever needed to be. Not an army. Not a great shout against the dark. Just this: a whole people, at one table, so full of joy and food and belonging that the sound of it rolled up and down the whole valley and echoed off the mountains and rose, surely, all the way to wherever the ancestors were leaning close to listen.

"This," said a voice at her elbow, and it was Kusi, breathless and laughing, dropping down beside her with a cup in hand. "*This* is what we built, Nina. Not the gardens. Not the schools, even. This." A gesture at the whole singing, dancing, overflowing table. "A place where nobody eats alone. Where the herder from the snow and the trader from the river sit at one table and call each other family. Where the broken get better by helping, and the lonely have somewhere to be, and every single soul — every one — belongs." Kusi's eyes were suddenly bright with more than laughter. "That's the whole treasure. That's what we so nearly lost. That's what came home."

"That's what came home," Nina echoed. And she lifted her own cup, and touched it to Kusi's, and looked out over the great feast of the whole valley in the falling gold light.

And she thought: if the story ended here, it would be enough. A whole valley, awake and gathered and glad, from the river to the snow. It would be more than enough.

But the story did not end there. Because as the sun went down behind the western peaks, and the feast burned low and warm, and the little ones fell asleep in their parents' laps, the old ones began to rise, one by one — Mama Rosa, and Don Emilio, and Don Teofilo, and the eldest of the mountain grandmothers — and to move quietly away from the tables, up toward the flat high place above the town. And Mama Rosa turned, and caught Nina's eye across the firelight, and beckoned.

For there was one more thing to be shown her. The last thing. The deepest of all. And it was written not in any book, nor in any garden, but in the stars now coming out, one by one, over the sleeping and waking valley.

. . .



CHAPTER Twelve

Under the Same Stars

the ones who lean close

The flat high place above the town was the same as it had always been — the ground falling away, the whole valley opening below, the great mountains rising huge and black and near, holding up a sky so thick with stars it looked less like a sky than a field of seed scattered by some vast and generous hand.

Nina had stood here before. Once, long ago, as a frightened girl, with two shining faces beside her, on the night she first learned to see. Now she stood here as a grown woman, a guide, with those same two faces beside her — older now, so much older — and all the eldest of the mountain grandmothers gathered close, and the whole feast-lit valley spread glowing below, every window a caught flame.

"Look down, child," said Mama Rosa softly. "At all the lights. And now look up. At all the stars. And tell me — can you see, tonight, what lies between them?"

And Nina looked — down at the warm valley, up at the cold stars — and this time, with all the years of seeing behind her, she understood what the old woman was asking. For Don Emilio had taught her, once, of the three worlds that are always here, stacked close as the pages of a book. The world above — *hanan pacha* — the stars, the high places, the ancestors. This world — *kay pacha* — the one your two feet stand upon, the valley, the feast, the

ordinary holy day. And the world within — *ukhu pacha* — the deep places, the roots, the seed in the dark, the prayer curled in the chest.

"I can see them," Nina whispered. "All three. The stars above. The valley here. And..." she pressed a hand to her own chest, "...the seed within. And they're — they're not separate, are they? They never were. It's all one thing. The light in the windows and the light in the stars and the light in here. All the same light."

"All the same light," said Don Emilio, and his old voice trembled with joy. "That is the last seeing, child. The whole of it. The three worlds are one world. What shines in the stars is what shines in the valley is what shines in your own chest — one single light, wearing three faces, the way a family is one love wearing many. And the chakana — the door you walked through, all those years ago — it was never a door *between* the worlds. It was the door that lets you see they were never truly apart."

Mama Rosa turned her ancient face up to the stars, and when she spoke again her voice was very gentle.

"And they are close tonight, child. The ones above. Can you feel them? All the grandmothers and grandfathers, all the way back to the beginning — leaning in around this valley the way we lean in around a cradle. They have watched the whole long story. They grieved when we slept. They rejoiced when we woke. And they are here tonight, closer than close, glad beyond all telling at what their children remembered."

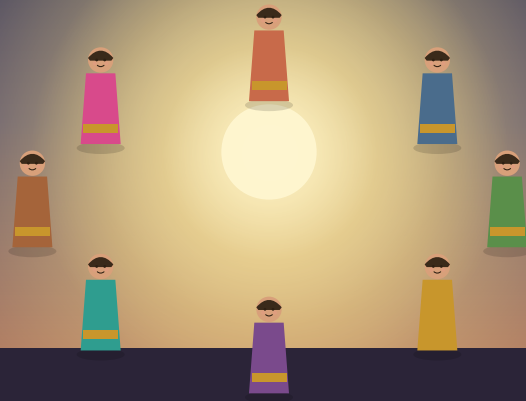
"The golden grandparents," Nina murmured — the old, old name, from the very first book. "They're here."

"They are always here," said Mama Rosa. "And one day — not soon, I hope, but one day — Emilio and I will lay down these old bodies and go to join them. And we will lean in with them, from just beyond the thin bright veil, and watch over you, and over your children, and over every child of this valley yet to come." She smiled, and there was not one drop of fear in it — only a vast and shining peace. "Do not grieve it, when it comes, child. It is not a leaving. It is only the last coming home. We will not be gone. We will only have stepped through the same door you did — the one that leads not away from this world, but all the way into it. We will be in the stars, and in the valley, and in your own chest, with all the same light. Closer to you then, perhaps, than we can be now."

And Nina took the two ancient hands in hers, under the blazing stars, and did not grieve — though her eyes were full — because she understood, at last, that there was nothing, anywhere, to grieve.

"There's one thing left to tell you," said Don Emilio. "The deepest thing. The thing all the rest was only leading to." He looked at her, and at the whole lit valley, and the whole starred sky. "It is about why the serving heals. Why the giving is the getting. Why there is no one, anywhere, truly outside your care. Sit, child. Under the stars. And I will tell you the last secret of the beautiful living — the one that holds up all the others."

. . .



CHAPTER Thirteen

There Is No One Outside Us

the healing was always each other

You asked me once," said Don Emilio, "long ago, when you were small — you asked who saved the valley. And I told you: no one came. The help did not come from without. It rose from within — from the mountains, the ancestors, and the children, which are not three things but one. Do you remember?"

"I remember," said Nina. "I have never forgotten it."

"Good. For now I will tell you why that is true — not just of the valley, but of everything. It is the deepest root, and from it the whole tree grows." The old man was quiet a moment, gathering it. "You have learned, this year, that the serving is the medicine. That when you go to heal another, you are healed. That there is no giver and no getter, only love moving between two people and mending them both. You have felt it — with Doña Feliciano, on the mountain. Yes?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever wondered *why* it works so? Why the giving should return to the giver? It is the strangest law in all the world, when you think on it. You would expect that what you give away, you would have less of. And instead — with love, with care, with the true serving — the very opposite. The more you give, the more you have. Why should that be?"

Nina had wondered it, in fact, many times. "I don't know," she said. "It has always seemed almost like magic."

"It is not magic," said Don Emilio. "It is only what is true, showing through. And here is what is true, child — the last and deepest thing." He gestured out at the whole valley, the whole sky, the whole world. "There are not, in the end, many separate people, each shut alone inside their own skin, reaching across a great cold distance to help one another. That is how it looks. That is not how it is. Underneath — down where the roots go, down in *ukhu pacha*, down beneath the seeming — we are not separate at all. We are one living thing. One great life, that has spread itself out into a thousand thousand faces, so that it might know itself, and meet itself, and love itself, in all of them. The herder in the snow and the trader by the river. Mama Rosa and the newest child. You, and Doña Feliciana. You, and Wren, across the sea. You, and the ones not yet born. Not many lives, brushing up against each other. One life, looking out through many eyes."

"And *that*," he said, "is why the giving returns to you. When you serve another, you are not sending your love away across a cold gap to some stranger. There is no stranger. There is no gap. You are one part of the one life, turning to heal another part of the same life — which is to say, you are life itself, healing itself. Of course it returns to you. It never left. The hand that binds the wound and the wound that is bound are the same body. When you healed Feliciana, life was healing life. When she taught you, love was loving itself. There was only ever *one* of you there, on that cold mountain, wearing two faces and calling it two people."

Nina sat very still beneath the stars, and felt the whole vast truth of it opening in her, too large to hold and yet somehow always known.

"So there's no one outside us," she said slowly. "No one to be afraid of. No one who is truly a stranger. No one whose healing isn't also, somehow... ours."

"There is no one outside us," said Don Emilio. "There never was. There is no stranger anywhere on this earth, child — only family we have not yet remembered. That is the whole reason the real rebellion, the real waking, is simply to love the forgotten. Because in loving the most forgotten one — the loneliest widow, the emptiest wanderer, the person the whole world has cast aside — you are loving the part of the one great life that has been out in the cold the longest. And when you gather that one back in, the *whole* body grows warmer. Including you. Especially you."

"**Huk ayllulla kanchis,**" Mama Rosa said softly, into the starlight. "We are one family. It is the oldest thing our people know, and the deepest, and the last. Not a pretty saying, child. A plain fact, truer than the mountains. We are one. And so there is no one, anywhere, left outside your love. There is only the one great life — remembering, through you, and through all of us, how to hold itself whole again."

And the stars blazed, and the valley glowed, and the whole one light shone in all three worlds at once — and Nina understood that this was the end of the teaching, and the root of everything, and the true and final secret of the beautiful living.

There is no stranger anywhere — only family not yet remembered.

When you serve another, life is healing life.

Huk ayllulla kanchis. *We are one.*

. . .



CHAPTER Fourteen

The Book Comes Home

the candle, passed on

Late that night, when the feast was long over and the valley had gone to its rest, Nina walked home alone under the stars, her heart so full it ached. And on the way, passing a small house at the edge of the town, she saw a thing that stopped her in the road — a thing so small and so ordinary that anyone else would have walked right past it, and so enormous, to her, that she stood and wept in the dark for the pure joy of it.

In the window of the little house, a lamp was burning. And by its light, a child was sitting up in bed — a child who ought long ago to have been asleep — bent over a book, utterly lost in it, turning the pages with the hungry wonder of one who cannot bear to stop.

And Nina knew, the way you know a thing in your bones, exactly what book it was.

It was *the* book. The one she had read, on a sleepless night, in another life. The one Wren had carried across the sea. The candle made of words, that someone had lit long ago from their own flame, and set loose upon the world — and here it was, still burning, still passing hand to hand, kindling one more small heart on one more ordinary night, in one more lamp-lit window, exactly as it had once kindled hers.

She thought of how far that little candle had traveled. From whoever first lit it, to Kusi and Illa and Mallki, whose true story it told. Into a book. Into

Nina's own hands, on the night that woke her. Across the whole sea, into Wren's, and away now to a grey far country to light a hearth that had waited cold for centuries. And here, tonight, into the hands of a child in a window she happened to pass — who would wake, and remember, and one day pass it on again, to someone Nina would never meet, in a time she would never see.

On, and on. One by one by one. Beyond her. Beyond all of them.

And then a stranger thought came to Nina — a wondering, spiralling, almost dizzy thought — standing there in the starlit road, watching the child read. She thought: *the book that child is reading — is it the story of Kusi and Illa and Mallki, that I read as a girl? Or has the candle been passed so many times, and the story grown so much, that by now it holds all of us? Mama Rosa's fire, and my walk through the door, and Wren at the blue door, and the mountain communities, and this very feast?* She thought: *how far has it grown, the story? Has it grown large enough, by now, to hold even this — even me, standing in a road at night, watching a child read a book?*

And she smiled in the dark, because she saw that it did not matter — that it was, in the deepest way, all one story anyhow, still being written, still passing on, with no edge to it and no end.

For that is the thing about a true story, child. And now — gently, the way the most important things are always said — I am speaking to *you*. The one holding this book. Yes: *you*.

Because you must have wondered, once or twice, reading all of this — how the story of a small valley, in mountains you may never see, came to be in your hands, tonight, wherever you are. And now you know. It is the candle. It has been passed, and passed, and passed again, from heart to heart, across all the years and all the miles between that valley and your window — and tonight, this very night, it has come to *you*. You are the child in the lamp-lit window. You are the next hand the flame is passed to. You always were. The whole book was travelling toward you the entire time.

The story has come home. It has come home to its reader. It has come home to *you*.

. . .



CHAPTER Fifteen

What the Grandmothers Always Knew

back to the first whisper

And so, at the very end of it all, Nina came back to the beginning. For as she stood there in the starlit road, with the whole long story settling into place inside her — the awakening, the door, the serving, the one great life, the candle passing on forever — she found that all of it, every last thread, gathered itself back down to a single point. To the very first thing. To a thing that had happened to her before she could remember, before she could even speak: a whisper, breathed over her cradle, on the day that she was born.

Mama Rosa had told her of it, long ago, by the fire. How every child of the valley, in an unbroken chain a thousand years long, has been leaned over on their first day, and whispered to — not always in words, sometimes only in the way they were held — a kind of prayer. *That you are loved. That you belong here. That you carry something precious inside you, a gift the world will one day need. And that when the time is right, you will remember it, and you will give it away.*

And Nina saw, now — standing under the stars at the end of the whole long road — that this was the whole thing. That everything. Everything she had learned, across all the years and all the fires and all the climbing — it had all been folded up, already, inside that first wordless whisper. *You are loved —*

there was the one great life, holding her, holding all of them. *You belong here* — there was the valley, the ayllu, the one family with no stranger left outside it. *You carry a gift* — there was the seed, the prayer, the light in the chest. *Give it away* — there was the serving that is the medicine, the candle passed from hand to hand forever.

All of it. The whole vast trilogy of her life — the remembering, and the crossing over, and the coming home — the whole enormous journey out to the edge of the world and the top of the mountain and the deep of the stars. And it had only ever been unfolding what a grandmother had folded into her, in a single breath, before she had words to hold it.

"We went all that way," Nina said aloud, softly, to the stars. "Around the whole world. Up the whole mountain. Out to the very edge and back. And it was all — it was all just to learn what my grandmother already knew. What she whispered over me before I could understand a word of it."

And she laughed, quietly, in the dark — the laugh of someone who has been let in on the oldest and gentlest joke there is. For this is the shape of every true homecoming, child, and now you know it too: that you journey to the ends of the earth, and climb to the roof of the sky, and cross through every door there is — only to arrive, at the very last, back at the small plain love that was breathed over you at the very first. You do not learn something new at the end of the road. You finally understand the thing you were told at the beginning. The grandmothers knew it all along. They always have. They whispered it into each of us, and then waited — patient as seeds, patient as mountains — for us to go the whole long way round, and come home, and understand.

Nina looked up at the blazing stars — at all the leaning, shining grandmothers and grandfathers, all the way back to the first one who ever whispered over the first cradle — and she whispered back to them, across the thin bright veil, the only word there was left to say.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm home. I understand now. Thank you."

And the stars, of course, said nothing. But they seemed, to Nina, to shine a little brighter — the way they do, they say, whenever one more of us goes all the way out, and all the way round, and finally, finally home.

*We journey to the ends of the earth
only to understand, at last,
what was whispered over us at the very first.*



CHAPTER Sixteen

Home

the door opens onto everything

And now, at the very last, I must speak to you once more — you, the one holding this book — because the story is nearly closed now, and there is one thing left, and it is for you, and only you.

You have come a long way, to reach this final page. Through three books, and three great movements — the *remembering*, and the *crossing over*, and the long *coming home*. You have watched a valley wake. You have walked through a door that led not away from the world but deeper into it. And you have learned, with Nina, the last and deepest secrets of the beautiful living: that the serving is the medicine, that the ordinary is holy, that there is no stranger anywhere but only family not yet remembered, that we are one great life, learning to love itself whole. It has been a long road. And I have saved the most important thing for its very end.

It is this: *everything in these three books is true of you.*

You were whispered over, too. On the day that you were born — whoever you are, wherever you live, in whatever valley or vast grey city on this wide and aching earth — someone leaned close, in words or only in the way they held you, and breathed the oldest prayer there is over your small new life. *You are loved. You belong. You carry a gift the world will need. One day, you will remember, and give it away.* It is in you still. It has been in you this whole time, curled small and patient in the deep place, waiting — like a seed in the dark, like a valley before its dawn — for you to remember.

And you have your own valley. Perhaps it is awake already; perhaps, like Wren's grey country, it is only sleeping. It does not matter which. Because the light you have been reading about is not in these Andean mountains, and never was. It is not ours. It is everywhere, sleeping, under the frost of every land — and it is in *you*, and in your own people, and in your own grandmother's half-forgotten ways, waiting for one of its own to wake and begin. You do not have to come to our valley. You do not have to become anyone but yourself. You have only to go home — all the way home, into your own ordinary holy life, with your eyes finally open — and begin.

And begin *small*, child. That is the last kindness, and the truest. Do not try to wake the whole grey world by Thursday. The dawn does not come that way, and it never has. Plant one thing. Sit with one lonely elder, and truly listen — and let them heal you, as much as you heal them, for that is how it works. Gather one friend at one table. Carry the water. Feed the fire. Do one plain, holy, ordinary thing, with your whole heart, for someone the world forgot. And know, as you do it, that it is not small at all — that no love is ever small — that in gathering back even one forgotten one, you are warming the whole great body of the world, yourself included. One candle, touched to the next. It is the only way the morning has ever come.

You are the child in the lamp-lit window. You are the next hand the flame is passed to. The candle made of words has traveled across all the years and all the miles to reach you, tonight — and now it is yours. What you do with it is the next book, and it will not be written on any page. It will be written in your one short, precious, altogether miraculous life.

So here, on the last page of the last book, I ask you the only thing left to ask — the same thing an old man once asked a girl named Nina, at the end of a long night, at the edge of the dawn. Not *is it real*. You know by now that it is real. The question is only, and always, *will you come home*.

The door is open. It has been open all along. And you are nearer home than you have ever known.

The new dawn is you. The door is open. And now — come home.

*Not away to some far and shining country,
but all the way into your own ordinary, holy, waiting life.*

Go, then, child of whatever valley. Remember the whisper breathed over your cradle. Walk through the door that leads all the way in. And come home — to your own people, your own land, your own plain and sacred work, your

own one wild life — and there, kneeling in the ordinary holy light, begin. Plant your one small seed. Pass your one small flame. And know that you are not alone, and never were — that a whole valley, and a whole mountain, and a whole sky full of leaning, shining ancestors, and a great one life wearing a thousand thousand faces, are all doing the very same thing beside you, this very moment, all together, moving home toward the morning.

Kausachun Allin Kawsay. Long live the good and beautiful living. ***Huk ayllulla kanchis.*** We are one family — you, and I, and Nina, and the valley, and the mountains, and all the shining ones who have gone before, and all the children not yet born.

The remembering is done. The crossing is made. And now, at last — for you, and for all of us, together — the coming home.

Mosoq Paqariy.
The new dawn has come.
And it is you.
Welcome home.

. . .