

Claus Tøndering

Where Are the Lions?



Tales from the
New Jerusalem

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Chapter 1

I'm still counting years.

Yes, I know it's silly, but so what? I've always been fascinated by numbers, lists, tables, that kind of thing; so counting years is just a harmless hobby for me.

514 years and counting. There you have it.

I'm not the only one to count. There are thousands of historians who are not only counting years, but also keeping track of the dates. They like to keep a record of events, and I can sympathize with that.

It'll have to stop eventually, of course. Remembering a three-digit, four-digit, or a five-digit year is simple enough, but what'll we do when the count needs twenty or even a hundred digits? Who'd be bothered with memorizing that the current year is 24,543,323,003,774,503,721,778,920 or whatever? Well, I'll probably still be counting then, but I'm weird that way.

It's been 514 years since the rebirth of the world; 514 years since God decided that enough was enough; 514 years since our bodily resurrection, the last judgment, the destruction of the old earth, and the creation of the new

heaven and the new earth.

We've had 514 years of really getting to know God; 514 years of seeing Jesus face-to-face; 514 years without suffering, pain, sadness, loss; 514 years without hatred, envy, selfishness, evil; 514 years without death. Even the words are gradually becoming fuzzy. Those of us who still remember pain, do so more and more on an intellectual level. Genuinely remembering pain is becoming increasingly difficult as it fades away in our memory.

And I'm not even sure I remember what "envy" means. Was it the same as "jealousy"? Well, who cares?

But I forget my manners. I should introduce myself.

God's peace on you, dear reader. My name is Nick—well, Nicholas actually, but everybody calls me Nick, even Jesus. Born in Connecticut in 1962, died in 2041. Resurrected by the power of God and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ 514 years ago. Mathematician by profession. Citizen of the New Jerusalem.

The New Jerusalem, the city of gold. Most people here call it simply "The City." Its wonders never cease to amaze me. The afternoon sun shone down on me as I was standing at my upstairs window looking out over The City. I let the sights, the sounds, and the fragrances of the New Jerusalem tickle my senses into delight.

A couple of children were running up the street, shouting, playing with a ball, while a small dog chased after

them, trying to catch it. Across the street, I could look into my neighbor's kitchen, where—my nose told me—he was preparing a large and quite delicious meal. The sun was shining on the rooftops of the houses, which reflected the sunlight in a symphony of colors. In the distance I could hear the noise from the local market, where bread and fruit and vegetables, baskets and tools and blankets, books and paper and paint were being distributed by the proud makers.

On a bench a short way up the street, a couple sat, deep in conversation, bending over a book they were studying. Now and then their serious conversation would be interrupted by laughter over some witty remark. A small monkey was sitting on the bench beside them, enjoying an apple the couple had given it.

Calling the New Jerusalem a city actually gives the wrong impression. First, it's huge! Colossal. It's almost the size of old earth Australia. Second, it's not a compact collection of houses. Yes, several hundred million people live here, but there's still plenty of room for fields and meadows and open spaces inside the city walls. There's a lot of agriculture in The City. The only thing that sets it apart from the surrounding countryside is the walls.

The walls define the square perimeter of The City, but more and more people are moving outside the walls to cultivate the fertile surroundings. Many now live hundreds of kilometers away; but as the surrounding area is being colonized, it becomes increasingly difficult to tell the difference between "inside" and "outside" The City.

I live inside the walls, fairly close to Reuben's gate, which

is the southernmost gate in the eastern wall and only about half an hour's walk from my home. I go there most days because the university is right next to gate.

Down in the street below me I could hear the squeaking sound of a cart as it was being pulled along. "Bread time," I thought. And, true enough, a few moments later there was a knock on the door, and I went downstairs to open.

It was, of course, Barbara, the baker. She makes the most marvelous bread and cakes to the delight of several hundred people every day. Most local producers distribute their wares on the market, but Barbara prefers to go from door to door with her cart and offer her bread. This gives her a better chance to chat with people, she says.

"God's peace on you, Nick," she greeted me.

"And on you, Barbara," I replied. "What have you got today?"

"Oh, mostly the usual stuff. Wheat bread, rye bread, some sesame seed buns, raisin scones."

"Do you have some of the honey flavored rye bread you sometimes make?"

"You're in luck, Nick. The answer is yes." She handed me a brown loaf and I held it to my nose to enjoy the smell.

"Could I have a couple of cinnamon buns also, please?"

"Sure! Two, three, four?"

"Two is fine, thank you." She handed me the goods.

"So how's work?" she asked, not intending to leave before we'd had a little chat.

"Great," I replied.

"What do you do?"

"I'm a mathematician at Reuben University, you know that."

"Yes, yes, but what do you *do*?"

"Oh, I'm currently investigating the topology of n -dimensional spaces where n is a prime. It turns out that such spaces have some fascinating properties."

She looked at me skeptically. "Is that useful?" she wondered.

"Yes! It demonstrates God's glory."

"How?"

"Math is beautiful," I claimed. "You dive into some highly complex structures, you look around you and everything seems chaotic and unsystematic and you feel lost. Then you take a step back and look at it from another angle, and suddenly you notice a very simple pattern you haven't seen before. Then everything falls into place and you're left with a feeling of wonder that such simplicity can be hiding inside such complexity. And you want to sing praises to God for creating wonders like those."

"Hm," was all she said.

"You're still not convinced?" I asked. "What is two plus two?"

"Four, of course."

"Have you ever wondered if God was forced to make two plus two equal to four, or if he could have made a world in which two plus two made five?"

"No, I can't say that I have."

"Think about it," I urged her.

"I don't see how two and two could possibly be five. If I take these two loaves in my left hand and these two in my

right, how could I not have four?"

"Exactly!" I replied. "Math is part of the very basic structure of the world. But I believe God made it that way. If he had made two plus two equal to five, the world would have been less beautiful."

"You're weird." She shook her head with a smile.

"And you're a great baker, Barbara. Thanks for the bread."

"You're welcome, Nick. Enjoy your numbers."

"Oh, I intend to!" I waved at her as she pulled her cart down the garden path and out into the street.

I went into the kitchen, took out a knife and cut myself a slice of her bread. Then I went back upstairs to sit by the window and enjoy the honey flavored treat.

One of the innumerable joys of living in the New Jerusalem is the many fascinating people you get to meet. People from all over the old earth, people from all ages. Barbara, for example, used to be a slave in a Greek household in the second century. She was responsible for the kitchen and took such a pride in her work that she became an expert baker. After the resurrection, she saw no reason to give up on baking. She loves it, she's so proud of her bread, and rightly so.

Not everybody is like Barbara, who baked bread on the old earth and bakes bread on the new. Many people didn't like the work they had on the old earth, and it's a joy for them to be able to devote themselves to things they really enjoy. On the old earth, my friend Giorgio used to be the manager of a company that manufactured refrigerators. He

hated his job for most of his life. Here, he's a gardener. He grows fruits and vegetables and relishes every minute of it.

But there are also many like Barbara who simply go on doing what they're good at. A strange consequence of this is that our life here is a curious mixture of old and new technology. No human-made artifacts from the old earth are available here; we've had to reinvent almost everything (with a few exceptions, but I'll tell you about that later). Therefore you have people like Barbara who prefers to bake her bread in a stone oven which she heats by burning wood; and then there's Radomir, who used to be a watchmaker in the late nineteenth century old earth, and who now makes the most intricate and complex high-precision watches in a small workshop by the river.

Watches are a rather curious commodity here. With literally—*literally*—an infinite amount of time at your disposal, you rarely feel the need for keeping accurate time. The fact that my interest in counting years is seen as “geeky” is an indication that few people care about time.

If I need to visit someone who lives two hundred kilometers away from me, I'll simply walk there. I don't need a car or even a bicycle. Yes, it'll take me a week to get there, but so what? There's hardly ever a deadline.

If someone shows signs of impatience, more often than not somebody will ask them, “Do you have to catch a train?” It's a standard phrase intended to show the absurdity of impatience. Often, the impatient person will reply, “What *is* a train?” Chances are the person either lived on the old earth before the invention of trains, or they were born on the new earth.

So, as I said, we have a strange mixture of old and new technology here. There are people in The City who know perfectly well how to construct a combustion engine and a car—or even a space shuttle or a computer or a television or a nuclear power plant. But why should they?

Take electronics for example. Some electronics could be useful here. As a mathematician, I wouldn't mind having an electronic calculator. But we still have a long way to go before that becomes a reality. So I'm stuck with calculating square roots on a piece of paper and using my trusty abacus. It's not a problem, though. I'm sure we'll get electronic calculators eventually; and what does it matter if it takes me five minutes rather than five milliseconds to calculate the cosine of an angle? I don't have a train to catch.

Barbara did have a point when she asked me if my work was useful. She sees no obvious usefulness in my investigations of the topology of n -dimensional spaces. Few people do. But every once in a while, I have a student who almost screams with delight at discovering a surprising link between, say, spherical geometry and vector field theory. As a math teacher on the old earth, I wasn't accustomed to hearing shouts of "Praise God!" in my classroom, but it happens occasionally here.

And that's what makes any job here so worthwhile: seeing the joy your work creates.

Why does Barbara bake hundreds of buns and loaves of bread every day? Why does she walk door-to-door giving her bread to people? The answer is love: She loves peo-

ple, and people need bread. So she bakes bread and gives it away; and people love her for it, and therefore Barbara makes bread the next day as well.

After the fall, God cursed the ground for Adam. Thus work became a bitter task rather than the delight it was intended to be. But now, we simply do things because we love to do them, and we love to help other people.

Delighting in doing things for others came naturally, receiving “favors” from others was more difficult to learn.

Over the course of a day, Barbara will come to my door and give me bread, at the market someone will give me vegetables, milk, butter, cheese. If I need paint, somebody will give me that; if a tree in my garden has grown too big, Giorgio the gardener will come over with his tools and cut it down; if I need a new chair, our local carpenter will make one for me.

At first, I kept saying things like, “What can I do for you in return?” The answer was always, “Nothing. It was my pleasure.” And that’s the truth. It’s always our pleasure.

Barbara’s mother tongue was, of course, second century Greek. Mine was twentieth century American English.

One of the most obvious changes we all noticed after the resurrection was the complete reversal of the incident at the tower of Babel. Some people claim that that’s what happened at the first Christian Pentecost: It wasn’t that the apostles could speak foreign languages, it was rather that everybody temporarily got a common language. I don’t know if that’s the case, and I haven’t had a chance to talk

with any of the apostles about it. But just a short time after arriving on the new earth, we discovered that we were able to talk with each other without any problems. It took us a few minutes to realize that we had switched to a completely new language which God had given us.

I can still speak English if I choose to, but why should I? Back on the old earth I learned Spanish in high school, and I was reasonably good at it. I could carry out everyday conversations in Spanish, but it never became as natural for me to speak Spanish as to speak English. It's the same here. Our new language just comes more naturally to everybody than our old mother tongues.

Some people who used to speak fairly obscure languages, such as Icelandic or medieval Czech, will occasionally switch to their old language if they're discussing a secret. If you find your friends conversing in a strange language, chances are they're planning a surprise party for you. We whose mother tongue was English don't have that option, since we never know who might understand us.

One particular source of delight in the first months on the new earth was meeting old friends and relatives.

One of the first people I met was my grandmother. Granny died when I was only eight years old. She was my mother's mother, and I have only the fondest memories of her. When I was little, I always loved spending time with Granny. When she was killed in a car crash, I was devastated.

Just a few weeks after the resurrection I suddenly saw

her! She was sitting under a tree talking pleasantly with a friend. I recognized her at once, but what's more surprising: she recognized *me* even though I was only a young child when she died.

"Granny!" I shouted.

"Nick!" she exclaimed.

And that's all we said for a long time as we seized each other in a gigantic hug.

Then there was Carl. He used to be the local homeless drunk back in my home town in Connecticut. He was always sitting outside the bus station, drinking, shouting at passers-by. He was in and out of prison for drunk and disorderly behavior more times than anyone could count. I once talked with a policeman who told me that Carl seemed especially good at timing his arrests so that he could spend some time in a warm cell during the winter months. During the warm summers, he tended to behave himself better. I occasionally gave him a few dollars when he was begging, but I did so more out of shame than love.

And there he was! Tall, handsome, with a winning smile and an intelligent glint in his eyes.

"Why, it's Carl," I said as I recognized him.

"Why, it's what's-his-name," he replied with a smile.

We hugged, but I was feeling somewhat uneasy.

"I'll bet you're surprised to find me here," he said.

"Not as surprised as I am to find myself here," I answered honestly.

I hesitated. "Look, Carl,..." I stammered. "I'm sorry..."

"Don't," he interrupted me. "Since I arrived here, people have been going out of their way to apologize to me. It's all

right! Don't worry about it. God is good to me."

Then there was the surreal experience when a woman walked up to me and introduced herself as my great-great granddaughter. She was a charming person and greeted me with huge enthusiasm. She explained that she'd been born 30-odd years after my death and she was trying to work her way backwards through all the ancestors she could find. So she asked me if I knew where my parents and grandparents were. At that time I only knew about Granny, so that was all the information I could give this very systematic lady. (She was so obviously a relative!)

And then, of course, there was Kate.

Chapter 2

I used to be a teacher. Back in Hartford, Connecticut in the early 1990s I taught math and science at a local high school. I normally took the bus to work; it was fast and convenient. Occasionally, when going home, I'd walk a couple blocks before boarding the bus so that I could stop to look at an antiques shop on the corner of 8th and King. They had a fine collection of old maps that fascinated me no end.

Their maps were usually very expensive and I couldn't afford them on my limited teacher's salary. But one day they had a beautiful old map of England on display, and I couldn't help myself. I had to go in and ask about it.

It had been a few months since I last was inside the shop, and I noticed that there was a new assistant in the maps section. She was young and very beautiful with short, black hair and brown eyes. As I talked with her, I discovered that she was also very bright and exceptionally knowledgeable about maps in general. Her name was Kate. We talked and talked until it suddenly occurred to us that there were a number of other customers waiting. Quite embarrassing.

When I left the shop, I didn't have a map, but I did have

a date with the shop assistant.

We were married a year later in the spring of 1992.

After a few years, Kate became a partner in the antiques shop, and she continued to develop her interest in maps, old and new; as the years went by, she became something of an authority on ancient maps.

Kate and I had 44 wonderful years of marriage together. We had three marvelous children, two girls and a boy. Kate died of cancer in 2036. I never got over losing her and I spent the remaining five years of my life in a state of shock.

On the day of the resurrection I woke up to find myself lying on a grass meadow on a small hill outside the colossal city that is the New Jerusalem. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and Jesus was standing a few paces away looking at me.

As I got to my feet, I noticed Kate getting up a few meters to my right. She looked at Jesus and smiled, then she looked at me and smiled. She stretched out her arms and ran to embrace Jesus.

On the old earth I repeatedly told her that I couldn't live with being number one in her life. Jesus had to be number one. Being number two in her life would be my greatest joy. Now she was hugging Jesus and tears of joy welled up in my eyes. They stood like that for several minutes.

Then it was my turn. I flung my arms around Jesus and we held each other for the longest time. I couldn't hold back my tears and I wept like a child as I felt his love fill me.

When he let go of me, I noticed that Kate had walked a few paces away and stood at the edge of the hillside looking at The City. I held back.

“Well?” Jesus prompted.

I looked at him quizzically.

“Don’t you love her?” he asked.

“More than I can say!”

“Then what are you waiting for?”

“I’m not sure what to do, Lord. You said there’d be no marriage here.”

“I said that on the old earth people married and were given in marriage, but at the resurrection, people will neither marry nor be given in marriage.” He paused. “I never said there would be no love.”

“I don’t understand...” I said hesitantly, a slight hope growing inside me.

“Before the fall, I created you in my image as man and woman. Do you think I’ve changed my mind about that? That it was a bad idea?”

“No, but...”

“On the old earth, love was always a risky business. Marriage was created to protect the love between man and woman from outside intruders, and to help you remember to be faithful to one another. Here, you no longer need the legal framework of a marriage, for you’re no longer capable of betraying your spouse. You can’t sin anymore—you are ‘like the angels in heaven,’ as I said back then.”

I looked at Kate, still hesitating.

“So what are you waiting for?” Jesus asked again.

I hurried over to Kate. She looked me in the face with that wonderful smile of hers and took my hand.

“Go to the mountain in the center of The City,” Jesus said behind us. “I’ll meet you there.”

We looked down at The City. It stretched out in front of us seemingly forever, but in the faint distance we could see a huge, shining mountain reaching up towards the sky. We set off, and hand in hand we walked down towards one of the giant pearls that form the gates in the wall around the New Jerusalem.

We walked and walked for days. But we never tired of the journey, and along the way there were plenty of streams from which we could drink and trees with wonderful fruits to fill our stomachs. Although the sun was in the sky, we soon realized that most of the light came from the mountain, and even after sunset when the sky went black and the stars came out, everything was still quite bright around us.

Thousands of people were walking in the same direction as we, and as we approached our goal we could see more and more people converging. When at last we reached the mountain, there were millions of people around us, but for some reason we never felt crowded.

Then we saw Him! The mountain was God’s throne, the light was his light. The Triune God was smiling at us and we all knelt.

Thus started a period of healing that would last for several months. We spent most of the time simply enjoying the presence of God. Just like two lovers can spend a long

time staring at each other's faces, so we spent months just looking at God and feeling his presence heal our wounded hearts and minds.

When we got thirsty, we would drink from the river of the water of life, which flowed from the foot of the mountain. When we got hungry, we would eat from the gigantic tree of life which stood by the river and which always had fruit enough for everyone. When we got tired we would sleep like babies, undisturbed by the ever present light of God.

It was during this time that I met my grandmother and many other old friends. As the days and weeks passed, I was somewhat surprised to realize that I hadn't really forgotten anything from the old earth. Today I still remember many things from my childhood, my youth, and my old age. Even bad things, traumatic things. But they don't hurt anymore. The pain is completely gone.

It's like my broken arm. When I was in college, I had a bad fracture on my right arm and it took some months to heal. Later, when my arm was perfectly fine again, I could still remember the fracture, but it was of no consequence for me any longer.

That's what looking into God's face does to us. He doesn't give us blinders or erase our memories. They just don't hurt anymore. I think it's important that we're still able to remember the past. If we don't remember our sinful, past selves, how would we understand what Jesus had done for us? How would we explain the glorified wounds still visible on his hands and feet?

* * *

After many months of basking in the light of God's love, the time came when Jesus instructed us, "Go and find your house in The City."

It was time to start cultivating the new earth and shaping our lives as God intended them to be.

Kate and I set out in an apparently random direction. As we walked past farms and workshops and other houses, we noticed that there were names on most of the entrance doors.

"There are millions and millions of houses here," I said. "How can we possibly find a house with our name on it?"

Kate shrugged. "Well, we have an eternity to search, so looking at millions of houses should not be a problem, should it?" she answered with her usual practical attitude.

We walked for several days without any particular goal in mind, but whenever we reached an intersection, we just *knew* if we were supposed to go right or left. And, somehow, I wasn't really surprised when Kate exclaimed, "There!"

It was a wonderful house. It looked very Middle Eastern, built of bricks in a yellowish color, with a flat roof and a brown, wooden door. It had two stories and a nice garden with a small orchard. I could see apple and cherry trees and something I later discovered to be a coconut palm. There was even a well, complete with a winch and a bucket, and on the front door were the names Kate and Nick.

"Do you think there are any other Kates and Nicks here?" I wondered.

"Probably, but this is ours," she answered with certainty.

We opened the door and looked inside. Downstairs there was a kitchen with an old-fashioned stove, and there

was a basket with firewood for the stove standing beside it. On the kitchen tabletop there was another basket with some vegetables, fruit, and a loaf of bread.

Next to the kitchen was a living room with a small table and a few chairs. Upstairs were two extra rooms, and in one of them there was a comfortable double bed and a writing desk.

"Nice!" I exclaimed. "But somewhat unexpected."

Kate merely nodded. After all, what *had* we expected?

But the most surprising thing of all was what was lying on the writing desk: There was a large stack of blank paper and a number of pencils. There was a fine compass and a 100 meter tape measure. And there was a very nice 31-rod *soroban*, a Japanese abacus.

We stared.

"What's that for?" Kate asked.

"Well...Paper and pencils will come in handy," I said, "and I'm sure I'll enjoy discovering how to use the abacus. I've read that on the old earth, people in the Far East could perform basic calculations on them with surprising speed."

"You're going to be a mathematician again!" Kate exclaimed, and patted me on the cheek as you would a small child who has just shown you a drawing of a doggy or a horsey.

That evening we dined on the food we found in the kitchen and water we drew from our own well.

When we came downstairs the next morning, we were surprised to find the food basket full again. We had a pleasant

breakfast, but I was thoughtful.

“Does God really provide room service?” I wondered. “Can we rely on finding food here every day? Somehow that doesn’t seem right.”

Kate was quiet for a few minutes. “No, this is manna,” she said at length.

“Manna?”

“Yes. Remember when the Israelites walked through the desert from Egypt to Canaan under Moses? Every day God sent them food from heaven, *manna*. But when they’d entered Canaan and could eat the produce of the land, the manna stopped coming.”

I pondered this.

“So I think,” Kate continued, “that when we’ve started producing food ourselves, and we start harvesting the crops of this land, the ‘room service’ will stop.”

She was right. A few months later, fruit and vegetables and grain and milk were being produced all over the place by people who enjoyed gardening and farming. When that happened, the food basket was no longer filled by God. Regular trips to one of the many markets that sprang up in The City became the norm for us.

People like me who enjoyed more bookish activities started teaching and researching and writing. I found the abacus useful as a battery-free calculator. It was a tool for a great start to my new work.

For Kate, the compass and the tape measure were useful tools as well. After a few days it became a customary sight to see her walking around our neighborhood, compass in

one hand, tape measure in the other, and several sheets of paper under her arm, creating fine maps of the area.

And here I was, 514 years later savoring the last bite of my slice of Barbara's honey flavored rye bread.

The sound of the front door opening downstairs interrupted my reminiscence, and a few seconds later I heard Kate's footsteps on the stairs.

"Hi, honey," she said as she gave me a kiss.

"Hi, sweetie, how was your day?"

"Puzzling," she replied.

Like me, Kate now works at Reuben University. It's a fairly large place next to Reuben's gate, hence the name. A couple of hundred scientists spend most of their days there, researching things they love and teaching anybody who wants to learn more.

On the old earth, the words 'I work there' implied a contract, a salary, and an obligation to spend a certain number of hours at the workplace. Here, neither of these is implied. Being scientists, we work there because we delight in studying God's creation and because we believe that our work can help demonstrate his glory. And we teach because we love to see other people become even more excited about God's creation.

Also, of course, our services are frequently needed by others. I spend a lot of my time making complicated calculations for other scientists, engineers, and even architects who need to know the strength of a particular structure.

Kate works at the university as a cartographer. After the resurrection we gradually discovered that the geography of the new earth is very different from that of the old earth. So Kate's long term (*very* long term) goal is to create a complete map of the entire new earth.

"What do you mean by 'puzzling'?" I asked.

"Well, mapping the world outside the walls has turned out to be surprisingly difficult. I've run into some astonishing discrepancies in the maps I've received from people who live there."

"I see," I prompted her.

"So now I'm going to do something about it. I'm going to check for myself. Or rather, *we* are. You're invited to a meeting at the university tomorrow."

"What's it about?"

"You'll learn tomorrow," she said mysteriously.

"Who'll be there?"

"Just you and me and Greg and Anna."

"Greg the astronomer?"

"The very same."

I knew Greg well, his office was close to mine and I frequently helped him with complex calculations. "But who's Anna?" I asked.

"She works in the zoology department on the top floor. White woman, not very tall, brown hair in braids tied up in a bun."

"Nope. Doesn't ring a bell."

"Well, you'll meet her at the party tonight."

"Party? What party?" I was confused.

"Janet's party, of course!"

“You’re doing this to me on purpose, aren’t you?”

“Yes, because you look so cute when you’re confused.”
She kissed my cheek.

“My confusion is ever at your service, My Lady. But, honestly, what party?”

“I ran into Janet this morning. She told me they were having a party tonight, and she asked if we could come. I said yes.”

“Great! And this Anna will be there?”

“So I’m told. Her husband is going to cook.”

Chapter 3

We were astounded when we discovered a few years after the resurrection that Kate was pregnant. Perhaps it shouldn't have surprised us; after all, Isaiah's old prophecies about the new earth talk about infants and young children there. And, to be sure, we'd seen pregnant women and parents with babies walking around The City. But still: Kate...pregnant?

It was a pregnancy like no other. Her three pregnancies on the old earth had been quite hard for her, and none of the births had been easy. But this time...She enjoyed every minute of it! Every day she would look at her growing belly and spontaneously burst into songs of praise. One day I came home to find her dancing wildly around the room, shouting praises to the Lord. "Sweetie," I exclaimed, "be careful!"

"Why in the world should I be careful?" she asked, beads of sweat running down her forehead. "I have not a care in the world!"

Our fourth child, our third daughter, was born in our home early one morning. I was awakened by Kate lying still

beside me humming a little tune. "What's up," I asked.

"The baby's coming. I can feel it," she answered, looking at me radiantly. "Let's get out of bed."

We got up, and Kate squatted on the floor.

"What can I do?" I asked with the confusion that still seizes all men in this situation.

"Hold my hand," she said.

And I did. Then she was quiet for a few minutes, closed her eyes, and a bubbling sound announced the arrival of a new wonderful person.

Janet had been born.

Raising a child in the New Jerusalem is both quite similar and quite unlike raising a child on the old earth. Many things surprised us, some because of their familiarity, some because they were so different.

There's no more sin in the world, and that affects children as well as adults. But making a dirty diaper is not a sin.

Yes, we had dirty diapers to change. And, yes, even on the new earth they stink. Also, even sinless children have to learn how to behave:

"Janet, you're not supposed to be picking your nose at the breakfast table."

"I'm sorry, dad, I didn't know."

Or:

"Janet, I asked you to do the dishes."

"I'm sorry, mom, I forgot. I'll do them now."

Or:

“Janet, you can’t come to the Sabbath celebration with mud all over your body.”

“Why not? Do you think God will mind?”

I wasn’t quite sure how to answer that one.

There’s no more suffering in the world, and that too affects us all. But a weeping baby isn’t necessarily a suffering baby. An infant’s language is limited, and a cry may simply mean ‘I want food’ rather than ‘I’m miserable.’

Raising a child or a teenager here was a novel experience as well. The secure knowledge that nothing bad will ever happen to your darling daughter takes some getting used to:

“Dad, I was walking through the park, and I saw a man sitting on a bench. He offered me some sweets and invited me home to see his puppies. They were so cute! Wasn’t that kind of him?”

“Yes, very kind, Janet.”

Or:

“Mom, I’m going over to Karen’s place. There’s a bunch of other kids coming over. I’m not sure what we’ll be doing, and I don’t know where I’ll spend the night.”

“When will you be back, Janet?”

“I’m not sure—maybe tomorrow, maybe the day after.”

“Okay, have fun, dear.”

Or:

“Mom, Eric and his friends are trying to make a hang glider, but it’s quite difficult for them to get it right. Can I go help them try it out?”

“Of course, Janet.”

Or:

“Dad, Amit followed me home from school today. We kissed all the way home! He said we should go on a camping trip just the two of us so we can get to know each other better.”

“What a splendid idea. Have a great trip!”

Janet and her husband live close to us, and we spend a lot of time together. As we walked along the street leading to their home, we could hear the happy chattering of many voices coming from their garden.

A busy Janet met us as we walked up their garden path. “Mom, dad, welcome! Grab something to eat and drink,” she shouted cheerfully as she ran past us chasing our youngest grandson.

There were about twenty people there already, talking, eating. A large group were gathered around a huge garden grill, where a man I hadn’t seen before was preparing the dishes with movements as those of a piano virtuoso.

We made the rounds, wishing God’s peace. I ended up in a group with Greg and a few other friends. “Say, Nick,” Greg started, “what’s this mystery meeting your wife has called tomorrow?”

“I honestly don’t know, Greg. But, frankly, I don’t think it’s so mysterious after all; she just likes to tease, as I’m sure you know.”

“Yes, I’ve gathered as much. Hey, have you tried these?” He lifted the roasted corn cob he’d been eating. “They’re fabulous.”

"No, I haven't been able to make my way to the grill yet. It's so crowded there."

"No wonder," Greg said. "The cook's a genius."

"Perhaps I should try then," I said and headed toward the grill.

The cook was a tall, black man, thin but muscular, with curly hair. He was whistling as he was juggling food around. I looked at his work for a few moments and was completely taken aback. He was successfully managing to prepare an impressive number of different dishes at once. He was spraying spices on frying corncoobs, stirring a large soup bowl, cutting raw vegetables with amazing speed and a sharp knife, frying eggplant in a sizzling sauce, mixing chives with...cocoa beans?, candying apples and pears, all the while maintaining a completely relaxed attitude. "What would you like?" he asked me, looking into my eyes while still chopping vegetables with breathtaking speed.

"Er, I don't know," I stammered. "What would you recommend?"

"Try this," he said, letting go of the knife and pouring hot soup into a bowl which he handed me. I took a spoon from a table beside me.

I heard a voice behind me. "God's peace on you, Nick. I see you've met Rediat," Amit said. Amit is Janet's husband, a short, thoughtful man with black hair and brown skin.

"Have I?" I asked.

"Yes, he's the cook. Amazing isn't he?"

"I'd say! I haven't seen anybody prepare food like that before."

"It's not that hard," Rediat said. "All it takes is practice."

"If you say so," I replied, doubtful. "How do you know my daughter and son-in-law?"

"Oh, you're Janet's father," Rediat said. "God's peace on you! I don't exactly know them, but you meet a lot of people in my line of work."

"And cooking is your work?" I inquired.

"Yes, I love it!"

"Rediat often invites people over to his home just to be able to cook for them," Amit explained. "If you ever need a cook for a party, I'm sure he'll be delighted to come."

"Oh, absolutely," Rediat said.

I suddenly remembered something Kate had said earlier. "Say, do you have a wife called Anna?" I asked him.

"I do indeed," he replied. "Lucky me!" he added with enthusiasm. "Do you know her?"

"No, but my wife said I'd meet her here."

He threw a quick look around the garden. "Well, she's here somewhere. You'll find her."

I took a sip of the soup he'd offered me. "This is delicious," I exclaimed. "What is it?"

"Gazpacho with a few extra ingredients added," Rediat replied with a slight smile.

"*A few extra ingredients* means that it has nothing whatsoever to do with Gazpacho anymore," Amit explained.

"I thought gazpacho was supposed to be cold," I remarked.

"Not this one," Rediat laughed.

I took a few steps away to allow others access to the grill.

"Have a glass of wine," Amit said, handing me one. "Oh..." he added when he discovered that I had the soup

bowl in one hand, the spoon in the other and was therefore acutely lacking a third hand.

"I'll put it here for you," he said, placing the glass on a table. I sat down on a chair beside it.

After I'd finished the soup and had a few sips of the wine, I got up again and walked around in search of the elusive Anna. I saw Kate, our grandson on her arm, talking with a group of people. Among them was a short woman with braided hair tied up in a bun. That must be her, I thought. I went over to them.

Kate handed me little Aaron so she could use her hands for eating. He immediately started tugging at my earlobe.

"Nick, I want you to meet Anna," Kate said. "Anna, this is my husband Nick."

"God's peace on you," Anna said.

"And on you," I replied. "I understand that you work at the university as well."

"I do. I've seen you there."

"Nick doesn't always notice things and people around him, he's quite absent-minded at times," Kate explained and kissed my cheek.

I smiled sheepishly.

"What do you do?" I asked Anna.

"I'm a zoologist," she replied.

"Yes, Kate mentioned that you work in the zoology department. What aspects of animal life are you interested in?"

"Well," she smiled. "Most zoologist are fascinated by the many extinct animals that have come to life here again. Especially the dinosaurs, of course. I must admit that they

fascinate me too, and I spend quite a lot of time studying them.”

“It must be difficult, though,” I said. “With the bigger ones, I mean.”

“It is. Following a flock of huge dinosaurs around is not easy. Fortunately, there are plenty of small ones.”

I nodded.

“But I also study the changes in well-known animals,” she continued. “There’s still so much to learn. So much has changed.”

“In what way?”

“Their new diet has brought about colossal changes. When former carnivores are no longer meant to eat meat, their whole digestive system needs to be dramatically ‘rewired’. God has also had to alter much of their behavior.”

“In what way?” I repeated.

“Well, take spiders, for example. They used to make webs to catch insects and eat them. Now, they still make webs, but the purpose is to catch seeds and pollen that fly through the air.”

She had a sip of her wine and then continued, “We’ve also had to rethink much of the reasoning behind the way animals look.”

“I’m sorry I keep saying this, but: In what way?”

“Why do tigers have stripes?” she asked. “On the old earth it was assumed that the stripes helped the tigers hide between trees so that their prey couldn’t easily discover them.”

I nodded.

“Here, tigers eat grass and leaves, so why the stripes?”

"I have no idea," I admitted.

"The best explanation we can come up with is: beauty." Anna gave an apologetic smile. "They have stripes because it makes them more beautiful."

"That doesn't sound very scientific," Kate said.

"No, it doesn't, but if science can't accept beauty as an explanation, then perhaps science has something to learn."

A big girl, a daughter of some friends of Janet's, came over to us with a tray full of chocolate-covered pears. We all grabbed one, and I exclaimed, "Now, here's beauty for you!"

Anna laughed. "*Da*, this is art! I'm so proud of my husband."

"I've only seen him for a few minutes, but what he did made my jaw drop."

"Mm, he does that." Anna looked over in the direction of the grill, where Rediat was flipping pancakes into the air with his left hand while stirring the soup with his right.

"Anyway," Anna continued. "We've had to rethink the whole purpose of why animals do what they do and look the way they look. I'm convinced that God not only wanted his creation to be useful and capable of surviving. He also wanted it to be *beautiful*. Beauty doesn't need a reason to be beautiful."

At this point little Aaron had got tired of tugging at my ear, and he started putting his finger into my eye. Kate had mercy on me and took him from me.

"Think about flowers," Anna went on. "Why are many flowers so beautiful? To attract bees? Yes, probably, but surely that could have been accomplished by simpler means. Some flowers are quite plain and still attract insects."

I think many flowers are beautiful because God wanted them to be beautiful. And I think tigers have stripes because it makes them beautiful.”

“Is that an acceptable explanation in a scientific paper?” I asked.

“It is now, but it took us some time to learn. You’re a scientist yourself, I gather.”

“I’m a mathematician—there’s some debate about whether that’s science or philosophy.”

“Ah. Well, the scientific community has learned a lot since the resurrection. We need to take God’s ‘personality’ into account when studying nature; and therefore the beauty of creation is an accepted explanation.”

“I understand you’re coming to Kate’s meeting tomorrow.”

“*Da*, I am, but I’m not sure why.”

“Because of the lions,” Kate said.

“The lions?” Anna looked at Kate quizzically.

“Yes,” was all Kate said.

“Kate likes to be mysterious,” I explained.

Anna smiled at her. “Well, now I’m curious.”

Chapter 4

When you walk around the New Jerusalem you see lots of animals all the time. Not just birds in the trees and bees in the flowers, or the occasional cat or dog. There are hipopotamuses bathing the river, there are pterodactyls flying above our heads, people use horses and camels when they need to transport heavy items. I was delighted when I recently spotted a dodo among some bushes in a park.

And if you travel outside The City, you'll find all kinds of animals. There are elephants and tigers, stegosauruses and cobras, eagles and kangaroos, all living happily together. And nothing, *nothing*, compares to the sight of a chimpanzee taking a leisurely ride on the back of a T. rex as they're wont to do.

Almost all the large mammals from the old earth have been found within a few hundred kilometers of the walls of The City. Cheetahs, rhinoceroses, mammoths, wolves, buffaloes, giraffes, you name it.

But no lions.

Isaiah the prophet had some vivid descriptions of the new earth in his book in the Bible. One of his most famous

images is that of the 'lion eating straw like the ox,' so it's hardly surprising that people at an early stage were looking for these herbivore lions. But they were nowhere to be found.

Since most other large mammals were easy to find, it soon turned into a major mystery: Where are the lions? They were just missing!

Kate and I walked together to Reuben University the next morning. Walking through The City is normally a slow process because of all the people you meet along the way. If you're determined, you can walk from our house to the university in about twenty minutes, but it normally takes us at least twice as long to get there because we constantly run into friends we want to talk with on the way.

This means that having a fixed time for a meeting is virtually impossible. The fact that Kate had called at meeting the following morning didn't mean that everybody would be present at, say, nine o'clock. In fact, it isn't unusual that a 'morning' meeting starts well into the afternoon. But we don't have a train to catch, so nobody minds. People will drop in when it's convenient, and everybody is happy with that.

But Anna was already sitting in the meeting room when Kate and I arrived. We grabbed some tea and coffee and a couple of scones and sat down to chat about this and that while we waited for Greg.

Anna was obviously curious about the meeting, and after some teasing her about catching trains, I volunteered to

go look for Greg.

I went down a flight of stairs to where Greg's office was located. His door was ajar and I stepped in.

Greg's office is a big, pleasant room with yellow walls and dark brown wooden furniture. The sun was shining through the open windows, falling on a huge star map on one of the walls. A Rubik's cube sat next to a pot of chrysanthemums on a bookcase filled with books about astronomy and physics. I noticed titles such as "Celestial Mechanics," "Galaxies and the Creation," and "Quantum Gravity and God's Dice."

Most of the time, Greg keeps his office quite tidy, but today I found him sitting at his desk deep in thought amid huge stacks of paper. An abacus, much like my own, was lying on the floor.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He looked up at me. "Light is slowing down," he answered, shaking his head.

"What do you mean?"

Greg looked down at his notes again, a bewildered expression on his face. "Well, I'm probably wrong, but it appears that light is slowing down, and I don't know what that means."

"Can you explain the problem?" I suggested.

He paused. "Yes, but let's wait until tonight. Do you know where my observatory is?"

"Yes, I do. It's in your home, isn't it."

“Yes. Listen, why don’t you and Kate come and have dinner with Marie and me tonight? Then I’ll show you what I’ve discovered.”

“Fine. But if you don’t mind, I’d like you to join our meeting upstairs.”

“Oh yes, of course. I’ll be right there.”

He looked at his notes once more, shrugged, and got up.

When the four of us were seated in the meeting room, I said, “Kate, the floor is yours.”

She smiled and started explaining.

“For the past several centuries, I’ve been working on creating reliable maps of the areas surrounding The City. More and more people are moving out and building new homes further and further away. This is a natural process as the population in The City grows, and there are so many fertile areas everywhere that can easily be cultivated.”

Anna nodded. “*Da*, my parents now have a farm more than 300 kilometers east of here. It’s a very nice place.”

I was bemused by her choice of words.

“Well, as more and more people are settling down outside The City—some of them quite far away—I thought it would be a great idea to get them to draw maps of the areas they’ve visited and the places where they live. I’ve asked people to send me copies of the maps they make. Hundreds of them have done so over the years, and I’m trying to piece it all together like a jigsaw puzzle.”

“It’s been her main research project for years,” I put in.

"Now, obviously, the maps these people draw will be somewhat inaccurate. Anything else would be strange. So I naturally expect some discrepancies between two different maps of the same area."

"Naturally," Greg said.

"But the problem is that the discrepancies are greater than I expected, and—this is the important thing—the further two maps are from each other in time, the greater the discrepancies."

"So you're saying that the older a map is, the less likely it is to match a newer map?" It was Greg again.

"Yes."

"Is that surprising? Landscapes change all the time."

"Yes, they do. But I'm not just talking about an expanding forest or a river changing its flow. I'm talking about lakes and even mountains that move!"

"That *is* odd."

"So, I've decided it's time for me to go and see things for myself. We're going on an expedition!" she announced with gusto.

"We?" Anna and Greg exclaimed simultaneously.

"If you want to, of course," Kate replied. "But somehow I very much doubt that you'll say no."

She took a swig of her coffee and continued.

"I imagine a small team of six or eight people plus a couple of horses and a wagon. We set out from the southeastern corner of the wall and go straight south. We map what we find on our way with as much accuracy as possible, we set up markers along the way to aid in future mapping, and when we get back, I'll be able to find out just what is

wrong with all the maps I've been receiving.—Or so I hope," she added.

"Well, I'll be happy to join you. It would be a splendid adventure, but I don't see why you need me," Greg said.

"I need you for two things, Greg: Navigation and Marie."

"Navigation and Marie?"

"Measuring large distances is one thing, and that's difficult in itself, but for accurate mapping we need longitudes and latitudes. Who better to help us with that than an astronomer who can accurately measure the altitude of the stars?"

"Fair enough, and you're bringing Nick to help with the calculations?"

"Yes, that's one reason I'm taking him," she answered evasively.

"And the other reason?" Greg prompted.

"He's my husband, you nitwit!"

Greg grinned. "And Marie?" he continued. "Is she coming just because she's my wife and you don't want to appear a nitwit yourself?"

"We need horses," Kate explained. "Nobody understands horses better than Marie."

"That's true," Greg said. Marie had a few horses in the fields around their house. Nobody *owns* animals here, but horses love Marie as if she were one of their own. She can make them do anything, and they're passionately loyal to her.

"You said something about lions," Anna put in.

"Yes...I think there may be a small chance we can find the lions," Kate said in a cautious voice.

“Why’s that?”

“Well, in one of the last letters I got from an area about 1,500 kilometers south of here, somebody wrote that they might have seen a lion. It may not be anything, but since we’re going, I thought it wise to include an expert.”

“You’re an expert on lions?” I asked.

“Not really,” Anna answered, “but I studied them closely on the old earth.”

“I must admit that I also have an ulterior motive for inviting you, Anna,” Kate said.

“Food,” Anna said without hesitating.

“Rediat,” Kate admitted. “He’s a marvelous cook. And I’ve heard that he can find food everywhere.”

“*Da*,” Anna replied. “He’s amazing. Give him a leaf from a beech tree, and he’ll turn it into a culinary marvel.”

“Excuse me, Anna,” I interrupted. “What is this *da* you say all the time?”

“It’s Russian. It means *yes*,” she explained.

“You’re Russian?”

“I was originally.”

“So now God has given us this wonderful new common language—a complete reversal of the tower of Babel episode—and you still say *da* in Russian?”

“*Da*,” she answered, and continued in a heavy Russian accent, “I find it adds to my charm, no?”

We all laughed.

“Anyway,” Kate brought us back to the matter at hand. “Anna, do you think Rediat would be willing to come with us and be in charge of feeding us?”

"It will be a challenge for him,...so I don't see how I could stop him."

"Okay. Do we need anyone else?" Kate looked around at us.

"An engineer would be useful," I said. "We may have to build a bridge or something on the way. And there may be repairs to our equipment."

"True," she said. "Do you know anybody?"

"There's Hans," Greg suggested. "He lives close to me. He's very inventive. He might want to come."

"Could you ask him?"

"I can do better than that," Greg said. "You and Nick are having dinner with Marie and me tonight."

"Are we? How splendid!"

"I'll ask Hans and his wife to join us. You can explain it to him then."

Chapter 5

As it happened, Greg, Kate, and I left the university together that afternoon. Greg wanted to show us a shortcut to his home.

We went out by Reuben's gate and followed a country road for a couple of kilometers. The sun was setting, and outside the wall the glorious light from God's Mountain was not as dominant. We crossed a stream that led into a forest, and we followed Greg's lead and left the road and walked along the stream.

The forest wasn't dense, and here and there there were open meadows full of flowers. Birds were singing in the trees, and a family of badgers, who were no doubt out searching for edible roots, came up to us and wanted to be scratched behind their ears.

We came out on the other side of the forest and saw a farm a short distance away.

"That's our home," Greg told us.

Three horses were grazing on a field close to the house. A tall woman with long blond hair was standing next to one of them, grooming it. When she spotted us, she came run-

ning over to us and flung her arms around Greg's neck and kissed him unabashedly on the mouth. He grinned.

"Hi Marie, you know Kate and Nick," he said. "I invited them to have dinner with us."

"God's peace on you," she said as she gave us a hug. "Wonderful to have you here."

"I'll quickly pop over to Hans's house," Greg continued. "I'd like him and Hoshi to join us as well."

"Super," Marie answered. "Come inside." She grabbed the currycomb she'd been using on the horse and led the way inside.

"Have a seat," she offered. "I'll just put a couple of pies into the oven."

She disappeared into the kitchen, and we sat down. The room was big, but with a cozy atmosphere. There were several drawings of horses on the walls, quite skilfully made. In one corner stood a desk with a jumble of lenses and screws and small tools. No doubt these were Greg's tools of the trade.

I got up, curious, and walked over to the desk. I didn't know what half of the instruments were. There were a set of binoculars, a spirit level, and something that looked like a sextant, but not quite. There was a stack of paper with Greg's scribbles on them, a ruler, and a pair of compasses—the kind you use for drawing circles.

Something lying under a piece of paper caught my eye. I lifted the paper and was astonished find a high-quality slide rule. I hadn't seen one of those since my youth.

There were steps outside, and Greg held the door open to let two adults and a boy in.

"This is Hoshi and Hans, my neighbors, and this is their son Samuel," he said. "And these are my colleagues, Kate and Nick."

We embraced and wished God's peace on each other.

Hans was a stout man with blond, curly hair and blue eyes. Hoshi was an Asian-looking woman with long black hair and a wide smile on her mouth. Samuel looked to be about twelve years old, but it's always hard to tell here. Children grow up at different rates.

We sat down. "Hans is an engineer," Greg explained. "He's been an enormous help for me in building my telescopes and some of my other equipment."

"Where *is* your telescope?" Kate inquired.

"Behind that door," Greg answered and got up. He opened the door and we followed him into a small, dark room. In the center stood a shining brass telescope, about two meters long, bolted to the floor.

Greg pulled a couple of ropes on the wall, and the roof slowly moved to one side, revealing the sky, dark blue in the dusk.

"There are no stars yet," Greg noted. "But they'll come soon; there are no clouds tonight."

I stepped over to admire the instrument. "Did you make this?" I asked Hans.

"Not on my own," he answered modestly. "Other people have provided the lenses, the mirrors and the metal."

"But Hans designed it, and put it all together," Greg said, obviously proud of his friend.

"So there's nothing to see now?" Samuel asked. We could tell that he was curious about the telescope, al-

though, knowing Greg, I was sure he'd seen it before.

"No, but we can take a look after dinner," Greg replied.

He closed the roof again, and we went back into the living room, where tantalizing smells from the kitchen announced that dinner was imminent. A few moments later, Marie came in with a large leek pie.

We sat down at the dinner table and sang our thankfulness for the food.

"How did you become interested in astronomy?" Kate asked Greg.

"Oh, it's been amazing for me," he answered. "Do you know my background?"

"Not really," Kate answered. "You were French, weren't you? Greg doesn't sound like a French name."

"Well, it's actually Grégoire," he explained. "Yes, I was French. I'm not sure when I was born, but as far as I can tell, it must have been some time around 1012—give or take a couple of years. I know I was a few years younger than our King Henry I, and he was born in 1008 if my sources are correct.

"I worked as a farm hand in northern France, not too far from Paris. But I was always fascinated by nature, and the stars had a special appeal to me. I knew nothing about the structure of the universe, of course; to me the stars and planets were merely dots traveling across the night sky, but they were marvelous!

"Over the years I noted the cycles of their movements. I noted how the planets move backwards and forwards among the stars, and I even remember seeing a comet once."

He paused to have another helping of leek pie.

“Did you all get a ‘gift’ from God after the resurrection to start you in your new life?” he asked.

Most of us nodded, but I noticed Hoshi shaking her head. “I was born here,” she explained.

“I got a compass and a tape measure,” Kate said.

“Of course,” Greg laughed. “Well, I got two things that were a complete mystery to me. Well, actually three things. I got two lenses, a large and a small one. I’d never seen a lens before. At first I only used them as magnifying glasses, which was exciting enough for me. But then one day I was sitting outside playing with them when I accidentally held the small lens to my eye and the large one behind it. Imagine my surprise when one of Marie’s horses, which was standing at the other end of the field, sprang into my eye quite close. Upside-down, to be sure, but that’s how telescopes work.

“I was completely overwhelmed. I experimented with holding the lenses at various distances from each other and soon discovered the concept of focusing a telescope.”

Greg was silent for a few moments as he chewed.

“I’d shown the lenses to Hans earlier...” he continued.

“I didn’t know about lenses either,” Hans put in.

“...So I rushed over to him and showed him my discovery,” Greg went on. “He quickly managed to create a framework that could hold both lenses in place, and thus my first telescope came into existence!

“That very night I turned the telescope to the skies, and what a wonder! I saw many more stars than I’d seen previ-

ously and I saw what I now know to be some of the moons of Jupiter.”

Greg took a swig of water before he continued.

“From then on I was completely hooked. I asked around in The City for people who were more knowledgeable than me about the universe, and one person in particular—a guy named Carlos, who’d lived in the 21st century—taught me all he knew about the structure of the solar system, the galaxies, and the universe.

“You must realize that for someone like me, who used to think of stars and planets as dots on the sky, learning about the mechanics of the solar system was quite overwhelming. But I enjoyed it so much. Many of the phenomena I’d observed could suddenly be explained! Why, for example, do the planets sometimes move in one direction and sometimes in another? That used to be a great mystery to me, but once I learned that the earth moves as well and that we see just the relative motion of the planets with respect to the earth, it all fell into place.

“Since then Hans has constructed a number of telescopes and other fine instruments for me. The largest one is the telescope you just saw next door.”

We sat smiling at Greg’s enthusiasm.

“You talked about three gifts from God. There were the two lenses, but what was the third gift?” Kate asked.

“This,” Greg answered and got up. He walked over to the desk and returned with the slide rule.

“What’s that?” Hoshi asked.

“You haven’t seen it before?” Greg asked. “It can be used to make all kinds of calculations.”

“How?” she wondered.

“Let me show you,” Greg said. “Suppose I want to multiply 2 by 3. I push the stick to the right so that the 1 is aligned with the 2, then I move this slider so that it’s over the 3. Now, what number do you see on the bottom line?”

“6,” she answered.

“Exactly, 2 times 3 is 6.”

“I don’t need a sliding stick to tell me that,” Samuel said grinning.

“Of course not, but what about 2.62 times 7.81?” Greg asked. “You can calculate it on a piece of paper or an abacus, of course, but I just do this...” He shifted the central stick and the cursor around and announced, “20.9.”

“How did you figure out how to use it?” I asked. “My father had one of those, and he showed me how to do simple calculations on it.”

“Well, you can learn to do simple calculations by playing with it,” Greg explained. “But for more complex stuff, I went looking for help again. And I found several kind people who were happy to teach me.”

We all helped clear the plates, and Marie produced a bowl of fruits for dessert.

“Kate, I think you should tell Hans why we’re here,” Greg suggested. “And come to think about it, Marie doesn’t know either.”

Kate nodded and began her explanation. She told about her mapping problems and about the expedition she was planning.

“So, Marie, we’d like you and your horses to come with us; and, Hans, your expertise will probably come in very

handy.”

“I’d love to come, but I can’t say about the horses,” Marie answered. “I’ll have to talk to them about it.”

“Can she *really* talk to horses?” I whispered to Greg.

“You know, after hundreds of years as her husband, I still don’t know,” he answered.

“What about you, Hans?”

“Well...,” he hesitated. “I sounds exciting, but...” He looked at Hoshi and Samuel.

“You’re welcome to bring Samuel along if you want to,” Kate said quickly.

“It’s not that,” Hoshi explained. “It’s me. I’m a teacher. I teach a group of about twenty children every day. If I were to go with you on an expedition that lasts...how long?”

“I’m not sure,” Kate answered. “Perhaps six months.”

“Well, if I were to leave the children for half a year, they would be quite disappointed. I couldn’t do that.”

“That’s what I meant,” Hans said.

“But, Hans, you should go if you want to,” Hoshi said, taking his hand. “These people need you, and you’d enjoy the trip.”

Hans thought for a few minutes. “Are you sure you don’t mind?” he asked his wife.

“Of course, I’m sure. I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll miss you,” he said.

At this, Hoshi looked confused. “Why?” she asked.

Hans smiled. “Because I still have a lot to learn about eternity.” He turned to Kate, “Okay, I’ll be happy to go with you.”

So it was settled: Kate and I, Marie and Greg, Anna and Rediat, Hans, and—if Marie could convince them—a couple of Marie's horses were going on the expedition.

"Who are the children you're teaching, Hoshi?" Kate asked interested. Our own children had gone to a school near our home, but we got the impression that Hoshi's job was somewhat different.

"We don't have a proper school around here," she explained. "Of course, we're not too far from The City, and when the children get older, they'll go there to learn more. But there's a group of small children from an area further east who prefer to come to me."

"So what do you teach them?"

"Reading, writing, arithmetic, history of salvation. Just the basics. I enjoy it very much. The children are so open and eager to learn."

"Do you have any children besides Samuel?"

"Yes, but they're all grown up. It'll probably be another hundred years or so before we have another one." She looked lovingly at Hans.

"You said you were born here," I said.

"Yes, I was," Hoshi answered. "You're both old earthers, you and Kate, aren't you?"

We nodded.

"It must have been strange," Hoshi mused. "So horrible much of the time. People hurting people. And yet, you got to experience the actual act of salvation! That must have been awesome."

"It was, of course," Kate said. "But life is so much better here, you have no idea."

“Perhaps not. I’ve got a feeling that Hans sometimes thinks I’m too carefree.” She looked sideways at Hans, who put up an apologetic look. “But I honestly don’t understand what he means. So, do you have children?”

“Yes, we had three children on the old earth and three children here. They’re all adults as well.”

“Did you teach your new earth children yourselves, or did they go to school?”

“There’s a nice school only ten minute’s walk from where we live,” Kate explained. “They loved it there.”

“Of course they loved it,” Hoshi said puzzled. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“You’re right, of course. It’s just...Back on the old earth many children did not enjoy school.”

“Why ever not?”

“If instruction is no more than instruction, or if teachers don’t love their pupils unconditionally, or if the pupils haven’t experienced the greatness of God’s work, learning sometimes becomes irrelevant.”

“I find that difficult to understand,” Hoshi said. “Surely, learning was always relevant.”

“It was, of course, but without the love of knowledge, learning becomes a tedious duty. You know, there were even some people who argued that you could have too much knowledge.”

“How could you have too much knowledge?”

“Knowledge—science—wasn’t always used for good. Sometimes science was used to find new ways to kill people. Sometimes science was used to try to disprove God’s existence. That alienated many people to science.”

“But that’s ridiculous! How can science disprove God’s existence? He’s the one who created everything!” Hoshi was truly mystified.

“As scientists discovered that nature follows certain fixed laws,” I explained, “they saw that as an indication that God isn’t involved in the way nature works. If you can explain exactly how a magnet attracts metal, it can’t be God doing the pulling.”

“That doesn’t make sense!” Hoshi exclaimed.

“No, it really doesn’t,” I agreed.

After dinner we went back into Greg’s observatory. He pulled the roof away again, and now the sky was black and littered with stars. Samuel stood eagerly looking at the telescope.

“I’ll show you something, all of you,” Greg said. He pointed his telescope to a large object in the sky, looked into the finder and turned a few wheels until he was satisfied with what he saw.

“Here, Samuel, take a look.”

Samuel put his eye to the telescope.

“Tell me what you see,” Greg said.

“I see a large round dot with with some tiny dots around it,” the boy answered.

“Right. The large dot is Jupiter, which is the largest planet in the solar system. The tiny dots are some of its moons,” Greg explained. “Let the others have a look too.”

We all took turns to look at the planet.

"Nice," I said when it was my turn to look through the telescope. With a little bit of imagination you could just make out the cloudy stripes across the planet. Three tiny moons were visible at various distances from the planet.

"I thought Jupiter had four large moons," Kate said.

"It does," Greg answered, "but one of them is currently behind the planet. If we wait a few hours it'll have moved and we'll be able to see it.

"And that," he continued, "was what was puzzling me so much this morning, Nick."

"Jupiter's moons?"

"Yes. Or rather, what they can be used for. Let's go back to the living room, and I'll explain."

He closed the roof.

When we were all seated, he began: "Do you know how the speed of light was first measured on the old earth?"

We all shook our heads.

"In the late 1600s a Danish astronomer by the name of Ole Rømer was working at the Royal Observatory in Paris. He was studying the moons of Jupiter as we've just done. He noted, as we did, that they sometimes pass behind the planet and reappear later.

"Rømer found that the time a moon spent behind Jupiter depended on whether the earth was currently moving towards or away from Jupiter. If the earth was moving towards Jupiter the moon would appear a little earlier than if the earth was moving away from Jupiter.

"He concluded that this was due to light traveling at a finite speed. If the earth moved a little away from Jupiter

while the moon was hidden, the light from the moon would have to travel a longer distance when it reappeared.”

“I’m not sure I follow you,” Hoshi said.

“It *is* a little complicated, but don’t worry. I’ll get to the important part soon,” Greg said, and Hoshi nodded for him to go on.

“By measuring these time differences and comparing with the movement of the earth,” Greg continued, “Rømer was able to calculate the speed of light. He found it to be a little over 200,000 kilometers per second, which was not quite correct, but it was close. The real speed of light is 300,000 kilometers per second. ... Or, rather, so it was on the old earth. Now, I’m not so sure.” He paused.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Over the last several decades I’ve tried to reproduce Rømer’s results. It’s not so easy. His calculations hinge on the movement of the earth and the moons, and I don’t have all the numbers.”

“Surely, somebody must know the distance from the earth to the sun,” I said.

“Well, somebody surely knows what it *was*. But I think it’s changed.”

“Why?”

“The new earth is obviously greater than the old one. If you stand at the south wall of The City and measure the altitude of a star and then compare that to its altitude when seen from the north wall, you’ll be surprised at how small the difference is. The distance between the walls is about 2,000 kilometers, and on the old earth that would mean that the altitudes of a star would differ by almost twenty degrees.

But here, the difference is barely noticeable. This can only mean that the new earth is much greater than the old one. And if the earth is larger here, it wouldn't surprise me if the entire solar system is larger."

"Are we sure that this world is round?" Hans asked.

"Yes. Most definitely yes! The altitude of the stars may not change much over a distance of 2,000 kilometers, but it does change."

"So what have you found, Greg?" I asked.

"Because I don't know the size of the solar system, I can only make relative measurements. I can't say if the speed of light is this or that, but what I can say is that light appears to be slowing down!"

"What do you mean, 'slowing down'?" It was Hoshi again.

"Well, I promised you I'd get to the important part: I've repeated Rømer's measurements several times over the last decades. And every time I make a measurement, I get a lower value for the speed of light."

"What value do you get?" Kate asked.

"As I said, the exact value depends on other values that I don't have. But if we assume (which is probably wrong) that the size of the solar system is the same as in the old world, the speed of light is about one tenth of the old value." He paused. "Or to put it another way, if the speed of light is still 300,000 kilometers per second, the current solar system is roughly ten times larger than the old one. But either way, my measurements show that light is slowing down."

"Or perhaps the solar system is growing," I suggested.

“No. I thought about that. If the planets are getting further and further away from the sun, there would be obvious changes to their orbits. A year on any particular planet would get longer and longer, and that’s not happening.”

“But why would light be slowing down?” I asked.

“I have no idea!”

“And what will happen if it continues like that?”

“If it continues forever, everything would grind to a stop. If the speed of light eventually gets down to, say, a few millimeters per year. It would be virtually impossible to move anything—including ourselves.”

“Surely, God doesn’t want that!” Marie exclaimed.

“I’m sure he doesn’t,” Greg replied, “which makes it all so much more puzzling. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not worried at all. Why should I be? We’re *here!* God is in control. I’m just very, very puzzled.”

Kate remarked, “For an 11th century farm hand, you know an awful lot about the universe!”

Greg laughed. “I’m an 11th century farm hand who has spent the last 500 years learning from the best teachers.”

“Talking about light,” I said. “How come the light from God’s throne doesn’t prevent us from seeing the stars? I know it’s darker out here outside The City, but even inside the walls, we can still see the stars at night.”

“I think God’s light is a different kind of light,” Greg answered. “The apostle John wrote about Jesus being the light of the world. He meant it in a spiritual sense, I think. Here, on the new earth, the spiritual and the physical mingle in new and interesting ways. We can see the spiritual light,

but it doesn't prevent us from seeing the effects of physical light."

"Interesting," I said.

Chapter 6

“Can you find your way home?” Marie asked as we were leaving.

“No problem,” Kate answered. “We simply follow the stream through the woods. Greg showed us on the way here.”

Marie and Greg stood waving at the door as we walked away.

The sky was pitch dark, but the light from God’s throne was bright enough to guide us easily along our way. We enjoyed the quiet walk through the forest. It wasn’t cold, and we could hear the sounds of the night all around us.

As we reached a small, grassy clearing, Kate stopped. “Sit down,” she said. “It’s so wonderfully peaceful here.”

We sat on the grass. She was right, it was very peaceful. A couple of fireflies flew by, briefly lighting up the air. We could hear animals scuttling around between the trees, both otherwise everything was quiet.

After a while, Kate lay down on her back in the grass. I lay down beside her. The stars were shining above us in all their splendor.

“We’ll have to go there sometime,” Kate said.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“The stars. We’ll have to go there sometime.”

“We’ll have to go to the stars?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Well, first, because we’re human. We investigate, we explore, we’re curious. That’s the way God created us.”

I looked at her. “And because of that, we’ll sooner or later reach a point where interstellar travel will be a possibility—as in a cheap old earth science fiction story?” I asked.

“Why do you think God has created the stars? Sure, they’re beautiful to look at, but if they’re just there to be visually pleasing, why has he created so many that are invisible to us?”

“I have no idea! Do you think there’s intelligent life out there?”

“Now who’s writing science fiction?” she teased. “I think that idea has been pretty much laid to rest. Jesus died *on the earth*. God recreated the whole universe after he ended Satan’s dominion over humans *on the earth*. On the old earth, some scientist spent decades—perhaps centuries—on the search for extraterrestrial intelligence, and they found nothing! The earth is where the whole drama of salvation was carried out. I’m pretty sure we’re the only ones here.”

“So...”

“So, I think God created the universe for us to explore. We’re centuries from having the necessary technology, I know. And we need to find energy sources that don’t ruin

this earth as we did the old one. But we'll get there eventually."

"But it'll take forever to get there," I objected.

"We have forever."

"I guess."

"Even after...how many years?"

"514."

"Even after 514 years, we still haven't got used to this 'infinite time' concept. People like Janet and the others, who were born here, think differently. For them, time is a much more fluid thing. But us old earthers, we're still learning—or unlearning, rather."

"That's true."

"Think about it. Suppose Greg told you one day, 'Hey Nick, I'm taking a trip to Betelgeuse. I'll be back in ten thousand years, give or take.' You'd simply say, 'Have a nice trip, Greg, I'll have coffee ready when you return.'"

We laughed, but I knew she was only half joking.

"So you think the entire universe is there for us to explore."

"Yes," Kate answered. Then she continued in a more serious tone, "And then there's the second reason."

"Which is...?"

"Overpopulation."

"What do you mean."

"Oh Nick, you're a mathematician. I don't have to teach *you* about exponential growth, do I? How many people are there on this earth?"

"Nobody knows, hundreds of millions, perhaps billions. I've no idea."

“Many children are born here every day. I’ve given birth to three children here in the course of 514 years. That’s less than the average. Suppose the average couple have a child every 100 years. This means that the population doubles every 200 years.”

“True.” I hadn’t really given that much thought.

“As Greg said, the new earth is considerably larger than the old one; but no matter how big it is, we’ll eventually fill it completely if we continue to double the population of humans every 200 years. And animals also multiply.”

“So you’re saying...”

“After the resurrection, we all lived in The City. Now more and more people are living further and further away. I think God’s long term plan is for us to expand into the entire universe.”

“Are you serious?” This was a completely new idea to me.

“What else can we do? Well, we could stop having children, but somehow I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

“But with the population doubling every 200 years, it sounds to me like you’re saying we’re on a deadline. We must develop interstellar travel before it’s too late. So we do have a train to catch, after all.”

“Well...” she said hesitatingly.

“No,” I protested, “that can’t be right! You said yourself that we’re still learning to deal with time not being a problem. I don’t think a frantic race against time to build a spaceship is what God had in mind for us.”

“Of course I agree with you. It would be so unlike everything God has done for us since we got here. But then what?

The eventual overpopulation is a real thing.”

“We could always ask him,” I suggested.

“Yes, but you know what he’ll say.”

“ ‘Be patient and wait,’ ” I said.

She nodded. “Of course, and it’s like Greg said: I’m not worried at all. God is in control. I’m just very curious about what’s going to happen.”

“Yeah,” I said with a satisfied sigh. “I wonder how he’ll handle that.”

We lay still for a while.

“It’s so good to be here,” Kate whispered.

“Do you mean here in the forest, or here in this world?”

“Both. Being here in this world, not having to worry, just breathing God’s love is so marvelous. And being here in the forest with you...” She got up on her elbow and looked me in the eyes, her face radiant in the faint light. “I love you so much,” she exclaimed.

She kissed me lightly on the mouth, and I wrapped my arms around her. The fragrance of the flowers mingled with Kate’s smell as we made love under the stars.

I was awakened at dawn by something tickling my feet. I looked up to find a fox licking my toes. As I sat up, it looked at me, cocked its head as if to say, “I’m sorry I woke you, but you *were* sleeping in my forest.”

I looked at Kate, still asleep in the grass beside me. I bent over and kissed her, and she opened her eyes.

“Did you sleep well?” I asked.

"You know I did," she replied, smiling. Then she looked around and noted the stream that ran through the woods not ten meters from us. "Care for a swim?" she asked.

"I think it's too shallow for a swim, but I wouldn't mind washing myself." I got up and walked over to the stream.

"Oh, that's nice," I exclaimed as I immersed myself in the running waters. Kate got in as well. The water was cool, but not so much as to be unpleasant. We sat in the stream for a few minutes and let the water wash away the dirt of the forest from our bodies.

"Did you bring a towel?" Kate asked as we got out of the water.

"No, I hadn't exactly planned this when we left home yesterday morning."

We ran back and forth in the grass to speed up the drying process.

"I'm hungry," I said. "Is there anything edible around here?"

"I've seen a few nuts and berries on the way, but nothing substantial. But it'll take us less than an hour to get home, and we can have a nice breakfast there."

So we headed home.

"There's a lot of planning to do before the expedition, isn't there?" I asked.

"Yes. I'll stay at home and make some lists today. Tomorrow is the Sabbath; that'll be nice."

Chapter 7

Six-one-six-one-six-one. That's the working rhythm God intended for us. Six days of work, one day of rest. For some people on the old earth, it became a straight jacket, rules for the sake of the rules themselves. Others ignored the day of rest completely, and paid the price.

Here, the Sabbath is a wonderful day of praise and celebration and doing things you normally don't do.

Every Sabbath morning you wake up to the feeling that there's a hush all over the earth. The entire world is taking it easy. Even the birds chirp less.

After breakfast everybody goes outside. Some stay in their garden, if they have one, some go out into the street, and others go to the homes of friends or relatives.

Then the Holy Spirit blows over the earth, and as if on cue everybody starts to sing at the same instant. Songs of praise rise from millions and millions of mouths everywhere. The angels join in after a while.

Then God is there! Everywhere. Whether you're standing by God's throne at the central Mountain in The City, or you're standing on a street corner close to the wall, or you're

in a remote village, several days' journey from The City, God is there. Embracing you. Loving you. Conversing with you, either privately or in groups.

On the old earth we were taught that the Church was Christ's bride. Here, we're his wife, collectively. Often people join hands, forming long, long chains across The City. We meet God both individually and as one.

We only ever have a vague idea about how long it lasts, but eventually the singing stops and a feeling of complete calm comes over everyone. We go home and sit for a while, letting the peace flow through our bodies.

When the Sabbath is over and the first day of the week begins, we're so energized, so alive that we feel we can tackle any task.

Occasionally, people travel to the Mountain to celebrate the Sabbath there. They eat from the tree of life and enjoy the feeling of overwhelming awe that seizes you there. Kate and I frequently go there for the Easter celebrations.

Easter is the only old earth holiday that is celebrated here as well. The celebration of Easter is an annual commemoration of several things. It's a reminder of the atrocities we committed on the old earth, it's a reminder of the sacrifice Christ made in order put things right again, it's a celebration of Christ's resurrection, and, by extension, it's a celebration our own resurrection.

There's nothing like the Easter celebrations! You tremble as you realize the awful gamble God made in letting Jesus become human. You hold your breath as you hear again the story of Christ's death, and you cast a stealthy glance at Jesus' hands as he stands on the Mountain, still scarred,

but gloriously so. Then you hear about his resurrection and you realize that God's 'gamble' wasn't a gamble at all, but a genuine demonstration that love—God's love—is stronger than death ever was. And you feel as if you're going to burst with happiness when you think about your own presence here and the love that bought you this place.

Easter also marks the start of a new year for those—like me—who still count years.

The days and weeks following our visit to Marie and Greg were filled with plans and preparations for the expedition. Marie apparently managed to convince two horses to come with us, and she even borrowed a large wagon from a friend.

Greg was asked to bring along any instruments that would help in an accurate determination of our location during the journey, Hans went looking for useful tools, and Rediat stocked up on non-perishable foods.

Kate and I made several trips to the market to look for items we might need.

Our local market is located in a large, open area about fifteen minutes' walk from our home. During the day it's bustling with people. Farmers and gardeners have large stalls where they distribute their produce: grain, flour, oil, fruit, cabbage, potatoes, carrots, sugar. They also have milk, juice, beer, and wine.

Unlike Barbara, many bakers like to hand out their goods at the market, and there's an incredible variety in the kinds of bread and cakes and crackers available.

Various craftsmen have stalls where they show their

blankets, pottery, furniture, and sundry mechanical devices. Artists proudly present their paintings or sculptures, and there are quite a few restaurants and cafés where you can get a meal or just sit down for a drink with a friend.

The market is also a place for lending and borrowing and exchanging stuff. We ran into Janet on the way to the market a few days after her party. She was carrying a large box full of plates and glasses. She'd got them from a potter a few days earlier, and now she was bringing them to the market either to return them to the potter or to give away to anyone who might need a few extra plates.

If you need something special that is not on display, you can normally find someone who knows someone who can get it for you.

One thing we needed was boots. In The City most people walk barefoot although a few prefer to wear sandals. But since we were going to travel through unexplored territory where we might come across muddy ground or stony paths, we reckoned that good boots, or at least sturdy shoes, would be required.

Kate and I had measured the foot size of each of our companions, and now we were walking around the market looking for boots. It wasn't easy, and we had to ask around. Finally, we ended up at Titrit's booth. She had a collection of sandals, so she seemed an obvious supplier.

"God's peace on you," she greeted us. "I'm Titrit."

"God's peace on you, Titrit," we replied. "We're Kate and Nick. You have a very nice collection of sandals here."

"Why, thank you. Are you interested in a pair?"

"No, actually we're going traveling, so we wonder if you have any boots."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Honestly, we don't know," Kate answered. "We're going south, probably a couple of thousand kilometers, and we don't know what type of landscape we'll be traveling through."

"Wow, that sounds amazing. Are you moving out of The City?"

"No, we're going exploring," Kate explained. "I'm a cartographer, I like making maps and I'm trying to map the area south of The City."

"Wow," Titrit said again. "I've heard that there are so many beautiful areas down there. My brother and his family live on a farm about two weeks' journey south of here. Perhaps you'll meet him."

"We might," Kate answered. "If you want us to take a letter or something to him, we can do so."

"Oh that would be wonderful. Thank you."

She smiled, then turned thoughtful.

"Now, boots...You'll need something quite solid, but solid boots are hard to make." She paused. "You'll probably need some that you can repair yourself if need be."

She ducked down beneath her counter and brought out a pair of light brown boots. "I think you'll find something like this useful. They're made from hemp and rubber. You'd be able to patch the fabric if you need to, and for the soles I can give you some extra rubber that you can cut to the right shape and glue in place if there's a hole you need to close."

Kate and I studied the boots, then we looked at each other and nodded. "That would be great," Kate said. "We need seven pairs. I have the sizes here." She handed Titrit a list.

"Seven?!" Titrit was taken aback. "I thought it was just the two of you. I've only got two pairs. I can make more, of course, but it'll take a couple of weeks."

"We can wait," Kate answered, "we don't have a train to catch."

Titrit looked at the list. "I think it would be best if you could get everyone to come to see me here. Then I can look at their feet individually and make some really nice boots."

"Okay, we'll ask them to come."

"Good, and give me three weeks. That should be enough for me."

"Thank you so much, Titrit. We'll see you later then."

"Peace," she answered absent-mindedly, still studying Kate's list of foot sizes.

We eventually got the boots. They were pleasant to wear, sturdy, and warm. Titrit also gave us a letter for her brother Ameqran along with detailed instructions about where his farm was located.

Finally, after four weeks of preparation we were ready to set out. We'd agreed to meet at Marie and Greg's house and start the expedition from there. Greg had, of course, accurate astronomical information that enabled him to calculate the geographical latitude of his observatory. Longitude was more tricky, since we have no 'Greenwich meridian' to

measure from. Kate had long ago suggested using the location of the Mountain as a zero meridian, but the Mountain is not a point, so any measurement of distance from the Mountain can never be more than an approximate number.

For the purpose of this expedition, we therefore decided to use Greg's observatory as the location of zero degrees longitude. Later, we could always adjust that number if we chose to.

As Kate and I made our way to Marie and Greg's, we were surprised to find several dozen people walking in the same direction. We knew many of them from the university, and news of the expedition had naturally made the rounds on the university grapevine, but still we were astonished at the turnout of friends and colleagues. There were also a number of people who'd turned up just because they were curious. I noticed Barbara and Titrit among them.

There was a large wagon parked outside the house. It was covered with canvas and two horses were hitched up to the wagon, one was brown the other was gray. Marie was standing next to them.

Inside the wagon were lots of stuff we were going to need. I noticed one of Greg's telescopes. He'd told us he needed a large telescope in order to get accurate measurements of the altitude of the stars, but on the other hand the telescope had to be so small that we could carry it if we came to an area where we couldn't bring the wagon. Still, I thought the one in the wagon would be too big to carry.

I spotted a collection of cooking utensils, canisters full of water, matches for lighting a fire, and sacks full of non-perishable food. All of this was obviously Rediat's equip-

ment, but lying next to it was a triangular, wooden box, which I couldn't identify.

There were three tents, a number of warm blankets, and some rope. This was something Anna had found at the market. She'd tried to get some sleeping bags, but they were nowhere to be found. However, warm blankets would do well enough, we believed.

Kate was bringing her compass and a lot of markers she wanted to set up as milestones along the way to help in future mapping. As she spotted Hans standing next to Hoshi and Samuel, she went over to them and asked, "Did you make me a wheel, Hans?"

"I certainly did," he answered with a smile, walked over to the wagon, and produced a large, solid wheel mounted on a stick. On the side of the wheel was a small mechanism.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's for measuring distances," she answered. "I discussed it with Hans a couple of weeks ago. The wheel has a circumference of exactly two meters, and this little mechanism counts the number of turns the wheel makes. We strap this to the back of the wagon, and thus we have a fairly accurate odometer, which will be a tremendous help in my mapping.

"Hans," she continued, talking to the engineer, "would you be kind enough to attach it?"

"Certainly," he said, took the device, and went over to the wagon.

Greg was still carrying instruments to the wagon. He came out of the house with a set of binoculars, a spirit level, and something that appeared to be a brass wheel, about

thirty centimeters across, with a ring attached at the top and a movable, straight piece of metal attached to the center.

“What’s that?” I asked him curiously.

“This is a primitive astrolabe,” he explained.

“Oh, that explains everything,” I said with a grin.

“Allow me to educate you,” Greg said. “You’ll notice that the wheel has degree markings all around it. You hold the device by the ring and allow it to stabilize. Gravity ensures that zero degrees on the ring is horizontal. Now this movable piece of metal is known as an *alidade*. You notice that it’s bent at the ends and that there are two small holes in the protruding ends. You select a star and adjust the alidade so that you can see the star through the two holes. When that happens, the angle of the alidade corresponds to the altitude of the star.”

“So using this contraption, you can measure the altitude of a star,” I said. “I thought that was what the telescope was for.”

“It is, but the telescope is heavy, and I’m not sure we can carry it all the way. This astrolabe is much less accurate, but it’s better than nothing.”

He looked around inside the wagon. “You’ve also got to see this,” he said proudly. “This is one of Radomir’s most accurate watches. It’ll be very useful when we want to measure longitudes. I’ve adjusted it to match the local time at my observatory...”

“GMT,” I said.

“What?” Greg asked, confused.

“Greg Mean Time, the time at the zero meridian.”

Greg didn't get the joke, but how could he?

"So when I want to find a longitude somewhere on our journey," he continued, "I measure the local time based on the position of the sun or stars and compare the result to this watch. That should give me a time difference which translates into a longitude."

"Nice," I said admiring Radomir's work. "It was kind of him to let you have it."

"Yes, wasn't it?"

Hans had attached the odometer to the wagon and had returned to his wife's side. I went over to them.

"You've been busy, Hans," I noted. "An odometer for my wife, and I guess you've also made the astrolabe for Greg."

He smiled. "Yes I have."

I turned to his wife. "So, Hoshi, you don't regret not coming with us?"

"I would have loved to, but you know I can't."

"What about you, Samuel?" I asked.

The boy smiled. "Mom wants me to stay here and study. Besides, all my friends are here," he added.

"Yes, and we're just a bunch of boring adults, aren't we?"

"If you say so," he grinned.

At last everybody was ready. "Let's get going," Kate shouted.

This, of course, had the opposite of its intended effect. Instead of leaving, we started hugging all the people who had come to see us off and wishing them peace.

“God be with you,” Barbara said as I hugged her. “Do you think you’ll find any n -dimensional thingummies out there?”

“No, actually, I don’t,” I answered. “I’ll miss your bread though.”

“Here, take this,” she said and handed me a loaf from a bag she was carrying. “But you should eat it today; it’ll be dry by tomorrow.”

I thanked her.

“Do you really think you’ll find the lions?” I heard someone asking Anna. I turned and saw a tall, dark-haired man with sharp features talking with her. I didn’t know him.

“I doubt it,” she answered, “but they’ve got to be somewhere, don’t they? Might as well look for them...They’ve suffered so much,” she added as an afterthought.

“So I’ve heard,” the man said. “They mean a lot to me. I hope you find them.”

“I hope so too, Daniel,” Anna said.

Again Kate shouted, “Let’s get going,” and this time it worked. Marie got up on the wagon and took the reins (although I doubt she really needed them). “Go,” she said, and the horses started going, pulling the wagon.

The rest of us walked beside them. There was an empty seat next to Marie, and there was still room in the wagon for a couple of people, but we were all excited and none of us wanted to hog the seats yet.

Chapter 8

We'd been warned against setting out at too brisk a pace. We hoped to cover about forty kilometers per day, which should not be a problem, but we didn't want to overexert the horses, who were, after all, pulling a heavy load.

Marie and Greg's home was a couple of kilometers to the east of the wall, and we set out in a straight southerly direction from there. We passed the south-eastern corner of the wall after about two hours' walk, and from there the huge expanse of the southern plains lay before us.

The river of the water of life, flowing from the throne of God in the New Jerusalem, fans out into a lot of smaller rivers and streams that travel in all directions outside The City, so the entire area is very fertile. Many fields were scattered around us, and we saw plenty of farms on the way.

There aren't any genuine seasons here, so you can see people sowing on one field and harvesting on a neighboring one. The crops are varied: rye, wheat, barley, corn, rice, beans. Most farms have a few horses that help with the work and a couple of cows to provide milk.

People would wave at us when we passed, and often

they would be surprised that we didn't stop to chat. They probably thought us a curious sight.

Kate was frequently checking the odometer, making notes and drawing on sheets of paper she'd brought along. Every ten kilometers she would shout, "Stop," and fetch a marker from the wagon. Her markers were black, wooden pegs, about a meter in length, with a small, white area for writing. On the marker Kate would write something like, *"20 km south, 0 km east/west. Reuben University Mapping Expedition number 1."*

"You expect more mapping expeditions, I can tell," I said.

"I'm not sure," she answered, "but if there's ever an expedition number 2, I'll be sorry if I didn't label this one 'number 1.'"

Kate would then hammer the marker about halfway into the ground. Then she'd cry, "Go," and we'd walk on.

"How many markers did you bring?" Anna asked.

"300. That should cover 3,000 kilometers. I doubt that we'll go further than that."

Occasionally along the way, Rediat would suddenly leave our track and run into a shrubbery or go looking at some trees or small plants. He'd return with mushrooms, berries, spicy leaves, or items I didn't know. No doubt, these were going to be part of our supper.

As the day drew on, the farms were further and further apart, and by sunset we hadn't seen a house for the past hour.

"Time to stop," Marie shouted. She wanted the horses to relax, but we were all happy to call it a day.

Marie jumped down from the wagon and unharnessed the horses. She patted each of them kindly on the neck, and let them go searching for fresh grass to eat.

“Will they stay here?” Kate asked.

“Oh yes,” Marie answered. “They won’t leave us.”

Rediat brought out his cooking equipment and started to light a fire. Soon he had a pot simmering with some kind of stew, and a frying pan sizzling with potatoes and carrots and other interesting roots.

The rest of us sat on the ground, relaxing our tired legs. We were camped out in the open with no trees near, and before long, a number of small, curious animals came looking at us. There was a family of rabbits, a couple of foxes, and two small dinosaurs. They studied us for a few moments, then deemed us uninteresting and went about their business.

“Time to give thanks,” Rediat said, “food is almost ready.”

We sang a song of praise, giving thanks for the food and for the fact that God was giving us this exciting adventure.

Rediat gave each of us a plate which smelled delicious. I suddenly remembered the bread Barbara had given me as we left. I passed it around and everyone broke off a lump.

We ate in relaxed silence—well not total silence for our chewing was interrupted by repeated words of admiration to Rediat for his incredible ability to turn anything into an amazing tasting experience.

There was a brook nearby. We washed the plates there and refilled our water canisters. Then we gathered around the bonfire again.

The sun was down, the stars were out, the night was warm, we were tired but happy.

I turned to Anna: "I overheard you saying something about the lions suffering a lot. What was that about?"

"You don't know what happened to the lions towards the end?" she asked.

We all shook our heads, except Rediat who had probably heard the story from his wife before.

"You told us that you'd studied lions on the old earth," I said.

"*Da*, I did." Anna sat thoughtful for a while, then she told her story: "I was born in a small town outside Moscow in 2089. I studied biology at Moscow State University, but when I graduated, it turned out that I couldn't get a job anywhere.

"I was desperate, and in the end I took a job as an assistant at the news department of the Russian State Television. It started out as nothing much: searching for pictures online, taking care of people who came to be interviewed in the news broadcasts, that kind of thing. But my boss knew of my background in biology and he allowed me to research a few stories that related to my field.

"Eventually I was promoted to a position where I could actually influence the way nature was presented in news broadcasts.

"It was around that time—early 22nd century—that catastrophe struck the lions. During the 21st century, lions had actually thrived. They were vulnerable, but not seriously so, and as the 21st century progressed, they increased

in number. Nature reserves throughout Africa had plenty of lions and the population was growing.

“But...well..., I guess it started as merely a silly rumor. Somebody got it into their head that lions’ teeth were beneficial to male sexual potency. If you got a fresh tooth from a lion, preferably with some of the lion’s blood still on it, crushed it to a powder and ingested it, it would dramatically increase your sexual capabilities—provided you were a man, of course.

“Then came the three large pandemics of the 2130s: Resistant forms of cholera and tuberculosis, and a revival of the smallpox virus we all thought eradicated. There was no cure for any of these, and people died by the millions.

“It was only natural that various types of superstition would arise among those afflicted by the diseases. And since lions’ teeth had already become a ‘magical’ drug, it wasn’t long before they were believed to also possess miraculous power over various diseases.

“Poachers started to hunt lions all over Africa. A lion’s tooth could bring a poacher a handsome sum of money. The nature reserves tried half-heartedly to stop the lion hunting, but many of the administrators were making a lot of money by looking the other way when poachers went hunting.

“It was at this point I got interested in the animals. I managed to convince my boss to send me on a research trip to Africa, and I spent several months traveling around the continent with a group of environmentalists, trying to gauge the extent of the damage.

“It was horrible! The problem was that there had to be

blood on and in the teeth for them to ‘work.’ If you shot and killed a lion, its heart would stop pumping and you’d get less blood when you pulled out its teeth. So many poachers preferred to shoot the lions with drug arrows that merely put them to sleep. They could then pull out the teeth with the blood still flowing around the body, providing plenty of blood to the mouth.

“After a while, the lion would wake up to discover that it had no teeth. It would take it a month to starve to death.”

We sat in total silence as Anna told her horrific story.

“The group of people I traveled with spent a lot of their time killing lions that would otherwise have starved.

“It took less than twenty years to reduce the population of lions from about half a million to a mere dozen living in the wild by 2150. Even zoos were not safe.

“Over the years other species have become extinct because of hunting, other species have been killed for their ‘medicinal capabilities,’ but few species have experienced such a systematic and rapid mass-killing in such a painful manner.”

Anna paused.

“I died in 2170. I don’t think there were any lions left in the wild by then,” she finished.

We were quiet for several minutes. Then Greg asked, “But how does this relate to their absence from the new earth?”

“I’m not sure,” Anna said. “I’ve thought a lot about it, and I have a theory if you’d care to hear it.”

“Please,” several of us said.

“Lions aren’t the only animals that went missing for a time after the resurrection. Think back to your first years here. How many of you remember seeing a moa or a dodo or quagga back then? They’re all species that were hunted to extinction by humans. As far as I’ve been able to find out, there were no sightings of any of these animals in the first 2-300 years after the resurrection.

“Why is that? My theory is that animals heal in another way than humans. When we were resurrected, we gathered at the Mountain, we looked at God, we felt his love flowing through us, and in the course of some months our past pain was reduced to a memory of little consequence for us. We were healed.

“Animals aren’t like humans. We were created in God’s image. We’re like him in many ways. We’re spiritual beings. He communicates directly with us. But animals are different. They’re not created in his image. I think their healing process is different from ours. I think, perhaps, it takes much longer for them to heal.

“So my guess is that God kept all the suffering species in special locations around the earth. In their own little ‘New Jerusalems’ if you like. Places where they could heal and become what God originally intended for them. Then, in due time, he would let them move about freely when they were ready.”

“And you think the lions are still in their special place of healing?” Kate asked.

“Well, that’s my theory at least.”

* * *

After that, we all sat silent for some time. But it was getting late and we were tired.

The night was warm, it didn't look as if it was going to rain, so we got our blankets from the wagon and went to sleep on the ground.

Chapter 9

I woke early the next morning. I sat up and looked around. The six others were sound asleep, but I couldn't sleep anymore.

I was still thinking about Anna's story from last night. As it so often happened, I was struck by the enormity of the sins of humanity. I think we never quite realize the extent of God's forgiveness, how much sin Jesus had to bear on the cross.

And yet, praise God, I now look at it all with a sense of detachment. It's over. It's past tense, not present tense. Yes, we were evil; yes, we were horrible; yes, we committed atrocious crimes; but that's all in the past. One of God's greatest gifts to us is that not only has he forgiven us, he has also given us the ability to forgive ourselves.

I got up and walked about a bit. The two horses were grazing nearby. I went down to the brook to wash.

When I got out of the water, I noticed Marie walking towards the horses. She stopped to talk to each of them individually, then suddenly she jumped on the back of the gray horse, she said something I couldn't hear, and the horse

broke into a gallop. It stormed away towards the sunrise at tremendous speed with Marie on its back. After a couple of minutes, I could barely see them anymore.

I stood there looking east when I heard Greg's voice beside me. "She's out riding," he stated matter-of-factly. "She does that almost every day."

Rediat was up now, starting to make breakfast. He was toasting some of the bread left over from the day before, and I smelled cheese and tomatoes.

Kate got up and walked over to me and kissed me good morning. She smiled. "What a wonderful day," she exclaimed.

Suddenly we heard the sound of galloping hooves and the gray horse with Marie on its back shot past us, this time heading west. She had no saddle, no harness, no reins; she just sat there.

"Some people say my wife is half human, half whirlwind," Greg remarked.

Everybody was up now, and Marie returned just as breakfast was ready. She walked over to Greg, wrapped her arms around him and gave him a long kiss. "Did you have a pleasant night, honey?" she asked. "You were still asleep when I got up."

We ate in happy anticipation of the day ahead of us. Then we gathered our things, Marie hitched the horses up to the wagon, and off we went.

The southern plains still stretched out before us. We made good speed. We passed a few small woods on the way,

crossed a couple of shallow streams, but otherwise the landscape was mainly grassland.

We passed two farms that morning and we decided to make a stop at the second one to ask if they could provide us with lunch.

As farms go, it was a smallish white building with thatched roof. It was surrounded by corn and wheat fields, and a horse and a herrerasaurus were grazing side by side on a nearby meadow. We also noticed a couple of oxen lying peacefully in the grass, chewing the cud under a huge tree.

As our wagon drove up to the farm, a short, black man with a beaming smile came out to meet us, followed by two happily barking puppies.

“God’s peace on you,” he greeted us. “I’m Themba, and this is my wife Themba,” he added as a tall, black woman joined him.

“God’s peace on you, Themba and...Themba?” we said.

“I know it confuses people,” he said with a laugh, “but we find it very convenient. Come, come inside. What brings you here?”

Marie jumped down from the wagon and unharnessed the horses. They trotted over toward the meadow for a meal. As they approached, the herrerasaurus lifted its head and let out a honking sound to greet them. They neighed and shook their heads in response.

We entered Themba and Themba’s home. It was small, but had a friendly touch to it. The walls were covered with colorful blankets, and between them hang several drawings

and paintings of adults and children. The family resemblance was obvious.

"These are our children," Themba the woman said, pointing to a number of pictures hanging together. "They're all grown up now, but I think I may be expecting a new one," she added with a laugh, touching her belly gently.

"Congratulations," we said as one.

"My mother made most of these blankets," Themba continued. "She's very clever. That's her, there, on the left," she said, pointing to a picture of four people sitting under a tree. "These nice people are our parents. They all live in The City, but we frequently visit them. Themba painted this picture when they came here to visit us a couple of years ago."

"I recognize the tree," Rediat said, pointing outside, where we'd seen the huge tree on the meadow.

"Yes, it's so pleasant to sit in its shadow when the weather is hot," Themba explained.

"Where do your children live?" Marie asked.

"They all have farms less than a day's journey from here. That's very convenient for us. Did you come from The City?"

Marie nodded.

"Then you must have passed the farm where our oldest son lives. It's just a few hours journey north of here. His name is..."

"Themba?" Marie suggested.

"Ha!" Themba replied. "No, that would not be convenient. His name is Dumisani. It means *give praise* in our old language."

"Which was?" I asked politely.

"Zulu," she answered.

Themba the man asked, "Are you hungry? Have you come far today?"

"Yes, we are, as a matter of fact," Greg said. "Could you spare some food?"

"Of course we can!" Themba the man answered. "It is not inconvenient at all."

In no time Themba and Themba laid a table with a wonderful lunch. We gave thanks and ate hungrily.

We learned that they were fairly self-sufficient on the farm. They had fields and an orchard, and the two oxen we'd seen were staying with them, willingly providing milk.

"What brings you here?" Themba the man asked again.

Kate told them about the expedition.

"Interesting," he said. "Mountains that move and lions that disappear. Quite a collection of mysteries!"

"Do you know anything about the lions?" Anna asked cautiously.

"No, I'm sorry. We haven't seen them at all. On the old earth, we often saw lions close to our home. Too close, sometimes; that was not convenient."

We talked and ate and enjoyed ourselves.

"You're very quiet," Themba the woman remarked to Hans.

"Well," was all he said.

"Hans is the quiet type," Greg explained. "And I think he's already missing his wife," he added in a whisper that everyone could hear.

Hans smiled and we all laughed. Missing someone is sort of a joke here. We all know that we'll see each other again, and for the people born on the new earth, the concept of 'missing someone' makes no sense. But we old earthers still need to unlearn that particular thing.

We thanked the two Thembas for their hospitality and went outside to the wagon. Marie whistled, and her horses looked up from the grass and walked over to us. Themba the woman gave them some apples to eat, and Marie explained that the horses were very grateful.

"Peace," we shouted as we left. Themba and Themba stood waving in their door as long as we could see them.

As we traveled on, I was walking next to Rediat.

"Where are you from originally?" I asked him.

"Ethiopia."

"Did you meet Anna during her travels in Africa?"

Rediat laughed. "No, when she was traveling, I'd been dead for 1,800 years or so."

"Okay. Well that's obvious then. So you met here?"

"Yes, we did."

"Tell me about your life," I prompted him. I noticed several of the others had joined us and were listening to Rediat's story.

"There's not much to tell, actually. I died as a child. I'm not sure when I lived. Anna and I have been trying to figure it out. We've talked with my parents, who've been able to provide some clues, but nothing definite.

“Our best guess is that I lived in the 4th century. Ethiopia became a Christian country very early; it happened sometime in the early 4th century. My parents were first generation Christians.

“My father was a fisherman, and as a young boy I joined him when he went fishing. One day—I must have been nine years old or so—I fell overboard. It was windy, I couldn’t get back on board. The last thing I remember is the waters closing above my head. I drowned.”

A short and touching story. “When you arrived here, were you a child or an adult?” I wondered.

“Still a child,” he replied. “I was resurrected together with my parents. They took me with them to the Mountain, of course, and I grew up in The City.” He paused. “I don’t think God would have deprived me of the process of growing up.”

“So where does your talent with food come from?”

“From God, of course!” He looked puzzled. “Where else?”

“No, I mean, is this a skill you’ve learned here on the new earth?”

“Mostly, yes. I remember my mother being a great cook on the old earth, and I must have learned something from her back then. But most of it I’ve learned here. My mother is still a great cook, by the way. We should go visit her some day.”

“I’d love that,” I said. “So how did you meet Anna?”

He smiled. “I caught her!”

“You caught her?”

“Yeah. I was walking through a small forest east of The City, not too far from where Marie and Greg live. I was looking for mushrooms. I was standing behind a bush when I saw her. About ten meters away between some trees, Anna stood studying a couple of small animals—I’m not sure what they were. She was *beautiful*. She still is. For me, it was love at first sight. (I have a feeling it almost always is, here.) I could see that she was about to follow the animals further into the woods; I was afraid that if she did, I’d lose her. So I jumped at her. Literally. I caught her from behind, and we both fell to the ground.

“She was very surprised, of course. I apologized for frightening her and told her that I thought she was extremely beautiful. That’s about it,” he finished with a grin.

I looked sideways at Anna who was walking just a few paces away. She pretended she wasn’t listening, but I could see her chest moving as she was chuckling to herself.

“Is that an accurate account, Anna?” I shouted to her.

“Quite accurate,” she answered in her most formal voice. “I was attacked and conquered.”

The rest of the day was uneventful. We took turns sitting on the wagon with Marie. She occasionally let us take the reins when she wanted to walk for a while, but it soon became obvious that the horses followed *her*, not the reins. Marie walked in front of the wagon, and the horses followed her faithfully.

We camped at the edge of a small forest. Or, rather, next to a small group of beech trees, for that was all it was. Once

again Rediat produced a scrumptious supper.

When it was dark, and the bonfire was casting long shadows around, Rediat fetched the triangular, wooden box I'd seen in the wagon. When he turned it around, I could see what it was: a balalaika.

A balalaika is a musical instrument, not unlike a guitar. Its has a large triangular body and three strings. It originated in Russia, so I expected that Anna would play it.

I was wrong. Rediat sat down on the ground and plucked the strings at random for a few moments. Then he started playing, and we soon discovered that cooking was not his only talent.

He played a number of songs. Some of them we knew, some of them we didn't. Occasionally, he'd put the balalaika aside, grab a couple of sticks and beat out a rhythm on a piece of wood that hadn't made it into the bonfire.

"Why a balalaika?" I asked him between two melodies.

"I'd have thought it was obvious," he answered, looking at Anna who was sitting on the other side of the fire.

"I love the sound of a balalaika," Anna said, "but I can't play. We managed to find an instrument maker in The City who knew how to make one. Before the day was over, Rediat was playing small tunes on it, and now...Well, you can hear how skillful he is."

She got up and walked over to sit next to her husband. He struck a chord, and they started singing together. The words must have been Russian, for we didn't understand any of it. But it was captivating and beautiful, switching between minor and major scales in an intricate way.

"What was that?" Kate asked when they'd finished.

“It’s an old Russian love song,” Anna said. “It is a praise to the heart that it is capable of loving.”

“Has Anna taught you Russian, Rediat?” Marie asked.

“No, just the words for this song. It’s her favorite.”

We sat for a while enjoying the evening. Then Rediat struck a few notes and we recognized a popular evening song of praise to God.

We all joined in, and for the next several minutes we sang our thanks to God for the day we had had.

Chapter 10

As the days went by, we got to know the landscape pretty well: There were huge grass meadows littered with flowers in all the colors of the rainbow as far as the eye could see, there were small woods where a multitude of birds provided a musical feast for our ears; there were brooks where fish leaped up the stream and colorful frogs sat on banks enjoying the sunshine; there were shrubberies, fields, farms, even the occasional village.

Towards the end of the third day, Kate announced that she'd just planted the 100 kilometer marker, and by sunset we'd reached 110 kilometers.

"On the old earth, one degree of latitude corresponded to roughly 111 kilometers," Greg informed us, "so I guess now would be a good time to get my telescope out and do some measurements."

We helped him unload his rather unwieldy telescope from the wagon, and he spent a surprisingly long time setting it up. "It's extremely important that this plate is completely horizontal," he explained, juggling with a spirit level that was too large for the plate he was trying to adjust.

“Don’t worry about me,” he added a little later, “I can’t make any measurements before the stars are bright and clear in the sky, so you just go ahead and enjoy Rediat’s food.”

When food was ready, Greg appeared to be ready as well. While we ate, Anna asked, “So if I understand it correctly, you’re going to measure the altitude of the North Star and compare it to its altitude at home, right?”

“Wrong,” Greg answered. “There is no North Star.”

“There is too!” Anna insisted. “There’s the Big Dipper,” she said pointing. “You follow the line from its two right-most stars, and bingo! There’s the North Star.”

“Wrong,” Greg answered. “That method will get you to *Alpha Ursae Minoris*, the brightest star in the constellation known as the Little Bear. That’s not the North Star. There is no North Star.”

“You’re pulling my leg.”

“I’m sure pulling your leg would be Rediat’s prerogative. But seriously, that star, *Alpha Ursae Minoris*, was only the North Star for a few hundred years on the old earth. The axis of the earth moves. It doesn’t always point in the same direction. Your ‘North Star’ only got that title in the 16th century. Before then it was quite far from the celestial north pole.

“Here, in our world, your ‘North Star’ is a considerable distance from the north pole. I have to measure the altitude of three stars in roughly the same area of the sky, then Nick and I have to do some calculations to find a weighted average of their altitudes, and only then will I have a value for you.”

We sat quiet for some minutes digesting this and digesting a particularly nice strawberry salad.

“Apart from what you just said, are the stars here the same as on the old earth?” the otherwise quite taciturn Hans asked.

“Mostly, but not quite,” Greg answered. “Take a look at Orion there,” He pointed to a constellation in the east. “See those three stars that form a regular triangle? They used to be known as Orion’s belt because seen from the old earth they sat on a straight line. Here, the middle star has moved a fairly large distance north so that the three stars now form a regular triangle. Why? We don’t know.

“Or look at the Big Dipper which Anna pointed out before. The central star in the ‘handle’ of the dipper used to be a double star with a bright main star and faint neighbor. Now the neighbor’s gone. It’s just not there! Again, we don’t know why.

“All over the sky there are small changes like that. The vast majority of the stars and the planets are where you’d expect them to be, but then there are these small changes: a new star here, a missing star there, or a star that has moved. There’s so much we don’t know. At least not yet.”

“Have you asked God about it?” I said. Kate looked at me as if to say, ‘silly man.’

“Yes, I have as a matter of fact,” Greg answered, “but he’s not telling.”

Kate’s eyes were saying, ‘I could have told you that.’

“God is not there to be our encyclopedia. He’s given us a brain for a reason,” she said.

"I guess that's true," I admitted. "Back on the old earth I used to fantasize about all the questions I would ask God when I met him. Questions about the world, the universe, mathematics, why he created things the way he did. And now I discover that he rarely answers that kind of question."

"He's given us a mind, intelligence, common sense," Kate said. "He means for us to use it. It's the same with accidents: God protects us against harm, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't think for ourselves about what we do. We don't start throwing knives at each other for fun, expecting God to catch them before anything happens."

After supper, Greg went over to look into his telescope. He looked at several stars, inspected some dials, and made some notes. Then he got out Radomir's precision clock and checked it. Greg had been faithfully rewinding it every day, so we could use it to calculate our longitude. Then he came over to me.

"Get your brain in gear, Mr. Calculator," he said to me. "Here are the numbers."

I knew what I was expected to do, and after a few minutes I had a result for him. I handed him a piece of paper.

"It's as I expected," he said, shrugging. "There's no measurable change since we left."

"What does that mean?" Rediat asked.

"It means that although we've walked more than one hundred kilometers, there's no measurable change in our geographical latitude."

"Again, what does that mean?"

"It means that this earth is much bigger than the old one."

"How much bigger?"

"I can't say. At least five times as big."

"But that's what I expected," Greg continued. "It merely confirms measurements that have already been made at various points in The City."

"Are you sure we're going due south?" Kate asked him.

"Yes, we are," Greg answered, looking at Radomir's clock again. "You've been constantly checking the compass, and Nick's calculations don't indicate any deviation east or west," he concluded, waving my notes in the air.

One of the delightful things about our journey were the many animals we saw. Anna was overjoyed.

Once we had to stop for half an hour because a herd of elephants crossed our path and were not inclined to let us through. Another time, a sable tooth tiger came up to us and wanted to be scratched on the back. The air was full of birds, both familiar and unknown to me, but Anna could name most of them. They were anything from archaeopteryxes to pigeons. A couple of hyenas followed us for a whole day.

Anna frequently got the binoculars out to scan the horizon for interesting fauna.

The landscape rarely changed, but we were never bored. Rediat continued to demonstrate his abilities as a musician. He'd pick up a curiously looking stone and a hollow piece of wood and start knocking them together in an intricate

rhythm while whistling a tune. Sometimes he'd take a few dancing steps, and soon we'd all be skipping along to his music. Marie would jump down from the wagon to dance with us. It made no difference where she was, the horses did what they were supposed to do.

There were a few lakes along the way, and a refreshing swim was almost always popular. While we were fooling around in the water, the horses would stand quietly and drink. There were a few friendly crocodiles in the lakes, and in one place we had to share the lake with about a dozen gnus.

Our sixth day was a Sabbath, and we decided to stay put for a day. We'd covered almost 200 kilometers, and both the horses and we could do with a day of rest.

A Sabbath on the southern plains is remarkably like a Sabbath in The City. The Holy Spirit moved us like he always does, and we all started singing like we always do. The choir of angels was there too, and God came and talked with us.

In the evening, Rediat got out his balalaika and we sat singing as the sun went down.

Marie sat next to her husband, her arms wrapped around him and she kissed his cheek at the end of each song. Greg was obviously enjoying it tremendously.

"What's your story, Marie?" Anna asked. "Did you find Greg on the old earth or here?"

"On the old earth," Marie answered. "I was a few years younger than Greg. As a young girl I was sent to work in the kitchen on the same farm where he was a farm hand. I've

always loved horses, so whenever I could, I'd sneak out to the stables to spend some time there.

"That's where I met Greg. His work involved all kinds of farm work, but one of his duties was to take care of the horses. I met him a few times when I slipped out of the kitchen to see the horses. As time went by, he would make a point of being in the stables when he knew I had a few minutes of free time.

"We fell in love. The farmer was a kind man, and he had no objection to us getting married as long as we kept working for him. So that's how it happened." She smiled and kissed her husband again.

"Did you share Greg's fascination with the stars?" I asked.

"Oh absolutely," she answered. "When the stars came out, he could sit outside for an hour just looking at them, and I could sit outside for an hour just looking at him!"

We all chuckled.

"Did you have any children?" Kate asked.

"No, and that made us quite sad," Marie said. "To make up for it, we've got four wonderful children here! Two boys and two twin girls. They're all grown up now."

Marie's story had left me wondering as so often happened when I heard someone talk about their marriage on the old earth.

When we set out the next morning, Greg was sitting on the wagon next to Marie; the rest of us were walking. I went

up to Anna and asked her, "Were you married on the old earth?"

"No, I wasn't," she answered. "It just never happened. It made me quite lonely and depressed at times, and I couldn't understand why I was unable to find the right man." She sighed. "Now I know why, of course."

"Rediat?" I asked.

"Obviously," she answered. "If the right man for me lived 1,800 years before me, it was pretty hard to meet him on the old earth."

"Do you ever wonder..."

"...about being husband and wife—here?" she finished my sentence. "I used to. A lot. But I think I've figured it out by now."

"What have you figured out?"

"How it works." She thought for a while. "You know, we all used to focus on the passage in the Bible where a number of Sadducees asked Jesus the silly question about a woman whose husband had died childless and then his brother was obliged to marry her. Then that brother died childless and a third brother stepped up to do his duty. And so on through seven brothers. And then the question was: She's been married to seven men; which one is going to be her husband at the resurrection?"

"Yes," I said. "And Jesus said there'd be no marriage here."

"Well, not quite," Anna replied. "He started by saying, 'You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.' In other words: If only they would read the Old Testament and get to know God, they wouldn't

ask such a silly question. But what did the Old Testament say? It talked about God creating us in his image as man and woman; it told us that God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone, I will make a helper suitable for him;' it contained dozens of passages where the relationship between God and humans was likened to the relationship between man and woman.

"So, if the Sadducees had read the Old Testament, they would have found lots of indications that the relationship between man and woman has always had God's stamp of approval on it—even before the fall."

She was quiet for a few moments, then she went on: "Remember who was talking with Jesus: the Sadducees. They didn't believe the whole of the Old Testament; they only believed in the five books of Moses, the Mosaic Law. And they didn't believe in the resurrection either. Their concept of marriage was based on the law and on the idea that when you're dead, you're dead.

"Jesus then said, 'The people of this age marry and are given in marriage.' He was talking about the worldview of the Sadducees. *Marrying and giving in marriage*. That's what they thought it was all about: Legal stuff, such as a man's obligation to give his brother offspring by marrying the widow. That kind of marriage does not exist in the resurrection, and thank God for that!" she added vehemently.

"But..." I started.

"Love between a man and woman has always been part of God's plan for the world. You know, I've actually seen Adam and Eve a couple of times when I've visited the Mountain. Do you really think that God would nullify their rela-

tionship? Would he walk up to them and say, 'Sorry, guys, I know I made you for each other, and I know I told you to multiply and fill the earth, but that's all over now. You can forget about that. You're no longer husband and wife.' "

"But the Sadducees' question still stands: Who will be that woman's husband at the resurrection?"

"I don't know," Anna answered. "Maybe the first, maybe none of them, maybe *she* would know if she'd been a real person."

"I think I know her," Hans said. He'd been walking next to us for some time, listening to what Anna had been saying.

"You *know* her?" Anna asked incredulously. "She's a real person?"

"No, of course not," he answered, "but I know someone who's much like her."

"Do tell."

"Her name is Carla. She has a fruit and vegetable stand at our market. She's very proud of it, and with good reason. All her wares come from a large orchard at her home. I met her about a year ago when I was looking for some watermelons, and we started chatting."

"You? Chatting?" Anna couldn't help herself.

"Well, she did most of the talking I guess," Hans admitted. "Anyway, she told me about her background. She lived in the late 1800s in South America near a city called...eh...some double name."

"Buenos Aires?" I suggested.

"No, not that."

"São Paulo? In Brazil." It was Anna.

“Yes, that’s it! Sorry, South America hadn’t even been discovered by Europeans when I lived. So, Carla lived in a suburb of São Paulo in the late 19th century. Her parents were fairly well off and it was important for them that their daughter marry a man of ‘suitable’ background. So when Carla was eighteen years old, she was given away in marriage to a local businessman, a widower. He had a huge coffee plantation and was quite wealthy, but he needed a wife.

“Carla’s parents were delighted with the match. Carla herself wasn’t thrilled, but she didn’t mind too much. She knew her place and she knew what was expected of her. Her husband was old enough to be her father, and he’d married her because he needed a presentable wife when his business partners came to visit. He wasn’t unkind to her and he treated her well. They were faithful to each other and it wasn’t an unhappy marriage. But it wasn’t love either.

“Carla was forty when her husband died. Being a woman in a man’s world, she couldn’t run the estate herself, so now it was she who was in need of someone to help her and support her. She married one of her late husband’s business partners. Again, it was not an unhappy marriage, but there was certainly no romance either.

“In her life, Carla had experienced ‘marrying and being given away in marriage,’ but as she said, ‘They say that God’s love for humans is like a husband’s love for his wife. In my case, marriage was simply a crude caricature of God’s love.’ ”

Hans thought for a minute and then continued, “Carla has no husband here, and she’s happy with her life. She

enjoys being independent and immersing herself in God's love. She's also very happy that there's no 'marrying and giving away in marriage' here. That was a practical arrangement of the old world and its Sadducees, as Anna said. I believe Carla will find her man eventually. 'It is not good for the man to be alone.' And neither for the woman; but she's got all the time in the world, so there's no hurry."

Chapter 11

On the fifteenth day of our journey with more than 450 kilometers behind us, Anna suddenly cried out, “There’s a village!”

She was looking through the binoculars, as always scanning the horizon for wildlife. Kate grabbed the binoculars and looked in the direction Anna was pointing.

“Indeed there is,” Kate said. “And there’s the lake,” she added turning her head slightly to the west.

“You know this place?” I asked.

“Yup. I’ve exchanged a number of messages with a man named Horace who lives here. He’s sent me a couple of maps over the years. We need to go to the lake first,” she added with determination.

So far we’d made a point of going almost exactly straight south, but now we had to go a little west to get to the lake and then a little east to get to the village. It was no big deal, but we had to take the detours into account when Kate was going to plant her next marker.

The lake was not very big. It was apparently fed by an underwater source, and a lively brook carried water away

from the lake towards the village. There was a large tree standing by the lake, and a flock of birds were sitting there looking at us.

Kate went to the back of the wagon and got out a huge ball of string. There was a large knot tied at one end of the string, and we later discovered that there was a similar knot at the other end.

"This string is exactly one kilometer long from knot to knot," she explained. "I need to measure the distance from this tree to the village as accurately as possible. Now, Nick, if you'd kindly stand here by the tree holding this end of the string with the knot at the southeastern side of the trunk. Take the binoculars." She handed them to me. "The rest of us will go toward the village, unwinding the string. When we've walked exactly one kilometer I'll wave at you—hence the binoculars—and you start walking towards us, rolling up the string as you go. Then we'll repeat the process until we reach the village. Okay?"

"Okay," I said.

So off they went, unrolling the ball of string along the way. I enjoyed the peace and quiet which was only interrupted by the occasional chirping of a bird. I checked their progress regularly in the binoculars, and when I saw Kate waving both arms, I started towards them.

We repeated the unwinding and winding process six times before we reached the village. "5.82 kilometers," Kate announced as we reached a large palm tree just outside the village. "Interesting," she mumbled to herself.

Our approach caused some happy excitement in the village. It was not every day that people passed through this

area. Soon we were surrounded by about twenty villagers, big and small, who all wanted to wish us God's peace and welcome us to their small town. Three dogs were running around us barking wildly.

"Is one of you called Ameqran?" Kate asked.

"That's me," a stout, brown man with curly hair answered. "I live on a farm not far south of here." He pointed.

"Do you have sister in The City called Titrit?"

"I do. She's a sandal maker."

"Then I have a letter for you." Kate handed him Titrit's letter.

"Why, thank you!" Ameqran exclaimed and tore open the envelope.

The sun was low on the western sky, and before we knew it, people had set up a long table in the center of the village and were laying out all kinds of food. A spontaneous banquet for the unexpected visitors from The City.

There was soup, tofu tacos, pasta with tomatoes and peas, moussaka, coconut salad, and fruits for desert. There were tasty wines and lemonade. And there were questions and answers and singing and merry chitchat.

After the meal, Kate found her friend Horace. He was a thin man with black hair and looked like an American Indian.

Horace fetched some notes from his home and then took a seat next to Kate.

Kate found a map among her own papers. "Horace, a century ago you sent me this map," she said. "You've noted several distances on it, including the distance from the lake to the village."

Horace nodded.

"Now, five years ago you sent me this," she brought out another map. "Do you know what I'm about to say?"

"Yes, I do," Horace said slowly. "The lake has moved."

"Lakes may move," Kate said. "But trees don't. You measured the distance between the trees, and they seem to have moved as well."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry, but I have to ask: Are you sure your measurements are correct?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"On our way here today, I measured the distance myself as exactly as I could. It was 5.82 kilometers. Your last measurement was 5.75."

"It's no big change, surely it's within the margin of error."

"Do you really believe that?"

"No, not really," he admitted. "We should compare our measuring tapes, of course, but that's a difference of 70 meters."

"Yes, and a century ago you measured the distance to be 4.55 kilometers."

"I did."

"So what's happening?" Kate asked.

"The earth is growing," Horace said with a shrug.

"Is that likely?"

"What's likely?" Horace asked. "We don't know what's likely in this world. But I do know that it used to take us twelve days to get to The City from this village. Now it takes us fourteen. But let's compare our measuring tapes."

They got up and walked away.

* * *

That night we slept under a roof for the first time in more than two weeks. We didn't have beds, but the villagers provided plenty of hay to sleep on.

Kate and I slept at Ameqran's farm. His sister had told him about our boots, and he was eager to see them. On our journey so far, we'd all be wearing sandals since the ground was easy to walk on, but Kate brought out the boots from the wagon and showed them to Ameqran. He was full of admiration for his sister's work.

"These are good, I can tell," he said. "I have a couple of homemade boots I use sometimes, but this is high quality. She's very skillful."

"She appeared to take great pride in her work," Kate remarked.

"As well she should," Ameqran said emphatically. "When God gives you a talent, you shouldn't be ashamed of it—as long as you give credit where credit is due."

"You're very proud of your sister," I remarked.

"I am." Ameqran smiled. "We've always been close. Do you have any siblings?"

"I had a brother," I answered, "but he's not here."

Ameqran nodded, knowing what I meant. Almost everybody from the old earth has some close former friend or relative who hasn't come to the new earth. I've mentioned how I met my grandmother shortly after the resurrection; well...my grandfather isn't here.

"Tell me about him," Ameqran said.

“His name was Tony. He and I were quite close when we were teenagers,” I started. “He was a couple of years older than me, but we spent a lot of time together. We went to ballgames and movies, and when we were old enough to be interested in girls, we exchanged views and opinions on that inscrutable half of the human species.

“When we were children, our parents used to take us to church every Sunday, and most of the time we were happy to go there. But when my brother was around twenty, something bad happened that changed his whole attitude towards God.

“Tony had a girlfriend at that time. She was a troubled girl, bipolar, anorexic, frequently depressed. Tony loved her. Then one day when he went to visit her, he discovered her in her room, dead. She’d slit both her wrists.

“Tony broke down. It was so bad that he was hospitalized for about a month. When he came home, he announced that he’d discovered that God was a fake. He’d simply stopped believing.

“After a couple of years he found a new girl, they got married, had two children, then got divorced. Tony’s life was not a happy one, but many others have had lives that were much more miserable than his. Nevertheless, as far as I can tell, Tony never wavered in this conviction that God did not exist.

“My relationship with my brother deteriorated. We still met frequently, and he was the best man when Kate and I got married. But he would always have a condescending remark about my faith in Jesus. ‘It’s not I who need God’s forgiveness,’ he would say. ‘It’s God who needs my forgive-

ness.’ ”

“So he never came here?” Ameqran asked.

“No. I’ve asked Jesus about him, and he told me that he has done what was best for Tony. And that makes me happy and thankful.”

“Your brother would have hated it here,” Ameqran said. It was a statement, not a question.

“Yes, he would,” I said. “If God had placed him here, he’d be constantly confronted with God’s holiness and majesty. It would have been torture for him, so I’m glad he’s not here. This life is full of things he would have hated. God has shown him mercy.”

“Do you miss him?”

“No,” I said with conviction. “If I missed him, I would want him to be here, and that would be most unkind of me. God loved him enough not to force him to live in this place. And so do I.”

I paused, then changed the subject. “But you know, back on the old earth, I never expected eternal life to be so busy,” I said.

Ameqran laughed. “You’re right. I know that I imagined life here to be simply a kind of lethargic bliss.”

“Lethargic bliss,” I mused. “I like that.”

“Yeah, you know, simply sitting around, singing praises constantly for billions of years and doing nothing else.”

“We do spend a lot of time singing praises,” I put in.

“We do,” Ameqran said, “and we should! But we also do so much more. God created us to be active and creative. That hasn’t changed. God’s Kingdom is the place where God

is in charge and everything happens the way he intended it to.”

“It’s like being husband and wife,” Kate said. “We spend a lot of time just looking at each other’s face and soaking in each other’s love; but part of being husband and wife also involves doing things together.”

“Exactly,” Ameqran said.

“I think part of the problem is the images we had about ‘going to heaven,’ ” Kate continued. “It was all so fuzzy and excessively spiritual. Many people didn’t even know what the Bible taught about the resurrection of the body and living on a new earth. They had a vague notion about dying and going to heaven where God would give you angel wings and a harp and you could sit on your little cloud and play music. But God had promised us so much more!”

We sang an evening song together, then Ameqran left us in the hayloft where we were going to sleep.

We fell asleep in the soft hay, hand in hand.

Chapter 12

Before we left the following morning, Kate asked Horace about what we could expect as we continued traveling south.

“About three days’ journey from here you’ll come to a large forest,” he said. “It’s quite dense at places, and you’ll have a hard time getting the wagon through it.”

“Are there people down there?” she asked.

“Yes, there are. Not many, but you’ll probably meet a few.”

We reached the forest at nightfall on the eighteenth day of our journey without meeting anyone on the way. We camped just outside the forest, and Greg got his telescope out for what was to be the last time.

“We’re not getting the wagon through the forest,” he said. “Which means we’re leaving the telescope here. So I’m going to get a last measurement here, as exact as I can before I need to rely on the astrolabe. How far have we gone, Kate?” he shouted to her.

"570 kilometers," she answered. She'd been helping Re-diat get a fire going and now she walked over to us.

"Why are we using kilometers?" Marie asked.

"Mainly because the tape measure I got from God was metric. It was 100 meters divided into meters and centimeters. Other people who got measuring instruments from God also got metric things."

"So you're saying the metric system is divine?" Anna asked teasingly. "I thought Americans believed the metric system to be evil."

Kate laughed. "Of course it isn't divine. But it *is* practical. I guess God gave us all metric devices to save us from the problem of having to discuss which system to use."

"Also, I guess most people used metric in their old lives," I said.

"No, that's not true," Kate said. "The metric system was invented towards the end of the 18th century. Before then, nobody used the system."

"That's right," Greg said. "I'd never heard about it before I came here."

"The problem was that different nations used different systems. An English inch was different from a French inch which was different from a German inch, and so on. The metric system had two great properties: It was universal and it was simple."

"Well, not quite universal," I protested. "Our country never surrendered."

"Yeah, well...", was all Kate said.

"But what is a meter really?" Hans asked.

“Originally it was defined so that the distance from the equator to the north pole would be exactly ten million meters,” Kate explained, “but that was not practical—especially since the earth was not a solid shape, what with a liquid core and moving tectonic plates. So later the meter was redefined based on the speed of light and the frequency of the radiation from a particular cesium isotope.”

“How in the world are we supposed to measure the frequency of the radiation from a particular cesium isotope?” Hans exclaimed. “And what is a cesium isotope anyway?”

“At present, we’ve no way of doing that,” Kate admitted. “So we use my tape measure instead. And others like it. In that way, I guess you could say that our meter is God-given.” She smiled.

While we’d been talking, Greg had finished his setup. He looked into his telescope, made his measurements, and came to me for the final calculations.

“So what have you got?” Kate asked.

“We’ve traveled 0.5 degrees of latitude,” Greg said. “Half a degree. This puts the distance from the equator to the north pole at roughly 100 thousand kilometers—or 100 million meters, compared to the 10 million meters you mentioned as the size of the old earth.”

Kate nodded thoughtfully.

“But the margin of error is huge,” Greg continued. “The correct size could be half or double that number. I may be able to get you better results as we get further south, if my astrolabe is accurate.”

* * *

"How do we proceed from here?" Greg asked after supper. "It'll be next to impossible to drive the wagon through the forest."

"We'll have to leave the wagon here," Kate answered. "We'll pick it up on the way back. We'll bring what we and the horses can carry on our backs."

"What about your odometer?"

"We'll have to take turns pulling it. It'll be less accurate, of course, since we can't travel in a straight line among the trees; but what else can we do?"

We went to sleep early, all of us aware that our journey would change dramatically now.

In the early morning Marie went on one of her high-speed rides on horseback. Normally, she'd choose one horse and ride it for half an hour or so, but this time she took a trip with both horses. "This will probably be their last gallop for several days," she explained.

We had a couple of backpacks, which we filled with food and instruments. Kate's many markers and our ropes were strapped to the back of one of the horses, and the other horse carried the water canisters and the tents and blankets. We took off our sandals and put on our new boots.

But we had to leave Greg's large telescope and Rediat's balalaika behind. The canvas on the wagon would keep them dry in case of rain, so we were sure we'd find them in good shape on the return journey.

And then we set off through the forest.

* * *

The forest wasn't as dense as it appeared from outside, and there were a lot of clearings between the trees. The trees were mainly hardwood with a palm tree here and there. There were also a lot of huge ferns. Plenty of small streams crisscrossed through the forest, and in many places the ground was decidedly muddy. We were grateful for our boots which proved to be surprisingly waterproof.

Where the trees stood close together, it could be quite dark, but most of the time the sun rays were filtering through the tree tops, creating a waterfall of green, yellow, and brown colors above our heads.

The animal life was different from what we'd encountered on the open plain. There were no large animals here, but plenty of small ones. Monkeys were everywhere, and they were very interested in what we were doing. Their constant "eek, eek" sounded around us, but we soon got used to it, and they *were* rather cute. A single large gorilla walked up to us at one time, but after looking closely at each of us individually for a while, he walked away again, perhaps disappointed that we were not gorillas too.

The air was damp, and when evening came, we decided that it was best to put up our tents. We'd walked for eighteen days on the southern plains without once having to erect our tents, but in the forest we could almost feel that rain was likely.

So at the end of our first day in the forest, we found a clearing where it would be safe to light a fire; and while Re-

diat was busy preparing our supper, the rest of us set up the tents.

Rediat had some problems getting the fire going. It was difficult for him to find dry wood, and when at last he succeeded, there was as much smoke as there were flames. Unsurprisingly, this did not in any way prevent him from making another culinary masterpiece. The forest provided him with lots of plants that didn't grow on the open plain, and in the following days our diet changed considerably. We had plenty of coconuts, dates, and figs from the trees, but Rediat also found several new kinds of mushroom which I'd never seen before. Even the leaves of some of the ferns could be used for a zesty salad.

After the meal we felt like singing again. Unfortunately, we'd had to leave Rediat's balalaika behind, but he found a few hollow tree branches of varying thickness which gave out different tones when he hit them. So using two spoons as drumsticks, he managed quite well on his homemade xylophone.

"We know very little about you, Hans," Kate said after we'd sung a few songs. "You're a very quiet type. Surely, there's an interesting person hiding behind those blue eyes of yours."

Hans smiled apologetically. "There's not much to say, I fear," he began. "I was born in 1322 in the northern regions of the Holy Roman Empire, in what some of you know as Germany. My father was a blacksmith, and that was also the trade I learned as I grew up.

"I liked working with metals. Not just iron. I enjoyed copper and bronze as well, and occasionally I'd make jew-

elry of silver.

"But life was hard. We had a bad famine a couple of years, and then, in the late 1340s, the Great Pestilence came."

"The Black Death?" I asked.

"Yeah, I gather that's what later generations have called it. The plague! It started as a rumor. We heard about thousands of people dying in the south; but it didn't take long before it reached our town. Some people started having breathing difficulties and would die within days. Others got boils on their arms and legs. There was death everywhere! By the time my parents died, half of our town was already dead. I was not surprised when I started having trouble breathing. I died in 1350."

"So you were...28?" Kate said.

"27, 28, I'm not sure."

"You never married?"

"No," he said. "I met Hoshi here on the new earth."

"Yes, she said she was born here," I remarked.

"Yes, she was. She's a wonderful woman. So uncomplicated in her attitude to everything."

"We're a minority now," Kate said.

"Who?"

"We," she made a gesture encompassing us all, "old earthers. Unless I'm much mistaken, there are now more people who were born on the new earth than on the old one."

"So we're a group of old geezers!" Greg remarked.

“Speak for yourself, Greg.” Anna said. “I am neither old, nor a geezer. I’m a sophisticated woman in the prime of her everlasting life. So there!”

We all laughed.

“Does the fact that Hoshi was born here mean that she has a different outlook on life?” I wondered.

“Oh, absolutely,” Hans said. “That’s what I find so invigorating about her. This world is her natural habitat. After several centuries here, I feel I’m still working on getting used to it.”

“I know what you mean,” I said. “Kate and I talked about it the other day. We’re still working on unlearning that time is limited. For those of our children who were born here, it comes naturally.”

“Yes. That’s the way it is with Hoshi. Do you remember what Greg said some days ago: that I was missing my wife. Well, there’s a lot of truth in that. I do miss her. But for her it’s different. I know that she loves me and enjoys being together with me. Now that I’m gone, I’m sure she thinks about me every day, but she doesn’t *miss* me the same way that I miss her. She knows we’ll see each other again, even if it takes years.”

Kate smiled. “I don’t think we’ll be away that long,” she said.

Hans continued, “I guess, deep inside me there’s still a lingering worry that I might lose her, that she may come to harm while I’m away. It’s ridiculous, of course, and fortunately this worry is getting smaller and smaller the more time I spend in God’s presence. But on the old earth, the

fear that you might lose your loved one forever was always part of *missing* them.”

He fell silent again. Then after a while he said, “Sometimes I get the feeling that Hoshi takes too much for granted: God’s presence, our safety, the conviction that our loved ones will always be here, that we’ll never have to starve or fall ill. She’s never known anything else. But then I realize that she’s *right* in taking those things for granted. Things are all right now, and always will be so. I’m the one who has the wrong attitude because I don’t take our eternal happiness for granted. We’re here now. The old life is over. We can relax. I’m guaranteed to see Hoshi again.

“I’m still learning this, but as a matter of fact, I’m enjoying the learning process. Every time I realize—or re-realize—that God is in complete control and that no bad things will ever happen again, I’m completely overwhelmed by a feeling of thankfulness. And that feeling is so awesome that it’s actually worth the price of not having quite learned it yet, if you understand what I mean.”

We nodded.

“We’ll learn it eventually, I’m sure. But for now, I enjoy being an old geezer who’s learning to be a carefree youngster,” Hans smiled.

“Kate said the other day that time is more *fluid* for people born here,” I said. “Is it becoming fluid for all of us?”

“I think it’s gradually happening,” Greg said. “I know that I find it increasingly difficult to guess at the duration of past events. Marie may ask me, ‘When did we last visit a market in The City?’ and I’ll be unable to say if it was a week ago or a year ago. That’s a new thing. It wasn’t like

that a couple of centuries ago.”

“I think part of that comes with aging,” Kate said. “Even on the old earth, time seemed to go faster the older you got.”

“But we’re not aging,” Greg protested.

“No, but we still fill our memories with more and more information. A ‘year’ is gradually becoming a smaller and smaller fraction of the time we’ve experienced.”

“I think it’s more than that,” Greg said. “I think it’s related to what Nick said: We’re unlearning that time is limited. I think there’ll come a time when we’ll be able to use the word ‘soon’ to mean ‘in a few thousand years.’ ”

“You mean like God did in some of the prophesies?” I said. “That used to frustrate me no end. I knew that ‘with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day,’ but I still felt somewhat cheated when the Bible used the word ‘soon’ for events that lay more than two thousand years into the future.”

“Perhaps that was a foretaste of what life was going to be like here. I think, perhaps, one day we’ll stop thinking in terms of time altogether.”

“You can’t have music without time,” Rediat objected. “Music is one tone *after* another. Rhythm is variations in timing.”

“That’s true,” Greg said. “And I’m not saying that time will disappear; but when we’ve been here a billion years, I’m sure our concept of time will have changed. It’ll become *fluid*, as Kate said.”

* * *

The night was pleasant, but not quiet. The sounds of the forest were all around us. Birds of the night crying out, small animals scuttling around outside our tents. But the atmosphere inside the tent was cozy.

It did rain during the night, but only briefly, and when we got up in the morning, the air was so fresh that it felt almost nourishing.

The horses had gone wandering in the forest during the night, and we couldn't see them; but when Marie whistled, they showed up almost immediately.

We packed our things and continued south.

The day passed uneventful, and once again we found a clearing and set up our tents.

After the sun had gone down we noticed a few fireflies around us. Their flashes of light shone briefly like colorful lamps in a garden. As we sat there admiring them, I felt as if the whole atmosphere was one of quiet...expectation? Yes, expectation was the only word I could find to describe it.

We sang again while Rediat played whatever 'instrument' he could improvise, but soon we sat quite still, listening. It was as if the sense of expectation around us was growing. And then we heard it. It started as a faint, indefinable sound—almost as a quiet whispering in distant tree-tops. Then Kate suddenly exclaimed and pointed, "Look at the fireflies!"

While we'd been singing, the number of fireflies had slowly increased, and now there were at least a hundred of them in the air around us. I noticed that some of them momentarily changed color from yellow to green or red or or-

ange. Each change was so short that at first I thought I was imagining it.

As we were looking at the fireflies, the distant whisper was growing louder, and after a few minutes we realized that what we were hearing was the sound of approaching music.

Another few minutes passed and we could tell that the music was in fact many voices singing. Then, suddenly, I recognized it. I'd heard it lots of times before, but almost always at close range.

We looked at each other. "It's angels," I said. The others nodded.

As the song approached, the green, red, orange, purple, blue light flashes from the fireflies grew more and more frequent, and it was as if their lights somehow had a structure to them. It was as if the flies gathered in areas of different color that came and went.

Then it happened! I guess there must have been at least fifty angels traveling through the forest. We couldn't see them, but we could certainly hear them.

We were surrounded by music. Angelic song is not like human song. When people are singing, you talk about music for two or three or four voices; but with angels that kind of counting doesn't make sense. If you're hearing just two angels singing, it sounds like, perhaps, eight-part harmonies. But when more angels sing together, you don't simply get a multiplication of the voices. It is as if the beauty spreads to all your senses—as if you begin to smell and taste and feel the song. That's what happened in the forest. The song of the angels propagated to the lights of the fireflies,

and thus the music was complemented by a fantastic colorful play all around us.

I don't know how long we sat there. The incredible harmonies reverberated from tree to tree, and an abundance of colors ran back and forth among the flies. Concentric color circles grew and shrank, geometric shapes rotated in intricate patterns, explosions of colors spread and gathered again. I don't know if the fireflies could actually hear the angels' voices, but there was no doubt that it affected them and that the swarm of flies was bubbling with delight.

At last, the angels passed us. The colorful display diminished, the song grew fainter, and at last everything was back to normal.

"Wow!" Kate whispered.

The rest of us said nothing. We just sat there. After a while, we lay down on our backs, overwhelmed.

And thus we fell asleep. The tents stood empty that night.

Chapter 13

On our fifth day in the forest we met Nasir. We were walking along chatting, singing, when suddenly we saw him. He was a short, dark man with black hair and brown eyes. He was carrying a large bag and had a long knife in a strap over his shoulder. He was looking directly at us as we approached.

“God’s peace on you,” he shouted. “My name is Nasir.”

We wished him God’s peace and introduced ourselves.

We soon discovered that he was even more surprised than we were at meeting someone in the forest. He wanted to know where we came from and what we were doing here. We told him about our expedition. When we mentioned our small hope of finding the lions, he pricked up his ears.

“There’s a boy in our village who claims he’s seen one,” he said. “I don’t know if he’s right.”

“Your village?” Kate asked. “Where is that?”

“About a month’s journey south of here. About halfway between the forest and the southern mountains.”

“I received a letter about a year ago from a woman I’ve been corresponding with. She wrote about someone seeing a lion. I wonder if she lives in your village.”

“What’s her name?” Nasir asked.

“Minna,” Kate answered.

“There’s a woman called Minna in our village. It’s her nephew who saw the alleged lion.”

Anna was excited. “Tell us about it.”

“I don’t know much about it,” Nasir said. “To tell you the truth, I don’t believe it was a lion. He was on a trip to the mountains with some friends. When they returned, the boy described an animal he’d seen there. It sounded like a lion. The others didn’t see anything.”

“So the boy didn’t actually claim to have seen a lion?”

“No. He saw a large, light brown animal like a panther, but with hair around its head.”

Anna looked disappointed.

Nasir had lunch with us, and as we ate he explained what he was doing.

“Basically, I’m just enjoying God’s nature,” he answered. “I go walking on my own for months at a time. I explore nature, I look at the trees, I smell the flowers, I listen to the birds, I commune with the animals. It’s marvelous.”

He sighed happily and continued, “I’m also an artist. When I’m out here, I write poems, songs. And I collect stuff. Samples of nature.” He opened his bag and showed us its contents. There were small tree branches in different sizes, dried flowers, strange colored rocks, birds’ feathers. “These I use for making decorations. Look at this branch, for example. Can you see what it is?”

“Not really,” Greg said.

"It's a giraffe," Nasir answered. "If I hold it like this and attach a couple of twigs here and make a small cut here and then paint it. It's a giraffe!"

We squinted, cocked our heads, staring at it sideways. "Oh, I see it!" Hans exclaimed suddenly. We looked at him. He had not struck us as a person with a vivid imagination. "See there! If you look at it from this side."

"Anyway," Nasir continued. "I study nature, I praise God for nature, I bring nature home to my village, I make decorations from nature."

"What do you eat here?" Rediat asked.

"Oh, a little of everything. God provides."

To most of us this sounded like a non-answer, but apparently it made sense to Rediat.

"When do you plan to return to your village?" Kate asked.

"I don't know," Nasir said. "Whenever."

"I would very much like to visit your village and talk with this Minna. Would you care to be our guide? The distances here are so huge, we might easily walk past your village without seeing it."

"I'll be happy to guide you. I almost never have company on my travels. It would be a nice change."

We thanked him, and thus our group of seven became a group of eight.

Nasir turned out to be an interesting addition to our group. He'd traveled a lot in the area around his village, and he

could tell us much about the forest and what we could expect further south.

"This is the only large forest in the area," he explained. "There are all sorts of animals here which you'll find nowhere else. South of the forest is a large plain, bordered on the east and south by a range of mountains. To the west, the plain just goes on and on as far as I have ever gone."

"Are the mountains high?" Kate asked.

"It varies. The southern mountain range has a few high peaks here and there, but there are several passes where you can cross without too much trouble. To the east, the mountains are higher—or so I'm told."

"You've never gone there?"

"I've never felt the urge to climb any of the mountains. The plain and the forest give me plenty of joy."

"Have you always lived here?" I asked.

"Almost. I was born in the New Jerusalem, but my parents left The City when I was still a child. They and a bunch of their friends traveled where God led them, and they ended up about a thousand kilometers south of The City, where they settled and built our village."

"A thousand kilometers?" Kate said.

"Well, approximately, of course. That's what I was taught as a child."

"How long ago was that?"

"I don't know, I don't count years." His expression clearly indicated that that would be a silly thing to do. Kate looked at me knowingly.

"Guess," Kate said.

"200-300 years ago, perhaps. I'm not sure," Nasir said.

"Back at the university, you said you heard about the alleged lion from an area 1,500 kilometers south," I said.

"I did," Kate replied.

"Is the earth growing?"

"It's beginning to look that way." Kate was thoughtful. "It's consistent with the measurements from Horace's village."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" I asked.

"Overpopulation?"

"Yup. If the earth is growing, perhaps overpopulation will not be a problem after all."

"It's an interesting thought. We need a more quantitative analysis of the size, however."

At that moment there was a loud shout from Anna: "Hey! Come back! Give me that!"

We ran up to her. "What's happening?" Kate asked.

"A monkey took the binoculars," Anna answered looking around frantically. "I was holding them in my hand, when I heard an 'eek!' and somebody pulled the binoculars from my hand. There! Look at that branch."

We looked. And there, high up in a tree, sat a small and very happy monkey with our binoculars in its hands. "Eek! Eek!" it shouted excitedly, as if to say, "Look what I've got!"

We had no success in getting the binoculars back. We tried offering the monkey food. We offered it various shiny objects. We talked to it. We called for it. Hans even tried climbing the tree, but the monkey jumped to a neighboring tree before he got halfway up.

Nasir was just standing there laughing at us. "There's nothing you can do," he said calmly. "Once one of those

monkeys finds an interesting object, it keeps it. They're amusing creatures!"

"Well, it's annoying, but no catastrophe," Kate said and we started walking south again. But as we went, we noticed that the small monkey was following us in the treetops.

That evening we found another clearing and erected our tents. This time it really looked as if we might get quite a shower during the night.

Rediat prepared a meal together with Nasir, who had a lot of experience about which plants were especially delicious and how you could prepare them. We thought Rediat already knew everything, but he was listening intently to what Nasir told him.

After supper, Nasir sang a couple of his songs for us. They were passionate expressions of wonder at God's creation, and the tunes were engaging and easy to learn. Rediat quickly found a number of sticks and rocks he could use for instruments, but at other times he'd sit still whistling a quiet accompaniment to Nasir's singing.

We offered Nasir a place in one of our tents, but he said he preferred to sleep outside. "This is God's nature," he said. "If it rains, it's God's rain, and I'll relish being soaked by it."

It did indeed rain that night. Quite a lot, in fact. I lay awake for some time listening to the raindrops on the tent canvas, thinking about Nasir lying outside in the rain. But now and then I thought I heard him singing; it appeared that he was

praising God for the wonderful rain.

I must admit that I was happy the rain had stopped when I got up the next morning. It appears that I still have a lot to learn from people like Nasir. As Rediat and Nasir were preparing our breakfast, I had a look around the area.

I noticed the monkey with the binoculars still sitting in a tree, not five meters from our campsite. I waved at it, and it answered with a friendly “eek!”

As always there was plenty of water in the area, and I heard the splashing of a stream behind a thicket. There was also another kind of splashing, as if someone or something was getting in and out of the water, so I forced my way through the thicket and found...well, I didn't quite know what it was I found.

About ten animals, roughly the size of cats, were bathing in the stream. They had dark brown fur and a trunk similar to that of an elephant, but they were, of course, much smaller than elephants.

“Anna,” I shouted. “Come and have a look.”

The small animals looked up at me when I shouted, then they went back to their bathing. I heard Anna coming through the bushes, then she stopped dead in her track as she saw the animals. She looked at them for several minutes, staring as if her eyes would pop out of their sockets.

“What are they?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” she whispered, stunned. “I’ve never seen anything like them before.” She bent down to have a closer look.

One of the small animals came over to her, looking at her curiously. She stretched out her hands towards it, and

it climbed up in her arms.

It had triangular ears that stood straight up in its head, black eyes, and the strange trunk, which was indeed very much like an elephant's. Its paws had three long claws and looked like the paws of a sloth. We got the impression that it would be quite adept at climbing trees.

The animal in Anna's arms climbed up on her shoulder where it sat and looked around. It was incredibly cute. Anna was overjoyed and very puzzled.

We went back to the campsite; the other animals continued their bathing, but Anna's new friend sat quietly on her shoulder.

Almost everybody came over to Anna to have a look at the strange animal, but Nasir remained standing at the fire, stirring the contents of a frying pan. "I see you found a yoffer," he noted.

"A what?" Anna asked.

"A yoffer. That's what I call them at least."

"Do you know what they are?"

"They're yoffers!" Nasir replied. "What kind of answer do you want?"

"I'm not sure," Anna said. "It's obviously a mammal, but other than that..." Her voice trailed off.

Nasir came over to her with an apple in his hand. He handed it to the yoffer, who stretched out its trunk and took it. It then took a bite of the apple and started making chewing noises that sounded like "yoff, yoff, yoff."

"Hence the name," Nasir said.

"I wonder why I've never heard of such an animal before," Anna said.

“Well, they’re quite new,” Nasir replied.

“What do you mean, new?”

“They’ve only been around for a few years. I expect God has only recently created them.”

We stared at him. “What?” he asked.

“Are you saying that God is still creating animals?” Anna asked.

“Why, of course, why shouldn’t he?” Nasir said, surprised at our naïveté. “Plants too. Try this,” he added, offering us a plate with some slices of a greenish-yellow fruit. It tasted like a mixture of apple and mango.

“Is this a new fruit?” Kate asked full of awe.

“I think so,” Nasir answered. “It didn’t grow in the forest five years ago. Nobody in my village has seen anything like it.”

“I guess we shouldn’t be surprised at this,” Kate mused. “As Nasir said, why shouldn’t God continue to create animals and plants?”

We ate our breakfast. The yoffer clung to Anna all the time. Every few minutes she would feed it an apple, and it would yoff it happily.

We gathered our things and continued our journey. As we walked along, Hans spotted the monkey that had taken our binoculars. It was still following us. Anna tried once more to get it to come down to us. She found a couple of nuts and held them up towards the monkey but to no avail.

All the while, the yoffer had been sitting on Anna’s shoulder. Now it looked intently at the monkey, and sud-

denly it jumped down from Anna's shoulder, ran to the nearest tree, and climbed it with amazing speed. Within seconds it was sitting next to the monkey on a branch. The yoffer held out its trunk, the monkey looked at it curiously, and with a rapid movement the yoffer grabbed the binoculars from the monkey and ran off with them. Alone on the branch, the monkey sat motionless with a 'what just happened?' expression on its face.

The yoffer scampered down the tree and ran over to Anna, climbed her leg and body, and took a seat on her shoulder again. Anna retrieved the binoculars from its trunk. "Thank you so much, little friend," she said, scratching its ear.

The rest of us looked at them with mixture of astonishment and mirth. "Rescued by a yoffer—that's not a sentence you hear every day," Greg said.

Chapter 14

After two weeks of walking through the forest, we reached the southern end of it and stepped out onto a vast grass-covered plain, not unlike the one we'd passed through at the start of our expedition.

Just outside the forest, Kate planted a marker labeled "970 kilometers". She thought for a while and then added " ± 20 km" to it. "We haven't been walking in a straight line through the forest," she explained. "So a margin of plus or minus twenty kilometers is appropriate, I think."

We'd tried to make adjustments for our inevitable zigzag movements, but such adjustments are hard to make, and I suspected that her twenty kilometer margin was perhaps a trifle optimistic.

We looked around. To the southeast we could barely make out the outline of a mountain range. South and west, the plain seemed to go on forever.

"Another three weeks' journey straight south," Nasir explained, "and we'll reach my village."

We set out, but we'd only walked a couple of steps, when the yoffer made a sound. It sounded like "ooh, ooh." It was

the first thing it had said since we found it, and it was obvious that it was not happy with crossing the plain. It jumped down from Anna's shoulder where it had been spending most of its days and ran back to the forest. It took one final look at us and then disappeared between the trees.

We were sorry to see it go, but the forest was its obvious home, and it needed to be with its kind, of course.

We made good speed after the relatively slow progress through the forest, and we enjoyed seeing more of the sun. Rediat found a couple of sticks he could tap together in a happy rhythm, and soon we were singing and dancing.

"You know," I said after a while, "sometimes I wonder why nothing from the old earth survived."

"What do you mean 'nothing'? We're here. We survived," Marie said.

"I mean no artifacts survived. We got our 'gifts' from God when we came here, but I wonder if they were really human artifacts. I got an abacus and some paper and pencils, which were all very useful to me. But did they come from the old earth, or was it something God made for us here?"

"What are you missing?" Greg asked.

"Surely, not everything we made on the old earth was evil. We're walking along here, singing. I remember a few songs from the old earth. They're in English, so I rarely sing them when I'm together with others, but Kate and I occasionally sing them together at home. They're good songs that give glory to God. They survived in our minds, but they didn't survive as sheet music. Why don't we have copies

of, say, Händel's *Messiah*? That was a great masterpiece, telling about what God has done."

"Who's Händel?" Greg asked.

"A composer. You wouldn't have known him; you died long before him. And what about other things? Why did no tools survive? Surely, they were not all bad. At times I really miss an electronic calculator."

"I don't know," Kate said. "Sometimes it's hard say if a thing is good or bad. It depends on how you use it. I think perhaps God wanted us to start over again. Yes, he gave us a few gifts to get us started, but they were all fairly 'primitive,' if I may use that word. Greg got two lenses; he didn't get a space telescope. I got a tape measure; I didn't get a complete GPS system."

"A what?" the others asked.

"Never mind. My point is: I think we've been given a chance to start over again. Ideas survive in our minds, but we now have a chance to decide which things are worth making and which are not."

"I agree," Marie said. "You said it yourself that some good songs have survived in your mind. It's up to you to decide if you want to share them with others. Several artists have been remaking some of their old masterpieces—sometimes with subtle changes, I'm told."

"I'm sure the *Messiah* has survived," Kate said. "So many people have played and sung it over the years, it's simply a matter of committing it to paper again. Who knows, maybe it's already happened; maybe Händel is sitting somewhere in The City penning music as we speak."

She started humming the *Hallelujah* chorus. "See?" she exclaimed. "It still exists." Anna and I, who were the only one's who'd ever heard it, joined in, but some confusion arose after the first few lines when we realized that Anna only knew a Russian translation of the text.

"I can see that some adjustments are necessary," I said with a laugh.

"And you'll get your electronic calculator in due time," Kate said and kissed me on the cheek. "But I think I'll need you to calculate some roots for me before long. You'll have to do that manually."

"Roots?" I asked.

"Yeah," was all she said.

We walked for several days. We slept in the open or in our tents, depending on the weather. Nasir always slept outside. We enjoyed Rediat's food, which was splendidly complemented by some of Nasir's suggestions. We took turns pulling the odometer, Kate planted markers every ten kilometers, and she drew maps and maps and more maps as we progressed.

Marie went back to her habit of taking fast morning rides on the horses. The first time Nasir saw her take off at tremendous speed with no saddle or harness, he stood transfixed, smiling as she disappeared in the distance. "Nice," was all he said when the noise of thundering hooves returned and flew past us, and Marie's long hair was flying in the wind like a flag in a storm.

At night, Greg would occasionally take out his astrolabe

and Radomir's clock and make some measurements. The results were less reliable than with his telescope, but about 1,800 kilometers south of The City he still estimated the size of the earth to be about ten times the size of the old earth.

"1,800 kilometers," Rediat said. "Kate, shouldn't we have reached Nasir's village by now? You said it was about 1,500 kilometers south of The City."

"It *was*," Kate said.

"We still have a couple of days to go," Nasir told us. "But we're getting there."

The range of mountains we'd seen to the south-east when we left the forest were now straight east of us. "Those are the eastern mountains, obviously," Nasir explained. "There's another range of mountains to the south, two weeks' journey from the village."

"Do people frequently go there?" Kate asked.

"To the eastern mountains, hardly ever. They're high, and almost impossible to cross, my friends say. People have occasionally crossed the southern mountain range, but there's not much point. On the other side there's another dense forest, and as far as I know, nobody's ever gone very far into it."

"We may be the first ones then," Kate noted.

"You plan on going that far?" Nasir was impressed.

"Yes, I'd like to go at least another thousand kilometers."

Nasir fell silent, thinking. "There are rumors about a hermit living in the eastern mountains," he then said. "One or two people claim to have seen someone—or something—standing high on the mountain side. Nobody's

ever seen him—or it—up close, though. It may be just an ape.”

“Interesting,” Kate said. “But we’re not going that way. I need to go straight south as accurately as possible. How much have we deviated from that intent, Greg?”

“So little that I’m not able to measure it,” Greg answered.

Two days later, Kate spotted the village in the binoculars, and as we drew near, a group of children came running out to meet us. A couple of dogs came with them, and several adults followed at a more leisurely pace.

“Paula saw you coming!” a small boy said in an excited voice, pointing to a big girl behind him. “She saw you coming!”

“Greet them nicely, Musad” the girl Paula said in a grown-up voice. “You know what to say.”

“God’s peace on you,” the boy said. “My name is Musad. Paula saw you coming!”

“And God’s peace on you, Musad, Paula, everyone.” We nodded to them all and told them our names.

“Are you friends of Nasir’s?” Musad wanted to know.

“Yes we are,” Kate answered. “We met him in the forest.”

“Nasir always goes there,” Musad was unstoppable. “Then he makes nice things for us.”

By now, one of the women from the village had reached us and greeted us with a huge smile. “My name is Corinna,” she said. “It’s wonderful to have visitors here. When Nasir comes home from his wanderings, he normally brings only branches and rocks.”

We greeted her and the others and walked back towards the village with them.

The village was larger than we'd first assumed. About two hundred people lived there. Most of them were farmers and gardeners of one kind or another, but there were also a carpenter, a blacksmith, a school teacher, a baker, and a few others. Visitors were a rare occurrence, and everybody wanted to meet us, everybody wanted to talk with us.

We got at least twenty invitations to dine with various people, and in the end they all agreed to turn the central square of the village into a huge banquet, just as it had happened in Ameqran's village more than a month earlier.

After singing and eating and talking, Kate was called upon to give a short presentation of our expedition.

She stood on a chair so that everyone could see her and spoke at the top of her voice. After explaining who each of us was and what we did back in The City, she continued:

"As a cartographer it's always been my hope to be able to create a complete map of the new earth. I realize that this will take many centuries, perhaps millennia, but I don't mind, I enjoy my work.

"In the past years I have had the pleasure of receiving maps from many people outside The City. Some maps have been no more than crude sketches, others have been quite detailed. I've tried to piece them all together, but I've constantly run into inconsistencies, so in the end I decided to go see for myself together with these fine people you see here."

The villagers nodded to us, and there was a spontaneous round of applause.

“We’ve traveled due south from the south-eastern corner of the wall around The City, and now after covering almost two thousand kilometers, we’ve arrived here.”

More applause.

“Along the way I’ve discovered to my surprise that older measurements of distance seem to be shorter than newer ones.”

A few people nodded.

“Minna, would you please stand up,” Kate said.

A redheaded woman with a face covered in freckles got up. Kate had been sitting next to her during the meal, and it was obvious that they’d done more than small-talking.

“Over the past several years, Minna and I have exchanged letters. As you know, there’s not much traffic between The City and this village, so a letter and a reply have sometimes been more than twenty years apart. But no matter, it’s been interesting just the same, and Minna has been extremely thorough in the information she’s sent me and the maps she’s drawn.

“Now, Minna, would you please explain some of the things we’ve discussed?” Kate sat down.

Minna smiled shyly, and then said, “Making accurate measurements is difficult. We normally rely on imprecise things like ‘a days’ journey’ or so-and-so many steps. However, since I started corresponding with Kate, I’ve tried to make at least some measurements around here. I’ve been on a couple of trips to the southern mountains and to the northern forest, and I’ve tried to measure the distances.

“The last time I traveled to the forest, about twenty years ago, I estimated the distance as 900 kilometers. Today Kate told me that the distance has grown to 940 kilometers. And several of you have reported that the trip to the southern mountains takes longer than it used to.”

Nods around the table. Minna sat down, and Kate got up again.

“So that’s roughly the situation. The earth seems to be growing. We’re planning on traveling further south for at least another thousand kilometers; I’m planting markers along the way, and then in a hundred years’ time we may do it again and measure the distance between the markers. If the earth is indeed growing, we’ll know by how much.”

“Why is the earth growing?” a small voice asked. We looked around and saw that it was little Musad.

“To make room for all of us, of course,” a boy sitting next to Musad answered.

“What’s your name, young friend?” Kate asked.

“Boutros,” the boy answered.

“You know, Boutros, you may actually be right. Both humans and animals are having children. There are more and more of us every year...”

“So God is making room for us,” Boutros interrupted.

“It’s possible,” Kate said.

“What about the moon?” Boutros asked.

Kate was puzzled. “What about it?”

“Will the earth grow so big that we can touch the moon?”

Kate was silent. Apparently, she hadn’t thought about that. Neither had I.

"I very much doubt that, Boutros," she said at length. "I think God knows what he's doing."

"Course he does," Boutros replied. "I just wondered."

"There's another reason for our expedition," Kate continued. "In her last letter to me, Minna mentioned that one of you boys may have seen a lion."

An older boy with red hair spoke. "That was me."

"What's your name?"

"Nathan."

"Tell me about it."

"Well, it was a couple of years ago," Nathan began. "I was on a trip with my friends to the mountains. I was taking a walk by myself, when I saw it. I've never seen a lion before, but I've seen several panthers. It looked like a panther, but it was orange or light brown and it had a huge beard around its head. The others don't believe it was a lion, but I think so."

"Where exactly was that?" Kate asked.

"In the mountains, as I said."

"Could you be more precise? Or could your friends? Were there any adults with you?"

But 'in the mountains' appeared to be the most precise answer we could get. And Nathan and his friends had been on their own. We later learned that it was quite common for older children in the village go exploring on their own for several weeks at a time.

"Do you think you could make a drawing of what you saw?" Kate asked.

"I can try," Nathan answered and somebody gave him a piece of paper and a pencil. The result was, however, dis-

appointing. The boy was not a good artist, and his sketch could just as well have been a drawing of a shaggy dog.

“Has anybody else seen anything like this?” Kate asked. Everybody shook their heads. Kate shrugged, “Oh, well.”

That evening we partied.

For once Rediat hadn't been cooking the dinner, so while the villagers had been preparing the evening meal, he'd got together with a group of local musicians and now they were playing an improvised medley of all manner of tunes. There were guitars, trumpets, drums, flutes, and a lot of home-made instruments that didn't even have a name.

Several of the villagers were skillful artists. There was Lungile who sang for us, there was Ajit who was an amazing acrobat and jumped around as if he were a monkey, there was Franz the juggler, and Perlita the conjurer.

But first and foremost there was ourselves: We danced, we sang, we told stories, and we sang and danced again while Rediat and his band played well into the night.

At one time I found myself sitting next to Minna who was enjoying a cup of tea. “This is a wonderful place,” I remarked, “and you're wonderful people.”

“Thank you, so are you,” she said.

“Why did you move here?” I asked her. “Or were you born here?”

“No, I was born in the New Jerusalem,” she said. “I guess I'm an adventurous kind of person. A group of my friends wanted to explore the world outside The City. I joined them. We traveled around as God led us and we ended up here. It's

a marvelous place. Nice and quiet. There were only about a dozen of us originally, but several people have joined us over the years, and we've had children of our own."

"Do you ever miss the busy city?"

"No, never. I do go there occasionally. I've been there two or three times for the Easter celebrations—that's an amazing event. But I'm always happy to get back here. The Mountain in The City is far away, but somehow God is especially close here."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It's the Sabbath tomorrow. You'll see."

Kate and I got a room for ourselves that night. Musad's parents had a nice house with plenty of space and an extra bed, where Kate and I spent the night. As we were lying side by side I breathed deeply, "Aah, it's so nice to be alone again, just the two of us."

"We spent the night alone in Ameqran's hayloft," Kate reminded me.

"True," I admitted, "but that was more than a month ago. Also, a hayloft is no bed, and I must confess that I'm a little tired of sleeping on the ground."

"You're right," she said. "We still have a month to go, probably. Do you mind?"

"No, of course I don't mind," I said. "This is an adventure. Yoffers and elusive lions. Who could ask for more?"

"Yeah...Remember what Hans said about how he felt that Hoshi was taking too much for granted?"

"Uh-huh."

“And then he said that she was right in taking much for granted.”

I nodded.

“Nick, are we taking too little for granted? Are we still too rooted in our old earth lives?”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you noticed how much we define ourselves based on what we were on the old earth? You ask an old earther about their background, and they’ll say something like, ‘I was born in Australia in 1844’ and continue to describe their old earth life.”

“That right,” I said. “You and I do it too.”

“Exactly. And why? We lived less than a hundred years on the old earth and we’ve lived more than five hundred years here, and still our ‘background’ is whatever we were back then.”

“I think, perhaps, that’s the way it should be. The old earth was where all the drama took place. It’s where God fought Satan and won. It’s where Jesus suffered and died. It’s where God chose us. I think it’s right that we remember it and still think about it.”

I paused. “Have you heard about the old earth museum?” I asked.

“No, what’s that?”

“As you said, we’re a minority now. More and more people are born here. They’ve never seen the old earth; perhaps their parents have, but quite a few people are two or three generations removed from an old earth person. It’s important that they learn about the old earth.”

“So somebody’s building a museum?” Kate asked surprised.

“That’s what I’ve heard. They’ll get old earthers to tell stories and draw pictures of the old world. And a number of old earthers from various ages have volunteered to talk about the way life was back there. Most importantly, the idea is to tell the story of salvation. We hear the dramatic stories every Easter; but without the proper background, some of it can be hard to grasp. The museum will give all the background from the first creation, through the fall, up to Christ’s death and resurrection—and his return, of course. Future generations must know about this; otherwise they’re missing a huge part of who God is and what he’s done for us.”

“I guess you’re right. What stories could you and I contribute?”

“I don’t know...We’re scientists—more or less at least. Maybe we could tell about the ridiculous schism between science and God in our lifetime. How people thought that by describing God’s work they were ruling out God. As if pointing to a mousehole would disprove the existence of a mouse.”

“Maybe we should volunteer,” Kate said.

“Yeah, maybe.”

We kissed.

Chapter 15

The Sabbath always starts with a sense of anticipation; but here, two thousand kilometers from The City, the expectation was almost palpable.

Before breakfast everybody gathered in the central square of the village where the banquet had been held the day before. The villagers were meeting God fasting. There was quiet conversation here and there, but even the children were only chatting discreetly.

Then the Holy Spirit came over us as he does every Sabbath. We sang praises, the angels joined in, and God came to visit the village. At that moment I understood what Minna had meant when she said that God was especially close here.

In The City, God always comes and talks with each of us, either privately or in small groups, but you can never quite forget the fact that you're part of a congregation of millions and millions of people. Here, with just two hundred people around us, we couldn't help feeling 'special.' The village became a miniature version of The City with God's throne standing in the central square. Somehow the smallness of

it all made God's presence all the more breathtaking.

We were more than usually aware that we were very important to God. The old expression 'less is more' made perfect sense here.

Afterwards, we had brunch with the entire village. As with the banquet of the previous day, this happened in the square, but this time it was more relaxed. There were few chairs and no tables, and people just carried food from their houses and sat down on the ground or on the few chairs and shared what they'd brought.

In the afternoon, Minna took us on a tour of the village. There were seventy houses of various sizes within a radius of about one kilometer from the center. A couple of farms were further away. A large building was under construction right next to the square.

"This is going to be our school," Minna explained. "Until now, the children have been meeting in the teachers' homes, but having a proper school building is going to be great."

We walked up a broad street next to the school, looking at the houses we passed. They were built in many different styles, probably a reflection of the times and places the builders came from.

There was a thatched, white, half-timbered house which turned out to be the bakery, and a red brick building with a tiled roof housed the smithy. We passed a small, colorful building of irregular shape. It appeared to be made of stones of varying sizes, and it had curious wooden and metal ornaments everywhere.

"This is where Nasir lives," Minna told us. Yes, we could see that that made sense.

"Can you really make everything you need here?" I asked her.

"Pretty much. The biggest challenge is getting supplies of everything. The blacksmith is especially demanding. It's not always easy to find all the different metals he needs for his work. It's not just iron, you know. He works with copper, tin, zinc, silver, even gold at times. Some of these metals can be quite rare—at least around here."

"So what does he do?"

"He goes on trips. Long trips. Sometimes he's gone for months on end. Then he returns with a cartful of various blocks of metal which he's got from people in other villages."

"Do people from other villages come here to get things?" Kate asked.

"Rarely. We have a potter who is very skilled. She makes the most beautiful ceramics. People will occasionally come to see her work and perhaps ask her to make this or that thing which they need. But it only happens every other year or so."

The Sabbath was a relaxing and invigorating experience, and when Kate and I went to bed that evening, we had a feeling of not being tired at all.

Five minutes later we were both sound asleep.

* * *

The next morning after breakfast we got ready to continue on our journey. The villagers gave us plenty of food to bring with us, although Rediat tried to convince them that there was really no need.

The local carpenter brought us a small cart. "You may find this useful until you get to the mountains," he said. And so we did. We hitched one of the horses up to it, Hans attached the odometer behind it, and we placed a lot of our baggage in the cart.

"When you get to the mountains, leave the cart there, I'll pick it up later," the carpenter said. "Unless, of course, your return journey takes you back the same way. Then you can take it with you."

Minna told us that according to her latest measurements, which were about ten years old, there were about 600 kilometers to the southern mountains. Once we got there, we'd have to look for a pass where we could cross the mountains. "There are quite a few passes," she told us, "but they can be hard to find."

"Can we get the horses through?" Marie asked.

"Oh, I doubt that," Minna answered. "You'll be going up and down some rather steep paths. I don't think the horses can manage. Have you got any rope, by the way?"

Hans held up a few coils of rope he was carrying.

"Good," Minna said, "you may need that."

So we set out. We were down to seven people again, as Nasir was staying in the village. It felt almost as when we left The City. We were being waved off by a large group of people, we had a wagon (well, not really, we had a cart, but

it was close enough), and we were walking south across a grassy plain.

The weather was not as sunny and it had been the past few weeks. There were a few clouds in the sky, and we got an occasional shower. Nasir had taught us something about enjoying all of God's weather, and as long as the rain wasn't too heavy, it was indeed quite pleasant and refreshing.

The journey to the southern mountains took us just over two weeks. And on the evening of the 70th day since our departure from The City, with 2,560 kilometers behind us, we reached the foot of the mountains.

They were more imposing than we'd expected. We had supper there at the southernmost edge of the plain, and we had some tough decisions to make.

"There's no way the horses can come with us," Marie said. "No way! We'll have to leave them here and meet them again on the way back."

"Will they stay here?" Kate asked. "It may be a month before we return."

"They will stay if I ask them to," Marie said. "Unless they forget," she added, grinning. "They're very loyal, but after a few weeks they're apt to forget what I asked them to do."

"So what'll happen?"

"They'll start making their way back. It's quite likely that they'll go back to the village and stay there. Whatever happens, they'll be all right. God takes care of them."

"So we need to restrict ourselves to what we can carry," Kate continued. "We'll have to rely on finding food and wa-

ter, so we'll just take one container for water. I've got forty-four markers left; I'll take half of them, so I'll have to place them twenty kilometers apart instead of ten. We need the odometer and Greg's astrolabe and clock for observations, we need paper for making notes, and we need rope and what else Hans feels may come in handy on the way. We'll leave the tents and the blankets here. Agreed?"

We nodded. If it was going to rain, we'd really have to get into Nasir's frame of mind.

That night we slept in the tents for the last time.

I woke up early, before sunrise. I couldn't sleep anymore, so I got up and went for a walk while the others were still asleep.

I walked east, toward the place where an orange-red sky heralded the imminent arrival of the sun. I sat down on the ground and looked around me.

A feeling of complete peace enveloped me as I sat there. I looked at the plain we were about to leave, at the mountains we were about to cross, and at the colorful sky. I was more than two thousand kilometers from our house, and yet, I felt strangely at home.

Then I realized that this *was* my home. The entire earth—the entire universe, Kate would probably say—is our home, because home is where God is. The peace that I was feeling was the peace that comes from knowing that everything is all right. You're safe, you're in good hands, all you need to do is enjoy it.

Then I noticed that God was there with me. I looked at

him, thankful. We talked for some minutes about nature, the sunrise, my friends. I told him how I was feeling and how happy I was to be here. As we talked, the sun rose and a symphony of green nuances smiled at me from the ground around me.

I heard hooves behind me and turned around. I saw Marie on the back of the brown horse galloping towards me. I stood up. A few seconds later the horse stopped next to me.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you," she said.

"That doesn't matter," I answered. "I was enjoying the scenery and having a talk with God."

"Yeah, I saw that."

"You're taking one last ride on the horses?"

"Yes. I won't be seeing them for a while now. I don't know how long. So we need to have some fun together before we part."

"How come you have this bond with horses?"

"I don't know." She was quiet for a time, thinking. "To me the greater mystery is why others don't. People say I can talk with horses, and in a way that's true; but not really, of course."

"What do you mean?"

"Horses don't talk, obviously. But they have body language, and I just have a knack for interpreting that language. If they move their ears in a certain way, I can tell if they're relaxed or alert. If they stand in a certain way, I can tell if they're tired or eager to go. To me it's as plain as if they were talking."

"And do they understand what you tell them?"

She smiled enigmatically.

"Well, do they?" I prompted.

"Yes and no."

"That's a nice, unambiguous answer," I said with a grin.

"I know. The truth is that I don't know how to answer. Yes, they understand simple instructions such as 'go' or 'wait.' But this morning I'm going to tell them to stay here in this area and wait for our return. I know they'll understand what I mean, but I don't think they understand the words I'll be telling them. It's as if they have an instinctive sense of what it is I want them to do."

"That sounds pretty mysterious."

"Yeah. Instinct is pretty mysterious, isn't it. Perhaps it's just a simple matter of God intervening."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I think it's obvious that God has given me a task that involves 'communicating' with horses. Perhaps, when I tell the horses to stay, God interprets my words for them and plants in them a desire to stay."

"Do horses know God?" I asked.

Marie looked taken aback. "Of course, they do," she exclaimed. "How could they not? He's here all the time."

I nodded, realizing that Marie had an insight into animals that I had missed.

"Well, I'd better get going," Marie said. "This fella tells me he wants to run."

"Enjoy yourselves," I shouted as they set off at breakneck speed.

* * *

After breakfast, Marie stood for a long time talking to the horses, apparently trying to make them understand that they were expected to stay here.

Kate spent some time walking a couple of kilometers east and west along the mountain range. "I think there may be a usable pass a few hundred meters west of here," she said when she returned. It's a pretty steep climb, but it appears to level out after a while.

We got ready, filled our backpacks, and decided who was to carry what. Then we set out.

The path Kate had found was not too bad. It was steep, but there were plenty of places where we could get a good foothold, and we ascended faster than we'd hoped.

After a climb of about half an hour the path leveled out and continued through the mountain range. I turned around to get last glimpse of the plain before we disappeared between the mountains. I looked down at our last campsite and exclaimed, "Marie! Look at the horses."

She turned and looked down. The two horses had left the campsite. The cart and the stuff we'd left behind were lying neatly together, but the horses were slowly walking east. They were not in a hurry, but they looked quite purposeful.

"That's strange," Marie said. "I wasn't sure they would stay for a month, but we haven't even been gone for an hour, and now they're leaving."

"Do you want to go back down?" Kate asked.

"No." Marie shook her head. "They'll be all right. I only wonder why."

We continued along on our way. The path was becoming more and more level and we made good progress. But the mountains were barren, and although Rediat was constantly looking for edible plants, he didn't find much.

For lunch we took out some fruit from our backpacks, but it was evident that we should not expect a more Rediat-like meal before we'd descended from the mountains again.

In the early afternoon we ran into problems. The path ended abruptly. The mountain fell down almost vertically into a narrow gorge.

"We have to cross here," Kate said. "Can you help us, Hans?"

Hans stood and looked. The gorge was about eight meters wide. Far too wide for anyone to jump, but on the other side the ground seemed to be quite level, and if we could only cross the gorge we should be able to proceed without too much trouble.

"There's a small bush over there," Hans said and pointed. "If we could throw a rope over there around the bush, I could cross by hand, and I could set up a makeshift bridge out of three ropes."

He took the ropes from his back and looked at them. Then he took one end and tied into a lasso.

"Has any of you ever thrown a lasso?" He asked. We all shook our heads.

"Okay, I'll try then. Hold this end," he said to me.

Hans took the loop end of the lasso and threw it out over the gorge. It made it about halfway across before it fell down. I pulled it up.

"I think you have to make the loop rotate to stabilize it," Marie suggested.

Hans tried several times, but after more than twenty attempts he gave up. "We need something that can serve as an anchor. What have we got?" He rummaged through our equipment, then shook his head.

"Kate, would you be willing to sacrifice a few of your markers?" he asked. "I could tie them together to make an anchor."

"Go ahead," she said, and Hans got to work, cutting a couple of markers and tying them together as a anchor-like object, which he attached to the end of his rope.

"All right, here goes," he said, swinging the rope with the anchor above his head. On the fifth attempt, the anchor caught on the bush. Hans tightened the rope and tried it. "Seems okay," he announced.

He tied the other end of the rope to a rock on our side of the gorge. Then he took two more ropes and fastened one end of each to other rocks.

"Now, I'm going to cross the gorge by hand," he said. "When I reach the other end, I'll attach the two other ropes, and you should be able to cross by walking on one rope and holding on to the two others."

"That sounds difficult," I said.

"It should be all right." Hans tied the two loose ends of rope around his waist, grabbed onto the rope spanning the gorge and lowered himself into the void.

"Careful," we said as one.

Slowly, slowly he moved first one hand then the other then the first again as he made his way across the gorge.

The bush on the other side was not big, and when Hans was halfway across it became clear that it would snap at any moment. "Hurry, Hans," some of us shouted. "Come back quickly," others suggested.

Then two things happened in quick succession. First the bush snapped and Hans started falling down into the gorge. Then there was a whooshing sound, a flutter of invisible wings, and Hans was lifted up and placed on the ledge on the other side of the gorge.

"Are you okay?" the angel asked as it materialized next to Hans.

"Yes, thank you!" he answered out of breath. "I suppose you were watching us closely here."

"I've been watching you closely ever since you left The City," the angel replied. "But this was the most difficult thing you have done so far. Now, if you tie the ropes to these rocks, your friends should be able to cross with little difficulty."

"Thank you," Hans said again as the angel disappeared before our eyes.

So we crossed. It was difficult, but we managed. When we got to the other side, we sat down to catch our breath.

"This is what I never learn to understand," Hans said. "The angel has been with us all the time. He's clearly protecting us against harm, so we're never in any danger. But you still had to cross the gorge yourselves. He didn't lift you over, although it would have been easy for him to do so. Why didn't he?"

"Because we could do it ourselves," Anna replied. "This is what's so marvelous about the relationship between God

and us. God could easily do everything for us, but is that really what we want? Do we want to just lean back and let God bring us food and drink while we do nothing all day? We're active creatures. We like doing things. When God wants us to move from A to B, he doesn't pick us up and move us, he tells us to go to B and expects us to use our own legs."

Greg nodded. "We've been given faculties—both mental and physical—in order to use them. God will always protect us and rescue us if we're in real danger. No harm will come to anybody. But things we can do ourselves, we should do ourselves. For our own sake."

While we were talking, Rediat manage to light a small fire. "I think we could all do with a cup of tea," he announced. We smiled gratefully as he passed full cups around.

After a while, Anna resumed the conversation: "I think that's also the reason why God so rarely answers questions," she said. "If we can find the answer for ourselves, we should do so. He's given us a brain for a reason."

"I'm glad he's watching out for us, though," Hans said. "Especially today," he added with a wry grin.

"Angel Gorge!" Kate suddenly exclaimed and pulled out the map she was working on.

"Beg your pardon?" Greg said.

"It has always been an explorer's privilege to name new places. So far, we've only traveled through areas where other people have gone before us. But here...We're probably the first people to pass through here, so I propose we name this place *Angel Gorge*."

The were shouts of "hear, hear" all around.

“But, surely, people have been this far south before,” I objected.

“Yes, Nasir said as much,” Kate replied, “but I doubt they have come through this pass and crossed this gorge.”

After a while, Greg said, “It’s getting late. The sun will set in an hour or so. I suggest we spend the night here. There’s plenty of room for us to sleep on this ledge.”

Rediat already had a small fire going, he added some more wood and managed to provide a simple but pleasant evening meal.

Chapter 16

The following two days we struggled to cross the mountain range. We climbed and descended and climbed again. We were only making slow progress, and Kate estimated that we rarely covered more than ten kilometers in a day.

There were a few waterfalls and streams where we could replenish our water supply, and Rediat did manage to find a few edible plants, but in general the diet was simple and our advance was slow and difficult.

But around noon on the fourth day, Marie cried out, “I see a forest.” Shortly after, we started the descent into the valley behind the mountains.

Compared to our days in the mountains, the valley was pure luxury. It was a dense forest, so there wasn’t much sunlight on the ground, but there were plenty of plants and animals, and that evening Rediat once more managed a magnificent meal.

“I’ve found a couple of ‘new’ plants as Nasir called them,” he explained. “They’re herbs I’ve never seen before, but I think you’ll like them.” We did.

* * *

I think it's safe to say that by now we were slowly growing tired of the endless walking. Kate was keen on reaching the 3,000 kilometer mark, and after a week of walking through the forest she was able to plant the 2,860 kilometer marker at the southern edge of the forest at a place where the trees gave way to a meadow with a river flowing quietly through it.

"Congratulations," she said that evening. "We are now officially pioneers! If Nasir was correct, no one has ever been this far south before."

In a way that was an amazing feeling, and Kate was delighted. She was constantly drawing maps of where we went, and the idea that we were the first ones to come this far south made her ecstatic. But the rest of us were beginning to think about our cozy homes in The City, and I caught myself daydreaming about Barbara's honey flavored rye bread.

As we lay down to sleep that evening, I asked Kate, "We'll reach the 3,000 kilometer mark in a few days. Are we turning back then?"

"Yes, I think it's about time," she answered. "I just need Greg to make one final measurement, and 3,000 is such a nice round number."

"That's good. I'm ready to go home."

"We all are," she admitted.

"I feel a bit sorry for Anna," I said. "We've seen no trace of a lion."

“Well, it was a long shot, I guess.”

The following days we walked along the river that flowed across the meadow. We had the river on our left hand, and Kate remarked, “Have you noticed something odd about this river?”

“No, I can’t say that I have,” I replied.

“It’s flowing north.”

“So?”

“Rivers normally flow away from mountains, this one is flowing towards the mountains.”

As we walked on, Kate continued to plant her markers, and as she was pressing the marker labeled “2,900 km” into the ground, Anna was scanning the area through the binoculars.

“Hm,” she said and walked over to Kate. “You remember how you said that we were the first people here?”

“Yes,” Kate looked at her quizzically.

“Well, it appears that we aren’t. Take a look.” She handed Kate the binoculars and pointed down the river. “Look on the right bank of the river. There’s a tall palm tree.”

Kate looked and then let out an astonished gasp. “There’s someone sitting there, under the tree!”

We all took turns with the binoculars. It was a bit hard to see, since the tree was still quite a distance away, but it definitely looked as if someone was sitting calmly under the palm tree.

We hurried along, eager to reach the tree before the mysterious person got up and left. When we were about a hun-

dred meters away from the tree, Anna looked through the binoculars again. "It's Jesus!" she exclaimed.

And it was. We ran the last stretch to the tree, and as we approached, Jesus got to his feet to embrace us all as we arrived.

"It's great to see you all," he said.

"What are you doing here, Lord?" Kate asked.

"I need to talk to you," he answered. "You have come to the end of your journey, and I need you to return."

He looked at each of us in turn. "You're tired of the journey, but I still have one more job for you."

"What is it, Lord?" Greg asked. But Jesus didn't answer straight away.

"Kate, I believe you have the information you need by now. Right?" he said.

"Yes, Lord. I just need Greg to make the final observations with his astrolabe, then I'm finished. We haven't quite reached 3,000 kilometers yet, but that's unimportant. We have what we came for."

"And you've also got the answer to your concern about overpopulation?"

"Yes, I believe I have," she said in a satisfied tone.

"And you, Greg," Jesus continued, "I believe you have the answer to your problem with the speed of light?"

"I have?" Greg was surprised.

"Yes. Think about it. What is the formula for the orbital period of a planet?"

"Er...Something times the square root of the distance cubed, divided by something," Greg answered looking bewildered.

"Well there you have it," Jesus answered. Did I spot a teasing glint in his eye?

He turned to Kate again. "Make your final measurements tonight," he said. "Have a good night's sleep, then follow the river back in that direction." He pointed towards the north-east, the direction in which the river was flowing.

"But that's not the way we came," she objected.

"I know that, but it's the way I want you to return. If you walk north-east along the river until you get to the mountain range, you'll find a pass across the mountains which is much easier than the one you used coming here. When you've crossed the mountains you'll be close to the point where the southern mountain range meets the eastern mountains. Your horses will meet you there."

"So it was you..." Marie started.

Jesus nodded. "They're fine. They have plenty to eat, and they're waiting for you there."

"Which way should we go once we've crossed the mountains?" Kate asked. "What is it you want us to do?"

"You'll find out in due time. Just cross the mountains where I tell you and continue your way north from there."

"Jesus, will you have supper with us tonight?" Rediat asked practically.

"I'd be delighted," the Lord answered.

After supper, when the sun had gone down and the stars came out, Jesus left us. Greg got out his astrolabe and I helped him with his calculations.

"So what's the verdict, Greg?" Kate asked.

“We’ve traveled just under three degrees of latitude. You have measured this to be 2,907 kilometers. So I estimate the distance from the equator to the north pole to be somewhere between 85,000 and 105,000 kilometers. On the old earth, that number was about 10,000 kilometers.”

“Okay, thank you, Greg.” Kate turned to me. “Nick, remember I told you I needed you to calculate some roots?”

“Yes.”

“If the distance from the south point of the yoffers’ forest to Minna’s village grew from 900 to 940 kilometers in the course of twenty years, what’s the annual growth?”

“That would be the 20th root of 940 divided by 900,” I answered.

“You know what to do,” she said with an endearing smile that would have melted my heart if she hadn’t already melted it years ago.

So I got down to some calculations by the faint light from our bonfire. After a few minutes I announced, “0.22 percent per year.”

“And how much does the earth grow in 200 years?”

I crunched some more numbers. “Just over 50 percent,” I replied.

Kate looked puzzled and disappointed. “That’s not enough!” she exclaimed. “If the population doubles every 200 years, the size of the earth should double as well if there is to be room for everybody.”

“That’s not true, my dear,” I replied. “The numbers I’ve been giving are for distances, not areas. Every time a distance is multiplied by two, a corresponding area is multiplied by four. You have to square the numbers.”

"Of course!" she exclaimed. "So how much does the area of the earth grow in 200 years?"

"By almost 140 percent. In other words: it more than doubles."

"Yes!" Kate shouted. "We don't need to build starships before the earth runs out of space, because the earth is growing fast enough to accommodate us all."

"But if the earth is growing, are we growing with it?" Rediat asked.

"No. If we were, we wouldn't notice its growth," Kate replied. "The earth is growing, we're not growing..."

She paused, lost in thoughts. "I wonder what else is growing," she said then.

"Of course!" Greg shouted. "Nick, paper, paper, quickly!"

I handed him some sheets of paper, but the fire was almost extinguished by now, and it was nearly impossible for him to see anything.

"You'll have to wait until tomorrow," I said.

Greg merely grunted, but I was right, of course. There was no moon that night, and it would be silly to light another fire to satisfy Greg's impatience, so he'd just have to wait until the sun came up in the morning.

Chapter 17

We woke the next morning with a new sense of anticipation. We were heading home, and on the way Jesus had a mysterious job for us to do. What could be more exciting?

While Rediat was preparing breakfast, Greg sat down with paper and pencil, and soon he was covering the sheets with formulas. Occasionally, he'd ask me to confirm a derivation.

"The angular velocity of a motion is two times pi divided by the rotation period, right?" he would say.

"That's correct," I would answer.

"What language are they speaking?" Anna asked Kate.

"Math," Kate answered.

"Is that like speaking in tongues on the old earth?"

"No. Speaking in tongues sometimes made sense."

Finally, after fifteen minutes of hard work, Greg shouted, "I've got it!"

"What?" we asked.

"The formula Jesus was talking about," Greg said. "Nick, you remember back in our home when I told you about my measurements of the speed of light?"

“Sure.”

“I said my measurements either indicated that the solar system was ten times larger than the old one or that the speed of light was one tenth the old one. But I also said that the speed of light appeared to be slowing down.”

“Yes...”

“And then you suggested that perhaps it was not the speed of light slowing down but the solar system growing.”

“Yes, but you said that if the planets were getting further away from the sun, they would also be slowing down because the gravity from the sun would be smaller at larger distances.”

“Yes,” Greg said, “but that’s not true.”

“It isn’t?”

“No, that was the formula Jesus was talking about. The formula that governs the time it takes a planet to orbit the sun. If the planet is moved further from the sun, its years will become longer; but if the sun is also growing at the same rate and becoming correspondingly heavier, there would be no change.”

I saw what he was getting at. “So you’re saying that if the entire solar system, plus the sun, plus all the planets, plus all the moons are growing at the same rate, there would be no change to their motion?”

“Exactly! At least not before Einstein kicks in as we speed up, but it’ll be several centuries before that is measurable.”

“And we won’t be hitting the moon either,” Kate said, thinking about Boutros’ question in the village.

“Correct, because it is moving away from the earth as the earth grows,” Greg said.

"So it appears God has everything under control after all," Marie put in. "That's surprising," she added with a wry smile.

"And we won't have to travel to the stars, Kate," I said.

She thought for a while. "Yes, we do," she answered. "Not because of overpopulation, but because we're human and we like to explore. It's in our nature, thank God. But we don't have a train to catch, and I'm happy for that."

"There's one more reason to be happy," Rediat put in.

"What's that?"

"Breakfast is ready!" he announced.

After breakfast we gathered our things. Kate pointed to the north east along the river. "Let's go," she said, and we went.

As we were walking, I asked Greg, "So God is making the universe grow so that there'll always be room for us, no matter what happens?"

"It appears so," he answered.

"Does that bother you?"

"Bother me? Why should it bother me?"

"A growing earth defies the laws of nature."

He shrugged. "It doesn't defy the laws of God."

"But there are other problems, aren't there? As the sun and the planets grow heavier and heavier, they will eventually collapse under their own weight and turn into black holes, right?"

"You really think that's a problem?" he asked.

“No, I’m sure God will prevent that from happening, but doesn’t it bother you that God has to constantly circumvent the laws of nature like that?”

“You’re looking at this the wrong way, Nick. What’s two plus two?”

“Four,” I answered hesitatingly, suddenly finding myself at the other end of the conversation I had had with Barbara some months ago.

“Why is it four? Because God made it so, or because that’s just the way it is and he can’t change it?”

“Because he made it so, I think.”

“I agree. God can change the laws of nature if he wants to. If one day he needs two plus two to be five, he can handle that. But somehow I don’t think that’s likely.” He smiled.

In the north-easterly direction we were now following, the animal life on the meadow was richer than what we’d seen on the way south. We even spotted a pair of apatosauruses grazing peacefully in the distance, occasionally stretching their beautiful long necks upwards as they surveyed the area. They’re quite rare, and Anna spent some time studying them through the binoculars.

“Did you know that we have no idea how these creatures breathe?” she asked us. “It’s assumed that they weigh about twenty or thirty tons. Because of their size and the length of their neck, it’s something of a mystery how they manage to get enough air in and out of their body at each breath.”

“There’s no way to tell?” Kate asked.

“Not really. We still don’t have X-ray equipment, and anyway, it would be pretty hard to get one of these giants behind an X-ray screen.” She laughed. “If this had been the old earth, we’d find a dead specimen and cut it open; but, fortunately, that’s not an option here.”

“Also, if this had been the old earth, they would all have been extinct,” Kate said dryly.

“Good point,” Anna admitted.

We were still pulling the odometer, and Kate was busy mapping as we went. She was happy to get a chance to see a part of the area that she hadn’t expected us to visit. She no longer planted markers, though.

We reached the dense forest four days after turning around. The river still ran in a north-easterly direction and we continued following it. After eleven days of walking, we reached the mountain range.

Kate had wondered why the river was flowing towards the mountain instead of away from it, but now we could see that the water flowed into an opening at the foot of the mountains. It was impossible for us to follow the river underground, so we had to climb.

Jesus had been right, of course. The mountains were much easier to cross at this point. There was a stony path leading up into a fairly wide pass between two peaks. It was still a tiring ascent, and we decided to set up camp for the night when we reached the top.

From the pass we could see far both north and south. The forest stretched out behind us, and to the north we

could see the long eastern mountain range. It was quite different from the mountains we'd been crossing. The mountains there were higher, and we could even see snow on the top of a few of the peaks.

This was a big thing for all of us. It never snows in The City. The days are warm, the nights pleasantly mild. None of us had seen snow since the old earth, and Rediat had never, ever seen snow in his short old earth life. God's Mountain in The City is undoubtedly higher than any of these mountains, but maybe because it's God's throne, or maybe because of the light that emanates from it, we've never seen snow on that mountain.

A number of skiing enthusiasts had ventured some distance north of The City and found snow in a few places, but none of us had gone there.

We took turns looking through the binoculars. "You know," Marie said. "I wouldn't mind a quick snowball fight. We didn't get much snow where we lived, but when it happened, I could beat Greg and a couple of his friends single-handedly."

"You looked so beautiful covered in snow," Greg said dreamily.

"Hey! I always looked beautiful," Marie retorted.

"You still do," Greg replied. Marie ran over to him and kissed him.

The night was quiet in the mountains. There were few animals there, even the birds were scarce. There was a wind brewing and since we didn't have the blankets anymore, we kept the fire lit through the night to keep us warm.

When morning came, the sky was overcast and the wind was blowing through the pass. We decided to try to reach the foot of the mountains before nightfall.

The descent from the mountains went without problems, and as we neared the ground, Marie cried out, "Look, the horses!"

And there they were. She got the binoculars and looked at them. They were standing with their heads raised, gazing up towards us as if they expected something interesting to come from our direction.

When we were almost down on the grassy plain again, they neighed loudly and came galloping towards us. They recognized Marie and came over to her to be patted and stroked and caressed.

We looked around us. We were standing in what seemed like a corner of the plain. The southern and eastern mountain ranges met at almost a right angle where we'd come down, and the vast grassy plain stretched towards the north and the west from where we stood.

On the southern side of the mountains, we'd seen the river disappear underground, and here it was again, emerging from the foot of the mountain and winding its way north along the eastern mountain range. It was wide and shallow here and appeared to be easy to cross.

The sun had gone down, the sky was still cloudy so it was getting quite dark, but we felt the wind less here because we were sheltered by the mountains. We still didn't have our blankets, of course—we left them in the cart we abandoned

many kilometers to the west—but the overcast sky meant that the night was not going to be cold.

Rediat went looking for food and the rest of us made a fire and sat down to rest our weary legs after the descent.

“What do you think Jesus has in mind for us?” Greg asked as we ate.

“I have no idea,” Anna replied. “Could be anything.”

“He specifically wanted us to come here,” Kate said. “We’re supposed to head north from here.”

“How far east have we gone?” I asked.

“I think we’re about 300 kilometers east of where we crossed the mountains on our way south. If we go straight north from here, we’ll end up well east of the eastern wall of The City.”

“What about the cart and the things we left in it?” I wondered.

Kate shrugged. “We can’t fetch it now. It’ll have to wait.”

Rediat changed the subject. “What do you think the weather’s going to be like tomorrow? It looks as if it might rain.”

Kate nodded. “We’ll see,” she said.

It did indeed look as if it might rain when we woke up the next morning. The sky was dark, and the wind was picking up. Marie took both horses out for a ride north, and when she returned she said, “I think we should walk on the east side of the river. As far as I can see, it should be fairly easy to walk with the river on our left and the mountains on our

right. Also the mountains will provide some shelter from the wind.”

We packed our things. It was nice to have the horses again so that they could carry some of the load. We'd been sleeping on the western bank of the river, but now we waded across it and headed north.

It was almost noon when we felt the first few raindrops. We thought about Nasir and shrugged, but as the day went on, the rain became heavier and soon it was pouring down. By late afternoon, the wind had become a storm and we decided that regardless of what Nasir might have thought, we all wanted shelter.

A couple of lightnings flashed across the sky, and although we were now completely soaked, we couldn't help admiring the display.

“We should seek cover,” Kate said, scanning the area around us through the binoculars. But it was hard for her to see anything because of the darkness and the constantly falling rain.

There was another flash of lightning and Kate exclaimed, “Hey!”

“What?” Anna asked.

“I think I saw someone.”

We waited. After a minute or so another flash lit up the area. “Yes, there's definitely someone standing over there,” Kate said pointing to the foot of the mountains. “He's waving at us.”

“Who might that be?” Greg asked. “Could it be the hermit that Nasir was talking about?”

“Who knows,” Kate answered. “Let's go and find out.”

We hurried in the direction she'd pointed. After a couple of minutes we could all discern a figure when a flash of lightning crossed the sky. He was definitely waving at us, beckoning us to come.

When we reached him, he wasted no time on pleasantries but simply said, "This way," and walked ahead of us to the mountain side.

He took us behind an outcropping into a corner between some huge rocks, and there we discovered an opening into a tunnel or a cave. The opening was less than two meters high, and some of us had to duck as we walked in. Marie was walking with the horses leading them inside too.

Once inside, we saw that we were standing in a tunnel. The ceiling was higher here, and we could easily walk. Our guide grabbed a lit torch that was hanging on the wall and walked ahead of us further into the mountain.

After about ten minutes, the tunnel opened up into a large cave. There was a fire on the ground and we could see the smoke rising up to invisible vents above us.

"Have a seat," our guide said, "and warm yourselves by the fire. I'll get us something to eat."

He left, and we sat down and let the fire warm and dry us. After a while our guide returned with carrots, beets, and potatoes and a large pot full of water. Soon a soup was brewing over the fire.

I took a closer look at our host. He was a tall, lanky man with a dark complexion and long, black, curly hair. He had a long untidy beard that looked as if it hadn't been cut or combed for months. His eyes were brown and sparkling.

“I’m so glad you came,” he said at last. “I expected that someone would come soon.”

“I’m sorry,” Greg said, “but who *are* you?”

“Oh, forgive me, I’ve been living on my own for so long I forget how to behave. I’m Japheth, son of Noah.”

Chapter 18

“*The* Japheth, son of *the* Noah, the guy with the ark?” I asked.

“That’s me,” our host replied.

“But...what are you doing here?”

“It’s a long story, and I need to show you something first. Only...as long as it rains, you can’t really see it.”

He fell silent, thinking.

“Let’s eat the soup,” he said at last. “Then you can have a good night’s rest here, and we’ll talk in the morning.” With that, Japheth fell silent again. He ate his soup without another word, and the rest of us could only do the same.

After we’d eaten, Japheth got to his feet. “I wish you a good night,” he said. He grabbed the torch and was about to leave us when Marie stopped him.

“Our horses are hungry,” she said. The horses had been standing quietly by themselves while we had eaten.

“Oh,” Japheth replied. “Well, let me take them with me. There’s plenty of grass on the other side. You’ll see them tomorrow.”

Marie spoke a few words to the horses, pointed at Japheth, and they followed him as he was leaving the cave by a tunnel opposite the one we'd entered through. At the last moment, as if he remembered something pleasant, he turned his head and said, "I'll see you tomorrow."

We sat staring at one another. The fire was still burning, but it was the only source of light. We had to prepare for a night in complete darkness.

"What just happened?" I asked confused.

"I don't quite know," Kate answered. "But I think we'd better find a place to sleep before the fire dies out."

We made ourselves comfortable on the ground. It was a bit hard to lie on, but we'd slept on hard ground before when we crossed the mountains.

"I do hope there'll be light here in the morning," Greg said. "It's going to be awkward getting up in total darkness."

"I think there may be some light," Kate answered. "The smoke from the fire is getting out somewhere over our heads. There must be holes in the side of the mountains where the smoke can escape. And if smoke can get out, perhaps sunlight can get in. We'll see."

We sang an evening song together, praised God for where he'd led us, and thanked him for the mystery that lay before us.

I was awakened by a small animal sniffing at my face. I sat up, startled.

There was indeed some light in the cave. The sun must have risen outside, and light was filtering down through

several openings in the top of the cave. I looked closely at the animal that had woken me. That startled me again.

I hadn't see that kind of animal for more than five hundred years, but it was so obviously a lion's cub. It started sniffing my hand and then licked it. "Hey! Wake up, wake up, everybody!" I shouted.

The others sat up, and one by one they got a shock as they discovered the small animal that had joined us. Anna got up first and came over to the cub. She squatted in front of it and examined its face closely. The animal looked at her face with equal interest.

"This is definitely a lion," Anna announced. "Female. About six months old, I'd guess. Or that would have been my guess if I'd met this girl on the old earth. Here, I don't know."

"What *is* this place?" Kate asked.

"I think we're about to find out," Rediat said as Japheth entered the cave.

"Good morning, everyone," he said. "I see you've met the little lady here." He scratched the cub behind her ear. "She's very curious and ran ahead of me when I went into the tunnel this morning.

"I've brought you some breakfast," he added, and produced a plate with bread and butter and cheese.

We thanked him and gave thanks to God. We each took a slice of bread and looked expectantly at Japheth.

"Eat," he said, "then I'll take you to the valley. Er...by the way, what are your names?"

Clearly, Japheth wasn't the only one who'd forgotten how to behave. We each introduced ourselves, and Kate told him

about our expedition.

At the end she said, "We also hoped we might find out something about what became of the lions." She looked at the cub. "And now it appears that that might indeed happen." There was an unspoken question in her last statement, but Japheth didn't answer.

"Eat," he said again, "then I'll take you to the valley. It's stopped raining, and the valley is beautiful in the sunshine."

We finished our meal quickly. We stood up and told our host, "We're ready."

"Very well," he said. He got up. "Follow me, please."

He left the cave by the tunnel opposite the entrance we'd used the evening before. It was quite dark in places, and Japheth was not carrying a torch, but we could tell that he knew his way well, for he walked briskly without stopping or needing to orient himself. Following him was not always easy, so we quickly found out that we needed to hold hands as we walked through the dark tunnels.

Occasionally, sunlight would shine through openings in the roof, and we'd see Japheth walking in front of us through the stony passage. The small lion was walking beside him.

We'd walked for about half an hour when at last we saw light at the end of the tunnel, and a few moments later we stepped blinking out into the blazing sunlight.

We had walked all the way through the mountains and were now standing on a ledge ten or twenty meters above the ground, looking across a huge valley. There were mountains behind us and to the south, but towards the north and east, the valley stretched out beyond the horizon. There

were small trees, large trees, bushes, grass, brooks, and lakes everywhere we looked.

And there were lions. Hundreds of them, thousands, perhaps millions. The more we looked the more lions we spotted. Most were lying lazily on the ground or resting on a branch in a tree, others were walking around peacefully grazing.

There were males with huge manes, elegant females, frisky cubs playing with each other. The sea of animals lay before us like an orange-brown carpet. But the valley wasn't crowded, there was plenty of room for all the animals. We got the impression that we could travel for weeks here and only meet more lions.

We also spotted Marie's horses grazing near the foot of the mountains.

"Come," Japheth said and started walking down a narrow path. We followed him.

When we reached the ground, a large male lion sauntered over to Japheth and licked his hands. He patted it and led us further out among the animals.

"So now you have found the lions," he said. "They have rested here, receiving healing after the horrible injustice that was done to them."

He continued to walk, and everywhere lions came up to him to be scratched and caressed. A few of them approached us and allowed us to pat them gently, but many seemed slightly wary of us and kept a respectful distance.

"Their healing is almost over," Japheth said. "But they need you before they can leave here."

Japheth walked over to a huge oak tree and sat down under its branches. A young adult lioness lay down beside him, and he rested his arm on her back. "Sit down," he said, "and let me tell you my shameful story."

We sat down around him, and a few inquisitive young cubs approached us cautiously.

"When I was a young man on the old earth, I had a dear friend called Beslor," he began. "We'd known each other since childhood, and we were inseparable. Almost every day we spent several hours together. While we were boys we played together, and as we grew older we went hiking and hunting.

"One day we were traveling far from our home. We'd spent the night at the edge of a forest, and Beslor got up early, while I was still asleep. I was awakened by his cries. A lion had attacked him, and he was fighting for his life with his bare hands. We didn't know there were lions in that area, but we were obviously wrong.

"I grabbed a large knife and ran towards my friend to help him, but by the time I got there, the lion had bitten right through his neck, and his blood was gushing out. Not thinking, I threw myself at the lion and drew my knife into its shoulder. It bared its teeth at me and threw me away with one slap of its front paw. Then it bit hard into Beslor once more. His left arm fell off, but the lion dragged the rest of his body away to eat.

"I sat there for a long time in shock. At last I got up, fetched Beslor's arm, wrapped it in a blanket and started the long walk home. On my way back I vowed that I would dedicate my life to hunting and killing as many lions as possible.

“Over the next several years, I grieved for my friend and I spent months every year hunting lions and killing as many as I could, male and female, old and young. But each killing only made my hatred worse, and I nourished my grief for my friend in order that the grief in turn would nourish my hatred of the lions.”

Japheth sat silent, looking at the young lioness under his arm.

“Then one day my father came and announced that God had spoken to him,” he continued. “God was unhappy with the people of the earth and he was going to destroy them. Only my father and his family would survive. We were to build a giant ship and take animals of all kinds with us on board.

“We worked for years, and when the flood finally came, we were ready and we had the animals on board.

“Nobody liked it on the ark. It wasn’t the friendly, pleasant zoo you may have imagined. It was crammed and smelly; we spent all our waking hours feeding the animals and mucking out under them. Almost everybody was constantly seasick for the first several weeks—humans and animals alike. Not Ham’s wife though. She could eat and work while we were all nauseous and moaning. Poor woman. She had to work for all of us at times.

“One of my many tasks was to take care of the deck where the lion couple was. I don’t think that was a coincidence; I believe my father deliberately put me there. He knew about my hatred of the lions, of course, and I think he hoped that spending time with them would teach me that they are, in fact, amazing creatures. He was wrong.

“In the few hours I slept each night, I had frequent nightmares about them, and having to care for them only made me loathe them more.

“All the time we spent in the ark, God prevented the animals from harming us and one another. But for some reason he didn’t prevent us from harming the animals. Whenever I was with the lions I’d kick them hard to make them move; I’d push them with the sharp edge of my shovel when I was mucking out under them; when I fed them, I’d make sure they got less than what they needed. In short, I did my utmost to make them miserable.

“One day I hit the female several times so hard with a shovel, that I think something broke in her hind leg. She moaned terribly, and for a long time she could only stand on three legs.

“When at last the animals left the ark, she was still limping badly and the lions were both starving. I was glad to see them go.”

Japheth closed his eyes. Then he sighed. “Years passed. We were busy cultivating the ground, and there was little time for anything but taking care of our crops and our few domestic animals. I became a father and a grandfather, and in all those years I never saw a lion.

“Then one day I was walking with my grandson Riphath to some mountains a couple of days’ journey away. While we were on our way, we saw a flock of lions resting peacefully in the fields. As we came nearer, one of them got up and started limping away. I recognized it and its gait. It was the female lion from the ark. Still alive, but still limping from the beating I gave it.

“I was completely taken aback. Suddenly I realized the scope of my wickedness. This poor lioness had done me no wrong. For a year she’d depended on me and my care for her, and I’d starved her and beaten her and crippled her for life. God only knows what happened to her mate.

“I fell to the ground and wept like a child. Riphath stood next to me, not understanding what had happened and not knowing what to do. But I wept and wept and cried to God to forgive me.

“I begged of God that he would give me a chance to serve the lions that I might remedy, at least in part, the consequences of the monstrous acts I’d committed to this lioness, to her mate, and to the dozens of lions I’d killed in my youth.

“But God didn’t answer then.

“I died and was resurrected at the New Jerusalem. Less than a year after my resurrection, I talked with a man who’d lived on the old earth towards the end of its time. He told me about the fate of the lions. Do you know how they suffered towards the end? Do you know of the heinous acts committed against them?” Japheth was passionately raising his voice.

We nodded.

Japheth continued, “Then one day God’s son came to me and asked me if I was still willing to serve the lions. I said, ‘Yes, of course.’ He told me that the lions were safe in a valley far from The City. Being animals, they needed time to heal, and they could do with a shepherd to care for them and show them that humans were capable of love. Would I be that shepherd? he asked.

“Of course I would. Imagine, *I* was to demonstrate to

the lions that humans could love them! So he took me to this place. This valley was considerably smaller back then. It seems to have grown, I don't know why. The lions were all here. Separated from the people who'd tortured them. They needed time.

"At first they were reluctant to approach me, but now as you can see," he patted the lion lying under his arm, "we've become very good friends. I truly love them and they trust me.

"And now their time is approaching. It's been...How long?" he asked.

"About five hundred years," I answered.

"Five hundred years? It doesn't feel like that much. That's almost a lifetime back on the old earth!"

"Well, considerably more for most of us," I said.

"Is that so?" Japheth was silent for a few minutes, then he went on, "As I said, their time is approaching, their healing is almost complete. They're just about ready to be released into the world. The only thing still missing is for them to meet other humans and discover that every human can be trusted now. This is where you come in."

He looked around at us. "We need you to spend some weeks here with us. Travel around the valley and see the lions. They'll soon realize that you, like me, are not going to harm them. And then they'll be ready."

We looked at each other. "Of course," Kate said. "We'd love to."

* * *

And thus started a wonderful time for us. We traveled around the valley, one by one or two by two.

It turned out that it was bordered on all sides by mountains. There were almost no usable passes over the hills; the best way out and in were via a number of tunnels like the one by which we'd entered.

Wherever we went, we would sit down quietly. At first the lions would look at us cautiously from a distance, but after a hour or so, they would approach and allow us to pat them and stroke them, and thus we would gradually bond with more and more of them.

They're truly beautiful creatures. Elegant and majestic.

After two months we all gathered again near the cave where it all started.

"What are your plans now, Japheth?" Anna asked.

"The lions are ready now," he answered with confidence.

"How many are there, do you think?" Anna looked at all of us.

"Several million," Greg answered.

"They should be released gradually," Japheth said. "It would not do to send a flock of several million animals out all at once. It would be chaos where they went."

We nodded.

"I suggest," Japheth continued, "that you take a flock of a couple of hundred animals with you and head for your home in The City. Tell everybody you meet about this place, and ask people if they would be good enough to travel here."

"Good idea," Anna said. "And then you'll release a few lions with everybody who comes here?"

“Yes. People can lead them to places where they could live happily. I’ll also release a few lions every day. They don’t all need to be guided by humans. I’ll stay here until they’re all set free. A few of them may want to remain here, but that’s all right.”

“It’ll take years,” I said.

“That’s a good thing. I’ve been living on my own for five hundred years now. I need to get used to people as well. So it’ll be good if people came down here to see me. I’ll get used to them, and by the time the last lion is free, I’ll be ready to join the rest of the human race.” He smiled at the prospect.

“Do you miss it?” Marie asked.

“What, the human race? Yes, I do. I’m surprised that it’s been five hundred years already, but I do feel that I’m ready to meet my own kind again.”

Chapter 19

On the eve of our departure from the lions' valley, we hosted a banquet for Japheth.

While we'd been traveling throughout the valley, caring for the lions, we each took care of our food; and when we were together with Japheth, it was he who provided food. But now it was time to demonstrate what Rediat was capable of. He sent the six of us out searching for all kinds of plants: cabbage, lettuce, onions, berries, fruits, garlic, cap-sicum, figs, eggplant, cocoa beans, coffee beans, anything tasty, whether it be edible or drinkable. Then he asked to be left alone, got two fires going, and started preparing.

Needless to say, it was delicious. Japheth was overjoyed. I got the feeling that his diet these many years had been simple and uninteresting. He did, however, find a barrel of wine he'd grown.

The evening was wonderful. We talked and sang and laughed. It was well past midnight before we went to sleep.

* * *

When we got up the next morning, Japheth was already gathering a group of lions. In the end we counted 308 of them all together, mostly adults but about a quarter of them were cubs.

We led them slowly through the tunnel we'd used when we arrived. It took four hours to get them all out, but when we finally stood on the grassy plain again, we were happy and ready to go. Marie led her horses out as well; they had made some great friends among the lions, and a few of the lion cubs had bonded quite closely with the horses.

"Just head towards The City," Japheth said. "The lions will follow you."

And so they did. We waded across the river and started walking in a north-westerly direction.

"I want to head for Minna's village," Kate explained. "They need to see the lions, and they'll probably be happy to send some people to Japheth to get some more lions out."

So we went. Lions are normally lazy animals who like to spend hours lying on the ground basking in the sun. After they've become herbivore on the new earth, they need to eat much more to keep their system going, but they're still much less mobile than horses.

Therefore we had to walk slowly. Every couple of hours we had to stop and rest for half an hour, or the lions would be too tired to continue. Thus it took us four weeks to reach the village where Minna and Nasir lived.

Just like the first time we came there, the children of the village were the first ones to come running out to greet us. I recognized many of them from our last visit.

“God’s peace on you,” they shouted all at once, patting the horses. Then they noticed the lions who were slowly walking a couple of hundred meters behind us. Their jaws dropped. Then little Musad shouted excitedly, “Tigers!”

“No, Musad,” Paula said behind him. “Tigers have stripes.” Then she turned to us and asked cautiously, “Are they lions?”

“Yes, they are,” Kate answered.

“Wow!” she exclaimed, then she turned and ran back toward the houses. “They’ve found lions! They’ve found lions!” she shouted as she ran.

Soon dozens of people were coming out to see what the commotion was all about. They all stopped in their tracks as they saw the lions.

The animals had caught up with us now and were walking around among the villagers. Most of the people had been born on the new earth and had therefore never seen a lion before. There were drawings, of course, but it was not the same as seeing the creatures in real life. Seeing a lion for the first time after only hearing about them for hundreds of years must be a fantastic experience.

The dogs and cats of the village and the lions greeted each other with curiosity and sniffing and licking. One little dog tried to communicate with a lion cub by barking loudly, but the cub merely looked at the dog with an expression that seemed to say, “What *are* you talking about?”

More people came running from the fields, among them was Nathan, the boy who’d claimed to have seen a lion in the mountains. He was pointing wildly at one of the male lions and shouting, “That’s what I saw, that’s what I saw!”

We were surrounded by villagers greeting us and asking us all kinds of questions. After a while, Kate said in a loud voice, "Perhaps it would be better if we all gathered on the central square so we'd only need to tell you our story once." There were sounds of assent around us, but the questions didn't stop coming.

It took more than half an hour to get everybody together on the square. Somebody brought out a table for Kate to stand on, and she told our story.

She talked about our meeting with Jesus, our return route over the mountains, the rain, and meeting Japheth. When she talked about the hermit in the mountains, there were sounds of, "I thought so," around us. She talked about the valley of the lions, about their suffering and their healing.

"The lions are ready to live with us again," she said. "I know that Japheth will be very pleased if some of you would go to the mountains and help more lions find a place to live outside the valley."

At once several people volunteered, and Kate gave them details about how to find the way to the tunnel through the mountains.

We had supper with the villagers, but instead of a banquet in the square, we went out to the surrounding fields where the lions were relaxing after a long day's walk. We sat down on the ground among them, and had our supper there.

Shortly before the sun was setting, one of the villagers got up. "Just a second," he said and hurried over to a neighboring field. He returned a few minutes later with a cow.

"I've got to see this," he said and led the cow over to a group of lions who stood grazing a few meters away. The man stopped there, pointed to the grass, and said to the cow, "Eat!" The he took a few steps back and stood with a huge grin on his face as the lion and the cow ate grass side by side.

The man wiped a tear from his eyes and said, "I was born on the old earth. I used to love Isaiah's prophecy about the lion and the ox eating straw. I always imagined them grazing side by side...*And now I've seen it!*" He shouted the last words and flung his arms into the air. "I love you, Lord!" he cried.

We all fell silent. Then, in a low voice, someone started a quiet song of praise, and soon we all joined in.

After the singing, the man came over to where Kate and I were sitting and sat down next to us.

"God's peace on you," he said. "I never introduced myself. My name is Hermann."

"God's peace on you, Hermann. We're Kate and Nick."

"Thank you for finding the lions! It makes me so happy. While I was in prison, I thought about Isaiah's prophesy all the time. It helped keep me sane."

"You were in prison?" Kate asked.

"Yes." He paused. "Do you know about the second world war?"

"Yes, we were both born in the late 20th century."

"I see. Well then..."

He paused again. "I was in Dachau," he said. "Not the town, the concentration camp."

“Oh, that must have been horrible for you!” Kate exclaimed.

“I think you misunderstand me. I was a guard, not a prisoner.”

We fell silent.

“I was proud of my job, initially. I believed in Nazism, and I admired Hitler. I was convinced that keeping communists, Jews, gypsies, and other enemies of the state away from decent Germans was a noble thing to do.

“As the war went on, we started receiving POWs from Poland, the Balkans, and Russia. I tortured people. Frequently. We would tie a prisoner’s hands behind his back and then hoist him up into the air by a rope tied to his wrists. I didn’t enjoy doing it, but I believed it necessary.”

Kate and I still said nothing. Even though we’d been born twenty years after the war, knowledge of the horrors of the concentration camps had still been part of our cultural background.

“Dachau was also the place where the Nazis kept clergy that wouldn’t follow the party line. It was mainly Catholic priests, but there were a number of protestant pastors as well. There was one man, Gottlieb Münster, who made a big impression on me. He was always caring for the other prisoners, helping them, comforting them. He would talk to everybody about Jesus, even us guards. We all respected him. Normally, we regarded the prisoners as filth, but not this man.

“In April 1945 it was evident that the allied troops would soon reach Dachau. So we started destroying incriminat-

ing documents; and prisoners were sent away or killed. It became my job to shoot Gottlieb Münster.

“I went to his cell, dragged him outside, pointed my pistol at him...and then I started weeping. I stood for several minutes, holding the gun in my hand, trembling violently. Then I pointed the gun at my own head instead, about to shoot. ‘Stop!’ he shouted. ‘Killing yourself won’t save me, but Jesus can save you.’

“At that very moment, a grenade flew over the walls. The allied attack had begun, and we were all called upon to defend ourselves. But we quickly surrendered. I was arrested with all the other guards.

“Pastor Münster had survived, and he came to visit me in prison soon after my arrest. He gave me a Bible, and in the following months he frequently came to see me, but he never recuperated from his time in the camp, and he died in 1946. I was eventually sentenced to five years in prison for my crimes, a mere fraction of what I deserved.

“During one of his visits, Pastor Münster showed me Isaiah chapter 11 with its prophecies about the new earth. It spoke directly to me. I learned the entire chapter by heart in a matter of hours; *Löwen werden Stroh essen wie die Ochsen*, the German text said—‘lions will eat straw like the oxen’. There was something in those words that reminded me of Dachau. I was one of the lions, the prisoners were the oxen. In God’s world the lions would not attack the oxen but live peacefully with them.”

He wiped a couple of tears from his eyes.

“God has been so good to me. He’s forgiven me the unforgivable. And now I’ve seen the lion eat straw with the ox!

Well, cow, actually, but that's good enough for me."

Once again Kate and I spent the night in the wonderful bed in Musad's parents' house. This was our first night in a real bed for more than four months. We were very reluctant to get up in the morning.

But we did get up. After breakfast, Kate went to look for the carpenter who had lent us his cart. She explained where we'd left it. "I'm sorry we didn't bring it back to you," she said.

"That's no problem," the carpenter replied. "I'll ride there one of these days and bring it back. But what about the things you left in the cart?"

"Oh, you can keep them. It's mainly blankets and tents. We'll be all right."

After an emotional parting with the villagers, we continued on our way north. We hadn't gone far, though, before we realized that a few of the lions had decided not to follow us.

Anna went back to the village to find out what had happened while the rest of us waited with the horses. She returned some minutes later with a grin on her face.

"Do you remember the cow that grazed together with the lions yesterday?" she asked.

"Of course," we said.

"Well it turns out that that cow and a few of the lions have become good friends during the night. So twelve lions have apparently decided to stay near the village to be together with their new bovine friend." Anna laughed out

loud. “Who would have thought? Anyway, the villagers don’t mind, of course. Quite the contrary. Having a few lions around the place is a welcome change.”

We set out again, seven people, two horses, and 296 lions. But in the following weeks we would occasionally ‘lose’ a number of animals here and there. If a group of lions took a liking to a particular area, they would simply stop following us.

This was as it should be. Of course, the intention was not that every single lion from Japheth’s valley should come and live near The City. They should spread out over the earth, and this was already happening on a small scale.

The going was slow. Although we didn’t have a deadline, we were eager to get back to The City and tell everyone the wonderful news. It took us a little over a month to get from the village to the forest where we’d met Nasir.

We got the feeling that the lions found walking through the forest rather strange; they followed us faithfully, but not a single one of them decided to settle down there.

Every day on our journey through the woods, we noticed Anna looking left and right at regular intervals. Sometimes she would go over to a group of bushes to look behind them. It wasn’t hard to guess what she was looking for.

“You’re hoping to find some yoffers,” Marie said. It was a statement rather than a question.

“*Da*, I do,” Anna replied. “Honestly, I must admit that I’m hoping to find *the* yoffer.”

“Your old friend from the last time?”

Anna nodded. "I know it's unlikely."

She did find her yoffer, but not in the way she'd expected.

Every evening we tried to find a large clearing where we could sleep. The lions were reluctant to sleep on the floor where the forest was dense, so they preferred a clearing—or, as often as not, sleeping on a tree branch.

But there was one evening we'd been walking through dense forest for a few hours, and as the sun was setting, it became clear that we would not find a suitable clearing before it was dark. So we settled down between the trees. Rediat started preparing food; the lions had learned that that was a sign that we were going to spend the night here, so they wandered around looking for a place to sleep that wouldn't be too uncomfortable for them.

I woke in the middle of the night to hear a strange humming sound. I couldn't place it, so in the end I went back to sleep. In the morning, the sound was still there, and it seemed to be coming from several directions.

"What is that sound?" I asked as the others got up.

"Purring," Anna said, listening. "Some of the lions are purring."

We walked among the trees looking for the lions. Then I saw it. "Hey, Anna! Look here," I shouted. She came over to me.

Lying at my feet was a large lioness, and sitting on her shoulder was a yoffer, caressing her neck with its trunk and sometimes gently scratching her shoulder with its claws. She was obviously enjoying it, for she was purring quite loudly.

"Who would have guessed?" Anna exclaimed.

We continued to look among the trees, and we found four or five other yoffers quietly rubbing the neck or back of some very contented lions.

"Why in the world do they do that?" Anna asked.

Marie had joined us. "Do they need a reason?" she asked. "The lions clearly like it. The yoffers are showing God's love. Surely, that's reason enough."

"Point taken," Anna admitted. Then she put her hand on a lion's shoulder, right next to where a yoffer was sitting. "But I do think the yoffers get something out of it too," she said with a smile. "Feel here."

We took turns placing our hand where Anna had had hers. We could feel the vibration of the lion's purring.

"I think the yoffers simply enjoy the sensation of the purring," Anna said. "Symbiosis. You scratch my back, I scratch your back. Only in this case, it is almost to be taken literally."

Suddenly she gave a startled cry. Without her noticing it, a yoffer had run up to her from behind and now climbed her legs and back to come sit on her shoulder. Anna looked. "Hey! It's you," she said happily.

"You recognize it?" I asked surprised.

"*Da*. You see this pattern in the fur on its left shoulder? It's my old friend all right." Anna was euphoric.

For the rest of our journey through the forest, a group of about thirty yoffers followed us, sometimes riding on the backs of lions, sometime jumping from branch to branch in the trees. We had to get used to the sound of purring lions in the night.

We reached the northern edge the forest and once more a grassy plain stretched out before us.

“Look, there’s our wagon,” Greg exclaimed. We had emerged quite close to where we’d left it so many months ago, and it was nice to be able to unload our backpacks and all the things we’d been carrying.

Marie hitched up the horses to the wagon while the lions were pouring out of the forest, delighted to be in open grassland again.

But the yoffers wouldn’t follow us. Much as they enjoyed being with the lions, the forest was their natural home. They looked for a moment at their leonine friends, said “ooh, ooh” a few times, and then turned around and disappeared into the forest.

The lions looked at the yoffers vanishing among the trees, then turned their heads toward the open grasslands full of flowers and lakes. And so we continued our journey north.

“Who are these lions?” I asked one evening. We were sitting around the bonfire, again enjoying Rediat’s music on his re-found balalaika.

“What do you mean?” Greg asked.

“Well...not just these lions, animals in general. You and I lived on the old earth, we were resurrected on this earth. A large number of people from the old earth have not come here, and a large number of people have been born here. What’s the story with animals?”

"You mean, are these lions a resurrection of lions from the old earth?" Kate asked.

"Yes. Obviously, some of them have been born here, but what about the rest?"

"Since they needed healing, I think it's pretty clear that a fair number of them experienced the horrible poaching I told you about earlier," Anna said.

"Yes, and I've heard stories about people who have met a dog or a cat they had as a pet on the old earth," Marie said.

"So animals experienced salvation just like humans?" I went on.

"No, not *just like* humans," Kate said. "When Adam and Eve fell, they dragged the whole of creation with them in the fall, including all the animals. Similarly, when Christ conquered Satan, sin, and death, he rescued his creation too."

"Didn't Paul write about 'creation waiting to be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God'?" Anna asked. "Or something like that. I think that means that God had salvation in mind for animals as well."

"Yes, but 'creation' isn't just animals, is it?" I asked. "It's also plants and rocks and water and air. All of it. So are you saying that these oxygen molecules we're breathing now are *resurrected* oxygen molecules?"

"No, that doesn't make sense, does it?" Anna admitted.

"Ah, you stupid scientists," Marie exclaimed. "You want everything to be put on a single formula! Why would God be limited like that? A dog, a horse, a lion has a *memory*. It makes sense to say that this animal *remembers* its life on the old earth. A stone or a drop of water has no memory, so

it doesn't make sense to talk about it being resurrected. You can't tell one oxygen molecule from another. So what would it mean to say that a particular oxygen molecule here is *the same* as a particular oxygen molecule on the old earth?"

I said nothing.

"This world is the real world," Marie continued. "This is the world as God always wanted it. This is what he had in mind way back when he created the heaven and the earth. As the years here turn into centuries and millennia and trillions of years, the old earth becomes less and less important. Instead of talking about an old earth creature possibly having an existence here, it may be more accurate to talk about a new earth creature possibly having had an existence there. This is the *real* world, guys!"

"I'm not sure I follow you," I said. "The old earth will always remain important, because that's where Jesus died and rose again."

"I'll give you that," Marie said. "But sometimes we go on and on about the old earth as if it were somehow more real than this one. Look at this horse." Marie pointed to the gray horse grazing a few meters away. "Is this a resurrection of an old earth horse? I don't know. Does it matter? Not much. It's here! That's what matters. Yes, back on the old earth I would have looked at a horse and asked, 'Will I see him or her again?' And that was a relevant question then. But that's in the past. It's of no consequence anymore. What matters is that this horse is here now."

* * *

We reached Horace's and Ameqran's village about a week after leaving the forest. It was almost a replay of the events from Nasir's village in the south, and people were thrilled at the sight of the lions.

That evening, Ameqran wrote a letter for us to take back to his sister in the New Jerusalem. "I've written to Titrit that I plan to come to The City to celebrate Easter next year. I'd love to meet you all again," he said.

When we left the next morning, we were not surprised that a group of lions decided to stay near the village. As we'd seen in the last months, the lions were slowly scattering across the earth.

During the following days, we passed more and more farms, and finally one evening we reached Themba and Themba's home.

Themba the man was working in the field just south of their farm, and he caught sight of us from a distance. He strode towards us, his arms outstretched.

"Why, God's peace on all of you!" he exclaimed. "And you found the lions!" He let his gaze survey the flock of animals that followed. "I haven't seen a lion for centuries. This is amazing! But, please, please, come to our house. You're welcome to spend the night here."

We walked the short distance to their home. As we approached, Themba cried at the top of his voice, "Themba, come and see who's here!"

Themba the woman came out of the house with a baby in her arms, breastfeeding it as she walked towards us. "Welcome, welcome, God's peace on you," she greeted us. "Come inside and sit down. Hey, is that lions I see?"

"It is indeed," Kate said.

Themba and Themba walked around among the lions, studying them, marveling at their beauty. "Will the animals be okay here?" Themba the woman asked.

"Why, of course," Anna replied. "As long as they have grass and a place to lie down and relax, they'll be fine. We've come a long way today, and the lions are tired. They really need to nap."

"That's very nice. Well, come in." All the time, Themba had been holding her baby in her arms. Now she shifted it to the other breast. "Can I offer you something to drink?" she said.

"Themba, dear woman, sit and relax with your baby," Marie said. "I'll find some water for us in your kitchen."

"Oh, it's not inconvenient at all," Themba said. "I can easily manage. And anyway, we'll need to draw some water from the well outside. I don't think we have any in the kitchen right now."

She was unstoppable, and when finally we all had a glass of water in our hands, she started talking about supper. "You're staying the night, aren't you? You must have supper here."

"First, tell us about you baby," Kate said. She got up and went over to Themba to admire the little one. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"It's a girl. Her name is Mbali. It means 'flower.' "

"She's beautiful. How old is she?"

"Just one week, yesterday." Themba was beaming. "Do you want to hold her?"

"Oh, may I?"

“Of course.”

Little Mbali went from arm to arm among us. She was almost asleep now, her little hands clutched in small fists. She gave a short hiccup. Another wonderful person who would grow up without knowing worry or grief, pain or sin, hatred or selfishness. Mbali would grow up immersed in her parents’ and God’s love, and she wouldn’t know that anything else was possible. God is truly good to us.

Chapter 20

We spent a pleasant and peaceful night at Themba and Themba's farm. The next morning they sent us off with all their best wishes and invitations to return soon.

We had less than two days left of our journey and we were eager to get home. We spent one last night under the starry sky on the grassy mattress of the southern plains, and then we set out for the last few hours of walk back to The City.

When at last we rounded a hilltop and caught sight of the walls of the New Jerusalem, we'd been gone for almost nine months. We'd been looking forward to this moment, but still the well-known sight of the pearly gates, the golden city, the gems that decorated the foundations, and the dazzling mountain at the center were a totally overwhelming sight, and we knelt spontaneously and sang praises to God.

Nobody was expecting us, of course. We headed for the area outside the city wall where Marie, Greg, and Hans lived.

As we approached, the horses sped up when they recognized the place. Marie and Greg's home was empty, of course, but Hans ran over to his house where he could see Hoshi sitting in their orchard. She sprang up when she saw

him and ran to kiss and embrace him passionately.

"I think she's missed him, despite what he says," Kate whispered to me.

Hoshi and Hans walked over to us. There were about 150 lions left by now, and Hoshi looked at them, wide-eyed. Having been born on the new earth, she'd never seen lions in real life before. To her, they were almost as much a novelty as the yoffers had been to us.

She walked around, patting them, feeling the manes of the males, admiring their build, laughing at the playing cubs.

"Is it true that lions were called the 'king of the beasts' on the old earth?" she asked.

"Yes," Anna said. "They were a symbol of royalty. Many powerful men had lions in their coat of arms."

"Coat of arms? What's that?"

"A shield used by noblemen to represent their family and illustrate their power and strength," I said.

Hoshi didn't understand. "If the men were truly noble, why would they need to demonstrate power and strength?"

"A nobleman was not necessarily a noble man," I replied.

"Strange."

"Anyway," Anna put in. "The lion symbolized power and royalty. And, yes, it was called 'king of the beasts,' although that should not be taken literally. It simply meant that the lion is a majestic creature."

"It sure is," Hoshi said. She was still admiring the animals. "What will you do now?"

“Good question. What should we do now?” Anna asked looking at us in turn. “Except for Hoshi, nobody knows we’ve returned.”

“I’m sure someone will notice soon enough,” Kate said. “We’ve got 150 lions wandering around here. Somebody’s bound to notice.”

“Yes, but wouldn’t it be fun to make a show out of it?” Anna grinned. “Let’s go into The City.”

She went over to a large male lion and patted him on the back. “Come with me, big boy,” she said; she pulled gently at his mane and together they headed towards the city gate. Rediat, Kate and I, Marie and Greg, Hoshi and Hans walked behind them, and the remaining lions followed close behind us.

We managed to get all the way to Reuben’s gate before anybody saw us. Side by side Anna and the lion walked through the gate, and the busy sounds of The City stopped as if someone had turned a switch.

We walked down the streets of The City, eight people and 150 lions. As we walked, people moved to the side to let us through. Nobody said anything, they looked in silent awe.

Then, a little way further on, a girl shouted “*Lions!*”. She started running up the street ahead of us, shouting, “The lions are coming! The lions are coming!”

We walked all the way to a park that lies about half an hour from the gate and not far from Kate’s and my home. The park is an open lawn with a brook and some trees. There was plenty of room there for all of us, and we sat down to let people come and take a close look at the magnificent animals that had been gone for so many years.

We spent two hours in the park. The rumor about our arrival spread like wildfire, and more and more people crowded in on us. Many men and women from the old earth had stories about lions, and they came over to us to share them. There was Sancha, who used to work with lions in a zoo in Peru; there was Daniel, who had talked with Anna before our departure, and whose life had once been spared by lions that were supposed to eat him; there was Valentin, who'd been a lion poacher in the last, cruel years; there was Jack, who'd written children's books about Jesus in the shape of a lion; there was Thabo, who'd traveled through Africa with Anna, trying to save the lions.

At one time we spotted three people, two men and a woman, who were slowly approaching. When they reached us, they stopped, looked around and walked over to a large male lying about ten meters from where we were sitting.

"Is this the one?" one of the men asked.

"That's what God said," the woman answered. "See how its left ear has this white patch? That was the last thing I saw."

All three of them got down on their knees and embraced the lion, patted it, scratched its forehead.

After several minutes, one of the men got up and walked over to us. "God's peace on you, my name is Servius," he said. Pointing to the other man and the woman, he added, "And these are my parents, Lucilia and Marcus." The couple was still bonding with the lion.

"God's peace on you, Servius," Kate said. "Is there a story behind this?"

"Yes, there is," Servius answered. "That lion killed them."

My parents were Christians in Rome about a hundred years after Jesus lived. They were thrown to the lions for their faith. It was a horrible death. I was only a small boy, and I was spared. This morning, God told my parents how they could find the lion that killed them; so they came here, and they found him." He pointed to his parents, who were getting up and coming over to us.

We greeted them. "Thank you for bringing the lions here," Marcus said. "They're glorious animals. It was wonderful to meet this lion as a friend and fellow creature."

In the end Anna said, "I think we need to leave again. The animals need to rest.—And so do we, by the way."

We got up and slowly made our way back through the streets and out through Reuben's gate. Once outside, Anna suggested that instead of returning to Marie and Greg's home, we should take the lions to a large field, just over a kilometer away. They would be able to sleep there peacefully, and there would be plenty of grass for them to eat.

It was already getting dark when we all stood again outside Marie and Greg's home. The lions were in their field, and we were all anxious to get home.

"Supper, anyone?" Rediat asked. We shook our tired heads.

"No, thank you, Rediat," Kate answered. "You've been absolutely marvelous, caring for us these nine months. You've been gathering food, cooking, serving, everything. But now, I think we just need to get home."

There were mumbles of assent from all sides.

"Tomorrow, we'll have to call a meeting of some kind. We need to tell people about our journey, about the growing earth, about the lions, and we need to get volunteers to go to Japheth's valley and help him send the lions out to the far regions of the earth."

We hugged, thanked each other, and waved as we headed home.

Kate and I walked home, hand in hand. We stopped at the entrance to our garden and looked up at our house.

"We're home," Kate said happily.

"Yeah," I sighed. "What are we going to eat for supper?"

"I got a few things from the wagon." Kate held up a bag she'd been carrying.

"I thought you had your maps in that bag," I said.

"Nah, my maps are still in the wagon. I'll get them tomorrow. For now, I thought food would be more important."

We walked up the garden path and opened the door. There was a basket standing on the kitchen table. It contained a loaf of bread, some scones, and some butter. There was a note attached to it: "I thought you might be hungry. Barbara."

"Oh, dear Barbara," Kate exclaimed. "Always so practical and considerate."

We enjoyed eating supper in our home after nine months in the wild.

* * *

That evening, as we lay in our bed, I asked Kate, "So what have you learned?"

"From this trip, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"On the scientific level, I've learned a lot about the way the land south of here is laid out. On the personal level, I've got very close to some really nice people. And on the spiritual level, I've learned—again—that God is always in control, that he's incredibly creative, and that he takes good care of all his creatures."

"Mm."

"What have you learned, Nick?"

"I've learned that my wife is the most wonderful person in the world, and that I'm so blessed to have her by my side."

"Always," Kate said.

"Always," I answered.

Epilogue

586 years and counting.

Japheth came to The City today. His project is over now, and the last lions have been sent out of the valley, except for a couple of thousand who chose to remain there. So now Japheth has to adjust to living together with other people again.

I met him briefly when he arrived. Anna had gone with a group of volunteers to help in the last release of lions, and Japheth came back with them. He's staying at Anna's and Rediat's home for now, but I think he has a home of his own somewhere in The City. This is all still so new for him.

The lions have wandered off in all directions, and they're no longer a rare sight when you travel. However, most of the lions in the first group we brought from the valley still live east of The City, not too far from Marie and Greg's place.

Kate's collection of maps is growing and growing. She's set up a large room at the university with her complete collection of maps of the new earth. Anyone can come there and study them and draw copies of them if they need to.

Kate's pregnant again. *Very* pregnant if you know what

I mean. It could be any day now. We're looking forward to that; it's been almost two hundred years since the last time.

Me? I'm still into math. I'm teaching and researching. I've talked a lot with Hans since our trip, and we're working on constructing a large mechanical calculator. Electronics are still not an option, but we hope to make a mechanical calculator that will make my work considerably easier. Hans is an incredibly inventive person.

Kate and I went to The Mountain last Easter. I never tire of that. Reliving the story of the Easter drama is incredible, and being reminded about what amazing love God has for his creation is—wow!

We also went to see the newly opened Museum of the Old Earth. It's quite good. They have some really interesting exhibits about all the stuff people worshiped instead of God: false gods, money, human tyrants. Not so much about science, though. Maybe Kate and I should volunteer.

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About This Book

Thank you for reading this book. I hope you enjoyed it.

Over the years, I've read quite a few Christian novels that describe what the end times and Christ's second coming may be like, but I've never found a book that focuses on the life after our resurrection.

Many Christians have only a vague idea about what God has promised us. They believe that when you die, your soul and/or spirit will go to heaven, and then you'll spend eternity playing a harp and singing hymns of praise to God. It all sounds very pious—and a bit boring.

Fortunately, God has promised us much more: Our bodies shall be resurrected, and he will create a new earth on which we shall live forever.

In this book I have tried to describe how that life *might* be. Of course, this is a work of fiction, and I have no way of knowing in detail what our eternal life will be like. But I'm pretty sure it will be a life where everything that is good and wholesome will still exist, and everything that is evil and painful will be gone.

Will such a life be boring? I'm sure it won't.

* * *

I would be pleased if you would take the time to post a review of this book on a book review site; for example, www.goodreads.com.

If you enjoyed this book, I'd love to hear from you. My email address is claus@tondering.dk.

– Claus Tøndering

About The Author

Claus Tøndering was born in Denmark in 1953. He has an M.Sc. degree in computer science from the Technical University of Denmark. Claus lives near Copenhagen with his wife Trine and is active in his local Lutheran church. You can find his website at www.tondering.dk.

Claus has also written *Hell and a Loving God*, a non-fiction book about how we can reconcile our belief in God's boundless love with the fact that the Bible clearly talks about condemnation and a real, tangible hell.