

Before We Enter His House

By: Luis Siles Villegas

Chapter 1 — *The Question That Sparked the Quest*

The morning light in the Kingdom of Calendor was gentle, spilling over the castle's golden spires and painting the courtyard with a soft glow. Birds sang from the trees, and the sweet scent of blooming flowers drifted on the breeze. Prince Sawyer wandered through the gardens, his thoughts unusually heavy for a bright morning. Beside him, Marshy skipped along, humming a tune she had learned from the village children, while Rocco the Rock rolled slowly behind, his stony surface reflecting the sun in quiet glimmers.

Sawyer paused near a fountain, where the water danced in sunlight, and looked up at Alaric, who had appeared from the castle shadows with his usual calm presence. "Alaric," Sawyer said, his voice tinged with curiosity and a hint of unease, "I have a question that I can't stop thinking about. Why... why weren't humans made first in Heaven? Why do we live here first, in this world, before entering God's house?"

Alaric's eyes twinkled with gentle amusement, and he crouched down to Sawyer's level, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Ah," he said, his voice low and thoughtful, "that is a question many have asked through the ages. It is a question that points to something very deep—something that cannot be answered fully in a single moment or with a simple explanation."

Sawyer frowned slightly. "But... don't we belong there already? Wouldn't it be better to go straight to Heaven?"

Alaric shook his head slowly. "Not quite, my prince. You see, some doors in life, some doors of understanding, should not be entered until you know the One who lives inside. Heaven is not merely a place—it is the presence of God, and to enter fully, one must first understand the heart of the One who welcomes you there."

Marshy tilted her head, curiosity lighting her eyes. "So... we're here, in this world, learning before we can enter? Learning what?"

Alaric smiled, looking out at the gardens that stretched beyond the castle walls. "Learning about life, about love, about creation, about humanity itself. The answer lies not only in stories or prayers, but out in creation—among the trees, the rivers, the animals, the people. God has hidden lessons everywhere, waiting for those who seek Him."

Sawyer's eyes widened. "Out in creation... you mean like... right here? The gardens, the forests, the villages?"

“Yes,” Alaric said. “Every leaf, every creature, every act of kindness and courage is a clue. The world itself is a kind of house, a place where we practice what it means to live rightly, to love fully, and to understand the heart of the One who dwells in Heaven. Each moment here is preparation for the doors you will one day enter in His house.”

Rocco rolled forward, his face—if rocks could have faces—looking solemn but amused. “Observation: world is classroom. Nature is teacher. Divine lessons hidden in plain sight. Humans... curious and capable of discovery.”

Marshy laughed softly. “I like that. It makes everything feel more... important. Like we’re already on a quest, even if we don’t know all the answers yet.”

Alaric’s gaze softened. “Indeed, Marshy. And Sawyer, your question is the spark of that quest. Curiosity, wonder, and the desire to understand the One who made all things are the first steps toward truly entering His house. But remember: the journey is just as important as the destination. In creation, in friendship, in service, and in reflection, you will find glimpses of His heart—and through those glimpses, you will come closer to the One you seek.”

Sawyer looked down at the fountain, the sunlight sparkling on the ripples. “So... if we look carefully, listen closely, and live rightly here, we’ll understand more about Him—and maybe the doors of Heaven won’t feel so mysterious?”

Alaric smiled, standing and gesturing toward the paths that led from the garden to the surrounding woods and meadows. “Exactly, my prince. The doors of Heaven are not locked to those who seek with sincerity. But first, you must walk, observe, and learn here, in the world God has made. That is where the journey begins.”

With that, Sawyer felt a strange mixture of excitement and reverence settle in his chest. Marshy grabbed his hand, Rocco nudged against his side, and together they stepped out of the garden and toward the first mysteries of creation that awaited them.

The quest had begun—and the answer, Alaric had promised, would be found not in books alone, but in the living world itself.

Chapter 2 — *The Garden of First Lessons*

The morning sun spilled across the Kingdom of Calendor like liquid gold, and the royal gardens were alive with a quiet, pulsing energy. Flowers of every color nodded in the breeze, bees hummed from blossom to blossom, and the hedges were trimmed in intricate patterns that seemed to form an endless labyrinth of discovery. Alaric stood at the garden's edge, his cloak brushing the grass, and looked down at Sawyer and Marshy with a thoughtful expression.

"Today," Alaric said, "you will begin to learn from creation itself. Go into these gardens, observe closely, and notice what God has placed here. Everything you see—the flowers, the trees, the birds, even the insects—carries a lesson for those who know how to look."

Sawyer's eyes widened. "But... what should we be looking for? How do we know what God is trying to show us?"

Alaric's eyes twinkled. "That is part of the journey, Sawyer. Look with care, listen with attention, and reflect with your heart. Creation itself is a book, written by the hand of God. Its letters are in colors, its sentences in patterns, its chapters in the unfolding of life itself. Beauty is a clue. Gentleness is a clue. Order is a clue. And in seeing them, you will see glimpses of the One who made them."

Marshy tilted her head. "So... if we watch carefully, we can understand God better?"

"Yes," Alaric said. "But understanding does not come from rushing. It comes from patience, from noticing the smallest details, from listening for what is hidden in plain sight. Let your hearts be still, and let creation teach you."

With a soft rumble of agreement, Rocco waddled behind them, carefully navigating the gravel paths. "Observation: earth, flora, fauna... rich in design. Humans may learn by study and reflection. Presence of stone... steady witness to divine order."

Sawyer and Marshy wandered along a path lined with roses, their petals delicate and soft to the touch. Sawyer bent close to examine a dew-covered bloom. "Look at this," he whispered. "Each petal fits perfectly. It's... like it was made with care."

Marshy nodded, reaching to touch a slender vine curling around a trellis. "And see how everything grows together? The flowers, the vines, the grass... it's all arranged in a kind of pattern, but it doesn't feel forced. It feels alive."

Rocco chimed in, “Conclusion: design is intentional. Beauty intentional. Life interwoven with care. Teacher: unseen, yet evident.”

Alaric, walking quietly behind them, smiled. “You are noticing the first lessons of creation. God reveals Himself in the order of life, in the gentleness of a breeze, in the intricacy of a flower, and in the harmony of all things living. The world reflects His creativity—limitless, patient, and tender. To observe it carefully is to catch a glimpse of His heart.”

Sawyer stopped to watch a butterfly land on a lavender stalk. Its wings shimmered with colors he hadn’t noticed before. “It’s... so small, yet so perfect. And it moves so freely, yet doesn’t fall.”

“Yes,” Alaric said softly. “Creation holds freedom within order. God gives life to flourish and teaches through it the balance of care and trust. Beauty, Sawyer, is not merely decoration—it is a reflection of the divine, a whisper of God’s creativity, His gentleness, and His intention for harmony in all things.”

Marshy crouched beside a pond, peering at the reflection of the sky in its still waters. “And even the water... it mirrors the world above. It’s like creation is speaking back to itself, and maybe to us too.”

“Exactly,” Alaric said. “Creation is a conversation with those who will listen. Flowers, trees, wind, rivers, and skies—they all tell us about the One who made them. They teach patience, beauty, order, and gentleness. They remind us that God cares about the smallest things as much as the greatest, and that every detail of life reflects His presence.”

Rocco gave a satisfied rumble. “Observation confirmed: beauty, order, gentleness, creativity... evident in living world. Human reflection beneficial for understanding divine attributes.”

Sawyer and Marshy walked along the winding paths, noticing the patterns in the hedges, the way the sunlight danced through the leaves, and the songs of birds as they flitted from branch to branch. Each moment seemed richer than the last, and their hearts grew quiet with reverence.

Finally, they paused near a small fountain at the center of the gardens. Sawyer knelt to touch the water, letting it trickle between his fingers. “It’s... peaceful,” he said. “I think I understand a little of what Alaric meant. God’s heart is in this—the beauty, the care, the order... and it all teaches us something about Him.”

Marshy smiled, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “I think the garden is like a classroom, but one we can walk through and touch and listen to. It’s... alive with lessons.”

Alaric stepped forward, his gaze gentle. “Well said, Marshy. The garden is the first of many teachers. If you pay attention, creation will continue to reveal God’s character: His creativity, His gentleness, His wisdom, and His care. Every leaf, every petal, every ripple in the water points toward the One who dwells in Heaven, inviting you to know Him more deeply.”

The sun climbed higher, warming their backs, and the children walked slowly through the garden paths, observing, touching, and reflecting. For the first time, they felt that the world itself was alive with meaning, and that by noticing its beauty and order, they were beginning to understand the heart of God.

Creation whispers God’s lessons to those who listen. Beauty, gentleness, and order reveal His heart, inviting us to know Him through the world He made.

Chapter 3 — *Marshy's Story of the Stranger's House*

The late afternoon sun bathed the royal gardens in warm amber, and a gentle breeze rustled the leaves of the trees. Sawyer and Rocco had paused near a patch of lavender, their attention drawn to the subtle hum of bees as they danced from flower to flower. Marshy sat cross-legged on a smooth stone, her eyes thoughtful, staring at a small bird perched on the fountain's edge.

Sawyer, sensing a rare quietness in her, leaned closer. "Marshy... you've been quiet. Are you thinking about what Alaric said yesterday—about knowing God before entering His house?"

Marshy nodded slowly. Her eyes softened with memory, and she drew a deep breath. "Yes... it reminds me of something that happened when I was very little. I think it helps me understand why He wants us to know Him first."

Rocco rumbled gently. "Observation: human memories carry lessons. Storytelling recommended for comprehension and reflection."

Marshy smiled faintly and began. "When I was a child, maybe six or seven, I wandered farther than I should have while playing near the woods outside the village. I found a small cabin I had never seen before. The door was slightly open, and curiosity got the better of me. I stepped inside... and everything felt strange. The smell, the shadows, the quiet—it was unfamiliar, and I froze. I realized then that I didn't know the person who lived there. I had no invitation. My heart raced, and I was afraid. I ran out as fast as I could and never went near the cabin again."

Sawyer's eyes widened. "You were... scared?"

"Yes," Marshy said softly. "I was scared because I didn't know who lived there, and I wasn't supposed to be inside. I realized, even then, that some houses shouldn't be entered until you know the One who lives inside. It's not the door itself—it's the presence within. And if you don't know the person, you can't truly be safe or at peace."

Alaric, who had been listening quietly, nodded slowly. "Exactly, Marshy. Heaven is like that stranger's house, only infinitely more holy and sacred. God's dwelling is perfection, yet it is not a place for strangers. It is a home, and it calls for relationship, trust, and understanding. To enter, one must first know the One who resides there, and learn to walk rightly, humbly, and lovingly in His presence."

Rocco gave a thoughtful rumble. “Conclusion: curiosity without understanding may lead to fear. Presence of the host necessary for safe and meaningful entry. Divine parallel evident.”

Marshy leaned back, gazing at the garden beyond the stone wall. “That’s why Alaric said the answer lies ‘out in creation.’ We learn about God through the world He made, through His love, through His care, before we step into His house in Heaven. Just like I had to learn about that cabin before entering, we must learn about God before entering His home.”

Sawyer’s face brightened with understanding. “So... the journey isn’t about rushing to Heaven. It’s about learning to know God here—through life, creation, people, and experiences—so that when we finally enter, it’s safe and joyful, not frightening?”

Alaric smiled, his eyes full of gentle wisdom. “Yes, Sawyer. God invites us into His presence, but He desires that we come prepared by knowing Him, by loving Him, and by understanding His ways. The lessons you learn here—through creation, reflection, compassion, and friendship—are the keys to walking confidently into His house. Heaven is not a reward earned by hasty entry; it is a home entered through knowledge, trust, and love.”

Marshy looked at her friends and let a quiet smile form. “I understand now. God’s home is sacred. We don’t just step in—we prepare, we learn, we grow, and we get to know Him first. That’s why creation, people, and every experience matter. They’re practice for living in His presence.”

Rocco slowly wiggled closer. “Observation: preparation through experience necessary for safe entry. Relationship with host central to understanding and comfort. Spiritual correlation... significant.”

Sawyer reached out and took Marshy’s hand. “I’m glad you shared that story. I think I get it now. It’s not about being perfect or rushing. It’s about learning, noticing, and walking with Him while we’re here, so Heaven isn’t scary when we finally arrive.”

Alaric placed his hand gently on both of their shoulders. “Remember this always. The house of God is holy, and knowing Him is the pathway to peace within it. Every step you take in creation, every question you ask, every act of love and reflection, prepares your heart to dwell safely in His presence. That is the journey, the quest, and the greatest lesson of all.”

The sun dipped lower, casting long golden streaks across the gardens. The children sat in quiet reflection, understanding more deeply that knowing God was not merely an idea but a journey lived through observation, love, and reflection.

To enter God's house, one must first know Him. Creation, experience, and reflection guide us to that knowledge, preparing hearts to dwell safely and joyfully in His presence.

Chapter 4 — *The Whispering River*

The morning sun sparkled across the Kingdom of Calendor as Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco followed a winding path that led to the outskirts of the royal gardens. Beyond the fields of lavender and trimmed hedges, a river gleamed like a ribbon of silver, flowing steadily through the meadows. Its waters moved with a quiet rhythm, whispering secrets in a language only the attentive heart could hear.

Sawyer leaned over the riverbank, watching the ripples catch the sunlight. “It’s... so steady,” he murmured. “No matter what happens, it keeps flowing.”

Alaric, walking behind them with his usual calm presence, smiled. “Indeed, Sawyer. Rivers are among God’s oldest teachers. They flow without ceasing, providing life to everything around them. They remind us of God’s constancy, His unwavering presence, and His patience in all things. Notice how the water bends around obstacles yet continues onward. So too does God guide us through difficulties while remaining faithful and steadfast.”

Marshy knelt to touch the water, letting it slip between her fingers. “It’s cool... and smooth. I can almost feel it calming me.”

“Exactly,” Alaric said. “The river teaches not only constancy but also gentleness. Its power lies not in violence, but in steady, patient motion. It nourishes, it reflects, it carries life. So does God’s love. It moves through us, around us, and within us—not harshly, but persistently, faithfully, and tenderly.”

Rocco, who had been observing silently, waddled to the river’s edge. “Observation: water... inviting. Potential for immersion... noted.” Before anyone could respond, he heaved himself into the shallow current. For a moment, he floated, then promptly sank halfway in, giving a small, startled rumble.

Sawyer and Marshy burst into laughter. “Rocco!” Sawyer exclaimed. “You can’t swim!”

Rocco sputtered, his rocky surface dripping, “Observation: water deceptive. Floating... failed. Humorous response... recommended.”

Alaric chuckled softly. “Even Rocco’s attempts teach us something. Just as the river cannot be rushed or forced, we cannot force our understanding of God. We must approach with patience, with humility, and sometimes with humor. God’s constancy does not demand perfection—only attentive hearts and willing spirits.”

Marshy laughed, brushing her damp hair from her face. “I like that. The river keeps going no matter what, and even if we stumble, we can get up and keep following its flow.”

Sawyer nodded, gazing at the water as it rippled over stones and branches. “And it reminds me that God is like the river, always there, always steady. Even when I don’t understand, He’s flowing along, carrying everything forward. We don’t have to be afraid.”

Alaric knelt beside them, pointing to the way the water curved around rocks and fallen branches. “Notice, too, how the river adjusts. It meets obstacles yet continues its path. God does the same with us. He meets our fears, our mistakes, our questions, and gently guides us onward. His presence is constant, His love unwavering. To follow the river is to practice patience, observation, and trust in the One who flows with us.”

Rocco finally wobbled back to the shore, dripping and slightly embarrassed, but still giving a low, self-satisfied rumble. “Conclusion: immersion in divine metaphor... informative. Humor... effective. Constancy... evident.”

Sawyer laughed and held out his hand to help Rocco onto the bank. “You’re teaching us something too, Rocco. Even when we mess up or sink, we can still learn from it—and we can keep going.”

Marshy smiled at the flowing river, the sunlight dancing across the water. “It’s like creation is full of lessons if we just watch and think. The river, the gardens, even Rocco’s swimming—everything teaches us something about God.”

Alaric stood, his eyes reflecting the sun on the water. “Indeed, Marshy. Creation is a living book, written by God. Rivers teach constancy, patience, and guidance. Trees teach strength, flexibility, and shelter. Birds teach freedom, joy, and reliance on the Creator. All of it is preparation—preparing hearts and minds to know God, so that one day, when you enter His house, it is not with fear, but with love, trust, and understanding.”

Sawyer sat on a large river rock, watching the water flow past. “I think I understand now. God’s love is like this river—it’s steady, patient, and always moving, even if we don’t see it all at once.”

Marshy nodded, her gaze softening. “And even if we stumble or make mistakes, like Rocco in the water, we can trust that He’s guiding us, teaching us, and flowing with us.”

Rocco gave a low, rumbling chuckle. “Observation: divine metaphor... integrated. Human reflection enhanced. Learning... enjoyable.”

The three friends sat in companionable silence, listening to the whispers of the river as it wound its way through the meadows. In its steady flow, they saw the constancy of God, the gentleness of His care, and the patient guidance that prepared hearts for the greater journey yet to come.

The river flows without ceasing, reflecting the steady, unwavering presence of God. His constancy carries all things forward, guiding hearts with patience, love, and faithfulness.

Chapter 5 — *A Storm Over Calendor*

The sky above the Kingdom of Calendor had been clear just moments ago, a soft blue stretching across the horizon, but in the blink of an eye, clouds thickened and darkened. The wind whispered ominously through the castle towers and the surrounding trees, carrying the scent of rain and the distant rumble of thunder. Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco had been wandering the meadow near the river when the first raindrops fell, cool and heavy on their faces.

Sawyer's eyes widened as he glanced at the darkening sky. "Alaric! What's happening? It's coming so fast!"

Marshy grabbed his arm, shielding herself with her hands. "We should get back to the castle—before it hits!"

Rocco waddled after them as quickly as his short legs allowed, slipping once and giving a startled, rocky rumble. "Observation: atmospheric conditions... dangerous. Rapid change... unexpected. Emotional response: fear. Confirmed."

Alaric appeared behind them, his cloak whipping in the wind. "The storm is fierce," he said calmly, though his eyes scanned the horizon. "But remember, children, storms—whether of wind and rain or of life—are part of the world God has made. They remind us that there is power beyond our control, and that knowing God includes seeing His strength in the midst of turmoil."

Sawyer shivered as lightning streaked across the sky and the rumble of thunder shook the meadow. "But... it's scary! I don't like it!"

Alaric nodded, placing a reassuring hand on Sawyer's shoulder. "I understand, my prince. Fear is natural, even for those who walk closely with God. Even Jesus Himself experienced fear and relied on the Father for strength. To know God fully is not to be untouched by storms, but to trust Him within them, to see His protection and His wisdom at work even when the wind lashes and the rain falls."

Marshy looked at Sawyer, whose eyes were wide and trembling. "It's like the river we followed yesterday," she said softly. "The water kept flowing, even when it met rocks and branches. Maybe God's strength is like that—steady, carrying us safely through what we can't control."

"Precisely," Alaric said, his voice firm but gentle. "God's strength is constant. He governs the storms, both literal and spiritual. The thunder and lightning remind us that He is mighty, that He holds creation in His hands, and that no force can separate those who

trust Him from His care. To know God is to recognize His power—and to rest in it rather than be overcome by fear.”

Rocco, now soaked and slightly bedraggled, rolled to Sawyer’s side. “Observation: immersion in storm... uncomfortable. Emotional response... intense. Lesson: trust in superior force... required. Humor... beneficial for morale.”

Sawyer chuckled nervously. “You’re right, Rocco. Even if it’s scary, we can still... see the lesson. God’s strong. He’s in control. And we can trust Him, even in storms we don’t understand.”

Alaric nodded, gesturing to the horizon as the first cracks of sunlight began piercing the clouds. “Exactly. Storms are reminders of both our human vulnerability and God’s eternal strength. They teach courage, reliance, patience, and faith. When you experience fear, remember that Jesus faced it too, fully human, fully trusting in His Father. And because He did, you can also trust that the storm will pass, and that you are held safely in God’s hands.”

Marshy looked out at the meadow, now glistening with rain, the wind beginning to soften. “It feels... reassuring. The storm is powerful, but it’s not the end. God is stronger than the wind and rain, and He can guide us through anything.”

Sawyer took a deep breath, letting the rain wash over him, and felt a strange sense of calm settle in his heart. “I understand now,” he said quietly. “Storms are part of life. They remind us that we’re not in control—but God is. We don’t have to be afraid, because He’s strong, and He’s with us.”

Rocco gave a small, contented rumble. “Observation: fear experienced, lesson learned. Divine strength acknowledged. Emotional state: calmer. Humor... retained.”

Alaric smiled, looking down at the three of them. “Remember, children: knowing God does not mean life will be free of storms. It means that, when the winds howl and the rains fall, you will recognize His strength, His protection, and His presence. You will know that nothing—neither thunder, nor trial, nor fear—can separate you from His love or His care.”

As the storm passed and the sun returned to the sky, casting a rainbow across the horizon, the children stood together on the meadow, wet but unafraid. In the whisper of the wind and the trickle of newly-formed streams, they could feel the steady, protective hand of God guiding them, teaching them, and carrying them safely forward.

Storms come, both in nature and in life, yet God's strength remains constant. To know Him is to trust Him, even when fear rises, and to find courage and peace in His unshakable presence

Chapter 6 — *Marshy and the Fallen Sparrow*

The morning air in Calendor was crisp and filled with the sweet scent of dew-covered grass. Sawyer and Rocco had paused along a winding forest path, enjoying the gentle warmth of the sun as it spilled through the canopy of leaves. Marshy wandered a few steps ahead, her keen eyes scanning the underbrush, as she often did.

Suddenly, she froze. A small, brown sparrow lay on the ground, its wing bent awkwardly beneath it. Its tiny chest heaved as it struggled to breathe, and soft chirps escaped its beak.

“Oh no,” Marshy whispered, kneeling carefully beside the fragile creature. She gently cupped it in her hands, feeling its rapid heartbeat. “You’re hurt, little one... but don’t worry. I’ll stay with you.”

Sawyer hurried over, his eyes wide with concern. “Marshy! What happened? Can we help it?”

“We have to be gentle,” she said softly. “I think it fell from its nest. We have to make sure it’s safe.”

Rocco waddled forward, tilting slightly. “Observation: bird in distress. Human intervention... necessary. Emotional response: concern evident. Compassion... recommended.”

Marshy stroked the sparrow’s feathers lightly, feeling the warmth of its tiny body. “It makes me think about God,” she said after a moment. “He cares about everything He made—even creatures as small and fragile as this bird. He watches over them and protects them, even when we don’t see it.”

Alaric, who had quietly appeared behind them, nodded. “You are learning an important lesson, Marshy. God’s compassion is not limited by size or importance. Every creature, every leaf, every person—no matter how small or seemingly insignificant—matters to Him. When He sent Jesus into the world, He showed us that love is active, tender, and present in every detail of life.”

Sawyer knelt beside her, watching the sparrow settle slightly in her hands. “So, God loves even the tiniest bird just as much as He loves us?”

Alaric smiled gently. “Yes, Sawyer. God’s care is infinite. He tends to the sparrow and to the human heart with the same tenderness. And He invites us to do the same—to show

compassion and concern for others, to act with patience and love, even in small ways. Each act of care reflects His heart.”

Marshy looked down at the bird, whispering softly. “I think... I understand now. Being gentle, staying with it, helping it—it’s like practicing God’s compassion. He wants us to love and care for creation and for one another.”

Rocco gave a low, approving rumble. “Observation: care given, lesson absorbed. Divine parallel... evident. Compassion reflected in human action.”

Alaric stepped closer, his voice calm and full of warmth. “Remember, children, God’s love is not only grand or dramatic—it is present in the quiet, attentive moments. Just as He watches over this bird, He watches over every human life. Each act of love, each moment of patience, each gentle word or deed mirrors His care. When you notice and respond to the needs around you, you are learning to reflect His heart.”

Marshy adjusted her hold slightly, ensuring the sparrow was comfortable. “It’s amazing to think that God sees every little thing. Even a bird like this—He knows it, loves it, and cares for it.”

“Yes,” Alaric said. “And remember, Marshy, the same God who watches over the sparrow watches over you, Sawyer, Rocco, and everyone else. Nothing is too small for His attention, and no heart is too fragile for His love.”

Sawyer smiled, his gaze on the tiny bird. “And it means that even when we feel small or hurt, God sees us and cares for us, too.”

Rocco gave a soft, reflective rumble. “Conclusion: divine care universal. Human action reflective. Emotional response: understanding deepened.”

Marshy continued to sit quietly, holding the sparrow with tender hands, feeling the warmth of life and the presence of God’s love in that simple, intimate moment. She realized that compassion was not just a feeling but an action, a way of participating in the heart of God.

The sun filtered through the leaves, highlighting the sparrow’s small feathers and the gentle care of Marshy’s hands. For a brief, sacred moment, the forest seemed to hum with life, and the children felt that God’s compassion was woven into every part of creation—from the smallest bird to the grandest trees, and from the quietest heart to the bravest soul.

God's love and care extend to all creation. By noticing and responding to the needs around us, we learn to reflect His compassion, showing tenderness, patience, and love in every action.

Chapter 7 — *The Night Sky Lesson*

As dusk settled over the Kingdom of Calendor, the sky transformed into a deep canvas of indigo and violet, dotted with stars that shimmered like countless tiny lanterns. Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco climbed a gentle hill just beyond the castle gardens, their footsteps crunching softly on the gravel path. The air was cool and fragrant with the scent of wildflowers, and the first hints of evening breeze carried the distant song of nightingales.

Alaric led them to the crest of the hill, where the view stretched wide and uninterrupted. “Tonight,” he said, his voice calm yet filled with quiet reverence, “we will look beyond the earth and into the heavens. The night sky itself is a teacher—a reflection of God’s majesty, His wisdom, and His intimate knowledge of all creation.”

Sawyer’s eyes widened as he took in the vast expanse above. “There are so many stars! It feels... endless. How can God know each one, let alone all the people in the world?”

Alaric smiled gently. “Sawyer, the vastness of creation is not a barrier to God’s knowledge. Rather, it reveals His power and His attention. Every star, every planet, every particle of dust is known to Him. And if He knows all the stars, surely He knows each person intimately—every thought, every joy, every sorrow, every hope and fear.”

Marshy’s eyes sparkled as she pointed to a cluster of stars. “Look at that one... it seems so tiny, but it’s shining brightly out there, far away. And yet God sees it?”

“Yes,” Alaric said. “Even the smallest light in the heavens is within His sight. And you, Marshy, are even closer to His heart than the most distant star. God’s knowledge is not impersonal—it is relational. He knows each of you personally, in detail, in love. He does not overlook or forget. Nothing is too small or too distant for His care.”

Rocco, sitting heavily on the hilltop, tilted his stony head upward. “Observation: human perception limited. Cosmic vastness overwhelming. Divine omniscience... reassuring. Emotional response: awe mixed with comfort.”

Sawyer leaned back on the grass, gazing up at the constellations, letting the cool night air wash over him. “So... even though the universe is huge and there’s so much we don’t understand, God still knows me. He still knows Marshy. He even knows Rocco,” he added, glancing at the rock who gave a modest rumble of affirmation.

Alaric nodded. “Exactly. The immensity of creation magnifies God’s greatness, but it also highlights His care. To know the stars is impressive, but to know each heart

personally is the work of infinite love. This is why we can trust Him, even when life feels uncertain or overwhelming. He is present in both the vast and the minute, in the cosmic and the intimate.”

Marshy traced a line in the air with her finger, connecting imaginary dots between stars. “It’s like the sky is a big map of God’s care. Each star a point of His attention... and every person a heart He holds close.”

Alaric smiled warmly. “Beautifully said, Marshy. God invites us to marvel at the universe, to see His power and creativity in the heavens, but He also calls us to trust His intimate knowledge of us. He sees our joys, our struggles, our questions, and our faith. The night sky teaches us both awe and intimacy—a reminder that God is infinitely great, yet personally close.”

Rocco shifted slightly, his rocky surface catching the moonlight. “Observation: perspective altered. Vastness does not diminish care. Cosmic understanding... paired with relational intimacy. Human reflection... beneficial.”

Sawyer leaned against Marshy, feeling a quiet peace settle over him. “I think I understand, Alaric. God is everywhere, and yet He’s right here with us. He knows everything, but He also knows us personally. That’s... amazing.”

Alaric rested a hand on Sawyer’s shoulder. “It is amazing. And this lesson is a part of knowing God before entering His house. Understanding His greatness, while also trusting His intimate care, prepares your heart. To walk with Him here on earth is to experience His majesty and His love, side by side.”

The three friends sat on the hilltop in comfortable silence, the stars above shimmering in quiet testimony to God’s vastness and closeness. Each one felt a mixture of wonder, humility, and reassurance, realizing that the same Creator who set the stars in motion also knew their hearts intimately, guiding and caring for them in every step of their journey.

God’s greatness is infinite, yet His knowledge of each heart is personal. In the vastness of creation, we glimpse His majesty; in His intimate care, we feel His love.

Chapter 8 — *Rocco Remembers the Mountains.*

The sun hung low over the Kingdom of Calendor, casting long shadows across the rolling hills. Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco had climbed a gentle rise overlooking the distant mountains, their peaks kissed by the warm light of evening. The wind carried the scent of pine and stone, whispering through the valleys like an ancient voice.

Rocco, unusually quiet, sat upon a flat boulder at the crest, his stony surface warm from the sun. Sawyer noticed a strange glimmer in his normally impassive face. “Rocco... you seem... different,” he said softly. “Are you thinking about something?”

Rocco gave a slow, deliberate nod. “Observation: memories resurfacing. Time... long. Humans... curious. Reflection... necessary. I have something to share.”

Marshy leaned forward, intrigued. “You have a story, Rocco?”

“Affirmative,” Rocco said, his voice carrying a surprising gravity. “I have spent millennia in the mountains. Long before you walked the gardens, long before the Kingdom of Calendor existed. I observed humans as they moved, built, laughed, cried, and dreamed. I watched as they struggled, loved, erred, and learned. I saw patterns... glimpses of something eternal within them.”

Sawyer’s eyes widened. “Millennia? You mean... you’ve been alive that long?”

Rocco tilted his head. “Alive... perhaps. Observing... certainly. And in observation, I have learned that every human reflects something of God. Each act of kindness mirrors His mercy. Every moment of courage reflects His strength. Every expression of creativity echoes His wisdom.”

Marshy’s gaze softened as she considered this. “So... even the smallest things humans do, the things we don’t think matter, are like... little reflections of God?”

Rocco nodded slowly. “Correct. The laughter of children, the care for the weak, the labor of hands, the contemplation of hearts—all reveal a spark of the Creator. Humans are imperfect, yes. They fail, they fear, they forget. Yet even in imperfection, the divine image shines through, sometimes faintly, sometimes brightly. And God sees it all. Nothing is hidden from His eyes.”

Alaric, who had been walking silently behind them, spoke softly, his voice like the rustle of the pine needles. “Rocco speaks truth, children. In Genesis, we are told that humans are made in the image of God. This does not mean perfection, but that each life bears

the mark of the Creator. Every human action, thought, and feeling has the potential to reflect God's character—His love, His mercy, His justice, His creativity.”

Sawyer leaned back on the grass, absorbing the words. “So... every person I meet, every friend, every stranger... they all carry a piece of God inside them?”

“Yes,” Alaric said gently. “And knowing this changes the way we look at others. Compassion, patience, understanding—these are not just good habits; they are the acknowledgment of the divine image in every heart. To see God in others is to participate in His creation, to recognize that He works in every life, even when we cannot fully comprehend it.”

Marshy looked toward the distant mountains, their peaks fading into the golden horizon. “I think I understand. It's not just about noticing the big miracles... it's about seeing God in small moments, in ordinary people, in the way life unfolds.”

Rocco rumbled softly. “Observation: ordinary human life... extraordinary in divine reflection. Emotional depth... witnessed. Lesson: the Creator is revealed in the smallest and grandest of acts. Awareness... essential.”

Sawyer watched a shepherd guiding his flock along the hillside far below. “Even the simple act of caring for others... God sees it. He values it. He is in it.”

Alaric smiled, placing a hand on Sawyer's shoulder. “Indeed, Sawyer. Each act of love, each moment of courage, each expression of creativity or compassion reflects God's image. And just as Rocco observed the mountains and the humans across centuries, we too are called to watch, to learn, and to recognize the divine presence in creation and in each person we meet. To know God is to see Him reflected in the world He made, and in the hearts of those He loves.”

Marshy leaned against Rocco, her hand resting lightly on his warm stone shoulder. “It feels... humbling. But also hopeful. If every person reflects God, then we can always look for His light, even in dark or difficult places.”

Rocco gave a low, approving rumble. “Conclusion: humans... vessels of divine reflection. Observation leads to understanding. Awareness strengthens connection to Creator. Lesson learned: cherish, observe, and reflect.”

As the sun slipped behind the mountains, casting the valley in shades of violet and gold, the children remained on the hilltop in contemplative silence. They could feel, in that quiet moment, the vastness of time and the intimacy of God's attention converging. Every human life mattered. Every act carried weight. Every heart mirrored, in some way, the eternal Creator.

Every person reflects something of God. To observe, to cherish, and to participate in life with love and care is to recognize His image and walk more closely in His presence.

Chapter 9 — *The Village of Craftsmen*

The morning sun spilled golden light over the Kingdom of Calendor, and the path ahead led Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco to a quaint village nestled between rolling hills. Smoke spiraled lazily from chimneys, and the rhythmic clanging of hammers on anvils echoed from the blacksmith's forge. The scent of fresh bread mingled with the earthy aroma of dyed fabrics, and the air was alive with the quiet hum of labor and creativity.

"Look at this place," Sawyer whispered, his eyes wide. "Everyone is making something... and it's all so beautiful."

Marshy smiled, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face. "It's amazing how much care and skill goes into everything. Look at the weavers—how the colors fit together perfectly. And the painter—every stroke tells a story."

Rocco waddled among the artisans, his rocky surface gleaming in the sun. "Observation: human labor... intentional. Patterns, skill, creativity... evident. Emotional response: admiration."

Alaric, walking calmly behind them, nodded. "This is a lesson in God's creativity, children. The gifts and talents of humans reflect the mind and heart of the Creator. Each skill, each act of careful work, mirrors the wisdom, order, and beauty of God. When humans create with care, with attention, and with joy, they participate in the divine artistry."

Sawyer stopped to watch a blacksmith hammer a glowing piece of metal. Sparks flew, dancing into the sunlight like miniature stars. "So... when he works, he's showing a little bit of God's creativity?"

"Yes," Alaric said gently. "God made the universe with infinite wisdom and creativity. When humans use their hands, their minds, and their hearts to create, they imitate their Creator. Every stroke of paint, every woven thread, every forged piece of iron carries a spark of God's image. The human mind and soul are designed to reflect His glory through work, beauty, and skill."

Marshy crouched beside a weaver, fascinated by the intricate patterns. "And look at this... the colors, the way they blend and balance. It's not just useful—it's art. God's wisdom in the world isn't only about survival or necessity. He loves beauty."

Alaric smiled. "Exactly, Marshy. God delights in beauty, and He made humans to delight in it as well. The creative process—whether through painting, weaving, music, or

building—is a way for humans to participate in the ongoing work of creation. It is sacred because it reflects the mind and heart of God.”

Rocco gave a slow rumble. “Observation: human creativity... reflection of divine. Participation in creation... active. Emotional response: awe and comprehension increased.”

Sawyer leaned closer to a painter, who was carefully adding golden highlights to a wooden panel. “And even mistakes—like if a line isn’t perfect—don’t ruin the work. It’s still... part of God’s reflection through the person.”

Alaric nodded. “Yes. God’s creativity flows through imperfection, through trial, through learning and growth. He values the effort, the attention, the intention, and the heart behind the work. In every human effort, the divine image can shine, if it is offered with care and love.”

Marshy looked around at the bustling village. “I think I understand. God gives everyone different talents—some paint, some build, some shape metal or cloth—and all of it points to Him. Our work can be prayer in action, showing His wisdom and beauty to the world.”

“Exactly,” Alaric said. “To recognize God in human labor is to see the sacred in the ordinary. It is to understand that every gift, every effort, and every act of creation carries His mark. And to work faithfully, with joy and diligence, is to reflect Him faithfully in our daily lives.”

Rocco shuffled to Sawyer’s side. “Observation: human vocation... sacred when intentional. Creation mirrored in labor. Divine reflection... visible. Emotional response: understanding enriched.”

Sawyer smiled, watching a blacksmith wipe sweat from his brow, a painter lean thoughtfully over a canvas, and a weaver adjust her pattern. “So even work—ordinary, everyday work—is holy if we do it with care. It’s like we’re helping God keep creating.”

Alaric nodded, looking at the children with warmth. “Indeed, Sawyer. Every honest effort, every careful touch, every act of love in our labor reflects the Creator. God’s creativity is not limited to the heavens or the stars—it flows through the hands and hearts of humans. In seeing this, you begin to understand how deeply He works through the world, and how intimately connected we are to Him, even in the smallest tasks.”

The children walked slowly through the village, observing artisans at work, feeling a quiet reverence for the rhythm of human creativity. Each hammer strike, each painted

stroke, each woven thread became a reminder that God's glory is reflected in the care, skill, and love He inspires in every person.

Every act of creation, no matter how small, reflects the wisdom, beauty, and creativity of God. Human work becomes sacred when it mirrors the heart of the Creator, showing His glory in the world around us.

Chapter 10 — *The Singer at the Gate*

The late afternoon sun bathed the castle gates of Calendor in warm, golden light as Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco strolled through the cobbled streets. Merchants called out from their stalls, children ran laughing through the square, and the gentle clatter of horse hooves echoed from the distant stables. But it was not these familiar sounds that drew the children's attention.

A voice—a single, clear, and hauntingly beautiful voice—rose from the gate. Sawyer stopped, mesmerized. Marshy tilted her head, curiosity sparkling in her eyes. Even Rocco, usually more grounded in observation than emotion, gave a low, appreciative rumble.

The woman's song carried through the air, weaving a tapestry of melody that seemed to touch something deep within the soul. It was not merely music; it was a story, a prayer, a reflection of something greater than the ears could hear or the mind could comprehend. Birds paused mid-flight, the breeze seemed to still, and for a moment, all of Calendor seemed to hold its breath in the presence of the song.

"Who is she?" Sawyer whispered. "Her voice... it feels like it's... reaching inside me."

Marshy nodded, her gaze fixed on the woman at the gate. "It's like she's telling secrets about the world—about life, about God... even about us."

Alaric appeared quietly beside them, his expression thoughtful and serene. "Music, children, is indeed a doorway. It can move the heart, awaken the soul, and reveal truths that words alone cannot capture. The melodies we hear, the harmonies that rise and fall, reflect the order, beauty, and love of God Himself."

Sawyer frowned slightly, trying to grasp the depth of Alaric's words. "But... how can a song show God? Isn't He... bigger than anything we can hear or see?"

Alaric smiled gently. "God is indeed infinite and beyond full comprehension. Yet He has given us senses, hearts, and minds that can perceive reflections of His glory. Music mirrors God's nature in several ways: its order reflects His wisdom, its beauty reflects His creativity, and its power to move the soul reflects His presence. When a song touches your heart, it is not the woman alone you hear, but the echo of the Divine speaking through her."

Rocco shifted, tilting his head thoughtfully. "Observation: sound... transformative. Emotional resonance... evident. Reflection: human art... conduit for divine. Cognitive integration... successful."

Marshy's eyes glimmered with understanding. "So... it's not just that her voice is beautiful. It's that God is using it to speak to us, to help us understand something about Him?"

"Exactly," Alaric said. "Music can awaken a longing for truth, beauty, and goodness. It can remind us of joy, sorrow, hope, and love. In the psalms, in hymns, in every song of praise, humanity participates in God's own expression. To hear music with attentiveness is to listen with the heart, and in doing so, we open ourselves to know Him more deeply."

Sawyer closed his eyes, letting the notes wash over him. Each phrase seemed to carry warmth, sorrow, wonder, and longing all at once. "It's like the song knows things I didn't even know I was feeling," he murmured.

Alaric nodded. "God's presence often moves quietly, subtly, and profoundly. Music is a vehicle through which we can encounter that presence. Like prayer, contemplation, or creation itself, it draws our souls toward Him, teaching us to listen beyond the surface, to perceive with the heart as well as the mind."

Rocco rumbled in agreement. "Observation: human response... awe, reflection, emotional awakening. Divine correspondence... confirmed. Lesson absorbed: artistry can reveal Creator's heart."

The song ended, leaving a delicate silence hanging in the air, like the space between one heartbeat and the next. The children opened their eyes, feeling a quiet sense of wonder, peace, and connection.

Marshy whispered, "It's amazing... how something so simple as a song can help me feel God."

Alaric placed a hand gently on her shoulder. "Music, like all acts of sincere creation, carries the reflection of God. Every note, every rhythm, every harmony is an echo of His wisdom, beauty, and love. When you listen with intention, you learn not just about the song—but about the heart of the One who inspired it."

Sawyer smiled, glancing at Rocco. "Even you, Rocco, seemed moved. And if a rock can notice, then anyone can."

Rocco gave a low, appreciative rumble. "Observation: emotional resonance universal. Engagement with divine reflection... successful. Humor... preserved."

The woman at the gate disappeared as quietly as she had appeared, leaving only the memory of her song and the profound stillness it had created. The children stood together, their hearts light, yet filled with the weight of understanding.

Music is more than sound; it is a language of the soul. Through melody, harmony, and rhythm, humans can encounter God's beauty, wisdom, and love—opening hearts to His presence and deepening the journey of knowing Him.

Chapter 11 — Sawyer's Pride and the Broken Bridge

The morning sun shone like a golden crown over the eastern trees, scattering beams of light across the forest path. Sawyer marched ahead proudly, his wooden practice sword at his belt, his steps quick and confident. Marshy and Rocco followed behind—Marshy thoughtful and observant, Rocco humming some strange, ancient goblin tune that no one had ever heard before.

They were traveling toward an old footbridge deep in the woods of Calendor, one that Alaric had asked them to inspect before the winter rains began. It was simple work, a small task, hardly worthy of heroes-in-training like them—or so Sawyer believed.

“Alaric probably sent us because he knows I’m getting better at everything,” Sawyer declared, pushing his chest forward with exaggerated grandeur. “Look how quickly I learn swordplay! And I can climb trees faster than any other kid in the kingdom.”

Marshy’s eyebrows pinched together. “Sawyer... tasks aren’t tests of greatness. They’re lessons. All of them.”

But Sawyer barely heard her. His mind was already racing with fantasies—Alaric praising him, King Rowan applauding him, maybe even all of Calendor singing songs about his bravery. Yes, this bridge task was small, but maybe it would lead to bigger missions. Important missions. Missions only *he* could do.

The woods opened to reveal the footbridge—a narrow wooden span arching over a quiet stream. The boards were old but mostly intact. Moss crept over the edges like emerald lace. Sawyer strode forward with a flourish.

“See? Easy work.”

“Sawyer, wait!” Marshy called. “Let’s check if it’s—”

CRACK!

The sound shattered the calm air.

A plank gave way beneath Sawyer’s foot. He dropped to his knees as one leg plunged through the hole. The entire bridge shook violently.

Marshy gasped. Rocco shrieked. Sawyer’s pride collapsed faster than the board.

He scrambled backward, his face hot, his heartbeat thundering. Marshy grabbed his arms and pulled him onto solid ground. Rocco wrapped himself around Sawyer's leg protectively, as though shielding him from an invisible enemy.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Finally Sawyer whispered, "I... I didn't listen."

Marshy gave him a small, sad smile. "No. You didn't."

Later that day, Alaric arrived, inspecting the broken plank with quiet attention. His long silver hair fluttered gently in the forest breeze. Without scolding or sighing, he simply knelt down and placed his hand on the aged wood.

"What do you think happened?" he asked calmly.

Sawyer swallowed. "I rushed ahead... because I wanted to prove something."

"And what was that?" Alaric asked.

Sawyer hesitated, then spoke the truth. "That I'm becoming great."

Alaric's eyes softened with compassion—never mockery, never disappointment, only deep understanding.

"Greatness," he said slowly, "is a shadow that follows the person who isn't looking at it."

Sawyer blinked. "What does that mean?"

"It means," Alaric continued, rising to his feet, "that when you chase greatness—pride leads. And pride often steps on weak planks without noticing."

He tapped his staff gently on the ground.

"To know God, Sawyer, is to see the world clearly. To see others clearly. And most of all, to see *yourself* clearly. Pride blurs all of those."

"Does God... care if I'm brave?" Sawyer asked.

"Oh yes," Alaric replied. "But bravery without humility becomes recklessness. Courage without listening becomes danger. Pride builds bridges that collapse." His eyes glimmered. "Humility builds ones that last."

Marshy touched Sawyer's shoulder. "You're already great, Sawyer. Not because of what you can do... but because of who you're becoming."

Sawyer looked down. Tears touched the corners of his eyes—not from fear, but from the weight of truth.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I didn’t respect the lesson. I didn’t listen. I didn’t think.”

Alaric smiled. “Humility begins exactly where pride falls.”

He handed Sawyer a new plank from his satchel.

“Let’s rebuild this bridge. Not to prove yourself... but to learn.”

Sawyer nodded slowly. Marshy knelt beside him. Rocco sat proudly, holding nails in his little clawed hands. Together they repaired the bridge—each hammer strike a reminder that strength grows from humility, not pride.

When they finished, Sawyer stood up and looked at the steady, safe crossing they had restored.

“Alaric...” he said quietly. “I understand the lesson.”

“Tell me.”

Sawyer took a deep breath. “Before we enter God’s house—before Heaven—we have to know Him. And to know Him, our hearts need to be humble. Otherwise we’ll rush ahead... and fall.”

Alaric nodded with deep approval. “A proud heart does not recognize holy ground, Sawyer. But a humble heart walks into God’s presence without fear.”

Rocco chirped thoughtfully. “Humility makes the inside bright.”

Sawyer laughed softly. “Yes, Rocco. I guess it does.”

As they walked home, Sawyer felt lighter—not smaller, but freer. The kind of freedom that comes only after pride breaks, and truth begins to rebuild.

And for the first time all day, he no longer felt the need to be great.

He simply wanted to be *good*.

Chapter 12 — *Marshy's Act of Mercy*

The afternoon sun glimmered over the rooftops of Calendor, turning the thatched houses golden and making the village square shimmer with warmth. Children ran across the packed earth, laughing, playing tag, tossing pebbles into barrels—simple joys echoing through the air like music.

Sawyer trained with Alaric near the edge of the square, while Rocco gnawed enthusiastically on a honey roll. Marshy—Kate to most, but *Marshy* to her closest friends—had slipped away toward the herb stalls to help a vendor organize her bundles of sage and rosemary. She liked quiet tasks like this. They helped her think. They helped her breathe.

But as she sorted the herbs, she overheard giggling.

Two boys her age stood near the well, whispering too loudly to be accidental.

“There goes *Marshy Mud-Face* again,” one snickered. “Do you think she rolls in the marsh behind her house?”

“Maybe she was born in it,” the other laughed. “Or maybe her brain’s still stuck in the mud!”

Marshy froze. Their laughter felt like sharp thorns pricking her skin. She swallowed, trying to ignore the sting. She’d heard mockery before—teasing about her nickname, jokes about her being the marshal’s daughter, whispers that she was too serious, too bookish, too strange. She’d always managed to shrug it off.

But today—today the words struck deeper.

Maybe because she felt tired. Maybe because her heart was already sensitive from the lessons they’d been learning. Maybe because she’d trusted the children of Calendor to be kinder by now.

Whatever the reason, her eyes burned.

Sawyer noticed first. He straightened, ready to defend her, fists tightening.

“I’ll go tell them off,” he growled, stepping forward.

But Alaric placed a hand on Sawyer’s shoulder, gentle but firm.

“No,” the old sage said quietly. “This lesson does not belong to you.”

Sawyer frowned. “But Marshy—”

“Watch,” Alaric murmured, his eyes deep and knowing. “Mercy must be chosen, not forced.”

Marshy turned slowly toward the boys. She wasn’t angry—not exactly. Anger would have been easier, simpler, cleaner. What she felt was something heavier, something complicated—hurt tangled with understanding, sorrow mixed with compassion.

She stepped toward them. The boys jumped slightly, surprised she’d heard.

“Are you... here to get us in trouble?” one asked, trying to sound brave.

Marshy inhaled.

This was the moment—she could lash out, demand apology, expose their cruelty to adults, exact justice.

Part of her wanted that.

But another, quieter voice whispered inside her heart. A familiar voice. A voice shaped by everything they’d been learning these past weeks—about Jesus’ humanity, His compassion, His tenderness.

Mercy is God’s language, Alaric had said once during their night sky lesson.

Justice tells you what someone deserves.

Mercy tells you who God is.

Marshy breathed slowly.

“No,” she said softly. “I’m not here for revenge.”

The boys exchanged confused looks.

“Then... what?” one asked.

Marshy knelt to their level. Her voice trembled—not from fear, but from courage forming inside her ribs.

“I forgive you.”

The words were simple. Quiet. But they fell upon the boys like a sudden hush, the kind that comes before a holy moment.

“You... what?” the taller boy stuttered.

“I forgive you,” she repeated. “Not because what you said was kind. It wasn’t. But I know you probably didn’t think it through. And... I’ve said foolish things too.”

The boys blinked in disbelief. No anger. No punishment. No retaliation.

Just mercy.

One of the boys looked down at his feet. “My older brother calls me names,” he admitted, voice cracking a little. “Sometimes I just repeat them to feel... bigger.”

The other boy nodded reluctantly. “And I just follow him. I don’t know why. It just happens.”

Marshy felt her heart soften.

She reached out and placed a hand on the well’s stone edge. “All of us do things we don’t think about. But when someone forgives us... it helps us grow.”

The boys looked at her carefully—really looked—and something in their eyes shifted. The hardness melted. The silliness faded. In its place was sincerity.

“We’re... sorry, Marshy,” the taller boy murmured.

“Yeah,” the other whispered. “We shouldn’t have made fun of you.”

Marshy smiled gently. Not triumphant. Not superior. Just warm.

“Thank you.”

The boys shuffled off, quieter than before, changed in small but real ways.

Sawyer hurried to her side as Marshy returned to the center of the square. Rocco waddled behind him, crumbs covering his cheeks.

“That was unbelievable,” Sawyer said breathlessly. “How did you—? Why did you—?”

Marshy shrugged. Her eyes glistened with both relief and wonder.

“Because mercy shows God’s heart more than any lesson,” she whispered. “We’ve been learning about who God is through creation, through stories, through the stars. But mercy—mercy is where we actually *imitate* Him.”

Alaric approached, his presence as still and steady as a stone on the riverbed.

“Marshy,” he said softly, “today you stepped into one of the deepest mysteries of God.”

She blinked. “Mystery?”

“Mercy,” Alaric said, “is the place where God’s heart meets human weakness. It does more than forgive—it transforms. It reshapes. It restores holiness where pain once lived.”

Sawyer looked thoughtful. “So... mercy is stronger than justice?”

“Both have their place,” Alaric replied. “But only mercy teaches us what God is truly like. Only mercy opens the door to His house. And only mercy prepares our hearts to enter.”

Marshy touched her chest lightly. “It... hurt to forgive.”

Alaric nodded knowingly. “Real mercy always costs something. But every act of mercy teaches your soul to love like God loves.”

She exhaled slowly.

“And that,” Alaric finished, “is why humans do not begin in Heaven. We must learn God’s heart before entering His home.”

Marshy lifted her chin, the light of understanding settling into her eyes like dawn breaking.

That day, she didn’t feel smaller because of the mockery.

She felt larger—expanded by love, stretched by grace, strengthened by mercy freely given.

And for the rest of the journey, Sawyer and Rocco walked a little closer to her, as though they, too, were learning from the quiet bravery of her mercy-filled heart.

Chapter 13 — *Rocco Feels Unimportant*

The path leading out of Calendor wound between rolling hills and flowering meadows, glowing under the soft afternoon sun. Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco made their way along it with no particular hurry—Alaric had sent them out to “let creation teach whatever lesson it wished to give today.” That usually meant something unexpected, something quiet and simple that grew into something surprisingly deep.

But today, Sawyer noticed something unusual: Rocco was...silent.

Not his normal silent, either. Rocco was a rock—he didn’t chatter incessantly—but he usually hummed contentedly, or wiggled when excited, or made a little *hrmph* sound when thinking. Today he trudged along with his pebble-sized eyes half-lidded, shoulders slumped, and his steps heavy—not physically heavy (Rocco was always heavy), but spiritually heavy.

Sawyer slowed his pace until he walked beside him.

“You okay, Rocco?”

Rocco didn’t answer at first. He kept waddling, head angled toward the ground.

Finally, he muttered, “I don’t think I’m very important.”

Sawyer blinked. Marshy stopped ahead of them, surprised.

“Rocco,” she said gently, coming back toward him, “what makes you say that?”

Rocco let out a long, gravelly sigh. “I’m just... a rock. I don’t do big things. I don’t teach lessons like Alaric. I don’t help people like Marshy. I don’t lead like Sawyer. I don’t even... have talents.” His voice got smaller. “I can’t sing. I can’t write. I can’t even float in a river. I just sink.”

Sawyer winced, remembering Rocco’s earnest but disastrous attempt to swim days earlier.

Rocco continued, “When we talk about knowing God through creation, I hear about stars and mountains and rivers and sparrows and trees. Beautiful things. Important things. But who talks about rocks?” He kicked a pebble dully. “Not even God, probably.”

Marshy opened her mouth to respond, but Sawyer touched her arm gently. He wanted to try.

He knelt down beside Rocco so that he was eye-level with the small stone-bodied friend.

“Rocco,” Sawyer said carefully, “can I tell you what I think? Honestly?”

Rocco shrugged. “If you want.”

“I think you’re wrong.”

Rocco’s eyes widened in shock. “Wrong?”

“Completely wrong,” Sawyer said, folding his arms like a knight trying to look authoritative. “You’re one of the most important reminders we have.”

“Of what?” Rocco grumbled. “Gravity?”

Sawyer smiled softly.

“Of God.”

Rocco blinked. “Me?”

Marshy nodded, crouching beside them. “Yes, you.”

They sat together at the base of a large oak tree. Sunlight filtered through the leaves, scattering gold patterns across the grass. Rocco settled between Sawyer and Marshy, still puzzled.

Sawyer leaned back against the trunk. “Rocco, do you remember what Jesus told the Pharisees when they tried to silence the people?”

Rocco thought for a moment, then shook his head.

“He said,” Sawyer answered slowly, “‘If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.’”

Rocco perked up a little. “He said that?”

“Yes,” Marshy smiled. “Rocks were part of His lesson. He chose *your* kind of creation to explain worship.”

Rocco blinked in disbelief.

Sawyer continued. “In Scripture, rocks are everywhere. God is called a rock—strong, steady, unchanging. Moses struck a rock and water came out. Jacob used a rock as a

pillow when he dreamed of heaven. The Law was carved on stone. And even the tomb of Jesus had a giant rock guarding it—until it rolled away.”

Rocco’s pebble eyes grew wider and wider, glowing faintly like two little moons.

Marshy added with gentle reverence, “Rocks last. They endure wind, rain, storms, time. They hold the memory of ages. And you, Rocco—you’ve lived for centuries. You probably know things that no human alive today remembers.”

Rocco stared at his hands, turning them slowly. “I guess I’ve... seen a lot.”

Sawyer nodded. “And you’re part of creation. Every creature—every part of creation—reflects something of God. Mountains show His majesty. Rivers show His constancy. Birds show His care. Trees show His growth.”

“And rocks?” Rocco whispered, leaning forward.

Sawyer smiled.

“Rocks show that God is steady. Faithful. Strong. Permanent. You remind us that God isn’t blown away by storms or changed by moods. He endures.”

Marshy touched Rocco’s shoulder gently. “You reflect God’s steadfastness more than any of us.”

Rocco stared into the distance, thinking. “But... I don’t do anything big. I don’t change the world.”

Sawyer shook his head. “Who said you have to be big to reveal God? Look at the sparrow we found. Look at a mustard seed. Look at a drop of water.” He gestured around them at the vast landscape. “Creation isn’t important just because it’s grand. It’s important because God made it and loves it.”

Marshy leaned her head against her knees. “And when you love someone, everything they make matters.”

Rocco’s breath hitched. No one had ever said it quite that way before.

Sawyer went on, “Besides, you’ve helped us more than you think. You make us laugh when we’re sad. You remind us not to take ourselves too seriously. You show us beauty in small things. You’re patient and gentle. You listen. Those things matter.”

Rocco hesitated. “Really?”

“Really,” Sawyer and Marshy said together.

Just then, a breeze moved through the meadow, rustling the grass around them. And for reasons he couldn’t fully explain, Rocco felt the wind as if it were a comforting hand, brushing his stone surface like a blessing.

“I... never thought God could use someone small like me,” he murmured.

Sawyer exhaled softly, understanding blooming in his eyes. “Rocco, creation is full of small things doing holy work. Dirt grows food. Pebbles shape rivers. Moss softens harsh places. Even tiny insects keep forests alive.”

Marshy added, “God doesn’t measure importance the way we do. He doesn’t see ‘big’ and ‘small.’ He sees love, and purpose, and the reflection of His own heart.”

Rocco looked up at both of them, voice trembling slightly. “So... I’m part of His creation too?”

Sawyer placed a hand gently on Rocco’s back. “You don’t just belong to creation, Rocco. You teach us about it. You’ve been reminding us every day that God is near—steady, strong, humble enough to reveal Himself in the smallest of things.”

Marshy smiled. “And that means you’re not ‘just a rock.’ You’re part of the story God is telling.”

Rocco let out a tiny, shaky breath. It wasn’t quite a cry, but if rocks *could* cry, it would have been close.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “I... I think I understand.”

Sawyer grinned. “Good. Because we’d be lost without you.”

Rocco puffed up a little—not arrogantly, but gratefully. A warm, quiet pride settled into him. Not the pride that seeks attention, but the kind that comes from knowing one’s place in the world—chosen, cherished, designed.

He lifted his rocky chin. “Well... I guess rocks *do* have purpose.”

Sawyer laughed. “Of course they do.”

Rocco nudged him playfully. “And I guess I’ll keep being your reminder that God doesn’t forget the small things.”

Sawyer shoved him gently. “Deal.”

Marshy giggled. “Let’s get back before Alaric thinks we’ve gotten lost.”

They walked on together, the sun lowering behind them in warm, honey-colored rays.

And as they went, Rocco hummed again—not with uncertainty this time, but with quiet joy.

Because he finally understood:

Even the smallest part of creation can echo the vastness of God’s love.
And in God’s story...

Nothing is unimportant.

Chapter 14 — *The Forest of Echoes*

The Forest of Echoes lay on the northern edge of Calendor, where the trees grew older than the memory of any living villager. Their trunks towered skyward like cathedral pillars, and their branches intertwined so thickly that sunlight trickled down in scattered gold threads. Few children ventured there; the place was known to be strange, mysterious... almost alive.

But today, Alaric had sent Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco into the forest with a simple instruction:

“Listen.”

Not explore.

Not search.

Not investigate.

Only *listen*.

So they entered the forest quietly, each step cushioned by moss and fallen leaves.

Almost immediately, Marshy felt something different in the air. The forest seemed to hold its breath, as though waiting. A faint breeze rustled the treetops, carrying whispers none of them could decipher.

Rocco gulped. “I don’t like places that whisper. Stones don’t whisper.”

Sawyer shrugged. “Maybe they do, and we just don’t hear them.”

“Well, we shouldn’t!” Rocco huffed.

Marshy smiled but said nothing. Something in the forest tugged at her attention. Something... calling.

As they ventured deeper, Sawyer cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, “HELLO!”

A moment later, a perfect “HELLO!” echoed back—but not from the same direction. It came diagonally, as though the sound had turned a corner.

“That’s odd,” Sawyer murmured. “Echoes normally bounce back straight.”

Marshy stepped forward. She called softly, “Is anyone there?”

But the echo that returned did not sound exactly like her. It carried her tone, yes, but it was softer, gentler—as though filtered through something peaceful.

Sawyer raised a brow. “Marshy... your echo is nicer than you are.”

She elbowed him. “Be serious!”

Rocco waddled forward and shouted his name: “ROCCO!”

His echo came back sounding deeper, richer, almost ancient—as though the forest remembered every rock it had ever sheltered.

Rocco froze. “That sounded like one of my great-great-great-great-grandparents.”

Sawyer laughed, but Marshy wasn’t laughing. She was thinking.

“What is this place?” she whispered.

The answer came in the form of another echo—her own breath exhaled, returned as a sigh not quite her own.

They walked until they reached a clearing lit by a shaft of sunlight. Wildflowers grew in a ring, and a single enormous cedar tree stood in the center. The air hummed lightly, like a choir warming up.

Marshy sat on a fallen log, deep in thought. Sawyer and Rocco plopped down beside her.

“I don’t understand,” Marshy said finally. “Why do the echoes change? Why do they sound like versions of us that aren’t us?”

Sawyer rubbed his chin. “Maybe the forest is magical?”

“It is magical,” Rocco said. “Everything here has too many feelings. I can sense them. Rocks in this forest remember everything.”

Marshy turned to him sharply. “Rocco... say that again.”

“Rocks remember,” he repeated.

Marshy stood. Her voice was clearer now. “That’s it. The forest isn’t just repeating us. It’s *reflecting* us.”

Sawyer frowned. “What’s the difference?”

Marshy looked around the clearing, her eyes full of dawning wonder. “Repeating is copying. Reflecting is showing what lies inside.”

She walked toward the great cedar and placed her hand on its bark.

“When I spoke,” she continued, “the forest didn’t just echo my words—it echoed something *true* about me. Something gentle. Something God put there.”

Rocco blinked. “So when my echo sounded ancient...?”

“Maybe because you carry the wisdom of ages,” Marshy said.

Sawyer whistled. “Then what about my echo? It sounded loud, strong, energetic.”

Marshy smiled. “Because you *are* loud, strong, and energetic.”

Sawyer puffed his chest. “That’s a compliment, right?”

The forest sent back a faint echo: “Right... right... right...”

Rocco shivered. “Okay, the forest doesn’t need to agree with everything we say.”

The sunlight shifted, and the clearing brightened just enough for them to see dust motes swirling in the air like tiny dancers. Marshy sat again, her face filled now with a kind of holy seriousness.

She spoke softly, more to the forest than to the others.

“Everyone reflects God differently. Like echoes shaped by trees and stones, people are shaped by their lives, their hearts, their gifts. No two echoes sound the same... because no two souls are the same.”

Sawyer listened quietly.

Marshy continued, “God doesn’t copy people. He creates each person as a unique reflection of Himself. Some reflect His strength. Some reflect His gentleness. Some reflect His joy or His creativity or His wisdom.”

Her voice softened.

“And some—like me—reflect His questions.”

Sawyer tilted his head. “Questions?”

Marshy nodded. “Yes. God invites us to ask, to wonder, to search. My echo sounded gentle because maybe God put that gentleness in me, even if I don’t always see it.”

She looked up through the branches toward the sky.

“God reflects Himself in ways we rarely expect. Through forests... through echoes... through people who are all different.”

Rocco stood proudly. “And through rocks!”

“Yes, Rocco,” she laughed. “Even through rocks.”

Sawyer tossed a pebble gently in the air. “So this forest is like a lesson built by God?”

Marshy nodded. “A lesson about identity. About how every person carries a different facet of God’s beauty.”

The forest around them hummed—soft, approving, embracing.

Sawyer stepped forward and shouted again, “WE ARE ALL HIS!”

The echo returned layered with warmth:

“All His... all His... all His...”

Marshy closed her eyes. “Every echo different. Every echo belonging.”

They stayed in the clearing until the sun dipped low, speaking softly, listening to the forest respond with voices shaped by their own hearts.

When they finally returned home, Marshy walked with a new quiet confidence. Not boastful. Not proud.

Just... secure.

She understood now:

To reflect God is not to be identical to others
—but to let His light strike the shape of your life
and echo in the way only *you* can echo.

And as they left the forest behind, Marshy heard one last whisper carried on the breeze—her own voice, but fuller, truer:

“You are Mine... Mine... Mine...”

And she knew the forest had spoken the truth.

Chapter 15 — The Temple of Remembering

The Temple of Remembering stood at the highest point of the hill country, its white-stone pillars rising like fingers reaching toward heaven. Sawyer had seen sketches of it in Alaric's scrolls, but nothing prepared him for the sheer beauty of the structure. Moss grew in the crevices between stones, a soft green crown around its base, as though nature itself honored it.

Marshy stepped forward slowly, almost reverently. "It feels...alive," she whispered.

Alaric smiled. "It remembers."

Rocco clacked along the stone path. "Remembers what?"

"Everything," Alaric replied. "Everyone."

The doors of the temple were carved with scenes from Calendor's earliest days—shepherds watching star-splattered skies, farmers shaping the land, elders teaching children. In each carving, people worked, sang, built, and prayed. The images flowed one into another like a long river of human longing.

Sawyer traced a finger across one of the carvings, the outline of a woman holding a lantern. "Who is she?"

"A seeker," Alaric said. "Just like you. Just like all of us."

Inside the Temple

The moment they entered, cool air wrapped around them. Torches burned steadily along the walls, their flames reflecting off polished stone. Every inch of the temple interior was covered with carvings—thousands of them—depicting people from centuries past. Some were kings and queens, robed in finery. Others were farmers with calloused hands, children with wide eyes, soldiers holding shields, healers gathering herbs.

But no single figure stood above the rest. All were carved at the same height, side by side.

Marshy noticed first. "There's no throne," she murmured.

"No place of honor," Sawyer added.

“That is the point,” Alaric said softly. “Here, every story matters. Every soul was created to seek the One who first sought them.”

The Carvings That Follow You

They walked deeper into the temple until they reached a wide circular chamber. A domed ceiling rose above them, painted with a night sky so detailed it looked almost real. In the center of the chamber stood a massive pillar carved with countless hands reaching upward.

As Sawyer stepped closer, he gasped. The carvings on the walls seemed to shift—subtle, almost imperceptible—as though the figures were turning their faces toward him.

“Are they...moving?” Marshy asked, pressing close to Sawyer’s arm.

Alaric nodded. “They move when you approach because they are about you. No, not *your story* specifically, but your search. Every human heart, across time, has asked the same questions you are beginning to ask now.”

Sawyer felt his chest tighten. “What questions?”

Alaric walked toward the pillar and rested his hand against it. His voice grew soft, almost prayer-like.

“Who is God?

Where is He?

How do I know Him?

And does He know me?”

The echoes of his words faded slowly, as though even the stones were listening.

The Lesson of the Temple

Marshy stepped toward a carving of a young woman kneeling by a riverbank. “Why would people carve their whole history like this?” she asked.

Alaric’s answer was patient and profound. “Because humanity is forgetful. We forget the ways God has whispered to us through fields and music, through friendship and forgiveness. We forget how He has met us in storms and in silence. So our ancestors carved their seeking into stone, that we might remember what they learned—that God reveals Himself through His world and through His people.”

Rocco studied a carving of a simple stone mason. “But some of these people weren’t special. They didn’t do miracles or lead armies.”

“And that,” Alaric said with a gentle smile, “is precisely why they are here. God is not known only through the extraordinary. He is found in the ordinary—the daily kindness, the steady faithfulness, the quiet hope.”

Sawyer swallowed. “So even someone like me...a prince who makes mistakes...someone who doesn’t always understand...”

“Especially someone like you,” Alaric said. “Every soul must learn who God is for themselves. No title, no heritage, no power can replace the journey of the heart.”

Marshy turned from the wall, eyes shining. “It’s like the temple is telling us we’re part of the same story.”

“Yes,” Alaric said. “One long story of people discovering that God is not far, but near.”

Sawyer’s Moment of Illumination

As they stood in silence, Sawyer felt something stir within him—a gentle warmth, an awakening. Looking around the temple, he realized that none of the carvings were perfect. Every figure had rough edges, uneven lines, or small imperfections.

“Why are the carvings like this?” he asked. “Why didn’t they smooth them out?”

Alaric placed a hand over Sawyer’s. “Because the imperfections matter. They show that God meets us as we are, not as we pretend to be. Perfection is not the door to knowing Him—honesty is. This temple teaches that all people, through all ages, have stumbled, sought, risen, and tried again.”

Sawyer thought of his pride at the broken bridge. Marshy thought of her mercy toward the child who mocked her. Rocco thought of his fear of being “just a rock.” And somehow, the temple seemed to gather all those moments and welcome them.

The Final Engraving

Before leaving, Alaric led them to the back wall where a single empty stone panel waited. Unlike the others, it had no carving—just a smooth, blank surface.

“What’s this for?” Marshy asked.

“For you,” Alaric said quietly. “For your generation. The story of how you will seek God, how you will learn to see Him in the world He made... has yet to be carved.”

The three friends stood before the empty stone, feeling the weight and wonder of that truth.

Sawyer finally whispered, “So the story isn’t finished.”

Alaric nodded. “The story never is. Each life adds a line. Each act of love adds a carving.”

And as they left the Temple of Remembering, they felt its silent promise following them—
that they were part of something ancient, beautiful, and still unfolding.

Chapter 16 — A Conversation With a Shepherd

The path down from the Temple of Remembering wound through the golden foothills of Calendor. The afternoon sun lay gently over the land, spreading warmth across the tall grasses. Here the wind moved in soft waves, rippling the hills like the breathing of some great, peaceful creature. Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco walked in thoughtful silence—each still carrying the weight of what they had seen in the temple’s carvings.

Eventually, the trail curved toward a quiet valley where a small flock of sheep grazed. A single shepherd stood among them, leaning on a wooden staff polished by years of use. He was neither young nor old—sun-browned skin, bright eyes that smiled even before his mouth did, and a slowness in his movements that suggested a deep and practiced calm.

“Good afternoon,” he called, voice warm as bread from the oven.

Sawyer waved. “We’re just passing through. Your sheep... they seem peaceful.”

The shepherd chuckled. “Well, that’s the hope. Peace in a flock doesn’t happen by accident.”

Marshy stepped closer, fascinated. “You know all of them?” she asked.

The shepherd’s eyes softened. “Every last one.” He pointed with his staff. “That one there—Mira—she always wanders to the far edge of the pasture. Likes the taste of the grass there more than any other. And that big fellow? Borren. Strong as an ox but startles at the buzz of a bee.”

Sawyer looked bewildered. “But you have so many! How can you keep them straight?”

The shepherd tapped his heart. “Time. Patience. Presence. The more I’m with them, the more I see what makes each one unique.” Then he added, “Love helps, too.”

Rocco tilted his stony head. “So... you choose to know them that well? Even though they’re just sheep?”

The shepherd gave a quiet laugh. “Just sheep? They’re mine. They trust me. And trust is a delicate thing—earned slowly, lost quickly, and precious always.”

Sawyer’s brows pulled together. “Do they ever get lost?”

“Oh yes,” the shepherd answered, leaning on his staff again. “Sometimes one slips away without meaning to—chasing butterflies or the scent of wildflowers. Other times a stubborn one decides it knows a better path.” He gave Sawyer a knowing look.

Sawyer felt his cheeks heat at the memory of his pride on the broken bridge.

“But either way,” the shepherd continued, “when one wanders, I go after it. Not because it deserves rescuing more than the others, but because love doesn’t leave anyone behind.”

Marshy asked softly, “You go even if it’s far? Even if it’s dangerous?”

“Of course,” he replied. “A good shepherd goes where the sheep cannot. That’s what care is—stepping into the places others fear so those you love don’t have to.”

The shepherd sat on a smooth rock and motioned for them to join him. “Most people think shepherding is about control,” he said. “But it’s mostly about waiting. Waiting for them to trust my voice. Waiting for them to learn the safe paths. Waiting for them to grow strong.”

He picked up a strand of wild grass and rolled it between his fingers. “Some think patience is weakness. But patience is what lets love reach its proper depth.”

Sawyer thought of Alaric’s earlier lessons: humility, mercy, the search for God in the ordinary. “So... knowing your sheep takes gentleness,” he said slowly.

“And attention,” the shepherd added. “I watch them closely—not to catch them doing wrong, but to understand what they need.”

Marshy smiled. “That’s... surprisingly beautiful.”

The shepherd shrugged modestly. “Shepherding is simple. But simple things often reveal the deepest truths.”

Rocco leaned forward. “Alaric says God knows us like a shepherd knows his flock.”

The shepherd’s face grew thoughtful, almost reverent. “Ah. Yes. But God knows you even more deeply than I know these.” He gestured to his sheep. “My knowledge of them is limited—I learn a little more each day. But God? He knew you before you learned to walk. Before you learned your first word. Before your heart had ever been broken or healed.”

Sawyer swallowed. Something inside him stirred—both comfort and awe. “So God doesn’t just know what we do... He knows why?”

“Exactly,” the shepherd said. “He knows the fears you hide behind brave words. The hopes you whisper only to yourself. He knows your strengths, even the ones you haven’t discovered yet.”

Marshy’s voice quivered slightly. “And... He cares about those things?”

“Oh yes. God cares so deeply that nothing in your heart is too small for His attention. A shepherd must be close to know his sheep well. And God is closer still.”

The shepherd suddenly whistled—a gentle, melodic sound. Instantly, the sheep lifted their heads. Some began to move toward him, others simply bleated in recognition.

Sawyer blinked. “They know your voice.”

“They trust it,” the shepherd said. “A sheep won’t follow a stranger’s call. They sense when a voice comes from love.”

He leaned in a little, lowering his voice. “God calls each of you, too—but not always with words. Sometimes through a quiet thought. Sometimes through a stirring in the heart. Sometimes through a friend who shows you kindness. But the more you walk with Him, the easier it becomes to recognize His voice.”

Marshy looked at Sawyer, eyes bright. “We’re learning, aren’t we?”

Sawyer nodded slowly. “We are.”

Rocco gave a happy little clack. “And God knows even me?”

The shepherd chuckled warmly. “Oh yes. Every part of creation has a place in His story—even a brave, talkative rock.”

As the sun dipped toward the horizon, painting the sky with amber and copper, the shepherd rose and dusted off his hands.

“Remember what you’ve seen today,” he said. “Just as a shepherd stays near his flock, God stays near you. He knows your steps, your thoughts, your dreams. He watches not to scold, but to guide. Not to judge, but to love.”

Sawyer felt a quiet peace settle in his chest—like the closing of a long-open door. Marshy breathed deeply, her earlier worries dissolving into calm certainty. Rocco felt taller somehow, as though the shepherd’s words had strengthened every grain of his stony form.

“Thank you,” Sawyer said.

The shepherd touched two fingers to his brow in a gentle salute. “Safe travels, seekers.”

And as they walked away, the shepherd’s sheep followed him with complete trust, the picture of a flock secure in the presence of one who truly knew them.

Sawyer whispered into the wind, “God knows us even better.”

And for the first time, he felt the truth of it—not just in his mind, but deep, deep in his heart.

Chapter 17 — The Festival of Light

The road back toward Calendor's capital wound through rolling meadows and soft hills that glowed beneath the gathering dusk. Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco had just finished their visit with the shepherd, and their hearts felt full—quiet, reflective, almost tender with the weight of what they were learning. But as they drew closer to the city, the air began to change.

It shimmered.

Not with heat or dust or wind—but with *anticipation*. Music drifted on the breeze, laughter bubbled in distant pockets, and colors blossomed in the sky like slow, blooming flowers.

Marshy inhaled sharply. “Oh! I forgot—today is the Festival of Light!”

Sawyer blinked. “The what?”

Rocco bounced in excitement, small pebbles clicking within him. “The best night of the year! And the heaviest! I once got mistaken for a lantern stone and—well, that's a story for another time.”

They hurried through the gates just as night began to fall. The city had transformed. Lanterns hung from rooftops, each glowing with soft, warm fire. Ribbons of light—magic woven by Calendor's artisans—floated overhead in sweeping arcs of gold, blue, and rose. Children ran in spinning circles, sparklers tracing bright trails in their wake. Musicians played near the fountain, their instruments tuned to joy itself.

It felt as if the entire city was breathing one great breath of celebration.

Marshy wandered ahead, drawn to the vibrancy of the crowd. Everywhere she looked, there were smiles—real smiles. Mothers carrying their little ones. Elderly men exchanging stories around candlelit tables. Merchants offering sweets shaped like stars. Friends calling out to one another over the music.

She felt her heart expanding in her chest.

“You know,” she said softly, “I always thought celebrations were just... fun. But this is different. It feels like... like joy overflowing.”

Alaric, who had caught up to them silently, stepped beside her. “Good. You're beginning to see.”

Marshy turned. “See what?”

“That joy *itself* is a signpost,” Alaric replied. “A reflection of the One who made us.”

Sawyer tilted his head. “How can joy reflect God? Isn’t joy just... happy feelings?”

Alaric smiled, but with the familiar patience of a teacher preparing to plant a deeper truth. “Joy is more than happiness. Happiness is brief, like a spark. Joy is like a lantern flame—steady, warm, able to light others without losing itself.”

Marshy nodded slowly. “So when we share joy... we’re sharing something from God?”

“Exactly,” Alaric said. “Joy that brings people together—joy that lifts burdens, heals wounds, and makes strangers feel like family—that joy comes from the heart of God. It is His delight echoing in us.”

Trumpets suddenly sounded near the central square. The crowd shifted, forming a wide circle around a raised platform. Elder Mira, the wise woman who tended the city library, stepped forward holding a single lantern.

“This,” she proclaimed, “is the first light of the Festival! A reminder that even in the darkest night, one light can guide many.”

Thousands of lanterns lowered in reverence.

Elder Mira lifted her lantern high. “We light our lamps not only to brighten our paths, but to brighten the paths of others!”

She lit a nearby lantern. That lantern lit another. And another. And another.

A wave of light rippled through the square—like a sunrise in miniature.

Marshy felt tears prick her eyes.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

“It’s communion,” Alaric said. “Not the bread-and-cup kind. The life kind. Each person here receives light and gives it. That’s how God’s goodness spreads.”

Marshy watched children beam as their lanterns were lit. She watched a tired merchant’s posture soften in the glow. She watched an elderly widow hold her lantern close to her heart, eyes shining with memory and hope intertwined.

And she understood something she had never considered:

Joy is not selfish. Joy is meant to be shared.

Near the musicians, dancers gathered in lines that curled and intertwined like flowing rivers. Marshy grabbed Sawyer's hand. "Come on!"

Sawyer sputtered. "I—dance? I don't even know the steps!"

She laughed and tugged him anyway. "I'll show you!"

Rocco rolled to the edge of the circle, cheering them with a rhythmic tapping—his version of clapping.

Sawyer stumbled at first, tripping over a man's foot and nearly crashing into a pair of spinning girls. But the man just laughed and gave Sawyer a thumbs-up, and the girls caught his shoulders and spun him right back into rhythm.

Marshy spun too, her hair loose, her eyes bright, her cheeks warm from exertion and emotion. She felt alive. Alive in the way people feel when they belong—when their laughter becomes part of a larger laughter.

"Rocco!" she called. "Dance with us!"

"I am dancing!" he protested, wobbling in tight enthusiastic circles. "These are extremely advanced rock steps."

Marshy laughed harder than she had in months.

Alaric watched from the edge of the crowd, arms crossed loosely, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

To see them laughing... to see them learning the goodness of God not through lectures or scrolls but through the warmth of community—it was the kind of lesson that stayed.

Later, when the children collapsed onto a stone bench to catch their breath, Alaric sat beside them.

"You felt it, didn't you?" he asked.

Marshy nodded, still glowing from within. "Yes. But I don't know how to put it into words."

"I'll help," Alaric said. "Tonight you've seen that joy isn't an escape from life's hardships—it's a gift from God that strengthens us to face them. In celebration, we glimpse God's generosity. His nearness. His desire for His people to live in communion, not isolation."

He gestured around them. “Look at these people—laughing together, sharing light, carrying one another’s burdens even if just for an evening. When community thrives, God’s goodness shines through.”

Sawyer leaned back, exhaling deeply. “So... joy is holy?”

Alaric’s eyes softened. “Very much so.”

Marshy felt that truth settle gently over her heart, like a shawl placed around her shoulders by loving hands.

As the festival reached its height, lanterns were released into the night sky. They rose slowly—hundreds, then thousands—each glowing like a tiny star awakened.

Marshy watched one lantern drift upward, its flame steady, its glow widening as it rose.

Rocco murmured, “Do you think God sees these lights?”

Marshy answered softly, “I think He sees the light in us.”

Sawyer, unusually quiet, whispered, “And tonight... that light is bright.”

The trio stood side by side as the lanterns climbed higher, filling the sky with a soft golden constellation.

For the first time, Marshy understood that joy wasn’t just something humans felt.

Joy was something God shared.

And tonight, Calendor reflected that joy back to Him—a city glowing not just with lanterns, but with gratitude, community, laughter, and love.

A small whisper rose in Marshy’s heart, gentle as the lantern’s ascent:

“Before we enter His house, we learn to recognize His goodness.”

And tonight, she had seen it clearly—shining in every face, every light, every note of music, every shared laugh.

Chapter 18 — Sawyer's Night of Doubt

Night had settled over Calendor with a gentleness that made the world feel smaller—closer—wrapped in a quiet dark-blue cloak stitched with stars. The Festival of Light had ended hours ago, its lanterns now far beyond the clouds, drifting toward distant horizons or already extinguished in the night wind. But the laughter and music had faded, replaced by crickets, soft rustling leaves, and the hush that comes after a long, full day.

Sawyer could not sleep.

He lay in his bed staring at the canopy above him, listening to the silence, feeling it press against him. He felt restless in a way he couldn't explain. Something tugged at him—an echo of curiosity mixed with unease. After tossing for what felt like forever, he finally slipped from his blankets and padded softly through the castle halls, careful not to wake anyone.

Except someone was already awake.

Alaric sat in the courtyard by the small reflecting pool, a lantern dimly glowing at his side. He didn't look surprised to see Sawyer.

"Can't sleep?" he asked gently.

Sawyer shook his head. "No."

Alaric patted the stone bench beside him. Sawyer sat.

They listened to the rippling water for a long while before Sawyer finally whispered the words he had been afraid to say:

"Why does God feel far away sometimes?"

Alaric turned slightly, studying him with quiet understanding. "Tell me what you mean."

Sawyer swallowed. "Tonight was beautiful. Everyone was laughing and celebrating. And I felt... close to God, I guess. Like He was right there in the lanterns and the music and the joy. But now..." He curled his fingers into his tunic. "Now it feels like He's gone. Like He was here, and then He stepped away."

His voice cracked in that last word. He clenched his jaw to hide it.

Alaric nodded slowly. "Ah. A night of doubt."

Sawyer blinked. “Is that... normal?”

“Very,” Alaric said with a soft smile. “Even the greatest saints had nights like this. Even King David wrote about it. Even prophets. Even ordinary people trying their best.”

Sawyer looked down at his hands. “But why? Why would God feel close one moment and far away the next?”

Alaric leaned back, folding his hands in his lap. For a moment, he didn’t speak. Instead, he gazed at the sky, at the dark stretches between stars where the eye sees nothing but the heart senses depth.

“Faith,” he finally said, “is not built only on moments of feeling close to God. If it were, our trust would depend on emotions alone—and emotions rise and fall like the tides.”

Sawyer nodded slowly.

Alaric continued, “But God is not the tide. He is the ocean. Sometimes we stand at the shore and feel His waves touching our feet. Other times the water pulls back, and we see more sand than sea. And in those moments, we *learn to walk toward Him*. Faith grows strongest in quiet moments when we do not feel Him—not because He is absent, but because He is teaching us to seek Him.”

Sawyer frowned thoughtfully. “So... God isn’t far away?”

“No,” Alaric said firmly. “He is never far. But sometimes we don’t *feel* Him because He is inviting us deeper—beyond feelings, into trust.”

The courtyard felt still, as if listening.

Sawyer looked at the ripples spreading across the pool. “But how do I find Him again? Or know He’s really there?”

Alaric picked up a pebble—Rocco-sized, but thankfully not Rocco—and dropped it into the water. The ripples expanded outward in perfect circles.

“Creation,” Alaric said, “is God whispering to us. His voice is in the night sky, in the steady course of the river, in the gentleness of a sparrow, in the laughter of friends, in the quiet of your heart. God speaks through beauty, order, wonder, and the things that stir us even when we cannot explain why.”

He pointed upward. “Look at the stars. They shine every night, whether or not clouds hide them. God’s presence is the same—constant, steady, even when unseen.”

Sawyer breathed out, letting the metaphor sink into him like warm tea spreading through chilled hands.

“But why does it feel so... lonely?” Sawyer whispered. “Why does the quiet feel empty?”

Alaric shook his head. “The quiet is not empty. It is full of invitation. Full of God’s nearness. Sometimes we mistake silence for distance when, in truth, silence is God letting our hearts slow down enough to hear Him.”

He placed a hand lightly on Sawyer’s shoulder. “Feeling far from God doesn’t mean you are far. It means you are being invited to look for Him in new ways.”

Sawyer let that settle. He didn’t understand it fully—but he felt it. Not as certainty, but as hope.

A gentle rustle sounded behind them. Rocco rolled into the courtyard, bleary-eyed—if a rock could be bleary-eyed.

“I felt the prince being sad,” he muttered. “Rock senses. Very advanced. I recommend cookies.”

Sawyer actually laughed. A small laugh, but real.

Alaric smiled. “See? There He is again. God weaving comfort through a very round, very persistent friend.”

Rocco puffed up proudly. “God uses rocks. It’s biblical.”

Sawyer leaned against Alaric, feeling the calm beginning to seep into him. The doubt hadn’t vanished—but it no longer felt like a storm. More like a cloud passing over a moon that remained whether or not he could see it.

“Alaric?” Sawyer whispered.

“Yes?”

“Will I ever stop having nights like this?”

Alaric shook his head. “No. Doubt comes and goes, like seasons. But each time it comes, you learn more about the God who holds you through it.”

Sawyer nodded, strangely comforted.

Alaric stood and extinguished the lantern. Only the moonlight remained, silver and soft.

“Come,” he said. “The night is quiet. God is near. And tomorrow, creation will whisper again.”

With Rocco rolling after them like a very devoted pebble sentry, Sawyer followed Alaric back inside.

And as he walked, he looked once more at the stars and felt—just barely, just faintly—the warmth of a whisper:

I am here.

And even in doubt, that whisper was enough.

Chapter 19 — The Lost Child

The following morning dawned calm and golden, the kind of morning that made Calendor look peaceful and whole—like nothing bad could ever happen within its borders. Birds flitted between rooftops. Bakers called out their warm greetings. Market stalls unfolded in a patchwork of color. Everything seemed in perfect order.

But before Sawyer and Marshy even reached the marketplace, the harmony of the morning was broken by a desperate cry.

“Please—has anyone seen my son? Elian! Elian!”

A frantic mother hurried from stall to stall, her braided hair unraveling, her hands trembling. Villagers paused mid-step, worry spreading across their faces. Even Rocco, rolling contentedly beside Sawyer a moment before, froze.

Sawyer felt his stomach twist. He had known fear before—storms, dark nights, moments of uncertainty—but this was a different kind of fear. A fear with sharp edges.

Marshy stepped forward. “What happened?”

The mother wiped her eyes. “He was chasing his dog near the eastern grove... and then he was just—gone.”

Alaric approached from behind, his expression grave but steady. “We’ll help. Children,” he said, turning to Sawyer and Marshy, “come with me. Rocco, you too.”

Rocco saluted dramatically. “I roll at your command.”

They reached the grove quickly—an area of tall grass, wildflowers, and towering oaks. But today the grove felt different. Quiet in a way that was not peaceful. Heavy with tension.

Villagers spread out in lines, calling the boy’s name. Sawyer cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted too: “Elian! Eliaaaaan!”

His voice bounced off the trees and returned empty.

Alaric watched the searchers carefully before speaking. “Sawyer,” he said gently, “what do you see in their faces?”

Sawyer studied them—neighbors, friends, strangers who had dropped everything to help. He saw fear, yes, but also determination. Urgency. Love.

“They won’t stop,” Sawyer murmured. “No one is giving up.”

Alaric nodded. “And that,” he said softly, “is what the heart of God is like.”

Sawyer blinked. “What do you mean?”

“God is not indifferent to His children,” Alaric said. “When even one wanders off—lost, confused, frightened—He does not stay in heaven waiting for them to return. He goes *after* them.”

He put a hand on Sawyer’s shoulder. “Just like these people are doing now.”

Sawyer’s chest tightened with a strange, profound ache. “So... God searches for us?”

“Always,” Alaric said. “Every lost heart. Every wandering soul. Every child who strays. God searches not with impatience, but with compassion. With relentless love.”

They continued searching. Marshy checked under thick bushes. Sawyer scanned the tall grass. Rocco rolled in loops, calling, “Elian! Small human! Please respond!”

But as minutes stretched into an hour, Sawyer felt fear growing inside him.

What if they couldn’t find the boy?

He imagined Elian alone, scared, hurt. The thought made Sawyer’s throat tighten. He suddenly understood something he had never considered before:

Love looks like searching.

Love looks like not resting until the lost one is found.

“Alaric,” Sawyer whispered, “is this how God feels all the time? When people forget Him? When they run away from Him?”

Alaric nodded sadly. “Yes, Sawyer. The human heart wanders easily. We lose ourselves in fear, pride, hurt, or confusion. And God looks at us not with anger, but with yearning. He calls out, again and again: ‘*Where are you?*’ Not because He doesn’t know, but because He wants us to answer—to come to Him.”

Sawyer swallowed. “That must... that must hurt Him.”

Alaric breathed deeply. “Love always risks pain. God’s love is no different.”

A sudden shout broke the tension.

“I heard something!” Rocco cried.

He had rolled into a narrow hollow at the groves edge. The tall grass rustled—then a faint whimper rose from within.

“Here! Over here!” Sawyer yelled.

They all rushed toward the sound. Alaric pushed aside the brush, revealing a small child curled at the base of a fallen log. Elian looked up with wide, frightened eyes.

“My... my foot,” he whimpered, clutching his ankle. “I slipped and... and couldn’t get out...”

Sawyer dropped to his knees. “It’s okay. You’re safe now.”

Marshy gently pushed Elian’s hair from his face. Alaric examined the ankle—it was swollen but not broken.

“You did the right thing by staying put,” Alaric said. “We’ll get you home.”

As they lifted Elian and began back toward the village, Sawyer felt something burning in his chest—a warmth he couldn’t explain. A weight lifting.

The lost one had been found.

And in that moment, Sawyer felt God’s love more clearly than in any festival, any lesson, any quiet prayer.

When they returned, the mother ran forward, crying out, gathering her son into trembling arms.

“Oh, thank you—thank you—thank God—you’re safe!”

Sawyer watched them, the relief on her face so powerful it almost hurt to look at. He felt something stir inside him—something sacred.

Marshy whispered, “She never stopped looking.”

“She never would,” Sawyer said.

“And neither would God,” Alaric added quietly.

Sawyer didn’t speak. He didn’t have words large enough, holy enough, to hold what he was feeling. Instead he simply watched the mother hold her child—crying, laughing, kissing his forehead.

It was love in its purest, most desperate form.

And he realized:
This is how God feels about us.
Not distant. Not passive.
But searching. Always searching.
Until we are safe in His arms again.

Later, as they walked back toward the castle, Sawyer finally asked, “Alaric... if God searches for us like that... why do people run away from Him?”

Alaric sighed. “Some don’t know they are loved. Others fear they are unworthy. Some are hurt. Some are proud. Some are simply lost.”

“But He still looks for them?”

“Every moment,” Alaric said. “God’s heart never sleeps.”

Sawyer felt tears prick his eyes. Not sad tears—something deeper. Something like awe.

“Then... then I want to search too,” Sawyer whispered. “For people who feel lost.”

Alaric placed a hand over Sawyer’s heart. “Then your heart is learning to beat like His.”

Rocco, rolling behind them, cleared his throat. “I was *instrumental* in that rescue. Quite literally. I rolled into holiness.”

Sawyer laughed softly, wiping the corner of his eye.

But the truth of the day settled deep inside him, warm as sunlight:

God’s love is a searching love.
A relentless love.
A love that refuses to give up.

And Sawyer knew—he would carry that truth with him always.

Chapter 20 — The Farmer's Field

The sun was still low when Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco followed Alaric down a narrow dirt path that wound through Calendor's farmland. The fields stretched out like patchwork quilts—golden wheat beside emerald barley, rows of leafy vegetables bordered by trellises heavy with late-summer fruit. Dew still sparkled on the ground, turning each step into a soft whisper.

Ahead of them stood a cheerful-looking man in a straw hat, sleeves rolled up, hands covered in soil. He waved broadly as the group approached.

"Morning, Alaric!" he called. "And morning to your young travelers."

"This," Alaric said, "is Bram the farmer. He's going to show you something important today."

Sawyer perked up. "Are we going to learn how to grow wheat?"

"Or how to tell weeds from herbs?" Marshy asked.

"Or how to sit in the dirt and not complain?" Rocco added helpfully.

Bram laughed—a warm, earth-deep laugh. "Well, you might learn all those things," he said, "but mostly you're going to learn how God works."

He reached into a basket and pulled out a small handful of seeds, letting them run through his fingers like tiny grains of promise. "Come," he said. "Walk with me."

They crossed into a portion of the field where the soil looked freshly tilled—soft, dark, and rich. Bram knelt, motioning for the children to join him. Rocco sat beside them, though he had no knees and simply wedged himself comfortably into the dirt.

"See these seeds?" Bram held one up between two fingertips. "To someone who doesn't know farming, they look like nothing. You might think they're dead. But inside"—he tapped the seed with reverence—"is a life waiting for the right time."

Sawyer tilted his head. "So they're alive... but you can't see it?"

"Exactly," Bram replied. "Just like how God works in us. Sometimes you don't feel anything. Sometimes you think nothing is happening. But something is growing beneath the surface."

Marshy ran a finger through the soil beside her. "But not fast."

“No,” Bram said. “Never fast.”

Bram stood and led them toward rows of plants at different stages: tiny sprouts here, larger shoots there, and fully grown stalks waving in the breeze just beyond.

“Look at these,” he said, pointing to a set of tender green shoots barely poking out of the ground. “I planted them weeks ago. To someone impatient, it might seem like they aren’t doing much. But every day, they’re pushing upward, reaching for the sun, rooting themselves deeper.”

He turned to the children.

“Tell me—does a seed grow the moment you demand it to?”

“No,” Sawyer said, frowning thoughtfully.

“Does it hurry because you want it to?”

“No,” Marshy echoed.

“Does it stop growing if you don’t watch it?”

“Absolutely not,” Rocco answered with a gruff certainty.

Bram’s eyes twinkled. “Exactly. Growth is not something we control. It’s something we cooperate with.”

Alaric nodded toward the children. “And this is why I brought you here. You’ve been asking how we prepare to enter God’s house. But the answer is not a step or a door or a test. The answer is time with Him—slow, patient, steady. Like a seed learning to become what it already is.”

They reached the far edge of the field where the grain stood tall—gold and whispering in the breeze.

Bram stretched out his arms. “Look at this. Every stalk you see came from a seed no bigger than a fingernail. But not instantly. Not without seasons of sun and rain and hardship.”

Sawyer stepped closer, letting the wheat slide through his fingers. “It’s beautiful. But I guess... full-grown plants weren’t grown in a day.”

Marshy smiled at the field. “Knowing God is like this, isn’t it? You can’t skip from seed to harvest.”

Bram's voice softened. "Precisely. Children sometimes worry they don't know enough about God. Adults sometimes think the same. But God is not asking for perfection—He is asking for growth."

He knelt again, picking up a clod of soil and crumbling it between his hands. "A farmer doesn't shame the seed for being small. And God doesn't shame us for not being fully grown."

Alaric looked at Sawyer and Marshy with pride. "This journey we're on... it's not just about understanding Heaven. It's about letting your hearts grow into the shape of Heaven."

As Bram continued tending to the plants, Marshy wandered a few steps away, gazing at a small patch where new sprouts were struggling between stones.

She crouched down, touching a fragile leaf.

"They're trying so hard," she whispered.

Alaric approached quietly. "What do you see?"

"That the stones make it harder. But the plants don't quit." She swallowed. "I guess... faith is like that too. Hard things don't mean God is gone—they just mean we're growing roots."

Alaric smiled. "A true insight."

Sawyer and Rocco joined them, standing in the quiet morning sunlight. The field seemed to sing—softly, patiently, full of ancient wisdom.

Bram returned, dusting off his hands. "Children," he said, "I want you to take something before you go."

He handed each of them a seed. Small. Ordinary. Easily lost.

"Keep these. And when you look at them, remember: knowing God is not about rushing, or having all answers, or being perfect."

He folded Sawyer's hand gently around his seed.

"It's about staying in His soil long enough for your true self to grow."

As they headed back toward the palace, Rocco rolled the seed across his stone palms. "Do you think rocks grow too?" he asked, sounding worried again.

Sawyer grinned. “Maybe not the same way. But you’re growing inside.”

Marshy nodded. “And you already reflect God’s steadfastness.”

Rocco straightened proudly. “Well... I suppose I *am* quite steadfast.”

Alaric laughed softly as they walked. “All creation grows toward God in its own way. You are no exception, dear Rocco.”

The morning light warmed the fields behind them, and Sawyer felt the seed in his pocket—a tiny, silent promise.

They were learning. Slowly. Steadily.

Just as God intended.

Chapter 21 — Rocco and the Ancient Door

It was late afternoon when the path beneath their feet shifted from soft earth to scattered stones. The air grew cooler, shaded by towering cliffs that rose like silent sentinels on either side. Marshy paused, rubbing her arms.

“Have we been here before?” she asked.

Sawyer shook his head. “I don’t think so. But Rocco seems awfully confident.”

Indeed, Rocco was scuttling ahead with an unusual sense of purpose. The little stone creature, usually unsure about directions unless food was involved, bobbed along with the determined wobble of someone following a memory older than the hills themselves.

“Rocco?” Alaric called gently. “Where are you taking us?”

“You’ll see!” Rocco chimed. “It’s... well... it’s something I think you should see now.”

The path narrowed, then opened suddenly into a hollowed clearing—a natural courtyard carved into the cliff face. And there, embedded in the mountain itself, stood a massive stone door. Weathered. Ancient. Beautiful.

The kind of door that felt like it had been waiting centuries for someone to find it.

Sawyer stepped forward first, brushing dust from the carved letters across the lintel. Marshy leaned in beside him, reading aloud:

“Know the Maker through His works.”

She breathed the words slowly, as though they were holy.

Alaric’s lips curved into a soft, knowing smile. “So. You brought us here, Rocco.”

Rocco rocked from side to side, the closest a stone could come to blushing. “I... I remembered it today. I’ve seen this door for ages—thousands of years maybe—but I never knew why it mattered. But now I think... I think it’s what you’re teaching them.”

Alaric bowed his head slightly, honoring Rocco’s discovery. “Indeed it is. This place is older than Calendor’s oldest scrolls. And older than any temple. Scholars have wondered for ages why our ancestors carved a door into the living mountain... and never built a chamber behind it.”

Sawyer frowned. “Wait—there’s no room on the other side?”

“No,” Alaric said with gentle gravity. “Because the door is the point—not what lies beyond.”

They gathered before the massive slab of stone. Its carvings were simple but deliberate: rivers, trees, stars, mountains, birds, fields—every part of creation etched with reverence. Between each image ran thin grooves that shimmered faintly in the slanted sunlight.

Marshy traced one with her fingertip. “It’s like creation itself is... pointing us somewhere.”

Alaric nodded. “The ancients understood a truth humanity often forgets: *Before you enter God’s house, you must first learn to recognize His fingerprints.*”

Sawyer blinked. “His fingerprints?”

“In the river that never ceases,” Alaric said. “In the mountains that stand firm even when storms rage. In the tenderness of sparrows, the vastness of the night sky, the creativity of craftsmen, the music that stirs the heart, the mercy you showed, the humility you learned...”

He rested a hand on the cold stone door.

“In every good thing, God has left traces of Himself—not to replace Him, but to prepare us for Him.”

Marshy whispered, “Like the way the smell of bread tells you a bakery is nearby.”

“Exactly,” Alaric replied. “Creation is the aroma of its Maker.”

Rocco shuffled closer, placing both stony hands against the door. “I used to sit here for centuries,” he said quietly. “Before humans even built villages nearby. I thought this was just a big rock with pictures. But now...”

His voice softened to something reverent.

“Now I think the reason I remembered it today is because everything we’ve been learning—about God in rivers and skies and kindness and courage—was carved on this door long before any of us were born.”

Sawyer’s chest tightened with awe. “It’s like the door knew.”

“No,” Alaric corrected gently. “It is we who are finally knowing what the door has always proclaimed.”

Alaric encouraged the children to stand before the inscription once more.

“Read it again,” he said.

Together they spoke the words:

“Know the Maker through His works.”

The wind shifted, brushing leaves across the stone. The cliff walls echoed with a soft resonance, as though creation itself were whispering the ancient truth back to them.

Marshy felt something stir within her—a warmth like understanding finding its shape. “This means,” she said slowly, “that everything we’ve been learning... wasn’t random. This whole journey is the way the Maker chooses to teach us.”

“And to ready you,” Alaric added, “for the greater mysteries. Heaven is not merely a place—it is a Presence. And His house is not entered by those who have memorized facts, but by those whose hearts have been awakened.”

Sawyer looked at the carvings—mountains, rivers, stars—and felt humbled. “So Earth, Calendor, all the world... it’s like the entry hall to Heaven.”

“Quite so,” said Alaric. “Creation is the first sanctuary. The first teacher. The first invitation.”

Finally, Sawyer stepped closer and pressed his palm to the stone, mirroring Rocco.

“It doesn’t open,” he said.

“No,” Alaric whispered. “Because you are the ones meant to open.”

Marshy felt a tremor of wonder at the words.

The door did not move.

But something in them shifted. Deepened. Rooted.

As they turned to leave the clearing, Rocco stopped for one last look. “I always thought doors were supposed to let you into something,” he murmured.

“They do,” Alaric said. “The right ones open you to truth.”

And as the children walked away, the ancient door remained silent—but no longer inscrutable. For now they understood:

Everything they had learned in the rivers, skies, storms, and stories had been preparing them.

Creation had been the first teacher.

And the Maker had been speaking all along.

Chapter 22 — A Visit to the Poor Quarter

The morning sun lay soft and warm across Calendor's cobblestone streets as Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco followed Alaric toward a part of the kingdom they rarely visited. The familiar bustle of the central market slowly faded. The streets narrowed. Roofs sagged. The smell of smoke and damp straw replaced the scent of sweet breads and polished wood.

Sawyer felt his chest tighten. "Alaric... where are we?"

"The Poor Quarter," Alaric said gently. "A part of Calendor where many struggle. Today's lesson waits here."

Rocco wobbled nervously, trying to stay close to Sawyer's boots. Marshy walked beside the prince, eyes wide and alert. She had seen hardship before—her father's patrols often passed through difficult places—but even she felt a knot in her stomach.

They stepped into a small square where children in patched clothes chased one another around a broken fountain. A woman stirred a pot of thin soup. An elderly man with tired eyes used a cane carved from driftwood. And yet, despite the rough surroundings, laughter rose like birdsong.

Sawyer's confusion deepened. *How can people with so little be so... happy?*

A woman with calloused hands and kind eyes waved them closer. "Visitors! Come, you must be hungry. Sit. Share what little we have."

Sawyer felt his cheeks flush. *Share what little they have?* He was the prince—he should be the one bringing food. Yet the woman's smile held no trace of pity or resentment—only warmth.

Marshy accepted a small wooden bowl of soup. "Thank you," she said softly.

Rocco sniffed the air. "Does this have rocks in it?"

"No, dear," the woman chuckled, patting his head. "But you're welcome to sit with us anyway."

Sawyer tasted the soup. It was thin—barely more than broth—but the care with which it was offered made it feel like a feast.

"These people..." Sawyer whispered to Alaric, "They're poor. Why are they so... grateful?"

Alaric's eyes softened. "Because gratitude does not grow from possessions, Sawyer. It grows from the heart."

A Boy Named Lio

A small boy approached them—barefoot, hair messy, cheeks smudged with dirt. "Are you the prince?" he asked Sawyer.

Sawyer nodded, not knowing what to expect.

Lio smiled wide. "I don't have anything to give you, except this."
He held out a tiny carved figure—crudely made, but shaped with love. "I made it from leftover wood."

Sawyer took it, stunned. "This is... beautiful."

Lio shrugged shyly. "I just wanted you to have something. To remember we're here."

Something in Sawyer cracked open. These people—who had so little—were giving freely, joyfully. Without hesitation.

Without fear.

Later, when they walked a little apart from the main square, Sawyer turned to Alaric. His voice trembled. "Why does God allow people to be poor like this?"

Alaric did not answer immediately. He knelt beside an old man who sat on a crate, massaging sore hands. The tutor wrapped his cloak around the man's shoulders, whispering a blessing. Only after the man smiled did Alaric stand.

"There is a mystery here," Alaric said, in the quiet tone he used only for the deepest truths. "Poverty is never God's desire. Human choices and brokenness create it. But in the midst of suffering, God does something astonishing."

"What?" Sawyer whispered.

"He draws near."

Marshy looked up. "Nearer than to kings? Or nobles?"

"Yes," Alaric said. "Scripture and the saints teach this again and again: God is especially close to the humble, to the hurting, to the forgotten."

He pointed to the square where the poor were sharing laughter, food, and warmth. “Look—these people depend on each other. They know they need help, need grace, need one another. Their hearts stay open. And open hearts feel God’s presence more easily than proud ones.”

Sawyer remembered the palace—rooms full of gold, people who bowed because they had to, meals where nothing was ever empty. And yet, there had been moments—many moments—where the palace felt far colder than this quarter.

“I think...” Sawyer said slowly, “I think God feels closer here than in the palace.”

Alaric nodded, eyes shining. “Because here, Sawyer, people cling to hope like a lifeline. And God rests His heart where hope struggles to breathe.”

Before they left, Sawyer returned to Lio. He pressed something into the boy’s hand—a small silver pin shaped like a star, one of his few treasured possessions.

Lio gasped. “Prince Sawyer—I can’t take this!”

“You already gave me something,” Sawyer said. “Now I want to give you something too.”

Lio hugged him tightly. “Come back again. You’re always welcome here.”

Sawyer felt the boy’s ribs beneath his arms—the thinness, the fragility. He felt tears sting his eyes.

Not out of pity.

But out of love.

As they walked back toward the castle, Sawyer stayed quiet, clutching the carved wooden figure.

Marshy finally asked, “What are you thinking?”

Sawyer’s voice cracked. “That God... really is close to the brokenhearted. I felt Him there. In their gratitude. In their laughter. Even in their struggles.”

Rocco, who had been nibbling on a pebble, added in a surprisingly gentle tone, “Sometimes cracks let the most light in. Rocks know that.”

Sawyer managed a small smile.

Alaric placed a hand on the prince's shoulder. "Remember this day, Sawyer. For in the Poor Quarter, you saw the truth of Heaven on earth."

Sawyer nodded, heart full.

Because for the first time, he understood:

God is never far from those who suffer.

And those who have little often see Him most clearly.

Chapter 23 — Winds on the Mountain Peak

The morning began with a sharp bite of cold in the air. Sawyer wrapped his cloak tighter around his shoulders as he followed Alaric up the winding path that coiled along Calendor's tallest mountain. Marshy trudged behind him with determined steps, and Rocco... well, Rocco hopped, rolled, and occasionally needed rescuing from cracks between stones.

"Why are we climbing *this*?" Sawyer asked, breath visible in puffs. "It's steep. And cold. And really far from breakfast."

Alaric chuckled without turning around. "Because some lessons can only be learned from above."

"And some rocks," Rocco grunted as he tried to wiggle free from a root, "are not meant for climbing mountains..."

Sawyer reached down and scooped him up. "We'll climb together."

They continued upward as the wind strengthened. The path grew narrower, the air thinner, the world below shrinking with every step. Marshy wiped sweat from her brow despite the cold. "Why does everything important have to be hard?"

Alaric smiled. "Because difficulty has a way of uncovering what comfort keeps hidden."

Sawyer wasn't sure what that meant—but he felt he was about to find out.

As they climbed higher, the wind began to roar like a living thing. It whipped Sawyer's cloak and tugged at Marshy's braid. Clouds swept around them in ghostlike swirls. The path became jagged, forcing them to slow down and choose each step carefully.

Sawyer's legs burned. His fingers tingled from gripping rocks. Rocco occasionally bumped Sawyer's shins and muttered apologies.

"Alaric!" Sawyer shouted over the wind. "Are you sure this is safe?"

"Safe?" Alaric answered, turning with a calm expression. "No."

Then he smiled.

"But it is good."

Marshy nearly slipped on a loose stone and steadied herself. "Good doesn't always feel good," she grumbled.

“Precisely,” said Alaric.

At last, after what felt like hours, the path widened. The ground leveled. The wind settled into a strong but steady whisper rather than a howl.

They had reached the peak.

Sawyer gasped—not from exhaustion but from awe.

Below them, the entire Kingdom of Calendor unfolded like a tapestry: green fields, winding rivers, tiny cottages nestled between forests, distant villages shimmering with morning light. The castle rose proudly at the center, its spires catching the sun like golden spears. Clouds drifted beneath the mountain’s edge, making the world appear like an island floating in heaven.

Marshy covered her mouth. “It’s... beautiful.”

Rocco stared silently, unusually still.

Sawyer felt his struggles melt in an instant—not because they disappeared, but because they now made sense.

“Everything... looks different from up here,” he whispered.

Alaric’s voice was soft, reverent. “Difficult climbs do that.”

The teacher sat on a flat stone, motioning for them to join him. When they did, he pointed across the kingdom.

“Down there,” he said, “difficulties feel overwhelming because you see only a small piece of the story. But from up here, the world widens. Challenges shrink. Your steps—painful as they were—led you somewhere higher.”

Sawyer nodded. “I see everything from a new angle.”

“That,” Alaric said quietly, “is what God often does with hardship.”

Marshy turned toward him, brow furrowed. “You mean God *uses* difficulty?”

“Yes,” Alaric replied gently. “Not to harm us. Never that. But to draw out strength we did not know was inside us. To teach us to lean on Him when our own strength is not enough.”

He touched a hand to the rock beside him. “A smooth stone looks nice, but a stone shaped by wind and water is strong, beautiful, and able to shine.”

Rocco blinked. “So you’re saying stones like me are perfect because of all the times I’ve been thrown, dropped, rolled downhill, or... uh... used as a paperweight?”

Alaric nodded affectionately. “Yes, Rocco. Even rocks tell the truth of endurance.”

Sawyer smiled. “So the hard climb is... part of the gift?”

Alaric’s eyes sparkled. “It reminds you you’re not meant to face life’s winds alone.”

Alaric motioned for the children to stand. “Come. Feel the wind.”

They stepped toward the cliff’s edge—carefully, but with trust. The wind pressed against them with steady strength. Not violent. Not cruel. Just powerful.

“Do you feel it?” Alaric asked.

Sawyer nodded. “It’s strong... but it’s holding me up.”

“Exactly,” Alaric said. “God allows winds in our lives, not to destroy us, but to reveal that He is the one who holds us steady. Hard times teach us His strength better than quiet days do.”

Marshy whispered, “It’s like... finding His presence in the struggle.”

“Yes,” Alaric said. “For when the climb is steep and your legs tremble, and the wind feels too strong, that is when you learn that God climbs with you.”

As they began to climb back down, the mountain felt different—not smaller, but friendlier, like a teacher they had finally learned to understand.

Sawyer looked over his shoulder at the peak. “I think the climb changed me.”

“It did,” Alaric said. “Difficulty always reveals who you are—and who God is.”

Rocco tapped Sawyer’s boot. “Do you think next time we can learn something on flat ground?”

Sawyer laughed. “Maybe. But I’m glad we climbed today.”

Marshy nodded solemnly. “Me too. Now I know that hard things don’t mean God is far away.”

Alaric smiled at them with quiet pride. “Indeed. Often, the hardest paths lead you closest to His heart.”

And with that, they kept descending—step by step—carrying the lesson of the mountain peak inside them:

God uses the winds of difficulty not to push us down,
but to lift our eyes higher.

Chapter 24 — The Return to the Castle

The journey back to Calendor felt different—not because the roads had changed, but because *they* had. Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco rode in thoughtful silence for much of the morning, each replaying the memories of the path behind them: the Forest of Echoes, the shepherd’s field, the Festival of Light, the poor quarter, and the windswept mountain peak. Every place had left a mark. Every lesson had carved something new into their hearts.

As the familiar towers of the royal castle came into view, Sawyer felt a tug of both relief and sorrow. “It’s strange,” he murmured. “I missed home... but part of me doesn’t want the journey to end.”

Marshy smiled softly. “Journeys don’t end. They just change direction.”

Rocco, trotting ahead, barked in agreement.

The gates opened, and the castle courtyard burst into life. Servants paused mid-task, children ran to greet them, and Queen Elara hurried down the steps with her arms outstretched. She wrapped Sawyer in a long, trembling hug.

“Thank the Maker you’re safe,” she whispered into his hair.

Alaric arrived seconds later, placing a firm hand on Sawyer’s shoulder. “You left as a prince looking for answers,” he said, eyes warm with pride. “But you return as one who has begun to find them.”

Sawyer felt heat rise to his cheeks. “I’m not done learning,” he said. “I think... I think I’m only just beginning.”

That evening, after the celebratory feast and after the bustle of welcome faded into quiet night, Sawyer retreated to his room. He sat at his desk—his favorite spot, near the tall window overlooking Calendor—and unrolled a fresh parchment.

For a long moment, he simply breathed. The castle stones around him were the same as ever, but Sawyer felt as if he were seeing them with new eyes. The world no longer seemed like a collection of things but a tapestry of signs—each pointing toward a God who was closer than air, wiser than ages, and more loving than anyone had ever told him.

He dipped his quill into ink and carefully wrote:

“What I Learned About Knowing God.”

At first the words came slowly.

He wrote about how every person echoes God's voice differently, just like the Forest of Echoes had shown them.

He wrote about the Temple of Remembering—how people long before them had searched for God in the world, and how that search continued in every generation.

He wrote about the shepherd who knew his flock by name, about the Festival of Light and the laughter that reflected God's joy, about the lost child and the heart of a God who never stops seeking His children.

He wrote until his hand cramped, and even then he continued—about the farmer, the mountain wind, the humility of the poor quarter, and the ancient stone door whose inscription felt like the key to everything:

“Know the Maker through His works.”

Marshy knocked gently and peeked inside. “Still writing?”

Sawyer nodded. “I want everyone in Calendor to understand what we learned—not just the nobles, not just the scholars. Everyone.”

Marshy stepped closer and read a few lines over his shoulder. “This is beautiful,” she whispered. “It could help so many people.”

Rocco rested his chin on Sawyer's foot and sighed contentedly, as if he too approved.

Sawyer looked at his parchment, then at the moonlit sky beyond the window.

“Maybe this is how God wants us to help,” he said quietly. “By telling what we've seen. By showing that He's here—everywhere—if we just learn how to look.”

Marshy nodded. “Then keep writing, Sawyer. The kingdom needs this.”

And so he did.

Late into the night, Prince Sawyer wrote—not as a royal chore, nor as a school assignment, but as a young heart overflowing with truth. He wrote because he finally understood: knowing God wasn't a treasure found at the end of a quest.

It was a way of walking through the world.

The journey had changed them, yes—but more importantly, it had prepared them for all the journeys still ahead.

And in the quiet of his chamber, beneath the calm glow of the moon, Sawyer smiled.

Because the greatest adventure of all was only beginning.

Chapter 25 — Before Entering His House

Alaric's voice grew soft, as though he were speaking not only to the children before him but to generations yet to come. The fire crackled gently in the hearth, casting warm light across his face. Sawyer, Marshy, and Colinus sat in complete stillness, their hearts open, their spirits awakened by all they had seen across the kingdom. Alaric folded his hands and continued, his words carrying the weight of ancient wisdom:

"Listen carefully," he said. "God gave us Earth not as a distraction from Heaven, nor as a test to pass, but as a *classroom of wonder*—a living, breathing revelation of His own heart. The forests teach us His creativity; the mountains whisper His majesty; the rivers show His constancy. Every act of kindness, every sigh of grief, every sunrise that paints the world gold—these are lessons in His character. Here, in this world, we learn His beauty so we may recognize His glory; we learn compassion so we may understand His mercy; we learn courage so we may trust His strength. Earth is where we grow into our true names, our true selves, our true relationship with our Maker."

He looked at each of them with eyes full of affection. "For Heaven is not a palace we enter as strangers, unsure and unprepared. It is our Father's home. And God, in His tenderness, wants His children to know Him before we cross that final threshold. He wants us to walk into His house with familiarity, with joy—like children rushing into the arms of someone they have known, trusted, and loved their whole lives."

A hush fell over the room. The children felt it—not sadness, not fear, but a swelling clarity, a warm certainty rising from deep within. Everything they had encountered on their journey—the shepherd's devotion, the gratitude of the poor, the mountain winds, the ancient inscriptions—felt like pieces of a single truth now fitting together seamlessly.

Alaric leaned back, his voice nearly a whisper. "So remember this: every day on Earth is another page in the story of learning God's heart. And every moment spent knowing Him here prepares you to walk joyfully into His home there."

The words settled like gentle rain on thirsty ground.

Slowly, the children rose and stepped outside into the cool night air. The sky stretched above them—vast, shimmering, immeasurable. Stars peppered the darkness like lanterns hung by an unseen hand. Sawyer drew a long breath, feeling the weight of the world and the weightlessness of hope all at once. Marshy folded her arms, gazing upward with a soft smile, as though she were finally beginning to understand a melody that had always been playing. Colinus stood between them, eyes wide, chest rising and falling with quiet awe.

Together, without speaking, they lifted their faces to the heavens.

They felt no fear of the unknown. Only invitation.

The constellations gleamed like windows into a greater home. The moon spread its silver path across the rooftops of Calendor. The night—immense, ancient, alive—seemed to whisper a promise: *Know Me here, and you will know Me there.*

Sawyer reached out and gently rested his hand on Marshy's shoulder, and Colinus leaned close, all three united in wonder.

They did not understand everything. But they understood enough.

They were ready to keep learning—ready to know God more tomorrow than they did today, and more the day after that, until the last sunrise of Earth gave way to the first morning of Heaven.

And beneath the endless sky, glowing like a doorway to their Father's house, the children of Calendor stood in quiet, joyful readiness—

hearts open, spirits awakened,
already learning the language of eternity.

Prince Sawyer, Marshy, and their stone friend Rocco set out to answer one question: “Why weren’t humans created first in Heaven?”

Guided by the wise Alaric, they journey through Calendor—its gardens, rivers, storms, mountains, and people—discovering that creation is God’s first classroom. Each encounter reveals part of God’s heart: His creativity, compassion, strength, joy, and care for the humble.

Through personal struggles and moments of wonder, the children learn that Earth teaches us who God is so that Heaven won’t be a stranger’s home, but a Father’s house.

By the end, Sawyer and his friends understand:
We learn God on Earth, so we may know Him fully when we enter His house.

Socks McSock, Taco Paco, Chip Choco Chippy, Bricka Bricka Blocky, Momo Monkey, Pogo Pug