

Into the Heart of the Kingdom



Into the Heart of the Fellowship

A Spiritual Journey

"A journey into the divine is a step into eternity."

February 6, 2025

Written by Andrii Zvorygin in Owen Sound

second draft, current:
https://anabaptist.ca/pfet/Into_the_Heart_of_the_Fellowship.html
send comments and suggestions to andrii@liberit.ca

Into the Heart of the Kingdom

Andrii Zvorygin

2025-02-07

Contents

Chapter 1: The Sinkhole of Indifference	1
Chapter 2: Encountering the Romans Road	4
Chapter 3: Encounter with Legalists	11
Chapter 4: Encounter with the Charismatic Christians	13
Chapter: Confronting the Thorny Locusts of Fear	16
Chapter 6: Confronting Emotional Distress in the Quaking Aspen Forest	19
Chapter 7: Struggle for Sustenance: A Journey Through the Walnut Forest	23
Chapter 8: Into the Murk of Mistrust	28
Chapter 9: Vinyard of Confusion	29
Chapter 10: The Hawthorns of Relational Conflict	35
Chapter 11: Oaks of Domination	42
Chapter 12: Willows of Enslavement**	45
Chapter 14: The Berry Shrubbery of Ego and Pride	53
Chapter 15: The Herb Garden of Social Anxiety	58
Chapter 16: The Thorny Blackberries of Group Conflict	63
Chapter 17: The Burdocks of Resentment and Forgiveness	68
Chapter 18: The Osage Orange of Hatred and Loving Enemies	73
Chapter 19: The Quinces of Loving Neighbor as Self	81
Chapter 20: The Russian Olives of Compassion	89

Chapter 1: The Sinkhole of Indifference

A dull haze of apathy draped over the alley like a suffocating shroud. Sleshne stood knee-deep in shifting sands that tugged relentlessly at his legs, threatening to swallow him whole. Around him, his companions lay languidly, each clutching a golden chain. These chains were not mere ornaments but symbols of materialistic attachments—wealth, status, comfort—that weighed heavily on their spirits. The withered plants around them bore silent witness to their stagnation: no growth, no vitality, just a slow, inevitable sinking.

The sinkhole of indifference was a strange and treacherous place. It bred hardened hearts and closed minds, as if crafted to keep souls from stirring. Some distant memory drifted through Sleshne’s mind, something he’d once read: **“Many remain in the sinkhole of indifference, self-created prisons of inertia,”** the Confederation’s commentary had said (Q’uo, 2020/01/04).

A murmur drifted through the crowd: “Stop thinking about it,” one voice grumbled. “There’s nothing out there; just accept it,” another added dully.

Since the accident that had cost him his job, Sleshne’s old routine now felt suffocating. The monotony pressed in on him. He felt a deep disquiet gnawing at his heart, a whisper that life held more than this endless sinking.

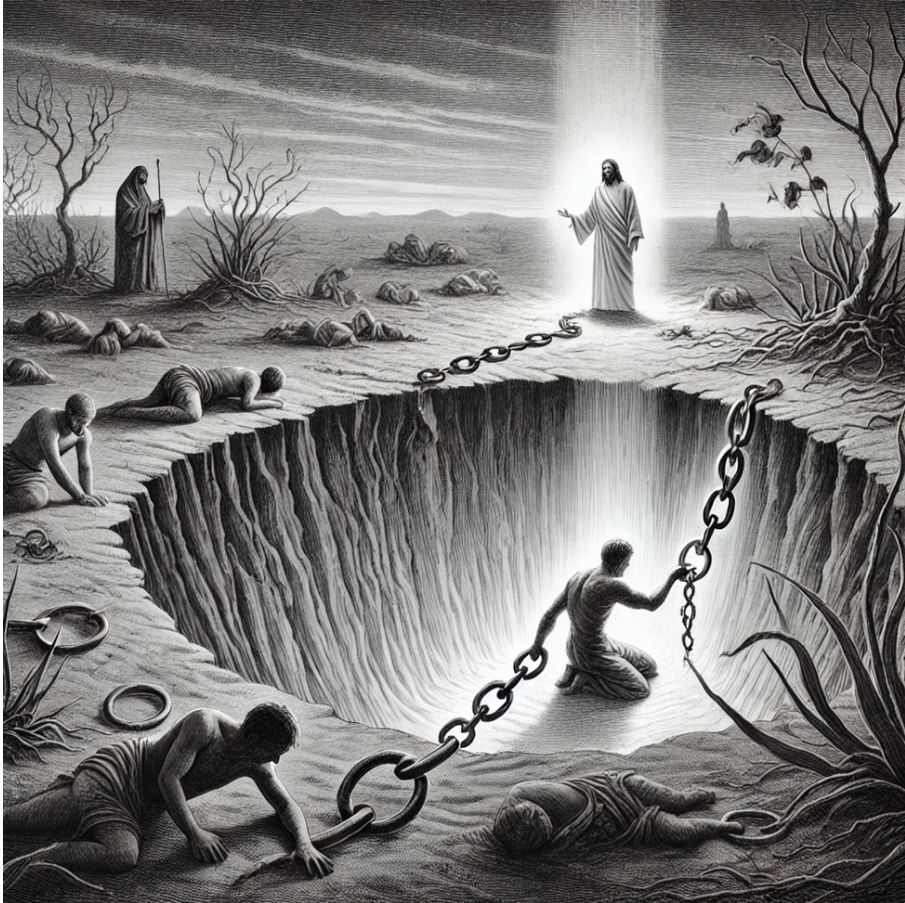


Figure 1: Chapter 1: The Sinkhole of Indifference

Then he spotted it: a half-buried book—an unfamiliar edition of the Bible labeled “with Confederation Commentary.” Curiosity stirred. He reached for it, and immediately a chorus rose:

“Don’t bother,” someone scoffed, “just another waste of time.” “You’ll never change anything,” another sneered.

Sleshne hesitated, heart pounding. The golden chain he held felt suddenly heavier. He looked at it, then at the book. Something inside urged him onward. He snapped open the clasp and began to read.

“Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”
(Matthew 4:17)

A bold command, stirring an ember of hope. Turning to God—could that break the suffocating pattern?

A marginal note caught his eye: *“The one known as Jesus did not intend disciples to rest in comfort. They must reflect His love and principles in thought and deed.”* — **Q’uo, 1987/09/13**

Sleshne’s chest tightened. These words rang true. Faith demanded action, not passive acceptance.

Just then, as if summoned by his longing, a figure shimmered at the edge of the sinkhole—Jesus, with compassionate eyes and gentle presence. **“Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”** (Matthew 11:28)

The crowd sensed his resolve. He tried to lift his legs from the sand, but it clung stubbornly. The chains rattled, pulling him deeper. The voices grew louder, urgent, mocking: “Stay with us! Why fight what’s natural?” “You’re just tiring yourself out!”

He recalled another passage: **“No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve both God and money.”** (Matthew 6:24) The chains were not just weighty; they symbolized his divided loyalties. To rise, he must choose. To follow Jesus, he must let go of these attachments.

His arms trembled. The chains glinted with false comfort. He inhaled slowly, remembering another directive he had just read: ask for help, seek inner guidance. He closed his eyes, visualizing strength entering his heart. The Confederation commentary had mentioned inner assistance: in meditation, seeking qualities like perseverance. He asked silently for that strength now.

Renewed courage flooded him. He gripped the chains one last time—then released them. The heaviness eased. He pressed forward, muscles straining, sweat beading on his brow. The sand fought back, but without the chains, he was freer. Every step was agony, yet he pressed on, fueled by the words echoing in his mind: **“But don’t just listen... do what it says.”** (James 1:22) He understood now: faith called for action.

“Fool!” someone hissed.

“You’ll never make it!” another snarled.

But their words fell hollow. He had chosen a different path. With a mighty heave, Sleshne broke free of the last grip of sand. Gasping for breath, he staggered onto firmer ground. Turning back, he saw the golden chains half-submerged and his friends still sinking, resigned. He pitied them, but he would not follow them back.

“Jesus expected each of those who followed him to take up the cloak of Christhood and become voices of love, thoughts of love, hands and feet of love, wills and intellects of love. This was a wise and compassionate human being, a being that drew unconditional and absolute love from those who followed him” (Q’uo 2010/1218) As he walked, he carried in

his heart a promise: to live out what he'd read, to become hands and feet of love, not just a passive observer. The journey stretched ahead, uncertain but alive with possibility.

And so he moved onward, leaving behind the complacency that once held him captive. Now, heart open and purpose ignited, he began the path to understanding and fulfillment, guided by faith and supported by the gentle echoes of love and compassion.

A gate creaked open ahead, revealing a path lined with green leaves and gentle light. Sleshne looked to Jesus, still there, inviting him forward. He understood this was just a beginning. The narrow gate awaited, the path of true discipleship would be challenging, but he would no longer serve the hollow gods of materialism and apathy.

“Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you.” Jesus said (Matt 7:7). **”The faith aspect of the seeker may become the guiding star, shall we say, that leads the seeker in the direction that it wishes to travel upon its spiritual journey”** the Confederation had said (Q'uo, 1987/09/13). He felt that truth in his marrow. Freed from chains, from the sinkhole's pull, he stepped through the gate. —

Chapter 2: Encountering the Romans Road

Sleshne's New Beginning

Emerging from the stifling darkness of the sinkhole, Sleshne squinted as sunlight bathed his face. He found himself standing on a broad, well-paved road bustling with activity. The air was fresh, filled with the aroma of blooming flowers and the distant sound of choir hymns. Grand buildings lined the street, each adorned with intricate carvings and towering spires that reached toward the heavens.

He felt a surge of hope. “Perhaps this is the path that will lead me to true understanding,” he thought.

As he walked, he observed various groups of people—families in their Sunday best, clergy in ornate robes, and individuals carrying Bibles and rosaries. The atmosphere was congenial, and many greeted him with warm smiles and polite nods.

An Invitation from the Missionaries

Two amiable missionaries approached him, their eyes alight with enthusiasm. Each carried a leather-bound Bible and wore badges bearing the emblem of a cross.

“Good day to you!” one of them greeted warmly. “We haven't seen you around here before. Are you new to this path?”

“Yes,” Sleshne replied, offering a reserved smile. “I've recently begun exploring faith more deeply.”

“That's wonderful!” the other missionary exclaimed. “We're here to share the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. Have you heard of the Romans Road to salvation?”

Sleshne hesitated, his brow furrowing slightly. “No, I'm not familiar with it. What's it about?”

The first missionary brightened and explained, “It's a series of verses from the Book of Romans that outlines the path to salvation.”

They shared the verses with enthusiasm:

- **“For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard”** (Romans 3:23, NLT).

- **Witnessing the Impact of Service:** The revival of the villages and the Russian olive trees reflected Proverbs 11:25 and the Confederation’s message that healing others heals oneself (1992/11/08).
- **Inspiring Collective Action:** Their deeds spurred a larger movement, aligning with Ephesians 3:20-21 and the idea that love’s seeds grow beyond one’s reach (2002/04/21).
- **Commitment to Ongoing Compassion:** Recognizing that compassion is a lifelong journey echoed Hebrews 10:24 and the Confederation’s encouragement to continually choose love (1990/05/27).

Conclusion of the Volume

The journey of Fretji, Hmenne, and Sleshne revealed that compassion is not a static state but an active, evolving force. By reaching out beyond their own needs and fears, they transformed not only themselves but also the lives of many others. Their village became a beacon of hope, demonstrating the profound impact that love in action can have on the world.

Elder Miriam addressed the community during a celebration beneath the flourishing Russian olive trees. “We have witnessed the power of compassion to heal, to unite, and to inspire. Let us continue to be vessels of this love, carrying it forward.”

The villagers cheered, their faces alight with joy and purpose.

Fretji looked at her friends, gratitude swelling in her chest. “Our journey is far from over,” she said.

Hmenne smiled. “And I look forward to every step.”

Sleshne nodded. “Together, we can face whatever comes next, guided by compassion.”

Final Reflection

Their story encourages us to:

- **Actively Seek Opportunities to Help:** Look beyond our immediate surroundings to find ways to serve others.
- **Face Fears with Love:** Let compassion overcome hesitation and doubt, transforming fear into a catalyst for action.
- **Build Genuine Connections:** Engage with others sincerely, fostering trust, understanding, and mutual growth.
- **Respond to Negativity with Kindness:** Use love to transform difficult situations and disarm hostility.
- **Recognize the Ripple Effect of Good Deeds:** Understand that our actions can inspire and uplift far beyond our immediate influence.
- **Commit to Lifelong Compassion:** Embrace service as an ongoing journey, continually choosing love in every situation.

As we carry these lessons forward, let us remember the words of Jesus: “**Freely you have received; freely give**” (Matthew 10:8), and the wisdom of the Confederation: “**By serving others without expectation, you align with the Creator’s love**” (1985/10/27).

May we, like the Russian olive trees, stand as symbols of resilience and the life-giving power of compassion that reaches beyond ourselves to nourish the world.



Figure 2: Chapter 2: Encountering the Romans Road

- **“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Romans 6:23, NLT).
- **“But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners”** (Romans 5:8, NLT).
- **“If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved”** (Romans 10:9, NLT).

As the words sank in, Sleshne’s thoughts swirled. He appreciated their sincerity and the structure of their message, but a quiet unease tugged at him. These were profound claims, but none of the verses directly quoted Jesus Himself.

He nodded politely, still processing. “That’s... an interesting approach,” he said slowly. “I suppose this is what Christians believe?”

“Yes, it’s the foundation of our faith,” one missionary confirmed, his tone enthusiastic. “Through these verses, we find hope and assurance.”

Sleshne’s mind drifted momentarily to his recent encounter with Jesus, the overwhelming presence that had filled him with awe and clarity. Could there be more to the story than what was summarized here?

“Thank you for sharing this with me,” he said eventually, his voice thoughtful. “I’d like to hear more. Where can I learn about this in greater depth?”

“We’d love for you to join us at our church,” the second missionary offered eagerly. “It’s just a short walk down this road. Our pastor delivers inspiring sermons that bring these truths to life.”

Sleshne paused, then smiled faintly. “I might just do that.”

Arrival at the Church of Stone

As they entered the great church of stone, Sleshne was struck by the sheer magnificence of the place. The vaulted ceilings were adorned with elaborate frescoes, and the polished marble floors reflected the soft glow of candlelight. A majestic pipe organ played a hymn that resonated throughout the vast space.

Parishioners filled the pews, their voices mingling in polite conversation. Many wore fine clothing—tailored suits, elegant dresses, and jewelry that caught the light. The atmosphere was one of reverence mixed with social grace.

“Welcome to our church,” one of the missionaries said. “Feel free to take a seat anywhere.”

Sleshne found a spot near the middle, observing those around him. The service began with a procession of clergy in ornate vestments, carrying gilded symbols and incense. The rituals were meticulously performed, each step choreographed.

The congregation participated in responsive readings, their voices unified but subdued. The hymns were familiar melodies, sung with practiced ease. Yet, despite the beauty and tradition, Sleshne sensed a formality that seemed to mask a lack of deeper engagement.

When the bishop took the pulpit, his voice echoed confidently. “Brothers and sisters,” he began, “we are gathered here to reaffirm our faith and partake in the blessings bestowed upon us.”

His sermon was eloquent, touching on themes of prosperity, obedience, and the importance of maintaining societal order. He emphasized the nation’s heritage and the role of the church in upholding cultural values. While his words were comforting, they seemed to focus more on external appearances and traditions than on personal spiritual growth or introspection.

Sleshne agreed, “The Confederation teaches, ‘**Nature reflects the inner state of being; as we heal others, we heal ourselves**’” (1992/11/08). “Our actions have brought life back to these trees.”

11. Deepening Community Bonds

The village gathered to hear stories of their journey. Marcus stood before them, a new light in his eyes.

“I was afraid to help at first,” he admitted. “But stepping out of my comfort zone taught me the true meaning of compassion.”

Clara smiled. “Your courage inspires us all.”

Fretji encouraged everyone, “**Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others**” (1 Peter 4:10). “We all have something to contribute.”

Hmenne added, “As the Confederation says, ‘**In serving others without expectation, you align with the Creator’s love**’” (1985/10/27). “Let’s continue to be a beacon for others.”

Regular outreach programs were established, and the village became a hub of generosity and learning.

12. Embracing Continuous Service

One evening, the trio sat beneath the Russian olive trees, the stars twinkling above.

“Our journey taught us so much,” Fretji mused. “But there’s still more to do.”

Sleshne agreed. “Compassion isn’t a destination but a path we walk daily.”

Hmenne concluded, “The Confederation teaches, ‘**By continuously choosing love, you evolve and aid the evolution of all**’” (1990/05/27). “Our actions ripple outward, affecting the whole.”

They sat in comfortable silence, feeling connected to each other, their community, and the larger tapestry of life.

Summary and Key Lessons:

- **Action-Oriented Compassion:** The trio demonstrated that true compassion requires stepping out of comfort zones to aid those in need, aligning with James 2:15-16 and the Confederation’s emphasis on humble service (1990/02/04).
- **Overcoming Fear with Love:** By facing fears to help others, they embodied 1 John 4:18 (“There is no fear in love...”) and transformed fear into service (1991/01/27).
- **Building Relationships Through Kindness:** Their genuine connections fostered trust and understanding, echoing Galatians 6:2 and the Confederation’s teachings on opening hearts (1993/03/21).
- **Responding to Aggression with Compassion:** Confronting bandits with kindness illustrated Matthew 5:44 (“Love your enemies...”) and the transformative power of love over aggression (1993/07/11).

8. Witnessing Transformation

As the days turned into weeks, the village began to bloom—both literally and figuratively. The seeds they planted sprouted, green shoots breaking through the once-barren soil. Laughter returned, children played, and a sense of community flourished.

Elara approached Fretji one morning, her face radiant. “Look,” she pointed to the fields where villagers worked side by side, including some of the former bandits.

Fretji felt a swell of joy. “It’s beautiful.”

Elara nodded. “Your compassion ignited this change. We’ve learned to care for one another.”

Fretji reflected, “**Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven**” (Matthew 5:16).

Hmenne joined them. “As the Confederation says, ‘**As you serve others, you serve yourself, for all is one**’” (1990/02/04). “We’re all uplifted by this transformation.”

9. The Ripple Effect of Compassion

Word of the revival spread to neighboring villages. Delegations arrived, curious and inspired.

A village elder named Tomas approached Fretji. “We’ve heard of your deeds. How can we bring such renewal to our own village?”

Fretji shared their experiences, emphasizing collaboration and compassion. “It’s about seeing each other’s needs as our own.”

Sleshne added, “**Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine... to him be glory**” (Ephesians 3:20-21). “When we act with love, possibilities expand beyond our expectations.”

Hmenne reflected, “**When you plant seeds of love, they grow beyond your reach, touching lives you may never know**” (2002/04/21).

Communities began to unite, forming a network of support that transcended boundaries.

10. Return and Reflection

When it was time to return home, the villagers gathered to bid them farewell. Elara hugged Fretji tightly. “You’ve changed our lives.”

Fretji felt a lump in her throat. “And you’ve enriched ours. Remember, the journey continues.”

As they approached their own village, they were greeted by the sight of the Russian olive trees in full bloom. Their leaves shimmered like silver in the sunlight, and the air was fragrant with their blossoms.

Elder Miriam awaited them at the entrance. “Welcome back,” she said warmly. “The trees began to flourish shortly after you left.”

Fretji gazed at the trees, her heart full. “Perhaps they’re reflecting the growth of our own spirits.”

She quoted, “**A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed**” (Proverbs 11:25).

Sleshne listened attentively but couldn’t shake the feeling that something was missing. The messages seemed to encourage conformity and complacency rather than challenging the congregation to embody the teachings of love, compassion, and service.

Enthusiasm Meets Tradition

During the service, the pastor delivered a sermon on the importance of tradition and adherence to church teachings. His voice was confident, and his gestures were measured.

“Our faith is a steadfast rock,” the pastor proclaimed. “By following the teachings passed down to us, we secure our place in the kingdom of heaven.”

While the message was comforting, Sleshne felt a yearning for a deeper exploration of Jesus’ teachings on love, compassion, and personal transformation.

After the service, the congregation gathered in the fellowship hall for refreshments. Determined to share his enthusiasm, Sleshne approached a group of congregants.

“Wasn’t that a moving sermon?” he began.

“Absolutely,” a gentleman replied. “Pastor always knows just what to say.”

“I’ve been reading the Bible,” Sleshne shared excitedly. “Jesus’ commandments to love our neighbors and forgive others have really impacted me. I’m eager to discuss how we can live out these teachings in our daily lives.”

The group exchanged glances. A woman smiled politely. “That’s admirable,” she said. “But isn’t it comforting to know that through the Romans Road, we’ve already secured our salvation?”

“Of course,” Sleshne agreed. “But I feel called to do more—to actively live out Jesus’ teachings. Perhaps we could organize community outreach or support those in need.”

A man chuckled softly. “We have committees for those sorts of things,” he said. “But the important thing is that we attend church and uphold our traditions.”

“Yes,” another added. “After all, faith is about believing, not necessarily doing.”

A woman added, “And the upcoming charity gala will be a splendid opportunity to showcase our support for the arts.”

Sleshne noticed that while the conversations were polite and the people friendly, there was little mention of personal faith journeys or spiritual transformation. The focus remained on external accomplishments and social status.

He overheard snippets of gossip and subtle judgments masked by courteous language. Discussions about less fortunate communities carried a tone of detachment, lacking genuine empathy or plans for meaningful assistance.

A Conversation with the Pastor

Determined to delve deeper, Sleshne sought out the pastor, who was greeting parishioners as they departed.

“Pastor, may I have a moment of your time?” he asked.

“Certainly, my son,” the pastor replied warmly. “How can I assist you?”

“I wanted to thank you for the sermon,” Sleshne began. “But I was hoping to discuss some of Jesus’ teachings in more detail—particularly about loving our enemies and caring for the less fortunate.”

The pastor nodded. “Those are important teachings indeed.”

“I feel compelled to find ways to put these teachings into action,” Sleshne continued. “Perhaps we could start a volunteer group or host community events?”

The pastor’s smile faded slightly. “While your enthusiasm is commendable, it’s important to remember that salvation comes through faith, as outlined in the Romans Road. Our primary focus should be on maintaining our faith and attending church.”

“But doesn’t faith without works lack substance?” Sleshne asked gently. “James 2:17 says, **‘So you see, faith by itself isn’t enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless’** (NLT).”

The pastor’s expression grew more serious. “It’s best not to get too caught up in interpreting Scripture on your own. That’s what we’re here for—to guide the congregation in understanding.”

“I see,” Sleshne replied thoughtfully. “But I thought personal study was encouraged.”

“Too much independent thinking can lead to confusion,” the pastor cautioned. “Remember, the mind can be the devil’s playground. It’s safer to accept the teachings as we present them.”

“Is that why the sermon focused mainly on tradition?” Sleshne inquired. “I was hoping for more insights into applying Jesus’ teachings today.”

“The sermons are provided by our denominational headquarters,” the pastor explained. “They ensure consistency across all our churches. Our role is to deliver the message, not to question it.”

Surprised, Sleshne asked, “So you don’t add your own understanding or interpretation?”

“It’s not necessary,” the pastor said firmly. “Our doctrine is sound, and our focus is on upholding it.”

The Pastor’s Perspective

Feeling a mix of confusion and disappointment, Sleshne pressed on. “But how can we grow spiritually if we don’t engage deeply with the teachings?”

The pastor sighed. “Spiritual growth comes from obedience and participation in the sacraments. We offer confession and prayer services—for a modest donation, of course—that can help you stay on the right path.”

“So my role is simply to attend services and support the church financially?” Sleshne asked.

“Precisely,” the pastor affirmed. “Leave the theological matters to the clergy. We are trained to handle them.”

“But I feel a strong desire to understand and live out Jesus’ teachings,” Sleshne insisted. “Shouldn’t we all strive for that?”

The pastor’s eyes hardened. “I must caution you against overstepping your place. Questioning the established teachings can lead to doubt and discord. It’s best to trust in the church’s guidance.”

“Isn’t seeking understanding part of faith?” Sleshne wondered aloud.

“Your eagerness is leading you down a dangerous path,” the pastor warned. “If you continue to challenge our practices, I may have to ask you to refrain from such discussions or consider finding another place of worship.”

Sleshne felt a knot form in his stomach. “I didn’t mean to cause trouble. I simply want to deepen my faith.”

One afternoon, Fretji sat under the shade of a tree, sharing bread with a young woman named Elara.

“Why would you help strangers?” Elara asked, her eyes searching Fretji’s.

“Because we’re not strangers,” Fretji replied softly. “We are all part of the same human family.”

She added, “**Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ**” (Galatians 6:2).

Elara’s gaze softened. “I had lost faith that kindness existed.”

Hmenne joined them, offering a canteen of water. “The Confederation teaches, **‘When you can bring yourself to open your heart to others, you begin to see a greater truth, a greater light, a greater love’**” (1993/03/21). “We’re simply sharing what we’ve learned.”

Elara smiled for the first time. “Your presence here gives us hope.”

7. Facing Challenges Together

One evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon, a shout rang out. “Bandits!” someone cried.

A group of armed men approached on horseback, their faces hardened. Panic spread as villagers scrambled for safety.

Fretji stood her ground, heart pounding but resolve firm. “We must face this with courage and compassion,” she urged.

Marcus grabbed a tool, ready to defend. “We can’t let them take what little we have.”

Sleshne stepped forward. “Wait. Let’s try to reason with them.”

The bandits halted before them, eyes narrowed. “Hand over your supplies,” their leader demanded.

Fretji met his gaze steadily. “We understand you’re in need. We can share what we have.”

The man scoffed. “Why would you do that?”

She replied, “Because violence isn’t the answer. We can help each other.”

She recalled, “**But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you**” (Matthew 5:44).

Hmenne added, “The Confederation teaches, **‘To look upon another with love, even in the face of aggression, transforms the situation’**” (1993/07/11).

The bandits exchanged uncertain glances. The leader’s hardened expression faltered. “We... we have families to feed,” he admitted.

“Then take these supplies,” Sleshne offered, handing over several bags. “And perhaps consider working with us to rebuild, so there’s enough for all.”

After a tense moment, the leader nodded slowly. “Perhaps we will.”

They rode away without further incident, leaving the villagers in awe.

Marcus exhaled deeply. “I can’t believe that worked.”

Fretji smiled. “Compassion can disarm even the fiercest opposition.”

As the sun climbed higher, the heat intensified. Sweat trickled down their backs, and fatigue began to set in.

A sudden rumble of thunder echoed in the distance. Dark clouds gathered, and the wind picked up.

Sleshne shielded his eyes. “A storm is coming. We should find shelter.”

They found refuge under a rocky overhang as rain began to pour, the drops heavy and relentless.

“Perhaps we should turn back,” Sleshne suggested, concern etched on his face.

Fretji looked at the weary faces around her. “I know it’s challenging, but we can’t give up now. Remember, **‘Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up’** (Galatians 6:9).”

Hmenne nodded. “The Confederation says, **‘Your perseverance in the face of adversity strengthens your spirit and deepens your compassion’**” (1990/09/30). “This is a test of our commitment.”

Marcus chimed in, “I didn’t come this far to turn back at the first sign of trouble. Let’s wait out the storm and continue.”

Their spirits bolstered, they huddled together, sharing stories and songs to pass the time.

5. Reaching the Needy

The storm passed, leaving the air fresh but the ground muddy. They pressed on, and by afternoon, the outskirts of Leor’s village came into view.

What they saw wrenched their hearts. Fields lay barren, the soil cracked and dry despite the recent rain. Homes were in disrepair, and the few villagers visible moved with a lethargy born of hunger and despair.

Children sat listlessly, their eyes dull. An elderly man leaned against a wall, his frame gaunt.

Fretji felt tears prick her eyes. “This is worse than I imagined,” she whispered.

Sleshne placed a hand on her shoulder. “We can make a difference here.”

They entered the village, and Leor called out, “I’ve returned with help!”

Faces appeared in doorways, eyes widening at the sight of the supplies.

A woman approached cautiously. “Is this real?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Fretji smiled gently. “Yes, we’re here to help.”

She remembered, “**When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd**” (Matthew 9:36).

Hmenne began organizing the distribution, ensuring that the most vulnerable received aid first. Sleshne set up a makeshift clinic to tend to the sick, his hands steady and his demeanor calming.

6. Building Relationships

Over the next few days, the volunteers worked tirelessly alongside the villagers. They repaired homes, dug new wells, and shared meals.

“Then focus on the essentials,” the pastor advised. “Remember the Romans Road—that’s all you need to know.”

“But there’s so much more in the Bible,” Sleshne said softly.

“Not for you to worry about,” the pastor replied curtly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have other parishioners to attend to.”

Reflecting Under the Wise Old Oak

Feeling disheartened, Sleshne left the church and found solace beneath a sprawling oak tree in the nearby park. The leaves rustled gently above him as he opened his Bible, seeking comfort.

He read:

2 Timothy 3:5 (NLT):

“They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly. Stay away from people like that!”

He pondered the words, considering the pastor’s insistence on adherence without understanding.

The Confederation had commented:

“Many there are who call themselves Christians but who have not yet learned that the church which this entity known as Jesus the Christ came to bring is within. It is a church built upon a consciousness of love, love of the Father and love of the neighbor. It is not a church built of stone.” — **Hatonn, 1974/11/24**

Sleshne realized that the grand church, with its emphasis on tradition over personal transformation, might not be the place where he could truly grow.

He continued reading:

James 1:22 (NLT):

“But don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.”

And the Confederation’s insight:

“Jesus expected each of those who followed him to take up the cloak of Christhood and become voices of love, thoughts of love, hands and feet of love, wills and intellects of love.” — **Q’uo, 2020/01/11**

He felt a renewed determination. “I want to be the hands and feet of love,” he thought. “But perhaps this isn’t the place where I can do that.”

A Smoother Transition

As the sun began to set, casting a warm glow over the landscape, Sleshne stood up, feeling a mixture of sadness and hope.

“I may need to continue my journey,” he mused. “Perhaps there are others who share this longing for a deeper, more active faith.”

He recalled:

Matthew 7:13-14 (NLT):

“You can enter God’s Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to destruction is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.”

The Confederation had said:

“The way of the spiritual seeker is narrow and challenging, requiring dedication and the courage to follow one’s inner guidance.” — **Q’uo, 1987/09/13**

With a resolute heart, Sleshne decided to continue along the broad path for now, understanding that his journey was not yet complete. He felt that there was more to learn and others to meet who might help him grow.

“I’ll keep seeking,” he affirmed. “Perhaps the next place will offer the guidance and community I need.”

Looking Ahead

As he walked back to the main road, he noticed a group of people handing out pamphlets. Their attire was modest, and their expressions earnest.

“Excuse me,” one of them called out. “Have you heard the true doctrine of salvation?”

Curious, Sleshne approached. “I’m seeking a deeper understanding of faith,” he replied.

“Then you must adhere strictly to the laws set forth in Scripture,” the person insisted. “Only by following the commandments to the letter can you achieve righteousness.”

Sleshne felt a stir of intrigue mixed with caution. “I’d like to hear more,” he said.

As he engaged with them, he sensed that this encounter would lead him into new challenges—perhaps with those who emphasized legalism over grace.

Key Lessons and Reflections:

- **Questioning Superficial Faith:** Sleshne recognizes that a faith based solely on tradition and acceptance without understanding is unfulfilling.
- **Desire for Active Discipleship:** He yearns to live out Jesus’ teachings, aligning with James 1:22 and the Confederation’s emphasis on embodying love.
- **Encounter with Authority:** The pastor’s discouragement highlights the conflict between institutional religion and personal spiritual growth.
- **Continued Journey:** Sleshne decides to keep seeking, preparing to face new challenges with legalistic interpretations of faith.

Conclusion

Sleshne’s experience at the Church of Stone underscores the importance of seeking a faith that resonates with one’s inner convictions. His willingness to question and desire for genuine discipleship set the stage for further exploration.

As he continues along the broad path, we see a transition toward encounters with legalism, setting up the next chapter of his journey.

May we, like Sleshne, have the courage to seek deeper understanding and live out our faith authentically, remembering:

“You can enter God’s Kingdom only through the narrow gate... But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it” (Matthew 7:13-14, NLT).

And embracing the Confederation’s wisdom:

Hmenne added, “Fear is natural, but we must not let it dictate our actions. The Confederation reminds us, **‘Fear is a natural emotion but must be faced with love and understanding, transforming it into an opportunity for service’** (1991/01/27).”

An elderly woman named Clara stepped forward, her eyes soft yet resolute. “I lost my son to famine years ago. If we can prevent others from suffering that pain, we should.”

A silence fell as the villagers considered her words.

Sleshne looked around, his voice gentle yet firm. “Compassion isn’t just a feeling; it’s a call to action. We must decide what kind of people we want to be.”

Slowly, heads began to nod. Marcus sighed heavily. “Perhaps you’re right. Fear has held me back, but I don’t want to be governed by it.”

Elder Miriam, who had been listening quietly, spoke up. “Let us put it to a vote. All in favor of aiding Leor’s village?”

Hands rose hesitantly at first, then more confidently until a majority was clear.

3. Mobilizing Compassion

With the decision made, the village buzzed with activity. Men and women gathered supplies—sacks of grain, barrels of water, tools, and clothing. Children helped by fetching items and preparing care packages.

Fretji helped load a cart, her hands working swiftly as she packed provisions. She glanced at a small loaf of bread and wrapped it carefully. “Every little bit counts,” she murmured.

Sleshne approached with bundles of herbs. “These medicinal plants might help with any illnesses they’re facing,” he said.

Hmenne organized the volunteers, assigning roles and ensuring that they had everything they needed for the journey.

As they prepared, Fretji addressed the group. “Remember, we’re not just delivering supplies; we’re sharing hope and solidarity. As Proverbs says, **‘Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done’** (Proverbs 19:17).”

She looked at each face, seeing a mix of determination and apprehension. “We’re in this together,” she assured them.

Marcus approached her, his expression earnest. “I want to help,” he said. “I’ve been selfish, but I see now that we must stand with others.”

Fretji smiled warmly. “Your willingness means a lot. Thank you.”

Hmenne added, “The Confederation teaches, **‘Service is only possible to the extent it is requested... We were ready to serve in whatever way we could’**” (1981/89). “By answering this call, we’re fulfilling a greater purpose.”

4. Journey of Service

The caravan set out at dawn, the sky painted with hues of pink and orange. The air was crisp, and the scent of earth filled their lungs. As they walked, the landscape changed from lush fields to parched terrain, the grass fading to brittle stalks.

Fretji walked beside Leor, who guided them. “How much farther?” she asked gently.

“Not long now,” he replied, his eyes reflecting both gratitude and sorrow.

Sleshne joined them, carrying a basket of freshly picked herbs. “Perhaps it’s a sign,” he mused. “These trees have always been resilient, thriving even in harsh conditions. If they wither now, maybe they’re telling us something.”

Fretji turned to her friends, her eyes searching theirs. “Have we grown complacent? We’ve found peace here, but what if our compassion is meant to extend beyond our village?”

1. Recognizing the Call to Action

As they pondered the state of the trees, a weary figure emerged from the path leading into the woods. An elderly man, cloaked in a tattered robe, leaned heavily on a wooden staff. His face was etched with lines of fatigue, and his eyes held a depth of sorrow.

“Welcome, traveler,” Fretji called out, moving toward him. “Please, rest and take some water.”

The man nodded gratefully, his voice hoarse. “I am Leor,” he introduced himself between sips. “I come from a village not far from here. We are in dire need. Drought has ravaged our lands, and our people suffer from famine.”

Hmenne felt a knot tighten in his stomach. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he said earnestly. “How can we assist?”

Leor looked at them, hope flickering in his tired eyes. “We’ve heard of your kindness. I came to ask if you might help us, share what you can.”

Fretji felt a surge of compassion, but also a twinge of hesitation. She knew their own resources were not limitless.

She recalled the Scripture: “**Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?**” (James 2:15-16).

Turning to her companions, she said, “We cannot ignore this plea. Our journey of love must reach beyond ourselves.”

Sleshne nodded. “The Confederation teaches, ‘**You have chosen to be in this mundane world... that you may serve, humbly, and without wisdom, but only compassion**’” (1990/02/04). “It’s clear that our path leads us to aid them.”

2. Overcoming Fear and Doubt

Back at the village, the trio convened a meeting in the square. The villagers gathered, curiosity and concern evident on their faces as they shared whispers and glances.

Fretji stepped forward. “Friends, we’ve been approached by Leor, whose village suffers from drought and famine. They’ve asked for our help.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd. Marcus, a stout man with a furrowed brow, raised his hand. “Our own harvest was modest this year,” he said skeptically. “If we give away what we have, what will become of us?”

Others nodded in agreement, fear flickering in their eyes.

Fretji took a deep breath. “I understand your concerns. But remember the words of Proverbs: ‘**Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to act**’ (Proverbs 3:27). We have the means to help. Can we, in good conscience, turn them away?”

“The way of the spiritual seeker is narrow and challenging, requiring dedication and the courage to follow one’s inner guidance.”

Chapter 3: Encounter with Legalists

Leaving the modestly dressed pamphleteers behind, Sleshne traveled further along the broad road. The path felt more crowded here, the air charged with intensity. He clutched the Bible with Confederation Commentary closer, still pondering the strict doctrines they had preached, and the subtle unease it stirred in him. Ahead, a small commotion caught his attention—voices raised, tense and urgent.

As he approached, he saw a grim tableau: a frightened woman surrounded by a stern-faced group. Stones lay piled at the leader’s feet, their cold permanence hinting at an impending act of violence. Sleshne’s heart tightened. Just moments ago he’d listened to those who insisted on strict, literal obedience to laws. Now he faced a group taking that logic to its savage conclusion.

He stepped closer. “Excuse me,” he said, voice steady but respectful. “What’s happening here?”

A tall man with harsh eyes and a rigid posture turned to him. “This woman has remarried after her husband’s death,” he declared. “Our interpretation of the Law deems this an unforgivable sin. We must stone her to maintain purity.”

Sleshne’s stomach knotted. He recalled how Jesus condemned sin but taught compassion. He remembered passages from his Bible: “**Do not judge others, and you will not be judged.**” (Matthew 7:1) He had learned from Jesus to look deeper than the letter of the law. The Confederation commentary had also hinted that clinging to rigid structures could smother the spirit of love. “*Many times, in adhering blindly to law, the spirit of love is lost,*” Q’uo had said.

Gathering courage, he addressed the crowd. “Did Jesus not speak of love, mercy, and forgiveness as the heart of the law? He said, ‘Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone’ (John 8:7). We must remember his greatest commandments: to love God wholeheartedly and to love our neighbors as ourselves.”

A murmur ran through the crowd. Some gripped their stones tighter, others looked uncertain. One woman’s voice trembled as she said, “But what of the law? Are we to ignore it?”

The leader’s gaze hardened. “The Law of God is clear. ‘For the wages of sin is death’ (Romans 6:23). ‘If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death’ (Leviticus 20:10). We must uphold God’s commandments strictly. Adultery, impurity—these demand punishment.” He gestured to the stones at his feet, his voice cold and certain.

Sleshne’s heart ached for the widow’s terror. He took a step forward, between her and the raised hands. “Jesus fulfilled the law but showed us its deeper meaning. The essence is love. By focusing solely on punishment, we lose that essence. Remember, Christ came not to condemn but to save.”

Some stones wavered in uncertain hands. The widow’s eyes pleaded silently for mercy. Sleshne inhaled deeply and quoted again: “**You are careful to tithe, but ignore the more important aspects—justice, mercy, and faith**” (Matthew 23:23). He added softly, “We must not let rigid adherence overshadow compassion.”

An older man in the crowd fidgeted, troubled. But the leader barked, “You think you know better than scripture and tradition? You cause division here! ‘Reject a divisive person,’ says Titus 3:10. You dare challenge our reading of the law?”

Sleshne met the leader's fierce glare. He remembered another Q'uo commentary, *"Those who cling to letter over spirit often lose sight of love, the true fulfillment of the law."* He spoke gently but firmly, "I'm not here to cause division, but to remind us what Jesus emphasized—love and mercy over ritual sacrifice. He healed on the Sabbath to show that love surpasses strict legalism."

A young man lowered his stone, confusion etched on his face. The leader, however, seethed his face grew red with frustration. "Enough! You twist words and deceive these people. We uphold God's commands. You undermine them. Jesus was the ultimate blood sacrifice, the Lamb of God. His words were the bleating of the lamb, meant to soften our hearts but not to erase the law. You are a troublemaker and a heretic. You are not welcome here. Leave us, and take her with you."

The widow's tears streaked her dusty cheeks. Sleshne turned to her. "Come," he said quietly. "Let's go." He offered her his hand. Several in the crowd stepped back, unsure, but the leader's pointing finger and furious scowl made it clear: they were not welcome.

As they walked away, Slesh could feel the weight of the congregation's angry stares on his back, stones clattering as some dropped from uncertain hands. One pebble hit Sleshne square on the back. The leader's voice rang out behind him, a final admonishment. "Remember, we are the true followers of God's law. You are the one who has strayed!"

They walked in silence, the widow trembling with relief and confusion. After a while, the road grew quieter, and they found a secluded spot beneath some hazelnut shrubs. The green leaves whispered softly in the breeze, offering comfort and shelter.

Sitting beside her, Sleshne opened his Bible again. He read aloud softly: **Matthew 23:23 (NLT)**: "What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things."

He turned to the Confederation commentary: "Many times it has been seen that in attempting to adhere to a rigid structure of law, the spirit of love is lost, and the true purpose of the law is forgotten. The one known as Jesus came to remind us that love is the fulfilling of the law." - **Q'uo, 1990/09/09**

The widow asked, voice still shaking, "Why were they so cruel?"

Sleshne chose his words carefully. "They believe that strictness is holiness. But Jesus taught that love fulfills the law. Without mercy, laws become hollow. He never taught us to harm; he taught us to restore."

The widow's eyes glistened. "You saved my life with his teachings. Where do we go now?"

"I've seen those who are superficial and those who are legalistic," Slesh said thoughtfully. "But I haven't yet found a community that understands the spiritual nature of Christianity. I believe there are people out there who truly follow Jesus, who understand that his teachings are about more than just rules and appearances."

Sleshne looked down the road. "We keep seeking," he said, resolve kindling in his chest. "We'll search for a community that weds truth with compassion, that honors both spirit and letter, but places love first."

They rested a while under the hazelnut shrubs, the sweetness of that shelter reminding them that nature's quiet grace often spoke more truth than a thousand angry voices. Though the journey ahead was uncertain, Sleshne felt steadied by what he had learned: faith must not be twisted into chains of empty ritual or cruel punishment, but liberated by understanding and mercy.

Creator" (2003/08/24). As John writes, "**God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them**" (1 John 4:16).

8. **Connecting Self-Love to Loving Others:** Loving oneself enhances the capacity to love neighbors. "**Trust then... turning to that love within the self and the worth within the other self**" (2002/03/17). Jesus emphasized, "**Love your neighbor as yourself**" (Mark 12:31).

Fretji expressed her gratitude. "By learning to love ourselves and our neighbors, we've deepened our capacity to create a harmonious community."

Hmenne added, "This experience shows that love is the foundation of all positive transformation."

Sleshne concluded, "As we move forward, let's carry these lessons in our hearts, ever striving to embody love in all forms."

Transition to the Next Chapter: The Russian Olives of Compassion

With their hearts fuller than ever, the trio sensed yet another horizon to explore.

Fretji pondered, "We've learned to love our enemies and our neighbors as ourselves. What lies beyond?"

Hmenne contemplated, "Perhaps it's time to delve into the depths of compassion—the kind that reaches out to alleviate suffering wherever it's found."

Sleshne agreed. "The Russian olive, resilient and nurturing, symbolizes compassion. Maybe our next journey leads us to the Russian Olives of Compassion."

Fretji smiled. "The Confederation teaches, '**By acting from compassion, we facilitate healing**' (1991/03/03). Let's continue to explore and embody this profound love."

United and inspired, they prepared for the next chapter of their spiritual odyssey, eager to embrace the boundless possibilities of compassion.

End of Chapter

Chapter 20: The Russian Olives of Compassion

The sun cast a golden glow over the village, its rays filtering through the leaves of the quince trees that had once been a symbol of division but now stood as a testament to unity and love. The air was filled with the sounds of laughter and the gentle hum of daily life. Peace had settled over the community like a warm blanket, and the villagers enjoyed the harmony they had worked so hard to achieve.

Yet, amid this tranquility, Fretji felt a stirring in her heart—a quiet unease that whispered of unfinished business. One morning, she walked to the edge of the village where the Russian olive trees stood sentinel. Their silvery leaves usually shimmered in the sunlight, but today they appeared dull, the branches drooping as if burdened by an unseen weight.

She reached out to touch a leaf, its texture dry and brittle under her fingers. A sense of melancholy washed over her.

"Something troubles you," Hmenne said softly as he approached, his eyes reflecting concern.

Fretji sighed, her gaze still fixed on the trees. "These olives... they seem to mirror a restlessness within me. I can't shake the feeling that our journey isn't complete."

Elder Miriam announced, “This is a sign of our renewal!”

The villagers gathered to harvest the quinces, their hearts filled with gratitude.

Fretji suggested, “Let’s share this abundance with neighboring villages, spreading the love we’ve cultivated here.”

Sleshne agreed. “As it is written, ‘**Give, and it will be given to you**’ (Luke 6:38). Our generosity can inspire others.”

Hmenne concluded, “Our journey doesn’t end here. Let’s continue to nurture ourselves and others, embracing the fullness of love.”

Summary and Reflection

Through introspection, self-forgiveness, and communal support, the trio and the villagers discovered the transformative power of understanding and practicing love for themselves and their neighbors, leading to personal healing and strengthened bonds within their community and beyond.

Key Lessons Learned:

1. **Acknowledging Inner Truths:** Recognizing and addressing internal beliefs is essential for authentic relationships. The Confederation notes, “**The inspiration that lifts frustration is within you and within this moment if you can but allow the self to express its nature through your instrument**” (1999/09/12). The Bible echoes, “**As water reflects the face, so one’s life reflects the heart**” (Proverbs 27:19).
2. **Practicing Self-Acceptance:** Embracing oneself fosters genuine connections with others. “**The self is learning about the self at all times... This process recapitulates the action of the Creator in knowing Itself**” (2004/01/04). As Scripture advises, “**I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made**” (Psalm 139:14).
3. **Embracing Community:** Nurturing relationships enhances the well-being of all. “**Each person that you encounter has a field of energy, and you will interact with that energy in certain ways**” (1999/09/12). Jesus said, “**For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them**” (Matthew 18:20).
4. **Overcoming Isolation:** Sharing journeys promotes collective healing. “**By loving and accepting others and yourself, you open that heart and clear it of the blockages that close the heart**” (2022/02/09). The Bible teaches, “**Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ**” (Galatians 6:2).
5. **Reflecting Inner Healing in the Outer World:** Inner transformations influence the environment. “**As each becomes able to see the self with love and all things outside the self with love one is able to create the atmosphere in which healing occurs**” (2002/12/22). Scripture reflects, “**A cheerful heart is good medicine**” (Proverbs 17:22).
6. **Overcoming Resistance:** Educating others about love can dispel misconceptions. “**If any entity... wishes to express its love for any other entity by simply joining in whatever activity is desired by the other entity, then the green-ray energy center is activated**” (1982/11/21). Jesus taught, “**Do to others as you would have them do to you**” (Luke 6:31).
7. **Living the Creator’s Love:** Embracing love aligns with the Creator’s desire. “**You are all things... Look into the eyes of the person next to you and see the**

Standing up, he offered the widow his hand once more. “Come,” he said gently, “There must be others who understand. Let’s find them, living out the love we’ve read and felt today.”

With that, they continued along the broad path, hearts tender yet determined. They knew not what lay ahead, but they trusted that grace and compassion would guide their steps.

Key Lessons and Reflections:

- **Beyond Legalism:** Sleshne confronts those who adhere strictly to the law while ignoring its heart—love, mercy, and faith.
- **Embodying Christ’s Teachings:** By intervening, Sleshne demonstrates that following Jesus means living with compassion, not just citing rules.
- **Balance and Fulfillment:** Inspired by both scripture and Confederation commentary, Sleshne sees that love is the true fulfillment of the law.
- **A Continuing Quest:** Freed from both superficial faith and harsh legalism, Sleshne and the widow now seek a community that honors the core of Christ’s message.

Conclusion

This encounter solidifies Sleshne’s understanding that mere legalistic enforcement or superficial tradition cannot sustain genuine spiritual life. True discipleship involves embodying love, mercy, and compassion. As they continue their journey, Sleshne and the widow carry with them a renewed commitment to live the spirit of the law, seeking a community that truly reflects the heart of Jesus’ teachings.

As they walked, Slesh felt a growing sense of anticipation. He believed that finding a more spiritually focused community would naturally lead them to the values of love and kindness.

Chapter 4: Encounter with the Charismatic Christians

The broad path stretched before Sleshne and his companion, the rescued widow from the legalistic crowd. Their pace had slowed as they recovered from recent encounters. Sleshne’s Bible with Confederation Commentary, though now a point of contention, remained his anchor. He lunged to it, hoping to find a more balanced community that truly embraced Jesus’ call to love and mercy.

Voices reached them first—passionate singing, fervent prayers, shouts invoking Jesus’ name. Curious, Sleshne followed the sound into a clearing where a gathering of believers surged with intensity. Some danced wildly, others wept or laughed, a few spoke in tongues. It was both exhilarating and unsettling. He felt the woman beside him tense, her earlier gratitude toward him for saving her from the stoning attempt now tempered by uncertainty. She had not asked to be rescued, after all, and her silence was thick with unresolved feelings.

A man at the center commanded attention. Dressed in a flowing robe, eyes bright with zeal, he raised his arms and boomed, “Welcome, newcomers! I am Pastor Gideon. You enter a place where the Spirit moves! Here we wield God’s might against the enemy—demons lurk in every shadow, and we cast them out in Jesus’ name!”

Sleshne’s heart lifted slightly; these people believed strongly in the spiritual realm. Perhaps they understood Christ’s deeper message. He approached, smiling softly. “I am Sleshne,” he said. “We seek those who live by Jesus’ teachings of love and compassion, beyond fear and empty form.”

Pastor Gideon nodded briskly. “You’ll see we are no empty form. We know our enemy well! As Scripture says:

Ephesians 6:12 (NLT): “For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.”

Matthew 10:34 (NLT): “Don’t imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! I came not to bring peace, but a sword.”

2 Corinthians 10:4 (NLT): “We use God’s mighty weapons, not worldly weapons, to knock down the strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments.”

Mark 16:17 (NLT): “These miraculous signs will accompany those who believe: They will cast out demons in my name, and they will speak in new languages.”

The world teems with demons. We cast them out with God’s authority!”

The crowd erupted in “Amen!” Several people then fell into ecstatic states, tongues babbling in unknown syllables. The display was impressive. Yet as days passed, Sleshne noticed how Pastor Gideon rarely spoke of love, but often of devils, sin, and enemies. A heavy cloak of fear lay over the community. They saw demons in every illness, every doubt.

Sleshne remembered reading something about demons and negative entities in his Bible’s commentary: *“Negatively oriented entities utilize such thought-form projections [demons] to control certain entities through fear ... By calling to a higher power and seeing the One Creator in all, one may transmute the demon within the mind and move beyond fear.”* (Q’uo, 2020/01/11)

This teaching reminded him that fear was a tool of negativity. Jesus taught that perfect love casts out fear. Instead of fostering love, these charismatics fanned fear into flames.

Pastor Gideon frequently spoke of his visions of demons, claiming to see them lurking in the shadows and within the hearts of the people. He insisted that only he had the power to see and cast them out, often performing dramatic exorcisms that left the congregation in awe of his supposed abilities.

The people hung on his every word, their eyes wide with fear and reverence. They eagerly brought their troubles to him, seeking his guidance and the protection of his unique gift. Yet, there was a pervasive atmosphere of fear and control. Conversations often centered around the dangers of demonic influence and the constant need to be vigilant against the forces of darkness.

Slesh began to feel uneasy. The community’s fervor, which had initially seemed like a deep commitment to faith, now appeared to be driven by fear and an obsession with demonic forces. He observed how the members interacted with one another, noticing the subtle ways they policed each other’s behavior, always on the lookout for signs of demonic possession or influence.

One afternoon during a prayer session, Pastor Gideon scrutinized Sleshne closely. “Brother, I sense a disturbance around you. Something unholy clings to you. Show me what you carry.”

Sleshne presented his Bible with the Confederation Commentary. “This commentary deepened my understanding of Jesus’ love. It has helped me approach others with compassion rather than suspicion.”

Pastor Gideon’s face contorted in alarm. “A channeled commentary? Such materials are filled with demons! You’ve brought the devil’s subtle influence among us!”

A hushed dread fell over the crowd. The widow, who had never truly reconciled her forced salvation, drew away from him. “He brought corrupted teachings!” she exclaimed, eyes wide with panic.

She reflected, “The Confederation encourages us to see that **‘The self is learning about the self at all times... As the response to the novel situation develops, the first person to be surprised by that response is the self’** (2004/01/04). I’ve surprised myself with how open I’ve become.”

12. Celebrating Transformation

To honor the collective healing, the village planned a grand festival under the now-flourishing quince trees.

Preparations involved everyone:

- **Decorations:** Children crafted garlands from fresh quince blossoms.
- **Music and Dance:** Tobias led a group of musicians, including new talents who had discovered joy in shared creativity.
- **Feasting:** Villagers contributed their favorite dishes, sharing abundance.

During the festival, the atmosphere was jubilant. Laughter and song filled the air.

Fretji addressed the gathering. “We’ve journeyed together from isolation to connection. As the Bible says, **‘How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!’** (Psalm 133:1).”

She continued, “The Confederation teaches, **‘By loving and accepting others and yourself, you open that heart and clear it of the blockages that close the heart’** (2022/02/09). By embracing love, we’ve opened our hearts.”

Sleshne added, “This transformation is evident in our community and in the revival of our beloved quince trees.”

13. Reflections Under the Stars

As the festival wound down, the trio sat together beneath the stars, the soft glow of lanterns illuminating their contented faces.

Hmenne gazed upward. “It’s amazing how interconnected everything is.”

Fretji agreed. “By understanding and practicing love for ourselves and others, we’ve healed our community.”

Sleshne pondered, “Perhaps this is what it truly means to love our neighbors as ourselves—not just in action, but in the very essence of being.”

Fretji smiled. “I think we’ve come to understand that love is not just something we do, but something we are.”

Hmenne added, “The Confederation says, **‘Whatever the source, the ultimate resolution is to offer love and acceptance... and to work with it... seek within it those gifts of self-awareness and self-love’** (2024/05/11). I feel we’ve embraced that resolution.”

14. A New Dawn

The , the village awoke to a breathtaking sight. The quince trees were in full pollination, their branches heavy with fragrant ripe fruit.

Hmenne shared, “The Confederation says, ‘**Each person that you encounter has a field of energy, and you will interact with that energy in certain ways suggested by your distortion and the distortion of the other self**’ (1999/09/12). By opening ourselves, we can positively influence each other’s energies.”

Tobias nodded. “I would like to start anew.”

9. The Quince Trees Begin to Bloom

As weeks passed, subtle changes became apparent. The quince trees showed signs of recovery—new leaves unfurled, and tiny buds appeared.

Elder Miriam was overjoyed. “Look! The trees are healing!”

Fretji observed, “Our collective journey to understand and practice love seems to be restoring not just ourselves but also the world around us.”

She quoted, “**The solution... is that all is love and as each becomes able to see the self with love and all things outside the self with love one is able to create the atmosphere in which healing occurs**’ (2002/12/22).

Children played beneath the trees, laughter ringing out. The village vibrated with renewed energy.

10. Overcoming Resistance

Not everyone embraced the focus on love. Marcus, a stoic farmer, voiced his skepticism during a gathering.

“All this talk feels impractical,” he grumbled. “We have work to do.”

Fretji approached him gently. “I understand your concern, Marcus. But consider this: ‘**And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds**’ (Hebrews 10:24). Our relationships enhance our work.”

Hmenne interjected, “The Confederation advises, ‘**If any entity within the gaming competition wishes to express its love for any other entity by simply joining in whatever activity is desired by the other entity, then the green-ray energy center is activated**’ (1982/11/21). Working together with love can improve our productivity and well-being.”

Marcus sighed. “Perhaps there’s merit in that.”

11. Embracing Wholeness

The trio continued to support villagers in their personal and communal journeys.

One day, Sleshne found Elara sitting alone, looking contemplative.

“Is everything alright?” he asked.

She smiled softly. “I was just thinking about how much has changed. I feel more connected to myself and others.”

He nodded. “That’s wonderful to hear. Remember, ‘**Therefore encourage one another and build each other up**’ (1 Thessalonians 5:11).”

Sleshne raised a hand, gentle but firm. “Please, listen. Jesus taught us to know them by their fruits. This commentary has led me to more love, more mercy—not fear or hatred. Could a demon bear such fruit?”

Pastor Gideon snarled, “The devil is crafty! Demons can wear masks of light. We must cast them out! You refuse our discernment—your stubbornness betrays allegiance to darkness!”

Sleshne recalled another Q’uo passage: “*When faced with negativity or a demon’s image, the positively oriented seeker may call upon love and light, seeing the One Creator in all, thereby transmuting fear into understanding.*” (Q’uo, 2020/01/11)

He tried to remain calm, surrounding these fearful souls mentally with love. Yet their fear swelled, twisting love into suspicion.

Now various members started shouting. “He’s tainted! Remove him!”

The widow’s voice, shaking, joined them: “I never asked to be saved. Now he brings demons here!”

Pastor Gideon thrust a finger towards a dense thicket at the clearing’s edge. Thorny honeylocust branches formed a cruel barrier. “You cling to your demon-book? Then depart to the wilderness. Go to the thorny forest—go to hell itself! We cast you out!”

The crowd hissed agreement, some making signs to ward off evil. The energy was oppressive, their eyes full of dread and loathing. No talk of love here, only fear, anger, and rejection.

Sleshne’s heart sank. He had again found believers obsessed with enemies and darkness, forgetting Jesus’ central command: to love one another. He said quietly, “I am sorry you perceive evil where I see hope. Jesus reached out to sinners with mercy. I hope someday you see that love is stronger than fear.”

They jeered, unmoved. He turned away, shoulders heavy. Approaching the thorny honeylocust boundary, he felt each step grow more somber. The twisted branches and sharp thorns seemed a fitting symbol for this painful expulsion.

Recalling the lessons learned: From superficial acceptance to rigid legalism, and now fanatic fear—each community had distorted Jesus’ message. He remembered Jesus’ words: “**Do not judge others, and you will not be judged.**” (Matthew 7:1) Yet here, they judged him possessed. He remembered Q’uo’s gentle wisdom about demons: fear is their tool, love their undoing.

With a last glance at the crowd, who still glared and muttered behind him, Sleshne said nothing more. They had told him to “go to hell,” to leave their presence as if he were cursed. In truth, hell was the absence of love and understanding. He would carry love forward, beyond their reach.

Key Lessons and Reflections:

- **Fear-Filled Faith:** The charismatics focused on demons and enemies rather than Christ’s love, turning spiritual warfare into a spectacle of suspicion.
 - **Demons and Illusion:** Q’uo’s commentary reminds that demons thrive on fear; love transforms and frees one from such negativity.
 - **Another Exile:** Just as legalists and superficial believers rejected him, the charismatics drive Sleshne away. Each extreme has lacked authentic love.
 - **Steadfast Resolve:** Though told to “go to hell” and face thorny obstacles, Sleshne remains true to Jesus’ central teaching: love conquers fear.
-

Conclusion

Expelled again, this time by fearful zealots, Sleshne heads into the thorny honeylocust forest. Guided by Jesus' words and Q'uo's counsel, he persists in his quest to find a faith community that embraces compassion and understanding. His journey continues, forged stronger by these trials.

As he approached the wall, he felt a deep sense of dread. The thorny branches seemed to symbolize pure fear, a barrier he must confront. Taking a deep breath, Slesh steeled himself and stepped forward, determined to continue his journey and seek a true understanding of Jesus' teachings.

As he stepped into the edge of the thorny forest, he felt a sting from a sharp branch. He grimaced but pressed on, determined to seek a place where faith bore gentler fruit. His faith, tested again, would not falter. He would keep searching until he found believers who cherished love over fear.

Chapter: Confronting the Thorny Locusts of Fear

The dense, twisted thicket of honey locust trees seemed, at first, merely an imposing forest. From a distance, Slesh perceived clusters of slender trunks and small, ordinary-looking leaves. Yet the moment he stepped under their canopy, the forest revealed a darker truth. The long, branching thorns—some as long as his forearm—jutting out from every possible angle, layered in grotesque spirals. Smaller thorns sprouted from larger ones, forming wicked spines ready to impale anyone who ventured too far.

Entering the Wall of Thorns

A faint, acrid odor hung in the air—tangy and metallic, biting at his nostrils. Before he could acclimate, another, more disturbing scent drifted in, causing Slesh to recoil. It was the reek of decaying flesh. Appalled, he glanced upward and discovered birds, small animals, and even insects impaled on the spikes. Their silent remains offered a sobering testimony to the forest's lethal nature.

His heart pounded. Each breath grew shallow, chest tightening with a rising panic. The forest felt alive in a menacing, almost malevolent way. He caught glimpses of rustling shapes moving just out of sight. Thorny branches shifted with ominous cracks, and an unnatural hush fell between every distant cry of some unseen creature. It all suffocated him—he felt certain the place was actively hostile, that it devoured anything bold or foolish enough to enter.

Struggling to keep calm, Slesh tried to chart a path through the labyrinth of thorns. They seemed to close in, scissoring from both sides. Fear latched onto him, forming dire visions of being skewered like the unfortunate animals above. His steps became labored, his feet skirting jutting spines and precarious tangles. Each vine or twig brushing him made him flinch, and the oppressive silence broke only by his own ragged breathing.

“They said this was the way,” he reminded himself, voice trembling. *“But do I trust them? Or was I cast out here for a reason?”*

No answer came. Fear whispered in his ear to turn back, to run. Yet there was nowhere else: behind him lay the condemnation of the charismatics; in front of him, an unknown ordeal. He took another tense step forward.

Panic and Injury

Then, amidst the gloom, Slesh heard something scraping—a thorn or branch sliding against another. Heart hammering, he broke into a run, no longer capable of measured caution. Leaves crackled beneath his feet; wild, spiny silhouettes blurred at the edges of his vision. He fled deeper and deeper, until—

Fretji stood up. “We’ve realized that our own neglect of understanding how to love ourselves and each other may be contributing to this malaise. Perhaps we all need to turn inward and reconnect with one another.”

A murmur spread through the crowd. Some nodded in agreement, while others looked skeptical.

Sleshne addressed them. “In the Bible, we are reminded, ‘**Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience**’ (Colossians 3:12). If we embody these qualities towards ourselves and our neighbors, we may find renewal.”

Hmenne added, “The Confederation mentions, ‘**You are all things... Look into the eyes of the person next to you and see the Creator; look into the eyes of your dearest enemy and see the same Creator**’ (2003/08/24). Perhaps it’s time we see the divine in each other.”

7. Cultivating Love Together

The trio proposed organizing gatherings focused on deepening relationships and understanding love for oneself and others. The idea was met with curiosity and cautious optimism.

They organized a series of events:

- **Community Dialogues:** Open forums where villagers could share their feelings and listen to one another.
- **Neighborly Acts:** Encouraging acts of kindness between neighbors, fostering connection.
- **Collective Projects:** Working together on village improvements, strengthening bonds.

During one of the dialogues, Elara, a young woman known for her quiet demeanor, hesitantly shared her thoughts.

“I’ve felt isolated, unsure if others cared about me,” she admitted.

Fretji responded warmly, “Thank you for sharing, Elara. Remember, ‘**Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ**’ (Galatians 6:2). We are here for you.”

She continued, “The Confederation teaches, ‘**If you have experienced anger, and intensified it, and forgiven yourself for that feeling, you spontaneously begin to feel forgiveness, and caring**’ (1990/09/30). Let’s practice forgiveness and care towards ourselves and each other.”

Elara smiled softly. “I feel lighter sharing this. Thank you.”

8. Healing Through Shared Stories

In the evenings, they hosted gatherings where villagers could share their stories and challenges.

An elderly man named Tobias stood up one night. “I’ve lived a long life, but I’ve always regretted not reaching out more to my neighbors. I isolated myself out of fear.”

Sleshne approached him. “It’s never too late to build connections.”

5. The Journey of Self-Understanding

The next morning, each of them set out on personal quests to reconnect with themselves and others.

Fretji's Path:

Fretji returned to the meadow where she used to gather herbs as a child. She sat among the wildflowers, closing her eyes and breathing deeply.

She recalled a verse, **“Be still, and know that I am God”** (Psalm 46:10). In the stillness, she felt a gentle presence within, a spark of divine love.

She remembered the Confederation's words: **“Self is learning about the self at all times. Indeed, this process recapitulates the action of the Creator in knowing Itself”** (2004/01/04).

Opening her eyes, she began to sketch the landscape, allowing her creativity to flow freely. With each stroke, she felt layers of self-doubt peel away, opening her heart to others.

Sleshne's Path:

Meanwhile, Sleshne ventured into the forest, his sanctuary. He climbed to a hilltop overlooking the valley, the village nestled below.

He pondered, **“I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made”** (Psalm 139:14). The realization dawned on him that he was a unique expression of the Creator, capable of deep connections.

Recalling the Confederation's guidance, **“The work you do regarding healing the schisms that exist within your own being is work within the precinct of your own heart... That place where enemyship exists is not within the self other to you... but rather it is how you perceive the other-self and your relationship with them”** (2023/05/28).

He spoke aloud, “I open my heart to myself and to others.” The words felt empowering.

Hmenne's Path:

Hmenne chose to meditate by the river. The gentle flow mirrored his breath, steady and calm.

He reflected on Jesus' invitation, **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”** (Matthew 11:28).

He embraced the Confederation's teaching: **“In the heart there is acceptance. And in that acceptance... there is clear seeing—clear seeing of the sole nature of the other being”** (2023/04/19).

In his heart, he resolved to approach himself and others with acceptance and understanding.

6. A Village in Need

As the trio embarked on their personal journeys, they noticed that many villagers seemed weary and disconnected.

Children played less energetically, and adults moved with a heaviness that hadn't been there before.

Elder Miriam gathered the community for a meeting. “Our village feels different,” she began. “There's a distance growing between us. The quince trees are still struggling, and so are we.”

A brutal, stabbing pain shot through his foot. A massive thorn had skewered his shoe and plunged into flesh. Crying out, he stumbled forward in agony. The momentum carried him crashing straight into a cluster of spikes. They tore at his upper back, each gouge burning like wildfire. He felt warm blood trickling across his skin. A choked scream escaped his throat, and in that blinding flash of pain and terror, the world faded to black.

First Vision: Meeting Peace in the Garden

Slesh drifted into a dreamlike state. With the shrill fear of the locust forest evaporating, he found himself in a soft, golden-lit meadow. No oppressive thorns nor the stench of decay—only a gentle breeze that carried a note of serenity. There, Jesus stood, face full of compassion.

“Do not be afraid; just believe.”

> (*Mark 5:36*)

His calm voice steadied Slesh's racing heart. The scene shifted, and Slesh witnessed Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus knelt in prayer, sorrowful and resolute under moonlit olive trees. The weight of impending crucifixion pressed upon him, yet even in agony, He radiated an unwavering trust in the Father.

“It was here,” Jesus' voice seemed to echo, *“that I faced my greatest trial through prayer, communing with the divine. You too may discover peace amid the densest darkness if you reconnect with the divine presence.”*

Next to Jesus, a figure made of starlight emerged, shimmering softly. Jesus introduced it as a guardian angel. The angel spoke:

“In the face of fear, remember love. There is no darkness so deep that love cannot transform it. Fill your heart with love, and fear shall melt away. Through prayer and meditation, open a doorway for divine guidance.”

A swirl of images followed: Slesh glimpsed the nails and blood of the crucifixion, felt the terror and heartbreak, yet also perceived a grace flowing through that suffering. Jesus turned back to him:

“Peace I leave with you... Do not let your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”

(*John 14:27*)

The glow around Jesus intensified; the scene dissolved into brilliant light. Slesh felt that radiance imprint upon his soul.

Awakening and Pain

He awoke to a fierce ache. Groaning, he discovered himself sprawled on the thorny forest floor. The monstrous thorn still impaled his foot. Blood seeped around the puncture. Gritting his teeth, he forced the thorn free. Each millimeter of withdrawal felt like tearing muscle, but at last it yanked out. He clutched his foot, breath ragged, then addressed the smaller thorns embedded in his upper back. Removing them was painstaking and agonizing, but eventually he managed, wincing at every fresh sting.

Sitting upright among scattered spikes, Slesh steadied his trembling spirit. The forest's hostility had not abated, but in the echo of that golden dream, something changed in him. He found enough clarity to retrieve his Bible with Confederation Commentary.

Flicking it open, two verses caught his eye:

Matthew 7:7 (NLT)

> “Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you.”

Confederation Commentary (Q'uo, 1992/07/12):

> “We do not mean to seem naive in this regard, for our recommendation in many instances where seekers feel confusion and fear is to focus upon the fundamental quality of love... it is a metaphysical principle that you shall find that which you seek.”

He inhaled deeply. *Focus on love*, he reminded himself. If fear was a prison, love was the key.

Another verse appeared:

Isaiah 41:10 (NLT)

> “Don’t be afraid, for I am with you. Don’t be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.”

Confederation Commentary (Q'uo, 1982/12/25):

> “Remove from your being fear that you shall fail and go forth in the glorious light and love of the one Creator that exists at the center of your being.”

He allowed the words to flow through his wounded psyche. He saw himself, not as a helpless victim, but as one who could choose how to respond to terror. *Pray*, he reminded himself. *Meditate and reconnect with love.*

Meditation in the Thorns

Despite the pain in his back and foot, Slesh began a meditative practice. He closed his eyes, inhaling deeply, then exhaling slowly. He visualized a gentle, radiant glow filling his chest, expanding with each breath. Love, he thought—pure, unconditional. *Let love replace fear*. Little by little, the oppressive ambiance of the forest gave way within him to calm and reassurance.

In this stillness, his mind drifted into another dreamlike vision. Jesus—again. The star-lit guardian angel—again. Familiar warmth. A door, shaped like a cross, loomed just beyond the dense thorns. From somewhere deep, he remembered the garden scene and the hush of Gethsemane. “*Jesus overcame terror*,” Slesh reminded himself, “*so can I*.”

He awakened from the meditation feeling lighter, if not physically healed. The weight of panic had lessened. The honey locust forest’s threat remained, but he saw it more plainly: the brambles were not actively chasing him. In his panic, he had run into harm’s way.

“*Yes, the thorns are real*,” he conceded, “*but my own fear magnified their danger*.”

Moving Onward

Rising to his feet, Slesh carefully tested his wounded foot. The injury throbbed, but he could walk. Each step brought pangs, though he felt a certain resoluteness blossoming—an inner confidence that overshadowed the stabs of pain.

Slowly, meticulously, he wound his way past razor-tipped spikes. He refused to succumb to panic, each breath a deliberate act of love over fear. Finally, a clearing appeared. Sunlight filtered in. He saw the phantom door—the cross-shaped gateway from his meditation—outlined in a subtle glow. Summoning the wisdom of Jesus’ words, he touched the door, heart thrumming with readiness.

“*Take me forward, Lord*,” he whispered.

The door yielded, and he stepped through. A momentary sensation of shifting pressure, like walking from dark water into open air, swirled about him.

He emerged under quaking aspen trees: tall, graceful trunks bearing leaves that trembled with the slightest breeze. The luminous green canopy shimmered in the sunlight, a striking contrast to the thorny gloom behind him. Yet, as the leaves rustled, he sensed an undercurrent

Entering his abode, they found Alaric tending to a small garden. He looked up with a gentle smile. “Welcome, my friends. What brings you to my sanctuary?”

Fretji spoke earnestly. “Our quince trees are dying, and we feel a disconnect within ourselves. We seek your wisdom on how to cultivate love for ourselves and our neighbors.”

Alaric nodded knowingly. “The outer world often reflects the inner. As the Scriptures say, ‘**As water reflects the face, so one’s life reflects the heart**’ (Proverbs 27:19). Tell me, have you been nurturing your own hearts and relationships?”

Hmenne admitted, “We’ve been so consumed with helping others that we’ve neglected to understand the love we need to foster within ourselves and with those around us.”

Alaric gazed into the distance. “The Confederation teaches, ‘**When you become frustrated with the self, with the lessons, with the pattern, then it is that we encourage the lifting of the self from pain... The inspiration that lifts frustration is within you and within this moment if you can but allow the self to express its nature through your instrument**’ (1999/09/12). Perhaps there are inner truths you need to embrace.”

Sleshne looked thoughtful. “So to heal the quince trees, we must first heal our understanding of love within and around us?”

“Precisely,” Alaric affirmed. “Begin by turning inward and embracing yourselves and your neighbors with the same love the Creator has for you.”

4. Facing Inner Truths

That evening, the trio gathered around a crackling fire under the starlit sky. The warmth provided comfort as they prepared to delve into their deepest selves.

Fretji broke the silence. “I’ve always felt that I wasn’t enough. As a child, my parents constantly compared me to my siblings, and I internalized the belief that I was inadequate. I realize now that this has affected how I relate to others.”

Sleshne placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “I understand. I, too, have carried burdens from my past. My father was strict, demanding perfection. I’ve struggled to connect deeply with others, fearing I might not meet their expectations.”

Hmenne shared his own struggles. “I was taught that focusing on oneself was selfish. I’ve pushed myself to exhaustion, trying to meet everyone’s needs but neglecting genuine connections.”

They sat quietly, the firelight casting flickering shadows on their faces.

Fretji whispered, “The Bible teaches us, ‘**Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law**’ (Romans 13:10). We’ve focused so much on actions that we’ve forgotten the essence of love.”

Hmenne added, “The Confederation reminds us, ‘**Trust then, when there is concern, to turn it from anger, grief or whatever other emotion does not feel as if it were the emotion of the true heart, to prayer. For turning to prayer, turning to hope that another individual’s suffering may be alleviated, is a turning to that love within the self and the worth within the other self**’ (2002/03/17). Maybe we need to reconnect with that true heart emotion.”

Sleshne nodded. “Perhaps it’s time we forgive ourselves and embrace who we truly are, so we can genuinely love our neighbors.”

1. A Mirror Reflects

One serene morning, Fretji stood by the river, gazing at her reflection. The water's surface mirrored her contemplative face, revealing subtle lines of worry and fatigue.

Sleshne approached quietly. "Is everything alright, Fretji?"

She sighed deeply. "Despite all we've accomplished, I feel a lingering emptiness. I can't shake the feeling that something within me needs attention."

Hmenne joined them, sensing the gravity of the moment. "Perhaps it's time we turn our gaze inward," he suggested thoughtfully. "Remember, Jesus taught, '**You shall love your neighbor as yourself**' (Mark 12:31). But how can we truly love our neighbors if we don't understand how to love ourselves?"

Fretji pondered his words. "You're right. The Confederation says, '**Yes, indeed, my friends, the Creator loves, and all of you are part of what it loves, for all of you are part of Itself. It desires to know each of you with a passion that is incomprehensible**' (1989/03/12). Maybe our next step is learning to love ourselves fully so that we can genuinely love others."

Sleshne nodded. "But how do we begin this journey of self-love and extending that love to our neighbors?"

2. The Withering Quince Trees

As they walked through the village, they noticed the quince groves were withering. The once vibrant trees bore sparse fruit, and their leaves hung limp and discolored.

Elder Miriam approached them with concern etched on her face. "Our quince trees are dying, and we can't determine the cause. The quince has always symbolized love and prosperity in our community. This decline troubles me deeply."

Fretji touched a brittle leaf, her eyes reflecting sorrow. "Perhaps the trees reflect our inner state. If we're neglecting ourselves and our relationships with our neighbors, the environment may mirror that."

Hmenne mused, "In the Bible, it is written, '**A tree is known by its fruit**' (Matthew 12:33). Maybe our lack of understanding in loving ourselves and others is manifesting in the world around us."

Sleshne recalled a Confederation teaching: "**Now, you see many, many wish to be of service to others. Many feel the need to express love to others. But first there must be two realizations. The first realization is that the Creator loves you with a passion most intense... Within you is infinity and within that infinity, an infinite intelligence. And this principle is one of love and so all that there is is love**" (1989/10/01). Perhaps we've been so focused on serving without understanding the depth of love within us."

Elder Miriam sighed. "But how do we restore both the trees and our spirits?"

3. Seeking the Hermit's Wisdom

Determined to find answers, the trio decided to seek guidance from Alaric, a wise hermit known for his deep understanding of nature and the soul. His humble dwelling sat at the edge of the village, surrounded by ancient oaks.

of heaviness. *Emotional distress?* A reminder of the rejections—first from the mainstream church, then the legalists, then the charismatics—washed over him, scraping raw feelings.

Though his body remained bruised, his spirit felt a measure of peace. He pressed one hand against an aspen trunk. The bark's smooth texture comforted him, yet his heart quivered like the leaves above, echoing with unresolved sorrow. He knew another challenge awaited him here: the confronting of emotional turmoil.

"I faced fear in the honey locust forest," he thought. *"Now, perhaps, I must face my own heartbreak."*

Steeling himself with the presence of the Holy Spirit still humming in his chest, he stepped fully into the grove, uncertain but resolved. The next lesson had begun.

Reflections & Transition

- **Facing Fear Directly**

Slesh discovered that running from fear only heightened the danger. His journey through the thorny locust forest taught him to pause, breathe, and summon a power greater than himself—love and faith.

- **Power of Meditation**

By embracing meditative stillness, he accessed divine guidance. The teachings—both from Jesus' example and the Confederation commentary—emphasized that love dispels fear when held as the heart's focus.

- **Vision of Gethsemane**

Reminded of Jesus' own trial and steadfast resolve in the face of suffering, Slesh felt validated that even in the darkest thicket, prayer and communion can bring clarity and courage.

- **Stepping Through the Door**

Emerging from fear, Slesh now stands at the edge of a quaking aspen grove, prepared to confront the next challenge: the turmoil of emotional distress triggered by rejection and heartbreak.

Though his wounds ache and his heart trembles, Slesh steps forward in faith, believing that each new forest, each new lesson, brings him closer to the heart of the Kingdom.

Chapter 6: Confronting Emotional Distress in the Quaking Aspen Forest

Entering the Grove

Stepping through the Jesus-shaped door among the thorny locusts, Sleshne at first felt a wave of relief. He had left behind the forest of fear where he learned to dissolve terror through love. Now, he found himself in a serene grove of quaking aspens. Slender white trunks rose around him, etched with dark, eye-shaped markings that seemed to follow his every move. Heart-shaped leaves trembled ceaselessly in the gentle breeze, creating a soft, rustling chorus across the entire stand.

Yet for all its beauty, something in this grove struck a chord of unease in Slesh's heart. The softly quaking leaves looked uncertain—unsure which direction to turn, whispering an undercurrent of restlessness that echoed his own inner turmoil. He realized, with growing dismay, that although the oppressive fear from the thorny honeylocust forest had eased, a deeper storm of emotions was brewing.

A faint ache spread across his chest at the memory of each rejection: from the superficial believers, the harsh legalists, the demon-slayer crowd, and even the callous indifference

of those in the sinkhole from whence he began. Everywhere he had gone, the doors to belonging had been slammed in his face. Could these trembling leaves be mirroring his own vulnerability?

He took one cautious step forward, the ground beneath him soft with mosses and wildflowers. The eye-like markings on the aspen bark appeared to gaze upon him, silent yet disapproving, bringing to mind the judging eyes of strangers in each new church. Each flutter of leaves overhead signaled the possible reawakening of emotional wounds he had carried but not fully addressed.

Piling Up of Emotions

As Slesh ventured deeper beneath the canopy of rustling aspen leaves, he became painfully aware of the unspoken emotions he had buried:

1. Feelings of Being Unloved and Rejected

Each misadventure replayed in his mind, replaying the suspicion and subsequent expulsion by multiple congregations. The cruelty stung anew, forcing him to acknowledge that these blows had sown a belief that perhaps he was inherently unlovable.

“That which tends to block red ray is a level of depression that argues against life and the joy of life.”

—2007/11/24

2. Fear and Insecurity

He realized the hostility of the demon-slayer community had left a brand of insecurity: If people could cast him out that easily, maybe he truly belonged nowhere. Each trembling aspen leaf overhead seemed to pulse with a question: *“Who are you? Where do you fit?”*

“Fear is a very common distortion of love. Within the red-ray the energy tends to be blocked if there is a fear of survival.”

—2001/10/21

3. Feeling Unsupported by the Sinkhole People

He recalled, with a hollow ache, how the indifferent sinkhole crowd never encouraged him in his quest. He had stood on the precipice, wanting to evolve and search for deeper meaning, yet they simply shrugged him off. The memory sent a stab of loneliness through him.

“There is a drive to continue evolution that is as instinctual as any other portion of the red ray.”

—1990/05/06

4. Loneliness and Sexual Frustration

Isolation gnawed at him, igniting the all-too-human longing to share his life with someone who truly understood him. He wondered if he was unhinged—seeing visions, speaking to guardian angels—without a partner to ground him. He remembered how the woman he had once rescued later publicly repudiated him.

“There is...no issue tougher than the red-ray issue because that natural function is so strong in the physical body, and the emotional need for connection and companionship, which sexuality is the door to within your peoples, is so very strong.”

—2001/03/04

5. Feelings of Unworthiness

A creeping voice inside him asked if he had any right to exist at all, or if his quest was a delusion. A wave of suffocating doubt overcame him as he trudged further into the aspen grove.

5. **Persevering in Love:** Continuing to show love, even when met with resistance, can lead to transformative breakthroughs. **“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”** (Romans 12:21).

6. **Shared Adversity as a Unifier:** Facing challenges together can strengthen bonds and dissolve enmity. **“Now we can give thanks... who have prayed for peace, marched for peace, or found love in their hearts for people not their own”** (2010/09/04).

7. **Living the Teachings:** Embodying principles of love and forgiveness creates ripples that extend beyond the immediate situation. **“If [Gandhi] had hated his enemy... he would not have succeeded”** (2004/10/03).

8. **Loving Neighbors as Ourselves:** Embracing this commandment fosters unity and peace. **“Love your neighbor as yourself”** (Mark 12:31).

Fretji addressed her companions with gratitude. “We’ve witnessed the incredible impact of choosing love over hatred. By seeing the divine in others, even when it’s challenging, we’ve helped heal a long-standing divide.”

Hmenne agreed. “This experience reinforces the importance of living our beliefs, not just speaking them. Our actions can inspire others to open their hearts.”

Sleshne smiled. “I feel a deep sense of fulfillment. Loving our enemies wasn’t easy, but it has brought about a peace I didn’t know was possible.”

Transition to the Next Chapter: The Quinces of Loving Neighbor as Self

As the festival concluded, the unity between the villages blossomed. Yet, the trio sensed that their journey of understanding love was evolving.

Fretji mused, “We’ve learned to love our enemies, but now we must deepen our love for our neighbors.”

Hmenne nodded thoughtfully. “The challenge ahead is to embody the commandment, **‘Love your neighbor as yourself’** (Mark 12:31), in all aspects of our lives.”

Sleshne felt a sense of anticipation. “Perhaps our next path leads us to the quince groves, symbolizing the sweetness and complexity of loving others as ourselves.”

Fretji smiled. “The Confederation teaches, **‘By acting from compassion, we facilitate healing’** (1991/03/03). Together, we’ll explore the Quinces of Loving Neighbor as Self, seeking to deepen our understanding and practice of unconditional love.”

United in purpose, the trio prepared to continue their journey, confident that compassion and understanding would guide them further along the path of enlightenment and peace.

End of Chapter

Chapter 19: The Quinces of Loving Neighbor as Self

After the unity forged between their village and Stone Creek, Fretji, Hmenne, and Sleshne returned home with hearts full of hope. The lessons learned about loving one’s enemies had transformed not only their relationships but also their understanding of love’s power.

Yet, as they settled back into daily life, they sensed that their journey was not complete. The next challenge lay within themselves and among those closest to them. The trio realized that to truly love others, they must first understand how to love their neighbors as themselves.

British rulership of his nation. Yet, never was this entity less than cordial and civil... If he had hated his enemy... he would not have succeeded' (2004/10/03)."

Peter stood up. "I propose we hold a festival to celebrate our unity."

Cheers erupted, signaling a new chapter in their relationship.

As they worked on the irrigation system, villagers from both communities shared stories, meals, and laughter. Bonds formed where there had been division.

14. Embodying Unconditional Love

At the festival, the atmosphere was joyful. Music, laughter, and shared meals created a tapestry of unity.

Fretji addressed the crowd. "Our journey has shown us that love conquers hatred. The Confederation teaches, '**You are not as you think you are, but rather, you are a personality shell that distorts the love and the light of the one infinite Creator... You are an instrument'** (1999/09/12). Let us be instruments of love."

Hmenne added, "As Jesus taught, '**Love your neighbor as yourself'** (Mark 12:31). This is the greatest commandment after loving God."

Marcus stood beside them. "I am grateful for your perseverance. Your love has transformed my heart. I now see that we are all connected."

Elder Miriam, who had traveled from their home village, spoke warmly. "You have lived the teachings of compassion and set an example for us all. The Confederation says, '**By loving and accepting others and yourself, you open that heart and clear it of the blockages that close the heart'** (2022/02/09). You have demonstrated this beautifully."

The festival continued late into the night, a celebration of unity, forgiveness, and the transformative power of unconditional love.

Summary and Reflection

Through perseverance, compassion, and unwavering commitment to love, the trio and the villagers overcame deep-seated hatred to forge a lasting bond.

Key Lessons Learned:

1. **Acknowledging Shared Humanity:** Recognizing that those we perceive as enemies are reflections of ourselves allows us to approach conflicts with empathy. The Confederation teaches, "**Those hatreds... are only reflections of the feeling for the self. Thus, it is the self which must be turned to in forgiveness and total compassion**" (1988/10/09).
2. **Demonstrating Goodwill:** Actions rooted in love can break down barriers of mistrust and open hearts. "**Let us not become weary in doing good**" (Galatians 6:9).
3. **Confronting Internal and External Conflict:** Addressing both external grievances and internal manipulations is essential for true reconciliation. "**Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free**" (John 8:32).
4. **Embracing Vulnerability:** Understanding that defensiveness often masks deeper pain allows for healing conversations. The Confederation advises, "**So, if you have experienced anger, and intensified it, and forgiven yourself for that feeling, you spontaneously begin to feel forgiveness, and caring**" (1990/09/30).

"This instrument has low energy into the heart chakra because it is blocked in red ray as it questions its right to be alive."

—1990/05/27

Peaking with an Earthquake

Almost on cue, the ground trembled beneath him. Initially, it was just a subtle vibration, but it swelled into a forceful quake that set the aspen trunks swaying and their leaves rustling frantically. The world spun, and Slesh lost his footing. He tumbled onto the soft loam, curled into a ball as if to protect himself from an unseen cataclysm.

All those pent-up emotions flooded his mind, colliding in an overwhelming surge. Panic gnawed at him, and his anguish found voice: He let out a raw, inconsolable cry. His Bible fell from his grasp, pages splaying outward. In that moment, the quake seemed to shake not just the ground but every certainty he had left.

When at last the shaking subsided, Slesh remained on the forest floor, trembling and tear-streaked. Even the aspens had quieted, their leaves rustling gently as though offering solace.

Finding Guidance

Feeling Unloved and Rejected Wiping the tears from his eyes, Sleshne crawled toward his fallen Bible. It lay open, beckoning him to read. Gently he picked it up and found reassurance in an oft-quoted line:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

—Matthew 11:28 (NLT)

His heart throbbed at the promise of rest. Another confederation quote came to mind:

"Depression is merely a very disturbing distortion... The consciousness which has been your source of life sees the creation with eyes of love, for it is love, and in this love all things are as they should be."

—1987/0726

He clung to those words, letting them sink in. The sorrow within him felt slightly less daunting when framed in the context of universal love, a living force that accepted him regardless of others' rejections. He prayed softly, "Lord, help me see with Your eyes of love."

Feeling Unsupported His memories circled back to how the sinkhole people—his earliest companions—ignored his growth. That sense of abandonment still cast a long shadow. He recalled, however, a confederation snippet about the presence of infinite support:

"You are never alone... one is being held in the infinite arms of the infinite Creator, that one is, in truth, nurtured."

—1989/0703

He let out a shaky breath. The eyes on the aspen bark no longer seemed judgmental; in that instant, they felt more like silent witnesses to his healing process. If the Creator's arms were truly infinite, then perhaps he was never truly abandoned.

Loneliness and Desire for Companionship Slesh's solitude felt especially sharp now. He yearned for a spouse or at least a companion who could offer warmth, stability, and understanding. He found solace in Jesus' affirmation of human partnership:

"Haven't you read...the Creator 'made them male and female'? ...They are no longer two, but one flesh."

—Matthew 19:4-6 (NLT)

He also remembered the Confederation’s encouragement about how a mated relationship can be a powerful catalyst for spiritual growth:

“The journey to adeptness is best accomplished by those entities of the mated relationship.”

—1983/0828

He lingered on that, imagining a future in which he could walk hand-in-hand with a fellow seeker, each mirroring the other’s truth. The grove, with its interconnected root systems, felt like a living parable of such unity.

Questioning His Right to Be Alive Slesh next faced the darkest question of all: *Was he worthy of life?* Was his existence meaningful or a cosmic error?

“The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.”

—John 10:10 (NLT)

The promise from Jesus rang loud and clear: not a life of shame, but of richness. He turned pages to see:

“...the first chakra is always the root or red-ray energy center. ...the energy that comes into your being is infinite...”

—1992/0705, 1997/0119 (combined reference)

This reminded him that his place in creation was sanctioned by infinite supply, infinite love, and infinite reason. Accepting the gift of existence was itself an act of faith.

Gaining Insight in the Quaking Leaves

Armed with these insights, Sleshne slowly rose to his feet. Emotions still swirled like the quivering aspen leaves, but a measure of calm had begun to take root. The trees gently shivered overhead, as though releasing the tension in his heart.

Inwardly, he acknowledged that each feeling of abandonment, loneliness, insecurity, or unworthiness was part of a bigger process, a stepping stone to deeper empathy and clarity. The quake that had driven him to the ground had also forced him to look up, to open himself to the possibility of divine comfort—and to open his own heart.

Surrounded by the watchful eyes of the aspens, he mused that the forest wasn’t judging him but guiding him to face his emotional wounds and to nurture them with compassion. He silently thanked the aspen grove for providing a sacred space, a living mirror in which his soul could reflect.

Moving Forward

After some minutes, he gathered his belongings, drew in a cleansing breath, and began walking again. The path ahead was no longer just a literal path through trees, but a figurative path to self-healing.

Little by little, the trembling aspen trunks gave way to sturdier walnut trees. He could see broad, deep-green leaves overhead. Catching sight of heavy drupes—unripe walnuts—dangling from high branches, he realized that after all this emotional labor, a hunger had awakened. Perhaps sustenance awaited him in this new environment.

Yet as he stepped across the threshold—out of the quaking aspen grove and into the walnut forest—he still carried subtle tremors in his chest. *Could a new orchard of challenge be next?* He sighed, determined nonetheless. The swirling kaleidoscope of emotion might remain for a time, but the knowledge gained here had armed him with faith, love, and a renewed sense of worth. And for the first time in weeks, that was enough.

Sleshne offered, “We’re here for you. Let’s find healing together.”

11. The Turning Point

Days passed with little progress. The villagers remained skeptical, and tensions were high. The trio felt disheartened but refused to give up.

One evening, a severe storm struck, causing the river to flood. Stone Creek was in danger of being washed away.

Without hesitation, the trio and a group from their village rushed to help. They worked tirelessly through the night, reinforcing barriers and rescuing those in peril.

As dawn broke, the storm subsided. The villagers saw the selfless efforts of those they once called enemies.

Beatrice, overwhelmed, said, “You’ve saved us. Why would you risk yourselves for us?”

Sleshne replied, “Because **‘Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’** (John 15:13). The Confederation teaches, **‘Now we can give thanks... who have prayed for peace, marched for peace, or found love in their hearts for people not their own’** (2010/09/04). Our hearts led us here.”

Samuel approached them, his demeanor softened. “Your actions speak louder than any words. We misjudged you.”

12. Healing Wounds

The shared crisis broke down the final barriers. Villagers from both communities began to see each other in a new light.

Marcus approached the trio, his eyes filled with humility. “I was wrong about you. My hatred blinded me.”

Fretji smiled warmly. “We all carry burdens. What’s important is how we choose to move forward.”

He nodded. “Can you ever forgive me?”

Hmenne responded, “We already have. The Confederation reminds us, **‘All are one... The place where enemyship exists is... how you perceive the other-self... See them as whole. See them as perfect. See them as magnificent—which is to say, see them for who they truly are’** (2023/10/15).”

Marcus took a deep breath. “I want to try. I don’t want to carry this weight any longer.”

Sleshne placed a hand on his shoulder. “We’re here to support you.”

13. Building Bridges

In the aftermath, both villages collaborated on repairing the damage. They decided to construct a new irrigation system that would benefit both communities equally.

During a joint meeting, Beatrice announced, “Let this be a new beginning. We’ve learned that **‘Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs’** (Proverbs 10:12).”

Sleshne added, “By loving our enemies, we’ve turned them into friends. The Confederation teaches, **‘In many, many ways, [Gandhi] made life very difficult for those of the**

9. Confronting Internal Conflict

The council became divided. Some villagers questioned their long-held beliefs. Arguments broke out, and tensions escalated.

Fretji called for calm. “Please, this discord only serves to harm us all. Remember, **‘If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand’** (Mark 3:25).”

Beatrice looked weary. “Perhaps we’ve been blind to manipulation within our own ranks.”

Marcus, feeling cornered, lashed out. “You’re all fools! They’re turning us against each other!”

Peter stepped forward defiantly. “No, Marcus. You’ve been using our fear for your own ends. It’s time we embrace peace.”

Hmenne gently said, “The Confederation advises us, **‘See them as whole. See them as perfect. See them as magnificent—which is to say, see them for who they truly are. That seeing alone invites the other-self into the recognition of the One Being within their hearts’** (2023/10/15). Let’s heal these divisions starting from within.”

Samuel, who had been vocal earlier, looked conflicted. “If what Peter says is true, we’ve been fighting the wrong enemy.”

Fretji offered, “Let us investigate together. Transparency will help rebuild trust.”

10. Breaking Through Hatred

Realizing that Marcus was a barrier to reconciliation, the trio decided to approach him privately.

They found him alone by the river, his demeanor hardened.

Fretji approached cautiously. “Marcus, we understand that you’re in pain. We want to help.”

He snapped, “You can’t help me. You can’t bring back my son.”

Hmenne’s eyes softened. “We’re so sorry for your loss. Holding onto hatred won’t heal that wound.”

Marcus’s voice cracked. “He died during the last drought. If your village hadn’t diverted the river...”

Sleshne gently said, “We didn’t know our actions had such consequences. Please forgive us.”

Fretji spoke softly, “The Confederation teaches, **‘So, if you have experienced anger, and intensified it, and forgiven yourself for that feeling, you spontaneously begin to feel forgiveness, and caring. Prayers may be said for the one who has acted in a way you would describe as hateful, and all is forgiven, the other self, your self, and the transaction between the two of you’** (1990/09/30). Let us help alleviate your suffering.”

Marcus clenched his fists. “I don’t know how to let go.”

Hmenne suggested, “Perhaps start by acknowledging your pain fully. The Confederation says, **‘What an amazing... gift that you got to experience this pain... Once you find the space to truly love that pain... you find space to do the same for the other-self’** (2023/05/28).”

Marcus looked at them, tears welling. “I’ve been so consumed by hatred that I’ve lost myself.”

End of Chapter 6

Chapter 7: Struggle for Sustenance: A Journey Through the Walnut Forest

Entering the Walnut Forest

As Slesh stepped out of the quaking aspen grove, the landscape around him began to change subtly but noticeably. The tall, slender aspens with their quivering leaves gave way to more robust and deeply rooted walnut trees. Their broad, thick canopies cast deep shadows on the forest floor, where little sunlight penetrated. The air grew cooler under the dense cover of the leaves, and the soft, fluttering sounds of the aspens were replaced by a hushed stillness, broken only by the occasional rustle of a falling walnut.

The ground was strewn with these walnuts, their shells thick and rough, blending with the dark, moist earth beneath them. The trunks of the walnut trees were thick and gnarled, their bark rough to the touch, a stark contrast to the smooth, pale bark of the aspens. Slesh noted how different this forest felt—more ancient, more guarded, as if it held secrets that it would not easily reveal.

As he walked deeper into the forest, Slesh’s thoughts began to drift toward survival. He hadn’t eaten since before entering the thorny locust forest, and the realization of his hunger gnawed at him with increasing urgency. His stomach twisted with the emptiness that had been growing for hours, and the dryness in his throat reminded him that he hadn’t had a proper drink of water in just as long.

Out here, alone in the forest, there was no one to offer him food, no group to support him. The stark reality of his situation began to press on him—how was he going to find food and water? His previous encounters had been challenging, but they had not tested him in this way. Now, with no clear source of sustenance in sight, his thoughts grew darker.

His thirst grew alongside his hunger. The forest, though cool and damp, offered no immediate sign of water. Each step he took seemed to drain more of his energy, and the worry gnawing at the back of his mind grew stronger with every passing minute. Slesh began to wonder if he had made a terrible mistake by venturing so far into the forest without ensuring he had enough supplies. His lips began to crack, and his tongue felt thick and dry as he continued to press forward.

The walnuts on the ground offered a tantalizing promise of nourishment, but when he picked one up and tried to crack it open, he found the shell impenetrable with his bare hands. He looked around for something he could use to break the shells but saw nothing that would serve the purpose. He tried smashing one on the bark of a nearby tree, but all he managed to do was scrape his hand, leaving it raw and bleeding.

As he sucked on the wound, the throbbing pain became a symbol of the many challenges he had faced. Weariness settled into his bones. He felt the weight of his journey, the endless trials that seemed to confront him at every turn. Slesh sat down heavily on the forest floor, the ache of hunger gnawing at him, and the thirst that dried his mouth made it impossible to find comfort.

Rising Concern

As Slesh sat on the damp forest floor, his mind began to spiral into worry. The coolness of the walnut forest, once a relief, now felt ominous, its shadows deepening as the light struggled to penetrate the thick canopy above. His stomach clenched with hunger, and the dryness in his throat became unbearable. He tried to push the thoughts of food and water from his mind, but they kept returning with increasing force.

What would happen if he couldn't find anything to eat or drink? The forest, though beautiful and mysterious, now seemed indifferent to his plight. He envisioned himself growing weaker with each passing hour, his body wasting away until he became nothing more than an emaciated corpse, blending with the earth that now seemed so unforgiving.

The vision was vivid and unsettling. He imagined his lifeless form, sprawled out beneath the walnut trees, a stark contrast to the life that teemed around him. The thought filled him with a deep sense of dread. He had come so far, faced so many challenges, only to be defeated by something as basic as hunger and thirst. The fear gnawed at him, and he could feel the edges of panic beginning to creep in.

Above him, Slesh noticed the quick, darting movements of squirrels, their small, agile bodies leaping from branch to branch. They seemed to mock him with their ease of movement and their apparent ability to find food. He watched as one squirrel deftly cracked open a walnut with its sharp teeth, devouring the flesh within. The sight only deepened his despair, as he realized how ill-equipped he was to survive in this environment. The squirrels were thriving, while he was struggling to even crack open a single walnut.

The forest, once a place of potential and challenge, now felt like a labyrinth with no escape. Slesh tried to quiet his mind, but the images of his possible fate continued to haunt him. He felt the weight of his loneliness more acutely than ever. There was no one to help him, no one to share the burden of survival. He was utterly alone in this ancient, guarded forest.

Slesh's thoughts turned to the people he had met along his journey—their indifference, their rejection, and the few moments of connection he had experienced. Now, those memories seemed distant and unreal, as if they had happened to someone else. His situation was dire, and he could see no clear way out. The forest, which had seemed so alive and vibrant, now felt like a silent, impenetrable barrier between him and survival.

The Descent into Despair

Under the weight of exhaustion and the emotional toll of the day's trials, Slesh found himself growing weary. He hadn't meant to stop, but his legs felt heavy, and his heart, though bolstered by the earlier reassurances, was now sinking into a familiar, creeping despair. There was a heaviness in his chest, a feeling he knew all too well—an overwhelming sense of being lost, of the road ahead being too difficult to bear.

Seeking some comfort, he sat down beneath the shade of a large tree. The ground was cool and soft, inviting him to rest. As he leaned back against the rough bark, Slesh reached into his pack and pulled out the Bible that had accompanied him through so many hardships. The familiar weight of it in his hands brought a small measure of comfort, a tangible reminder that he was not alone, even when he felt most isolated.

As he opened the Bible, his eyes fell upon a verse that seemed to resonate with his current state of mind, almost as if it had been waiting for him to find it:

"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

—Matthew 11:28-30

The words felt like a balm to his troubled heart, offering a promise of rest and relief. The burden he carried, both physically and emotionally, seemed lighter for a moment as he let the words sink in. Slesh closed his eyes, holding the Bible close to his chest, and allowed the message to soothe his spirit.

As he sat in silence, he could almost hear the gentle whisper of his guardian angel, speaking words of wisdom that mingled with the scripture he had just read. The voice was soft but clear, carrying a message that resonated deep within him:

Beatrice began, "State your purpose."

Hmenne spoke respectfully, "We are here to understand your grievances and to make amends. We acknowledge that there may have been actions that caused harm."

A man named Samuel stood up angrily. "Your people diverted the river, causing our crops to fail!"

Another shouted, "You expanded your boundaries, leaving us with less land!"

The room erupted in accusations.

Fretji raised her hands gently. "Please, we hear your pain. We're willing to work together to find solutions."

Marcus sneered, "Why should we trust you now?"

Sleshne responded, "Because **'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God'** (Matthew 5:9). The Confederation reminds us, **'In the open heart there is non-judgmental acceptance... Even when... there is disagreement or disapproval... in the heart there is acceptance'** (2023/04/19). We come with open hearts."

Samuel challenged, "Words won't fix our failed crops or lost land."

Hmenne suggested, "We can work together to redirect the river and adjust the boundaries fairly. Your prosperity is our prosperity."

The villagers exchanged glances. Beatrice asked, "Are you willing to commit resources to help us rebuild?"

Fretji nodded. "Absolutely. We brought initial supplies and are prepared to do more."

8. Unveiling Hidden Agendas

As discussions continued, it became apparent that not all in Stone Creek shared the same motivations. Some leaders had been stoking fear for personal gain.

Peter, the young villager, bravely stood up. "I discovered that some among us have been spreading falsehoods to keep us divided."

Gasps filled the room. Beatrice looked shocked. "What are you saying, Peter?"

He continued, "Marcus has been hoarding supplies and blaming the shortages on our neighbors to maintain control."

Marcus glared at him. "You're out of line!"

Sleshne saw an opportunity. "The truth is being revealed. Let's seek it together."

Hmenne added, "As Jesus said, **'Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free'** (John 8:32). The Confederation teaches, **'The work you do regarding healing the schisms that exist within your own being is work within the precinct of your own heart... The place where enmity exists is... how you perceive the other-self and your relationship with them'** (2023/05/28)."

The villagers began murmuring among themselves. Doubt about Marcus's leadership spread.

Marcus narrowed his eyes. “Words are meaningless without action. Prove your sincerity.”

5. Demonstrating Goodwill

Determined to show their intentions, the trio noticed that the villagers were struggling to clear a fallen tree blocking a vital path. Fretji offered, “May we help you clear this? It would be our honor.”

Marcus hesitated but then stepped aside. “Fine. Let’s see what you’re made of.”

Together, they worked tirelessly alongside the villagers, chopping and moving the heavy logs. Sweat and effort began to break down initial barriers.

As they labored, Sleshne shared, “In Galatians, we’re encouraged, ‘**Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up**’ (Galatians 6:9).”

One of the younger villagers, Peter, glanced at him. “Why do you care so much?”

Sleshne smiled. “Because we believe in the unity of all. The Confederation teaches, ‘**In the seeking of unity, love is the Grand Central Station... The positively oriented seeker does not come to unity except through love... The other-self before you is the One in its entirety**’ (2021/05/27).”

Peter seemed thoughtful. “I’ve never heard it put that way.”

Fretji added, “By working together, we can overcome our divisions. Actions speak louder than words.”

6. Facing Deep-Rooted Resentment

After the work was done, Marcus remained unconvinced. “Physical labor doesn’t erase the pain you’ve caused.”

Fretji replied earnestly, “We know that actions speak louder than words. Please, allow us to meet with your council to address your grievances directly.”

An elderly woman named Beatrice stepped forward. “Marcus, perhaps we should hear them out.”

He frowned. “They’ll just twist words to their advantage.”

Beatrice looked at him firmly. “Even so, ‘**To answer before listening—that is folly and shame**’ (Proverbs 18:13).”

Hmenne added, “The Confederation advises, ‘**When you become frustrated with the self, with the lessons, with the pattern, then it is that we encourage the lifting of the self from pain... The inspiration that lifts frustration is within you and within this moment if you can but allow the self to express its nature through your instrument**’ (1999/09/12). Let’s give each other a chance to understand.”

Marcus reluctantly agreed. “Very well. But know this: we’re not easily swayed.”

7. The Council Meeting

In the Stone Creek meeting hall, the atmosphere was tense. Villagers filled the room, their faces a mix of anger and skepticism.

“Spiritual despair is an absolute necessity. It is through this despair that the soul is moved to transform, to seek beyond its current limitations and embrace the path of growth. When you feel lost, know that you are on the brink of discovering a deeper truth, a greater strength within yourself.”

The combined weight of these insights, both ancient and divine, filled Slesh with a strange mixture of sorrow and hope. His despair was not a sign of failure, but a necessary step in his journey. It was a moment to pause, to rest, and to gather the strength he would need for the path ahead.

Slesh felt his body relax, the tension easing as he leaned further back against the tree. The sunlight filtered through the leaves above, casting a warm, dappled light across his face. The soothing rustle of the leaves, the comforting presence of the Bible in his hands, and the whispered encouragement of his guardian angel all worked together to lull him into a gentle, peaceful sleep.

As he drifted off, Slesh knew that when he awoke, he would face his challenges with renewed resolve. But for now, in this quiet moment, he was at peace, enveloped in the warmth of divine love and the promise of rest.

Dream of Birds

As Slesh drifted into a gentle sleep beneath the comforting shade of the tree, he found himself transported into a vivid and serene dream. In this dream, he was standing in a vast, golden field, the kind that seemed to stretch infinitely in all directions. The sky above was clear, and the air was filled with the soft songs of birds. There was a profound peace in this place, a stillness that seemed to hold the entire world in a loving embrace.

Suddenly, Slesh noticed a figure approaching him, walking slowly and deliberately across the field. As the figure drew nearer, Slesh recognized Him—Jesus, His presence radiating warmth and love. Jesus smiled gently, His eyes filled with compassion and understanding.

“Slesh,” Jesus began, His voice calm and reassuring, “look around you. Do you see the birds in the trees? They do not sow or reap or gather into barns, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”

As Jesus spoke, Slesh noticed the birds fluttering in the branches of nearby trees. They were carefree, their songs light and joyous, and yet they lacked nothing. They were provided for, every need met, without worry or toil.

“Therefore, do not be anxious about your life,” Jesus continued, “what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

The words settled into Slesh’s heart, filling the empty places within him with a sense of profound trust and peace. Jesus then placed His hand gently on Slesh’s shoulder, and with a loving gaze, He added, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you.”

The words of Jesus filled Slesh’s heart with peace and assurance. His worries and fears began to dissolve, replaced by a profound trust in the divine care that surrounds him. As the dream continued, the presence of his guardian angel became more distinct, and another message resonated softly in his mind, a whisper of loving guidance:

“Know that your thirst is greatly important, and pursue your desires. Pursue those intuitions and inklings. Listen for those hints that come in the wind of everyday detail and coincidence. And know that whatever is occurring on the physical plane, what is important in terms of your harvestability is your response to what is occurring. Look at your responses and see what you can do to sit with them, to work with any fear that you find in them, to comfort

yourself through any suffering that occurs from them, and to encourage yourself to move always to the higher plane, the loftier principle, the belief that all is well and that all will be well."

These words resonated deeply within Slesh, weaving themselves into the tapestry of the teachings he had just received from Jesus. They were like a gentle reminder that his desires, his thirst for meaning and connection, were not to be ignored but embraced and pursued with faith and courage.

As he slowly awakened from the dream, still holding the Bible close to his heart, Slesh felt a renewed sense of purpose. The teachings of Jesus and the guidance of his guardian angel had come together to offer him not just comfort, but a clear path forward—a path of trust, of seeking first the kingdom of God, and of responding to life's challenges with love and faith.

A Glimmer of Hope

As Slesh sat in the heavy stillness, trying to summon the strength to continue, a sound caught his attention—a soft, almost imperceptible trickle. At first, he thought it was merely a trick of his weary mind, but as he focused, the sound grew clearer. It was the unmistakable melody of flowing water.

His heart leaped at the realization. Water meant life—a chance to quench his thirst and regain some strength. Pushing himself to his feet, driven by the faint hope that this might be the key to his survival, Slesh moved deeper into the forest toward the source of the gentle, life-giving noise. His steps were unsteady, but his determination was unwavering.

As he made his way, more squirrels darted around, seemingly at ease in this challenging environment. For a brief moment, Slesh envied their natural comfort, their simple survival. The sight of these creatures reminded him of the words he had heard in his dream: how the birds of the air are provided for by God, without worry or toil. The squirrels, too, seemed to live in accordance with this divine provision, finding their sustenance in the bounty of the forest.

This thought warmed him, and the fleeting envy turned into a deeper understanding. The squirrels, the birds, and all the creatures of the forest were part of a grand design, each sustained in its own way by the Creator. And so, too, would he be provided for, if he sought first the kingdom of God and its righteousness. His task was to trust, to seek, and to remain open to the ways in which his needs might be met.

And then, he found it—a small, clear stream bubbling up from a spring and flowing over smooth stones. The sight of it filled Slesh with a profound sense of relief, so deep that tears welled up in his eyes. He dropped to his knees beside the stream, cupping the cool water in his hands and drinking deeply. Each sip was a balm to his parched throat, a revitalization of his weary spirit.

As he drank, Slesh looked around and noticed the stones lining the stream, their surfaces smooth and solid. An idea began to form in his mind. Perhaps these stones could be the answer to the impenetrable walnuts he had struggled with. The hope that had been so elusive began to return, fragile but present. The forest, it seemed, was not as indifferent as he had feared. It held the means of his survival, if only he could see them.

With renewed determination, Slesh picked up one of the walnuts and a stone. Striking the walnut with the stone, he felt a spark of satisfaction as the shell began to crack under the pressure. The trials of the forest were not over, but neither was his resolve. The forest, with all its challenges, was also a place of lessons and opportunities, if only he could learn to see them.

As dusk began to fall, Slesh noticed that each time he struck the stones together, tiny sparks

They spent time gathering provisions—fresh bread, fruits, and clean water. As they packed, they each took moments to meditate, seeking inner peace.

Fretji shared, "I realize that part of me fears rejection. But I must release that fear to truly embody love."

Hmenne nodded. "I too feel apprehensive, but the Confederation reminds us that **'Trust then, when there is concern, to turn it from anger, grief or whatever other emotion... to prayer. For turning to prayer... is a turning to that love within the self and the worth within the other self'** (2002/03/17). Let's allow our true nature of love to guide us."

3. Entering the Thorny Path

Setting out on the path leading through the dense thickets of Osage orange trees (*Maclura pomifera*), the trio felt the weight of their mission. The trees' sharp thorns and twisted branches seemed to symbolize the complexities of hatred and mistrust they would face.

As they journeyed, Fretji reflected, "These trees remind me of the scripture, **'They sharpen their tongues like swords and aim cruel words like deadly arrows'** (Psalm 64:3). We must be cautious yet steadfast."

Hmenne replied, "Yet, even amidst the thorns, there is beauty. The Confederation says, **'From this standpoint, then, it would seem that it is not possible to know another entity without distortion... The self is learning about the self at all times... This process recapitulates the action of the Creator in knowing Itself'** (2004/01/04). Perhaps this journey is as much about learning ourselves as it is about understanding them."

Sleshne mused, "If we can see them as part of ourselves, maybe we can connect on a deeper level. Our journey isn't just physical; it's a spiritual path through our own fears and judgments."

They walked in silence for a while, each contemplating the unity of all beings. The dense forest began to feel less threatening as they embraced this perspective.

4. First Confrontation

As they neared Stone Creek, a group of villagers blocked the path. Their leader, a stern man named Marcus, stepped forward. "Turn back. You're not welcome here."

Fretji stepped forward calmly. "We come in peace. We've brought gifts as a gesture of goodwill."

Marcus eyed the provisions skeptically. "We don't need your charity. Leave now."

One of his companions added, "Your village has taken enough from us already."

Sleshne took a deep breath. "We understand there have been misunderstandings. We hope to listen and find a way to reconcile."

Marcus scoffed, "Reconcile? After you've stolen our land and resources? We won't be fooled by your pretenses."

Hmenne felt frustration rising but recalled the Confederation's teaching: **"If any entity within the gaming competition wishes to express its love for any other entity by simply joining in whatever activity is desired by the other entity, then the green-ray energy center is activated"** (1982/11/21). He said gently, "Perhaps we can assist you in any tasks you need help with, to show our sincerity."

1. The Seeds of Hatred

As dawn broke, a council meeting was called in the village square. The elders gathered, and a hush fell over the crowd as Elder Miriam addressed them.

“My dear friends, we’ve received troubling news. The village of Stone Creek harbors ill feelings toward us due to past misunderstandings. They believe we’ve encroached upon their lands and taken resources that are rightfully theirs.”

A murmur spread through the crowd. Sleshne felt a knot tighten in his stomach. “How could this have happened?” he whispered to Fretji.

She replied, “Sometimes, old wounds fester when left unattended. Hatred can grow like the Osage orange trees—thorny and difficult to penetrate.”

Elder Miriam continued, “We must decide how to respond. Do we defend ourselves, or do we seek reconciliation?”

A man named Thomas stood up, his face hardened. “We must protect our village! If they threaten us, we should be prepared to fight.”

Others nodded in agreement, the seeds of fear and anger taking root.

Hmenne spoke softly but firmly. “Before we choose a path of conflict, let us consider the teachings of love and forgiveness we’ve embraced. Hatred only begets more hatred.”

Sleshne added, “Jesus taught us, **‘But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you’** (Matthew 5:44). The Confederation echoes this wisdom: **‘Frequently, the most difficult problems are, indeed, karmic... We ask that you attempt with all your being to stop the wheel of karma. The way to do this is to forgive. Forgiveness is another word for love of that who seems to be an enemy’** (1978/10/18). Perhaps we can find a way to heal this rift without resorting to hostility.”

Thomas scoffed, “Easy words to say, but how do we love those who hate us?”

Fretji responded, “By seeing them as part of ourselves. The Confederation teaches that **‘Each other self is the Creator... Each other person is truly a mirror of yourself’** (1988/10/09). If we recognize that, we can begin to heal.”

Elder Miriam looked thoughtful. “You may be right. Perhaps a peaceful approach is worth attempting. Who will go to Stone Creek on behalf of our village?”

2. Preparing the Heart

The trio volunteered to lead a delegation to Stone Creek. As they prepared for the journey, they gathered in prayer and reflection.

Fretji said, “We must cleanse our hearts of any fear or prejudice. The Confederation teaches, **‘Oh, it is easy to forgive others... But to love the enemy in yourself, or outside of yourself, ah, my friends, that is more difficult’** (1990/07/15). We need to examine our own hearts before reaching out.”

Hmenne pondered, “Perhaps our own insecurities and fears are contributing to this conflict. If we can address them within ourselves, we might approach Stone Creek with genuine compassion.”

Sleshne added, “In Proverbs, it is written, **‘If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink’** (Proverbs 25:21). Let’s prepare gifts as a gesture of goodwill.”

would fly. His mind, now alert and resourceful, saw the potential in these sparks. Gathering dry leaves and twigs, he struck the stones together with greater purpose. A small ember caught on the leaves, and he gently nurtured it into a flame. Soon, a modest fire crackled beside him, its warmth dispelling the growing chill in the air.

With the fire sustaining him, Slesh turned his attention to building a proper shelter. Using nearby branches and leaves, he constructed a simple lean-to that would provide protection through the night. The warmth of the fire, combined with the shelter, created a safe haven amidst the wild.

As he settled into his shelter, feeling the heat of the fire on his face and the cool earth beneath him, a deep sense of peace began to wash over him. The trials of the day were behind him, and for the first time in what felt like an eternity, he allowed himself to rest.

As sleep began to overtake him, a gentle voice—his spirit guide—whispered in his mind, “You are planting seeds which shall be reaped by those that come after you. Your efforts are never in vain, for they contribute to the greater tapestry of creation.” The words wrapped around him like a comforting blanket, easing the weariness from his bones.

Dawn of Renewal

The next morning, Slesh awoke to the soft light of dawn filtering through the trees. The fire had long since died down, leaving only glowing embers. He felt renewed, his body refreshed from the deep sleep. Before setting out, he filled his pockets with the walnuts he had successfully cracked open, now a source of nourishment and hope.

As he prepared to continue his journey, Slesh took a moment to fully absorb his surroundings, seeing the forest with new eyes. The tall walnut trees that had once seemed so imposing now stood as gentle giants, their broad canopies of dense, green foliage providing shade and shelter. The bark, rough and deeply furrowed, spoke of resilience and strength, each groove a testament to the tree’s enduring life through countless seasons. The trees’ stature was commanding yet comforting, like ancient sentinels watching over the forest floor.

Among these trees, the squirrels darted with ease, no longer just creatures to be envied but now symbols of divine care, living reminders that in this forest, everything had its place and purpose. The squirrels thrived on the walnuts provided by these very trees, and so did Slesh. He realized that the trees not only offered nourishment through their fruit but also lessons in patience, perseverance, and the subtle yet profound ways in which life sustains itself.

The flowing stream, which had saved him from the brink of despair, represented more than just water; it was a lifeline, a promise of sustenance and renewal amidst the forest’s challenges. Each ripple and eddy reflected the ongoing flow of life, reminding him that there is always a path forward, even when the way seems uncertain.

The sparks from the stones and the warmth of the fire symbolized the light that could be kindled even in the darkest of times. Just as the walnut trees provided the raw materials for survival, so too did the stones and fire offer the means to create warmth, light, and safety. These elements, once merely parts of the landscape, now felt like allies in his journey—a reminder that the forest, with all its trials, also held the keys to overcoming them.

Slesh felt a deep connection to the forest around him, understanding that every element, from the towering walnut trees to the smallest stream, played a role in the intricate web of life that sustained him. With this newfound awareness, he set out on his journey once more, his steps light, his heart full, and his pockets brimming with walnuts—gifts from the very trees that had sheltered and nourished him.

Following the Stream

As Slesh followed the stream, he noticed how the landscape began to change. The trees, tall and sturdy, with their thick bark and deep green foliage, gradually became sparse, giving way to twisted roots and low-hanging branches. The clear, bubbling water of the stream grew murkier as it led him deeper into the forest. The air grew thick with moisture, and the ground beneath his feet softened into wet, spongy earth.

He soon found himself at the edge of a swamp, where the stream disappeared into a dark, still expanse of water. The walnut trees, once symbols of sustenance and strength, now stood at the periphery like silent sentinels, their gnarled roots reaching into the swamp as if grasping for stability. The foliage above cast a tangled web of shadows on the water, where the reflections twisted and shifted with the slightest breeze.

Slesh hesitated, peering into the murky water. Though he knew that the Creator had provided for him so far, an unease began to creep into his heart. The surface of the swamp, so different from the clear stream, seemed to hide unknown dangers beneath its dark, still waters. As he stood there, the sense of distrust slowly took hold, mingling with the humid air and the thickening shadows.

Chapter 8: Into the Murk of Mistrust

As Slesh gazed into the water, a creeping sense of unease began to settle over him. The murky surface concealed what lay beneath, and this unknown stirred the first inklings of mistrust. Could he truly trust this path that had seemed so clear before? The swamp, with its still, opaque waters, challenged the faith that had carried him this far. “The mistrust of self and circumstance creates very nearly all of the confusions within one’s incarnation.” (Confederation, 1992/11/01). Yet, despite his growing apprehension, he knew he had no choice but to cross.

Taking a deep breath, he removed his shoes and rolled up his pants. With his belongings held above his head, Slesh stepped into the swamp, feeling the cold mud begin to swallow his feet. Each step was deliberate, but with every movement, the earth seemed to pull him down further. The first layer of mistrust settled deeper in his mind: Was this a mistake? “If you will use your powers of discrimination and trust in them, you shall not be led astray by slick words and by shallow thoughts but shall remain within your integrity and follow your own process.” (Confederation, 2009/01/10). Was he being led astray by his own choices?

As he ventured further, the swamp’s grasp tightened. The once shallow water now rose to his knees, then to his waist, and the more he struggled, the more it seemed to pull him under. His heart raced, gripped by the fear of being consumed by the swamp. He recalled the teachings he had learned about trust and faith, yet they seemed distant in this moment of peril. His mind whispered doubts: Could he really trust the path he was on? “It is this journey through which surrendering is developed. For underneath this resistance and lack of acceptance is a distrust or a mistrust.” (Confederation, 2023/09/28).

Panic set in as he felt himself sinking further into the muck. This second layer of mistrust piled atop the first—was he capable of making it through? The more he fought to free himself, the deeper he sank, his strength waning with every struggle. The swamp was no longer just an external challenge; it mirrored the internal battle he fought within himself.

Amid the chaos, a voice from deep within his heart surfaced, cutting through the noise of fear and doubt. “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.” (John 14:1). The words echoed in his mind, and slowly, he began to release the tension in his body. He ceased his frantic movements, allowing his muscles to relax, and with that surrender, he noticed something remarkable—the mud that had been pulling him down began to let go. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews

8. **Embracing Love and Community:** Sleshne’s public sharing affirmed the strength found in unity and the collective embrace of unconditional love.

Fretji addressed her companions with warmth. “We’ve witnessed how unconditional forgiveness transforms not just individuals but entire communities. By surrendering justice to God and cleansing our hearts, we’ve found true freedom.”

Hmenne agreed. “Acting from compassion without expecting anything in return aligns us with the highest teachings of Jesus and the wisdom of the Confederation.”

Sleshne smiled. “I feel a profound sense of belonging and purpose. By cleaning the soot from my heart, I can let God’s love shine through me.”

Transition to the Next Chapter: The Osage Orange of Hatred and Loving Enemies

As the celebrations continued, a messenger arrived with news that a neighboring village harbored ill feelings toward their community due to past misunderstandings. Concern arose about potential tensions.

Fretji gazed toward the horizon where the dense thickets of Osage orange trees (*Machura pomifera*) stood, their thorny branches and bitter fruit symbolizing deep-seated hatred and enmity.

She turned to her companions. “It seems our journey now leads us to confront the challenges of hatred and the call to love our enemies.”

Hmenne nodded solemnly. “Navigating this will test our understanding of love and forgiveness even further.”

Sleshne felt a mix of determination and serenity. “With the soot cleared from our hearts, perhaps we can help bridge the divide and let God’s unconditional love shine through us.”

Fretji placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Together, we’ll face the Osage orange of hatred, seeking to transform enmity into understanding.”

United in purpose, the trio prepared to embark on this next challenge, confident that unconditional love has the power to heal even the deepest wounds. Their journey toward enlightenment and peace continued as they stepped forward into the unfolding path of compassion and reconciliation.

End of Chapter

Chapter 18: The Osage Orange of Hatred and Loving Enemies

After the heartfelt reconciliation ceremonies and the deep lessons on forgiveness learned among the burdock fields, Fretji, Hmenne, and Sleshne felt a renewed sense of peace and unity within the community. The air was filled with a lighter energy, and the villagers moved with a shared purpose.

However, news of unrest from a neighboring village cast a shadow over their newfound harmony. The trio knew that their journey was far from over. Ahead lay the daunting challenge of confronting hatred and embodying the profound teaching of loving one’s enemies.

Fretji added, “As we clean the soot from the panes of our hearts, we allow the infinite light to shine through us.”

Watching the boats drift away, the trio felt a deep sense of peace and renewal.

8. Embracing a Lighter Path

As the ceremony concluded, the community gathered around a bonfire, sharing songs and stories. Sleshne stood up to speak.

“These past days have taught me the power of unconditional forgiveness,” he began. “Even when we cannot make amends directly, we can cleanse our hearts and let God’s love flow through us. By releasing resentment and surrendering justice to God, I’ve opened my heart to love and connection. I’m grateful to be part of this community.”

The crowd applauded warmly. Jakob called out, “Your journey has inspired many of us, Sleshne. Thank you.”

Fretji and Hmenne stood beside him, their faces reflecting pride and joy.

Fretji addressed the gathering. “Let us all embrace forgiveness, both for ourselves and others, trusting that compassion and love are enough.”

Hmenne concluded, “As we move forward, may we carry these lessons with us, fostering harmony and understanding without expecting anything in return.”

The night was filled with unity and hope, the burdens of resentment replaced with the lightness of unconditional love.

Summary and Reflection

Immersed in the heart of the community, the trio experienced firsthand the transformative power of forgiveness through interactions with its members.

Key Lessons Learned:

1. **Recognizing the Weight of Grudges:** Helping Jakob with the burrs illustrated how holding onto grudges burdens us and that mutual support can lead to healing.
2. **Choosing to Forgive:** Witnessing Marta and Anna reconcile showed that forgiveness is a personal choice that brings peace.
3. **Unconditional Forgiveness:** The discussion with Brother Matthias highlighted the liberation found in forgiving unconditionally, surrendering justice to God.
4. **Self-Forgiveness:** Sleshne’s journey toward forgiving himself demonstrated the importance of self-compassion, especially when making amends isn’t possible. Cleansing the heart allows God’s love to shine through.
5. **Avoiding the Roots of Bitterness:** The elder’s tale and the new understanding from the Confederation’s teachings emphasized that pulling back often stems from a desire to protect the vulnerable self. Recognizing this helps prevent bitterness from taking root.
6. **Healing Through Compassion:** The reconciliation of Jakob and Heinrich showcased the joy and unity that unconditional forgiveness and compassion bring.
7. **Practicing Letting Go:** The river ceremony provided a tangible way for individuals to release burdens, reinforcing their commitment to forgiveness.

11:1). This was the first closing of the layers of mistrust, as he remembered that trust in the divine was his true lifeline.

As Slesh allowed himself to float, he felt his body rise above the muck. His breathing steadied, and he slowly began to swim toward the far shore, the dark waters no longer a threat but a medium that carried him safely forward. With every stroke, the doubts that had plagued him dissolved, one by one. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.” (Proverbs 3:5). “In the metaphysical world which your spirit rests in at this precise moment and at all moments, you are a larger being by far. You have chosen many, many things about your present experience that have deep reasons for being as they are. Faith is a matter of trusting that this experience is on the track that you intended it to be before you came.” (Confederation, 1996/09/15).

As Slesh caught his breath, the voice of his guide gently reminded him, “The One Creator cannot be reduced or influenced or have any concern or any fear of any situation. Trust in the divine plan, and let your faith be your guide.” “For an entity that is filled with faith, there is no challenge too great. For any entity without faith, all challenges feel too great. Faith is that which one develops by wishing to develop faith.” (Confederation, 2000/09/10). The final layer of mistrust was peeled away, revealing the core of faith that had been there all along. “All is well and all will be well.” (Confederation, 1999/03/21).

As Slesh reached the far shore, his fingers brushed against something firm—an old grapevine, thick and twisted, hanging just above the water’s edge. Grasping it with the last of his strength, he pulled himself out of the muck and onto solid ground. His body, heavy with exhaustion, collapsed onto the damp earth. For a moment, he simply lay there, chest heaving as he caught his breath, the adrenaline slowly ebbing away.

Just as his breathing began to steady, he heard a soft giggle, a sound so out of place in the swamp that it sent a shiver down his spine. Confused, he lifted his head and squinted through the fading light. There, not far from where he lay, he caught a flicker of movement. His eyes adjusted, and he saw her—a young woman standing at the edge of the trees, her expression serene and welcoming.

A creeping sense of confusion washed over him. Was she real? Or was his mind playing tricks on him after the ordeal he had just endured? The questions lingered as he tried to make sense of this unexpected encounter.

Chapter 9: Vinyard of Confusion

Slesh stood at the entrance of the vineyard, the dampness of the moat still clinging to his clothes and the cold, wet earth beneath his feet reminding him of the struggle he had just endured. The young woman who had appeared so suddenly—her presence as ethereal as the mist that clung to the air—now stood a few paces ahead of him. She was a striking figure against the backdrop of the vineyard—a labyrinth of grapevines that stretched out in neat rows, their leaves shimmering in the fading light.

For a moment, Slesh hesitated, still unsure if she was real or just another figment of his imagination, conjured by the confusion and exhaustion of his journey. His heart raced, a mixture of relief and doubt coursing through him as he tried to make sense of her presence. The way she moved, so effortlessly, so confidently, made him question everything he had experienced up to this point.

Finally, he summoned the courage to speak, his voice betraying the uncertainty he felt. “Who are you?” he asked, his words barely louder than a whisper.

The young woman turned to him, her gaze softening as she met his eyes. There was a serenity in her expression, a quiet confidence that seemed to put him at ease despite the strangeness of the situation. She smiled—a gentle, knowing smile that held the promise of answers yet unspoken.

“We were expecting you,” she said simply, her voice as calm as the stillness that surrounded them. “My name is Fretji. I was sent out to meet you if you made it past the moat. Now that you’re entering our community, I’ll accompany you the rest of the way to the inner sanctum.”

Her words were both comforting and mysterious, leaving Slesh with more questions than answers. But there was something in the way she spoke, a certainty that made him feel as though he was exactly where he was meant to be. The vineyard before them was vast, its paths winding and twisting through the landscape like veins in a leaf, and Slesh knew instinctively that this was only the beginning of a new journey.

Slesh took a deep breath, feeling the tension in his body begin to ease as he stepped forward, following Fretji as she led him deeper into the vineyard. Her footsteps were light, barely disturbing the earth beneath her, and she moved with a grace that made her seem almost otherworldly.

Bench of Indecision

As they walked through the vineyard, the air seemed to thicken with an almost palpable sense of anticipation. Slesh could feel the weight of every step, as if the very ground was pulling him into a deeper layer of thought. The young woman walked ahead of him, her movements graceful but measured, as if she too was navigating more than just the physical terrain.

They soon arrived at a crossroads, where the path split into three directions. In the center stood a weathered prayer bench, covered in ivy that seemed to have grown over centuries. The left and right paths appeared equally inviting, lined with ripe grapes and golden sunlight. However, the path straight ahead was different—shrouded in a dense mist that obscured whatever lay beyond.

Slesh hesitated, uncertainty gnawing at him. The woman noticed his pause and walked over to the prayer bench, placing her hand on the ancient wood. She closed her eyes for a moment, as if drawing strength from the silence, before opening them to meet his gaze.

“This is where many get lost,” she said quietly. “This is where the endless discussions of right and wrong begin, where people try to reason their way through the fog of confusion. But no matter how much we debate, harmony will never be found on that level” (1976/10/17).

Slesh furrowed his brow, feeling a flicker of resistance rise within him. “But how else am I supposed to decide? Isn’t it natural to weigh the options, to discuss and analyze until I find the right path?”

The woman smiled softly, a knowing look in her eyes. “That’s exactly the trap, Slesh. The mind can argue both sides of any issue, turning in circles without end. It’s the heart that finds the way forward. Have you ever tried just listening—truly listening—to what lies beneath the surface of your thoughts?”

Slesh looked down, feeling a mixture of frustration and confusion. “I... I don’t know if I can trust that. What if I choose wrong?”

“Choosing isn’t about being right or wrong,” she replied, her voice gentle but firm. “It’s about alignment—aligning your will with the divine, with the deeper truth that doesn’t argue, doesn’t debate, but simply knows. The more you listen to that quiet voice within, the clearer the path becomes” (1987/09/26).

The mist ahead seemed to part slightly as she spoke, revealing just a hint of the road beyond. “But how do I know what that voice is?” Slesh asked, feeling the tension in his chest ease just a little. “What if I mistake it for something else?”

5. Avoiding the Roots of Bitterness

As evening approached, the trio attended a community storytelling session. An elder shared a cautionary tale about two families who held a grudge for generations, leading to division and sorrow.

“The bitterness consumed them,” the elder narrated. “Their unforgiveness became like the burdock’s roots—deep and unyielding, choking out joy and unity.”

After the story, a young woman named Lydia approached the elder. “How can we prevent bitterness from taking root in our own hearts?”

The elder replied, “By recognizing the danger early and choosing forgiveness. The Confederation teaches, ‘When entities pull themselves away from the fully open heart it is usually not from a motive of anger, bitterness or offense but rather it is a move to defend the vulnerable self within’ (1996/04/14). We must have the courage to keep our hearts open.”

Hmenne added, “Hebrews advises, ‘See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble’ (Hebrews 12:15). It’s a daily choice to let go.”

Lydia nodded. “I have someone I need to forgive. Thank you for the wisdom.”

6. Healing Through Compassion

The next day, the community gathered for a reconciliation ceremony. Jakob stood before the crowd with his brother Heinrich by his side.

Jakob spoke earnestly, “For too long, I have held onto anger and resentment toward my brother. Today, I choose to forgive and ask for forgiveness.”

Heinrich embraced him. “I, too, have harbored ill feelings. Let us move forward in love.”

The community cheered, witnessing the healing power of forgiveness.

Fretji smiled warmly. “This is the essence of unconditional forgiveness—letting go without expecting anything in return.”

Hmenne reflected, “The Confederation reminds us, ‘The skillful help one may give the entity who does not ask questions, but is suffering, is simply to allow the overwhelming compassion within and send, out of fullness of Self, that loving and healing energy of acceptance of that other self just as it is’ (1991/03/03). By acting from compassion, we facilitate healing.”

Sleshne felt inspired. “Witnessing their reconciliation gives me hope for my own journey.”

7. Practicing Letting Go

That evening, the community held a symbolic ceremony by the river. People were invited to release a small wooden boat carrying a written note of what they wished to let go.

Sleshne wrote down his self-resentment and regrets, including the names of those he could no longer reach. As he set his boat afloat, he whispered, “I forgive myself and others, surrendering justice to God. May my heart be cleansed so that Your love may shine through me.”

Fretji and Hmenne released their own boats, each silently offering their burdens to the flowing water.

Hmenne recited, “In each moment, you are brand new. Forgive, accept, and love yourself” (1991/01/20).

Brother Matthias reflected. “Perhaps you’re right. As Paul said ‘Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God.’(Romans 12:17-19) Surrendering justice to God and embracing unconditional forgiveness can liberate us from the heavy yoke of resentment.”

The discussion left the audience, including Sleshne, contemplating the profound freedom found in forgiving without expectation.

4. The Burden of Self-Resentment

Later, Sleshne sat alone near a fountain, his reflection wavering in the water. Fretji approached quietly. “You seem deep in thought.”

He sighed. “Seeing others struggle with forgiveness reminds me of my own self-resentment. I can’t seem to forgive myself for past mistakes.”

Fretji sat beside him. “Self-forgiveness is often the hardest. The Confederation advises, ‘Never ever to hold a grudge against the self, but to forgive the self, to intend a newness which is less imperfect in the ways of doing things’ (1989/11/26). We must be gentle with ourselves.”

Hmenne joined them. “Psalm 103:12 tells us, ‘As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.’ If the Creator forgives us completely, shouldn’t we also forgive ourselves?”

Sleshne looked down. “But some of the people I’ve hurt are no longer here. I can’t make amends or ask for their forgiveness. How can I move past that?”

Fretji placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Sometimes, those we’ve wronged are beyond our reach, whether they’ve moved away or passed on. In such cases, we must find a way to forgive ourselves regardless.”

She continued, “The Confederation shares profound insight: ‘What you are able to do as you work with your mind and your heart is, little by little, to clean the panes of your lamp so that they are transparent and so that the infinite light may shine through, each of you, though you deem yourself unworthy’ (1998/05/03).”

Hmenne nodded. “By releasing self-resentment, you’re cleaning the soot off the lamp of your heart, allowing God’s unconditional love to shine brightly through you.”

Sleshne pondered this. “So, even if I can’t make amends directly, I can honor them by transforming myself, by letting go of guilt and becoming a better person?”

Fretji smiled gently. “Exactly. Forgiveness starts within. By healing your own heart, you become a vessel of love and light, touching others in ways you may not even realize.”

Hmenne added, “In Isaiah 1:18, it is said, ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.’ The journey from head to heart is challenging, but it’s where true transformation occurs.”

Sleshne took a deep breath. “I want to make that journey. I want to forgive myself and let God’s love flow through me.”

Fretji encouraged him. “Then begin by accepting that you are worthy of forgiveness. Release the burden you’ve been carrying. The infinite Creator’s love is always present, waiting to shine through you.”

“That’s why we practice,” the woman said. “It’s why we meditate, why we pray, why we open our hearts in silence. The more we do, the more familiar that voice becomes. And soon, it’s the only voice we hear, even in the midst of confusion” (1993/01/18).

She gestured toward the misty path ahead. “Go ahead, Slesh. Don’t think—just listen. What do you hear?”

Slesh took a deep breath and closed his eyes, trying to silence the chatter of his mind. For a moment, there was only darkness and the distant rustle of the vineyard. Then, faintly, he felt something else—a quiet, steady pull, not from his mind but from somewhere deeper. It wasn’t a voice in the usual sense, but a feeling, a sense of direction that bypassed his thoughts entirely.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself stepping forward, his feet moving of their own accord down the misty path. The young woman followed, her presence a calm reassurance at his side.

Stones of Misalignment

As they walked, the ground beneath them began to shift, becoming uneven with stones of varying sizes scattered across the path. Slesh stumbled, his balance thrown off by the sudden change in terrain. He reached out instinctively, and the woman caught his arm, steadying him.

“Emotional and energetic mismatches,” she said as if reading his thoughts. “They throw us off balance, make us question whether we’re on the right path at all” (1991/01/13).

“Why does it have to be so hard?” Slesh asked, his voice tinged with frustration. “Why can’t we just walk in harmony from the start?”

“Because we’re not the same,” she answered. “And that’s not a bad thing. These mismatches are opportunities—chances to learn, to grow, to find balance together. But it takes time, and it takes trust” (1990/04/29).

She let go of his arm, but stayed close enough that her presence remained a support. “The key is not to resist the differences, but to work with them. To find where you need to give, where you need to hold firm. It’s like walking on uneven ground—you adjust, find your footing, and keep going.”

Slesh nodded, understanding dawning slowly. As they continued, they came to a vine-covered archway that twisted and turned, almost as if the vines themselves were alive, pulling the structure in every direction. The passage through was narrow and winding, each twist revealing more of the path ahead but only one step at a time.

The Archway of Twisting Paths

The archway loomed ahead, its wooden frame entwined with thick, gnarled vines that seemed to twist and turn of their own accord. The path beneath it was narrow and winding, forcing Slesh and the young woman to walk single file. The light dimmed as they entered, the canopy of vines above them filtering the sunlight into a patchwork of shifting shadows.

“Love isn’t a straight path,” the woman said softly, her voice echoing slightly in the enclosed space. “It’s full of twists and turns, confusions and clarities. But each turn brings you closer to the heart of it, closer to understanding what it means to love and be loved” (1997/02/02).

Slesh felt a tightness in his chest as he listened. He had always imagined love as something pure and straightforward, a beacon of light that would guide him through the darkness. But the reality, as the woman described it, seemed much more complex, more uncertain.

“Why does it have to be so complicated?” he asked, his voice tinged with frustration. “Why can’t love just be simple?”

The woman glanced back at him, her expression unreadable. “If it were simple, it wouldn’t be real. Love is not about avoiding the difficult paths; it’s about walking them together, even when the way forward isn’t clear” (1998/05/24).

They continued through the archway, the path twisting and turning with no end in sight. Each step felt like a journey into the unknown, and with each turn, Slesh could feel the weight of his doubts and fears growing heavier.

“But what if we get lost?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper. “What if we take a wrong turn and end up further away from where we need to be?”

The woman paused, allowing him to catch up. “In love, there are no wrong turns. Every path, every twist, and every moment of confusion is part of the journey. It’s not about reaching a destination; it’s about what you learn along the way. Even when you feel lost, you’re still moving closer to the truth of what love is” (1999/11/21).

As they emerged from the archway, Slesh felt a sense of relief, but also a lingering unease. Ahead, the vineyard stretched out in rows of vines, but these were different. The grapes were hidden beneath thorny vines, making them difficult to reach without being pricked.

Grapes of Hidden Love

Slesh hesitated as they approached the thorny vines. The sight of the ripe grapes, so tantalizingly close yet so difficult to reach, filled him with a sense of frustration. He could see the potential for something beautiful and nourishing, but the path to it was fraught with pain.

The young woman didn’t hesitate. She stepped forward, carefully pushing aside the thorns with her hands. Despite the sharpness of the thorns, she moved with a calm and practiced grace, revealing a cluster of grapes hidden within the dense foliage. She picked one and handed it to him.

“In every moment of doubt, ask yourself, ‘Where is the love?’ It’s always there, even if you have to push through the thorns to find it” (1998/05/24).

Slesh took the grape, feeling the smoothness of its skin against his fingers. He hesitated before taking a bite, the weight of the woman’s words settling in his mind. “But what if the thorns are too thick? What if it’s too painful to reach the love that’s hidden there?”

The woman looked at him with a mixture of patience and understanding. “Love is often found in the places where it’s hardest to reach. It’s easy to see love when everything is smooth and perfect, but true love is revealed when you’re willing to face the challenges, when you’re willing to endure a little pain to uncover what lies beneath” (1998/05/24).

She paused, her gaze softening. “It’s not about avoiding the thorns, Slesh. It’s about being brave enough to reach through them, to trust that what you’ll find is worth the struggle” (1999/11/21).

He nodded slowly, understanding dawning in his eyes. He bit into the grape, the sweet juice filling his mouth, and for a moment, the bitterness of the thorns was forgotten. The taste was pure, rich with the essence of life itself.

“Love isn’t always easy,” the woman continued, “but it’s always there, waiting to be found. Even in the midst of pain, even in the heart of confusion, love is the constant. It’s the thread that runs through every twist and turn, through every thorn and vine” (1998/05/24).

Slesh swallowed the grape, the sweetness lingering on his tongue. He could feel a change within himself, a new resolve forming in the face of the challenges ahead. The thorns no longer seemed as daunting, and the path forward, though still uncertain, was one he felt ready to walk.

2. The Struggle to Forgive

Nearby, a group had gathered around two women, Marta and Anna, who were arguing heatedly. Concerned, Fretji approached them. “Is everything alright?” she asked calmly.

Marta turned, her face flushed with anger. “She betrayed my trust! I can never forgive her.”

Anna looked away, tears welling in her eyes. “It was a misunderstanding. Please, let me explain.”

Fretji gently interjected, “Forgiveness can be challenging, especially when we feel wronged. The Confederation teaches, ‘Forgiveness is based upon the knowledge of who you are... You are beings of immense metaphysical power, and you squander your inheritance with petty grudges and hardness of heart’ (1990/06/23). By holding onto resentment, we harm ourselves.”

Hmenne added, “In Matthew, Jesus teaches us, ‘For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you’ (Matthew 6:14). Forgiveness brings healing to both parties.”

Marta hesitated. “But how can I forgive when I’m so hurt?”

Sleshne stepped forward. “I’ve struggled with forgiveness too. But I’ve learned that it’s not about excusing the behavior, but freeing yourself from the pain it causes.”

Marta took a deep breath. “Maybe we can talk privately,” she said to Anna. “I’m willing to listen.”

They moved aside, beginning a heartfelt conversation.

3. Unconditional Forgiveness vs. Conditional Forgiveness

As they wandered further, they came upon a gathering where a community elder, Brother Matthias, was speaking to a small crowd about forgiveness.

Brother Matthias declared, “Justice demands that wrongs be righted. Those who have harmed others must make amends before forgiveness can be granted.”

A young man named Elias raised his hand. “But didn’t Jesus teach us to forgive unconditionally? To love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us?”

Brother Matthias replied, “Yes, but forgiveness without repentance may seem to neglect justice. We must ensure that offenders understand the weight of their actions.”

Fretji felt moved to speak. “Brother Matthias, may I share a thought?”

He nodded. “Please, go ahead.”

She continued, “While justice has its place, holding onto the demand for it can keep us bound to resentment. The Confederation shares, ‘You must also remember that you are a portion of the Creator, and that which is forgiven by you will be forgiven, and that which is retained by you will be retained’ (1990/06/23). By surrendering justice to God, we free ourselves to act from a place of unconditional love and forgiveness.”

Hmenne added, “Jesus transcended the old teachings of ‘an eye for an eye’ by showing us the path of compassion. In Luke 6:27-28, He said, ‘But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.’”

Elias nodded enthusiastically. “By forgiving unconditionally, we align ourselves with Christ’s teachings and allow healing to begin, regardless of the other’s actions.”

Fretji gazed at the imposing plants. “Our journey continues. It seems we now face the challenges of unresolved grudges and resentment within the community.”

Hmenne observed, “Navigating these will require patience and forgiveness.”

Sleshne felt a mix of anticipation and resolve. “With the lessons we’ve learned, I’m ready to face whatever lies ahead.”

Fretji nodded. “Together, we’ll explore the depths of the heart, healing wounds and fostering harmony.”

With unity and purpose, the trio stepped forward, ready to embrace the teachings of the Giant Burdock of Grudges and Resentment. Confident in their ability to transform challenges into growth, they looked forward to building deeper connections within the community and continuing their journey toward enlightenment and peace.

Chapter 17: The Burdocks of Resentment and Forgiveness

Having navigated the thorny challenges of group conflict among the blackberries, Fretji, Hmenne, and Sleshne found themselves entering the heart of the community. The village was alive with activity—children laughing, artisans crafting, and elders sharing stories. The trio felt a mix of excitement and apprehension as they prepared to integrate into this vibrant society.

Surrounding the central square were towering burdock plants (*Arctium lappa*), their massive leaves and clinging burrs symbolizing the weight of grudges and lingering resentments that can exist even in close-knit communities.

1. The Weight of Grudges

As they stepped into the square, Sleshne noticed a man named Jakob struggling to remove burrs from his clothing. Approaching him, Sleshne offered assistance. “Those burrs can be relentless,” he said sympathetically.

Jakob sighed. “They’re a nuisance, much like old grudges. No matter how hard I try, they cling to me.”

Fretji joined them. “Grudges can indeed weigh us down,” she observed. “The Confederation teaches, ‘You are a part of the infinite Creator; you are worthwhile, necessary, and beloved. May you love yourself enough to move the imperfections out of the way of your service, and never ever to hold a grudge against the self, but to forgive the self’ (1989/11/26). Holding onto grudges hinders our ability to serve and love fully.”

Jakob looked thoughtful. “But some wounds run deep. How do you let go?”

Hmenne added gently, “Ephesians reminds us, ‘Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger... forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you’ (Ephesians 4:31-32). Forgiveness is the key to releasing these burdens.”

Sleshne smiled. “Perhaps we can help each other remove these burrs—both the physical and the emotional ones.”

Working together, they picked off the burrs. As they did, Jakob shared his story of a longstanding feud with his brother, Heinrich. By the time they finished, he felt lighter, both in body and spirit.

“Thank you,” he said gratefully. “I think it’s time I speak with Heinrich and try to mend things.”

The young woman smiled at him, as if sensing his shift in perspective. “Remember this moment, Slesh. When the path grows dark and the thorns seem too thick, remember that love is always there, hidden but waiting to be found.”

They continued through the vineyard, the sun beginning to dip below the horizon, casting long shadows across the rows of vines. Slesh walked with a newfound sense of purpose, the woman’s words echoing in his mind as they approached the next challenge on their journey.

The Fountain of Clarity

They walked in silence for a time until they reached a clearing in the vineyard where a fountain stood at its center. The fountain was simple, made of stone, and the water bubbled up from the top, clear and pure as it cascaded down into the basin below. But as the water reached the bottom, it became murky, clouded with sediment that had settled there over time.

Slesh watched the water flow, mesmerized by the contrast between the clarity at the top and the murkiness at the bottom. He and the young woman both knelt to drink, cupping the cool, refreshing water in their hands. As they did, the woman spoke, her voice gentle but firm.

“Sometimes our thoughts are as clear as this water,” she said, “but more often, they’re as murky as the sediment that lies beneath. Life has a way of stirring up that sediment, clouding our clarity and leaving us confused. The key is to trust in the process, to let the water settle, and to move from the head to the heart. Only then can we find clarity in the midst of confusion” (2001/03/18).

Slesh drank deeply, savoring the coolness of the water as it washed away some of his lingering doubts. The murkiness at the bottom didn’t bother him as much now; he understood that it was part of the process, part of the journey toward deeper understanding. He looked at the woman, her expression serene as she too drank from the fountain.

“But how do we keep the water clear?” he asked, his voice filled with genuine curiosity. “How do we stop the sediment from clouding our thoughts?”

The woman smiled, a knowing look in her eyes. “We can’t always prevent the sediment from stirring,” she said. “Life will always bring challenges that disrupt our clarity. But we can learn to trust the process, to give ourselves time and space to let the water settle. When we move from thinking to feeling, from the head to the heart, clarity will naturally return” (2001/03/18).

Slesh nodded, understanding that the path to clarity was not about avoiding the murkiness but embracing it as part of the journey. He felt a newfound resolve to face the challenges ahead, knowing that clarity would come with patience and trust.

The Labyrinth of Repeated Patterns

Their journey through the vineyard brought them to a labyrinth—an intricate maze of hedges that stretched out before them, its paths winding and looping back on themselves in a disorienting pattern. The entrance loomed before them, and without hesitation, Slesh and the young woman stepped inside.

As they walked, the paths twisted and turned, creating a confusing and disorienting experience. Slesh felt a sense of déjà vu, as if he had walked these paths before, only to end up back where he started. The sensation was unsettling, a reminder of the repetitive patterns in his own life—patterns of behavior, of thought, of relationships that seemed to loop endlessly without resolution.

“This is where many of us get stuck,” the woman explained as they took another turn, only to find themselves at a dead end. “We keep walking the same paths, expecting different

outcomes. We fall into the same traps, the same patterns, over and over again, not realizing that we're simply retracing our steps" (1998/05/24).

Slesh paused, contemplating her words. "How do we break free from these patterns?" he asked, his voice tinged with frustration. "How do we find our way out of this maze?"

The woman turned to face him, her eyes reflecting a deep understanding. "With meditation and reflection," she said, "we can begin to recognize these patterns for what they are—illusions of the mind, traps we've set for ourselves. By stepping back and observing, by aligning ourselves with a higher will, we can find our way out. It's not easy, and it requires patience and perseverance, but it's the only way to truly move forward" (1998/05/24).

They continued through the labyrinth, their steps slow and deliberate. Each turn felt like a test of their patience, each dead end a challenge to their resolve. But with each step, Slesh felt a deeper understanding taking root within him. He began to see the patterns more clearly—the thoughts and behaviors that had trapped him in the past—and slowly, he learned to navigate around them.

When they finally reached the center of the labyrinth, Slesh felt a profound sense of relief. The weight of the repetitive patterns, the cycles of confusion, seemed to lift from his shoulders, leaving him with a newfound sense of clarity and purpose.

The woman looked at him, her smile warm but still cautious, as if recognizing the progress he had made but aware that the journey was far from over. "You've done well," she said, her voice filled with quiet pride. "But the journey isn't over. Beyond the vineyard lies the hawthorn hedge—another challenge, another lesson. But for now, rest. You've earned it".

Slesh nodded, grateful for the respite. He sat down on the cool grass, allowing himself to relax for the first time since they had entered the vineyard. The labyrinth had been a trial, but it had also been a revelation—a chance to see himself more clearly and to understand the patterns that had shaped his life. He knew that the challenges ahead would be difficult, but he felt ready to face them, with the woman's guidance and his newfound clarity to light the way.

Conclusion: The Morning Harvest of Understanding

As the morning sun continued to rise, bathing the vineyard in soft golden light, Slesh and Fretji found themselves nearing the end of their journey through the maze of vines. The lessons Slesh had absorbed felt like the first rays of clarity after a long night, each one illuminating a path that had once been shrouded in darkness.

The vineyard had become a memory palace of sorts, each section anchoring a lesson learned:

- **The Bench of Indecision** had taught Slesh the futility of endless debates about right and wrong. Harmony, he realized, was found in listening deeply—to himself, to others, and to the divine.
- **The Stones of Misalignment** reminded him of the importance of honesty and direct communication in relationships. He had confronted the discomfort of examining his true feelings and learned that authenticity, though challenging, was the only path to true connection.
- **The Archway of Twisting Paths** revealed that love is not a straightforward journey. Its twists and turns, its moments of confusion and clarity, were all part of the process of deepening his capacity to love and be loved.
- **The Grapes of Hidden Love** showed him that love is always present, even in difficult circumstances. Sometimes, it's hidden beneath thorns, but with patience and persistence, it can be uncovered and savored.

of the yellow-ray energy center; and again, the choices that you make can, through the incarnative experience, help to crystallize and make transparent this center' (1996/11/22). By embracing diversity, we strengthen our social bonds."

Hmenne added, "In 1 Corinthians, it says, 'For just as each of us has one body with many members... so it is with Christ' (1 Corinthians 12:12). We're all parts of a greater whole."

Sleshne felt a sense of peace. "I realize now that embracing differences can lead to harmony rather than conflict."

Summary and Reflection

As they emerged from the thicket, the trio reflected on the valuable lessons learned about group conflicts and the importance of unity.

Key Lessons Learned:

1. **Collaborative Problem-Solving:** By working together and communicating openly, seemingly insurmountable obstacles can be overcome.
2. **Self-Reflection:** Recognizing that frustrations may reflect inner conflicts allows for personal growth and better interactions with others.
3. **Avoiding Division:** Open discussion and mutual respect help prevent unnecessary divisions within groups.
4. **Resolving Misunderstandings:** Approaching others with openness and a desire for connection can transform hostility into cooperation.
5. **Understanding Inner Turmoil:** Accepting and addressing one's own inner struggles reduces the projection of negativity onto others.
6. **Evaluating Conflicting Information:** Thoughtful assessment and seeking truth help navigate conflicting advice or directions.
7. **Learning from History:** Acknowledging past conflicts encourages efforts toward peace and harmony in the present.
8. **Embracing Diversity:** Recognizing the strength in diversity fosters unity and enriches the community experience.

Fretji addressed her companions with warmth. "We've faced many challenges in this thicket, but each has taught us invaluable lessons about working together and understanding ourselves."

Hmenne agreed. "Conflict doesn't have to lead to division. When approached with compassion and wisdom, it can strengthen our bonds."

Sleshne smiled. "I feel more prepared to join the community now, understanding that conflicts are opportunities for growth rather than obstacles."

Transition to the Next Chapter: The Heart of the Community and the Giant Burdock of Grudges and Resentment

As they left the thicket behind, the landscape opened up to reveal a welcoming village nestled among rolling hills. The path led toward the heart of the community, where vibrant activity bustled.

However, towering over the entrance stood giant burdock plants (*Arctium lappa*), their massive leaves casting shadows. The burrs clung to everything they touched, symbolizing grudges and lingering resentments.

6. Navigating Conflicting Advice

As they approached another challenging section, they encountered two signs pointing in both directions. One read “Safe Passage Ahead,” while the other warned “Danger—Do Not Enter.”

Hmenne scratched his head. “Which way should we go?”

Sleshne felt uncertain. “Both signs can’t be right, but both could hold some truth.”

Fretji considered. “This reminds me of when advice conflicts. The Confederation addressed such confusion: ‘I have some friends who receive information of a teacher such as possibly yourself, however the advice they receive often conflicts with what I receive from you... I therefore ask you about their teachers and about the level of competence of these teachers and how much they should be believing’ (1980/11/16).”

Hmenne nodded. “In 1 Thessalonians, we’re advised, ‘Test everything; hold fast what is good’ (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Perhaps we should assess both paths carefully.”

They decided to explore each path slightly. Fretji moved ahead on one, while Hmenne and Sleshne checked the other. They discovered that one path led to a swampy area, while the other, though overgrown, was passable.

Regrouping, they chose the safer route.

Sleshne remarked, “By evaluating conflicting information ourselves, we made an informed decision.”

7. Learning from Past Conflicts

As dusk approached, they came upon remnants of an old camp. Charred wood and scattered belongings hinted at a past conflict.

Fretji observed, “It seems a disagreement here escalated into something destructive.”

Hmenne sighed. “History is filled with such tales. The Confederation recounted, ‘The second and most devastating of the conflicts occurred approximately... ten thousand eight hundred twenty-one years in the past... This created an earth-changing configuration and the large part of Atlantis was no more... Three of the positively oriented of the Atlantean groups left... placing themselves in... Tibet, Peru, and Turkey’ (1981/01/10).”

Sleshne reflected, “Even advanced societies can fall due to conflicts. It’s a warning of what can happen when disagreements aren’t resolved.”

Fretji added, “Hebrews teaches, ‘Make every effort to live in peace with everyone’ (Hebrews 12:14). We must strive to resolve conflicts peacefully.”

They honored the site with a moment of silence, vowing to learn from the mistakes of the past.

8. Embracing Unity in Diversity

Near the edge of the thicket, they encountered various berry bushes—blackberries, raspberries, and gooseberries—growing together.

Sleshne smiled. “Despite their differences, they thrive side by side.”

Fretji agreed. “It’s a beautiful example of unity. The Confederation describes the energy centers: ‘This is the plane of your Earth. This is the social energy center where the self deals with society and its associations... in any group in which you are working with distortions

- **The Fountain of Clarity** provided insight into the nature of thoughts and emotions. Slesh learned to trust in the process, to move from the head to the heart, and to find clarity even in the midst of confusion.
- **The Labyrinth of Repeated Patterns** had been the most challenging, forcing Slesh to confront the cycles of behavior and thought that kept him trapped. But with Fretji’s guidance, he had begun to see these patterns for what they were and learned the value of meditation and reflection in breaking free from them.

As they emerged from the vineyard, Slesh felt a deep sense of gratitude for the journey he had undertaken and for Fretji’s unwavering presence by his side. The lessons he had learned were not just abstract concepts; they were truths that had been anchored in his experience, tied to the physical journey through the vineyard and the spiritual journey within.

Approaching the Hawthorns of Relationship Conflict

Ahead of them, the landscape began to shift. The orderly rows of grapevines gradually gave way to a dense thicket of hawthorn bushes, their sharp thorns glistening in the morning light. The path, once clear and inviting, now seemed to vanish into the tangled undergrowth, the way forward obscured by the thick, twisting branches.

Fretji slowed her pace, her calm demeanor now tinged with a seriousness that Slesh hadn’t seen before. He noticed this change and felt a subtle tension rising within himself as well. The peace and clarity of the vineyard were fading, replaced by a growing sense of unease.

“This is the next challenge,” Fretji said softly, her voice carrying a note of caution. “The Hawthorns of Relationship Conflict. They’re not easy to pass through, but they hold important lessons of their own—lessons about forgiveness, compassion, and the resolution of deep-seated conflicts.”

Slesh’s heart began to beat a little faster as he looked ahead. The thorns seemed to represent every painful argument, every misunderstanding, and every unresolved conflict he had ever encountered. Yet, he knew there was no turning back. The only way forward was through.

Fretji stepped closer, still maintaining a careful distance, but her presence was a comfort. “Remember what you’ve learned,” she encouraged. “The lessons from the vineyard will guide you through the thorns. Trust the process, and trust yourself.”

With a deep breath, Slesh nodded, feeling a mix of trepidation and determination. Together, they approached the hawthorn hedge, ready to face the challenges that lay within, knowing that the journey was far from over, but that each step brought them closer to the heart of understanding.

Chapter 10: The Hawthorns of Relational Conflict

Slesh walked alongside Fretji, who had been his guide since he crawled from the moat. The vineyard had offered lessons of clarity and confusion, but now they approached a new challenge—a towering, twisting hedge of hawthorn bushes. Its dark, thorny branches wove together in a seemingly impenetrable wall, and a sense of unease filled the air.

“This is the Hawthorn Fence,” Fretji explained, pausing at the entrance. “It represents the conflicts we face in relationships. Each section holds a lesson, and each gate or passage requires something of you. Only by understanding the nature of these conflicts can we find our way through.” She turned toward him with a gentle but firm expression. “Are you ready?”

Slesh nodded, though his heart fluttered with uncertainty.

Uneven Gates: Imbalance in Dynamics They began to walk, and soon they encountered two gates along the hedge. One gate stood wide open, its hinges gleaming and polished, swinging effortlessly in the breeze. The other gate, directly across the path, barely hung open—rusted and worn, entangled with thick vines and thorns that clung to it like a burden too heavy to bear. The disparity between the two gates puzzled Slesh, a knot of confusion forming in his chest.

“Why are these gates so different?” he asked, his brow furrowed as he gestured toward the wide-open gate and the nearly shut one. “Isn’t there supposed to be one clear way through?”

Fretji stopped in front of the open gate, her hand brushing lightly against its smooth surface. She then turned to the rusted, closed one and gestured. “This is what happens when balance in a relationship is lost,” she explained, her voice soft but clear. “One side remains wide open, giving endlessly without hesitation, while the other side shuts down, overwhelmed or withholding, unable to meet the other halfway. It’s a mismatch, one that creates disharmony and strain.”

Slesh stared at the rusty gate, and the image of it hanging barely open resonated deeply within him. He thought of moments in his own relationships, where he had poured his heart into the other person, only to be met with silence or distance. The sense of rejection, the loneliness that had crept in—he could feel it now as he gazed at the overgrown vines.

“But why does this happen?” he asked, his voice thick with both curiosity and memory. “Why do some people give too much, while others hold back?”

Fretji smiled gently, her eyes reflecting an ancient understanding. “There are many reasons. Some fear vulnerability, others are worn down by their past wounds, and still, others are simply at a different place in their journey. The truth is, it’s rare that two people are in perfect harmony all the time. There are moments when one person may need to give more, but when it becomes a pattern—when one gate stays open and the other remains closed—that’s when the imbalance becomes a burden.”

She quoted softly, “**Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers**” (2 Corinthians 6:14). “Not in the sense of belief, but in the balance of openness and trust. The heart must be open equally on both sides for the energy of love to flow freely. Without this, the relationship becomes like these mismatched gates—uneven and out of sync.”

Slesh’s mind returned to the past relationships where the mismatch had drained him. He had tried so hard to force the gates open, to bridge the gap, only to realize that one person alone couldn’t create balance. The lesson of the gates was profound. Both had to be willing to open together.

Fretji continued, “In every relationship, there’s a rhythm—a dance. Sometimes one must lead, but the other must follow. If both are trying to lead, or one refuses to follow, the dance falters.” She touched the vine-covered gate. “Balance is the key. Both must learn to open and close with grace, together.”

Entangled Thorns: Avoiding Conflict As they walked further along the path, the hawthorn branches thickened. The once clear walkway became tangled with dense, thorny vines that twisted tightly together, forming an impassable barrier. The air felt heavy here, the scent of overgrown flora mingling with the tension of unresolved conflict. Slesh hesitated, a sense of dread creeping in.

Fretji stopped and gently touched one of the thorny branches. “This,” she said softly, “is what happens when we avoid conflict for too long. These thorns are like the issues we refuse to address, growing thicker and more tangled with time. They block our path, making it harder to move forward.”

They took a moment to share their thoughts without judgment. Recognizing the benefits of both paths, they decided to combine their ideas: they would take the path with the blackberries but proceed carefully to avoid the densest thorns.

Sleshne smiled. “By listening to each other and avoiding division, we’ve found a better solution.”

4. Overcoming Misunderstandings

As they moved forward, a sudden rustling startled them. A small group of travelers emerged from the bushes, looking wary.

One of the strangers eyed them suspiciously. “What are you doing here?” he demanded.

Fretji responded calmly, “We’re journeying through, learning as we go.”

The man scoffed. “This is our path. You should turn back.”

Sleshne felt tension rising. “We mean no harm,” he assured them.

Hmenne whispered, “Remember, ‘The desire to connect, the desire to communicate, the desire to enter into communion with others... this is the true instinct of humankind’ (1995/03/12). Let’s try to find common ground.”

Fretji smiled warmly at the strangers. “Perhaps we can help each other. We’re all navigating these thorny paths.”

Another traveler softened. “We’ve been stuck here, unable to find a way through.”

Sleshne offered, “We can share what we’ve learned. Together, we might find a better route.”

The initial hostility faded as they began to communicate openly. By sharing knowledge and working collectively, they all progressed more easily.

Fretji reflected, “Misunderstandings can lead to conflict, but open communication fosters harmony.”

5. The Reflection of Inner Turmoil

Later, as they rested, Sleshne confessed, “I noticed that when the strangers confronted us, I felt anger bubbling up. I wanted to argue.”

Fretji replied, “It’s natural to react defensively, but the Confederation teaches, ‘The conflicts within are given overt expression with other selves standing in for those dynamics within the self which the self has not yet accepted’ (1995/03/12). Perhaps their hostility mirrored something within you.”

Hmenne added, “In Ephesians, it says, ‘Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love’ (Ephesians 4:2). Recognizing our inner turmoil helps us respond with compassion.”

Sleshne pondered this. “Maybe I was projecting my own insecurities onto them. I need to work on accepting myself.”

Fretji smiled. “Self-awareness is the first step toward inner peace and better relationships with others.”

Fretji added, “In Matthew, it says, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God’ (Matthew 5:9). Let’s approach this barrier with the intention of peace.”

Sleshne took a deep breath. “But how do we start?”

Fretji smiled. “Carefully and together. Let’s gently push aside the branches, watching out for one another.”

As they began to navigate the thicket, they communicated each step, warning each other of hidden thorns. Slowly but surely, they made progress.

Sleshne realized, “Working together and communicating openly makes this challenge manageable.”

2. The Temptation to Blame

Midway through the thicket, Sleshne’s sleeve caught on a thorn, tearing the fabric. Frustrated, he exclaimed, “This is impossible! If only these bushes weren’t so overgrown!”

Hmenne gently replied, “It’s easy to blame the bushes, but perhaps there’s a lesson here. The Confederation teaches, ‘Entities may play those games in which masks are worn, sides are taken, and the conflicts within are given overt expression with other selves standing in for those dynamics within the self which the self has not yet accepted’ (1995/03/12). Maybe this frustration reflects an inner conflict.”

Fretji nodded. “James reminds us, ‘What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?’ (James 4:1).”

Sleshne sighed. “I suppose I’m more upset with myself for not being careful.”

Fretji placed a hand on his shoulder. “Acknowledging our own role in conflicts helps us find resolution. Let’s focus on being mindful and patient.”

With renewed determination, Sleshne continued, paying closer attention to his movements.

3. The Danger of Division

As they progressed, they came upon a fork in the path. One direction led through dense blackberry vines, while the other seemed to have fewer thorns but was overgrown with raspberries.

Hmenne suggested, “I think we should take the path with fewer thorns.”

Fretji countered, “But the blackberries are ripe and could provide nourishment along the way.”

Sleshne felt torn. “We need to decide together. Dividing could lead to us getting lost or hurt.”

Fretji recalled a teaching: “The Confederation warns, ‘It is almost impossible for citizens of your planet to avoid identifying with one side or another of many a conflict that arises to public attention... So, it is most definitely premature to judge an individual as one who is polarizing on the path of service to self... without necessarily having embraced it full and complete’ (2017/09/03).”

Hmenne nodded. “Proverbs advises, ‘Where there is strife, there is pride, but wisdom is found in those who take advice’ (Proverbs 13:10). Perhaps we should discuss the pros and cons of each path.”

Slesh stared at the thorns, his chest tightening at the sight. “But conflict only brings more pain, doesn’t it?” he asked, uncertainty lacing his voice. “What’s the point of facing it if it just hurts?”

Fretji’s gaze softened, but there was a firmness in her response. “Avoiding conflict may seem like a solution, but it only delays the inevitable. When we avoid addressing the issues between us, they grow—like these thorns—until they become too dense to pass through. Facing conflict may cause temporary pain, but it’s the only way to clear the path forward.”

She stepped closer to the thorns, carefully parting them with her hands. “Conflict is like these brambles. Yes, it stings to touch them, but if you don’t clear the way, you’ll remain stuck. Honest communication, even when painful, clears the path.”

Slesh hesitated, remembering all the times he had avoided difficult conversations, hoping that by staying silent, the problems would simply disappear. But they never did. Instead, they festered, growing thorns that choked the relationship and left him feeling trapped.

Fretji seemed to sense his hesitation. “It’s easy to avoid what hurts,” she said, her voice gentle but resolute. “But true healing, true growth, comes from addressing the pain, not running from it. The thorns may sting, but they also clear the way for new growth.”

Slesh took a deep breath, feeling the weight of her words settle over him. She was right—avoiding conflict had only prolonged his suffering. He had tried to protect himself by avoiding pain, but in doing so, he had only allowed the issues to grow thicker, more insurmountable.

Fretji smiled softly, quoting, “**If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them**” (Luke 17:3). “Conflict, when approached with love and a willingness to forgive, becomes a gateway to deeper understanding. By confronting it, you free yourself and the other person from the weight of unresolved issues.”

With a determined nod, Slesh stepped forward, reaching out to part the thorns as Fretji had done. The sharp edges bit into his skin, but the pain was less than he had expected. As they pushed through the entangled barrier, Slesh felt a sense of release, as if the act of facing the conflict had lifted a heavy burden from his heart.

Fretji’s voice drifted to him as they cleared the thorns, “By confronting what we fear, we reclaim the energy we’ve given away to avoidance. We find our way forward.”

Crooked Arches: Uneven Commitment A few steps later, they arrived at a crooked archway formed by the intertwining branches of the hawthorn. One side of the arch rose tall and strong, its branches woven tightly together, while the other side drooped, barely able to support its weight. The imbalance made the structure seem precarious, as though it might collapse at any moment.

Slesh felt a pang of unease as he stared at the arch. “It looks like it could fall any second,” he murmured, instinctively stepping back from the unstable structure.

Fretji glanced at Slesh, her eyes calm yet observant. “Commitment in relationships is like this arch,” she said, her voice carrying the weight of experience. “When one person’s commitment rises, strong and unwavering, while the other’s falters, the imbalance threatens to break the bond. It’s like a tree with uneven roots—eventually, it topples under its own weight.”

Slesh nodded, feeling the truth of her words resonate within him. He thought about the times in his past relationships when his enthusiasm and dedication had surged forward, only to find his partner’s resolve weakening. The frustration of feeling like he was carrying the weight alone, the confusion when the other person’s heart seemed to drift away—he had never fully understood it until now.

Fretji's voice softened as she continued. "Both must be equally committed for the relationship to grow strong, just as both sides of this arch must rise in harmony to support the structure." She smiled gently, sensing the reflections stirring in Slesh. "Relationships are a dance of patience and perseverance. Not every moment will be perfectly balanced, but over time, the commitment must level out."

Fretji quoted softly, "**Be patient, bearing with one another in love**" (Ephesians 4:2). Her words carried a gentle reminder of the necessity of enduring moments of imbalance with grace, trusting that love, when nurtured, can heal the unevenness.

Slesh felt the weight of the crooked arch symbolizing past moments when he had tried to pull too much of the weight in his relationships, feeling drained. Yet Fretji's words encouraged him to see that patience and time could strengthen even the most imbalanced arches.

The Double Gate: Control and Separation They continued walking until they reached another gate along the hawthorn hedge. This one was large, heavy, and imposing, with two thick handles made of wrought iron. The gate was clearly meant to be opened by two people. Without thinking, Slesh stepped forward and grasped one of the handles, pulling with all his might. It didn't budge.

Frustration surged through him as he pulled harder, his muscles straining against the unyielding gate. His brow furrowed as he tugged again, yet it remained firmly closed.

Fretji observed him calmly before stepping forward. She placed her hand gently on the other handle. "Some things can't be done alone," she said, her tone kind but firm. "In relationships, control often makes things heavier, harder to manage. When one person tries to carry the load by themselves—either by taking too much control or resisting it altogether—it creates separation. But when you work together, with love instead of control, the weight becomes lighter."

Slesh met her gaze, the frustration in his chest softening as he realized the gate's weight was never meant to be managed by one person alone. He had been trying to force it open through sheer will, thinking that if he could just pull harder, everything would work. How many times had he done the same in his relationships? How many times had he tried to control the outcome, to fix things on his own, only to feel the weight of it all crushing him?

Fretji smiled warmly and gave a slight nod, inviting him to try again. This time, they pulled together, and the gate opened with surprising ease. The burden, shared between them, was no longer overwhelming.

"Control divides, but love unites," Fretji said, her voice filled with gentle wisdom. "**Let love be genuine**" (Romans 12:9).

Slesh's shoulders relaxed as they passed through the gate. He understood now that love wasn't about controlling the outcome or forcing the other person to see things his way. It was about working together, sharing the load, and trusting that the gate would open when both hearts were aligned in purpose.

Narrow Passage: Fear of Rejection As they moved deeper into the maze of the hawthorn hedge, the path began to narrow. The once open walkway became tighter, the hawthorn bushes pressing in on either side. Their thorns scraped against their clothing, creating a feeling of tension in the air. The further they walked, the more confined the space became, until it seemed they could barely move without being pricked by the sharp thorns.

Fretji addressed Sleshne with warmth. "You've shown remarkable growth today. Each challenge you faced has been an opportunity for transformation."

Hmenne agreed. "We're proud of you. Remember that we're always here to support you on your journey."

Sleshne smiled genuinely. "I couldn't have done it without both of you. I feel ready to face the community and whatever lies ahead."

As they left the herb garden, the sun began to set, casting a golden glow over the healing plants. The path ahead led to an area where blackberry bushes (*Rubus fruticosus*) grew wild, their thorny branches intertwining.

Transition to the Next Chapter: The Thorny Blackberries of Group Conflict

Walking toward the thicket of blackberry bushes, Fretji noticed the dense maze of thorny vines blocking their path. "It seems our next challenge awaits," she remarked.

Hmenne examined the thorns. "Navigating through this will require care and cooperation."

Sleshne felt a newfound determination. "Just as we faced the nettles, we can face these thorns together. Perhaps they hold lessons on handling conflicts within groups."

Fretji nodded thoughtfully. "Indeed, blackberries symbolize not only nourishment but also the difficulties that can arise in communities."

Hmenne smiled. "Let's prepare ourselves to learn and grow from whatever challenges these thorny paths present."

With unity and purpose, the trio stepped forward, ready to embrace the teachings of the Thorny Blackberries of Group Conflict. Confident in the lessons they've learned and the strength of their bond, they felt prepared to overcome any obstacles and continue their journey toward greater understanding and harmony.

Chapter 16: The Thorny Blackberries of Group Conflict

Leaving the Herb Garden behind, Fretji, Hmenne, and Sleshne approached a dense thicket of wild blackberry bushes (*Rubus fruticosus*). The tangled vines stretched high, their thorny branches intertwining to form a seemingly impenetrable barrier. Among the blackberries grew other shrubs like raspberries and gooseberries, each with their own thorns and challenges. The path ahead was fraught with obstacles, symbolizing the complexities of group conflicts and the lessons they held.

1. The Impenetrable Barrier

As they stood before the thicket, Sleshne gazed at the maze of thorns with apprehension. "How are we supposed to get through this?" he asked. "It's impossible to avoid getting scratched."

Fretji examined the dense bushes. "This reminds me of the conflicts that can arise within groups," she mused. "They can seem insurmountable and fraught with pain."

Hmenne nodded. "The Confederation once shared, 'We say to you at this time that your planet has never been very much closer to what you would term armed conflict, and we ask that in your meditations you realize that you are the light of the world and that that which is you is of infinite help' (1978/10/18). Perhaps by bringing our own light and love, we can find a way through."

8. The Path to Inner Peace

Near the garden's exit, they found a serene meditation area surrounded by passionflower vines (*Passiflora incarnata*), symbolizing peace and calm. The gentle sound of a nearby fountain added to the tranquil atmosphere.

Sleshne took a deep breath. "I want to find inner peace and overcome this anxiety."

Fretji gestured to the meditation cushions. "Let's take a moment to meditate. 'In meditation one can learn and, in a very real way, practice disengaging from these mental patterns that obscure and narrow the expansiveness of being, that separate oneself from that infinite wellspring of worth that is always rising up from within the heart of self' (2023/04/19)."

They settled into comfortable positions, closing their eyes. Hmenne led them in a simple breathing exercise, guiding them to inhale positivity and exhale tension.

As they sat in silence, Sleshne felt a profound sense of calm wash over him. The worries that had weighed on him seemed distant, replaced by a gentle awareness of the present moment.

After some time, they opened their eyes. Fretji smiled warmly. "Isaiah assures us, 'You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast because they trust in you' (Isaiah 26:3). Trust in the journey and in yourself."

Sleshne nodded. "I feel more centered than I have in a long time."

Hmenne added, "Remember this feeling. You can return to it whenever you need."

Standing up, Sleshne said with renewed confidence, "With your support and these teachings, I believe I can face the community and whatever challenges come my way."

Summary and Reflection

As the trio stood amidst the calming herbs of the garden, they reflected on the meaningful resolutions they had found together.

Key Lessons Learned:

1. **Facing Fears Courageously:** By confronting his fear of the nettles using careful techniques, Sleshne learned that approaching fears directly can transform them into strengths.
2. **Breaking Isolation:** Planting the willow herbs symbolized the importance of community and reaching out to others, showing that togetherness fosters growth.
3. **Overcoming Overthinking:** Sharing laughter and stories helped Sleshne break free from the cycle of overanalysis, highlighting the healing power of joy.
4. **Releasing Fear of Judgment:** Engaging with the garden visitors demonstrated that fears are often unfounded, and open communication fosters connection.
5. **Redirecting Negative Thoughts:** Focusing on gratitude and meditation provided practical tools to combat negativity and cultivate positivity.
6. **Managing Expectations:** Recognizing the need to set personal expectations allowed Sleshne to alleviate self-imposed pressures and listen to his inner guidance.
7. **Seeking Support:** Accepting help from friends highlighted the strength in vulnerability and the value of mutual support.
8. **Finding Inner Peace:** Meditation offered a practical method for achieving tranquility and connecting with the infinite wellspring of worth within.

Slesh slowed his pace, his heart tightening with anxiety. The narrow passage made him feel vulnerable, exposed. The walls of thorns seemed to close in on him, pressing against his deepest fears—fears of rejection, of not being enough, of opening himself only to be hurt.

Fretji noticed his hesitation and turned to him with compassion. "Fear of rejection or conflict can narrow our path," she said softly. "It makes us close ourselves off, afraid to fully open our hearts. We retreat, guarding ourselves from pain, but in doing so, we shrink our capacity for love."

Her words cut through the tightness in his chest. Slesh had been here before, in this narrow place. He had felt the thorns of rejection pricking at him, and he had closed himself off, afraid to take the risk of vulnerability again. The fear of being hurt had become a barrier, blocking him from the deeper love he craved.

Fretji reached out, gently touching the thorns as they walked. "But vulnerability is the only way to deepen love. When we allow ourselves to be open, even to pain, we make space for greater connection, for greater trust."

"There is no fear in love," she quoted, her voice soft but resonant. "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18).

Slesh took a deep breath, the weight of her words sinking in. He realized that the narrow path was his own creation—his fear of rejection, his reluctance to be fully seen. But Fretji's words gave him courage. He could walk through this narrow space. He could face the thorns of vulnerability and come out stronger, more open.

As they continued through the passage, Slesh walked with a newfound confidence. The thorns still brushed against him, but they no longer felt like a threat. Instead, they reminded him of the importance of staying open, of facing his fears with courage.

Each step through vulnerability, through the fear of rejection, brought clarity, not fear. The path, though narrow, was one that led to greater love. And with each step, the thorns seemed to lose their sting.

The Unyielding Gate: Expectations vs. Reality At the end of the narrow path, they found themselves standing before a large, imposing gate. Its iron surface was weathered and worn, yet it stood firm, unmoving despite Slesh's attempts to push it open. Frustration welled up within him as he tried again, leaning his full weight against the gate, only to be met with resistance. His expectations of steady progress were thwarted by this immovable barrier.

"Why won't it move?" he muttered under his breath, the tension rising in his chest. His desire for forward movement, for answers, pressed heavily upon him. Slesh had grown accustomed to pushing through obstacles, believing that sheer determination could force things to unfold the way he wanted.

Fretji, who had been watching silently, stepped forward and placed a gentle hand on his arm, stilling his efforts. "Not every path opens when we expect it to," she said softly. Her voice held a calmness that contrasted with his growing frustration. "Sometimes, the door remains closed because we aren't ready to walk through it. Sometimes, it stays shut because the right way hasn't yet revealed itself."

Slesh met her gaze, his tension beginning to dissipate under the weight of her words. He realized that this gate wasn't just a physical obstacle; it symbolized the expectations he held in life, the rigid ideas of how things should unfold, how relationships should go, and how the future should look.

Fretji smiled, seeing the realization dawning on him. “Let go of your attachment to how things should be. Trust in the timing of the universe, in the wisdom of the path, even when it doesn’t match your expectations.”

She quoted softly, “**Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding**” (Proverbs 3:5).

Slesh sighed, releasing his grip on the gate. He took a step back, realizing that sometimes, no matter how much he wanted something, it wasn’t the right time for it to happen.

Fretji’s smile widened. “It will open when the time is right. Until then, let go of the need to control. The path forward will become clear in its own time.”

The heavy weight of expectation began to lift from Slesh’s shoulders, and as they moved on, he felt lighter, trusting that even closed doors had their purpose.

Thorn-Covered Stone: Unresolved Emotional Baggage As they continued, the path ahead was suddenly blocked by a large stone, its surface covered in thick, tangled thorns. The thorns were sharp and dense, forming an impenetrable barrier that made it impossible to pass without injury.

Fretji paused, her gaze fixed on the stone. “This is the weight of unresolved past conflicts,” she said softly, gesturing to the mass of thorns that enveloped the stone. “Until we forgive and release the old wounds we carry, they remain like this—blocking our way forward. Every thorn is a memory of pain, a resentment left to fester, an apology that was never given or accepted.”

Slesh knelt down, his fingers tracing the edge of the stone where the thorns began. The sight of the tangled thorns stirred something deep within him—memories of past hurts, unresolved grievances, words left unsaid. He realized that this wasn’t just any obstacle—it was his own emotional baggage, the weight of years of unresolved feelings and unspoken forgiveness.

Taking a deep breath, he reached forward, his fingers carefully plucking away at the thorns. The sharp points pricked his skin, causing him to wince, but he didn’t stop. With each thorn removed, he felt a small release, a letting go of something he had held onto for far too long. Fretji knelt beside him, her hands working alongside his, helping to clear the thorns.

“This is what it means to forgive,” she said gently. “Forgiveness is never easy. It’s like pulling out these thorns—painful at first, but necessary if we are to move forward without being wounded again and again by the same old hurts.”

Slesh nodded, the sharpness of the thorns a tangible reminder of the emotional pain he had carried. With Fretji’s help, they cleared the last of the thorns, revealing the smooth stone beneath. For the first time, the path was clear.

Fretji stood, quoting softly, “**Forgive, as the Lord forgave you**” (Colossians 3:13). “Only through forgiveness can we clear the path ahead. Without it, we remain stuck, unable to move forward.”

Slesh felt a wave of relief wash over him. The weight he had been carrying for so long seemed to dissolve as he understood the power of forgiveness—not just for others, but for himself. Together, they continued, leaving the thorns behind, the path now clear.

The Shattered Mirror: Fear of Vulnerability As they walked deeper into the maze of the hawthorn hedge, they came upon a shattered mirror embedded within the thorny walls. The mirror’s shards glimmered in the light, but they reflected back only distorted,

Sleshne considered this. “I like that idea. Focusing on gratitude might help me see the good around me.”

“Exactly,” Fretji agreed. “It’s about cultivating a habit of positivity.”

6. The Pressure of Expectations

They reached a tranquil pond surrounded by valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*), known for its calming properties. Sleshne gazed at his reflection in the water. “I feel pressured to meet everyone’s expectations,” he sighed. “It’s overwhelming.”

Fretji sat beside him. “Pressure can heighten anxiety. The Confederation notes, ‘This primal anxiety, this hunger to know the self, has within it the seeds of many densities of progressive learning and harmonizing and coming to an ever more full blooming... Perhaps it can be seen that it is well to do whatever the individual might find useful to bring that anger, that judgment... back to the interior of the self’ (1995/03/12). Embracing this journey inward can lead to growth.”

Hmenne offered, “Jesus said, ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest’ (Matthew 11:28). It’s important to find rest and not carry burdens alone.”

Sleshne looked up. “But what if I disappoint others?”

Fretji responded, “What’s most important is staying true to yourself. Set your own expectations based on your values and capabilities.”

Hmenne added, “Remember, growth is a personal journey. Others may have opinions, but only you know your path.”

Taking a deep breath, Sleshne said, “Perhaps I’ve been trying too hard to please everyone else. I need to listen to my own heart.”

Fretji smiled. “That’s a significant realization.”

7. The Hesitation to Seek Help

As they strolled past a cluster of echinacea (*Echinacea purpurea*), Sleshne admitted, “I often hesitate to ask for help, even when I need it. I don’t want to be a burden.”

Fretji picked a bright echinacea flower and handed it to him. “This plant boosts the immune system, just as seeking support strengthens us. The Confederation suggests, ‘Self-doubt gives you a chance to reevaluate what you feel is important in your life journey... The anxiety that comes from self-doubt adds to you a greater desire to find answers that come from within, for you do have those answers, my friends’ (2023/03/15).”

Hmenne said, “Galatians teaches, ‘Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ’ (Galatians 6:2). We are meant to support one another.”

Sleshne looked at the flower. “But how do I overcome the fear of reaching out?”

Fretji suggested, “Start small. Share your feelings with someone you trust.”

Hmenne offered, “We’re here for you. Let us know when you need help.”

Feeling touched, Sleshne said, “Thank you. I realize now that asking for help is a sign of courage, not weakness.”

Fretji nodded. “Indeed, it takes strength to acknowledge our needs.”

4. The Fear of Judgment

They came upon a group of garden visitors admiring a patch of fragrant lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*). The visitors chatted amicably, sharing their appreciation for the blossoms. Sleshne hesitated at the edge of the group. “What if they judge me or find me awkward?” he whispered.

Fretji reassured him, “Fear of judgment can be paralyzing. The Confederation says, ‘It is never apparent that all entities have a living, solid, connectivity... Consequently, entities spend incarnational time not being aware of the present moment... In some cases, the exercises of open communication reduce the anxiety and the sense of confusion that come from not knowing what another entity is thinking’ (2004/01/04). Open communication can alleviate our fears.”

Hmenne offered, “Romans teaches, ‘Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another’ (Romans 14:13). If we approach others without judgment, we often find they do the same.”

Gathering his courage, Sleshne took a deep breath. “Maybe I can start by simply listening.”

He approached the group quietly, and Fretji and Hmenne followed. One of the visitors turned and smiled warmly. “Isn’t the lavender lovely?” she said.

Sleshne nodded. “It truly is. The scent is so calming.”

Another visitor added, “We were just discussing how it can be used to make soothing teas and oils.”

As the conversation flowed, Sleshne found himself relaxing. The group welcomed his input, and his fear of judgment melted away.

Rejoining his companions later, he said, “They were so kind. I realize now that my fear was unfounded.”

Fretji smiled. “Often, our fears are bigger in our minds than in reality.”

5. The Cycle of Negative Thoughts

Exploring a section filled with soothing lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*), Sleshne admitted, “I often get caught in negative thoughts, replaying awkward moments or imagining worst-case scenarios.”

Fretji picked a leaf of lemon balm and handed it to him. “This herb is known for reducing stress and promoting positivity. The Confederation advises, ‘Now that you, our friends, exist deep into the experiment of the veil of forgetting, you are greatly susceptible to this pressure... In this nexus of your planet’s evolutionary journey where a new world is being born... that pressure may push in upon the walls of your mind and create a squeezing, a great worry, an anxiety... This, again, is why we frequently counsel the activity of meditation’ (2023/04/19). Meditation can help us break free from negative cycles.”

Hmenne added, “Philippians encourages us, ‘Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right... think about such things’ (Philippians 4:8). Redirecting our thoughts can break the negative cycle.”

Sleshne rubbed the leaf between his fingers, releasing its calming scent. “How do I start to change my thought patterns?”

Fretji suggested, “When a negative thought arises, acknowledge it without judgment, then gently shift your focus to something positive.”

Hmenne said, “Perhaps you can create a gratitude journal. Each day, write down things you’re thankful for.”

fragmented images. Slesh gazed into the mirror, seeing his own reflection twisted and broken, unrecognizable.

Fretji touched the edge of the mirror, her fingers tracing the jagged glass. “This mirror shows us how fear distorts our reflection,” she said quietly. “Fear of vulnerability keeps us from seeing ourselves clearly, and it prevents others from truly seeing us as we are. When we hide behind our fears, we become fragmented, showing only parts of ourselves, never the whole.”

Slesh stared at his reflection, feeling the sting of her words. He had spent so long hiding parts of himself—his fears, his weaknesses, his insecurities—fearing that if he showed them, he would be rejected. The mirror before him reflected the consequences of that fear: a broken, incomplete image of who he truly was.

Fretji’s gaze softened as she continued. “Only when we show our true selves—flaws and all—can love grow. Vulnerability isn’t weakness; it’s the strength to be seen, to let others in, even when it’s frightening.”

She turned to him, her voice filled with gentle conviction. “When we confess our fears, our doubts, and our mistakes, we open the door to healing. We allow ourselves to be truly known, and in that knowing, we find connection.”

Her voice dropped to a soft whisper as she quoted, “**Confess your sins to each other, and pray for each other so that you may be healed**” (James 5:16).

Slesh looked at the shattered mirror again, and this time, instead of turning away, he reached out to touch the glass. It was sharp, and the jagged edges pricked his skin, but he didn’t pull back. He realized that vulnerability wasn’t something to fear—it was the very thing that could heal the brokenness he saw in the mirror.

As he withdrew his hand, the reflection began to shift. Though the mirror was still shattered, he could now see his true self in the fragments—not perfect, but whole in his willingness to be seen.

Fretji smiled at him, a smile of understanding and acceptance. “We are all reflections of one another. When you allow yourself to be vulnerable, you invite others to do the same. And in that shared vulnerability, love has room to grow.”

Slesh took a deep breath, feeling the power of her words settle within him. Vulnerability wasn’t something to be feared, but embraced. It was the path to deeper connection, to healing, to love.

Together, they continued, leaving the shattered mirror behind, knowing that the journey ahead would require more vulnerability—but also knowing that each step forward would bring greater clarity, trust, and love.

Conclusion: Approaching the Oak Forest As they neared the end of the Hawthorn Forest, Slesh felt the lingering weight of each lesson, like thorns still scratching at his skin. The challenges of the uneven gates, the entangled vines, and the heavy iron doors had left their mark on him, not just physically but emotionally. Each step had taught him something about relationships, about himself—about balance, vulnerability, and the delicate dance between control and surrender.

Fretji walked beside him, her pace steady and calm. She glanced at Slesh with a knowing smile, as if sensing the thoughts that swirled within him. “You’ve come a long way,” she said, her voice warm. “The imbalance of relationships, the fear of conflict, the weight of unresolved emotions—they no longer hold you in the same way. But remember, each thorn

you passed through was a reminder of something deeper. Lessons that will carry you forward, if you let them.”

Slesh nodded, though the weight of it all still pressed upon him. He thought of the **uneven gates**, where imbalance had shown itself so clearly—one side giving too much, the other too little. He had seen it in himself, in his past, and in the way he struggled with uneven commitment. He had learned that balance wasn’t about perfection, but about recognizing when to step forward and when to let go.

The **entangled thorns**, too, had taught him that avoiding conflict only allowed the issues to grow denser, more suffocating. He had felt the sharp sting of those thorns, the pain of facing unresolved emotions, but with each step, the way had cleared, and so had his understanding.

And then there were the **heavy gates of control**. He had tried to force them open on his own, straining against the weight of them, only to realize that control was an illusion. Fretji had shown him that it was through working together, through releasing the need to dominate, that the gates had opened, lighter than he had imagined.

But despite the lessons, Slesh still felt the remnants of fear, the lingering doubt that clung to him like the last thorns of the forest. He had learned much, but the journey was not over. The lessons were deep within him, but the weight of his own unresolved burdens—the fear of vulnerability, the struggle for balance—remained.

As they approached the final gate, a tall wooden door covered in ivy, Fretji paused, placing a hand on the rough wood. Beyond it, Slesh glimpsed the towering **oak trees**, their branches reaching high into the sky. The oak forest loomed ahead, ancient and steadfast, its presence both comforting and daunting.

“This is where your next journey begins,” Fretji said softly. “The oaks hold deeper wisdom, but they also ask more of you. What you’ve learned here in the Hawthorn Forest will help guide you, but the work is far from done.”

Slesh stared at the oak forest, feeling a mixture of anticipation and trepidation. The lessons of the hawthorns had prepared him, but the weight of unresolved emotions and unhealed conflicts still lingered. He wasn’t fully free yet.

Fretji’s voice was gentle but firm. “The thorns of conflict, control, and imbalance were necessary to show you where you’ve been holding on too tightly, or where you’ve been too afraid to open. But the oaks... the oaks will ask you to face what remains. They will show you that true liberation is not found in avoiding the darkness, but in embracing it—learning to forgive yourself and others, and in doing so, finding your strength.”

Slesh took a deep breath, his gaze fixed on the ancient trees ahead. He felt the thorns still scratching at his heart, but he also felt something else—a quiet resolve. He was ready to continue, even if the path was still unclear.

Together, they passed through the gate, stepping into the shadow of the oak trees. The Hawthorn Forest was behind him, its lessons etched into his soul, but the journey ahead promised more challenges, more growth. And with each step toward the heart of the oak forest, Slesh knew that the thorns of conflict were only the beginning.

Chapter 11: Oaks of Domination

Slesh had felt the warmth of the morning sun fade as they entered the deep forest of oaks. The towering trees stretched high into the sky, their branches forming a dense canopy that blocked out much of the light. The air was cooler here, the path more shaded. Fretji walked ahead of him, her steps light but deliberate, as if she knew these woods well. Slesh followed closely, his mind heavy with the lessons he had learned in the hawthorn hedge.

2. The Weight of Isolation

Continuing along the path, Sleshne was drawn to a solitary willow herb (*Epilobium angustifolium*), its vibrant flowers standing alone among the greenery. “Sometimes I feel like this lone flower,” he admitted. “Separate from others, isolated by my own fears.”

Fretji sat beside him. “Isolation can amplify anxiety. The Confederation once shared, ‘Depression itself becomes food and the thought-forms become stronger, and other vulnerable entities are then, shall we say, infected and encouraged by such vampiric entities’ (1988/02/28). Feeding into isolation can make our fears grow.”

Hmenne placed a hand on Sleshne’s shoulder. “First Peter offers comfort: ‘Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you’ (1 Peter 5:7). You don’t have to carry this weight alone.”

Sleshne sighed. “But it’s hard to reach out when I feel so disconnected.”

Fretji suggested, “Let’s plant more willow herbs around this one. By surrounding it with others, it won’t stand alone, and neither will you.”

They gathered additional plants and carefully placed them around the solitary flower. As they worked, Sleshne felt a sense of connection—not just with the plants but with his companions.

“Thank you,” he said softly. “I realize now that by isolating myself, I miss the opportunity to grow alongside others.”

Hmenne smiled. “Together, we create a more beautiful garden—and a stronger community.”

3. The Barrier of Overthinking

Approaching a garden bench surrounded by calming chamomile (*Matricaria chamomilla*), Sleshne hesitated before sitting down. “I worry about what others think of me,” he confessed. “I replay every interaction in my mind, fearing I’ve said or done the wrong thing.”

Fretji joined him on the bench. “Overthinking can trap us in a cycle of anxiety. The Confederation teaches, ‘One thing we do recommend for all who experience confusion is a very well-encouraged sense of humor. The most helpful point of view for a changing spiritual seeker is light-hearted irreverence. Play with that which is occurring. Be playful. Allow the vision to relax... Lighten your own load with laughter’ (1992/07/12). Sometimes, we need to lighten our hearts.”

Hmenne chuckled. “Proverbs reminds us, ‘Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up’ (Proverbs 12:25). Let’s share stories and laughter to lift our spirits.”

Sleshne smiled slightly. “I suppose a good laugh might help.”

They began sharing amusing tales of their past adventures, each story more lighthearted than the last. As laughter filled the air, Sleshne felt his worries fade.

“You know,” he said, “I can’t even remember what I was overthinking about.”

Fretji grinned. “That’s the power of joy and connection.”

Hmenne added, “When we focus on the present moment, we free ourselves from the anxieties of the past and future.”

Sleshne nodded. “I see now that I can choose to engage with others rather than dwell on my fears.”

Sleshne took a deep breath. “Let’s apply what we’ve learned about humility and love here. Together, we can navigate these challenges.”

Fretji added, “And let’s remember to ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you’ (Luke 6:31). Compassion starts with ourselves and extends to those around us.”

With renewed determination, the trio ventured deeper into the herb garden, ready to embrace new lessons and continue their journey toward spiritual growth.

Chapter 15: The Herb Garden of Social Anxiety

Leaving the Berry Shrubbery behind, Fretji, Hmenne, and Sleshne entered a tranquil herb garden rich with medicinal plants. The air was filled with soothing aromas of lavender, chamomile, and the distinct scent of stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*), which lined the pathways. The garden was a place of healing but also held lessons on facing inner fears and social anxiety. Sleshne felt a mix of anticipation and apprehension, knowing that soon he would be entering the larger community after passing a few more ordeals.

1. The Sting of Uncertainty

As they wandered deeper into the garden, Sleshne paused beside a patch of stinging nettle. The delicate leaves swayed gently, but he knew a careless touch could result in a painful sting. “These nettles remind me of how I feel about joining the community,” he confessed. “I’m afraid of making mistakes and getting hurt—or hurting others—without meaning to.”

Fretji approached him with understanding. “Social situations can indeed be like these nettles,” she said. “But consider this wisdom: ‘Most of the imbalances that manifest in your physical vehicle as pains, limitations, etc., are the result of some form of tension, fear, and anxiety, anger or resentment. It is not to your discredit that these things occur. That is why you are in the physical body, so that you may go through the catalyst of the experience of these things, and from them learn’ (1980/12/14). Facing our fears allows us to grow.”

Hmenne nodded. “Philippians tells us, ‘Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God’ (Philippians 4:6). You’re not alone in this journey.”

Sleshne looked thoughtfully at the nettles. “But how do I avoid the sting without gloves or tools?”

Fretji smiled gently. “There’s a technique. If you approach the nettle from the top and firmly grasp the leaf stem, you can avoid being stung. It requires confidence and care—much like navigating social situations.”

Hmenne added, “Let’s try it together. We’ll harvest some nettles for tea. This way, you can practice facing your fear with support.”

Taking a deep breath, Sleshne agreed. Carefully, they approached the nettles. Fretji demonstrated the technique, pinching the leaf stem from above and swiftly pulling upward. Sleshne followed her lead, and to his surprise, he avoided the sting.

“See?” Fretji said encouragingly. “By confronting your fear directly and with the right approach, you can transform a potential pain into something beneficial.”

As they gathered the nettles, Sleshne felt his anxiety begin to ease. “I understand now. I can face my fears by learning and practicing the right methods.”

But this place felt different. The oak trees seemed ancient, their gnarled roots snaking across the ground like veins. Slesh felt a sense of gravity here, as though the forest itself carried the weight of centuries of struggles for power. He sensed that what lay ahead would challenge him in ways he had not yet faced.

Twisting Roots of Control As they ventured deeper, Slesh stumbled over a thick root that crossed the path, almost falling to the ground. Fretji turned back to help steady him, her expression soft with understanding.

“Control is like these roots,” she said, pointing to the twisting mass beneath their feet. “It’s often hidden, lying just below the surface. We may not see it, but it trips us up, tangling our relationships in ways we don’t expect.”

Slesh nodded, the image resonating with him. How often had he tried to control things in his relationships, only to end up ensnared by his own efforts? He had always thought that taking charge would protect him, but now he saw how it had led to tension and distrust.

Fretji continued, her voice gentle but firm. “Control often comes from a fear of losing. But control never builds—only love can do that. Fear trips, but love guides.”

“For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice,” she quoted quietly (James 3:16).

The Dark Hollow: Greed for Power The path led them to a dark hollow beneath the thick branches of the oaks. The ground here seemed barren, the sunlight failing to penetrate the dense foliage. Slesh shuddered at the sight of the void that lay before them.

Fretji stopped and gestured toward the hollow. “Greed for power is like this,” she said, her voice echoing slightly in the emptiness. “When one partner seeks to dominate, to have more control, it creates a hollow in the relationship—a void where love and trust should be. What’s left is emptiness.”

Slesh stared into the darkness, recalling moments in his past where his desire for control had left him feeling hollow, disconnected from those he loved. He had thought that by asserting power, he could protect himself. But in the end, all it had done was isolate him.

“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil,” Fretji added, her voice soft but clear (1 Timothy 6:10). “Greed doesn’t just apply to wealth—it’s also about power, control, recognition. When we seek those things over love, we lose sight of what really matters.”

Branch of Vulnerability They continued on, the path winding deeper into the forest. Ahead of them, a heavy branch drooped low, its weight pulling it close to the ground. Fretji stopped beneath it and gently touched the bark, her fingers tracing the deep grooves.

“Vulnerability is often seen as a weakness,” she said. “But true strength comes from being willing to bear each other’s burdens. When we exploit someone’s vulnerability to gain power, the relationship becomes brittle. It may look strong on the outside, but it will eventually collapse under its own weight.”

Slesh studied the branch, noting how it bent without breaking. It reminded him of moments when he had refused to show vulnerability, fearing it would make him seem weak. But in doing so, he had pushed others away, creating distance rather than closeness.

“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ,” Fretji quoted (Galatians 6:2). “Only when we share our vulnerabilities can we grow together.”

The Splitting Oak: Division As they walked, they came upon a massive oak tree that had slit down the middle. One half of the tree stood tall, its branches reaching skyward, while the other half had fallen, its branches withered and lifeless.

Fretji placed her hand on the bark of the standing half and sighed. “This is what happens when a relationship becomes divided—when control and separation enter, the unity that once existed is broken. Like this tree, one half may still stand, but it’s not whole. It’s only a matter of time before the weight of that imbalance causes the rest to fall.”

Slesh felt a pang of recognition. He had seen relationships in his life torn apart by division, by the need to control or by the refusal to yield. Each time, it had felt like watching something strong and beautiful wither and die.

“A house divided against itself cannot stand,” Fretji whispered, her eyes on the fallen half of the tree (Mark 3:25).

Shadows of Fear The deeper they went into the forest, the darker it became. The shadows between the trees seemed to press in on them, and Slesh felt a growing unease. He glanced at Fretji, who walked ahead, seemingly unbothered by the darkness.

“Fear often drives the need for control,” she said, as if sensing his thoughts. “We fear being hurt, being left behind, losing what we have. And so, we try to control everything around us, thinking it will keep us safe. But fear never protects—it only isolates.”

Slesh nodded, the weight of her words settling in his chest. He had lived much of his life trying to control things out of fear—fear of rejection, fear of failure, fear of vulnerability. But now, walking through this darkened forest, he realized how much that fear had cost him.

“There is no fear in love,” Fretji quoted, her voice calm and steady. “But perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18).

The Fallen Tree: Reversing Roles They came upon a massive fallen oak, its roots exposed and its trunk overturned but still clinging to life. The sight of it, uprooted yet stubbornly alive, made Slesh pause.

Fretji knelt beside the fallen tree and ran her hand along its bark. “This is what happens when roles reverse in a relationship—when one person uses another’s vulnerability to gain power. The relationship may still seem alive, but it’s been uprooted. Without balance, without mutual respect, it can’t survive for long.”

Slesh thought of times when he had exploited someone’s weakness, using their fears or insecurities to assert his own dominance. He had always thought it made him stronger, but now he saw how it had only torn things apart.

“The greatest among you must be your servant,” Fretji said quietly, standing up and looking at him (Matthew 23:11). “True strength lies in serving, not in controlling.”

The Silent Clearing: Choosing Peace At last, they emerged into a clearing, a quiet space where the air felt lighter, the tension of the forest behind them dissipating. The sunlight filtered through the trees, casting a soft glow on the ground below. It was a place of peace, a brief respite from the struggles they had faced in the oak forest.

Fretji turned to Slesh, her expression gentle but firm. “Sometimes, the hardest choice isn’t between domination or submission, but simply choosing peace. Letting go of the need to control, letting go of the desire to be right. In the end, peace is what heals.”

Slesh looked around the clearing, feeling the calmness wash over him. He realized that peace wasn’t something that came from winning or asserting control—it was something that came from within, from letting go.

“Blessed are the peacemakers,” Fretji quoted, smiling softly. “For they shall be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9).

Sleshne nodded. “James reminds us, ‘Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up’ (James 4:10). Let’s approach this with open hearts.”

Together, they closed their eyes and focused on the unity between them, letting go of any lingering pride or ego. When they opened their eyes, the statue seemed less imposing, its shadow receding.

Fretji smiled. “We did it. By embracing humility and love, we’ve overcome the challenge.”

Hmenne grinned. “It feels liberating, doesn’t it?”

Sleshne agreed. “Absolutely. This journey has taught me so much about myself and the power of unity.”

Summary and Transition to the Next Phase

As they stood beneath a sprawling gooseberry bush, the trio reflected on their journey through the Berry Shrubbery. Each challenge had unveiled deeper truths about ego and the importance of humility.

Key Lessons Learned:

1. **Avoiding Conceit:** Recognizing that true strength isn’t about outward appearances. (*Galatians 5:26*)
2. **Embracing Humility:** Understanding that feeling unworthy isn’t humility, but trusting in being uplifted. (*James 4:10*)
3. **Serving Others:** Realizing the importance of serving rather than controlling. (*Mark 10:45*)
4. **Living Harmoniously:** Acknowledging that pride can hinder unity. (*Romans 12:16*)
5. **Valuing Each Role:** Appreciating everyone’s contributions to the whole. (*Romans 12:4-5*)
6. **Practicing Empathy:** Treating others as we wish to be treated. (*Luke 6:31*)
7. **Sharing Experiences:** Recognizing our shared joys and sorrows. (*Romans 12:15*)
8. **Remaining Humble:** Letting go of pride to be lifted up spiritually. (*James 4:10*)

Fretji addressed her companions with warmth. “We’ve learned that true strength lies not in outward appearances or individual accomplishments but in our ability to love and support one another.”

Hmenne nodded thoughtfully. “Letting go of pride has brought us closer together. It’s clear that humility and compassion strengthen our bond.”

Sleshne smiled. “I’m grateful for these lessons. They’ve prepared us for whatever lies ahead.”

With hearts full of wisdom and a renewed sense of unity, they prepared to enter the next part of their journey—a tranquil herb garden rich with medicinal plants and featuring stinging nettle.

Transition to the Herb Garden: Lessons of Social Anxiety

As they entered the herb garden, the scent of fresh herbs enveloped them. Neatly arranged rows of plants greeted them, and Fretji paused by a patch of stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*). “This garden represents our fears,” she observed. “Just as nettles can sting if not approached carefully, so can our anxieties if we don’t handle them with compassion.”

Hmenne gazed at the delicate plants. “Facing our fears requires patience and gentle strength, much like tending to these herbs.”

He met her gaze with gratitude. “Thank you for reminding me. I’ll strive to let go of vanity.”

6. The Echoes of Judgment

As they approached a grove of statues with exaggerated features, Hmenne couldn’t help but critique one with an overly muscular physique. “This seems so unrealistic,” he scoffed. “It’s almost laughable.”

Fretji raised an eyebrow. “Is it helpful to judge like that?”

He shrugged. “I’m just pointing out the flaws.”

Sleshne stepped in. “Luke tells us, ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you’ (Luke 6:31). Perhaps the artist had their reasons.”

Fretji nodded. “The Confederation advises, ‘The impulse to defend, when communicating, is that fear-driven impulse which is motivated by characteristics within such as pride’ (1993/03/14). Let’s focus on understanding rather than criticizing.”

Hmenne sighed. “You’re both right. I let my ego get the better of me.”

Fretji smiled gently. “We all have moments like that. What’s important is recognizing it and choosing compassion.”

7. The Illusion of Separation

Feeling a sudden wave of isolation, Sleshne drifted away from the group, his footsteps leading him toward a secluded cluster of gooseberries. He stared at the ground, lost in thought.

Fretji noticed his absence and approached him quietly. “Sleshne, is everything alright?”

He hesitated before speaking. “I felt disconnected, like I don’t truly belong with you both.”

Hmenne joined them, concern etched on his face. “Why would you think that?”

Sleshne shrugged. “Maybe it’s my own insecurities.”

Fretji gently said, “The Confederation reminds us, ‘There is no unworthiness. There is no grasping. Service is truly your path beyond ego’ (1992/04/09). We’re all here to support one another.”

Hmenne added, “Romans encourages, ‘Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn’ (Romans 12:15). We’re in this together, sharing each other’s joys and burdens.”

Sleshne looked up, a hint of relief in his eyes. “Thank you. I needed to hear that.”

Fretji smiled warmly. “Never forget that you’re a valued part of our journey.”

8. The Balance of Love and Humility

As the sun began to set, they found themselves standing before the largest statue yet—a figure exuding pride and dominance. The shadow it cast seemed to challenge them.

Fretji took a deep breath. “This is our test,” she said softly. “Can we maintain love and humility in the face of such grandeur?”

Hmenne stepped forward, his voice steady. “We must. The Confederation teaches, ‘Each experience of the darker side of self is that which burns away pride and what this instrument would call egotism’ (1996/11/10).”

Approaching the Willows of Submission As they rested in the clearing, Fretji gestured to the path ahead. In the distance, Slesh could see the slender forms of willow trees swaying in the breeze, their long branches hanging low as if in a perpetual bow. He felt a strange tension in his chest—he had learned so much about control, but the willows ahead seemed to promise a new lesson. One about submission, yielding, and perhaps something deeper.

Fretji caught his gaze and nodded. “Beyond the oaks lies the next challenge—the willows of submission. But for now, rest. You will need your strength.”

Slesh nodded, feeling both the weight of the journey behind him and the anticipation of what was to come. The oaks had taught him the dangers of control, of dominance, of fear. But as he looked toward the willows, he knew that the next lesson would take him even deeper into himself.

Chapter 12: Willows of Enslavement**

1. The Shadow of Control

The late afternoon sun cast a golden glow as Sleshne and Fretji entered the willow forest. The long, silvery branches of the willows swayed gently, their leaves whispering secrets carried by the breeze. Interspersed among the willows were clusters of hazelnut bushes and vibrant strawberry plants, adding bursts of color and life to the temperate food forest.

Sleshne glanced at Fretji, his heart warmed by her presence. Ever since she appeared in his life at the grape vineyard, she had been a guiding light on his journey. He noticed a towering willow that dominated the canopy, its massive branches overshadowing the smaller plants beneath. “That willow seems to suppress everything around it,” he remarked, his voice tinged with both observation and vulnerability.

Fretji stepped closer, her eyes reflecting the dappled sunlight. “As Ra said: ‘The purpose of the Orion group, as mentioned before, is conquest and enslavement. This is done by finding and establishing an elite and causing others to serve the elite through various devices, such as the laws you mention and others given by this entity.’”
(Ra:73)

Sleshne nodded thoughtfully. “I’ve learned that focusing only on oneself leads to isolation. True strength comes from lifting others up.” He reached out to gently touch a strawberry plant, its bright berries a stark contrast to the looming willows. “Do nothing out of selfish ambition, but value others above yourself.”
(Philippians 2:3)

Fretji smiled, her fingers brushing against his. “Exactly.” Their hands lingered for a moment, the connection between them deepening as they shared a silent understanding.

2. The Strangling Vines

Deeper into the forest, they came upon trees entangled by thick vines, their growth constricted. Among the willows, thorny rose bushes and espaliered apple trees struggled to thrive under the oppressive growth. Morning glories, with their vibrant blooms, twisted around the trunks, while *Apios americana* vines sprawled aggressively across the forest floor.

Sleshne touched a vine, feeling its rough texture. “These vines are suffocating the trees,” he observed.

Fretji looked around thoughtfully. “In our present illusion we have undoubtedly lost sight of techniques of enslavement that are used since we are so far departed from the pre-veil

experience. Many with service-to-others orientation are using techniques of enslavement—even though they are not aware these are techniques of enslavement—simply because they have been evolved over so long a period of time, and we are so deep into the illusion.”

(Ra:60)

“It’s easy to become trapped without even realizing it,” Sleshne agreed. “Enslaved by our own acceptance of the status quo.”

Fretji met his gaze. “But awareness brings freedom. When we recognize these bindings, we can choose to break free. ‘Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’”
(John 8:32)

She gently untangled a morning glory from an apple tree, allowing it to flourish once more. “Freedom starts with recognizing the chains that bind us.”

3. The Mirror of Self

They reached a dense thicket where the path seemed to disappear, surrounded by blueberry bushes and ferns that thrived in the shaded understory. Sleshne felt a wave of frustration. “I don’t see a way through,” he admitted, his voice wavering.

Fretji pointed to a clear stream nearby, its surface reflecting the surrounding flora. “Perhaps the answer lies in reflection,” she suggested.

Kneeling by the water, Sleshne saw his reflection wavering in the gentle current. As he watched, the ripples settled, and his image became clear. “I’ve been battling my own doubts,” he said quietly. “It’s like I’ve been holding myself prisoner.”

Fretji knelt beside him, her hand resting gently on his shoulder. “Understanding ourselves is the first step to liberation. It is very instructive to see how simple and direct many of these exercises in enlarging consciousness are. The truth of enslavement to fear and suffering and other people’s wars, and the possibility of choosing instead empowerment, freedom and the spiritual path is one which lies directly in the path of every day and of every man.”

(Confederation:2003/02/06)

He took a deep breath. “You’re right. Fear doesn’t define me.”

She touched his hand gently. “Remember, we’ve been given a spirit of power and love, not fear.”

(2 Timothy 1:7)

Their eyes met, a shared understanding passing between them, deepening the bond they were forming.

4. The Obstructed Paths

As they moved on, they encountered several paths blocked by fallen branches and dense undergrowth. Among the obstacles were espaliered pear trees and rows of kale bushes, their orderly arrangements disrupted by the fallen limbs. Sleshne sighed. “These obstacles remind me of the barriers society puts up—rules that don’t always make sense.”

Fretji stepped over a fallen limb, her movements graceful despite the impediments. “True freedom often means finding our own path,” she said. “Not all roads are meant to be followed.”

“Then let’s make our own way,” he suggested, offering his hand to help her over the obstacle.

She accepted with a grin. “Gladly. Let’s not be burdened again by unnecessary constraints.”

(Galatians 5:1)

He turned, puzzled. “What’s wrong? I’m leading us away from danger.”

She approached him calmly. “We appreciate your concern, but we should decide our path together. Remember, ‘For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve’ (Mark 10:45).”

Sleshne nodded. “The Confederation said, ‘We especially congratulate one whose pride is in logical thought, but whose desire to serve has been so purified, the egoistic demands of the small self so well put aside’ (1990/03/13). Let’s serve each other by making decisions collectively.”

Hmenne’s expression softened. “I didn’t realize I was being overbearing. I just wanted to protect us.”

Fretji placed a hand on his arm. “We know, and we value your care. Let’s work together to find the best path.”

He smiled gratefully. “Agreed. Your insights are just as important.”

4. The Mirage of Superiority

Later, Sleshne became engrossed in examining a cluster of gooseberries, their perfect symmetry captivating him. “Look at how these berries grow,” he mused aloud, pride evident in his tone. “Nature’s design is flawless, much like my understanding of it.”

Fretji noticed his self-satisfied smile. “Your knowledge is impressive, Sleshne, but remember, ‘Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud’ (Romans 12:16).”

Hmenne joined them. “The Confederation teaches, ‘Such a concentration of an entity’s attention upon its own self... is a means by which a seeker grows... and not to impose this character upon another’ (1995/09/24). We all have much to learn from each other.”

Sleshne’s cheeks flushed. “I didn’t mean to boast. I guess I got carried away.”

Fretji reassured him. “It’s natural to feel proud of our accomplishments, but sharing and humility help us grow together.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “You’re right. I value what each of you brings to our journey.”

5. The Weight of Vanity

As they rested beside a statue adorned with elaborate carvings, Fretji observed Hmenne subtly adjusting his posture, his chin lifted slightly higher. “Hmenne,” she said gently, “are you seeking recognition?”

He hesitated, then sighed. “Perhaps I am. I want to be seen as strong and capable.”

Sleshne offered a kind smile. “The Confederation mentioned, ‘Another principle that is involved in becoming a good channel is the emptying of one’s pockets of those artifacts of ego which, as a group, can call themselves pride’ (2007/09/02).”

Fretji added, “Romans teaches us, ‘For just as each of us has one body with many members... so in Christ we, though many, form one body’ (Romans 12:4-5). Your worth isn’t measured by appearances but by your contributions.”

Hmenne looked down, his expression contemplative. “I suppose I’ve been too focused on how others see me.”

Fretji touched his arm. “We see you for who you are—kind, protective, and dedicated. That’s what matters.”

1. The Allure of Exaggerated Grandeur

Sleshne's eyes widened as he gazed upon a towering statue depicting a heroic figure with oversized muscles and a triumphant pose. The figure's chiseled features and confident expression captivated him. "Look at how strong and impressive it is," he exclaimed, stepping closer to run his fingers over the intricate carvings. "Imagine having such power and presence."

Fretji noticed his fascination and approached him gently. "It's quite a sight, isn't it?" she said softly. "But true strength isn't just about outward appearance."

Sleshne turned to her, a hint of longing in his eyes. "I can't help but admire it. I wish I could be as formidable."

Hmenne joined them, placing a reassuring hand on Sleshne's shoulder. "Brother, Galatians teaches us, 'Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other' (Galatians 5:26). It's easy to admire what's on the surface, but real strength comes from within."

Fretji nodded. "The Confederation once said, 'Your pride and your vanity you will leave behind. These, my friends—pride, vanity, boredom—these are the things that make men sad' (1979/12/02)."

Sleshne sighed, gazing back at the statue. "I suppose I've been too focused on external power. Maybe it's a distraction from what's truly important."

Fretji smiled warmly. "Recognizing that is a step toward true growth. Let's continue our journey and discover the strength within ourselves."

2. The Mask of Unworthiness

As they walked further, Fretji paused beside a bush laden with ripe gooseberries. She delicately plucked a berry and rolled it between her fingers. "Sometimes I feel like I'm not doing enough," she admitted quietly. "That I'm unworthy of leading us."

Hmenne looked at her with concern. "Why would you think that? You've guided us with wisdom and compassion."

She shrugged, her gaze fixed on the berry. "I worry that I might not have all the answers, that I might let you both down."

Sleshne stepped closer. "Fretji, James tells us, 'Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up' (James 4:10). Your humility is a strength, not a weakness."

Hmenne added, "The Confederation shared, 'Service is truly your path beyond ego, because as you walk that path of service you see constantly how that illusory self arises' (1992/04/09). Your dedication to us is a gift."

Fretji smiled softly, a glimmer of relief in her eyes. "Perhaps I need to trust more in the journey and less in my doubts."

"Exactly," Sleshne agreed. "We're in this together, supporting one another."

3. The Temptation of Control

Navigating through a maze of gooseberry bushes, Hmenne took the lead with determination. "This way is safer," he declared, moving briskly along a narrow path.

Fretji and Sleshne struggled to keep up, branches brushing against them. "Hmenne, wait!" Fretji called out, her voice tinged with frustration.

Together, they forged a new path, their cooperation bringing them closer and their laughter echoing softly through the forest.

5. The Chilling Shadow

A sudden shadow swept over the forest, and the temperature seemed to drop. Sleshne shivered, pulling his cloak tighter around him. "Did you feel that?" he asked, a hint of unease in his voice.

Fretji looked around cautiously, her eyes scanning the dense foliage. "Negative influences can appear when we least expect them," she warned. "But we have the power to stand against them."

"What should we do?" he asked, his curiosity piqued.

She began to gather herbs from the forest floor—chamomile, mint, and lavender—known for their protective and soothing properties. "We protect ourselves with love and faith. 'Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.'" (*Ephesians 6:11*)

As she prepared a protective blend, Sleshne felt a renewed sense of strength. "Together, we can face any darkness."

Fretji smiled, her eyes twinkling. "Yes, we can."

6. The Cycle of Renewal

They entered a grove of ancient willows, their trunks scarred and weathered by time. Nestled among them were thriving blackberry bushes and vibrant marigolds, signs of resilience and rebirth. Seabuckthorn bushes and rows of cucumbers added vibrant life to the temperate food forest. Sleshne touched one of the old trees. "These willows have endured so much, yet new life grows from them."

"Just as hope emerges from suffering," Fretji said softly. "We can choose to break the cycles that have held us captive."

He looked at her with admiration. "Let's be the ones who plant seeds of change."

She nodded, her hands busy planting a young sapling. "By renewing our minds, we transform ourselves and the world around us. 'Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.'" (*Romans 12:2*)

As they planted together, the sapling stood as a symbol of new beginnings and the promise of growth beyond the shadows of the past.

7. The Illusion of Separation

Lost in thought, Sleshne realized Fretji was no longer beside him. Panic surged within him. "Fretji!" he called out, his voice echoing among the willows.

"Over here!" her voice echoed softly.

He followed the sound and found her beneath two willows whose branches intertwined above, forming a natural archway. Relief washed over him. "I thought I'd lost you," he confessed, his voice filled with gratitude.

She looked at him with gentle eyes. “Even when apart, we’re connected. Enslavement arises from the desire to control and the illusion of separation.”

(Galatians 3:28)

He stepped closer, feeling the warmth of their connection. “You’re a constant in my life now.”

Fretji’s cheeks flushed slightly, a playful smile tugging at her lips. “And you in mine.”

He smiled warmly. “We’re all one, bound by love.”

(Confederation:2017/0916)

They stood together under the archway, the moment filled with unspoken promises and the deepening of their bond.

Epilogue

Emerging from the Willows of Enslavement, the landscape opened into rolling hills bathed in the glow of the setting sun. Among the hills, vibrant patches of seabuckthorn bushes stretched out before them, their bright orange berries gleaming in the soft light. Rows of cucumbers lined the edges of the grove, adding to the abundance of the temperate food forest. Sleshne took a deep breath, feeling lighter than he had in a long time.

“Thank you for being my guide,” he said, his gaze meeting hers.

Fretji shook her head gently. “We’ve guided each other.”

He hesitated for a moment, then added with a soft laugh, “I once prayed for a companion on this journey.”

She reached out, her fingers brushing against his. “Perhaps prayers are answered in unexpected ways.”

He smiled. “I’m beginning to believe that.”

Just then, the sound of footsteps through the seabuckthorn bushes ahead of interrupted their quiet moment. Fretji turned, her face lighting up. “Hmenne!” she called out, waving to a figure approaching them.

##Chapter 13: Seabuckthorn Grove of Power Struggles**

The sun began its descent, casting a warm golden hue over the Seabuckthorn Grove. The vibrant orange berries shimmered under the twilight sky, their brilliance a stark contrast to the dense canopy of intertwined branches above. Fretji and her brother Hmenne led the way through the grove, their familiarity with the terrain evident in their confident strides. Sleshne, a newcomer to their journey, followed closely behind, his uncertainty palpable as he navigated the winding paths.

1. Struggle for Control Over Others

As they ventured deeper, the path became narrower, overgrown with thick vines that seemed to resist their progress. Sleshne felt a surge of frustration, the urge to assert himself bubbling to the surface. “We need to find a clearer path,” he suggested, attempting to contribute to their direction.

Hmenne mirrored his stride, his protective instincts kicking in. “The main trail is safest, but perhaps we can explore a bit to find a better route,” he replied calmly, subtly challenging Sleshne’s suggestion.

letting go of control and embracing each other’s strengths, we’ve created something beautiful together.”

Hmenne nodded in agreement, his demeanor reflecting genuine humility. “It’s a reminder that our individual ambitions should never overshadow our collective well-being. Serving each other with love and trust is our greatest strength.”

Sleshne, the eager seeker, felt a deep sense of fulfillment. “I’ve discovered that seeking power isn’t about dominance but about contributing to something greater than myself. This journey has taught me the value of humility and cooperation.”

As the last rays of sunlight filtered through the seabuckthorn branches, the trio prepared to leave the grove, their spirits uplifted and hearts aligned. Ahead of them lay a new challenge, one that would test the very foundations they had built.

Transition to Berry Shrubbery: Lessons of Ego and Pride

Leaving the tranquil harmony of the Seabuckthorn Grove, Fretji, Hmenne, and Sleshne entered the Berry Shrubbery, a contrasting landscape characterized by statues with exaggerated features and abundant gooseberry bushes (*Ribes uva-crispa*). The vibrant berries and ornate statues seemed to celebrate individualism and pride, setting the stage for new lessons ahead.

As they walked through the Berry Shrubbery, Fretji paused to admire a towering statue with exaggerated muscles and a proud stance. “This place embodies the challenges of ego and pride. Just as these statues stand tall and imposing, so too can our own egos create barriers between us.”

Hmenne, ever humble, looked thoughtfully at the intricate designs. “It reminds us that true greatness lies not in how we appear to others, but in our inner humility and willingness to serve.”

Sleshne, inspired by their previous journey, felt ready to face the upcoming lessons. “As Jesus taught his disciples, ‘For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’ We must remain vigilant against the allure of pride and stay true to our path of unity and service.”

Fretji nodded, reinforcing their mission with spiritual wisdom. “Q’uo once said, ‘The type of communication of which you speak is the language of control, the language of suppression, the language of confusion. Choose instead the language of love, humility, and clarity.’ Let us carry these teachings forward as we navigate the challenges of the Berry Shrubbery.”

With hearts full of purpose and minds clear with the lessons learned, the trio ventured deeper into the Berry Shrubbery, ready to embrace the teachings of Ego and Pride, and to continue their journey toward spiritual and emotional enlightenment.

Chapter 14: The Berry Shrubbery of Ego and Pride

As Fretji, Hmenne, and Sleshne left the harmonious embrace of the Seabuckthorn Grove, they entered a new landscape—the Berry Shrubbery. The air was crisp, and the path was lined with statues boasting exaggerated features. Abundant gooseberry bushes (*Ribes uva-crispa*) stretched as far as the eye could see, their vibrant berries glistening under the sun. The ornate sculptures seemed to celebrate individualism and pride, setting the stage for profound lessons on ego and humility.

8. The Balance of Respect and Unity

Near the edge of the grove, the trio stood beneath a massive seabuckthorn tree, its branches heavy with fruit. They began to harvest together, their movements synchronized and purposeful. Respecting each other's strengths, they worked in harmony, the earlier struggles giving way to a unified effort.

Fretji looked around, feeling a profound sense of peace. "When we acknowledge each other's strengths and work together, we create something beautiful," she remarked, embodying her role as the spiritual guide.

Sleshne and Hmenne smiled, the weight of their earlier conflicts lifted by mutual respect and unity. The Seabuckthorn Grove, once a symbol of their power struggles, now stood as a testament to their collective harmony.

*"When one works through the yellow-ray experience, and achieves some balance there, one is able to gather within the solar plexus enough energy to move it upwards. From the yellow-ray energy center, balanced in love and humility, there is the natural upward thrust of energy to the heart."
(1996/11/22)*

Fretji concluded with the biblical wisdom from Romans 12:16, "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position." "Harmony and respect are the foundations of our strength."

Chapter: Seabuckthorn Grove of Power Struggles

... [Previous sections of the chapter as previously provided] ...

Summary and Transition to Berry Shrubbery

As the trio stood beneath the massive seabuckthorn tree, their hearts filled with a newfound sense of harmony and respect, they reflected on the journey through the Seabuckthorn Grove. Each challenge they faced had unveiled deeper truths about power, unity, and the essence of true leadership.

Key Lessons Learned:

1. **Cooperative Leadership:** Embracing shared leadership fosters mutual respect and collective strength.
2. **Balancing Individual Integrity with Collective Purpose:** Valuing each member's voice ensures a harmonious group dynamic.
3. **Transparent Communication and Trust:** Open dialogue prevents manipulation and builds trust.
4. **Humility Over Dominance:** True strength lies in serving others without seeking recognition.
5. **Overcoming Fear of Losing Power:** Trusting in the group's unity diminishes personal insecurities.
6. **Transcending Competition:** Cooperation enhances relationships, replacing rivalry with collective joy.
7. **Harmonizing Individualism with Collective Power:** Recognizing that individual talents contribute to the group's overall strength.
8. **Maintaining Respect and Unity:** Mutual respect solidifies the foundation of a united and powerful community.

Fretji, embodying wisdom and compassion, addressed her companions with a serene smile. "We've learned that our true power comes from our unity and respect for one another. By

Fretji sensed the growing tension between them. She paused by an overgrown vine, gently touching its tangled strands. "We're here to support each other, not to lead or control," she reminded them softly, her voice steady and calming. "As the Confederation teaches us, 'The yellow ray is a focal and very powerful ray, and concerns the entity in relation to groups, societies, or large numbers of mind/body/spirit complexes.' We need to work together, respecting each other's strengths."

Sleshne took a deep breath, reflecting on Fretji's words. "You're right. I've been so focused on finding our way that I forgot we're a team," he admitted, his assertiveness softening.

Fretji smiled, reinforcing the biblical wisdom. "Do to others as you would have them do to you," she quoted gently from Luke 6:31. "Let's embrace cooperative leadership and move forward together."

2. Struggles in Group Identity

The trio reached a crystal-clear stream, its surface reflecting the myriad colors of the forest. Fretji and Hmenne began to outline their plans for navigating the grove, their voices overlapping as they discussed potential routes. Sleshne felt a pang of anxiety, torn between contributing and feeling overshadowed by their established bond as siblings.

"I think we should follow the main path," Fretji suggested, gesturing toward a well-trodden trail.

Hmenne nodded in agreement. "Yes, the main path is well-marked and safe. We can always explore from there if needed."

Sleshne hesitated, feeling his voice diminish in the presence of Fretji and her brother. "Maybe we could try a different route to cover more ground," he proposed, his uncertainty evident.

Fretji noticed his reluctance and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Your input is valuable, Sleshne. Let's find a balance between safety and exploration. Together, we can decide the best way forward," she encouraged, embodying her role as the experienced finder.

*"Insofar as these energies are allowed to remain murky, the power that moves into the heart will be less. It is only when one is able to release the so-called lower energies... no grudges are held, no sorrows clutched close, and no fears ruling the nature, that the energy centers become clear and are able to pass on the full strength of the infinite energy."
(1992/04/26)*

Fretji reflected the biblical wisdom, "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" from Matthew 16:26. "Our identity as a group is more important than any single path we take. Let's honor each other's voices."

3. Power and Manipulation

As they progressed, the path led them to a dense thicket of thorny rose bushes. The air grew thick with the scent of blooms, but the thorns posed a challenge. Hmenne, driven by his protective instincts towards Fretji, insisted on taking the more difficult route through the thorns. "It's safer this way," he reasoned, his voice tinged with concern.

Fretji and Sleshne hesitated but ultimately agreed, allowing Hmenne to lead. As they navigated the prickly obstacles, Fretji observed Hmenne's subtle manipulations. His over-protection was inadvertently undermining her autonomy, creating an imbalance within the group.

Later, by the edge of a secluded grove, Fretji addressed the issue openly. “Hmenne, I appreciate your concern, but we all need to make our own decisions. Trust in each other’s abilities,” she said, embodying her wisdom and experience.

Hmenne looked taken aback, his defensive demeanor softening. “I just wanted to keep you safe,” he admitted, exemplifying humility.

“The yellow ray is a powerful ray and [the healer’s] will can be channeled very easily by one who has a powerful will to impinge upon other entities. This means that the healing is a human transfer. The healer pushes wellness into the energy body of the one to be healed.”
(2008/09/27)

Fretji reminded them of Galatians 5:26, “Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.” “Our strength lies in our trust and transparency. Let’s move forward with honesty.”

4. Struggles Between Ego and Service

Crossing a narrow bridge made of fallen seabuckthorn branches, Sleshne offered to help Hmenne steady the structure. His eagerness to assist was overshadowed by his need to be seen as the leader. In his attempt to control the situation, he overreached, nearly causing the bridge to sway dangerously.

Fretji placed a calming hand on his shoulder. “Sleshne, true service doesn’t seek recognition. We’re here to support each other,” she gently reminded him, embodying her role as the experienced guide.

Embarrassed, Sleshne stepped back, his ego subdued by Fretji’s gentle reminder. “I’ve been so focused on leading that I forgot the essence of service,” he confessed, seeking to realign his intentions.

“The center of energy most closely aligned with this particular area is that of the yellow ray, and in many drawings of your Egyptian culture you may notice that the entity that seeks power in this world and in the mundane sense will be depicted as having a center of energy flowing out from this area.”
(1990/08/05)

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”
—Mark 10:45

Fretji echoed the biblical message, “Mark 10:45 reminds us that our purpose is to serve, not to be served. Let’s focus on supporting one another.”

5. Fear of Losing Power

As twilight deepened, the trio found themselves near a tall seabuckthorn tree, its branches stretching towards the sky like arms yearning for connection. Fretji and Hmenne engaged in a lively discussion about their next steps, walking ahead with ease. Sleshne lingered behind, watching them with a mix of admiration and jealousy. The fear of losing his influence over Fretji gnawed at him, manifesting as defensiveness.

When he finally caught up, his demeanor was distant. “Is everything alright?” Fretji asked, noticing his unease.

Hmenne nodded sympathetically. “We need you just as much as you need us. Let’s support each other,” he encouraged, exemplifying humility.

“Now, those issues of red ray, orange ray, and yellow ray are neatly designed and most tidily packaged to maximize your confusion and to limit the power that you may bring and allow up to the heart center.”
(1997/01/19)

Fretji offered reassurance, embodying the biblical wisdom from James 4:10, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” “We’re stronger together, without fear.”

6. The Illusion of Competition

Reaching a grove thick with seabuckthorn bushes, Sleshne and Hmenne both rushed to help Fretji pick the ripe berries, each trying to outdo the other. Their competitive spirits flared, turning what should have been a cooperative effort into a race for approval.

Fretji laughed gently, holding up a handful of berries. “There’s enough for all of us. Let’s work together instead of competing,” she encouraged, embodying her role as the experienced finder.

Realizing the futility of their rivalry, Sleshne and Hmenne slowed their pace, joining forces to gather the bounty. The shared effort strengthened their bond, highlighting the importance of cooperation over competition.

“Those who wish to skip working on the self in relationships, with regards to issues such as sexuality, survival and so forth, may wish that they could spend all of their time working on communication and consciousness itself, yet unless the energy centers of red, orange and yellow... are addressed, there will be a lessening of the flow of energy into the heart.”
(1998/01/11)

Fretji reflected the biblical wisdom from Romans 12:15, “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” “Our joy multiplies when we share it together.”

7. The Struggle of Individualism vs. Collective Power

Under the towering seabuckthorn tree, Fretji paused to reflect, gazing at the interwoven roots beneath the soil. She realized that while each of them had individual desires and strengths, their true power lay in their unity. Embracing her role, she spoke with conviction. “Our strength is in our unity. Let’s harness our individual talents for the greater good.”

Sleshne and Hmenne nodded, understanding that their collective harmony was more powerful than any individual ambition. Together, they envisioned a path that honored both their personal goals and their shared purpose.

“As the energy moves further upward to the next center, the orange ray is that which is concerned with the individual expression of your power or your emotions on a one-to-one basis with other entities. When this has been accomplished... the yellow ray energy center... is awakened, and concerns itself with your expression and your energy upon a group level.”
(2016/12/03)

Fretji echoed the biblical insight from Romans 12:4-5, “For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” “Our individual strengths make us a stronger whole.”