

THE CANOPY BETWEEN CALLS

A Forest Story in Thirteen Movements

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Toms Jansons

Nothing in the forest closes alone.

CONTENTS

- I. The Leaning Morning
- II. A Fig Split Cleanly
- III. Mud Under the Bright Roots
- IV. Five Heights of Rain
- V. The Noise of Open Fruit
- VI. Three Crossings
- VII. Warmth Behind the Ribs
- VIII. The Weave That Loosened
- IX. Aru at the Listening Fig
- X. Scars That Knew Another Season
- XI. What Your Palm Could Hold
- XII. Between Call and Return
- XIII. The Branch No Name Could Hold

THE LEANING MORNING

You wake before the gibbons begin.

Below your nest, purple hibiscus hold the last rain in their open throats. A wild citrus has split against a root, and its clean bitterness rises through the wet dark. Beneath one flower, a black scorpion has left a skin so pale it could be mistaken for moonlight.

The rain has stopped, but every leaf is still speaking with the weight of it. Water gathers at the tips, grows clear and round, then lets go. Far below, the river moves without showing its face.

Your nest has leaned during the night. Not enough to break, only enough to make your body remember gravity. One leg is numb beneath you. Your fingers are curved around a branch polished by sleep.

Then the first call crosses the canopy.

Three hollow knocks.

A pause.

A long branch-rattle falling away towards the east.

Heads lift among the leaves.

Mala rises with her infant folded against her belly. Rin turns from the half-open fruit in his hand. Sela, who sleeps farther than the others and usually arrives after the light, is already awake. Somewhere beyond the crown of the strangler fig, Batu answers once from the low trees.

The call comes again.

Three knocks. A pause. The falling rattle.

It means movement before high water.

No one says this. Your body knows before language arrives. Your shoulder opens towards the western ridge. Your toes find the edge of the nest. Around you, the whole canopy changes direction without yet moving, a leaning made of attention.

You are the first to touch the vine that leads west.

It is wet and cold. You draw it towards you, ready to let your weight go, and hear a dry tap hidden between the third knock and the rattle. Too even for rain. Too clean for falling fruit.

Your hand does not close.

Aru appears through the wet leaves.

She is older than anyone who still crosses the upper vines. Her hair has gone pale along both arms, and one finger bends inward from an old break. She reaches each branch as if it has been waiting for her.

Rin asks where the call began.

Aru looks east.

"Beyond the black palms," she says.

"Did you hear the first mouth?"

She shakes rain from her wrist. "I heard it carried."

The difference does not slow Rin. He moves to the next tree, then the next, throwing his weight into the vines until they sing. Mala follows more carefully. Sela stays where she is, head turned towards the smaller sound inside the larger one.

The call comes again, farther west now. It has passed through three throats and a hollow trunk. With each passing it grows more certain.

Below, the river is still dark.

Above, the sky is whitening.

The tribe begins to move.

No one commands the movement. A mother chooses the next branch. A young male follows her shoulder. An elder sees bodies turning and turns with them. Those who are far away hear the call without seeing any of this. The forest needs no single centre to gather motion.

You travel west among them.

At first it feels like any seasonal crossing. Arms extend. Weight releases. The body falls before the hand catches. Each swing is a surrender completed by touch.

Then the canopy narrows.

The familiar vines above the red-root ravine hang lower than they did yesterday. Fresh leaves are torn on the northern side. The bark of one support tree has opened in a pale strip. Rin lands on it, feels the movement, and leaps away.

Mala stops.

Her infant has begun to cry without sound, mouth open against her chest.

Behind you, more bodies arrive. Ahead, the western route waits, green and wet and nearly wide enough.

The call sounds again from behind.

Three knocks. A pause. The falling rattle.

Your foot is already on the next vine.

A tremor travels through it into the trunk, disappears, then returns through your ankle. You lift your foot, not because you know what the tremor means, but because it has answered your weight.

Rin reaches for the crossing.

Mala touches his wrist.

That is all.

His fingers remain open around empty air.

Sela lowers herself until her feet touch the fork beside Mala. Batu climbs from below with mud dark to his elbows. Aru arrives last. The bodies at the back do not press. Those ahead do not pull away. Rainwater ticks from leaf to leaf. The infant quiets.

Aru listens towards the east. Sela listens into the wood. Batu presses his palm against the trunk and closes his eyes.

You do the same.

The branch is colder than the air. Deep inside it, something moves with a rhythm that does not belong to the wind.

For a long time, nobody names it.

The call travels once more across the canopy, reaches the ravine, and ends there.

The forest leans around the silence.

Then Mala shifts her infant higher. Batu turns downward. Sela follows the line of his shoulder. Rin releases the vine. One by one, the bodies descend towards a broad fig whose roots make a dry floor above the flooded ground.

No one has decided what happened.

No one has decided who was right.

The movement changes because one hand remained open long enough for another hand to stop inside it, and because your foot lifted before it was required to know why.

You descend with them.

Behind you, the wet crossing hangs untouched.

By afternoon, half of it has fallen.

II

A FIG SPLIT CLEANLY

The fig lies in two red halves between Aru and Mala.

It has fallen without bruising. The white inner threads still shine. Ants have not found it yet, though one scout moves along the root as if the morning has already given it a task.

Everyone can see the same fruit.

That is why Sela chooses it.

She carries a strip of bark and a pale stone from the ravine. Batu brings mud cupped in a folded leaf. Rin brings the broken end of the support vine. Mala brings no object. Her infant sleeps across her thighs with one hand closed in her hair.

You bring the sound you heard inside the call.

The gathering is loose. No one sits at a centre. Some hang from low branches. Some rest on roots warmed by a brief opening in the clouds. Two juveniles chase each other through the hanging fibres, one with a citrus rind pressed over his nose like a second mouth. Their movement keeps entering the space between serious faces.

Sela turns the fig so its split faces east and west.

Aru touches neither half.

Rin wants to know why they are gathered when the crossing has already fallen and no one was hurt.

Before anyone answers, the infant wakes and reaches for the fruit. Mala gives him one red seed. He examines it, puts it against his ear, then closes his fist.

Batu looks at the mud in his leaf. "The river climbed without rain here."

"It rained upriver," Rin says.

"Perhaps."

"Then we know."

Batu presses one finger into the mud. A thin skin of grey water rises around it. "We know this was under the roots."

Sela places the pale stone beside the leaf. It is river stone, but the nearest visible riverbed has not carried stones of that size in many seasons.

The wet bark. The broken vine. The pale stone. The mud. The split fig.

Nothing among them accuses anyone. Nothing among them explains itself.

You make the small dry tap with your knuckles.

Once.

Again.

The sound is almost lost under the juveniles moving above you. One freezes in mid-swing and copies it against the citrus rind. The rind gives back no sound at all. He laughs and bites it, then spits at the bitterness.

Sela asks you to tap the hollow root.

You do.

The root answers with a deeper note. Not the migration call. Not quite. But close enough that several faces turn east at once.

Rin looks at Aru.

Aru does not lower her eyes.

"I carried what I heard," she says.

The ant scout reaches the first half of the fig.

There is no single reason to continue looking. There are many small reasons, each with its own shape and time. The crossing fell after the movement began. The river rose from rain no one here saw. A strange rhythm travelled inside a familiar call. The mud held stone from another reach of water. Aru heard the call carried, not born. Several families farther east have not yet arrived.

Sela lifts the broken vine. The fibres are fresh on one side and dark on the other.

"Yesterday?" Rin asks.

She smells it, bends it, lets the torn strands brush her lower lip.

"Not one day," she says.

"Two?"

She turns the vine in her fingers. "Longer than wetness. Shorter than rot."

Rin makes an impatient sound. The infant opens his hand. The seed drops into the mud and disappears halfway.

Everyone looks down.

Mala does not retrieve it at once. She waits while the child presses one finger beside it, then another, making a small red island in the grey surface. When she lifts the seed, a line of mud joins her hand to the fig.

The morning has changed while they looked. Sun draws sweetness from the fruit. The ant scout has become three ants, then seven. A bruised citrus rind under the roots sharpens in the warmth. One purple hibiscus petal lies in the mud without being placed.

You look at Aru.

She is not the call. She is a body that heard and carried it. The difference is simple while you look at her and difficult when the sound moves through many mouths.

Mala breaks off a piece of fig and gives it to Aru.

Aru takes it.

Rin watches, and something in his shoulders lowers.

The gathering does not decide whether the call was false. Water did rise somewhere. Movement may have protected kin beyond the black palms. The western crossing was unsafe before anyone reached it. These things stand beside one another without being forced into one thing.

Sela drags the pale stone through the mud. It leaves a narrow line. Batu places the broken vine across it. Mala puts the red seed where the lines meet.

The infant immediately takes the stone instead.

He carries it three roots away and drops it into a patch of sun.

No one calls him back.

The line remains without its stone. The stone remains without the line.

"We go to where the call changed," Sela says.

Not to find a mouth to punish. Not to make one story large enough to contain every branch. Only to walk while the tracks, scents, fibres, and watermarks can still answer contact.

The fig stays in two halves on the root.

By the time they leave, ants have opened both sides in their own way.

III

MUD UNDER THE BRIGHT ROOTS

The lower forest is brighter after rain.

Water holds the sky in every footprint. The roots of the ironwoods shine as if freshly skinned. On the ground, your arms feel too long and the spaces between trunks feel larger than they are.

Batu leads because he knows where the land usually stays firm beneath leaf mould. He does not choose the shortest way. He chooses places where one body can stop without bringing down another behind it.

Aru walks near the middle. No one puts her there. She is slower on the ground, and the others gather around her pace.

The first change appears at a salt lick beneath the black palms. The earth has collapsed into a shallow bowl. Fresh tracks enter from three directions: pigs, deer, one human boot softened by water.

Rin crouches over the boot mark and places his hand beside it. The print is longer than his palm, edged with repeating squares.

"Here," he says, as if arrival were explanation.

Sela does not answer. She follows the waterline around the bowl until she finds bark stripped from a sapling. A pale thread is caught there, too straight and smooth to be vine.

You have seen human thread at the far edge of the forest. It can mark a path, a boundary, a future cutting, or nothing any orangutan can read.

Batu lifts it with a twig.

Above the lick, an old hollow branch hangs between two palms. Its cut end faces west. Rain has filled the chamber inside it. When wind moves the fronds, a thin twig strikes the rim.

Dry tap.

Pause.

Dry tap.

The sound you heard inside the migration call.

Rin climbs before anyone speaks. He shakes the branch. Water spills. The twig strikes faster, then stops.

"There," he calls down. "That made it."

A fruit bat bursts from the hollow and crosses his face. Rin ducks so hard that three young ones below laugh. He laughs too, though one hand remains wrapped around the branch.

Sela has already moved beyond the lick.

Three saplings lie pressed in the same direction, not cut, but flattened by weight moving through water. Farther east, Batu finds silt on a root shoulder above his head.

The river did rise.

At the edge of the black palms they meet a female from the eastern families. Her name is Omi. She carries a young one on her side and a rolled leaf in her mouth.

She gives the leaf to Mala. Inside it is a black seed husk from the high ridge, still wet with the sour smell of fruit there. Omi points east and makes the migration call once.

Then she adds two knocks at the end.

A local ending.

Aru closes her eyes.

"I did not hear those," she says.

Omi repeats the complete call. Three knocks. Pause. Falling rattle. Two final knocks.

The last two mean: the water is high here.

Without them, the call means: the water is rising everywhere along the path.

You all listen to the hollow branch above the salt lick.

Wind moves the fronds. The twig taps twice.

No one has to guess what changed the call. The relations are present in front of you, though not in one place: the hollow wood enlarging the first rhythm; the valley bending sound westward; rain softening the ending; distance entering Aru's hearing; other mouths repeating what reached them; the old crossing already dark within; the river moving through channels under apparently dry ground; the human thread turning water at the salt lick without revealing why it had been tied.

Each thing can be touched or heard somewhere. None can carry the whole alone.

Rin stays in the tree.

"So what began it?" he asks.

Batu presses both hands into the mud and lifts them, palms shining. Omi points towards the ridge. Aru points back towards the broken crossing. Sela looks at the human thread. Mala looks at Omi's young one, whose feet are cut from travelling over fallen bark.

You look at the hollow branch.

The forest does not hide one true beginning behind the others. It has many contacts, some visible, some already gone.

You climb to the branch and put your ear against it. Inside, water moves through chambers hollowed by age and insects. The twig rests against the

rim. A small change in wind would make another call. A small change in water would make none.

Your hand reaches to remove the twig.

Then you stop.

Taking it would make the branch quiet. It would also remove the relation before those farther east could see it.

You turn the twig outward instead and leave it visible.

When you descend, Sela has placed the objects where they were found: pale thread on stripped bark, husk inside leaf, mud beside the boot print, broken saplings pointing east. No symbol binds them.

The group separates before noon, not from disagreement, but from the size of what remains available.

Some go to the ridge. Some return to the crossing. Some follow the human thread. Mala stays with Omi until the young one's feet can rest. Rin descends last, bringing no piece of the hollow branch with him.

You remain at the salt lick a little longer.

Rainwater falls from the chamber into the mud. The print of the human boot softens at one edge. A pig steps into the other.

Under the bright roots, the ground keeps receiving what arrives.

IV

FIVE HEIGHTS OF RAIN

From the crown, the flood is silver.

From the middle branches, it is sound.

From the ground, it is cold around the ankles.

From inside a nest, it is the weight of a mother not moving.

From the far ridge, it is a story carried by somebody else.

You learn this in one day without anyone gathering to say it.

Sela takes you upward first. The crown tree is taller than every tree around it and almost bare at the top. Wind flattens your hair against your arms. From there, the forest becomes a green skin stretched over hidden land.

The flooded east is easy to see, a broad shine between black palms. The western ravine is hidden beneath unbroken leaves. The fallen crossing cannot be seen at all.

Sela points at a dark patch beyond the ridge.

"Fire?" you ask.

She does not answer. A cloud moves. The patch becomes wet trees.

Below, Rin calls that the river is falling. Water has left a pale ring around the roots where he stands.

Farther down, Batu says it is still rising. A side channel is filling behind a wall of debris.

Neither can see the other water.

At midday you join Mala beneath a leaf shelter. Her infant is fever-warm from the long crossing. The forest narrows to his breath. Every call beyond the shelter becomes less available than the small movement under her palm.

Aru arrives with chewed leaves and water held in a folded sheath. Mala smells the leaves before taking them. Aru drinks first. Only then does Mala wet the infant's mouth.

Outside, two juveniles repeat fragments of the migration call while playing. They use the falling rattle whenever one chases the other. A smaller child adds two notes that belong to no warning at all, rising and falling like a fruit dropped and caught before the ground.

The others copy only the tune.

Soon it means danger, speed, laughter, hiding, and nothing that can be carried whole.

Mala does not look up.

In the afternoon you go to the ground with Batu. He shows you where water has entered old animal tunnels beneath places that appear dry. He breaks a thin crust of soil with one finger. Dark water rises.

"From the crown," you say, "this place was green."

Batu puts your finger into the water.

It is colder than rain.

He shifts his foot to a patch that looks equally firm. It gives way to his ankle. Batu catches the root above him, surprised, and Sela, descending without warning, offers the hard seed she uses for tapping. He grips it between his teeth while pulling free.

She says, "That ground was speaking too softly."

Batu spits the seed into his palm. "Then speak louder next time."

For once, Sela laughs before touching anything.

Later you cross to the far ridge with Omi. From there, the tribe below appears as scattered red movement. You cannot see faces. You cannot tell who carries whom. The call that sounded urgent in the lower valley reaches the ridge softened by distance.

Omi says that when water rose around her family, the complete call brought them towards fruit and dry nests.

You think of the western crossing.

Both remain.

Near sunset, the groups return to the broad fig with different weather on them. Sela's hands smell of high bark and wind. Batu's legs are black with mud. Mala's chest is damp with the infant's sweat. Omi's shoulders carry leaf dust. Rin has a scrape along his side from moving too fast through a narrow fork.

Aru sits among them, not above them.

Sela lays a leaf flat and traces the silver curve she saw. Batu presses wet mud where the unseen channel rose. Mala puts the warm chewed leaves beside it. Omi adds the black seed husk. Rin lays down a strip of skin from the fallen crossing.

You have brought nothing.

Then you notice the scrape on your finger where Batu placed it in the cold water.

You hold out your hand.

The mark is small. It proves almost nothing. It is what your body carried from one height to another.

The infant wakes and watches the objects. Above him, a moth crosses the last light. His eyes leave every adult face and follow it.

For that moment, the moth is the only height he needs.

V

THE NOISE OF OPEN FRUIT

When the durians split, every creature knows.

The smell travels farther than a warning call and carries more uses. To one body it means sweetness. To another it means the ground will become crowded. To another it means hurry. To the hornbills it means watch. To the small civets it means arrive before the larger mouths.

The first ripe fruit opens two days after the crossing falls.

By morning, its heavy sweetness has covered the citrus sharpness near the broad fig. Eastern and western families are both moving towards the grove, and the stories arrive before their bodies.

"Aru broke the route."

"Aru saved the eastern young."

"The river has changed forever."

"The river never changed."

"Humans cut the channels."

"No human came."

"Rin weakened the crossing."

"Mala stopped everyone because her infant cried."

Each version reaches you with the breath of the one carrying it. Some are angry. Some are bright with the pleasure of a clean shape. Some are given as if the listener has only to open a mouth.

You hear one version twice and almost pass it onward.

The words are already at your teeth when a juvenile swings down between you and the next body, holding a durian husk over his head. He has filled it with leaves. The leaves fall over both of you.

He sings the two-note curve the young ones made under Mala's shelter.

Up, down.

Up, down.

Then he forgets the second note and bites a fruit fibre instead.

The story stays in your mouth until it has no listener. You chew it once, taste how certain it has become, and let it go without sound.

At the grove, branches dip under gathering bodies. Open fruit lies below, too heavy to carry far and too rich to ignore. The juveniles imitate everyone.

One drapes pale fibre over his shoulder and walks like Aru. Another beats a hollow shell and leaps aside when the others pretend the crossing has fallen.

A small female touches his wrist with exaggerated slowness. They all collapse laughing before he can complete the fall.

Aru watches from a fork above the ground. Her face gives nothing away.

Rin arrives late. The scrape along his side has dried black. When he hears his name in the chatter, his shoulders rise and his arms move away from his body. He looks larger, then younger.

A northern male calls, "Did you jump on the support?"

"I landed where I always landed."

"So you did."

"So did others."

The male opens his mouth again, but a durian drops behind him with a thud that sends three civets racing. The branch above shudders. Everyone looks up.

Nothing else falls.

Mala reaches the grove from the opposite side. Her infant is cool again. Several mothers touch his feet as she passes.

The stories change around her.

Now the infant was almost lost.

Now the infant warned them.

Now Mala knew the crossing would fall.

"He was hot," Mala says to no one in particular. "Then he was less hot."

She opens a durian with a stick and feeds him from the pale flesh.

Sela moves among the trunks, tying nothing, marking nothing. She listens to which calls return unchanged and which become easier to carry. A statement moved through five mouths is smoother than one moved through two. Its uncertainty is often the first rough edge to disappear.

Praise and blame travel in the same way.

Both prefer a single body.

Both become simpler when the branches are crowded.

A young female asks you where the hollow branch was found. Before you answer, another says humans built it. A third says it grew that way. A fourth says Aru chose it because she wanted the tribe to move west.

"I found it at the salt lick," you say.

"Before or after the water?"

"After the call. Before we knew the ending was missing."

The young female nods, not because the answer settles anything, but because it gives her somewhere to place the next question.

Aru climbs down.

The branches quiet near her but not far away.
She rolls one unopened durian across the ground until it rests beneath the largest tree, then sits beside it. She does not call anyone.

Mala joins her first. Batu comes with mud drying between his toes. Omi arrives carrying the young one whose feet were cut. Sela appears after sunset. Rin remains above until the smell of fruit grows stronger than the noise around his name.

You sit too.

The unopened durian is hard, green-brown, and silent. No one knows whether its flesh is sweet, bitter, empty, or spoilt.

The juvenile with the husk reaches for it. Aru lets him touch the spikes. He pulls back, touches them again, then uses the husk to drum the two-note curve.

Up, down.

This time another child answers from a branch behind him.

Down, up.

They argue without words, each repeating a different shape until neither remembers which began.

Above them, the grove remains loud. No one asks the forest to become quiet because quiet would be easier to understand.

Near midnight, the fruit opens by itself.

The shell separates with a soft crack. Warm scent fills the dark.

The flesh inside is pale and good.

Aru gives the first piece to Rin.

Rin holds it without eating. Then he tears it in half and gives one part to the juvenile who had mocked his running.

The juvenile takes it, chews, and immediately reaches for more.

Nothing is settled.

The grove remains noisy.

But the fruit passes from hand to hand without carrying a name.

VI

THREE CROSSINGS

The new route to the ridge is first spoken of as three routes because three bodies reach for it in three ways.

Kiri sees the upper vines and wants to know what holds now.

Mala sees the middle branches and counts the wide forks where bodies can rest.

Sela looks low, where roots knot into old scars and water has entered places hidden from the crown.

The fruiting tree on the ridge has opened early. Its scent comes down in warm waves. Every direction seems to promise it.

You begin with Kiri.

He tests each vine with his whole weight, bouncing until leaves shake loose. He is young enough to distrust what cannot be touched and impatient with every sentence that arrives before the hand.

At the first gap, a green creeper tears on his second bounce. Kiri catches another branch and hangs there, eyes wide.

"It lied," he says.

The wet fibres brush your face.

"It gave what it had," you answer.

Kiri has already swung elsewhere. He does not need your sentence, but the infant below hears your voice and looks up.

Mala is crossing beneath you. The infant clings to her side, one fist closed in the hair at her shoulder. The middle route bends towards shade, water, fruit, and branches broad enough for stillness. Twice she refuses branches that held Kiri without effort.

"Too narrow?" you call.

"Not for me."

She nods towards an older female following with a stiff wrist.

At a split trunk, another mother approaches from the opposite direction. Neither has room to pass. Kiri, already above them, urges Mala towards a higher branch.

Mala reaches for it.

Her infant tightens his fist in her hair and begins the soft cough he makes when frightened awake.

Kiri stops speaking.

He lowers himself until his feet rest on the same fork as Mala. For several breaths, the one who trusts immediate touch becomes the one who waits.

The infants see each other. One reaches. The other laughs.

The mothers exchange fruit across the gap while their bodies decide who will move. By the time the way opens, no one has yielded and no one has won. One mother goes higher. Mala goes lower. Kiri remains long enough to steady the branch for both.

You descend with Mala and find Sela kneeling at a bridge of intertwined roots near the edge of the ridge.

Kiri crossed above it at dawn. Mala would have avoided it.

Sela taps the upper root with her hard seed.

The answer is deep and clear.

She steps onto it, then stops before transferring her full weight. The earth on the far side has a darker colour. No sound has warned her. She speaks before touching.

"Batu."

He answers from below.

She asks what the ground carried during the night.

"Less water than yesterday."

"Here?"

A pause.

Batu climbs to the far side, presses his arm into what appears to be firm soil, and breaks through to the shoulder. Water has opened a cavity under the roots.

He pulls himself free, mud to his chest.

Kiri arrives from above and laughs once. Batu looks at him, then at the torn creeper caught around Kiri's ankle.

"Your sky held you well," he says.

Kiri sits down to untangle it.

The roots will hold one body, perhaps two, not a whole gathering.

Then a ripe fruit falls somewhere on the ridge.

The impact passes through the tree. Upper vines tremble. A cloud of hornbills lifts. The middle branches fill with bodies moving towards the sound. On the low route, water shakes loose from the cavity and begins running into the path Batu used to climb.

For a few breaths, all three crossings change together.

Kiri wants to go up and mark the vines before more bodies arrive. Mala moves first, not slowly now, calling the mothers at the middle forks towards

a broader tree. Sela sends her hard seed down the line of roots so Batu can tap supports while his hands are muddy. Batu catches it in his mouth.

You are standing where the three routes come closest.

A young orangutan reaches you from the upper vines with fruit smell on both hands. Behind him, an older body is moving more slowly than the branch can bear.

You do not know the whole route. You know only the fork beneath your feet.

You hold the young one against the trunk until the older body reaches the next support. He protests, then notices the fruit in your hair and begins picking at it.

Kiri turns leaves pale-side outward along the upper path, but only where he has just passed. Mala sends fruit back towards those waiting. Sela taps the root bridge, then directs two light bodies across before the cavity widens. Batu opens a lower rest where the ground is cold but firm.

By evening, the three movements arrive at the same fruiting tree from different heights.

No one names a best crossing.

Kiri has come last because he stayed with the upper markers. Mala has come first because the middle route opened when bodies moved together. Sela carries no strip of bark; the damp soil on her knees is enough to show where she has been. Batu, who usually prefers the ground, sleeps that night in the lowest canopy fork because his shelter below is under water.

Omi asks which route should carry the next call.

Kiri looks up, then at the infant still holding a strand of Mala's hair.

Mala looks towards the wide branches, then at Batu's wet ground.

Sela rolls the hard seed between her fingers.

You look at the tree where the routes meet and at the fruit being passed in more directions than one call could contain.

The next morning, movement begins again.

Not as one route.

Not as three roles.

Kiri tests where hands are needed. Mala carries food where waiting gathers. Sela listens where appearance and support disagree. Batu moves between ground and branch. Others take these capacities from them and give them back changed.

The crossings remain distinct.

What passes through them does not belong to any one body.

VII

WARMTH BEHIND THE RIBS

That night, no one gathers.

The forest is dry enough for each body to choose its own nest. The moon is hidden. Heat stays close beneath the leaves.

You build higher than usual and regret it halfway through. The branches are thin. Your arms are tired. You could descend, but pride keeps you weaving.

When the nest is finished, one side sags.

You lie in it anyway.

Below, bodies settle into darkness. The tribe becomes breathing without faces.

Your mind returns to the broken crossing.

Rin reaching. Mala touching his wrist. Aru arriving after the call. The branch falling later. Each time the scene returns, one movement grows larger. Sometimes it is Rin's speed. Sometimes Aru's silence. Sometimes the warmth of being among those who stopped.

A fruit falls in the dark and hits a root with a sound like a body landing badly.

You sit up.

Nothing follows.

Your fingers have already tightened around the nest edge. Only then do you notice that part of you had been waiting for another sound, one that would make the fear simple.

Farther off, Mala hums to the infant. The sound is low, almost below hearing. It enters your chest more than your ears.

On the bark beside your hand, a black scorpion stands half free of its old skin. Its new body is soft and nearly colourless. It does not hurry into hardness. You keep your weight away from the bark until it has drawn itself clear.

You descend.

Mala's nest is built between two branches close to the trunk. She sees you and shifts aside without asking why you have come.

You rest on the outer edge.

The infant sleeps between you.

Mala's hand is open on his back.

After a long time, she says, "I wanted the crossing to fall."

You turn towards her.

"After we stopped. I wanted it to fall so stopping would be right."

The leaves above you move though there is no wind.

You tell her that you wanted Aru to have heard the call badly, because then the strange sound inside it would belong to one body rather than the whole forest.

Mala does not call either wish good or bad.

The infant sighs and presses one foot against your wrist.

Across the darkness, Rin is awake. A branch near his nest flexes once, twice, then becomes still. Batu sleeps in the lowest canopy fork because the ground remains wet. Sela has built no nest at all; she sits against a trunk with the hard seed loose in her hand. Aru sleeps alone in a fork open to the sky.

You can see the pale length of her arms when the clouds move.

The pressure behind your ribs changes shape. It does not leave. It reaches the places where your body touches branch, infant foot, damp air, and Mala's shoulder.

"I do not know what I would do if the call came now," you say.

Mala listens.

"I would listen for more," you add. "Then I might still move."

"I might move before you," she says.

The answer makes you smile because it is true and because neither of you can know which body will be quicker until the next water comes.

Near dawn, the infant wakes and reaches towards your face. His fingers catch your lower lip. He pulls until your mouth opens.

Mala laughs without sound.

You laugh too, carefully, around his hand.

When you return to your sagging nest, the eastern sky is pale.

You rebuild the weak side. This time you descend for a stronger branch. Halfway down, Rin, still awake, releases one he has been holding and lets it drop within your reach.

You catch it.

No thanks passes between you. No explanation is needed.

The nest holds.

VIII

THE WEAVE THAT LOOSENED

The new pathways begin with leftovers.

Broken vines from the western crossing. Seed husks from the ridge. Human thread found at the salt lick. Broad leaves that dry without curling. Hollow reeds from the floodplain. Pieces of bark carrying old scars.

No one announces a building.

Kiri ties a vine between two trees because he wants a faster return from the fruit grove. He makes the knot high and tight. The first body across is Kiri. The second is Rin. The third is a mother carrying a sleeping young one, who cannot reach the upper grip without waking him.

Mala lowers the knot.

Kiri complains that the vine will drag against the bark.

It does.

By evening, the rubbing has opened a pale line in the trunk.

Sela sees it and adds a second support. She listens to the first tree, listens again, then places the new line where neither rope cuts the living skin. Batu clears a path beneath, not as the main way, but as somewhere a body can descend if the canopy becomes unavailable.

The next morning, two juveniles move every pale-side leaf marker to one branch because they like the way the cluster trembles.

Kiri finds them there and makes the sharp call used for snakes.

Both juveniles freeze.

There is no snake.

Mala looks at Kiri until he lowers his face.

The markers have not become dangerous because children touched them. They have become unreadable because the adults expected them to remain obedient to a meaning no child had been given.

Kiri takes the lowest marker down and hands it to the younger juvenile.

"Where did this come from?" he asks.

The child points everywhere.

Kiri laughs despite himself.

They begin again.

Fresh leaves are paired with their stems so age can be seen. Bark strips are placed high enough to survive play, but a lower touch-mark is added for smaller bodies. Reeds are cut open so insects cannot hide inside. Ground rests

appear beside long routes. No closure is made too tight for a tired hand to release.

The first braid they use to close a damaged path does not loosen.

Rain swells the fibres. At dawn, Batu finds the route sealed though the branch beyond has become sound again. He pulls until the braid bites his fingers. Rin joins him. Then Mala. Three strong bodies make it tighter.

A child watching from above drops a half-chewed fruit onto the knot.

The fruit breaks. Oil and pulp enter the fibres. The braid slips at once and falls around Batu's wrist.

No one calls the child wise. He has already climbed away to recover the other half.

Sela smells the loosened fibres, then rubs citrus rind into the next braid before rain. Kiri adds a dry leaf under the final loop so swelling can be seen. Mala makes the release low enough for one hand carrying another body.

The weave grows through these encounters. It is not one structure. It is many relations between bodies and places, each true only while renewed by contact.

No one keeps all the knots.

Kiri learns the upper releases and forgets one lower marker. Mala remembers the wide rests but asks Batu where the ground turns cold. Sela can hear hollowness in trees and cannot always tell whether a child has moved a leaf in play. Omi carries eastern patterns. Aru remembers calls no longer used. You know enough of several paths to become lost differently.

The first larger pressure arrives without ceremony.

Smoke appears on the southern horizon.

It may be a burning field beyond the forest. It may be cleared land. The wind turns north.

A call begins from the south: move away from smoke.

It arrives with a dry seed but no source bark. The rhythm is hurried and loses one beat after two crossings.

At the marked forks, bodies do not obey and do not refuse. They pause long enough for the surrounding conditions to become available.

Sela climbs high, sees smoke beyond the ridge, and calls down before testing the next branch. Batu smells the ground wind and finds cool air still moving from the east. Mala touches the throats of the young and old, then moves first towards water when one elder begins coughing. Kiri runs south on the upper route until the air thickens. On his return, he does not announce certainty. He presses his face into wet leaves before speaking.

"Smoke south. No fire under the crown."

Omi listens for eastern rain.

You carry a wet seed to the nearest fork and discover that the leaf marker there has dried brown. Your hand almost turns it pale-side out again. Instead, you replace it with a fresh leaf and leave the brown one beside it.

The call changes as bodies return.

Smoke south. Wind north. Upper route clear. Ground cool eastward. Young and old near water. Watch until the sun lowers.

The weave does not decide for them. It prevents the decision from becoming invisible.

By evening, the wind turns. Rain takes the smoke down before it reaches the nesting trees.

The tightened southern braid relaxes during the night.

At dawn, the path is open.

Aru crosses first. Halfway through, she stops to let the younger juvenile pass in the opposite direction with a citrus rind over his nose.

The child does not thank her.

He offers her the rind.

Aru smells it and continues.

IX

ARU AT THE LISTENING FIG

Aru chooses the fig herself.

Not the broad one where the first objects were placed. This tree stands alone on a low rise. Purple hibiscus crowd its lower roots, and a faint citrus edge drifts down from fruit split farther uphill. Its roots open into hollows where voices become softer. Nothing spoken there travels far unless someone carries it.

She arrives before the others and eats.

When you come, she is peeling a small fruit with her teeth. Mala sits close enough for their shoulders to touch. Rin settles on the opposite root. Sela remains above, where she can see both paths. Batu rests with his back against the trunk.

No one circles Aru.

The space stays open on one side.

Aru places three things on the ground: a strip of old call-bark, a pale hair caught years ago in resin, and a seed from the black palms.

"Ask what belongs to me," she says.

Rin's mouth opens first, then closes.

Sela descends. She takes the bark and asks when Aru first heard the migration call.

"Before the light."

"From which direction?"

"East, but low. The sound travelled under the wet crown."

"Did you hear the final two knocks?"

"No."

"Did you know there could be a final ending?"

Aru looks at the pale hair in resin. "When I was young, that ending belonged to the black palms. I had not heard it in many seasons."

Sela turns the bark once and places it back. She does not add a conclusion.

Batu asks whether Aru saw water.

"Not before I carried the call."

"Did you smell it?"

"Wet earth. That morning the whole forest smelled of wet earth."

Batu nods. He has no use for an answer larger than the sense that carried it.

Mala asks why Aru repeated the call before seeing its source.

Aru turns the seed between finger and thumb.

"Because I remembered a flood that arrived faster than proof."

The infant climbs from Mala's lap onto the root and reaches for the seed. Aru gives it to him. He puts it in his mouth. Mala extends her hand. He looks at it, then at Aru, and keeps chewing.

Rin asks whether she would repeat the call now.

Aru looks towards the open side of the gathering.

"Not in the same way."

"Would you wait?"

"I would carry where it came from, what I heard, what I did not hear, and what my body remembered. Then I would move if movement was needed."

Rin touches the thin pink line where his scrape is healing.

"And if there was no time?"

Aru meets his face. "Then I would do something before I knew enough."

The answer does not make the risk smaller.

You ask whether she wanted the tribe to follow her.

She takes time.

A hornbill calls from the ridge. The infant spits the seed into Mala's palm.

"I wanted no one beneath water," Aru says.

"That is not the same question," Rin says.

Aru nods.

The forest remains with his words. No one closes around her. No one moves to rescue her from the space they have opened.

She looks at you, then at Mala, then at the child wiping black seed skin across his mouth.

"Part of me wanted the call to be mine," she says. "Not because I made it. Because I carried it first among you. A body can enjoy being where movement begins."

Rin's shoulders lower. Mala's hand stays open beneath the infant's chin. Sela does not look away.

No one forgives Aru, because no one has asked her to become guilty enough for forgiveness. No one treats intention as the whole of consequence either. The answer has entered the gathering. That is all it is permitted to do.

Sela asks what Aru knew about the western crossing.

"I knew it had grown low. I did not know the inner fibres had darkened."

Batu asks who inspected it last.

Silence.

Several faces turn towards different bodies, then away. The crossing belonged to no single one and therefore, for a time, to no one's attention.

Rin breaks the silence.

"I crossed it the day before."

Mala says she avoided it for three days.

Sela says she heard a dull answer in the lower support but followed another task.

Batu says he had been clearing a ground path after the previous rain.

You say you saw torn leaves on the northern side and thought wind had done it.

The listening fig holds the voices without choosing one as the trunk.

The infant wriggles free, crawls into the hollow between the roots, and begins laughing at his own echo.

Aru reaches for the strip of call-bark. Sela lets her take it.

Aru snaps it into two pieces.

Rin stiffens.

Then Aru gives one half to Omi, who has arrived at the open side. She gives the other to you.

"Carrying and beginning are different," she says.

The sentence could become a teaching if anyone made it clean enough to repeat.

The infant shouts into the hollow. His echo returns the wrong sound. He shouts again, delighted by the failure.

One by one, the bodies turn towards him.

Aru remains among them, not released from relation and not held inside it.

When the gathering ends, the open side is still open.

She leaves through it with Mala.

Rin stays a little longer and helps the infant search for the seed he has dropped.

X

SCARS THAT KNEW ANOTHER SEASON

The oldest trees do not remember in words.

They remember in turns.

A branch lost to storm becomes a shoulder of new wood. Fire becomes a black seam beneath living bark. A cut closes unevenly and changes the direction of every later ring.

After the listening fig, Aru takes you to a tree she has not visited in years.

It grows beyond the ridge where the forest thins into scrub. Lightning has opened the crown. Half the trunk is dead. The other half carries fruit.

Aru climbs slowly.

Near the first fork, she shows you a scar shaped like a long eye.

"I made this," she says.

When she was young, a dry season emptied the nearby pools. She stripped bark to drink the wet inner fibre. Others followed the mark. By the next season, too many bodies had fed from the same trunk and the branch above it died.

"Did you know?" you ask.

"I knew the bark held water."

"Did you know the branch would die?"

"No."

"Could you have known?"

Aru looks into the opened crown.

"Someone older might have. No one was with me."

She does not use ignorance as shelter. She does not use consequence as proof that her younger body intended it.

Both remain in the scar.

Higher up, you find a newer cut where bark has been removed in narrow sections on opposite sides, leaving living bridges between them. Water can still be reached. The branch still fruits.

"Who changed it?"

"Many."

No name is attached.

A young male is feeding at one of the newer cuts. He begins to widen it with his teeth. Aru watches for a moment, then places two fingers against the living bridge between the cuts.

He stops.

She does not tell him the story of the dead branch. She lets him feel the strip of bark that must remain wet and whole. Then she moves her fingers to a different place where the cut can continue.

The young male tests it and drinks.

What Aru learnt passes without becoming her possession.

On the way back, time begins to show itself everywhere.

Rin's caution does not erase the speed that nearly carried him onto the falling crossing. Mala's stop at the ravine does not make every future stop wise. Sela's careful listening does not erase the dull branch she once left unexamined. Batu's ground paths were shaped by an old fall from the canopy, but his fear of height sometimes makes him hear weakness in sound wood.

At the black palms, Omi shows you the complete migration call again. The two final knocks have changed since her youth. Once they were made on thin trunks. After a beetle season hollowed those trees, the same knocks travelled too far. The eastern families moved the ending to living roots.

Aru remembered an older form.

Omi carried a newer one.

Neither memory was false. Neither was enough alone.

"I did not know what I was doing at the scar," Aru says as you leave the palms. The words are quiet. They are not an apology to every future branch.

She touches the newer cut.

"I know what changed after."

That evening the tribe eats at the tree with the lightning crown. The fruit is small and intensely sweet. Several young ones drink from the narrow bark cuts without enlarging them. No one guards the tree. No one performs regret.

Rain begins after dark.

Water runs over the old wound, follows its shape, and falls into Aru's open palm.

She drinks.

Then she shifts so the next drop lands in yours.

A third drop falls between both hands and enters the bark below.

XI

WHAT YOUR PALM COULD HOLD

The morning after the rain, Sela places a leaf in your hand while you are still moving.

"Wet," you say.

She places a seed beside it.

"From the black palms."

"How do you know?"

You smell sour fruit, dark soil, and a trace of smoke.

"I have smelled this there."

Sela nods, but the answer does not become larger than your nose.

The gathering is not a gathering at first. Objects and bodies pass through the low branches in pairs and threes. Batu carries mud from beneath the bright roots. Mala has a strand of hair caught from her infant's nest. Omi arrives with the complete call held in her throat. Rin brings a fresh strip from the new crossing support. Aru brings nothing.

No one speaks to the whole tribe.

You pass the wet leaf to Kiri at the next fork.

"Wet," he says.

"From where?"

He tastes the water. "Rain."

It may be rain. It may have touched river mist or someone's mouth. The leaf carries wetness directly and origin only through relation.

A child is following Kiri with the ordinary round stone taken from the first fig gathering. No one knows when it returned to her. She rolls it along the branch and hums the two-note curve from the durian grove.

Up, down.

The stone reaches a fork and drops.

Everyone bends at a different speed.

Rin catches it against his foot. Mala reaches for the child. Batu looks below to see where it might have fallen. Your hand closes around the leaf and squeezes water onto the fresh bark strip.

The wet bark darkens. A scent rises that was not there before: sap, smoke, and the faint bitterness of citrus from your fingers.

Aru comes close enough to smell it.

"Stored near smoke," she says of the seed.

Omi smells your hand. "Black palms."

Sela smells it and says nothing.

The stone has proved none of this. It has altered who bent, what touched, and which scent became available.

The child takes it from Rin and immediately loses interest. She pushes it into a pocket of moss and climbs after a moth.

At another fork, Mala asks Rin what he can say about the crossing support. He bends the strip, smells it, pulls at the fibres.

"Fresh. Strong."

Sela asks whether the whole support is strong.

Rin looks at the piece in his hand.

"This part was."

The answer is smaller and more useful.

Omi makes the complete migration call. Batu answers with the version heard west of the salt lick. The difference sits in two knocks.

Aru listens. Her face tightens when the older form enters her body. She does not hide it.

They walk to the hollow branch.

Wind is low. The twig does not strike.

Kiri shakes the frond. Tap. Tap.

The missing ending appears.

Everyone can hear the sound now. No one can hear the wind as it was that morning.

You place your hand inside the hollow. The wood is cool. Insects have opened galleries along one side. Water stains mark a height above your wrist. These things are present.

Why the call travelled exactly as it did remains larger than your palm.

The child returns. She has found the stone again. This time she puts it inside the hollow and hums.

The stone does not answer the tune. It knocks once against an insect chamber and falls into your hand.

For a moment, the humming stops.

Through the small quiet, you hear water moving under the root.

Batu lowers himself to listen. Sela lies beside him. Rin holds the branch steady. Mala keeps the child from reaching into a crack where ants are moving.

The water was there before the stone. It becomes available because bodies changed their positions around it.

Near noon, the wet leaf dries. The mud cracks. The bark changes colour. Hair lifts in the breeze. Objects do not keep their state simply because they were once observed.

You turn your palm upward.

The stone is there.

The child holds out her hand.

You return it.

She does not thank you. She uses it to crush a soft fruit and feeds the pulp to a beetle.

When the bodies separate, no record is complete. The seed goes east. The bark goes back to the crossing. The hair returns to Mala's nest. The mud is placed beneath the bright roots and dissolves in the next rain. The child carries the stone until another attention replaces it.

You wash your hand in the river.

The scent leaves slowly.

What remains is not proof.

It is the closeness required before one body can receive a trace from another, and the way that closeness changes both positions without making them the same.

XII

BETWEEN CALL AND RETURN

The first new call comes at dusk.

One strike on living wood.

A breath.

Two softer strikes.

A green leaf turned pale-side outward.

A wet seed from the southern pools.

The pattern means: water is moving where it usually rests.

It does not say move.

It does not say remain.

It opens a condition into the forest.

You are nearest the lower fork. You take the seed. It is cold and newly wet. Kiri takes the leaf. Mala listens to the rhythm while her child sleeps against her. Sela climbs high. Batu goes down.

Aru stays.

Once, she would have carried the call immediately. Now she sits with the source objects and keeps them visible while the others move.

You travel south with Kiri.

At the first crossing, the water is normal. At the second, it touches roots usually dry. At the third, a side pool has entered the path. No flood. No safety either.

Kiri wants to continue.

You hold the wet seed between you.

He looks at it, then at the water. The seed came from farther south. Neither of you can see that place yet.

Mala arrives by the middle route with two older females and no young ones. She has left the small bodies at a high fruit tree with Omi. Without the infant against her, her movement is faster than Kiri expected. She reaches the edge of the water first and listens to it moving under leaf litter towards the east.

Batu calls from below: the ground path is filling behind you.

Sela answers from above: rain is falling beyond the ridge.

The available movement changes.

You are no longer deciding whether to go south. You are deciding how to return without sending those behind into the water now rising at your back.

Kiri makes the call for pause.

It is a held note that asks every body within reach to stop long enough for the next sound to become possible.

Rain thickens.

The note breaks in his throat.

Kiri tries again. Water hits leaves hard enough to split the sound. Bodies continue moving on the middle route because they cannot hear whether the note ended or failed.

The child-song is not with you. The children are high to the north.

Still, Kiri has heard their two-note play so often that his mouth finds its curve before he decides to use it.

*Purple bloom, bright peel - come where the green branch still
bends.*

The line hangs alone in the rain.

No one explains it.

For three breaths, only water answers.

Then, from the east, another voice returns the tune with words changed by distance:

*Purple rain, split peel - wait where the green branch still
bends.*

The answer is wrong and sufficient.

One group stops. Another turns towards the upper leaves. A third hears only the curve of the tune and answers without words.

Kiri does not become the keeper of the song. He stays at the fork, repeating only what the changing branches need.

Mala takes the middle route back, moving first where the broad supports are still open. Batu reaches the ground braid and finds its lower knot under water. Sela drops a long vine from above. Rin, arriving from the north, uses it to pull the braid loose without entering the current.

You carry the wet seed. Twice you almost close your hand around it so tightly that the shell creaks. Each time, its cold surface brings your fingers back open.

The route does not become one. The bodies do not become one. The return moves because each position offers what is presently possible.

At the broad fig, Aru receives the seed and leaf from you.

She does not ask what they mean.

"Where did your hand touch the water?"

You show the dark line on your forearm.

"What did you see beyond it?"

"Nothing. We turned back."

"Who remained south?"

You name those you know and leave space for those you do not.

The call goes out again, changed by what has returned.

Water rising at third southern crossing. Ground route filling northward. Upper route open. Small ones already high. Two groups unconfirmed. No movement beyond the source until dawn.

No single voice contains the call. Kiri gives the failed pause and the upper fork. Mala gives the bodies sheltered and the broad route. Batu gives the ground water. Sela gives the rain beyond the ridge. Rin gives the released braid. You give the place where skin entered current. Aru gives the spaces in which none of those reports is made to stand for the others.

During the night, the rain moves east. The southern pools overflow and settle. One group returns by the upper route. Another stays safely on a fruiting ridge. The third was never south at all; they had turned towards distant calls from another family.

At dawn, the children come down from the high tree.

The child with the stone hears Kiri's song from those who returned. She frowns.

"That is not how it goes," she says.

She sings only the two-note curve and leaves the words behind.

Batu loosens the ground braid. The path is still wet, but the closure has no hands to keep it closed.

Sun enters through the leaves.

Aru places the seed in your palm.

It has warmed to your skin.

You carry it back towards the southern pool, not as a warning and not as a command.

It is what returned with you, available for the next body that needs to know where the water had been.

XIII

THE BRANCH NO NAME COULD HOLD

Months later, the hollow branch falls.

No storm takes it. No body touches it. The old fibres release during a quiet afternoon, and the branch settles into the mud with almost no sound.

You find it while travelling alone.

Insects have opened the inside into many chambers. Rain lines mark different seasons. The twig that once struck the rim is gone.

You stand over the branch and wait for recognition.

Nothing arrives.

The event that changed the tribe no longer looks like its own beginning.

It is wood in mud under a flowering shrub.

Purple hibiscus have opened along the low bank. Their colour is so deep in shade that the petals seem black until you move closer. A torn citrus leaf releases bitterness beneath your foot. In the seam where branch meets bark, a scorpion waits without moving, dark enough to belong to the night that has not yet come.

You could carry a piece back. You could place it beneath the listening fig. You could preserve the chamber where water once held the sound. You could leave it where it fell.

Each act would alter what remains available. None would contain the whole.

You sit beside it.

The forest around you has changed without becoming new. The western crossing has regrown through other routes. The eastern call now carries its source and missing parts when those are known. The loosened weave has spread, though some families use only pieces. Several routes have been abandoned. Others appeared without anyone planning them.

Aru travels less. Rin travels more slowly. Mala's young one moves independently and rarely where she expects. Sela has begun forgetting where she put her hard seed. Batu sometimes sleeps high again. Kiri, who once trusted only what his own weight could test, now waits at certain forks until smaller hands arrive.

The capacities have not faded. They have moved.

A young female from the eastern families carries the pause call better than Kiri. Rin knows where Mala's broad route narrows after dry weather. Omi's youngest can hear hollowness in living roots. A child who never met the old crossing turns closures loose when rain ends, because someone once showed her fingers the direction of the final loop.

No one owns these things long enough to become them.

Not everyone carries what happened in the same way.

Some young ones know only that the old western route is avoided during heavy rain. Some know the call and believe the hollow branch caused everything. Some have heard humans changed the river. Some care only that the durians opened early that year. One family uses the loosened leaves without remembering why. Another remembers the flood and refuses the markers entirely.

The weave works even when memory thins, but it does not force memory to remain.

Sometimes urgency outruns form.

Sometimes a body moves before the second sign arrives and is right to do so.

Sometimes everyone waits and the fruit is gone when they return. Ants open it. A child eats the edge. Another body remains hungry. The morning has moved. No single meaning is assigned to the change.

The forest does not become inhabitable by becoming fully understood. It remains inhabitable where correction, tending, staying, leaving, return, and the unmarked path remain possible.

A young orangutan approaches through the low branches.

You have seen her before at the object gathering. She is older now, though the round stone is still in her hand.

"What is it?" she asks.

You touch the hollow.

"A branch."

She waits.

You can feel the old story gathering in your mouth: the call, the flood, the crossing, Aru, the salt lick, the wet seed, the listening fig, the weave. Every part is ready to become a clean sequence.

The young one climbs down and puts her hand inside the branch. Insect dust clings to her wrist.

"Something lived here," she says.

"Yes."

"Did it make the sound?"

"Part of one."

"What made the rest?"

You look at the bright roots, hidden water, open sky, human thread almost buried, routes that no longer exist, bodies absent from this place.

"I do not know all of it."

She accepts this more easily than you do.

She places the stone in the hollow. It rolls through one insect chamber, strikes another, and stops where neither of you can reach without breaking the wood.

The young one peers inside.

"Now it lives there," she says.

"For a while."

She considers the answer, then hums the two-note curve.

The stone gives back one small knock.

She laughs. The sound disturbs the scorpion, which moves deeper into the seam and is gone.

The hibiscus does not close. One petal catches the last light and becomes visibly purple.

The young one asks whether the stone must be recovered.

You think of all the hands that have held it, the fruit it crushed, the gathering it interrupted, the water it helped bodies hear, and the fact that it is now only where it is.

"Not now," you say.

She sits beside you.

Nothing requires either of you to leave.

Evening enters from the roots upward. Citrus remains in the crushed leaf under your foot. The black petals become purple whenever the last light touches them, then darken again. The fallen branch holds the stone without explaining it.

When you return to the tribe, you carry no relic.

The young one carries no stone.

You carry the question, but not as a burden that must be answered. It moves with you like the distance between two branches: real, open, crossed when a body reaches.

At the evening fruit tree, the others make room without asking what you found.

Aru sleeps against the trunk. Mala's young one hangs upside down above her. Rin shares fruit with Omi. Sela searches her hair for the seed she misplaced and laughs when Batu shows it resting behind her ear. Kiri is below, waiting while two smaller bodies decide which fork to take.

The canopy is full of unfinished movements.

You settle among them.

Night rises through the lower leaves.

One path is closed where a tree has fallen. The braid around it hangs loose, waiting for morning hands. Another path leads beyond the known fruit trees and carries no marks at all.

The tribe does not seal it.

No call comes from that direction.

The opening remains.

You rest one hand on the branch beneath you.

The other stays open.

For the first time, the word does not arrive from another mouth.

I stay.