



THE MIRROR VISITOR

BOOK 3

Christelle Dabos

THE MEMORY OF BABEL

"An irresistible mix of character development, imaginative world-building, and tightly-wound suspense."—*Entertainment Weekly*


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THE MEMORY
OF BABEL

*Translated from the French
by Hildegard Serle*



THE MEMORY
OF BABEL

THE MIRROR VISITOR
BOOK 3

VOLUME 2 RECALLED

THE MISSING OF CLAIRDELUNE

Due to a misunderstanding, Ophelia is appointed Vice-Storyteller at the court of Farouk, the family spirit of the Pole. She plunges into the reality of Citaceleste and glimpses the corrupt souls behind the gilded illusions. Disturbing disappearances from among the nobles soon lead her to investigate—as a reader, this time—a blackmailer who claims to act on behalf of “GOD.” Ophelia is herself targeted by him when Farouk counts on her power to unlock the secret of his Book, a coded text, of which every family spirit owns a copy, and which is all that remains of their forgotten childhood. It is a reading on which Thorn’s life will ultimately depend, for he has been sentenced to death.

What Ophelia will discover goes far beyond what she had imagined. God really does exist. He is the creator of the family spirits, parent of all their descendants, master of the families’ destinies, censor of their collective memories!

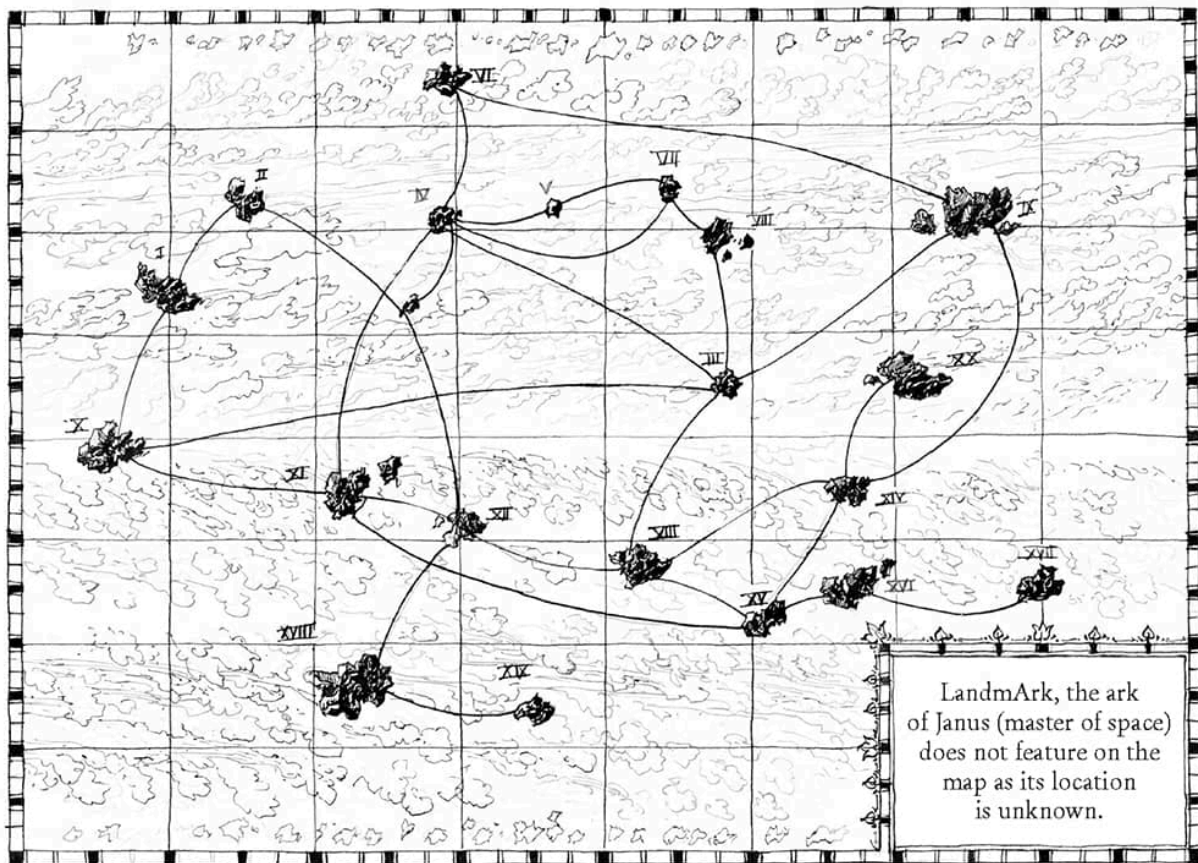
And above all, he can assume the characteristics and power of anyone whose path he crosses, something Ophelia and Thorn will learn at their expense when God visits them in prison. He tells them that the worst is still to come: the Other is far more formidable than he is . . . and it was Ophelia who had unwittingly released him during her very first passage through a mirror.

Thorn, who has himself become a mirror visitor thanks to his marriage, uses his new power to vanish into thin air.

Forced to leave the Pole and return to Anima, Ophelia is left, alone, with all her questions. Who is the Other? Was he really the one who brought about the Rupture? Why is he planning to cause the disintegration of the arks? And is she really destined to lead God to the Other?

But one question remains the most nagging of them all:
Where is Thorn?

MAP OF THE COMPASS ROSES AND THEIR DESTINATIONS



- I. Anima, the ark of Artemis (mistress of objects)
- II. The Pole, the ark of Farouk (master of spirits)
- III. Totem, the ark of Venus (mistress of animals)
- IV. Cylope, the ark of Ouranos (master of magnetism)

- V. Flora, the ark of Belisama (mistress of vegetation)
- VI. Leadgold, the ark of Midas (master of transmutation)
- VII. Pharos, the ark of Horus (master of charm)
- VIII. The Serenissima, the ark of Fama (mistress of divination)
- IX. Heliopolis, the ark of Lucifer (master of lightning)
- X. Babel, the ark of twins Pollux and Helen (master and mistress of the senses)
- XI. The Desert, the ark of Djinn (master of hydropathy)
- XII. The Tartar, the ark of Gaia (mistress of tellurism)
- XIII. Zephyr, the ark of Olympus (master of the winds)
- XIV. Titan, the ark of Yin (mistress of mass)
- XV. Corpolis, the ark of Zeus (master of metamorphosis)
- XVI. Sidh, the ark of Persephone (mistress of temperature)
- XVII. Selene, the ark of Morpheus (master of dreams)
- XVIII. Vespéral, the ark of Viracocha (master of phantomization)
- XIX. Al-Andalouse, the ark of Ra (master of empathy)
- XX. The Star, the neutral ark (seat of interfamilial institutions)

*Once upon a tomorrow,
before too long,
there will be a world that will finally live in peace.*

*At that time,
there will be new men
and there will be new women.*

It will be the era of miracles.

THE ABSENT ONE

THE FESTIVAL

The clock was charging forward at full speed. It was a giant grandfather clock mounted on casters, its pendulum loudly marking every second. It wasn't every day that Ophelia witnessed a piece of furniture of this size rushing toward her.

"Please excuse it, dear cousin!" exclaimed a young girl, tugging on the clock's lead with all her might. "It's not usually so forward. In its defense, Mom doesn't take it out very often. May I have a waffle?"

Ophelia kept a wary eye on the clock, whose casters were still squeaking against the paving. "With some maple syrup?" she asked, plucking a crispy waffle from the counter.

"No thanks, cousin. Merry Tickers!"

Ophelia had responded half-heartedly, watching the young girl and her big clock disappear into the crowd. If there was one festival she wasn't in the mood to participate in, this was certainly it. Assigned to the waffle stand, right in the center of Anima's traditional market, she was seeing a never-ending procession of cuckoo clocks and alarm clocks. The continuous cacophony of tick-tocking and cries of "Merry Tickers!" reverberated against the large windows of the covered market. Ophelia felt as if all those clock hands were turning just to remind her of what she didn't wish to remember.

"Two years and seven months."

Ophelia looked at Aunt Rosaline, who had tossed these words out along with some piping-hot waffles onto the counter. She also found that Tickers put her into a dark mood.

"Do you think *madam* will reply to our letters?" Aunt Rosaline hissed, while shaking her spatula. "But then, I suppose *madam* has better things to do with her days."

"You're being unfair," said Ophelia. "Berenilde probably has tried to contact us."

Aunt Rosaline laid her spatula back on the waffle-iron, and wiped her hands on her kitchen apron. "Of course I'm being unfair. After what happened in the Pole, it wouldn't surprise me if the Doyennes were intercepting our mail. I shouldn't be complaining in your presence. These past two years and seven months have been even more silent for you than for me."

Ophelia didn't feel like talking about it. Just thinking about it made her feel as if she'd swallowed the hands of a clock. She hastened to serve a jeweler, adorned with his finest watches.

"Come, come!" he chided, when his watches all started frantically snapping their covers. "Where have your good manners gone, misses? Want me to take you back to the shop, do you?"

"Don't tick them off," said Ophelia, "it's me that has that effect on them. Syrup?"

"The waffle will suffice. Merry Tickers!"

Ophelia watched the jeweler move off, and placed the bottle of syrup, which she'd almost knocked over, back on the table. "The Doyennes should never have assigned me a festival stand. All I can do is hand out waffles that I can't even make myself. And even then, I've dropped half a dozen of them onto the floor."

Ophelia's pathological clumsiness was notorious within her family. No one would have risked asking her for maple syrup with all that clockwork around the place.

"It pains me to admit it, but for once I don't think the Doyennes were wrong. You're a fright to behold, and I think it's good for you to do something with your hands." Aunt Rosaline gave her niece a stern look, focusing on her drawn face, colorless glasses, and plait of hair so tangled that no comb could get through it.

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not fine. You don't go out anymore, you eat any old thing, you sleep at any old time. You haven't even been back to the museum," Aunt Rosaline added, solemnly, as if that particular detail were the most concerning of all.

"In fact, I have been back," countered Ophelia. She had rushed straight there on her return from the Pole, as soon as she'd got off the airship, before even dropping her suitcase off at home. She had wanted to see with her own eyes the cabinets stripped of their weapon collections, the rotunda stripped of its military aircraft, the walls stripped of their imperial standards, and the alcoves stripped of their ceremonial armor.

She had left the place distraught, and had never returned.

"It's no longer a museum," she muttered between her teeth. "Relating the past but refusing to relate war, that's lying."

"You are a reader," Aunt Rosaline rebuked her. "Surely you're not just going to stay with your fingers crossed until . . . until . . . In short, you must go forward."

Ophelia refrained from retorting that she wasn't crossing her fingers and that going forward didn't interest her. She'd done much research in recent months, without leaving her bed, nose buried in geographical tomes. It was *elsewhere* that she had to go, except that she couldn't. Not as long as the Doyennes were keeping a close eye on her.

Not as long as God was keeping a close eye on her.

"It would be better to leave your watch at home during Tickers," Aunt Rosaline suddenly declared. "It's stirring up the others."

Some clocks had, indeed, flocked around the waffle stand. Ophelia instinctively laid her hand over her pocket, and then indicated to the dials to go and tick somewhere else. "That's typically Anima, that is. One can't carry an unruly watch around without sensing the disapproval of all those in the vicinity."

"You should get it treated by a clockmaker."

"I have. It isn't broken, just very troubled. Merry Tickers, dear uncle."

Wrapped in his old winter coat, his moustache heavy with melted snow, her great-uncle had just sprung out from the crowd. "Yeah, yeah,

happy festival, tick-tock, and the rest of it," he mumbled, going straight to the other side of the stand and helping himself to a hot waffle. "It's getting ridiculous, all this bunkum! Festival of Silverware, Festival of Musical Instruments, Festival of Boots, Festival of Hats . . . Every year, a new booze-up in the calendar! Soon you'll see 'em celebrating chamber pots. In my day, we didn't spoil objects like they do now, and then they're surprised that they throw tantrums. Hide this, pronto," he suddenly whispered, handing an envelope to Ophelia.

"You've found another one?" As she slipped the envelope into her apron pocket, Ophelia felt her heart beating faster than all the festival's clocks.

"And no mere trifle, m'dear. Finding them's not too hard. Doing it without the Doyennes knowing, that's quite another matter. They spy on me almost as much as on you. Watch out, in fact," the great-uncle muttered, shaking his moustache. "I saw the Rapporteur, with her confounded sparrow, lurking around the place."

Aunt Rosaline gritted her long teeth on hearing their exchange. She was perfectly aware of their little schemes, and although she didn't approve of them, fearing that Ophelia would get herself into more trouble, she was often their accomplice. "I'm starting to run low on waffle batter," she said, drily. "Go and fetch me some, please."

Ophelia needed no persuading to slip into the provisions store. It was freezing cold in there, but she was away from prying eyes. She soothed the scarf, which was getting restless on its peg, checked that no one was around, and then opened the envelope from her great-uncle.

It contained a picture postcard. The caption read, "XXIInd Interfamilial Exhibition," and the postmark dated back more than 60 years. As a worthy family archivist, her great-uncle must have used his contacts to get hold of this card. It was the photograph that interested Ophelia. The black-and-white image, tinted here and there with artificial colors, depicted the exhibitors' displays and the exotic curiosities along the aisles of a massive building. It was like Anima's covered market, but a hundred times more imposing. Pushing her glasses up on her nose, the young girl held the postcard closer to the light. She finally found what

she was looking for: through the building's large windows, almost invisible in the fog outside, stood a headless statue.

For the first time in a long while, Ophelia's glasses colored with emotion. Her great-uncle had just brought her the confirmation of all her hypotheses.

"Ophelia!" called Aunt Rosaline. "Your mother's asking for you!"

At these words, she quickly hid the postcard. The surge of excitement that had overcome her instantly dissipated, to be replaced by frustration. It was even beyond that. The waiting, the endless waiting was digging a hole within her body. Each new day, each new week, each new month made that hole bigger. Ophelia sometimes wondered whether she wouldn't end up falling in on herself.

She took out the fob watch and lifted the cover with utmost care. The poor mechanism was suffering enough as it was, Ophelia couldn't risk any clumsiness. Since she had retrieved it from Thorn's belongings, just before being forcibly repatriated to Anima, the watch had never told the time. Or rather, it told a few too many times at once. All its hands pointed now one way, now another, with no apparent logic—four twenty-two, seven thirty-eight, five past one—and no longer the slightest tick-tock.

Two years and seven months of silence.

Ophelia had received no news from Thorn after his escape. Not a single telegram, not a single letter. She could keep telling herself that he couldn't run the risk of making contact, that he was a man wanted by the law, perhaps by God himself, but it was eating her up inside.

"Ophelia!"

"I'm coming."

She grabbed a pot of waffle batter and left the provisions store. On the other side of the stand stood her mother, in her enormous, flouncy dress.

"My daughter, who finally deigns to leave her bed! About time—any longer and you'd have turned into a bedside table! Merry Tickers, darling. Serve the little ones, would you?"

Her mother indicated the long line of children accompanying her. Ophelia saw among them her brother, sisters, nephews, second cousins, and the sitting-room clock. They weren't that "little" in her eyes. Hector had shot up so much in recent months, he'd more than caught up with Ophelia. Seeing them all like this, with their height, their flaming hair, and their freckles, she sometimes wondered whether she really belonged to the same family.

"I discussed your case with Agatha," Ophelia's mother said, leaning her entire bust over the stand. "Your sister agrees with me, you must think about finding yourself a job. She's spoken about it with Charles, and they both agree to you coming to work at the factory. Just take a look at yourself, my girl! You can't carry on like this. You're so young! Nothing still binds you to . . . you know . . . *him*."

Ophelia's mother had mouthed that last word without actually saying it. No one in the family ever mentioned Thorn, as if it were a shameful subject. In general, no one ever mentioned the Pole. There were days when Ophelia wondered whether all she'd lived through over there was actually real, as though she'd never been a valet, or a vice-storyteller, or a great family reader.

"Do thank Agatha and Charles, Mom, but it's a no. I can't see myself working in lace."

"I can have her with me at the archives," her great-uncle growled into his moustache.

Ophelia's mother pursed her lips so tight, her face looked like bellows. "You have a deplorable influence on her, uncle. The past, the past, always the past! My daughter must think about her future."

"Ah, that!" he said, with irony. "You'd like her to be as conformist as those nice little books in the library, hey? Might as well send her out into the sticks, your kid."

"I would particularly like her to give a favorable impression to the Doyennes and Artemis, just for a change."

Ophelia was so exasperated that she mistakenly handed a waffle to the family clock. It was no use—she could keep repeating to everyone that a Doyenne was not to be trusted, no one listened to her. She would have

liked to warn them about so many more things! About God, in particular. And yet she'd spoken of him to no one; neither to her parents, who endlessly questioned her, nor to Aunt Rosaline, who fretted over her silence, nor to her great-uncle, who was helping her with her research. The whole family knew something had occurred in Thorn's cell—the less informed thinking it was Ophelia who had been imprisoned—but no one had ever obtained the final word from her on this story. She couldn't utter it, not after what she'd discovered about God.

Mother Hildegarde had killed herself because of him.

Baron Melchior had killed for him.

Thorn had almost been killed by him.

The very existence of God was a dangerous truth. For as long as was required, Ophelia would keep the secret.

"I know you're all worrying about me," she finally declared, "but it's *my* life that this is about. I don't have to explain myself to anyone, not even to Artemis, and I don't give a damn what the Doyennes think."

"Much good that will do you, dear girl!"

Ophelia stiffened on seeing a middle-aged woman stealthily approaching the stand. She wore no watch, walked no clock, but sported an extraordinary hat, on top of which a weather vane in the form of a stork was spinning at full speed. Her gold-rimmed spectacles further enlarged two protruding eyes, which watched every move of the Animists in general, and Ophelia in particular. If the Doyennes were the accomplices of God, the Rapporteur was that of the Doyennes.

"Your daughter is a freethinker, my dear Sophie," she said, smiling benevolently at Ophelia's mother. "Every family has to have one! She doesn't want to return to her work at the museum? Let's respect her choice. She doesn't want to work in lace? Let's not force her hand. Let her fly with her own wings . . . Maybe she needs a change of scenery?"

In one movement, the Rapporteur's eyes and weather vane turned to Ophelia. She had to struggle to stop herself from checking that her great-uncle's postcard wasn't poking out from her apron pocket.

"You're encouraging me to leave Anima?" she asked, warily.

“Oh, we’re not encouraging you to do anything at all!” the Rapporteur hastily countered, cutting off Ophelia’s mother, whose mouth was already wide open. “You’re a big girl, now. You’re a free agent.”

This woman definitely lacked subtlety; that was why she’d never be a Doyenne herself.

Ophelia knew only too well that the second she’d board an airship, they would have her followed and keep a close eye on her. She wanted to find Thorn, yes, but she had no intention of leading God to him. At such times, more than ever, she regretted not being able to use mirrors to leave Anima: her power, unfortunately, had its limits.

“Thank you,” she said, once she’d finished distributing the waffles to the children. “I think I’d still rather stay in my room. Merry Tickers, madame.”

The Rapporteur’s smile became strained. “Our dearest mothers are doing you an immense honor—an immense honor, do you hear?—in concerning themselves with a small person like you. So stop with all your little secrets and confide in them. They could help you, and much more than you think.”

“Merry Tickers,” Ophelia repeated, drily. Suddenly, the Rapporteur jerked backwards, as if she had received an electric shock. She stared at Ophelia first with stupefaction, then with indignation, before turning on her heels. She rejoined a phalanx of old ladies in the midst of the procession of clocks. Doyennes. They merely nodded their heads as they listened to the Rapporteur, but the look they directed at Ophelia from a distance was frosty.

“You did it!” Ophelia’s mother exclaimed, furiously. “You used that ghastly power! On the Rapporteur herself!”

“Not deliberately. If the Doyennes hadn’t forced me to leave the Pole, Berenilde could have taught me how to control my claws.” Ophelia had muttered these words while giving an annoyed wipe to the stand. She couldn’t get used to this new power. She’d injured no one up to now—she’d cut no nose, sliced no finger—but if someone caused her to dislike them too much, it was always the same: *something* within her was