



Chapter VI - 9

Silence. A fresh breeze is flowing through the trees, reaching the land from the deepest woods. Over there, the breeze carries the scent of fields, barks, cluster pines, depths. Just like snared waves rejoice when they evade a crevice, the cold breeze shatters through the last trees and spreads over the seashore. All around the wind flows, and spins, and twirls, awakening the shrubs that coat the landscape. Their leaves, hidden in the darkness, swing and shine under the moonlight, as trampolines of light between the Earth and the stars. Wishful, the green breeze now seeks for more, in a last attempt to escape these lands. The ancient stones, as old as time, watch it raise higher over the trampoline, and higher, and higher... until its flight bends down, and silently falls back on water. Behind the gust, a brave new companion is just about to come to shake the clearing. The stones had seen many, during their long existence. Silver tendrils of light, entangled in the dark, revolving towards the sky with inextricable, astral geometries. There was a time, long ago, when these stones used to welcome the incoming gusts... to support them... to warn them... to stop them... but it was all in vain. Now, they just witness their leaps, one by one, in a ceaseless procession. Silently, at night over the cliff, some of the stones may shed a tear, for, after all, they have never dreamt.

A rivulet of saltwater flows down through the damp algae up to the surface of the ocean. Emphasized by an incoming breeze, it takes some time for the conversation to take back its rhythm.

“Do you think this is what we are looking for?” – asks Ujana.

“I don’t know, but... well, it perfectly fits your story.”

“Maybe... But how can we find a key with this shape? I’ve never seen a key for a book and this is even thinner than a nail!”

“I know, it’s strange but there’s nothing we can do about it. You said they were looking for a key and this is perfect for the scope... if only books needed keys, of course.”

“So, what do we do now?”

“Now? Now we move on and quickly: we’ve spent too much time here and someone is waiting for you at the lighthouse.”

“Let’s hope we find a way through all those plants... I’m a little bit scared that it’s all dark, there can be animals...”

“It will be all OK, don’t worry. Just take your things and let’s go. I’ll keep the book; I have enough space in my bag.”

From a dune, sheltered by bushes and a comforting darkness, the white seagull follows the two silhouettes as they step away from the cliff. Curiosity pushes him to peer every now and then, only distracted by the wind and the fragrance of blooming plants.

The seashore looks creepier while you leave the water behind and head to the woods. With each and every step you take, you feel the wet, cold sand moving under your feet. More than one hour has passed since you set off for the lighthouse, and the late time starts pressing on your eyebrows. This notwithstanding, a river of adrenaline and sense of duty spurs you to give everything to the cause. However, how far still is the destination and how long the journey are not clear at the moment. You only have one common goal, which forges an unbreakable bond with the child, and this is everything you need.

Meanwhile, as you navigate your thoughts, you open the way for the other side of the clearing. The vegetation at the boundary

is dense, hostile and thorny. The view from here suggests that there must be a way to reach the other side... but where? People must have traced it for their walks during the day, even if this place looks wild and unfriendly, so the true question is how to find it in the dark. Only a few meters away, you keep Ujana in constant eye contact, to be sure he doesn't get lost, or vanishes, between the bushes. He seems intent to find another path: a path that looks better than the one you are following, which is not really promising. Certainly his stature does not help spot a good direction, but this does not discourage him to try harder.

A few minutes have passed already but you have entered the vegetation by no more than a few meters. You could already see, just ahead of the path, a couple of good passages, but their trajectory is interrupted by a sudden turn which prevents any further planning. You take one of them and hope for the best, while Ujana follows your steps just behind. Under the shoes, the soft sand leaves room for sharp rocks and tangled roots, then again for new sand, with no clear pattern to guide your steps. At the very least, the protean territory you were exploring gave you a sense of the distance, both in space and time. The natural gate to this dark green realm is left far behind soon, covered to the eye by numerous plants, protrusive crags and ubiquitous obscurity. However, slowly but uninterrupted, you penetrate the vegetation to a large extent, with no dead ends to undermine your drive. The passage twisted and turned across the shrubs, here clearer, there thicker, with multiple ramifications towards the water, on the right, and through the crags, on the left. Perhaps, you think, moving closer to water is safer and gives the chance of stepping over the rocks, to circumvent the overgrown maze. On the other hand, this strategy makes you feel even more trapped, with less line of vision and fewer opportunities. Hence, you choose to remain in the center, waiting for a better motivation to take another way. Motivation that was not long in coming.

“Hey! Why don't we go up there” – shouts Ujana, pointing at a high, rocky formation you were about to pass.

“What? Where?”

“There, on that giant rock. Maybe from there we can spot a good passage! Also, everything here is damp and I’m all wet, sure I’ll get sick this time...”

“Oh come on, it’s just water, you’ll be fine. And for the rock... yeah, seems like a good plan! Actually” – you remark – “I saw it but there’s no way we can get to the top from this point.”

“Are you sure? Have you seen here, behind this stone?”

“No, what did you find?”

“There’s a passage between these plants. I think it goes around the cliff, maybe it gets us up to the top. Maybe people use it during the day... Why don’t you come here and have a look?”

Impressed by his resolution, it was really nice to feel you could count on him. When you reach that point, a few meters behind, it was also hard to see how you could have missed it. Between the two plants, whose branches had probably been cut on the two sides, you see a small open space that looked too clean to be natural. Wooden sticks were laying on the ground, some of them partially covered by leaves and sand, some leaning onto a flat stone. Apparently, few smaller stones had even been displaced, since their position looked too regular to be due to chance. Someone had definitely been there recently, which, in a sense, was quite reassuring. However, before you can even point it out, you spot something that wakes up your attention: a white and red sign, carefully painted on the wall of the cliff.

“Look U, there’s a sign there! You’re great, we found it!”

“What, a sign? I don’t understand... I don’t see anything.”

“Yeah there’s a sign, look, it’s like a flag but it signals the way!”

“Hmm, no, I don’t see it but hey... cool!” – replies the boy with a happy expression – “Shall we follow it?”

“Wouldn’t you?” – you laugh sonorously.

The passage turns around the rocky formation with a sinuous path, carved between two round hills and the surrounding vegetation. As you step over more and more flat stones, heavily drowned in the shadow, you realize that the path had to be largely

artificial: something, you think, that was very encouraging in this moment. A few more, and you both get to the top: a nice, safe, empty clearing facing the ocean. The height from the first red sign was about ten meters, enough for a better understanding of the situation. In front of you, as you step on this little plateau, the view of the ocean overwhelms you completely. All around, you see the profile of the treetops, the black shape of the hills and the mountains behind, and the warm, red light shining from Ujana's house in the background. It felt so inconvenient to have more urgent things to care about than laying there and enjoy this moment. Instead, Ujana seems to have a totally different attitude: he literally jumps on the grass from a round rock and runs to the edge of the cliff, searching for a way out of that maze. That was really impressive. You join him on the brink, paying attention to the slippery plants and stones on the ground. He mumbles some weird strategy and considerations, which you easily ignore for the good of both. However, it takes really nothing to realize that, even though the plants were spread all over the area, the end of this tortuous passage was actually close. Perhaps, you think, you would have reached it anyway in a few minutes, simply keeping the same route. Of course, who could believe it down there.

"Have you seen it?" – says the boy, timidly.

"Yes, I think so too."

"That's great, no? We can make it!"

"Yes that's great, you're right. I'm happy to leave this place."

"Yeah, me too! I hope we'll find them soon."

"Sure, the lighthouse must be near now. I even feel like I see something, like a tower, under that big cloud: how far can it be? Ah, doesn't matter, let's keep moving and we'll find someone."

"Yes, please, I miss them... and my mother too. I can see she's still awake: she's turned on more lights while we were walking."

"True, I saw them too" – you emphasize, turning your look at the hill – "Anyway, let's go now, we've got a long way to go!"

"Yes, sounds good! But what were you looking at?"

"Me? There at the lights, why?"

"Hmm, that's weird."

“Why?”

“Because my place is on this other hill...”

“...”

“... and no one lives on that one.”

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“What’s happening? I don’t understand...”

“Yeah, that’s weird. Are you sure that no one lives on that hill? Maybe it’s just another country house, no?”

“...”

“Fine, then I don’t know what it is... but they don’t look like from a rich country house, with a garden and a swimming pool.”

“No, definitely no.”

“Also, did you notice? They’re not exactly in the same point. They look like two or three groups, all quite close to each other...”

“...”

“... and they’re even oscillating, do you see it too?”

“Yes, I can see it well now...”

“Wow.” – you let yourself go in a display of stupor – “Maybe you were right that they were moving... At least, these lights are vibrating much more than before. This is interesting.”

“I’m sorry” – says Ujana, frowning – “but I don’t see anything interesting here.”

“Why not? Weren’t you the one surprised?”

“Yes but, come on, that’s another hill, it’s not my place. I don’t care if they’re moving or not, or if it’s another optical illusion. Can we please leave this place and go find my dad?”

“Sure, just a moment,” – you add calmly – “have a look once more: do you see that they are exactly between those two hills?”

“Yes, I see it. So what?”

“Is there anything between those hills?”

“Hmm, maybe. In that point no, nothing, only pasture... but there is the town in that direction, beyond the hills. Why?”

“The town? Isn’t the town on that other side, along the sea?”

“No, it isn’t. There you take the main road that brings here” – he explains – “but the town is actually behind them. There’s also a small path in the woods, which connects it to the sea.”

“Aha, I knew it!” – you shout happily – “Then, my friend, I have a new explanation... and I’m sure you will like it!”

“What now, please... I just want to go away.”

“Come on, listen: those are not lights in a garden.”

“I don’t know what they are, and honestly I don’t care” – he shrugs his shoulders showily in a surly manner.

“Look, they are not from a house but people with flashlights! They’re coming directly from town to find you, can you imagine?”

“What... people, you say?” – he opens his eyes wide shut.

“Yes, people! Your people, your friends, everyone! They are coming in groups along that path, retracing your movements... or maybe they are heading to the lighthouse, or both if they split. Well, surely they’ll split: the more they are, the easier for you to find them. Can you imagine, aren’t you happy?”

“Seriously, you think that all those lights are people and that they are coming to save me?” – he asks, visibly touched.

“Of course! And you know what? Also the lights from your place had to be people. I’m sure they’re keeping your mother company while the others search the area” – you emphasize – “She’s not alone, you’re not alone, and they all wait for you to come back. This is so incredibly beautiful, isn’t it?”

“I cannot believe this is true.”

“It is, U! And guess what? What we need to do now is simply find them, and they will bring us home. There’s even no need to go to the lighthouse!”

“But they don’t know where we are...”

“Ah, that’s true” – you murmur – “you’re right.”

“...”

“Anyway” – you add with authoritative voice – “our new goal is to let them know that we are here, or to reach one of those groups as soon as possible. Then, they’ll take care of the rest.”

“So the question is how to reach them, right?”

“Exactly!”

“But...”

“Yeah... I see what you mean: we can’t reach them from here. But we’ll find a way, don’t worry. By the way, do you know where that road goes?”

“What road?”

“The road they’re walking on now, from town.”

“That is not a road, it’s a narrow passage in the woods... anyway yes, I think I know where it goes. It goes down that hill, there on the right, then it twists and follows the valley (we cannot see it now) and then runs along the seashore to the lighthouse.”

“How far is it from the water?”

“That path? Hmm... Two hundred? Three hundred maybe?”

“I see, that’s a lot for us, what a pity.”

“Yes, it’s a lot... but there’s a point where the road crosses a tiny bridge, and this bridge is very close to the shore and easily reachable. At least during the day, now I’m not sure how it...”

“Really, a bridge? That’s great, we have a chance to meet there! And if not, we proceed to the lighthouse. They are still pretty far though, I think we’ll get there earlier... which is better, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I hope so. I can’t believe it, it would be a miracle!”

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Motivated by the discovery, you leave the stars behind and quick-paced head back to the ground. The narrow passage that descends from the plateau is much easier to pass through now, despite the darkness and the sharp stones. There, as you get down on the sandy terrain, tall and tangled plants make it even more claustrophobic than you remember. This notwithstanding, the roadmap to escape the wild maze seems clear now, allowing you to focus on the next steps. With this picture in mind, you take one of the wet, wooden sticks you spot on the clearing and proceed through the plants. Ujana does the same with a smaller stick, likely useless, more for emulation than for a need: Yours, in particular, had an interesting shape that captured your imagination: a slender branch, perfectly sized for your body, with only few scars on the surface. Its bark had been treated and polished with a knife, while

its tip was carved in a sharp wedge shape: better against animals than for stability... but certainly enough to make you content.

A quick look at Ujana, who was playing with his new toy, and you are both ready to enter the wild, shadowed maze of brambles. The direction was impressed in mind and, luckily, the intricate path keeps you on the right way - not really intuitive, which makes you proud of the detour on the plateau. Soon you are already out of the jungle, and you can breathe again fresh air from the ocean. Turning back, you see the large wall of untamed plants and the gentle cliff, which surmounted that strip of wild land. "Must be very easy with daylight" – you think, but now it really makes you happy to be on the other side. Moreover, as extra motivation, you see no other obstacles before the next turn.

The seaboard ahead is calm, safe and open. You couldn't wish for more in that condition, so you take a deep breath to enjoy the view. The atmosphere was charged with enthusiasm: a clear route to follow, no more distractions along the way and a whole crowd of citizens coming to rescue him as a *deus ex machina*. What a nice feeling, after all the scary moments you just passed through. The only thing that was missing was the lighthouse, but Ujana, with the charismatic voice of a lost child, reassures you that it is not far anymore. After all, likely you will never get there if you manage to meet the citizens. Probably you will simply find that bridge, as he suggested, and wait for them in that spot. This and other considerations dance around in your mind, as you leave the vegetation and take the first steps along the coastline.

The wind had progressively faded out, the more you entered the new shore: maybe because of the downy sand hill with plants, or because of the woods peeping out on your left. The ocean still looked majestic instead, with a large, bright moon surrounded by graceful clouds. Cherished in this sweet environment, the only element out of place, and time, is the lonely child: not even you, who are already one with nature. After a few more seconds of respectful silence, he reaches you trotting with his clumsy rod and explodes in an avalanche of comments.

“We made it, we made it!” – he shouts – “Didn’t we? We made it, I’m so happy! I was really scared, you know? I didn’t want to distract you but I really didn’t know what to do there. I couldn’t even see where we were going! How could you make it instead? You were so good, it seemed you knew the place perfectly, it was impossible... and all those plants were so wet, sticky and thorny, I didn’t believe it would be so hard to walk through. Fortunately we didn’t hurt ourselves” – continues Ujana, relieved; you keep listening, taking another peek at the cuts on your hands, lightly bleeding – “and you took the best path: you looked so focused and it was like magic, I just had to follow you and you brought us here... You are so good!”

“Thanks, you’re kind but it was nothing special, really.”

“No no, it’s true, you are a hero!” – he goes on, unstoppable – “Also, now maybe I can ask you that question: do you think there was a better way between the plants? I saw a few from the hill but I didn’t want to break your...”

“...” – you take a deep breath and try to answer.

“... concentration, and I just wanted to go away as soon as possible, you know... Also, I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry for how I replied to you. I thought about it the whole time while we were walking and I hope you know I’m really sorry. I was very worried and I couldn’t wait there longer or listen, so I did not talk well... I hope you understand and you can...”

“Oh, but you don’t have to explain yourself for...”

“... no no, really, I behaved badly and I want you to know that I’m very sorry. You were so kind with me: you let me rest, showed me what you discovered on the book, found this passage, and then you saw the lights and understood what’s happening... how could I make it without you? You’re like a hero!”

“Come on, what are you saying! I’m only doing what I must to bring you back home and look, you did well too... You even spotted that hidden passage... it’s thanks to you if we are safe!”

“Really, you think so?”

“Of course, don’t you see it? If we’re here, it’s only thanks to you” – you smile, catching a sad irony in your own words – “so you should feel even more motivated to move on.”

"I am! I'm very motivated to find them, I want to run and get there as soon as possible! And I want to help you: you've been so kind with me, can I do something for you?"

"For me?" – you laugh – "How!"

"Yes! I can run further to see where we're going, come back and you decide, or I can carry something: my bag is empty, I have a lot of space and I feel super!"

"Thanks but there's no need, really. You would get tired again and I can easily carry it, it's not heavy at all" – you add, hiding a bit of effort after all the travel.

"At least I can carry the book, that is very heavy... Look, we can share it: I carry it for some time and then you take it back?" – he urges, taking off his knapsack.

"Hehe, no thanks, there's no need for that... and it's better if I keep it. It's heavy for you and I think it's safer in here" – you add, pointing at your back – "If your relatives were carrying it to the lighthouse it means it's not only valuable but also important for them... so we'd better take care of it too."

"OK, you're right. I don't understand this attention though: it's big, golden... whatever, but in the end it's just a book, isn't it?"

"Maybe it's a gift from your ancestors, or maybe they were going to meet someone to return it... I don't know, there are many explanations and none really makes sense" – you both laugh – "but at least we have a lot to talk about now."

"Oh yes, we do!" – says Ujana, trotting around – "So, how can I help you? I want to help you, I want to help you!"

"Really, thanks but there's nothing to worry about. Let's keep walking and we'll get to the bridge soon."

"But I want to! Can I carry other things? You had a bag full of stuff, I remember it so don't lie. I can carry a few things..."

"I already said no, thanks. It's fine, let's move on and chat about something else."

"..."

"Hmm?"

"I feel useless, you do everything alone..."

“Oh boy, but I’m only carrying a book!” – you comment amused – “All right... look, if you really want to help so much, there is something you can do for us!”

“Really?? Tell me, I’ll do my best, everything you like!”

“Good. First, chill down, you’re too exuberant!” – you stress with a huge smile.

“Done! I’m calm. Super, super calm.”

“...”

“...”

“Good. Then, what you can do, if you like, is telling me other stories about you, or about this book, or your family... everything you want. I like listening and we will enjoy the walk to the bridge. Can you do that for me?”

“Stories? Of course, I like telling stories! My friends always tell me that sometimes I talk too much so yeah, what story would you like to hear?” – he asks with a thrilled smile – “I can tell you about my family if you like! Or about the book, why not... but, well, for that... I think you already know more than I do.”

“That’s fine, you already said you don’t know more” – you stress to make him feel at ease, and to reassure yourself that he was telling the truth – “So yes, why don’t you tell me something about your family? I’m curious, especially since I’ll meet them soon” – you emphasize, with quite a sense of humor.

“All right, so, where to start...” – he mumbles – “OK, as you know I live over there, on that round hill” – he points again at some random hill among many others – “with my mom and my dad. My grandpa lives with grandma on the other side of the same hill. Well, more or less, anyway very close: I visit them every day, they are so nice with me, I really love them.”

“Nice!”

“Yes! Then... my mom! My mom is a housekeeper. She takes care of everything at home, she cooks, cleans, washes clothes, harvests vegetables in the garden... all those boring things that no one wants to do. I wonder how she can do it all day but, when I ask her, she just smiles and nods, smiles and nods. She says, ‘one day you will understand, my boy!’ and returns to her things. I

really don't understand, and I don't like when she tells me that I don't understand because I'm too young. I am not too young."

"..."

"Am I too young?"

"No, you are not. Just..."

"Exactly, you see? You agree then. But I don't know how to explain it to her, she doesn't believe me. Well, she believes in me. She always says she loves me, and that I'm the most important thing she has in her life. She always says it when my relatives come to visit us, or family friends, or the doctor. But I don't understand what she means, so I look at her without replying."

"She must love you so much, what you're saying is beautiful."

"She loves me, she's very caring and does her best to make me happy. I'm very grateful to her, even if, maybe, I don't show it enough. She always asks me if I feel good, if I need something, if I want to talk to her, but I don't really have much more to tell her. Sometimes I look at her and words don't come out, I would like to share my emotions but I'm shy or afraid that I'm not interesting, or that she thinks I'm too young to understand... so sometimes I stay silent, and look at her in the eyes: she looks back at me, seconds pass and the content of her questions maybe does not matter anymore. Something else is happening, which draws our attention, and we turn to it and enjoy it together. That is so much more beautiful than running after conversations that do not really matter much, and you miss the chance of feeling the beauty that is around you."

"U, this is... I'm impressed, what you say is very deep. Hard to believe it comes from a boy, really, I'm saying it in the best way. Also, I can relate to it completely, and I'm sorry this caused some friction with your mom."

"No, it is not friction, it's simply a little bit sad when I see disappointment in her eyes. I wish I could do anything to make her happy, but I don't know why... I simply can't."

"Don't be sad, it's not your fault. Maybe sometimes she has high expectations, or maybe she's a little bit apprehensive and this is how she manifests it. Really, don't worry: she is a mom, and all moms want to see their children happy!"

“Maybe. But I’m also worried for her. Lately she was often lost in thoughts, and once I saw her cry in the garden. She said she had something in her eye but no, it was not true, and she didn’t want to talk to me. I’m not that stupid. I went to take some water for her and, by the time I came back, she was already fine, she thanked me and went away. I’m afraid I’m disappointing her and she doesn’t want to tell me the truth.”

“Are you crazy?” – you reply on instinct, astonished – “this is impossible. Don’t you ever say it again. Maybe it is a stressful period with her jo... relatives, or the season is harder this year for the crop. Anyway, adults sometimes are nervous for no particular reason, so you can get used to it... unfortunately.”

“But she is my mom.”

“I know, I know, but try not to worry too much... anyway, tell me something also about your dad! We will meet him soon and I want to know what type of person he is. Tell me something about him, whatever you like!” – you ask happily, to change topic and avoid a breakdown, and to figure out his situation at home.

“My dad? OK... my dad is... where to start?” – he mumbles.

“Well, this is surprising...”

“What? No no, wait, I know where to start.”

“No... look there.”

“What?”

“That round bay, over there.”

Only a few hundred meters after you left the cliff, the shore bent on the right and on the left again, interrupted by another strip of wild vegetation. Once you reach the other side, a whole new landscape is disclosed to your eyes. Several tiny bays, with round, sandy dunes and rocky cliffs, sprinkled by other small patches of green. A few bays in front of you, what looked like the mouth of a river. Beyond that, another cliff more prominent than the others, dominated by a shady, old-fashioned tower.