



Chapter XV - 9

In the animal kingdom, down on Earth, newborns struggle to explore, and exploit, their immediate surroundings. They climb, fall, run, fall again, challenge each other to the limits of their possibilities, to trace a line that defines their limits and capabilities: a life line, which ultimately establishes what they are, and what they were. Watching over them, their parents may provide the shelter and example they need, to stand out in their environment. Whatever, so as to ensure the preservation of their treasure. Meanwhile, still on Earth, the plant kingdom follows the example of their fellows, sheltering their newborns until they bloom, fall and start their own life anew. Startling, since the start of their journey, living beings are rarely exposed unprepared to this harsh competition, armored with the smartest strategies that were sharpened through the ages. Unfortunately, none of them will live long enough to admire the beauty of this cycle. In this deceptive game of life, where only the fittest survive, the only goal of the elders is to pass their knowledge to the offspring. By the same token, the goal of their progeny is to grow and bequeath their legacy to the unaware descendants.

Astonished, you follow the man in silence, retracing his story and the whole adventure: his last words had touched a sensible chord deep inside you. There, in the dark, dancing shadows were following your steps, revealed by the red flame of his oil lamp.

A few seconds later, you find yourself again on the first floor. You stare at the doors and the wooden corridor, as if an eternity had passed since the last time you stepped on it. Indeed, despite the throbbing wound over your temple, you do not feel the same person anymore. You throw a quick look inside the room, where Ujana was still laying, when his father directs the lamp towards the door and encourages you to move. Unhesitatingly, he nods at the stairs and continues the ascent on the second flight. The upper level looked similar to the first, with wooden interiors and two rooms. One of them, corresponding to the one where you had been ambushed, was closed and shadowed, while the other one was left ajar, its door surrounded by all sorts of tools. Once again, the man encourages you to follow him, showing the way with a wave of his hand. As you approach him through the corridor, until the bolstered door overlooking the balcony, he throws one last, resigned look before unbolting it. What you see from that moment leaves you stunned, and speechless.

The whole strip of land, connecting the lighthouse to the wooded foothills, was crowded by tens of demonstrators in the most peculiar outfits. Performers and farmers, men and women, young and old: all were yelling and gesticulating from a distance, towards somewhere up above on the tower. All around them, the clearance was full of heraldic flags displaying different coats of arms: a white triangle on a blood red background, a rounded orange arrow similar to a smile, a white waxing crescent moon on a green and white disk, colorful and wavy squares, a white crosslike symbol on a blue disk, also a rainbow open ring.

Far behind, from the dark slopes of the distant hills, luminous clouds and wakes seem to make their way through the beat trails, pointing to the same clearance. There, a unified body of protesters shouts and chants, but the distance and their gibberish make the

meaning obscure. Then, as some of these people see you step on the balcony, they start yelling with a peculiar dialect, followed by many other confused voices.

“What... what is this?” – you stutter, utterly stunned.

“*This* is the end of our journey. The doom that never had to come.”

“What does it mean ‘the end’? And what do all these people want from us?”

The man lays his hands on one of the massive merlons, right next to you, staring at the valley.

“Us.”

A second, ghastly chill runs down your spine, and a sense of fainting bedims your mind.

“You know? My spouse’s father made a promise to me, before we separated to find my son: ‘we’ll find him, and we’ll meet again, at night, at the lighthouse’. That was several hours ago, next to the Ensnaring bridge” – he continues, gazing at the horizon – “and here he is, to keep his promise as always.”

Astounded, you follow his look across the multitude of protesters until you catch sight of him, laying handcuffed and unconscious on a small cart.

“He... he saved us.”

“I know. He was a great man; may the Lord have mercy of his soul.”

“What does it mean ‘he was’? Is he...?”

“Come, follow me” – he moves forward.

“...” – unable to oppose resistance, you hesitantly chase him up to the other side of the balcony.

“One day” – he commences the narration, looking far beyond the crowd – “almost a century ago, a longstanding peace reigned

prosperous across the lands of Janua. In a few decades, Janua established itself as a dominant force in the maritime landscape, and our commercial and cultural influence extended much further than our territorial boundaries.”

“Janua?” – you ask perplexed.

“Yes. Everything was magnificent and glorious, and the eyes of the Lord seemed to watch over our lands... until that day, when the flawed nature of the human race made us lose the way... and we lost ourselves in an internecine war. The transcendent... against the immanent.”

“...”

“Our longstanding peace, in our beloved city, was devoured by the war between the two factions. One of them is yelling there, in front of your eyes. The other one, the major, still dominates the land despite the bloody rivalry. We” – he continues – “belong to the latter. This is why these two incidents, the internecine dispute and our personal tragedy, became intertwined. Their cursed faction took advantage of this pretext, and exploited it accusing my son of possession, to corroborate the political attrition in Janua. Only a small group from our side decided to oppose such an infamous trend. They helped me save him” – he continues – “sailing towards distant lands, where we would arrange our resistance. Everything was carefully planned: we waited for today, for the celebrations in town, to gather at the lighthouse, where a complicit vessel would take us on board. We brought only the essential, food for a few days and all the available grappling hooks, to take the tower and prevent them from trying the same. Things did not have to go this way.”

“We... who?” – you ask, scared and confused by the unabated sequence of events.

“The men and the women you encountered in the room, when we... well, you remember” – he lowers his look in sign of apology – “We are in seven, nine including you and my son. We will have a chance to meet them soon.”

“Where are they now? I didn’t see anyone inside.”

“They are still here... in the tower, in some of the rooms and balconies of the three floors. As you can see, it is not possible to

leave the building: immediately after you lost consciousness, the first groups of protesters reached the clearance and blocked the access. Then, one after the other, they all lined up on the cliff.”

“So why don’t we call the police and disperse the crowd?”

“The police, you say” – murmurs the man, leaning forward with his elbows on a merlon – “Look... can you still see my old man, on that crumbling cart over there?”

“Yes, I think I see him... yes, why?”

“Good. Then, please have a look at the surrounding crowd. *That* is the police.”

1

“Yet, worry no more my friend, all is not lost” – he whispers, breaking the silence – “Let me show what we devised to find a way out... our last hope.”

Without saying a word, you throw a last gaze at the multitude of protesters, with their costumes and waving standards, and reenter the tower. The man opens one of the doors, peers inside and closes it back, then he shows the way for the uppermost level.

When you reach the top of the staircase, guided by his steps and the feeble light, you finally find his companions busy with their own activities: three men and three women, all of different ages and look. One man, the eldest, standing at the center next to the lighting system, was probably helping and coordinating all the others. As soon as he sees you come, he draws everyone else’s attention and warmly invites them to greet you.

“Sir.” – emphatically starts the man to Ujana’s father, before turning his chest to you – “Welcome. On behalf of all of us, I do apologize for the accident.”

“It is all right, thanks. He explained to me everything.”

“Thank you for your kind words and for your time.” – says the father – “Now please, let us all come back to our duties.”

Nodding, the old man takes his leave and returns to his position. Ujana's father looks at you with a pleasant smile and invites you to follow him outside. Before you can even say a word, he begins to talk with a calm and soft voice.

"They are all special persons; the Lord has been benevolent with them: I know you would love them. Her, for instance" – he points at a woman – "I saw her offer her loaf to that young man, who's sitting there, next to the window. He is sick now, and, yet, he is motivating and encouraging all of us to resist. That woman over there, instead" – he continues – "is the mastermind of our escape... the last hope. She has devised a brilliant plan... but, you know, the divine design is unfathomable. Hence, the invaluable help of our two siblings, who are studying the papers and elaborating a strategy towards a diplomatic solution.

"I am... impressed... but why does the police endorse this revolt? Is there something..." – you find the courage to ask – "anything you did... that was against the law?"

"Us? No, of course" – replies the man, offended by such an insinuation – "but I understand your concern. Look, why don't you take some time and find the answer yourself, if you wish? In the meantime, if you will excuse me, I would go back inside and help them find a diplomatic solution. Yet..."

"..."

"Yet, you will not find the answer between the gelid walls of this tower, nor within the fires of heather and gorse that are lit on its top. The answer you are looking for" – he whispers – "lays already inside you, my friend, and you only."

With these words, he turns his back on you and walks away, serenely, leaving you alone with your concerns.

There, leaning on the merlons, you contemplate the vastness of the ocean, the sky at night, the halo of the moon between the clouds, the sparkling reflections on the surface of the water. A cold breeze ruffles your hair, and reminds you of the long, long journey that had led you upon the lighthouse.

“What did he mean?” – you ponder – “Nothing makes sense here, and I wonder who’s telling the truth.... Just look at them” – you stare at the clearance, full to the brim of fanatics – “they’re shouting and threatening us, what for? What did we do to deserve it? Those people, down there, seem driven by ethical, political, religious beliefs, or fears... but why don’t they see the emptiness that they encircle? Even this man here: did he really end up in this situation because of his lord?”

A long, silent breeze from the ocean traverses the shore.

“Time has carved these drives by pruning the tree of life, and they are the way they are because they reproduce themselves... but there’s no reason now in finding a deeper reason to this shouting. Even good and evil don’t exist...” – you turn your eyes to the man, walking around inside the room – “so why don’t we ignore them? Fine, they simplify our everyday life... but is it really the case? Wouldn’t it be better to call them legal or illegal, instead? I don’t know what cruel crime they committed... but why should it be considered *evil*? Crimes are not evil: in the long term, they may only be inconvenient for society. We can condemn all terrible acts, but why aren’t we aware that sentences are but another form of violence - exerted by society?”

Slowly, you make a few steps along the balcony.

“Of course, I see why people like them don’t see it this way... and, to some extent, I’m glad they don’t, otherwise society would collapse. Ignorance is crucial for the persistence of our condition. Take these citizens down there: are they really aware of the reason why they protest? Are they moved by fears, or is there an actual, free purpose behind their action? And if so, is their need real, or is it due to their fears, passed down through the centuries to the forthcoming generations? And what about *him*, confabulating behind these decrepit windows: does he truly believe he’s free to choose his actions, or does he live abandoned in his lord’s will?

Does he truly believe that we're all free, even though, ultimately, everything is already scripted by his almighty?"

A second breeze shakes the land and lifts your spirit.

"Freedom. Does everyone, here, in the middle of this protest, really believe that we are free? After all, what does it mean to be free? Do plants have free will? I don't think anyone would say so, since they can't move. Also, most people believe humans have a privileged role between living beings. And how about animals, which lay in between: where should we trace the line between free will and instinct, especially now that technology makes it blurred? Is there a point where we move from one to the other? And what about self-awareness: is it necessary for free will, or is the other way around true? Why don't we say that plants, mushrooms, bacteria, all of them have minor forms of freedom? Accepting that a stone is free would be a huge leap ahead in our relationship with the natural world: pollution would be seen as mass murder, house fabrication as enslavement. Think about it, seriously" – you tell yourself – "why are we so confident that only we are free? Because we think? What does it mean to *think*?"

A dull sound of machineries distracts you for a moment.

"Everything we know comes from our senses... the same senses that experience our external world... is there a difference, then, between inside and outside? How can we be sure that we're free to think, if what we see is only its outcome? Even now that I'm thinking, how can I say that I'm free if everything I feel is the feeling of the words that would match my thought if it were to be spoken by another person? Maybe plants do the same, and the only difference is our representational power... our ability to reflect and simulate the environment in our brain. Even more, does it really exist such a separation, between external and internal worlds? Probably yes, since our mind can simulate potential futures before we take action, also in conditions where senses seem to be useless. But even then, thoughts always happen behind

the scenes: when we talk, think, plan... we're only aware of a minimal part of the huge processing that occurs in our body. What makes us different from a falling stone, then?" – you wonder, staring at those thrown by the crowd – "We both behave according to physical rules, still largely unexplored, whether we refer to free fall or free will. Even with probabilistic mechanisms, is there room for a world where everything is not scripted?"

A wooden door bangs onto the wall animated by a draft.

"I don't know, probably it makes no sense, but maybe all this distressing is nothing but irrelevant... maybe, in the tiny portion of reality that we perceive, it's convenient to think of ourselves as free. Maybe, due to the incompleteness, it's even impossible to test whether freedom exists or it's only an illusion... so why not to live our story, our illusions, as well as we can? Is there a way I can contribute to make my own better?"

Following the wind, you reenter the room and head to Ujana's father, who was still discussing with the siblings, surrounded by the scrolls and the papers that were laid on a big trunk. As soon as he sees you, he murmurs to them some indistinct words and approaches you at the center of the room, next to the torches.

"I would like to help you."

"That is wonderful to hear" – he replies – "though I had not questioned it for a moment. Come, let me show you the plan."

As he moves towards the stairs, just before you left the room, you accidentally catch sight of the ancient tome, which was laying open, underneath a scroll. Despite the temptation, you resolutely grab one of the oil lamps and rapidly catch up with the man.

Surprisingly, the dark staircase and the corridors looked much more friendly now, and you navigate them with no effort nor awe. There, Ujana's room was half-closed and seemingly silent, but you choose not to linger any longer. A few seconds later you are already in the main hall at the ground floor, which was still full of

standards and torches and hundreds of old books. The man leaves his oil lamp on the rustic table and moves towards one of the corners, the one, you remember, with the pile of grappling hooks. To your greatest surprise, he moves them over, together with the standards and the heavy bookcase, revealing a small, hidden door, carved within the stony walls.

7

The contour of the door was smooth and solid, sign that it was planned together with the building. The man takes an oil lamp and a torch and commences the descent through the darkness. Speechless, you glimpse once more at the hall before entering the narrow corridor. After a dozen of high steps, down the winding staircase, a wooden portal in the stone opens out onto one side of the steep cliff. The location was secreted by rocky formations and the precipitous profile of the strip of land, so that no one could see you from the clearance. In front of you, a few meters below and far from the slope, a large vessel was swaying anchored in the bay, together with a pair of small canoes secured to its sides.

“Impressive...” – you murmur in a thread of voice.

“That was our way out. We were waiting to set sail at sunset.”

“I’m sorry... but what about now? Can’t we use it?”

“Maybe, but now this is not our intention. We are studying a way to solve the situation using diplomacy, with no risks and harm on either side. We are confident that we can sign an agreement to settle the situation.”

“I see, that would be ideal. So, why did you bring me here?”

“To show you everything we have, so that we can collaborate at the best of our possibilities” – he comments, while walking along the narrow gallery carved in the cliff – “Please, have a look down there” – he points at the vessel with the torch – “can you tell me what you see?”

“What I see...” – you mutter compliantly – “I see a large, unoccupied ship... a few small boats attached... some dangerous

rocks that emerge from the water... a lot of... whatever, on board and... a few ropes that go somewhere from the..."

"Perfect, that is all we need. This is our backup plan, in case it takes time to find an agreement between the parties."

"..."

"We cannot maneuver the vessel in this condition, none of us has experience. We stipulated a deal with the sailor, who was willing to escort us... but since I lost my son, I refused to get on board and leave. I left my father-in-law in the woods and ran here, to inform everyone and plead that man to wait, but he refused... he refused my money, he refused my prayers... it was too risky for him to wait here, he knew someone would find us, eventually."

"That is terrible."

"As you know, my old man was captured while searching for my son... he gave his life for him... and all my other fellows refused to get on board and leave me here... That is why, although he does not know it, we owe everything to them."

"I understand."

"So, here we are now, we must resist and find a solution. A formal deal will be ready soon but, in case it takes time to the authorities to sign it, *this* is our solution" – he goes on, with renewed energy and enthusiasm – "We wedged some provisions in the vessel, which should be sufficient for a few days, and the sailor accepted to leave it here. This should allow us to carry on, in addition to those we already moved to the tower."

"That is great..." – you murmur – "but do you really believe things can take so long? Authorities will intervene tomorrow, if there's no way to settle it, don't you think?"

"We cannot know at the moment" – replies the man with firm voice, turning his look to the horizon – "and we must be ready for the worst. Anyway, do you see the problem now?"

"The problem? I'm afraid I see many, actually."

"The main problem is that we cannot leave the tower and reach the vessel during the day, this is too dangerous, and we do not know their intentions. Hence, we must find a way to enter the vessel without being seen from whoever camps on the clearance."

"I don't think swimming or climbing this cliff is safe either."

“Exactly. That is why we secured those ropes to the mainmast of the vessel. They are not there to help the vessel to stand the waves, but as a bridge between the tower and the provisions.”

“Seriously?” – you shout in awe – “I see... in the night they are invisible, and during the day no one will... wait... that is over fifty meters long, how can anyone use it to transport food? Do you want me to...?”

“No, of course not, that would be a suicide. Our strategist had a brilliant idea: she found a very large basket in the ship, which we can hang to the rope. A person can hide inside and slowly drag himself between the two ends.”

“Wow, this is ingenious... I don’t think we’ll need it but if...”

“I don’t think anyone will come to save us” – he adds, with sad emphasis – “Anyway, since this is just about...”

A tremendous din distracts your attention from the plan, followed by a growing clamor raising from the clearance above. On instinct, you immediately find a shelter under the stony gallery and wait covered to understand the situation. Indistinct voices and screams from the valley become louder and louder, until the sound of a second, frightful explosion pierces the air. When you recover from the scare, you feel the vague sound of cobbles and flakes of plaster coming down from the cliff.

“What was that?” – you shout to the man.

“Oh God, please... not now...” – he replies, shocked and out of breath.

Before you can even offer a shelter, he stares at you with eyes wide shut and rushes towards the portal and the dark staircase. You grab the oil lamp and run after him, paying attention to the uneven steps of the winding staircase. As you pass the portal and enter the narrow corridor, a dense cloud of dust covers you completely. Ignoring the darkness and the irritated eyes, you desperately call the man loudly and make your way up along the stairs. Hesitantly, you carefully traverse the hall until the main staircase, stepping on the heaps of stone chippings fallen from the

ceiling. You hurry up along the stairs to the first floor, tripping and risking to fall down in multiple occasions, and then again to the second floor, seeking anyone to talk to. When you finally get to the last room, everyone is already on the balcony, looking down at the valley: some of them appear worried, some absorbed in their thoughts, some resolute to take action. When he hears your steps on the doorway, Ujana's father turns his look to you, comes closer and shakes his head in sign of despair.

“Prepare.” – he whispers – “You shall leave shortly.”

With these words, he reenters the tower, hurriedly rummages in one of the trunks and rushes down the stairs. Around you, his fellows look at each other open-eyed and lament the situation. Slowly, you move away from the group to an isolated corner and stick your head out of the merlons. What you see, then, makes you pale and feel faint. The clearance is full of people, many more than you remember, each one with a torch, a pitchfork, or a pike. Behind the first rows, surrounded by tens and tens of protesters, you glimpse the unthinkable: one trebuchet and a few onagers were being loaded and operated by some of the soldiers, under the eyes of the cheerful crowd. While you are staring speechless at the scene, the eldest man bursts in and shouts something to the others, which you barely miss for the deafening clamor.

“They... They refuse to negotiate...” – stutters the man, out of breath and incredulous – “They are ready to... to tear it down, if we don't surrender.”

An appalling silence falls onto the balcony, carried by a salty breeze from the ocean. You come closer to follow the discussion, but nothing seems to make sense anymore.

“They say we have until tomorrow” – he continues – “before they start... digging.”

What came after, there on the sheltered walkway, is only a vague memory made of blurred voices and indistinct sounds. You heavily return to the corner, trying to make sense of what you just saw and heard, but it is impossible to accept it. “Someone must be intervening” – you tell yourself – “We are in the hands of those fanatics... and no one comes to stop them?” You lean against one of the massive boulders and observe, astonished and powerless, the escalation of events on the clearance.

When you turn to the other fellows, the same atmosphere of fear and uncertainty still pervades the discussion. Among them, you catch sight of Ujana’s father, partially hidden to your sight behind the corner, looking down between the merlons: he is discussing with the elder man, and seems to be the most resolute between his companions. Suddenly, as you stare at their dynamics from the opposite end of the walkway, they both turn and look around with determination, until they track you down. The old man lays one hand upon his shoulders, before he starts walking towards you, keeping his gaze fixed on yours.

“Come with me, it’s time to leave. We need to be fast.”

“What? Where?” – you stammer.

“You know now, follow me” – he replies, his face in gloom.

Reluctantly, you take a deep breath and slowly chase him, as he makes his way through his fellows towards the central torches.

Inside, the wide room is empty and silent, everyone else being wandering nervously along the walkway. There, you find him standing tall, awaiting your arrival, holding your bag with his left hand and the ancient tome with the right one. You observe frightened his prodigious figure, his firm eyes only illuminated by few trembling lights, leaving part of his person shrouded in darkness. Then, to your surprise, he places the tome in your bag and consigns it to you, with a piercing look that chills your blood.

“Sir, I don’t understand... Where are we going?”

“Time has come, your place is not here.”

“What? What will they do if we leave?”

“I will guide them; I have faith in our Lord.”

“You mean... I am...?”

“No, not alone” – he replies – “My son is coming with you. Please, take care of him, until I meet him again.”

“Wait please, how do I...”

“I put my trust in you” – he continues – “You have shown to be important to him, for reasons the Lord has concealed to my eyes. I know you will make it.”

“Sir, I...”

“Here is the book. It is the most precious treasure I own after my son. Please, shield it as well. It gathers the memories of all great figures of the past who made us who we are now.”

“But how, I cannot even open it!”

“Don’t worry now, you will see how with the light.”

“How?” – you stammer – “I don’t... I don’t have the key.”

“Oh, you do not need one, my friend... the book *is* the key.”

Then, he reiterates his request to leave and rush down the stairs, where, in one of the rooms, you would find the old man waiting for your arrival. Vigorously, you shake his firm hand and readily leave the floor, without turning back. Downstairs, at the first floor of the dark tower, you eventually find his elder fellow, who points at the window with his hand. There, peeping out from a basket hung to a rope, Ujana welcomes you with a warm smile and copious tears. A few moments later, you are dragging yourselves towards the opposite end, frightfully suspended several meters above the black water, until you finally touch the mast of the vessel. While another explosion shakes the land, you desperately jump on one of the small boats, untie it and sail it away as far as possible, confronting the overwhelming power of the untamed ocean.

