



## Chapter II - 1

*The universe is a crowded place, for those who have eyes to see. A limitless aquarium of innumerable worlds floating on ethereal streams, homes for countless species along all branches of adaptation. Like tiny grains on ocean water, whole bubbles of universe keep flowing in an endless cosmos, sustained by invisible forces. Within each bubble, time has played the puzzle of life for eons, testing all combinations to build its perfect machines. Numberless branches have been pruned in the tree of life, leaving space, and time, to the fittest to prove themselves in a majestic theater. Unaware actors of a play without a final, and without a moral, these machines rise and compete to take on the main role in the drama. In front of the stage, as a mirror representation, other machines play the role of spectators of this universal competition. What are these machines playing, and what for, it is not relevant in the end: they have studied their scripts so carefully, through the ages, that they recite them by heart, and everything has become wonderfully natural in their action. They do not think, as they feel they do, neither they feel as they think they do. Everything is fully scripted, with no space for ambiguities: every percept, every information, every hint on how to act on the stage. Time has been generous with them, giving each specimen its own rules for interaction. In return, time has given each machine limited means to play, so that more auditions can take place, and more adjustments to the scripts. Time is a wise, smart player.*

The wind stops blowing from the forest, laying a veil of silence over the shore. Shaken by surprise and terror, you too stop breathing before falling all the way back on the sand. The sense of fear gets higher and higher as you realize the situation. You drag yourself away as far as possible, dropping the flashlight a few meters behind. Partially buried in sand, the cone of light points in a random direction, enlightening flowers and treetops. You look around frantically, unused to the growing darkness, inventing furtive shadows that slide towards the water. Crouched in an instinct of protection, you wait a few seconds, panting and turning your head to that scary presence. “How many are there? Where did he come from?” A vortex of fearful images come to your mind, while adrenaline rivers fill up your body.

As seconds go by, nothing else breaks the quietness of the silent shore. Nothing else besides the child, who is still looking at you, curious, innocent, afraid for the previous scare. You grab the flashlight as a shield from madness and point it towards him, who falls back on one side covering his eyes. Behind, the cone of light illuminates leafy branches of pines, waving at the breeze: no one else seems to be there. Only a lonely child is still writhing, hiding his eyes from the bright light.

“Who are you?” – you scream, visibly scared.

The child lowers his tiny hands, revealing eyes deeply scared by your reaction. You see him clearly now: a beautiful child, about ten years old, with black hair and big, dark eyes. He is wearing a brown peasant cape, with an old-fashioned jacket made of cotton, baggy pants and a strip of colorful cloth around his waist.

“I’m Ujana” – he replies with trembling voice. “Can I... stay?”

“Ujana? What...”

“It’s my name. Don’t you like it?”

“No, I mean... what are you...”

“But you can call me U, if you prefer!”

“U? Wait, I don’t... How did you get here? And what are you doing here, alone?”

You look around with open arms, in a clear reference to the expanding darkness.

“I was only telling you my name.”

“What? That’s not what... never mind. Are you OK?”

The question sounded rather rhetorical, since he did already look much better than you, with your nerves on the edge. Yet, a fundamentally inexplicable instinct pushed you to take care of him despite the situation.

“Yes!” – smiles the child, looking far along the shore– “Well... not completely. I miss my parents.”

“Your parents?” – you ask surprised – “Yes, of course... where are they?”

“I don’t know. Did you see them?”

A cold breeze bursts into the shore from the trees, shaking bushes and sand along the seaside. Distracted for a moment, you imagine the multitude of paths it had taken before landing on your skin, through the wild woods, the leafy branches and the hills nearby. Could that be a sign of oneness, to embrace you in its vastness? The answer does not matter, as it inebriates your spirit to stand the situation.

“Yes, I’m alone” – he answers – “well, no... I mean, not really. I was with my dad and grandpa, we were walking under those trees, you see?” – he goes on pointing to a faraway hill – “Then suddenly they got lost... so yes, I came here alone. By the way, did you see them?”

“Oh dear... I’m sorry...” – you reply regretful – “Tell me, when did you lose them?”

“No, *they* got lost! I was walking there” – he replies annoyed, pointing again to the woods – “then I turned behind some trees,

to follow a beautiful butterfly, but when I came back... they were no longer there. I don't know what happened... but I thought I had to find them, they could be in danger, so I ran to help them but... nothing, I haven't seen them anymore."

"..."

"I feel sad" – he continues – "I ran down the hills but they disappeared. Now I'm afraid for them... I hope they are fine."

"So, you say that you were following a butterfly when you realized... that your parents got lost, is that what you mean?"

"Yes! Yes. And now I don't know what to do" – he murmurs – "The lighthouse is still far and I don't know how to go back home. Can you help me?"

"Help? Yes, of course" – you put him at ease – "but I don't know *how* from here: we should return to the town and ask. Your father is certainly looking for you and it's getting dark soon... it's a miracle you found me" – you say, with a veil of pride and drama.

"So, really you will help me to find them? Will you?"

A spontaneous smile appears on his innocent face, beautifully colored by the milky moonlight and his big happy eyes. At the same time, your shoulders release the muscles all at once, tense until that moment. Next to you, two tiny birds take flight between the trees, as you spot by chance over the bright side of the sky. The dark branches smoothly sway at their passage, but the detail is totally absorbed by the landscape. A deep breath and you tumble down heavily on the sand, facing the ocean: you were not in danger anymore, though something concrete had to be done. "One lonely child in the night, on a solitary seashore" – you wonder – "No one will believe this story."

The moon shines bright in the navy sky, watching the shore with her sparkling maids. Soft clouds paint stripes of earthly matter, framing the picture for everyone to see.

“Come here Ujana” – you say with renewed spirit – “come, have a sit down.”

“...”

“Don’t you want to come?”

“I want to find my dad. Why do you want to sleep?”

“I’m not sleeping, I’m trying to find the best way to meet them. If you come for a moment, we try to call them together. Can you bring me the bag, please?”

“What will we do now?” – asks the child, surprised.

“Well, first we call them to let them know that it’s all OK and that you feel all right. By the way... are you OK?”

“So and so. I’m worried.”

“Of course you are, but do you feel all right?”

“Yes, I think so, thanks.”

“Great, it’s all good then... and there’s nothing to worry about. Now we call them and we meet them in a few minutes. Can you tell me their number?” – you ask kindly and confident, to let him calm down and relax.

“No.”

“No? Don’t you know any?” – you stumble for a moment.

“No, sorry. I remember my home number, it should...”

“Great. Let’s call that, it’s perfect. Just a second that I find my... it should be here, somewhere” – you add, inserting the torch in your bag – “And where is your home, U, where do you live?”

“I live in the countryside, on that hill over there” – he points at an indistinct hill, where you could barely distinguish a profile on the dark sky.

Ujana’s house could have been a few kilometers away or more, you cannot say for sure with that dim light. Besides, having a flashlight in the bag made it even harder to focus. In front of you,

the eyes of the child appeared and disappeared intermittently, as you move the cone of light in different angles of the pockets. His look, innocent and hopeful, tries to follow the search, sitting tense and holding the breath. Behind him, a never-ending line of perfect blue separates the ocean from the ground. You linger on this sight, captured by the littleness of your condition.

“You mean, you live on that distant hill in front of us, close to that shore... that one with an irregular shape?”

“No, not that one! I live there on that other hill, where there are gardens and many, many animals the whole time. Well, they’re sleeping now, I think... but you should see it during the day, it’s all green and beautiful!”

“I see, I’m sure it must be beautiful” – you give in – “Just wait a... oh, finally, here it is!” – you shout, showcasing it as a trophy – “Please take it, just write a number and we call them.

He takes the black plate with his wet hands, leaving stripes and sandy fingerprints all over it. You keep looking at him, pleased, as he skittishly tries to press the first digits.

“Wait, sorry” – you stop him – “what is their... Oh, no...”

“What?”

“It seems we don’t have connection...”

“You mean we can’t find them?” –he replies with a sad look.

“I don’t know, now it seems we cannot. Maybe later it gets better... I had no problems today.” – you add embarrassed.

“I see...” – he looks around with disenchanted eyes – “and it’s late... Fine, thanks anyway, I’ll go alone.”

Not even had he finished to reply and he put his tiny hands down to stand up, ready to leave. Before you could say a word, he was already planning his new pathway across the wood.

“Wait, where are you going now? You don’t know the way, let alone in the night!”

“What else can I do, stay here and wait?”

“Wait? No but...”

“I did it once, I’ll find a way. My dad and grandpa need me.”

“Oh dear, you are only a child” – you reply – “I’m sure they are not lost, don’t... just come here and sit with me one moment.

“No!” – he screams – “I mean... no, thanks. I need to...”

“They’re fine, trust me!” – you smile, sneakily checking the signal – “Just come here, tell me more about what happened.”

He weighs your words, switching more than a glance between you and the trees. His eyes show fear and determination, while his legs seem much more reluctant to undertake this folly. A few seconds in silence and he slowly leaves the woods behind, heading back towards you. You wonder what stream of thoughts he had to go through to make this decision.

“Good, it will be all OK. Would you like some water?”

“No, thanks. What will we do now?”

“Well... first, you can briefly describe to me what happened, so that we both know the situation. To move, unfortunately I only have an old bike here and we cannot ride it together. Anyway, do you know the way to your place?”

“Maybe... I’m not too sure.”

“I see, so better not to risk it. We could go to the town instead, but it’s quite far and it’s not nice to walk at night in the woods...”

“...”

“... and I can’t leave you alone, of course... so we can wait here, or we can move to that bay to see if the connection gets better.”

“OK.”

“Good. Then, maybe you can tell me what happened before you... before they got lost in the wood, would you?” – you start packing your things in the bag and in your pockets, paying attention not to leave anything on the sand.

Ujana comes closer and sits next to you, on the fresh sand. When you feel that he is comfortable enough, you both relax for a moment and turn the eyes to the ocean in front of you. It seems a very good moment, indeed, to take a deep breath before the talk. He puts his elbows on his knees and rests his chin on one palm, with a long, hesitating sigh.

“Do you want to hear all the story?”

“Sure. I mean, only if you want. We can find some ideas.”

“Right, so... today we left home before lunch, for a walk in the forest. We wanted to go to the big lighthouse, at the end of that road. I like it very much, it’s in the shadow of big oaks with trees and flowers of all colors, and it’s season for them, you know... So, when we decided to go, they took a walking stick and headed off from our country house. We took the usual road and I liked the walk... until we found that problem, when we entered the forest. I mean, the forest was fine, and we...”

“What problem?” – you ask, raising your head from the bag and closing it tight.

“The bridge. Do you know the Ensnaring bridge?”

“I think I’ve heard about it. Is it far?”

“No, it’s not far. It’s on that hill behind us, on the top, over that small river that flows into the sea just behind those trees. It’s beautiful, half natural and half in stone, from the ancient times - they say. They called it this way because it’s all covered by wild vegetation and animals sometimes got trapped in it. At least, this is what people say. I’ve never seen any animal trapped there.”

“So... what happened on this bridge?”

“No, nothing happened there. The bridge was there as usual, but today a big tree had fallen before it and they couldn’t pass. I jumped on it and made my way through the branches but they got scared and shouted at me to stop. They said they could not pass that tree, it was too difficult for them and too dangerous, so I had to come back to them. I’m sure they could have made it, it was a pity they didn’t try, I really didn’t understand.”

“I see, so you had to take another road.”



“Yes. Grandpa said he knew another path, the old road that existed before the bridge was built, something like a few hundred years ago. My dad didn’t know it but OK, ‘no problem’ they said. So we left the bridge and went up the hill. The new way was very nice at first, we saw grapes, sunflowers and an ancient fountain hidden in the bramble. It was like... an adventure! But then...” – the child lowers his look.

“Then, what happened?”

“Then they started discussing about that road. A little, not too much, but I was very annoyed. I mean, we were going for a walk to enjoy the day but first” – he starts counting with his fingers – “they change the way for a tree, then” – he continues – “what do they do? Discussing? No thanks, so boring... At some point, I also think that grandpa was not sure anymore about the way, because we slowed down and hesitated a few times. They didn’t tell me anything but I understood it: I’m no longer a baby as they think.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Yes. So, they stopped in a clearing and began to talk about time, sunset and many other boring things. You know how adults do, all those things that are useless and with all those obsessions.”

“So you were bored and you went away.”

“I didn’t go away! I was very bored, OK, but I didn’t go away. I told you, at some point I saw a... beautiful butterfly and... well, I followed it, to see if there were others around and what it would do with all those flowers. I like butterflies very much. Or did I have to listen to all those stories all the time?”

“...”

“So, I followed that butterfly for a while, we turned behind a small cliff full of bushes and berries and I came back. Only a few seconds but I didn’t find them anymore. They were gone.”

“Oh dear, I see. I’m sorry for what happened.”

“Yes... So, I waited there a little but they didn’t come back. I screamed but... nothing. They got lost on that new road, for sure, and now I’m worried for them.”

“No U, please! I’m sure they are fine and they’re looking for you now, maybe with other people... you see what I mean?”

“...”

“Anyway, I understand now, thanks” – you comment softly, to put him at ease – “Just, how did you manage to come here if you didn’t know the way?”

“Ah, but I didn’t take the new way! That’s boring... I just went down the hill to the bridge, jumped over the tree and followed a river until the end.”

“Really? Weren’t you scared to go alone?”

“...”

“And why didn’t you go home instead?”

“Because I wanted to find them! They’d get lost in the forest, so I thought ‘let’s go to the lighthouse, maybe I’ll find them there’ but it took much longer than I expected... and I lost the way, a couple of times... In the end it was getting darker and it was scary to return to the bridge.”

“So here we are, right?”

“Yes, I think that’s all. I’m so sorry for the situation...” – he adds, noticeably rueful – “What can I do now, can you help me?”

“Well, since this is not working, we definitely need to move: maybe we can find a place with a better connection, to make this one call” – you add, looking at a distant bay – “Anyway we can’t stay here any longer, they must be looking for you there...”

“...”

“So here’s what I would do: we take our things, take the bike and start walking towards that lighthouse, right? There we’ll find your relatives or someone else to make a call... but it’s the only place where we’re sure they would look into. What do you think?”

“Can’t you just go home by bike and talk to my mom?”

“Me? Seriously, do you think I can leave you here? I don’t even know how to find your house!”

“...”

“In principle, we could walk on the road through the woods but I don’t feel safe now: riding is one thing but on foot in two... What if something happens to you?”

“So complicated! For every thing there is a problem. Like my dad. Can’t I simply wait for you here, on the beach? I will not move, never, I promise.”

“No way, I’m sorry. One day you will understand: let’s simply stay together” – you tell with a very big smile – “We will joke a lot along the beach: after all, how many friends of yours have had such an experience?”

“Hmm... not many, I think.”

“Yeah, exactly! Then let’s go... ready for the quest?”

Ujana smiled happy, recovering a burst of energy from the talk. Everything was settled and the time was right for both of you to start this journey. You secure the bag on your shoulders, give him a vigorous pat on the back and point at the way.

Meanwhile, the wind had just stopped blowing and a peaceful breeze accompanied your steps on the fresh wet sand. All around, the tallest trees and the green bushes had stopped waving, as if they were following your walk along the seashore. As you move further, your steps leave shy footprints on the wet sand, too shy to stand the curiosity of the incoming waves. Their ephemeral existence resembled that of your own steps: you would pay attention to all of them, one after another, and one after another you would forget their existence. For the whole journey, with no regrets. So had to be their feelings, continuously washed away by the waves of memory in the ocean of time.

