



Chapter XIV - 7

Peaceful. Harmonious. Patient. Wise. Resolute. Sea turtles start their lifelong journey from the soft sand to the faraway ocean. Cradled by the Earth until they are ready to leave, life puts them to the test from the very first moments of their existence. On instinct, driven by the sparkling reflections over the sea horizon, they crawl down in mass, through the darkness towards the shining water. Only few hatchlings survive this cruel competition, leaving their brothers and sisters behind for others to content with. For the young survivors, while natural selection takes its course, sea turtles face all its countless challenges, slow but enduring, fragile but armored. As they keep sailing, they traverse an ocean of perils they had never seen before, towards a magnetic destination that is imprinted in their selves. Where are they going to, how, and for what reasons, is not important to them. The destination is not important, after all, as they cannot even picture it in their imagination. Someone says the journey is the actual matter, as you grow and learn from your experience. But turtles are wise, and do not question it at all. They are their own journey, and do not need anything more.

The young man was staring back at you, his eyes wide shut and full of terror. You jump and shout for the scare, hitting the wooden jamb with the lamp. On instinct, you slam the door in front of you and fall a few meters back in the corridor, keeping your hands as firm as possible on the stony corner of the stairs. A long chill runs down your spine, urging you to run away, but you manage to take back control and face the situation.

Inside, the prisoner was gasping and moaning and desperately knocking the bed to capture your attention. You open the door wide, leave the lamp next to other candles and rush to him.

“Hey! It’s all OK, don’t worry!” – you shout – “I’ll free you.”

As you remove the thick rag from his mouth, he falls back on a side and starts coughing and wheezing. His legs were writhing and fidgeting, as if he were suffering the most tremendous agony, and his eyes seemed as red as the flames on the shelf. As soon as he regains control, he looks at you in the eyes for a few long seconds, trying to catch his breath, and then throws a frantic look at his arms, tied behind his back. Only then, due to the feeble light from the narrow window, you notice that he too was wearing one of the costumes from the parade. A vision that makes you startle. As you show some hesitation, confused and bent over his body, the young man springs forward, grasps your neck and points a dagger at your throat. Stunned and terrified, you stare at him in the eyes as a strangled supplication, while the shadows of other people detach from the background and surround you completely. Before you can even cough a word, a sudden punch from behind stuns you and knocks you out. Falling back senseless on the floor, the last thing you remember is the cry of Ujana from the door, encircled by several other soldiers.

Slowly and uneasily, you finally open up your eyes. You don't remember anything since then: a terrible headache obfuscates your mind, and a heavy darkness still permeates the atmosphere. "Where am I?" Without a single movement, keeping your breath low, you explore the environment with your eyes alone: one after the other, you recognize the bed where you have been laid, the shelves with the candles and the oil lamps, the rustic wooden door. Apparently, the same room where you were ambushed.

"Ujana" – you wince – "where is he?" Stealthily, laying on one side, you try to figure out if you had been tied, but the fear appears to be unfounded. Meanwhile, a dull sound of wood and pottery signals that you were not alone in the cell. Eventually, with a slight turn of your head, you manage to see him: a middle-aged man, messing about at the shelves with a pensive look, next to a second bed where the child was laying. Silently, you keep watching the guard for a few more seconds, trying to read his intentions. He looks tall, with a bushy beard, and is wearing a long, blue and white tunic, white pantaloons and leather ankle boots. As he turns his back to pour a liquid into a jug, you quickly glance at the other corner of the room, which appears to be empty and shadowed. The small window let a suffused moonlight spread out in the air, but no chance it could serve as a way out, even for the child. From the outside, a fitful clamor draws your attention, but the sound is too low and confused to visualize it in your mind. Then, a hushed cough from the man puts you on alert, just in time to close your eyes again and faint.

"Some wine?" – he whispers with a deep tone.

His voice echoes in the small room and chills the blood in your veins. Someone else was there, with you - behind you - and you didn't see them. Likely, as you realize, that someone must be standing in the blind corner behind your back, but you have no clue how and where exactly. What is worse, as you immediately understand, is that he could have noticed your movements.

A deep silence falls onto the cell, as heavy as the large boulders that enclosed it. With the eyes closed and holding your breath, you listen to your free ear as it navigates the creaks from the floor. When the last creak stops, you hear a soft sound from the bedside table, less than a meter away from your head. A second of silence, and then again, the heavy steps through the room. When their sound seems far, you take another peek in the feeble light but no longer catch sight of the man. The door was closed, sign that he had to be inside... somewhere. Next to you, on the bedside table, you find an apple and a terracotta pot that were not there before.

“Don’t worry, you can drink it. It will make you feel better.”

Scared, you jump on the bed and frantically explore the room with your eyes: the man was standing tall, hands behind the back, looking out of the narrow window. On the other side, Ujana was still laying unconscious, with an apple core on a small table and a second pot just like yours.

“Who are you?” – you shout – “What do you want from us?”

Slowly, the man turns his chest and sketches a sneer.

“Nothing. I am deeply regretful for the accident; I hope you will get over it.”

“Regretful?” – you raise your voice – “Who are you? Why are you keeping us here?”

Disturbed by the growing noise, the child turns over and murmurs something confused in his sleep.

“I understand your fear, and your anger” – he adds, unhurried – “this whole situation is truly unfortunate. However, let me say a few words: first, as you may come to understand – he continues – I am his father. I am sincerely sorry for what happened, we did not know about you.”

A chill of stupor mixed to relief runs down your spine, which leaves you speechless and unable to reply.

“Things were not supposed to go as they did. Please, let us have a talk in a more appropriate place.”

With these words, taking for granted your consent, the man heads towards the door and nods to you before leaving the room. Shocked, you throw a look at the child, exhausted on the bed, and at the four corners of the room, in search for something that even you do not know. Hesitantly, you take the jug and follow him, slowly, through the shadowed corridor.

There, the man was waiting for you silently in front of the staircase. He is turning his back on you, absorbed in his thoughts, but you can feel a veiled smile when he hears your steps from the door. Without any sign, he starts walking down the stairs, and you follow him until you reach the main hall at the entrance. Immediately, you notice that the huge door had been locked down and bolstered with metal bars and spears, and some of the objects you remember - the coats of arms, the grappling hooks, the bookcases - had been moved. Without a word, he takes a seat at the table and invites you to join him with a wave of his hand.

“Are you going to explain what’s going on here?” – you break the silence, taking a seat at the opposite side.

“Sure, here we can talk. First, let me thank you for what you have done for my son. I am profoundly grateful, which urges me to apologize again for the accident.”

“...” – you stare at him, in silence.

“I understand that you may not trust me yet, but now we trust *you*. My son told me everything about your story, how you took care of him and escorted him until here. That was impressive and touching to hear.”

“I just did what I had to” – you comment, with a touch of embarrassment and satisfaction – “Now, could you please explain to me what’s going on in here with all of you? Is it normal to knock someone out?”

“That was a necessary precautionary measure” – he replies readily – “we could not imagine that you came here to help him.”

“A ‘necessary precautionary measure’, are you serious?”

“Yes. As I said, we did not know your intentions” – says the man apologetically – “I hope you can get over it soon, we do not have much time.”

“Time for what? Why don’t we call someone and go back?”

“I am afraid we cannot anymore, now. Things took a turn for the worse while you were... unconscious. I am sorry we got you involved in this situation.”

“What situation?” – you raise the voice – “Would you mind explaining what is happening, what’s wrong with you and what was all that story about your...”

“...”

“... wait, where’s my bag?”

“Your bag? Oh, yes, sure. It was next to the bed, in a corner of the room” – he adds calmly – “maybe you did not see it. We took the liberty to... inspect it, for safety reasons, you understand. But everything is in its place, I guarantee you.”

“I see... So, I must suppose that you took it, the book.”

“Of course. Thank you so much also for carrying it, it was very important for us.”

“Fine. I don’t know why you carried it, but it was... fascinating, we talked about it.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing, I was just commenting the book... incredible, with all those fine decorations... Ujana told me something about it, also how he took it from you.”

“My son... told you about the manuscript?”

“Yes... no? I just said that I found it beautiful, that’s all.”

“...”

“Instead, would you please explain to me what’s going on?”

“No way... that is impossible” – he replies – “This is not fun, I warn you.”

“What, *you* warn *me*?” – you laugh – “I’m sorry man but I don’t like this attitude. Why don’t you explain what’s going on in here and what’s wrong with that hell of a book?”