



Chapter XI - 5

Since the dawn of time, explorers have always fascinated the human collective consciousness: they seek the unknown, the unforeseen, until it demolishes the cultural pillars of their own consolidated colonies. Nonetheless, within their convoluted species, explorers are just what they are: nothing more than outliers in a lifetime journey. Here, coherent in their irrationality, humans elevate them as glorious symbols of virtue... but steer clear of their example. Ultimately, human's awareness is well known to be extraordinarily limited. Among explorers, sailors have always performed a privileged role in human imagination: they supply resources, discover new lands, tell stories about distant realms. Sailors navigate the ocean of the unknown, fishing truths of unspeakable depth. Only they know the origin of their loot, but many others, in future, will taste it for them. Every day on the mainland, thanks to their fruits, some creatures will prosper, some others will die. Unconcerned, sailors will continue their journey: a new horizon at dawn awaits their arrival.

Walking on a desolate seashore at night, surrounded by a cemetery of worn boats, with a lonely child to rescue, had never teased your imagination. Around, inky shadows on the trunks dance under the moonlight, tattooing those images also on your cortex. The memories of the day seemed so distant, instead, that you barely remember what led you there. The massive walls of the old medieval town, the festive reenactment, the colorful sight of balconies in flower. Everything has gone for the moment, dragged away by yet another sudden chilly breeze. Night owns you, and being one with nature never felt as natural before.

“U” – you ask loud – “how far do you think we are?”

Ujana was running a few meters in front of you, playing and dancing with his usual wooden stick, circling around a fantastic audience. He looked lighthearted and full of energy, to an extent that was hard to believe. Being on your own now, after a nice talk, makes you feel the hunger and sleep you were carrying in the bag. Not so much to worry about, but you do feel that it is not your best condition. The child, instead, jumping and singing like a star, didn’t show any sign of resignation. “Those years... had I known, back then, how I would miss them.”

“Hey, did you hear me?”

“What?” – he turns to you – “How far are we?”

“Yes... do you know it?”

“Far from where?”

“Oh come on” – you laugh, with a veil of impatience – “From the lighthouse, no?”

“Yes yes, but maybe you meant the bridge...”

“Right, the bridge... yeah, no, I meant the lighthouse.”

“See! I’m not the only one who’s asleep at the wheel!”

“Fair enough, anyway... how far are we?”

“From the lighthouse? Hmm, I don’t know, I can’t see well... and this place is all dunes and turns, so annoying! Could be five

minutes, just behind that turn, or a bit further..." – he peers at you, afraid to upset you.

"..."

"Yeah, but I'm sure it's not far! Instead, guess what? I think we are close to the bridge!"

"Seriously?" – you ask, pondering the large amount of wrecks capsized over the shore – "Is it because of these boats?"

"Yes! How did you... Have you been here before?" – he asks, failing to catch the blatancy."

"No, I told you..."

"Ah, right. Yes, I remember there were a lot of boats close to the bridge, so, well... it must be here! By the way, the last time there were many also next to the lighthouse."

"But why are they so many in two little quays? Weird, isn't it?"

"Yeah, strange."

"Also, they all look so rough and old... I wonder if someone still uses them."

"I don't know... I don't come here often. That's how they look here, maybe people use them every now and then."

"Yes, maybe. We are... Ah, by the way: how far is that bridge from the lighthouse? It's important, I forgot to ask you."

"Right. I don't remember actually... not too far, but I've never reached it from the beach. I don't know, sorry."

"Really, never?"

"Nope, sorry. We always reached it from the bridge and I haven't seen much around, I can't say more."

"Hmm, not even an estimate?"

"Well, it should be more than between the quays... but we crossed the woods, now we are on the beach..."

"Ah... clear, you're right. Do you think we can take that path from the bridge, in case?"

"Hmm, no, I don't think so... *We could* but it's all hidden and, honestly" – he adds – "I'm a little scared to go inside..."

"Sure. I hoped there was an easy..."

"... but is this a problem? Can't we continue along the beach? We're almost there!"

“No, of course it’s not a problem. Actually we also have a flashlight, so if it’s not too difficult we can even try.”

“What is a flashlight?”

“A flashlight! I used it when we met, to make light. Don’t you have one at home?”

“No, I don’t think we have it, I had never seen one before. How does that work? Is it magical?”

“Uh, that’s an interesting question, who knows! Batteries, circuits, mirrors... it’s almost magic to me too!”

“Can I see it again?”

“Now? We are almost there; do you want to stop?”

“No no, without stopping, just a second and we go!”

“Only a second? Hmm... I don’t have it here, it’s in my bag” – you show with your thumb – “in one of these pockets, under my stuff. I should take it out and search it...”

“I see... fine, don’t worry, thanks.”

Ujana was still young but he already knew how to deal with people. For the next few seconds he kept walking silent, with a thin smile printed on his face. He knew how to repay you in the same way, so here you are, walking silent, with his stilted grin. You definitely did not miss that feeling.

Anyway, despite his attempt, you realize a couple of things: it was not that wise to keep the light out of reach, and you didn’t check if he wanted to drink, eat or have a short break. That was certainly the right time, now that you think about it, in case you find the river and leave the seashore.

“OK, fine, let’s stop next to that canoe and I’ll let you try it.”

“Really? Are you serious? Thanks!” – he shouts, without even waiting for an answer.

“Yes, sure, five minutes will not be a problem. Instead, what if you drink or eat a little? You must be hungry, aren’t you?”

“Me, hungry? No no, just some water but I’m fine thanks!”

“Cool. Then, I’ll take a bottle and see where...”

“No no, I don’t need it, thanks!” – he interjects, overturning his bag and pulling out a small canteen, in perfect outfit with his dress for the parade.

“Well done” – you think, considering how thirsty he was: there seemed to be no more water when he put it back, but surely he drank a lot. “Let’s save mine for later, in case we decide to have another break.” Meanwhile, you carefully open your rucksack trying to keep the content inside. The flashlight was very easy to find, so you pull it out and clean it again from sand and humidity. Without a notice, you turn it on from inside the bag, not to blind the child, who literally jumps from the canoe to highlight his enthusiasm. The last thing you see, before handing it in to the boy, is the huge black tome, laying undisturbed in the bag. The sparkling silver of its decorations amazes you once again, teasing you to strip it of its puzzling quirks.

“Thanks! It’s fantastic” – he smiles, admiring the beauty of the gadget – “can I keep it a little more?”

“Sure, but we’ve got to go, you know.”

“Yes yes! When you’re ready” – he adds, looking at the bag.

“Perfect, just give me a second that I put some order in here. I’m afraid the tome can be damaged with all this stuff; I don’t want this responsibility.”

“You can give it to me, I have space!”

“No U, it’s better if it stays with me, thanks.”

“OK! Can I go to play with the lamp at that quay?”

“There? Can’t you wait a minute and we go together?”

“Maybe... but with this you will see me and it’s so safe here!”

“Hmm... fine, but don’t go too far this time.”

“Promised!”

“... and keep it on until I reach you, OK?”

Ujana smiled and started running to the next little quay, just before another cliff and a small isle of bushy ground. You saw him fade into the dim light, following his movements from the luminous wake.

The large rucksack was laying open between your legs, reversed on the wet sand under your feet. The ancient tome was still there, staring back at you, inviting you to explore it in more depth. Daring you, to unveil the reasons why they had carried it along. Provoking you, not to search it for the answers. Bewitching you. There and then, out of space and time. As you stare at it in silence, one hand sneaks into the bag, caressing its thin pages and sinuous tendrils. When it feels ready, it slowly lifts the tome up, until the sensuous cover is exposed to the bright moonlight. Unrestrained, a second hand draws near to its lock, fondling the alluring latch that aroused your attention. Ensnared in a stream of sensations, only one thing could bring you back to reality: the sight of Ujana appearing from the dark background, running back towards you, screaming and agitating his walking stick in the air.

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“What?!” – you shout, lunging on instinct and making the heavy bag falls back on the sand – “What happened, an animal?!”

“No no” – he tries to reply, panting amply and showily – “no animal, no animal... There was... no one... there...”

“So why did you run back?” – you urge, monitoring the area – “What did you see?”

“Light... I saw the light!”

“What, are you serious?” – you reply with scorn – “You ran back screaming because of... this stupid flashlight?”

“The flashlight?” – he looks at you stunned – “No! Not this light... are you crazy? This didn’t even...”

“So, what light did you see? I don’t see anything there” – you add, throwing a suspicious look at the quay.

“I saw a light... far, between the trees... not too far, for a few seconds... then it disappeared” – he continues – “and I ran back to tell you...”

“...”

“Did I do bad?”

“So, you were playing with this flashlight when you saw a... light in the wood?”

“Yes.”

“But you cannot see far in the wood.”

“Yes, there you can: there is more space, fewer dunes and... maybe we found it!”

“Found what? The bridge?”

“Yes, I saw something that looked like a river.”

“Really? Great!” – you shout – “And what about the light, was it natural?”

“It was... you scare me, why so many questions?”

“OK sorry, I didn’t want to” – you slow down – “but if there is someone we must run before it’s too late.”

“And my dad? Don’t we go anymore to meet him?”

“Oh dear, of course... but if we find them, they will call him, you see what I mean?”

“I think so, yes.”

“Great, let’s run, show me the place.”

Ujana was standing right in front of you, ready to leave, while you fill the bag as fast as possible. When you put it back on your shoulders, a hard-edged object hurts your hip for a moment: some sharp and sneaky pain, with the taste of a sweet revenge.

You were both running towards the quay where he saw the light. Suddenly, halfway from the canoe, the landscape changes completely: the dense vegetation withdraws significantly, and the sandy dunes that populated the shore leave space for a wide and open clearance. There, a calm river is flowing into the ocean, making its way around a little hill through a pillow of untamed plants. Several other boats were laying around, some emerging from the bushes, all with a very similar craftsmanship. The quay, instead, seems bigger than the others: a wider and higher staircase makes the wooden structure imposing, and a long wharf leaves more room for boats to unload their goods. Nothing special, you consider, but it suggests that you were getting closer to some reference point. Along the seashore, as far as you could see in the dim light, a garland of sharpened rocks emerges from the water,

illuminated by the moon. Their rocky profiles were sparkling in the background, altering the pattern of the quiet surface of the ocean. Behind them, dominating the landscape, a waisted, slender cliff protruding over the bay. On its summit, barely visible from that distance, the shady shape of a stately tower.

“U, look there... we found it!”

“What? Did you see the light?”

“No, not the light... the lighthouse!” – you shout out happily, pointing to the distant cliff.

“Really? Ooh, finally!” – he bursts – “Yippee! Awesome!”

“Yes, we’re almost there: it seems incredible.”

“True! I’m so happy... I hope he’s waiting there too.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure we will find someone waiting for us!” – you smile – “Hurry up now: we must find it, if it’s still around.”

“Wait, what shall we do?”

“Was that light over there?” – you ask, pointing at the dark treetops along the river.

“Yes, yes. A little further maybe but yes, there.”

“Cool, so let’s ask for help. Ready to scream?”

“Wait, what... scream??”

You take a long, deep breath and shout a tremendous ‘Help!’ towards the shadowed clearance. Ujana looks at you astonished, as if that were the last thing he would expect from you.

“Come on, scream with me! Don’t you want to find them?”

The boy stared back at you puzzled, hesitating at first, then joining your attempt as if it were the funniest game he had ever played. After several tries, no response returns from the woods: no light from the trees, no echo from the dark. Only you and him, shouting desperately to the river, feeling more and more insane. “Can it be he imagined everything?” – you wonder – “Maybe he saw a reflection on a rock? No, that’s not possible” – you argue – “it lasted for a few second, and the light didn’t work well... wait, why is it broken?” With no hesitation, you throw again your bag

on the ground, open it and extract the flashlight. Ujana looks at you in silence, puzzled. One click at the bottom and a feeble halo surrounds the area: he looks astonished, as if you had done something magical. A second click, and the cone of light becomes stronger, illuminating a good distance in front of you, while a third click makes the light flash. Turning your eyes to Ujana, he looks back at you in awe, feeling kind of sorry for branding it broken. He turned it off before, that's clear, so no one could have seen him. "That's unfortunate, what a chance we missed" – you realize, pointing the light towards the wood.

"I guess you didn't turn it on again, am I right?"

"Yes... I didn't know how to do it, I'm sorry."

"Never mind. Was that light flashing like this one?"

"It was more stable, but it also oscillated a bit."

"Good. Was it white like this, or what is more... yellow?"

"No, it was not like this one. It was reddish, and it was diffuse, not a point. It was illuminating the treetops, like a huge ball of light, then it seemed to move a little (but I'm not sure) and after a few seconds it vanished."

"Red, you say..."

"Yes, it looked red, why?"

"Because, if it's red, they could be some of those lights we saw from the hill."

"Are you... serious?"

"Of course, why not?"

"Because it means they found us!"

"No U, I'm sorry, unfortunately they did not" – you point out with a sad expression.

"..."

"Even if they're close, they don't know where we are" – you add – "We should run to the lighthouse, so that we catch up with them as soon as possible and in the easiest condition."

"To the lighthouse?"

"Yes, let's run, we must get there before them."

"But why? I mean... we don't know where they were going."

“Where? To the lighthouse of course, where else? There is nothing else around.”

“Yes but... what if they were coming back from there?”

His words hit your ears like a heavy cannonball. So undeniably true, that you crumbled in silence for an interminable moment.

“Right, I see. Then, I’m not sure anymore that we should go to the lighthouse, but we must take a decision immediately. What do you think?”

“Hmm... If there’s someone there” – he mumbles – “it makes no sense to go in another direction. We can run to the bridge, see if anyone appears or hears us and then decide if we follow the trail or we come back here.”

“Fine, let it be then, let’s go.”

You rapidly fasten your bag, set the flashlight to the usual, feeble cone of light and start running along the riverbank. Both of you were determined to reach the bridge as soon as possible, and it felt really good to see Ujana focused on the situation. What you didn’t tell him, however, is the true reason why you made up your mind. He was right, indeed, and it should have been clear that you had no clue where those lights were heading to. But now something more disturbing was hammering in your head: the lighthouse was, in fact, completely silent and dark.

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“Do you know the way?”

“I think it’s this one, next to that tree” – says Ujana.

“I see, are you sure this is the best we have?”

“Yes, I think so. From the bridge, the path to the sea is on this side, so I guess this is the one we must take. Also, I...”

“Fair enough, let’s go. Do you see well the path?”

“Not sure. Maybe you go first, with the light, and I follow?”

That was a good idea, though it did not make a big difference with that feeble light. Anyway, you take his place in the line and open up the way through the bushes.

The narrow trail was clearly well frequented, judging from the scarcity of weeds and the definition of its borders. A few meters on the right, you could feel the water flow in the river while, on the left, it circled the trunks at the boundary of the wood. Carved into the overgrown riverbank, the path quickly led from the seashore to another area, rockier and more inconvenient, hidden in the vegetation. Fortunately, Ujana seemed pretty confident and amused, and the two walking sticks proved very useful to push the brambles aside.

A few minutes later, the narrow path ends in a second clearance between trees and brambles, with a few wooden tables and benches placed in various positions. The ghostly vision, unexpected and in a dim darkness, was everything but reassuring in that moment. You look around for the natural prosecution of the trail, which seems to be on the other side. You keep walking next to the child, improvising random questions to keep him focused. Then, all at once, after a few turns, it finally appears in all its magnificence: an old, wooden, rustic bridge, no more than ten meters long. On your left and on your right, a much larger path emerged from the dark wood, crossing the narrow one you were on and disappearing on the other side of the bridge.

“Is this the bridge, U?”

“Yes, yes, it’s this one, I remember!”

“Great, I thought it would be harder. Ready?”

“Wait, for what?”

Another long, deep breath and you scream again towards the hills. Ujana follows you immediately, screaming during your short pauses. After a minute, a contrived smile suggests that it was time to stop and wait for an answer; yet, no answer emerges from the dark. Only at some point, a beautiful bird leaves a mighty tree next to you, but you can barely pay attention to it.

“What shall we do now?” – asks the boy, disillusioned.

“...”

“Shall we wait here, or shall we return to the beach?”

“I don’t know, give me a second.”

“What for? There’s not much to think... and this is creepy.”

Indeed, since you left the shore, an orchestra of chilling sounds had followed your steps until that moment: insects, birds, nocturnal animals... every little movement was a shiver down your spine. This was especially true after your inconvenience with the bike, a dreadful experience you didn’t want to try again.

“So the track continues on the other side.”

“You mean... you want to cross it?”

“I didn’t say that, just saying we have also other options. I want to leave this place as soon as possible, just like you.”

“OK, OK, don’t be upset please. Think about it, I’ll stay silent here until you’re ready.”

“Oh dear, you don’t need to... fine, never mind. Why don’t we look at the other side, and then we decide how to continue?”

“OK, it’s fine for me. Just please, don’t go too fast.”

Smiling - a smile that went lost in the darkness - you point the flashlight towards the bridge and gauge its stability with the point of the stick. Solid, definitely. A silent nod, and you proceed over the boardwalk, with no unforeseen difficulty. On the other side, the situation looked pretty much the same, but the entrance of the wood was much wider and safer than the one behind. This fact didn’t make the choice any easier.

“Hey, is this the part you described, where the path enters the wood and is not easy to walk by night?”

“Yes, it’s that...” – he replies – “not really as I remembered, but it’s that one for sure. Look, there’s even that useless sign over there, I remember we joked about it.”

“...”

“Anyway, yeah, I see the point: it’s better than I thought...”

“Yes, the trail seems fairly easy here... I mean, we can still go back to the beach, but it takes a lot and it’s not a pleasant excursion by night. Is there any information on that sign?”

“No, just some useless names and directions.”

“OK, then, let’s see once more if there’s anyone around, as long as we are in open space. If not, we try here” – pointing timidly to the entrance of the wood.

A last shout explodes in the sky, disrupting the quiet of the valley at night. A last deep breath, with a flashing light swaying in the air, in the hope that what he saw was not only his imagination. The last attempt you make, before all the others started to appear desperate. The last words you shout, before a faint, diffuse sound re-emerges from the depths of the nocturnal sky.

