



Chapter XII - 8

From the trembling cauldron teeming of life, where countless creatures keep dancing on their stage, the vastness of the universe unravels to their senses. Some are told to grow spontaneously, some others according to a script, which is known only to them and to the author. For some others, finally, choice depends on their entire history, a tremendous burden that is simply unbearable to conceive. Did the authors set different rules for every entity? Few creatures have questioned it, but none of them has found it out yet. Down the stage, time observes the play in awe, contemplating the beauty of their graceful evolution. No one really knows whether he crafted it, or whether it is simply enjoying the miracle from a privileged position. Creatures keep dancing on the stage for their illusory audition, while time, impassive, observes them in silence. None has questioned the truth of their experiences, as they play and compete in this endless theatre. None has questioned whether time, their unique spectator, is just another illusory experience ensconced on a front stalls seat.

“Did you hear that?” – asks Ujana, shyly, with eyes wide shut.

“I did, yes. What was that?”

“I don’t know, but I felt it. It was far, like... horses?”

“Horses? You sure? In a forest, on the beach, at night?”

“I don’t know, maybe they’re riding to go faster?”

“Horses, seriously? Is it so common here? If they wanted to be fast they could have ridden a motorcycle. Anyway, did you hear it too there?” – you ask hopeful, looking towards the closest hill.

“Yes yes, I’m sure, it came from there!”

“Let’s shout once more then, then we run.”

“Wait, run where?”

“Doesn’t matter, just do it.”

After another shout, you hold your sticks tight and make way through the wood. The flashlight was barely sufficient to illuminate the path for ten meters around you: beyond, it was not possible to see more in that dim light. You run, run, run, for one or two minutes, as fast as the growing darkness allowed you. Blurred fragments of woods passed by like frames in a film, impressed in your mind for a moment, and already fading away within the black you left behind. The path turned a few times, on the left and on the right, then up and down across a multitude of small humps. The rarefied vegetation that had greeted you at the bridge became denser and denser, as you progressed into the nature. Every now and then, you need to slow down to let Ujana reach you, visibly intimidated by the frightful location and the bumpy trail: ideal occasions to launch a shouting, waiting for him to keep up. Then, all at once, the curvy passage opens out on an wide expanse, with overgrown, indistinct boundaries. It is in that moment that you finally see it: a warm halo of yellow, trembling fire lights illuminating the treetops, far ahead of you, slightly elevated along the slope of the hill.

“Hey look, we found them!” – you shout to Ujana, euphoric, without halting the race.

“I see, I see! We made it!”

“Yeah we did it! Let’s hurry up, we’ll be there in a minute!”

You look around across the ample clearance, full of untamed plants and brambles on its perimeter. On your right, a small opening between the bushes paves the way for another narrow passage, likely culminating on the sea, you gauge on instinct. In front of you, about twenty meters on the opposite side, the blurred sight of a second, larger opening, likely hosting the prosecution of the trail. On the left side, only shadows and vague shapes of maritime trees: no way to see beyond, in that condition.

“That one, right?” – you ask hurriedly, as if he could convince you otherwise.

“Yes yes, it’s that one, goes to the lighthouse. Go go!”

The race continues for another minute, circling around the illuminated area above you. Meanwhile, slowing down for Ujana, you could hear the horses whinnying, and the vague sound of machinery in action. They were clearly waiting for your arrival, thanks to the flashlight and your shouting... if you only found a way to go up there from that loopy trail. Those were your considerations when, suddenly, a bright, disruptive light emerges from the scrub ahead.

“Hey, you two! Who’s there?” – shouts a man from the short distance. You turn to Ujana, bursting into a huge grin of victory. – “Hello-o?” – he repeats, slowly approaching through the dark.

“Hello! Hello! We’re here, can you see us?” – you pause – “Thanks for coming sir, thank you so much!”

The man slowly comes out from the dark, dazzling you with his old-fashioned torch. When you open your eyes again, not used to that strong light, you find his massive person right in front of you, smiling imperiously at the child.

The man was tall - much taller than you, you realize - quite burly and broad-chested. He was still wearing one of the colorful

costumes from the parade, with an unkempt beard and a serene, accommodating look. His left hand is holding a brown wooden stave, wrapped in a smelly gauze soaked in some flammable substance. When he understands it was not comfortable for your eyes, he kindly lowers it and hides it behind his person. He checks your equipment and the child's condition, then shows to you his right hand for a powerful shake.

“Thank you for your service, it is very appreciated.”

“Oh... well, you don't need to say that” – you reply, visibly embarrassed – “just my duty.”

“That is commendable, well done... Anyway, what town are you from? I've never seen you around.”

“Oh yes, that is true, I'm not from here” – you reply, surprised – “I came only today, for the commemoration.”

“Cool” – he laughs – “they must pay you well then!”

You laugh with him showily, to keep the conversation going, despite his awkward humor and temper. Ujana was standing close to you, slightly behind and in silence, funnily frightened by the enormous figure.

“Anyway, thank you so much for coming to rescue us. We felt so relieved when we saw those lights, up there on the hills” – you confess – “We did hope someone was coming, but I mean... it is unbelievable you actually did it.”

“Yeah, it seemed impossible to find you, and we knew he was not prepared for a night in the forest. By the way” – he smiles, looking at the child and his leather bag – “come on, I'll carry it to the camp: now you must rest well, hero!”

“...” – the boy looks at you in search for approval, then accepts his kind offer.

“Actually” – goes on the giant – “how did you find him?”

He looks at you with sincere admiration and curiosity, waiting for an answer as he shows the way with the torch. You make a short pause, smile and briefly retrace the events of the last few

hours: the bike, the lights from the hill, the walk on the shore, the sight of the lighthouse. The tall man continues walking in front of you, following an invisible, unmarked shortcut between the trees and the stones. He keeps listening carefully to the story, enthralled by the dynamics and by your genuine enthusiasm.

“...but in the end here you are: you found him first! Awesome, I’m sure someone will reward you for that.”

“Ah, have you seen my dad??” – shouts out Ujana, jumping into the conversation.

“Who, your father?” – he replies, turning an austere look to him while leading the way – “No, not yet unfortunately... Do you know where he is hiding?”

“Yes, yes, I know it! He must be waiting at the lighthouse!”

“Have you tried already there?” – you ask respectfully, ignoring his dark humor.

“No, not yet, but that would be great. Thank you, Ujana” – he smiles.

“Can we go there together, please? Please? Please!”

“I’m not sure” – you answer for the citizen – “it’s been a long evening for everyone, and maybe some of these kind people would like to go back and rest...” – you throw a look at the man – “but I’d be happy to join them and help find him.”

As you pronounce these words, the path climbs up the slope for a few more meters, until it finally opens up onto a well-trod path, at the same level as the lights. On your right, you see the distant reflection of the ocean, tracing a sparkling line over the dark treetops. Unconcerned, the man shows you the way with a resolute gesture of his hand, bringing your feet back on the ground. There, ahead of you in the other direction, you eventually spot their campsite: an ample and nicely enlightened clearance, with people, horses and tumbrels. The horses, freely wandering around the camp, were adorned with colorful saddle blankets, chest pieces and gorgeous rein covers. Supposedly, their evocative patterns recalled the motifs of the many standards, which were leaning against the steep slope of the hill. Between the horses,

people seemed to be discussing animatedly while messing about with the equipment. What stroke you the most, in such a comforting sight, was that everyone was still wearing their costumes from the parade: horsemen, acrobats, even an old clergyman. None of them had spotted you yet, but it was touching to imagine how they left everything and rushed to find him.

“But I want to go with you, he’s my dad, I’m worried for him!”

“I think he’s right, he should come with us” – says the man, agreeing on the spot – “It won’t take long, you’ll see.” – he goes on, returning a quick, sly look at you.

“OK, then it’s fine for me too” – you step back, embarrassed – “Anyway, how did you discover that he got lost? Did you manage to talk to his father?”

“No, we didn’t, we couldn’t find him today. Eventually, we...”

His last words got interrupted by a sudden confusion in the camp. An elder, whitehaired man, with his hands tied, jumps down from a cart, kicks a man in the stomach and starts running towards you. In a second, everyone turns in your direction and starts running after him, trying to block him at any cost.

“Damn, you stupid bastard” – grumbles the tall man next to you. “You” – he continues, throwing a chilly stare at you – “block the child, I’ll take care of him.”

“Wait, what...”

You cannot even complete the sentence, when he violently pushes Ujana on the ground and starts charging towards the man.

“Run, U, run! They will kill you!” – screams the old man, running desperately towards the child and a certain end.

A cold wind was blowing harshly on your faces, holding back his tears as you both rushed down the hill towards the lighthouse. The feeble flashlight was not enough to illuminate the trail, but it did not matter at all in that moment. You even did not dare to stop a moment, to check if anyone was running after you: what you just saw, up there at the camp, was too much for you to bear... let alone for a little child. Now, an adrenaline rush was filling up your blood to the edge, and the brambles and the obscurity became nothing more than a sympathetic shelter.

“Why am I fleeing?” – you ask yourself after some time. Recollecting those memories was not the easiest task while running at breakneck speed in the dark, but, eventually, you manage to retrace those fragments. In a chaos of indistinct frames, you do remember Ujana reversed on the ground, shouting the name of his grandfather as he crushed onto the armed giant. You recall the old man’s face, a mask of pain and terror, and that of every other person who came to pin him down. You remember yourself, bewildered, stepping back a few meters while the child, petrified, nearly stopped breathing. A second later, as you regained consciousness and evaluated the situation, Ujana crawled behind on instinct and ducked out wheezing. What came after was the image of you, alone, in the middle of the scene, facing the distrustful look of the men in the first line.

After a few minutes of wild running, the track culminated on a sudden turn facing the shore and the underlying valley. A river of questions floods you head, though you fear there is no way the boy can empty it.

“Hey... wait for me please! Can you... stop for a second?” – you shout, panting heavily.

“...” – he continues running for a long distance, then gradually slows down, stops and turns to you in silence.

“Can we... talk a little... about what just... happened?”

“What do you want from me?”

“I don’t... Nothing, only to say... that I’m... sorry for what...”

“ ... ”

“I’m sorry, I don’t... know why they did...”

“... are you done?” – he brusquely interjects.

“What? Yes, sorry... I didn’t...”

“I said, are you done?” – he presses, with glossy eyes.

Ujana’s body was shaking like a volcano. You leave him alone for some time, crouched on the grassy ground of the cliff, lost in the view of the uncontaminated land. All around, the corner of the trail was carved within brambles, rocks and wild shrubs. On one side, the path continued following the slope of the hill, likely ending in the valley with the river. On the other side, oriented towards the sky and the stars, the way still looked clear and safe. For the moment, at least.

“U, I’m sorry but there’s something I must say.”

“ ... ”

“Can I have your attention for just one second, please?”

“ ... ”

“OK, fine. I believe someone is chasing us... if not all of them” – you continue, slowly – “and *this* is the first place they’ll search...”

“... ” – the boy turns his eyes to you and listens in silence, with his shaded cheeks cut through by rivulets of tears.

“We must move on immediately, before it’s too late.”

“... where?”

“I don’t know. If we find how, we can stop at the lighthouse and see if anyone is inside. In the worst case” – you murmur – “we spend the night there.”

“ ... ”

“So?” – you ask skittishly – “We don’t have much time.”

“No” – a no that buries you under an avalanche of frustration.

“Why not?”

“Because we can’t. They know we’re going there.”

“Why should they know it?” – you ask perplexed – “It’s a gang of brigands: if we leave, they will not haunt us forever.”

“Because I told them. I told them that my father is waiting there” – he whispers regretful.

“OK, so what? We can’t spend it in the woods either.”

“We can go further and sleep on the beach...”

“Yeah, maybe, it’s not a...”

“... but what about my dad, then?”

“Your father?”

“Yes... What if he’s waiting for us at the lighthouse, and those people find him?” – he looks down at his feet and mumbles – “I don’t want to even think about it...”

“U, I understand it but let’s be rational: why should he be waiting for you alone, in a lighthouse, at night? It makes no more sense at this point, no?” – you comment confidently, trying to put some pressure – “He must have contacted the authorities and some rescue teams, and they will come soon to search the area.”

“Yes, the authorities will come... like all the lights we saw on the hills, uh? ‘They are coming to save us’, ‘they are coming to save us’ you said, and here we are, great! Are you happy now?”

“...”

“You know what? I understood what you’re doing. You fooled me the whole time, you’re nothing but one of them” – he keeps pressing, with a sad and angry look – “I trusted you, and all you did was bringing me to that trap!”

“What...”

“Oh, I see now!” – he shouts, shocked, with crazed eyes – “Yeah, I see that, how you found the way out of the brambles: of course, you knew it perfectly!” – he goes on, stepping back to the edge and looking at you with scorn and repugnance – “And I remember how you didn’t want to take the bike... the ‘bike!’”

“U...”

“And the deviation to the bridge, the decision to enter the woods unprepared, the meeting with that giant in the wood, you two talking friendly: you knew everything from the beginning, didn’t you? It was only a trap!” – cries out Ujana, crawling on the grass and the cliff edge.

“U... Please... This is all a fantasy and we don’t have time to play, let’s grab our stuff and leave immediately” – you continue, looking for his bag to flee.

“What do you want from me? Stay away, or...” – he starts crying, looking at you with distressed eyes – “I hate you, I hate you with all my heart!”

“But... U, I’m... I’m... I’m your friend” – you whisper – “and I’ve done everything only to help you...”

“...”

“We were looking for your relatives, which is what *you* wanted...” – you continue – “Please, let’s not create fantasies, it’s already very difficult as it is.”

“Fantasies? You always make things easy, don’t you?” – he shouts, as you attempt to come closer to hug him – “Stop! Don’t move... I’m not stupid, you know? I...” – he makes another step back, on the edge of the cliff.

“U... don’t take crazy initiatives please, OK? I will not move, I swear...” – a sonorous neigh from the hill distracts you for a second – “Let’s only talk one moment, OK?”

“...”

“OK... So, please, look at us. Do you see that I’m only trying to help you?”

“...”

“You remember, *you* came to *me* on the beach... and how can I be connected to them if we had to walk so long to reach them? Also...” – you pause for a second – “when did I have the chance to tell them that we were coming, if we didn’t talk to anyone?”

“...”

“Also, look: it was you who saw the lights, not me, and it was your decision to reach the bridge instead of the lighthouse.”

“Why do you blame me now? Do you think you’re perfect?”

“Oh dear, I’m not blaming you! Come on, I just wanted to say that... that it could not be *me* who brought you here: everything we did, we did it together. My only responsibility was taking care of you...”

“...”

“... and be sure that we find your relatives as soon as possible.”

Ujana falls on his knees, folds his legs and cover his eyes, hiding a river of tears flowing down his cheeks. You leave him

alone for a few seconds, silent, when he starts gasping and coughing for the crying, until he lies back on his flank listlessly. You come closer, timidly, and put an arm around his shoulders. There, he immediately finds the shelter he was looking for.

A minute had passed quickly, laying with him on the soft ground, when a second neigh captures your attention from the other side of the hill. Ujana must have heard it too, since he turned his glossy eyes to you in sign of understanding. A moment after, you were both running down the bumpy trail through the nocturnal wood, headed towards the flourishing valley and the dark lighthouse.

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“This whole situation is absurd” – you repeat to yourself, running down the hill – “no one would ever believe it. Me, lost in a forest, at night, running away from a gang of bandits with a child... and how unlucky have we been to meet them! Yeah, it was not even their fault: it was us who chased them, looking for his fellow citizens... but where are they? I see no lights from the hills, in this nocturnal valley.

That’s weird, in fact. Why don’t we see any signals from the rescuers, after all this time since he separated from his relatives? He was clear about it, he lost them when the sun was still high in the sky... what happened all this time? What... the bandits! What if they captured them?

Wait, no, this is not possible: there was only his grandfather there, handcuffed and beaten... damn, I can’t even think about it, it’s so miserable what they did to him... but still, there was no one else on that cart... or not? Maybe they also caught his father, and he was hidden in one of the other carts. Maybe they beat him up and he was unconscious... Gosh, that is terrible... and that’s why no one is coming to save us! They didn’t even have the chance to call for rescuers, and Ujana escaped that hell only because of his irresponsible behavior. So horrible, I hope he doesn’t realize it...

No, no way, this doesn't make sense either: why were there all those lights at his place then, and across the valley? Who told them to visit his place and come here? I mean, clearly they were his fellow citizens, what else could light up a fire in the night here? No, no doubt about it... but what for, if no one told them?

OK, I see now: his father did manage to make a call, warned the town, asked for help and then got caught by that gang. Yes, this makes more sense... but why is there no one around after all this time? Maybe... maybe it's because we walked along the sea, and they're not coming this far? Please, tell me I didn't ruin it...

This is not my fault. *He* told me that his father was waiting for him at the lighthouse, what else could I do? The woods were risky at that late time, the bike was gone, I don't know the area and can't help if any emergency happens. Better to take the low-risk option, which is non-ideal but safer. After all, he asked me to help him reach this place, what else could I do but trust him?

But was it really him, anyway, who pushed to engage with this endeavor? Could it be me, who always wanted to feel like a hero? Was it really this one the safest solution, or was it rather a cunning way to selfishly seek attention and recognition?

This is no longer relevant now: now I must only find a way to get out of these woods without other surprises. Ah, I can't believe brigands still infest these lands... anyway, if we found them here, in principle they could have been anywhere else... so yeah, maybe it was not unreasonable to avoid the valley at night. Yes! I did it well, in the end: no one can ever blame me of naivety and irresponsibility. I did my best to avoid such an encounter, and when we risked and it happened, it was only for a greater good. Maybe I'm not really selfish, in the end.

But this encounter, those people... the entire chain of events looks so weird. We were looking for rescuers in an empty land, and the only people we meet are bandits who carry the same old-fashioned lights. Could it be that they saw them coming and, somehow, set up this trap? I mean, sounds crazy but it's possible... but then, how could they know that they were looking for us? They wouldn't even know where to go... then no, it could not be

a trap. So, if they were not pretending to be rescuers... and there's no one else around...

Maybe... is it them whom we've been chasing all this time? Maybe we were trying to intercept the rescuers, and instead were rushing towards a tragedy? That would be so sad and unlucky, indeed. It means that his relatives were captured immediately, without even warning the town, and that no one is coming to save us here. Oh god, this is so... and we would have to spend the night outside, hidden somewhere, with this humidity and wind... This is terrible, how can I even try to explain it to him?

No, wait again: if that were true, why were there those lights at his place? Ujana is sure that they do not have those yellow lights around his country house, and I must believe him here. So, in the end no, it's not possible that his relatives bumped into the gang in the woods. Someone had to go intentionally to visit his place: someone who has not yet showed up for all this time, or... well, the gang we met. Can it be that his relatives were not captured in the woods, but rather at his place? This would explain a lot of things: the lights there and in the valley, his grandfather being handcuffed... but would not explain why they followed us here, a few hours from their place, in the middle of nowhere. Could have someone in his family told them where to search? Damn, that is impossible, who could do that? His grandfather was ready to give his life for him, and maybe his father already... no way, let's move on from this picture.

So, those people could be the same we followed all the evening... but, then, how could they force his family to tell about their son? Especially because they did not know it either. There's no way... unless they pretended to offer their help, got the essential information and then turned out to be evil. Can this be?

No, it can't be. That's simply non-sense: someone would need to arrange a gang of ill-intentioned guys and this strategy so quickly, and what for? To assault a child, lost somewhere in the night? If they really wanted, they could have done it on any other day, with no complications. Then no, they didn't swindle them: no one could ever cheat in such a tragic situation, in a small rural

community like this one. Only people of good intentions could visit their house and offer they help.

Only people of good intentions... Wait. What does this mean? Does this mean... that those people we met, up there, on the hill... could they be our rescuers?

Come on, this can't be real. OK, it would explain the lights at his place, why they traversed the valley in the night, but then... then, they would know each other, but U had never seen that tall man before, and it's not easy to forget his size! But... in fact, that giant did call him by name... He called him by name: 'Ujana'.

There's no way a bandit could have gotten this information from his grandfather, no way. Then, this means that they know him. Jeez, I knew it but I didn't realize it before! They can't be strangers; they must be his fellow citizens! That's clear, how could I overlook it? They're even wearing costumes, who else could they be! They must have left the stage to come here, rushing maybe, without the time to change. Yeah, that must... wait, no. Damn.

If they are his good fellow citizens, why would they beat up his grandfather, and why would that giant man push Ujana on the ground, as if he didn't matter at all? Ah, this makes again no sense... Why nothing makes sense here?

If they are his good fellow citizens, then it's his grandfather who must be a criminal! He must have done something terrible to deserve that treatment... but that's crazy, in a quiet valley, with a lovely child... No, what am I thinking? His relatives, criminals? Come on... should I really believe that they were chasing them down through the woods? That means that...

...that they were trying to flee, and Ujana with them. But this is impossible: today they were just having a nice walk through the woods, until that unfortunate event happened. Yeah, Ujana told me all the story, and he would not lie to that extent, I would have felt it. He would be sincere with me at this point, and tell me only the truth... only his truth...

He could have told me his truth... where he enjoyed a beautiful promenade in the nature... while his father and grandfather were, indeed, discussing nervously all the time... and when they suddenly wanted to change path, taking a hidden trail, for reasons

that, in fact, were unclear to him. A path that, eventually, was leading to a distant lighthouse... a lighthouse... a lighthouse on a shore, strewn with boats and quays, accessible and yet completely relinquished. An unusual promenade in a hot summer day, when everyone in town was busy with the parade and could not pay attention. And their visit to his country house and his relatives, to ask for information. And his mother, who has been tense for so much time... And the visits to his place, with the officers, and her mother crying... And her words, that I don't remember anymore but, oh yes, I remember that chill:"

‘...so, my boy, if one day someone tells you something strange about our family, don't listen to them. Ever... You know the truth, and no one will take it away.’

