



## Chapter III - 4

*On the very top of a leafy branch, on one of the tallest trees, one flying squirrel was very active that night. His furry back, of a brilliant amaranth that shines under the sunlight, was almost hidden in the dark of the tangled twigs. The next nest, built by a woodpecker after weeks of effort, was on a tree cavity only a few meters beneath. The tiny squirrel was there on the edge, just about to jump, when two shaded figures along the sea drew his attention. Standing on his hind paws, in a spectacular demonstration of balance on the branch, the squirrel raised his muzzle and took a look at the seashore. Their silent promenade was as much impressive to his eyes, with such overwhelming calm, and peace, under the gigantic beacon of the bright moonlight. "What prey are they hunting there, so late at night? So self-confident, that they don't even urge to hide." These and many other questions distracted the tiny squirrel's mind, surprised by the unusual visit in his native lands. "They must be strong" – he ventures, enthralled by the view from the leafy tops – "or new to this harsh life." A simple reasoning, that of the squirrel, though very hard to understand for most creatures on Earth. An essential rule for someone, a crude lesson for most. That evening, on the very top of that leafy branch, an owl was going to teach this lesson just behind him, for all the other creatures to hear.*

“Did you hear that scream?” – said Ujana, turning left towards the forest.

“Yes, must be some little bird on one of those trees... So, what did you say about your friends?”

“That they’ll be envious when I tell them. It’s so cool here!”

“Yeah, definitely” – you sigh, looking at the incoming dark clouds – “or maybe no one will trust you, can you imagine? You go to school and no one believes it: what would you do then?”

“Really, do you think it can happen?” – asks the child.

“Of course! Would you trust someone saying ‘Hey guys, this summer I walked in the forest at night and... guess what? I even met a stranger on the beach, we talked the whole time about this and that and it was so cool!’ ”

“Uh, right, could be. But at least *you* will believe me!”

“Me? Who knows! What if we don’t meet anymore?”

“What? I already decided that you’ll be my best friend when we go back home! Don’t you want to be friends?” – he murmurs, with growing disillusion.

“Oh boy, of course. I was only kidding you!”

“Ah... I thought you were angry and didn’t want to...”

“How! We’re just joking... Who’s boring then, me?”

“No no, you’re not boring! I was only... nervous. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry, come on, I’m still joking” – a tiny bird flies on the trees, distracting you both for a second – “Look at the moon, U, it’s so yellow... When it rains, the sky takes such a beautiful shade... breathtaking, isn’t it?”

“... ”

“I see, all right. Anyway, my bike is over there.” – you point at a narrowing in the vegetation, behind a dune – “Wait for me a moment, I’ll be back in a minute.”

“OK OK, I’ll stay here.” – he replies – “Come soon, please.”

The child was distinctly calmer now, after that short talk and a walk together. ‘How lucky’ you think, turning your back to him,

considering the fear and the situation. The night was still young, but everything looked much easier in that condition.

A few meters after, your bare feet left the wet sand to reach the small, natural path you took that evening. Everything was just as you remembered, except for the scary narrow threshold of the forest: inadvisable for you to step inside, even with a flashlight, let alone bringing the child with you. You distract your look from the doorway to the old, rusted metal of your bicycle. The seat and the handlebars were still covered by tiny raindrops, as they were also all the leaves and branches in the surrounding. With a rapid tug, you tear off the bike from the hollow of the trunk, making a chilling rain spray fall from the treetops. Fresh rivulets of water flow down across your face, carrying a tiny pine needle that ran aground on your lips. You look down to your clothes, with genuine surprise and embarrassment. “What a shame!” – you think, tempted to turn and check if the child had seen it.

A few seconds later, the wet branches had ceased to oscillate: you shake the drops off at your best, which, in the end, were quite pleasant with the breeze. Yet, despite the nice and evocative atmosphere, a few hushed, unfamiliar sounds from the trees suggest nothing pleasant to your vivid imagination. Reluctantly, still bent on the bike with both hands onto the handlebars, you raise your look towards the dark woods. Also your ears, numbed by years in a metropolis, focused on the green nearby and on the distant depths of the forest but, all around, they assure, there was nothing more. Just a deep silence. A wonderful, nocturnal silence.

Time had come, then, to hide the embarrassment and return to Ujana: after all your motivating speeches, indeed, that feeling was really inappropriate. You reorient the bicycle towards the sea, eager to find him happy and distracted. A hope that turns rapidly into a chill of terror, as you find no trace of the child.

Moon must have truly admired the scene from behind the clouds, since it raises higher and higher to enjoy it. Illuminated by the moonlight, the atmosphere on the shore grows differently instead. You leave the bicycle between the bushes and frantically search the shore for any sign of the child... in vain. Vanished. You run back to the water where you left him, no more than a few minutes before, retracing the tract along the sea until the point where you met. Empty. You turn on the other side, wondering if he had ever listened to your words, but no sign on the shore... nor in the dense vegetation nearby. Far away, at least the moon seems to return your attention from the sky.

You were about to lose any hope when, all at once, Ujana shows up from the background: an imperceptible spot in the dark, on a distant dune with an outcrop of rock, looking far behind you.

“U! What the... come here!” – you shout, torn up.

From far, the child turns his look to you, to ensure that he heard it, and continues to stare at some faraway landscape behind. Still standing on the top, irritating and with no sign of yielding... but it did relieve you that he was fine. You take a deep breath and cover the distance, traversing the beach until that high dune.

“Where... are you crazy?” – you ask, panting nervously.

“...”

“Hey! Did you hear me? You promised to wait!”

“Shh. Look...” – he replies softly, without distracting his eyes.

You turn, trying to understand what was all about. Before you, only the usual landscape of the night seashore, with the waves and the stars and the dense vegetation: nothing interesting to catch your attention, though majestic to your heart, unused to such splendor.

“What’s there? I don’t understand what’s going on here.”

“Look... on that hill, over there, very high.”

It takes a few seconds to find something unusual to draw your focus, faraway up on a round hill: something more than the nearly black profiles on the background. There, on one of the highest hills, you indeed see some trembling lights of a warm yellow. Very tiny but distinct, now that you found them.

“What is that?”

“I don’t know. Someone turned on some lights, it seems.”

“Lights...” – you whisper – “and why are they so interesting? They’re barely visible.”

“Because I don’t remember them.”

“So what?” – you pause for a moment – “You made me scare without a reason: they can be everything, you can’t know all the streetlamps in the area. Let’s move on, please.”

“Well, actually I do” – he murmurs, absorbed by the view.

“What? You see that I’m not up to play now.”

“...”

“Hey, are you OK?”

“Yes. That is my place.”

A deep silence falls on the dune, pervading the air for a very long moment.

“That’s the hill I was talking about, when we met.”

You take your time to think, making it manifest that, finally, you remember the conversation and that you do understand.

“That’s great, it means your family is waiting for you!” – you shout – “They turned them on to help you find the way in the night. Sounds great, it’s a good idea!”

“Yeah, but I’m here, far. I cannot go there.”

“We’ll find it; we’ll find a way, don’t worry. I’m sure that your mother turned them on and your father is waiting for you at the lighthouse. Trust me!”

“ ... ”

“So, shall we? The earlier we go, the earlier we return home.”

“Yes, let’s go...” – he murmurs, still looking back at the hill.

The high dune was unexpectedly hard to climb down, now that you put your mind on it. Ujana didn’t find any difficulties instead, jumping and crawling like a little monkey. Nostalgically, you remember all those years when everything was just a game, while now it takes the best of your balance to bounce through the bushes... eventually falling down, hands in the sand. Ujana hops to give a hand, warmly welcome in that moment.

“Thanks! So, ready?”

“Yeah, ready!” – he answers, before jumping on a long line of imaginary stones, pointing directly to the water.

“Hey... wait for me!” – you shout, laughing at the show.

“So slow... come on, let’s go let’s go!”

The spectacle of Ujana playing was truly gratifying, with his little, vivacious shape on the dark blue sky. You were optimistic about the plan but seeing him happy was simply another story.

You had already walked a good distance when another fresh breeze shakes the land, with a delicate taste of salty water. The path has slightly turned left, revealing a whole new landscape that hides the hills far behind. Still no sign of the lighthouse, though.

“... and this is how I learnt to swim!” – says Ujana, concluding his long story of past adventures, full of anecdotes and memories.

“That’s so cool! That was awesome, must have been too fun with your friends!”

“Yes yes, that was incredible, we had so much fun that week at the lake.” – he sighs – “I still remember it like it was yesterday. I wish I could go back to those days, I miss them so much!”

“I can believe it, and that story was too fun! I wish I had friends as crazy as them! Are they also your classmates?”

“Some yes, especially my favorite, others no... like that older child, you remember... but we all live there, in the same town.”

“Cool, it’s a great luck to grow up with such friends.”

“Yes, I’m very happy. I miss them... They don’t live close by but, every time we can, we meet and play until it’s late. I’m eager to meet them tomorrow and tell about you and this evening.”

“Nice! At least you can meet often, that’s great” – you add – “By the way, is your school the one with pink walls, close to the main square, with a very big garden on the back side?”

“Yes, that one! Why do you know it?”

“Oh, actually I don’t. I just saw it today walking in the center.”

“Ah, right, of course” – he laughs – “there’s only one school in town! It was not too difficult to guess!”

“Hehe, you see, I’m not a magician.”

“That was fun in fact, you surprised me!” – he admits, still laughing – “And why were you in the center today? You’re not from this area, are you?”

“No, I’m not. I came only for the historical reenactment. I guess you’ve been there too this morning.” – you smile, scanning his well-finished clothes – “How did you like it? I think it was awesome, especially the last part.”

“Me? No, unfortunately no” – he replies – “what a pity I missed it. I was all the time with my dad this morning, we didn’t have the chance to visit the town. What did you see there?”

“Oh, so many things! People were dressed like you, with ancient costumes. There were knights, damsels, acrobats, huge standards everywhere, shows, choirs: beautiful, I loved it.”

“Cool! I’m glad you liked it! The town is small but these events are fantastic. You know, once when I was younger I participated in one of these parades! I rode a horse with my mom, all the way through the town: you should have seen us!”

“That’s so nice, you even ride horses then!”

“Ride? Maybe, I can ride a little but not too well. I did it a few times but I’m scared when they’re big. Who knows what... ah...” – he leaps up, turning back to you.

“Hey, what, all OK?”

“Nothing. I just thought you wanted to take the bicycle... Why did you change your mind in the end?”

“The bike...” – you stop – “damn, the bike.”

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A long silence falls again on the shore, as you stare at some random point on the water, trying to work out the issue. Ujana looks back at you, aware of the situation, waiting for a response.

“Yes, I forgot it” – you admit – “When I turned I didn’t find you, I got scared and... I’m sorry, I don’t know what to say.”

“I see, don’t worry. Do you want to take it?”

“I’d rather continue but I cannot leave it there. I need it to go back home and I’d rather not return here for that.”

“But we can bring you home tomorrow.”

“Maybe... thanks, but I don’t know what else I left when I ran away. There are important things with it that...”

“No one will come here, no worry, but if you want just go.”

“Maybe. I could go and... wait, no, no way” – you mumble – “You should come with me then...”

“Me? You mean, until that point where we... stopped?”

“I guess so, yes...” – you reply, desolate.

Whether everything would really go well or not, some doubts start growing in your mind: everything looks surreal and you have nothing concrete to help your decisions. A lost child in the night, under your own responsibility, on the edge between an incredible luck and a cynic misfortune. In any case, it feels frustrating to lose time for your mistake. “But was it really mine, or just his childish behavior?” As you search for an answer, soft waves on the shore kept undoing the situation, swallowing the steps of the human error in the unperturbed immensity.

Nevertheless, Ujana was very sensible to spend this time for that without additional stress. Walking fast and resolute, it does not take much to spot the high dune where you left it.



“OK, I’m going to take it, will you wait for me here this time?”

“Yes...”

“Hey, did you hear me?” – you ask embittered.

“...”

“Please, what’s wrong now?”

“There...” – he looks up to the hills, pensive.

“Where?”

“At my place.”

“What?” – you reply hurriedly – “I remember the lights, let’s take the bike and we leave, OK?”

“OK but take a look please: they moved...”

This was unexpected indeed. Yet, you fail to find a good point of reference in the open landscape.

“Sorry, to me it all looks the same. Are you sure you’re not confused? It’s far and it’s dark, it’s easy to...”

“Yes I am” – whispers the child.

“OK, so streetlamps moved, lights, whatever... Maybe your relatives just changed their position... Is this a problem?”

“It’s not a problem but it’s... strange. Look, it seems they’re much higher than before.”

“Higher, you mean on the hill? Maybe but what’s the matter?”

“That the road with the gate is down under. On the other side there is nothing.”

“So why worry?” – you reply confidently – “Since you know the way home, they put them where it’s harder to walk. I’m sure they will put others also at the entrance, later.”

“You think? Hmm... it can be, mom is very careful” – he murmurs – “but then why are they moving?”

“Lights, moving?” – you look again at the hill – “I’m sorry, to me they are all still.”

“But look better, aren’t they all... kind of... vibrating?”

“Vibrating?” – you mumble – “Ah, that can be! Maybe it’s an optical illusion, some effect due to the temperature and this mist.”

“You think?”

“Yes of course, there’s no other explanation.”

“Oh, so nice!” – shouts the boy – “I like illusions!”

“Me too, fascinating! By the way, is it better now? Can I...”

“Yes yes, it’s all OK now, thanks. I’ll wait for you here!”

A sense of satisfaction echoes in your mind while turning to the woods, lost in your thoughts, sinking your feet in the grainy sand. “How silly... how could I forget it?” The bike was still there, lying on wet grass, right next to the green bushes and the trees. “Such a pity that we cannot ride to the lighthouse, we would get there much more easily...” – you ponder – “but hey... can’t we ride along the shore? There’s a nice moonlight and the area is flat... why didn’t we think about it before!” The scary encounter with the child suggests a credible answer. “Also... I don’t remember such a big space on my bike” – you remark to yourself, looking at its body. You keep thinking about it for a few seconds with enthusiasm, until you are sure that no, you didn’t leave that space before. “No way, how can it be? I had a bottle of water fastened to the axle... and a small bag with snacks over there and... oh, gosh.” The bottle was lying a few meters away, partially covered by the grass. Much further, close to the path, you spot the fiber bag, lacerated in multiple parts and with paper sheets all around, while snacks and bread had been thrown in different points, even close to your feet.

Along the shore, Ujana was crouching down relaxed, caressing the surface of the water. With a wet stick in one hand, and a polished rock in the other, he was painting the landscape on sand. Quite relaxing, until a curious wave erased the opera. He was raising his head in sign of disapproval, ready to start anew, when your dark figure appeared from the trees traversing the beach.

“Run, U, run!”

An expression of doubt and surprise appeared and disappeared from his face in less than an instant. A few seconds after, you were running after him along the seashore without looking back, with neither regrets nor hesitation.