



## Chapter V - 5

*Along the seashore, smooth rocks were shining under the moonlight, fully drenched in foaming water. Below, countless tiny fishes populated the waters, vivaciously, and yet so discreetly, that the whole reef looked, in fact, desolate. Suddenly, a red hermit crab peeks out from the ruffles, and stands, imperious, over a giant rock. Gorgeous, cloaked by bravery and elegance, it peers at the landscape flaunting its mighty armor. Planned the next move, the crab traverses the slimy surface until, slowly, the head of a baby turtle emerges from a rift. Surprised, the two stop and study each other, despite the darkness and the deafening waves onto the cliff. Their confrontation is short, and silent, but everything is clear to them: one of them, proud and agile, fears the other one, clumsy and dormant. Life is ironic, indeed. With deference, the hermit crab retreats in its seashell and rolls away, down through the rocks, greeted by the incoming waves. On the rocky formation, totally unconcerned, the water turtle takes a deep breath and lets the waves pull it back into the ocean. Only the moon, up above in the sky, enjoys the wonder of the mortal realm, where an armor is a burden and an edge, at the same time. She stares enchanted, and envious, at the beauty of the earthly stage, since, in her perfection, she will never tell the difference.*

Ujana sits down on the sand and opens his bag in front of you. Inside it you immediately spot a huge, heavy tome with glossy finishes. You stare incredulous at the scene, as the child sighs and struggles to take it out. A few seconds later, he raises a guilty look, then hands it out to you with manifest effort.

“U, what the heck is this?” – you ask astonished.

“It’s that old book, the one I was talking about...”

“Yes, I see that! I mean, why... why are you carrying it here?”

“My dad gave it to me, this morning.”

“You father... gave you such a book... to you, seriously? To a child, who can’t even understand it, before a walk in the woods, during a hot summer day?”

“...”

“U?” – you urge him stuffily.

“What?” – he looks embarrassed in another direction.

“Why are you carrying this book, really?”

“I told you, it’s his book. He wanted to bring it with us today, I don’t know why.”

“OK but why is it with you now and not with them? It’s so heavy and unwieldy...” – you throw another suspicious glance – “this is not something you would carry around for a relaxing day in nature. Are you sure you’re telling me the truth?”

“It’s his book, I don’t know why he took it. Can we just...”

“He gave you such an impossible load to carry, from this morning? Come on, it’s heavy even for me! Is he crazy?”

“No no, he didn’t do that” – he answers bashfully – “It was me. I took it...”

“You stole it?”

“No, what do you say! I didn’t steal it... of course not. I... borrowed it, to have a look. I was very curious and, you know, I thought no one would find out after.”

“So you stole the book, great, well done! Then you carried it the whole day without letting them notice it, then at some point

you got lost following some random butterflies and... gosh..." – you start – "I understand now..."

"What?"

"I understand the story you made up, you and your fantastic butterflies. That's when you stole it, and you hid to read it. Please, tell me that it's not true and that I'm a very mean person."

"..."

"Oh dear... how could you do that? It was so stupid!"

"I'm sorry, OK? I'm sorry" – says the child with shiny eyes – "I didn't want to create this situation; it didn't have to happen. It just... happened."

"What happened, U..."

"It happened that they asked me to wait in the woods, with all the bulky bags, while they explored a path through the brambles. And you see, they had spent the whole time talking about this book... and the day before, and the weeks before, and they didn't want to explain to me why. It was not fair, you know? So I got curious, and I took advantage of that time to figure out what it was all about. But you see" – he goes on – "I could not even open it and I thought I was doing something wrong, so I moved away from the shadow to see better, and that is when they came back. I got scared, I was very scared, so I hid behind a tree trying to find an excuse as quickly as possible. They called me, screamed, it was horrible, but I thought I would find one so I didn't reply. And when I turned, a few seconds after, they had already left..."

"I see. U, I hope you understand the gravity of the situation."

"Yes, yes, I do" – he replies, weeping – "I understand now, but please... don't leave me alone. I must find them; I hope nothing bad happened to..."

"I'm sure they're fine, and of course I won't leave you... but I don't like that you lied to them, and especially to me: there was no need for that."

"I know, I'm sorry."

"Fine. Look, let's make a deal, seriously. From now on, you will always tell me the truth, OK?"

"Yes... promise" – he nods.

“Good. Then... is there anything else you didn’t tell me, that I should know about?”

“No no, there is nothing else: the rest was all true, I swear. But if I remember something that is important, I’ll tell you, OK?”

“OK. Now, please, stop crying, try to relax and take back your energy. We’ve got to go, and fast, I don’t know how far we are from that place.”

“...”

“Look, there’s a cliff over there, it’s not too far. Let’s sit there for a while. When you feel better we move on, OK?”

Ujana was still crying when he started walking next to you, freeing himself from the burden he had carried the whole day. You feel a bit cynic to push him now, so tired and upset, but you also feel, deep inside, that it was time to take the lead. Indeed, all at once you feel the whole responsibility on your shoulders, and the guilt for trusting a child so blindly. “But hey” – you wonder – “how could I even imagine?” A few answers pop up in your mind, but you set them apart and focus on the problems to solve. What’s more, the flat, ample seashore you walked on so far was just disappearing in front of you, crashed onto the shadow of a gigantic rocky formation. Though not far, from this distance you cannot see an easy passage to overstep it, without entering the strip of land overgrown by dense vegetation. Hence, the commanding decision to move ahead and stop. This way, he can rest a few minutes, while you take some time to find a path.

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As you get to the cliff, Ujana drops his heavy bag and lays down without energies. Standing tall, you stare at the spellbinding landscape and at the child, with a mixed sense of scolding and tenderness. All around, wild vegetation has invaded the beach and dominates sovereign over the area, forming a protrusion of forest that nearly reaches the water. The path, if any, must be hidden between the brambles: something easy to find during the day, you

suspect, but quite challenging now, despite the bright moonlight. However, you easily spot a few empty spaces here and there, where somehow the green becomes rarefied. The search may take more than expected, you realize, and you don't want to leave the child alone that long. The best solution, then, seems to rest with him a few minutes, to see how it goes.

“I'm laying here a minute, OK?” – you ask, without waiting for the answer.

The child looks at you silently, his eyes still shiny but visibly more confident. He throws a glance at the bulky tome under your arm, then quickly reverts to the vast sparkling ocean. Indeed, absorbed by the situation, only now you realize that you were still carrying it. Curiosity raises higher and, weariness accomplice, you decide to sit down and have a look.

The heavy tome stands compelling in your arms, bent over your knees to sustain its weight. You secure your feet down on firm stones, while a fresh breeze welcomes you on the cliff, with the rhythmic crashing of the waves onto the rocks. Before your eyes, the manufacture of the ancient tome was impressive, and carried a powerful sense of elegance that overrides its size. Your eyes move rapidly across the thick hardcover, one moment pausing on a detail, another one contemplating the overall appearance. The leather cover is large, robust and magnificent, finely decorated by silver inlay works that traverse the whole binding. When you try to peer inside, you find the tome firmly closed by a tiny, elegant buckle, made of leather and silver: an inner curiosity pushes you to unlatch it, but you do not resist the immediate beauty of its exterior craftsmanship. There, an overawing glossy plate, made up of rich wooden and metal tiles, already captures, and devours, your attention. Under a thin layer of dust and sand, which you remove with careful wipes, you progressively uncover an artwork of incredible mastery. Softly, your fingers retrace the grooves that compose the mosaic, as if you did not want to trust your eyes any longer: the grooves spread

over the surface, forming rings of different dimension that intersect with witching dynamics. You count five of them, although a few smaller rings were traced in other points. In each ring, you discover a small, silver disk, hollow and framed in a braiding of splendid lines. Your fingers caress the cold metal, avidly, lingering on the precious cavities strewn on the silver plate. As you skittishly move one of them, with curiosity and awe, you feel something cede under the slight pressure. Nothing seems broken, though; rather, the more you inspect it, the more the rich decoration seems firm and robust. With a closer inspection, one of the disks seems to have moved under your finger, as you deduce from the moon's glare on the silver surface. When you release the pressure, the disk moves back again, gently returning to its original position. As you explore the artwork more carefully, guided by a gentle touch and your creativity, you see the thin disk slide laterally within the hardcover. With surprise, you try to push it further, slowly, until it vanishes in an interstice under the frame. Below, the silver disk leaves space for a marble background, preciously adorned with the contour of a star with many points. "This is... unbelievable." The star shines bright under the moonlight, with many more lines carved in its interior, following evocative and yet inexplicable patterns. Whether or not it was merely ornamental, its actual purpose remains unknown.

Minutes pass by quickly, cradled by the salt wind on the wet stones. You have never seen anything even close to that artifact, to that level of detail, to the purity of the manufacture. Such an artifact had to be extremely precious, ancient and rare... unique, perhaps. A unique, ancient tome in your hands, carried by a child, completely unaware of the situation. You throw a quick look at the cliff, where Ujana was still lost in his thoughts, playing with the leather laces of his uniform. Greedily, you return to the tome, to explore its mysterious cover before any further distraction.

The mechanism that regulates the first disk is still working... which is quite reassuring, after all the unfortunate events of the past hours. The other four disks, hollow in as many silver frames, where waiting just next to that one. You pick one of comparable size, and carefully displace it to its left, as you just did with the

first one. The same mechanism triggers under your fingers, revealing a second, evocative shape, carved on marble with inexpressible ability. Somehow, this shape resembled the geometry of the first star, but with many more points, making it more similar to a circle. Also, the lines in the interior followed different patterns with regular polygons, but you cannot say more in such dim light. You try to incline the tome, to infer some details from the moonlight reflections, but its considerable weight, and the cumbersome presence of the child, force you to desist. Hence, you keep your focus on the cover, studying with interest the other disks that were still shining in the center. One after another, soon you reveal all their hidden content: three more shapes, with different geometries and the same, breathtaking style. The last ones have simpler patterns, more regular, whose lines still intersect to form triangles, squares and pentagons. You conclude that similar shapes had to be hidden in the first two, but you could not be sure yet, in the shadow of the seashore. You rub a finger over the thin grooves, press them, try to make them slide, but no further mechanism triggers. The cover seems to stand solid between your hands, with all its secrets uncovered.

So, there you are, with five marble inscriptions, and several questions to fulfill your curiosity. Among the other details, the silver grooves seem to propagate throughout the page, like tendrils in a blooming vineyard. Despite the tiresome darkness, you carefully follow one of their tangled paths, until it fuses with the ornamental finishes at the edge of the cover. Apparently, judging from the astonishing symmetries of the work of art, the same was happening also for the grooves, and the high-relieves, sprouting from the other disks. All these decorations were handcrafted with a smooth shining metal, silver perhaps, and wrapped the tome as a precious shield against the wear of time. You turn it upside down, following the pattern carved by the silver tendrils with your eyes. With some attention, you finally realize that they were not just spreading across the back cover; rather, the main branches of these tendrils were all pointing towards the center, where a tiny, silver hollow had been carved. You had not seen it before, due to the thick darkness and the

astonishment, but you have no doubt now: another tiny disk, hidden by the high-relieves, was laying under the tip of your finger. You cannot wait longer to explore it. With the right amount of pressure, you let your finger seize the disk and make it glide, until the tiny plate vanishes inside the leather cover.

Inside, the cavity was dark and empty. No geometrical shapes, no grooves, no stars. Pushed by a sort of delusion, you impatiently readjust your position on the stones, as if that would increase the chances to find something - anything - inside. Yet, it is in that very moment that a bright reflection catches your attention, directly from the empty hollow. "What was that?" You slowly tilt the book forward under the moonlight, trying to make that point stand out again: a minuscule fissure, precisely at the center of the metal plate. Invisible, almost. "Had the cover been damaged?" – you wonder on instinct, but it was too precise to be accidental. "Did they extract the marble?" Maybe, although it was impressive that such a fissure could have held it. "Is there any other sign?" Unlikely, now that you see better. A tiny crack, in a hidden plate covered by a silver disk, at the center of a book cover.

You try a few more seconds, but no other mechanism triggers under your fingers. Reluctantly, you investigate the remaining of the work of art, following the countless tendrils, tangling and spreading over the surface until they melt with the bindings on the large spine. There, silver grooves, sprouted from all over the cover, seem to sink into the black leather like ribs of a living creature. You slide your fingers on the surface, feeling wrinkles in the leather and, perhaps, smooth segments of printed letters. You take a closer look from different perspectives, but it is hard to discern them. In your vivid imagination, instead, you can even distinguish the lines wherein the title and the author were printed. You have no doubts: only your eyes cannot follow you.

As you hover on the spine of the tome, lost in awe and confusion, white and thin clouds veil the moon in the sky, hover for a few seconds and then pass by. The child had just stood up, turning his back at you to explore the surroundings. "Soon he'll push to move" – you realize. Regretful for the wait, you stare at the tiny buckle that lays unarmed between your fingers. You easily

undo the first knot, made of a simple leather lace, and the second bind that secured the small latch. A third, last joint is disentangled, and the book is finally free to open over your arms. Once again, you place your feet firmly over the stones, to sustain the weight and prepare for the revelation. A revelation that takes on a dark flavor, when you realize that the tome was instead sealed, and that, actually, there was no way for you to open it. “This is... this is impossible” – you complain, in an imaginary argument with its creator. You are sure that the buckle was fully open now, and that there was no other lace, nor hook, along the edges. “What else could it be then? The disks? The silver grooves, perhaps?” Or was it all just fake, no more than a subtle and extravagant masterwork, in conspiracy with the darkness?

‘So I got curious, and I took advantage of that time to figure out what it was all about. But you see, I could not even open it and I thought I was doing something wrong, so I moved away from the shadow to see better...’

That ancient contraption simply made no sense to you, more and more since the first moment you saw it. Then, a second chill traverses your spine, as you internalize that what you are holding must be anything but sane.

‘One day, my dad brought home a huge book with beautiful illustrations, really, it was impossible! It seemed English but it was not, with strange symbols and weird figures. Once I opened it and it was full of impossible drawings. The hardcover was scary too, and the title meaningless...’

Ujana’s words echo in your mind as invisible stabs.

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“Hey...?” – he shouts, climbing a stone – “Did you hear me?”  
“What?”

“At last! I was calling you, I thought you left me here.”

“Yes, I... Rather, what are you doing up there?”

“Me? I checked if there was a path down here, but it doesn’t look too safe... Maybe can we see somewhere else?”

“Wait... where have you been?” – you reply, sharply. He opens his eyes wide shut and looks at you petrified – “Never mind... So, you say there’s no path down the cliff?”

“No... no way there. It goes down a little, I see the direction but then it becomes steep and dangerous and there’s no light...”

“Of course, I see it from here that there’s no good way down there... We need to explore the area, I hope we don’t have to walk through those plants.”

“Yeah, sounds good! Ready?!” – he playfully shouts, jumping from a stone. He takes his bag and runs towards the forest.

“U?”

“Huh?”

“Can you come here a moment, please?”

Ujana throws a last glimpse at the area and, reluctantly, returns to the stones where you are still sitting. Between you, only soft shadows, a fresh breeze and a dark, ancient tome.

“Thanks. Now, can you please explain what this is?”

“It’s my dad’s book, you know that.”

“U, please, of course I know it” – you reply peeved – “I mean, do you know anything about it? Where it comes from, what it is about, why was he carrying it in his bag through the forest...”

“Oh no, I don’t know it, I’m sorry! As I said, I saw it open only once, and you remember what I saw inside no? It was really weird, with drawings and symbols I could not understand... and I even study a lot, you know.”

“Yes” – you interrupt him, to keep him focused – “but you must know something more about it, come on. You’ve heard your relatives talk about it, you have held it in your hands, you even... you must know something!”

“I swear, I’m sorry but I don’t know anything more than that! You know that I could not open it, so what more can I tell you?”

I can tell you that the pages are yellowed and that they talked about it all the week, but who knows why!”

“But why should someone carry it during a summer day in a forest? Don’t you see it makes no sense?” – you reply, irritated.

“Why they carried it the whole day, you ask? Well, maybe I know this: I think they wanted to open it there, at the lighthouse.”

“What? This makes even less sense, no?”

“Because they have the key there. Or, at least, this is what I understood from their words. Now that you ask me, I remember that they talked about opening it there with a key, or that they would find a key there, something like that. I’m sorry I didn’t remember it before so please, don’t get angry.”

“...”

“Anyway, maybe this is why I couldn’t find a way to open it... I didn’t think about it when I took it, I thought it would be easy and quick...” – he murmurs, looking down at his feet.

“No, I won’t get angry, but... why? When ever does anyone need something to open a book? There isn’t even a lock here, no case, no nothing” – you add, discontent – “Also, why couldn’t they simply go to the lighthouse, take this key and come back home? There’s no reason to carry this jewel in the woods... There is something missing in this story, don’t you think?”

“Yes, I agree that it looks strange...”

“Fine, so, I’m asking once again: was this really all the truth?”

“...”

“I’m serious. I want to help you, but for that I need to know what’s going on. It’s not the time to be shy and keep secrets.”

“I know, and I see that you want to help me and that you are serious but what more can I say? I only remember my dad saying ‘as soon as we get there, we will use the key’ and my grandpa replying ‘this is the only possibility we have’. Then I went to them, to be involved, but they quit it and changed topic. You see, that’s why I got nervous today... they excluded me all the time.”

“Wait, maybe they just needed a key to open the lighthouse.”

“The lighthouse should be open, it’s abandoned, and they were talking about the book: I don’t know how but I’m sure. I remember my grandpa saying ‘...on the book...’, ‘...for the book...’,

'...we take the book and, once we have that, we will...'. So no, I believe they wanted to open it. Have you already tried too?"

"Yes, I tried but it doesn't work. It's closed, and I don't even see by what."

"You see, that's what I meant. There was a long leather lace closing it, and I tried to... ooh, what is that?"

"What?" – you ask, surprised.

"That, on the book! Those white circles on the cover, I didn't see them before! What did you do to it?"

"Yeah, that is something even more weird that I would like to understand. I just found a mechanism hidden beneath this thick cover, which activates with pressure under the disks. So, when I figured out how it works, I just opened all of them easily... but no way to open the book with this trick."

"..."

"Here, you see, there are some shapes inscribed, which make no sense to me. I can't see well with all these intricate squiggles: they could be stars or cubes, no idea now. And behind, right here" – you add, turning the heavy tome upside down – "I found another silver disk without a drawing. There's only this cut, as if something has been extracted or damaged."

"Oh, that's strange... but it's so beautiful! I didn't think there could be something under the disks" – he murmurs, in awe – "Did you try the same trick with the empty disk?"

"I did and this is what I found. Before it was closed like all the others, then I opened it and it was empty. See what I mean?"

"Yes yes, I see. And did you try to push it aside with a finger?"

"No, it's not possible, look: it is really tiny, too tiny even for a nail. Must have been something to attach what once was inside this non-sense fissure."

"Maybe we can use something to trigger that mechanism you found. Maybe it's just damaged" – he adds, naively.

"You want to insert something into this fissure?"

"Yes, why not?"

"To open it?"

"Yes. Like a..."

"..."