



Chapter XVI - 3

9

Clouds are no more than a memory when you plunge your head into the gelid waters. Therein, flinging your imagination as a sailfish, you overtake gushes and vortexes, dodging fearsome predators and entangling algae. Schools of invisible fishes come into view from all around, submerging you way more than the whole pillar of water. One moray eel whirls about your arms, stares at you and slips away through your limbs: full of awe you turn behind, just in time to see her actual interest. Not of a creature you are prey, not of a deadly stream that traps your arms, but of your sense of wonder that winds you up.

As you inure to the water in your lungs, icy currents wrap your shape like vines on old remains, in an unusual welcome from the outer world. Sparkling dusts of twirling plankton come to dance about you, and with you, in a pacific ballet with no spectators. All the while, a shaft of moonlight brightens the way, as you let the

currents guide your steps. Timely and appropriate, a cone of light follows you as you dive deeper, and deeper, oriented to the trembling surface of the sea. Seconds pass by, hours maybe: who could say? Soft algae join the stage to crown your head, while shoaling goldfishes close a final curtain over the show. You abandon yourself to the fancies of the stream, gently floating your mind in the freshest safari. Before you, thousands of creatures peer out from the cliffs, slowing down to inspect their foreign visitor. The navy blue gets brighter as you slide on the ocean floor, only interrupted by the brown, vague shape of a splendid ancient galleon. Its flourishing, musky interiors, generously corroded by the centuries, bring back that sense of time that flows relentless. "How full of life it had be. Full to the brim of valiant explorers, vigorous soldiers, enterprising merchants... humans, in the end." Opaque sesterces emerge from strips of algae, timid memory of human hopes, desires, illusions of grandeur. "Time is the only currency we trade, universal and equal, manifest, shared. Spikes of life and inanimate matter: all is leveled out when weighted on its balance." These considerations trap you on the seabed, amazed by the worn-out drapes suspended in the cabin. There, as patches of a standard are lifted by a fish, you catch sight of a floating skeleton resting on the planks. One arm, once chained to a rusted ring, is now free to explore the wonders of the sea. The other one, as much unrestrained, fluctuates in the stream, seemingly pointing at the rotten remains of the ship's wheel. Grateful, you move ahead towards that, overflying the shining corals and blooming flowers of the vessel deck. There, as you approach it, a multitude of corals and fishes erupts from nowhere, raising a wall of life before your goal. Behind, the musky skeleton waves its skull, as its parts are dragged out of the ship by a strong current. You hold fast to the ship's wheel with all your energies, to withstand the force of nature creeping over the deck. Bubbles of air start flowing from the green, drawing an abyssal maelstrom with thousands of flowers. Your determination holds tight to the rotten wheel, observing astonished the majesty of the awaking titan. Trembling, and severely weakened by the burden of time, the galleon cedes to its fate and slowly bends down the cliff.

Deep down, the ship capsizes under the thrust of enormous water flows, disrupting the quiet life on the seabed. Sharpened rocks dismember its body, and the deck, the mainmast, the wheel: all gets swallowed by the maelstrom, which expands nourished by the ancient legacy. All around, shiny corals detach from the ground in a cloud of sparkling gems, forming a slipstream of light for the black eye of the storm. Green algae filaments indulge the flow, followed by crystals, oblivious creatures, huge rocks. Floating in the blue realm, you admire the nature unleashed by its awakening. A slight tingling spreads over your bare arms, where tiny air bubbles come to grasp the wet skin. The whole seabed overturns under your feet, unearthing newer and fresher bubbles for your floating body: you stare at the crystalline, as you fall into the black core, when an appalling sensation makes you wince: a chill climbs up your spine as you skim the memories of the dive. You search the maelstrom for reassuring signs, but all your mind sees is sea eyes staring back at you from the depths. You open yours wide, but all your eyes see is the impetuous crystalline whirl, draining the golden seafloor in an overwhelming embrace. You feel them closer, on its left and on its right: two interested expanses, that follow your fall through the vastness of the ocean. You close your eyes, leaving the submarine stream take its course. The surface of the ocean is now dramatically far: you direct your last gaze to its waves, but even their memory is fading to black. A black so dark, and so deep, that everything can find its own place, and yet lose any meaning.

8

“Where am I?” – you whisper with a dazed voice. The load of water has relieved your shoulders, and your lungs expand in the absence of pressure. Darkness surrounds you, silent and stately, as you keep on circling in a weightless flight. Your hands caress the void that welcomes your arrival: their skin, clean and dry, is

hard to reconcile with the descent into the underwater. No drops follow behind, no algae filaments to paint contrails, no sparkling dusts of corals guide your way. No trace of the wreckage and of your old companion, who so eagerly preceded you in this journey. Everything keeps spinning around, though the darkness conceals it completely. Even time flows differently with no orientation: it does not flow at all. Indeed, there is only you here. “Where is the maelstrom? The impetuous stream, and those dreadful eyes?” A heartening voice whispers in your mind – “You are still here.”

As time passes, the heart starts beating more slowly: your movements become more natural, your thoughts sharper. Gently pushed by a mysterious energy, your contour detaches from the background and takes shape in your mind, rippled by intangible winds that blow from nowhere. Skittishly, you search your figure for signs of distortion but your fear, unfulfilled, leaves room for a raising freedom. A sigh of relief seals the past burden, and you picture it behind in a veiled outburst of joy. Yet, naïve victim of the dark, soon you realize that the eyelids never opened. A storm of emotions climbs your limbs, in a race between impatience and fear of disillusion. You take a deep breath, foretasting the surprise that was reserved for your visit.

Black. Everything around is black, as black as the maelstrom. Faster than light and imagination, you dash from one point to another in unpredictable trajectories. Many questions rise in your mind, curious, insatiable... but no one to ask to, nor to beseech. “How did I get here?” – you shout, while your limbs hold on tighter in a fetal position – “Where am I headed for?” Silence still reigns deep and beautiful, while your eyes, wide shut, stare at the infinite emptiness that fills up the surroundings. Defeated by the oblivion, you eventually loosen your muscles, reclining your head over a bed of inertia.

Nighttime goes on unending, gentle and sovereign in its invisible kingdom. The moon, majestic ambassador of its power, must be hiding somewhere with her pages and damsels, discreetly

following their visitor's flight. Gradually, your memory goes back to the maelstrom, the sparkling slipstream, the moonlight dance and the ancient galleon, keeper of treasures. You recall the dreadful eyes, the enormous currents on the seabed, your starved companion and the musky ship's wheel. "The ship's wheel... was it really..." It is all gone now. Yet, it lives in your memory, in great harmony with shining dusts of plankton and corals. Floating softly between schools of deep-sea fish, you recall the crystal slivers surrounding you, so firmly and vividly that you still see them now, shine on your skin. And you miss them all, completely. Like a traveler, you, lonely visitor, long for everything you left behind as you fall, and fall, into the arms of darkness... until a sudden feeling wakes you up: as you whirl about your person, some of the shiny dots do not follow your rotation. Could that be an illusion of a worn mind? Could they be real, firm gems of light shining in the darkness?

The stars look different from here. Tiny, pulsing gems shining in the darkness, billions and billions of glittering corals on the vault of heaven, which reveals itself in all its perfection. They watch their guest whoosh at light speed across incommensurable distances, with a faint smile that you fail to catch, but feel warm inside. Where did they hide all this time, and why, you may never know. You stare leisurely at the endless vastness while, behind, a sprinkled drape closes a slit on unspeakable territories, framed by a luminous crown. Sailing on a dreamy stream across the universe, the view of infinitely many stars, galaxies, clusters, dominates your destination. Stellar slipstreams of shining matter weave a gigantic mesh of suns and earths, recreating a neural network for the cosmic mind. Galactic neurons fire rhythmically with flashing pulsars, whose blinks dictate the timing of all creation. Just like the brightest ideas fecundate the smartest mind, their beams spread the elements of life in all directions, allowing for more complex intuitions to take a role. The cosmic network enlarges and enlarges in fractal dimensions, while you feel the deep connection between spacetime and energy. "Matter fills up space and time... but what is left without it? No more clocks for time,

nor flags for space. No more...” Your mind startled, when a nova explosion drew the attention to the galactic fireworks celebrating your arrival. A silent blast, then another, and another, and countless novae went on firing from the whole cosmic horizon. Their circles of light shine in the darkness and enlighten your way, and the absence of sound makes the show even more dramatic.

Your flight proceeds across a multitude of nebulae and dark highways through galaxies and stars that bend, from time to time, to run along the falling matter. You gaze at it travel gigantic spirals, emitting one last, tremendous farewell before departure: its memory is projected to the furthest spacetime, becoming source of inspiration for the unaware life. Around, luminous points appear and disappear instantaneously, fleeting traces of worlds that you have no time to explore. Hypergiants, supergiants, and red, brown, white dwarfs defending their dignity among their younger sisters. You barely glimpse them as bright arrows of light cleaving the vacuum, whose beauty is captured by your imagination. As you travel inconceivable distances across folds of spacetime, their unperturbed flow seems to bend and listen to your desires: slowly, the arrows become more vivid, more intensely impressed in your eyes. Beautiful shades of colors start springing from the stars, rings of shining icy gems, belts of planets dancing in solemn harmony. The perfection of their movements, so elegant, so delicate, is hardly paralleled by the infinite wonders you encountered. Their dance reminds you of the ocean, so far in time and space, hidden in remote drawers of your memories. Two souls, surrounded by countless creatures of the deep and shiny rainbow corals: admiring the perfect composition of their orbits, you paint again their imaginary lines with human features. In your mind, you see it clear: a red giant sun, seducing her wooers, who have been competing since the dawn of time in a never-ending courting. In your mind, that gelid view is no different from the warm human carousel. “What do they get from such endeavor” – you wonder – “beyond daylight, and motivation?” Silence is the echo to your question. Thousands of orbits pass by, admiring its epic poetry. Finally, revolving about the sun, enthralled in a spiral

of interest, you think you saw the answer for a moment: a perfect line, of intangible concreteness, seems to mark this separation. Below that, a trembling cauldron teeming of life, where countless shiny dots dance at the night breeze, finely touches the limitless vastness of the universe above. The two worlds seem to disentangle under your eyes, unraveling their kingdoms of fleeting life, ubiquitous realms, timeless history.

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Before you, Ujana is sitting on the shore, gazing at the waves that wet your ballast. Everything feels so light, suddenly, that you can barely remember the hurdles of your journey. “So, this is how it feels” – you whisper from the sky, descending from the rarefied atmosphere through the white cotton bolls. Above, the vault of heaven shines of your new companions, in a collective greeting from the furthest galaxies: their lively motions is still vivid in your mind, as they elude us and observe us in ages beyond our comprehension. Below, tiny raindrops paint interference patterns on cold water, while green twigs emerge from sand, cradled by faraway lullabies. Indeed, it is in their very swaying, which they can’t escape, that they create and consolidate their own existence. And from their swaying, beautiful, ceaseless, frightening, you raise your look to the distant line of intangible concreteness.

Floating over currents from the clouds, your feet delicately land on wet sand, once so familiar to your skin. A few meters before you, laying on the shore, you see Ujana gazing at the horizon through your own figure. Fresh hair shiny for the rain, eyes lost in the endless ocean at night, hands joined in an empty embrace. One arm, once chained to a rusted ring, is now free to explore the beauties of the sea. The other one, as much unrestrained, is feeling the saline wind, apparently pointing at the ship’s wheel. You step toward him, but lost in his thoughts he does not even notice. A veiled sigh hides in the breeze, leaving space for a pleasing smile. “Does it really matter, after all?” A wayward ripple climbs your heel, and a soft chill brings your mind

back on the bare sandy ground. Pure wilderness, solemn loneliness... freedom, maybe? Your heartbeat, your breath: even time flows differently with no orientation. It does not flow at all. You close his eyes, releasing his focus and leaving time take its course. The surface of the ocean is now dramatically far: you direct your last gaze to its waves but even their memory is fading to black... and you miss them all, completely. Like a traveler, you, lonely visitor, long for everything you left behind as you fall, and fall, into the arms of darkness. A black so dark, and so deep, that everything can find its own place, and yet lose any meaning. With these considerations, you sit on the shore next to Ujana, and join him to contemplate the view of the universe.