

*CHRY'S ROMEO*



*ISLAND OF BLISS*

# *Island of Bliss*

*by Chrys Romeo*

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Just one day - sometimes, that's just about enough time to hold an eternity in it.

As the rays of sunlight seem to take off, in just one second, there is enough time to live and love for an entire eternity. In one moment there can be enough intensity to equal infinity itself... if you know how. If you can feel it.

Ramos was slightly aware of that, but his thoughts were light and airy as the ship was approaching the shores of the sunny island. He could feel the breeze, warm and soft, tickling him under his white shirt, ruffling strands of hair in his eyes, as he glanced toward the steep edge of hills surrounding the distant shore of the little island, soaked in the summer sun and carrying the scent of vineyards, orange trees and olive leaves. He wasn't thinking of time that day when he arrived on the island. His mind was a mixture of stranded thoughts about his ancient Greek roots, lost in an age of legends and myths, and the bright day ahead, awaiting with promising shores of vacation. He could remember from childhood vague family talks about some far away ancestor that originated from one of those little islands scattered along the Mediterranean Sea. Yet his mind was easily distracted by the view and the energy of the water. The air was filled with splashing drops of salty waves. He could feel some familiar welcoming sense of belonging, as the ship was getting closer to the land. As he was standing on the deck, in full sunlight, there was something in his appearance, perhaps the dark hair, the powerful shoulders and the glistening eyes that made him look like one of those ancient athletes painted on pots and vases. But more than that, there was something deep in his soul - a thirst for life, a fire burning to capture the moment, a need to enjoy each second to its full extent that made him feel he belonged there somehow. He deserved the magic of the island.

It felt as if it was there that life displayed to its full intensity the best of what it could offer; and he was ready to enjoy the moment, the unrepeatability of being exactly in that place, in that one place at that time. He almost didn't realize how much he was already enjoying the presence of the orange trees and vineyards, scattered on the dry heated land of the little island, the soft welcoming atmosphere of solitary bliss in a corner of the world where nature had complete freedom to become wild, unrestricted and charming at the same time. As the ship made contact with the shore, he didn't even wait for the sailors to throw the rope and stairs. He jumped directly on the edge of stones that appeared white and long washed by sun and waves.

"Wait a minute sir!" he heard an alarmed voice behind, and he smiled and looked around, enchanted by the view, as the sailor was bringing his bag across the ledge, eager and almost anxious to get rid of the luggage.

He wasn't attentive to the ship anymore. He was looking around the shore. Something was entirely familiar to him. A very peaceful and deep silence covered the hills basking in the midday sun. To the other side of the harbor, he could see a lighthouse, white as chalk and painted with blue stripes. It stood there, like a testimony of the unending tranquility of the island. He imagined the ships it would beacon at night, as he could see wooden little boats tied afloat in the long hours of dozing in the summer heat, just hearing the tide swishing back and forth, awakening tiny creatures. The warm gentle temperature seemed to make everything float around in undisturbed stillness. Even the white clouds above were slowing down to doze off, dissipating effortlessly, as if enjoying the hour.

"Hey, hey, what do you know!" someone exclaimed and he saw a bright figure coming down the hill, toward the shores.

It was a man, dark haired and wearing a moustache, speaking in a friendly manner, with fast gestures and quick restless eyes. His sharp profile cut through the air, as he skipped the stairs and hopped on the shore. He seemed mature enough to know his way around, but not old enough to keep his childlike sly attitude in check. His eyes were sparkling so intensely, as if he didn't miss anything.

"They told me we would have new visitors today, but I wasn't expecting such an adventure boy like yourself", he smiled, extending a hand to Ramos. "I'm Frankie, the island guide."

Ramos shook his hand. His powerful grasp made the other man stare at him with amused admiration.

"Are you working out a lot?" he grinned under his moustache.

Ramos noticed that the slender restless man was dressed extravagantly in a bright costume, made of white leather, adorned with sparkling pieces of metal and diamond-like ornaments. He was wearing a dazzling belt and his tight trousers were white too, similar to the color of the stones on the shore, as if the waves and the storms had washed him in time, along with everything else around. He looked like a ballet figure, yet there was something mysterious in his attitude, something he was keeping to himself. Ramos felt safe enough in his presence to have the conversation flowing.

"I'm from Arizona", he stated briefly and casually, "but my folks say I have some distant ancestor from around here. I've finally come to see where my roots spring from. Otherwise, I'm just a student on vacation. This looks like a fabulous place."

"The best there can be on earth, trust me!"

Frankie grabbed the voyage bag.

“Let me help you. I know the way, I’ll show you around. Don’t you worry about a thing!”

Ramos could do nothing more but go after the man who behaved like an island expert.

As they started to climb the hill in the heated sunlight, Frankie kept talking, while Ramos unbuttoned his shirt and paused every now and then to glance back at the blue shore expanding more and more in sight, as they were going up. The uneven cliffs that were immersed in the warm sea water offered the same peaceful stillness.

“Some days there’s me, some days there’s Mikalos to show you around and answer your questions. We take turns to watch the island. He is the other shift, a very nice fellow. You won’t find a better heart, more giving, more enthusiastic. Mikalos is my best friend. We hang out a lot. We’re in charge around here.”

He laughed and Ramos didn’t know if his words were meant as fun or they were the actual truth.

“You don’t believe me?” Frankie continued. “You just wait and see. This island is ours. It’s yours too now, even more, because you are the new guest. You are the prince. Name it and we bring it.”

Frankie laughed again, but Ramos was getting accustomed to his way of talking and he guessed that the guide could speak about serious matters in the most amused way, without diminishing the meaning of the words. And beyond that, there was something more he didn’t intend to reveal. Ramos wondered what it was. But he was soon distracted by the aroma of the orange trees and the approaching vineyards. Small houses with walls of white chalk appeared on the road, spreading in front of them.

“So you say you’re a student, huh? You’ve got stubble across your cheek, kid. Don’t they teach you to shave in your university?”

Ramos touched his own cheek and felt the slight roughness. He went along with Frankie’s game.

“I’m on vacation. Besides, I bet hair doesn’t grow so fast on this island. Everything seems at a slow pace around here.”

“Yes, you are right about that”.

Frankie became serious and stopped in front of a little house.

“Here we are. There’s enough room during this time of year. This is one of our guest houses. Mikalos comes to water the plants. Other than that, you’ll have complete peace. Mikalos won’t bother you - you won’t even know when he’s in the garden. He’s in charge of whatever grows on the island. Ask him and he’ll go on for hours about the orange trees and

the small goats and the little seagulls and the crabs on the shores... and whatever other living creature you can imagine that exists. Yeah, that's our Mikalos."

Frankie smiled, glancing to the sun that was imperceptibly shifting its place in the sky, still as bright and intense as the heated shores. Then he turned to the sea and pointed far away, in a triumphant gesture:

"Look! Your ship is leaving. You are one of us now!"

Ramos saw the ship that was indeed leaving the island. Its tiny figure was getting smaller, becoming more of a paper boat. He suddenly felt a bit anxious as he watched it get a distance, almost vanishing. He felt an unexplained worry, a hidden shadow passing by and clouding his vision for an instant. He shrugged it off quickly. He was enjoying the island too much to worry about the ship. He was looking forward to spending some wonderful days ahead. He smiled and let the warm afternoon air wrap around him, with the whispering orange trees and the yellow grass covering the cliffs. He breathed content and enchanted. The Mediterranean island was indeed a corner of paradise.

As they went inside the house, the air cooled off. The ceiling was not too high and the small windows had shaded curtains, beyond which the blue line of water could be seen in the distance. Across the bay, the silhouette of the chalky lighthouse was steaming off in the sun, like a pointed exclamation mark in the dense heat of the summer sky. The house was simply decorated, but it had the same peaceful, welcoming charm. Ramos glanced at his watch.

"Listen bro", he said to Frankie. "Is there a store where I can buy a watch on this island? This one seems to have stopped – it's probably the battery. Would it be too fancy to ask for a replacement?"

Frankie smiled absently.

"You don't need a watch around here, kid. Trust me. I'll tell you what time it is whenever you want to know. I'm an angel of time."

And Frankie laughed. Ramos thought he was teasing him again, so he just went along with the game. The other added:

"However, if you really need to know the time, there's a big clock tower in the square down the road, you can check the time there. And there's a calendar on the bedroom wall. One page for every day of the week."

"Thanks. I think I'll be fine with that".

Frankie stuck his hands inside his sparkling belt, thumbs sticking out.

"Sooo... I'll let you rest for a while now. Call me if you need anything. Either I will come, or Mikalos will. One of us will be around. "

“How do I find you?” Ramos inquired.

“You don’t. I’ll find you.”

Frankie winked at him, childishly again.

“We’re having this secret code, like in those detective movies. Get it? Don’t worry. I’ll be on the island.”

He extended his arms and his big white teeth sparkled under the spiky moustache.

“Where could I go anyway? I’m not going anywhere.”

Then he laughed; he turned around and left, whistling without a care.

Ramos glanced after him amused, then unpacked his bag and threw himself on the bed, wondering if an hour of sleep was what he needed. He didn’t feel sleepy, so he decided to just explore the island. He changed his shirt, grabbed a sandwich from his lunch pack and went outside.

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The island proved to be a bit larger than it had initially seemed to him.

First, he went to the square that Frankie had spoken about. The road was empty, the square was deserted too. It was as if everyone had disappeared, vanished into the stillness and the glowing heat of the afternoon. It seemed the air was radiating invisible waves. The pathways were paved with the same white washed stones and a few oleanders decorated the walls, swishing lazily in the breeze. The alleys were narrow and inevitably, invariably leading to the shores. No matter where he was, he could see some part of the blue line of the horizon from whichever angle of the pathways. Walking around and not meeting anyone seemed an unreal truth of the island. He finished his sandwich while walking, then stopped to sit on a bench on one of the white terraces built up on the cliff, opening the view to the immense Mediterranean sea, hanging just above the steep wall of rocks. He sat there for a while, letting the entire view sink in, somewhere in the depth of his consciousness, magically wrapped in the silent atmosphere. Nature was however speaking, whispering something. There were seagulls floating away toward the lighthouse and waves continually splashed down along the harbor. He closed his eyes, envisioning the distance to the rest of the world. It was as if nothing else but the island had remained under the sky: the eternal, immemorial stillness of the island. He felt he was a part of that truth, integrated in it, with each breath he peacefully inhaled, melting his existence in it, perfectly belonging there.

“Are you alone?” he heard someone ask.

Ramos opened his eyes. He smiled. A teenage girl was sitting on the other end of the bench, holding a closed book in her hands. She was glancing attentively and curiously at him. She was one of those subtly refined sculpted Greek girls, sharp nose and deep eyes, firm jaws and slender back, as if she had always been vertical, sustaining the sky. Her brown chocolate eyes inspected him with enthusiasm and a kind wisdom, unusual for her age. She seemed to have stepped down from a pedestal. Yet she was very real, waiting for an answer,

“Well, I’m sorta kinda by myself here”, he said and he ran a hand through his slick black hair, feeling somewhat awkward.

The teenager seemed to look right through his mind.

“What about you?” he said composing a more determined and confident tone.

“What about me?”

Teenagers, he thought. They are so direct.

“What’s your name? Where are your folks?”

“My name is Althea. I live over there, beyond the square, just behind the clock tower.”

“Ah, the clock tower. Yes, I’ve seen it”.

He looked back at the empty square.

“So where are they now?”

“Are you talking about my family?”

“Sure”.

“They’re taking my little sister to the continent; I’m supposed to join them in an hour down the bay. We’ll take a motor boat. We’ll be back before the weekend is over.”

“So why aren’t you with them now? Maybe you need to get ready for the visit.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” she laughed.

“No, I just wondered...”

He felt as if the girl kept going one step ahead and catching him off guard. Teenagers... She was too clever for that hour of the day. He looked at her a bit more interested.

“What are you reading?”

She handed him the book.

“It’s *Myths and Legends*”.

“Right. It fits the place completely.”

He browsed the pages.

“So you say you’ll be back before the weekend is over? Would that be on Sunday?” he asked her absently.

“Yes... I guess so.”



Ramos suddenly realized he didn't know anymore what day of the week it was.

He gave her back the book and looked at her a bit disoriented.

"What day is today? Saturday?"

"Nope. It's Friday."

"Right. I remember now, I got on the ship on Friday morning and arrived here at noon. It feels I've been here since forever already..."

He got up and they both looked down to the bay.

"Well, I gotta go", the girl told him. "They'll be waiting for me. It was nice to meet you. I'll see you around, then?"

"Yeah, sure. Take care."

She was still standing there.

"You didn't tell me your name".

Teenagers, he thought.

"Ramos. My name is Ramos. I'm from Arizona, if it means anything to you."

"It does. It was nice to meet you, Ramos".

He smiled.

"You're a clever girl, Althea. Keep reading."

She hurried off and he lost sight of her beyond the oleanders.

The place was silent again. He looked around. In the distance, the white chalk lighthouse was waiting, as if patiently painted against the clear blue sky.

He decided to go that way and explore the other part of the island.

As he was getting closer to the bay, he noticed another terrace, right near the water. The chairs were mostly empty and had been turned upside down. But at one table, he saw someone - a woman. She was sipping lemonade and the Mediterranean breeze was softly moving her long blond hair, along with the rhythm of the splashing waves on the shore, which was fascinating and captivating to see. She had a straw hat that was hiding her eyes. Yet underneath the hat, he could notice her chin and the hands holding a tall glass. The glass was covered with steam from the cold lemonade, most probably. She was wearing a yellow dress and the vanilla nuance of the folds above her knees stood out in the complete white of the terrace. It was a contrast that harmonized with the light blue, nevertheless. Something about her entire being made him stare.

Ramos realized he was lost in thoughts, watching the woman and it surprised him to become so acutely aware of it. She looked like a tourist herself. She looked a bit out of place.

“I can’t just go to her and introduce myself”, he thought. “It would be rude. And there’s no one else around.”

He pondered for a second. The intensity of the sun was blinding his eyes. What if he turned away and never went to speak to that woman? What if he never had the chance to meet her ever again? They would never know each other, he thought. Things would remain like that. Unknown, unresolved. Suspended, unaccomplished, undeveloped... As if life would meet a blocked road. The idea of an unexplored opportunity seemed like a lost chance. But then, there was a risk. What if he went to her and it made him look like a fool? Or worse, like a jerk?... He hesitated.

However he evaluated the situation, he couldn’t let the moment pass him by. He finally acted on the intensity of the impulse and chose to walk to her. What was the worst that could happen anyway?...

He realized that somehow he always did that. He liked to experience things in their most intense aspects, to enjoy the best of life’s offerings. He would prefer to choose to go to the end of it. To do the best that could be done. To be the best he could become. To see how far it could go. To not let things be wasted. Maybe that was a risky choice: a lot could be lost instead, but he knew he would regret it more if he didn’t do anything. Who had taught him to think like that? It was an inherent instinct, a daring impulse, an endless courage that pushed him forward. Maybe he really had an ancestor from that island. Maybe it was the ancient spirit of a knowledge long gone that life must be taken to its most, that infinity was waiting to rise from underneath the slow hours of a simple day and turn it into eternal splendor. The instinct was undeniably there, like a part of the island. Seize the day. Seize the moment. Live your life. Make it shine. Be the best. Get out of mediocrity and safe middle ways. Go out and be.

He came to her table and stood there in the sun.

“Is this seat taken?” he asked casually, but he felt his voice a bit unstable.

As afraid as he was of being rejected, he was even more frightened of losing the opportunity of getting closer to that person in the sun, who was so attractive.

She raised her eyes and looked at him. The glimmer of her eyes was subtle and warm.

“You may sit if you like”, she answered politely.

He sighed of relief and sat next to her.

“I think I’ll have one of those too”, he said pointing to her glass of lemonade.

And he smiled, trying to be friendly. She said nothing. The strands of her hair, unevenly spreading under the straw hat, were irresistibly drawing his eyes to her shoulders and the vanilla dress. He controlled his stare and looked away to the lighthouse in the distance.

“Have you been there yet?” he asked.

It was worth a try asking. He knew it was always worth a try. Not always with results, though.

“Not yet”, she answered in the same tone.

She was absently ignoring him somehow.

“I’m Ramos”, he said. “I’ve just arrived on this island today. Isn’t it wonderful?”

He paused to look around. And then he looked back at her. It was obvious he was trying to start a conversation, yet she wasn’t helping very much. He stared in her eyes helplessly. And then, she smiled. A miracle has happened, he thought. He felt a load lifting off his shoulders and he relaxed.

“I arrived two days ago”, she told him. “I’m Lisa.”

“Lisa...”

“Yes. I’m from London.”

He was listening to her and enjoying the sound of her voice. It had a certain resonance that seemed absolutely enchanting to his ears.

“Are you staying longer?” he asked her.

She looked at him again, and the eyes under the hat made him shiver unexpectedly.

“Maybe”, she answered after a while, still looking at him.

At that moment, he heard someone shout his name from the pier. He turned to look at the tall figure running and waving his arms at him. He didn’t know the guy. It was a pale silhouette, with locks of pitch black hair flowing in the sea air like the mane of a horse.

“Ramos!”

He got up from the chair.

“It seems I’ve got to go”, he said to Lisa. “I hope we’ll meet again”...

The running young man was barefoot, approaching in a hurry along the bay. He had deep large eyes and marble-like skin, which seemed unusual, as if he had never spent time in the sun, not in the least tanned, a very odd appearance on those shores. He was wearing dusty trousers and a shirt floating like a ship flag.

“You’re Ramos, right?” he gasped, pausing to catch his breath.

Ramos watched him puzzled.

“That’s me. What’s happened?”

“You’ve got to come with me.”

And he grabbed his arm. Ramos didn’t move, still looking at the other in disbelief, reluctantly drawing his arm back.

“Why? And who are you? I was just having a conversation with someone at that table...”

He turned to look at the blond yellow dressed Lisa, yet the table was empty and she was gone. Ramos bit his lip and frowned a little. His eyes clouded. He didn’t understand. Where did she go?...

The other kept talking.

“I am Mikalos. Frankie must have told you about me. You must come now. The island is going down tonight.”

Ramos became more attentive.

“What do you mean it’s going down?”

“There’s been an earthquake and by the time it gets dark everything you see will be under water.”

Mikalos was very serious. Ramos just realized, in a second, that the young man probably spent most of his nights watering the plants and most of the days hiding from the sun. That explained his pale complexion.

“What earthquake?” he asked in disbelief, starting to walk beside Mikalos along the bay.

“Didn’t you feel it? It was just half an hour ago. They announced it on the news. We should evacuate the island.”

“Wait... if this is true, we must warn Lisa too.”

“Who is this Lisa person?”

Mikalos seemed naïve for his age and his innocent eyes stared at Ramos with sincere interest.

“It’s someone I’ve just met on that terrace...”

“The problem is that even if we warn her, there is nothing she can do. The boats at the lighthouse have been set loose by the last tide, or someone untied them on purpose, I don’t know. The last motor boat left ten minutes ago, with a family. There is nothing we can do but swim. We must get on higher ground before it sinks.”

Ramos was staring into space. His mind seemed to not fully comprehend the meaning of the words. Mikalos was making large gestures and his white shirt looked like big wings across the bay. The sky was getting darker; clouds were coming from the horizon. The waves had

changed their slow splashing pace and were becoming higher, more aggressive, throwing heaps of water over the edge. A rumbling sound started to shake the ground.

“See? I told you! Let’s go!”

Mikalos grabbed his sleeve and started to run up the hill. Ramos was jumping over the rocks and bushes, scratching his feet. They arrived at the top just as the cliff was beginning to crack and fall apart. The noise was deafening and the dark was spreading fast. Night was coming too soon, Ramos thought.

“Where’s Frankie?” he shouted at Mikalos.

“Frankie’s already taken off. He’s gone”

“What do you mean taken off?” Ramos shouted, but the storm swallowed his words.

The next thing he knew, he was falling deeply and water was engulfing everything.

He got covered by it, and then everything went dark.

He didn’t know if he was breathing anymore. He didn’t know where he was. He didn’t even wonder if he was anymore.

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He woke up in a bed.

It was morning.

The rays of the sun were flowing around him. He looked up. He was in the little house, with small windows that showed the blue line of the horizon beyond and away.

He stood there, not knowing what to believe at first. It was, obviously, morning. Things seemed still and peacefully sinking in that tranquility he had encountered the day before, when he had arrived on the island. And yet, the other night, the island had been immersed in water, destroyed... or had it been a dream?

‘Maybe it was just a nightmare’, he thought. ‘Maybe I came back here in the afternoon and I fell asleep. Then, I dreamt that I went for a walk and I met those people.’

He stood up. And yet, it was morning. The sun was rising, but the heat was not so strong. It was definitely morning. He looked at the pots of plants on the window pane. Someone had watered them at night. Mikalos, he thought.

He wanted to check his watch, but he didn’t have a watch anymore around his wrist. He remembered the clock tower in the square. ‘I must go there’, he thought.

He had to get out of the house. Before he went out, he looked at the calendar. It was Friday. He tore the page away and opened the door.

He went outside. To his surprise, there were people in the streets. Some were going to the market, with baskets around their arms. Some were walking to coffee shops, some were just talking casually. He passed them by. 'I need some breakfast', he thought and he stopped in front of the clock tower. It was nine. He looked around. He noticed a coffee shop and went to sit at a table. By the time he was having his coffee and toast with orange jam, someone sat down next to him.

"Hi Frankie", he said and continued his breakfast, undisturbed.

Frankie smiled.

"I see you remember me. I'm glad".

"Of course I remember you. Who could ever not. You're one of a kind".

Ramos smiled, but there was a trace of anger and frustration in his voice. He didn't remember why he had slept so long the day before.

The tasty breakfast was somehow erasing his bewildered thoughts. A sense of comfort and ease covered his mind, infusing his mood with better impressions. He glanced around. It was a kind of happiness to sit there in the morning sun, listen to the oleanders in the salty sea air, feel the aroma of the orange trees and the burned yellow grass, and watch the animated little island come to life. It was an overwhelming feeling of comfort and certainty. It was a beautiful summer morning. Everything was just right. It was just perfectly fine. Life was good. Life was miraculous. Ramos thought about his ancestor and Althea's book of myths. Maybe they had felt that for centuries, those people living there: the essence of bliss, the best of life. The sky was a clear blue, sharp and cloudless. Had Althea been part of the dream? And Lisa?... He doubted they had been real. He was asleep anyway by the time he had met them. 'I must have invented them', he concluded. His mind had invented everything for sure.

He stared at his remaining coffee.

"Hey Frankie, he said, I think I'll take a walk down to the bay. It's almost ten o'clock and I haven't taken advantage of this sunny day yet."

"Have fun", Frankie replied, leaning casually on the seat. "And if you need anything, just call me."

Ramos got up. He had already paid for the breakfast. He started to walk toward the shore.

"Next time I'll buy you coffee", Frankie shouted after him. "Or you'll buy one for me".

Ramos approached the shores with thoughts running irreversibly through his mind. He was still turning the events in his head, wondering about what to do for the rest of the day, when he noticed a tourist ship that was cruising the waters around the island. He was just

getting to the pier when the ship passed closely nearby, so close that he could see the passengers on the deck. He stared absently at the tourists. They were just passengers. They were not going to visit the island. They were probably a larger group from the continent. Suddenly, he blinked in the morning sun. The sting hurt his eyes and he felt his breathing stop for a second. He stared painfully at the deck that was overflowing with sunlight. He thought he had seen a flash of vanilla yellow dress. He started to run along the shore, as the ship was getting distance. Could it have been her? Could it? How could it, actually? Deja-vu, he thought. I'm experiencing a deja-vu. I've dreamed about it and here she is.

He grabbed the metal bar of the shore barrier and leaned beyond it, trying to squint and distinguish the yellow dress among the passengers. The ship docked, to his surprise, and people started getting off. His heart hurried, beating faster. He walked up to them, pretending to just pass by. 'I'm stalking her', he thought. 'I shouldn't'. But the temptation was too strong. And his face lit up when he saw her stepping on the shore, elegantly holding her straw hat by the ribbon. It was her. It was really her. He couldn't understand. Had it not been a dream? Why was she really there? Was it a premonition? A deja-vu moment? Had he seen her before somewhere else?...

He chased away the rush of thoughts that was flooding his mind and just enjoyed the vision of her walking past him. It was just one thought, one enchantment - happiness. He was happy to see her. He followed her to the terrace where he watched her sit at the table. He hesitated only for a second; then, he went straight to her, with a big smile on his face.

"Can I sit here?" he asked her.

She raised the rim of her hat a little, to glance at him attentively.

"I don't know", she replied. "Can you?"

There was irony in her voice, but she remained distant.

"I mean, would you mind very much if I sit here?" he added, not in the least intimidated by her cold answer.

Being there with her, having found her so unexpectedly, so suddenly, in such an unexplained miraculous way, meant so much more to him. It meant so much happiness, it made him so enthusiastic, that it didn't matter what she said. Ramos took the chair and adjusted in the seat, relaxed and content, still smiling at her.

"So... let me guess... you're going to have some lemonade?"

She watched him carefully.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"No, I don't think so. I'm Ramos. I just arrived yesterday."

“Well, I came two days ago...”

“From London, right?”

He was amused at her bewilderment.

“How did you know?”

He shrugged, mysteriously.

“I just guessed. It must be your accent.”

“Okay...”

She started to smile a little. ‘Victory!’ he thought. ‘She’s smiling!’ Things seemed to be going great. And yet, the cruise ship rang its siren.

“I must be going”, she said and stood up.

“Why must you return to the ship right now?”

“The ride is two hours long. We’re going around the island. There are secret vaults on the other side. They say there are lots of interesting things to see.”

“Yes”, he agreed, “Most probably.”

And as he saw her go, he still had something more to ask.

“Tell me your name.... please?”...

She replied without turning her head, as if it didn’t matter:

“Lisa.”

Why did I ask? he thought. I knew that!

He remained alone on the terrace. The ride would take two hours. A thought was haunting him, disturbing him somehow: had he spotted her earlier, he could’ve been on that cruise ship too. He could’ve gotten up earlier and caught the ride to spend more time with her. If only he had known that. If only.

He watched the ship fade into the distance. The sun and the heat were getting stronger. He stared dreamily after the ship that was taking her away... he could have been there. And yet, he wasn’t.

Eventually, after the ship disappeared and the silence covered the terrace, he realized he was alone. He got up and started walking up the hill, on the path, breathing the scent of yellow grass and orange trees. He finally arrived on top of the hill and found a bench. He sat down.

“Hi”, he heard a voice.

A teenage girl was standing in front of him, holding a book. She was wearing sandals, a t-shirt and shorts, and her vertical shadow was cutting the bench in two. Her sculpted presence took him by surprise.



“Hi”, he replied, hardly finding his voice.

“Are you waiting for something?”

He shook his head.

“No. I’m just... watching the view”.

She sat next to him, so confident, as if her shoulders were sustaining the sky by her mere presence.

“Have you read the *Legend of Atlantis*?” she asked him so unexpectedly, that he was startled.

He stared at her.

“There are many legends about the island of Atlantis”, he said slowly. “Which one do you refer to?”

“The one in this book.”

She showed him the cover. *Myths and Legends*.

He stared at the horizon, in silence.

“My name is Althea, by the way”, she added.

Why am I not surprised, he thought.

“I’ve been thinking about the truth of it”, she continued.

“What truth?”

He glanced at her. Teenagers. Whoever knows what goes on in their minds?

“The truth about Atlantis, of course. I think it wasn’t just an island.”

She seemed so sure of herself. He smiled.

“What was it, then?”

“It was a dream, a way of life. It was a piece of eternity.”

“You are very clever”, he noticed.

She smiled.

“Thank you.”

She stood up. “It was nice to meet you...”

“Ramos.”

“It was nice to meet you, Ramos. I’ll be leaving the island later this afternoon, but if we meet again before the weekend is over, I’ll be glad to talk some more about myths and legends with you.”

Why would a teenager find it interesting to talk to me, Ramos wondered. And yet he just waved at her.

“As you wish. Take care, Althea.”

He watched her go past the oleanders and he remained silent for a long while. His thoughts were worrying him. There was a shadow hovering in his mind. What if the dream had been entirely a premonition? Things were starting to look odd. What if the earthquake was about to happen indeed that evening?

He got up from the bench.

'I must find Frankie and tell him to warn people', he thought.

"Were you looking for me?"

A familiar voice startled him.

"How did you get here?" he asked Frankie who was joyfully approaching from the path downhill.

"What do you mean, how? I'm walking!"

Frankie was laughing.

"I don't have a private plane, if that's what you were thinking. I'm not a bird either."

He paused to look around ecstatically. He extended one hand, as if to include the distant view, the horizon and the surroundings in a grand gesture.

"Look! Isn't it a beautiful day? Isn't it just bliss??"

Ramos frowned.

"Something worries me", he said. "I had a dream yesterday night that the island was sinking in the sea, after an earthquake."

Frankie chose to pat his shoulder reassuringly.

"Relax kiddo. Nightmares come and go. Things are going to be just fine."

Ramos wasn't convinced about that.

"It's just more than a simple nightmare. Things have happened quite similarly today. I think we should warn people. It might really happen tonight. We could evacuate the island before it happens."

Frankie shook his head.

"Boy, aren't you a worried puppy! Let's sit down for a while."

They sat on the bench. Ramos was still staring at the horizon with a sense of doom. Frankie took a blade of grass and started to chew on it casually.

"How do you propose to evacuate the island? Should I go to people in the streets and shout at them: There's going to be an earthquake! Run for your lives! Do you think they would believe me? Even if it was true, they would laugh in my face. I'm telling you, just relax and get it off your mind. It's probably just your subconscious fear taking shape in that

nightmare. Get it off your mind. Find something interesting to do. Explore the island. Go get a beer. Have fun. Enjoy the sun! Isn't this island wonderful?"

Ramos stared at Frankie, as the grinning teeth under the moustache were glistening in the morning light. Ramos focused on Frankie's jacket. The sparkling pieces of metal and glass reflected rainbow rays.

The shadows started to dissipate from his thoughts. Maybe it had been just a nightmare. Maybe it was nothing. What were the chances it could happen like that? It was absurd. It was just a pointless fear. And if it was a premonition, what could he do? He couldn't prevent an earthquake from taking place. He understood that Frankie was speaking the truth. Even if there was the slightest chance the earthquake was about to happen, what could they do? People would never take them seriously. They wouldn't believe them.

"You can't save everyone, kiddo. People would not believe you. And what are the odds for that to happen anyway?"

"You might be right..."

"You can say that again."

Frankie laughed and slapped his shoulder in a friendly manner.

"Go find something interesting to do. Enjoy your time!"

Ramos thought about the other side of the island. Lisa had said there were secret vaults and other interesting things. Maybe he could meet her on the other side too.

\*

Ramos climbed the rocks and saw the lighthouse in the valley, at his feet. As he stood there, watching the bay pensively, thoughts and images of the island sinking in darkness were running through his mind.

The cruise ship had been there and had already moved on. The waters were empty to the horizon. There was just the sound of peaceful waves and random seagulls somewhere. He glanced down to the rocky valley. Big cliffs rising out of the water, with seashells and crabs clinging to their surface, hanging on as if from immemorial times, were basking in the sun. It was already afternoon and the light was getting softer. The golden glow spreading on the Mediterranean blue had become a mysterious display of rays and fantastic reflections. Ramos watched the light play on the waves and his thoughts wandered astray, to the vanilla dressed lady he had seen that morning. 'I have to find her again. But she might be long gone by now.'

He jumped on the sand, took off his shoes and started walking on the beach. The place was deserted, but it had the same calm and welcoming atmosphere about it. Were there really secret vaults on that part of the island? Ramos was walking absently and the hot sand was tickling his toes. Was there really going to be an earthquake? What if everything that existed around him at that moment, the peaceful shore, the amazing view of the blue horizon, the deep aroma of sea and orange trees, the silent white lighthouse, the blissful happiness of just being there in that perfect corner of time and space, what if everything was about to disappear in a second? What then? He didn't have any answers, except he didn't want it to end. He wanted to be there forever, he wanted it to last for an eternity. And yet, he knew time was flying. The sun was slowly approaching the line of the horizon. He paused to roll his trousers above his knees, as foamy waves came splashing on his feet. The tide was advancing. The water was warm, but it stirred a shaded thought in his mind. He remembered sinking in it, in darkness, the night before. He looked behind, to the other end of the bay. There were two wooden boats tied by the lighthouse. The paint on their surface had been washed out by time and water, yet they seemed safe enough, swaying gently in the waves, waiting for something. Ramos figured that he could take Lisa on one of those boats, to get away before the earthquake. Mikalos and Frankie could take the other boat. 'I've got to get back to the clock tower', he thought. 'I've got to tell Frankie about it.'

He climbed back and started running. The sky above the horizon was turning pink and red, mixed with yellow and orange. He felt out of breath when he arrived in the square. The island seemed empty in the evening light.

"Frankie!" he shouted. "Frankie! Where are you?"

He paused to catch his breath.

"What happened?" he heard an amused voice.

He turned and found Frankie standing next to him, wearing colorful shorts, an extravagant shirt and holding a tennis racket in his hand.

"You interrupted my game, kid! I was having so much fun! What's up?" Frankie said and his eyes glistened with interest.

He was grinning, as if the whole island was just a playground to him, and he was the king. Ramos spoke fast:

"I saw two boats by the lighthouse. We could use them to get away. You can call Mikalos too – and whoever else you can find that wants to go. Let's do this before it's too late! I'll find Lisa."

He turned to go, but Frankie grabbed his shoulder.

“Hey, slow down bro. Wait a minute. What’s this about? That earthquake story again? I thought we talked it out this morning and decided that things are fine as they are. Didn’t we? Look at me, Ramos. Didn’t we?”

Frankie had become serious. Ramos met his glance. They stared at each other for a moment. Ramos frowned.

“I don’t know. I just think it would be better if we get away NOW. I must go find Lisa.”

Frankie laughed.

“How far would you get on a wooden boat? Can you row all the way to the continent? And if there really is going to be an earthquake, won’t the waves swallow your little leaf? And who is this Lisa anyway?”

“It’s just someone I met on the island.”

Frankie smiled happily and smacked his arm.

“Get outta here! You’re not wasting any time, are you?”

Ramos wasn’t amused. He knew he hadn’t been making much progress in getting acquainted with Lisa, so he wasn’t proud of it. He wasn’t going to reveal anything.

“That’s not important now”, he said seriously. “It’s more important that we get away.”

Frankie stared at him and his smile faded a little. He seemed to give up.

“Fine. Have it your way. We’ll leave together. Go tell Mikalos and get us to the boats. But I’m still going back to my game, until you two show up.”

Ramos didn’t wait a moment longer. He started running downhill. The air was colder and the light was becoming dark blue when he reached the bay. He saw Lisa seated alone on the terrace, in the distance, her vanilla dress like a lost lemon peel on the white shore.

“Ramos!” he heard someone call.

He turned around. From the other side, he saw Mikalos running and waving to him, with his shirt like huge wings fluttering and his black hair contrasting with the pale skin. Ramos turned his eyes to Lisa. He looked back at Mikalos. He looked at Lisa again.

And then, the earth started to tremble and shake under his feet.

“Lisa!” he shouted, but his words were swallowed by the storm that was suddenly raging from the sea.

Dark clouds had covered the sky. Mikalos reached him and grabbed his arm.

“I’ve just been to the vineyards. I saw the goats agitated. Something terrible is going to happen.”

“I know”, Ramos answered. “There’s not enough time. We must take the boats from the lighthouse. Go and take Frankie with you. I’m going to Lisa now”.

He didn't even try to explain to Mikalos more than that. But Mikalos didn't let go of his arm.

"You don't have time to get to the lighthouse! Let's just climb the hill. As long as we're on higher ground, we'll be fine."

Ramos took a step back.

"No! That's what we did last night and it didn't work out! I must take Lisa away from here. And you go find Frankie."

"Frankie can take care of himself. Let's just go uphill now!"

Mikalos was tearing at his sleeve. Ramos was trying to get in the other direction, to the terrace, where the vanilla dress was already lost under the shadows of the clouds. And then, the earth cracked completely under their feet and water sprouted everywhere. Ramos fell and felt engulfed at once by huge waves. His vision became a blur. He swallowed the salty sea water, as everything went dark.

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As he opened his eyes, he realized he was in his bed, in the little house with small windows.

He jumped up.

He looked around. Everything was silent. It was early morning.

He didn't know what to think anymore. Had it been just a dream?... Again?...

He couldn't decide anything. He noticed the calendar on the wall. It was Friday. 'I thought I tore this page off yesterday...' And then he realized the day was starting again.

He went to the calendar, a bit angry and tore the page away. Friday. Friday forever...

Suddenly, he began to think faster. Lisa. He had another chance to find her. He remembered the cruise ship. 'If I leave now and skip breakfast, I can make it there on time.' The thrill and perspective of having the opportunity to be with her for the entire day animated him instantly. He started rushing around, finding fresh new clothes, washing himself up, shaving quickly in the broken mirror and running out of the house. He didn't stop at the clock tower, just kept running to the bay. When he was almost there, he saw the sailors prepare to close the barriers and untie the ropes of the ship. He waved to them, still running.

"Hey! Wait a minute! Wait for me!"

Luckily, they noticed him and stopped. He got there almost out of breath.

"I'm coming on this ride too..."

He paid for a ticket and mingled with the other passengers, trying to look casual, but his eyes searching for Lisa. His heart was still beating faster and he couldn't breathe right. The morning air was cool and peaceful. And then he saw her. She was standing with her back to him, watching the sea that was spreading in front of them, as they were leaving the shore. Her straw hat was hanging elegantly by a ribbon to her back, and he could see her hair glowing in the light. It was like an aura around her. He stood there for a second, not able to breathe, stunned by the view. She was a dazzling miracle. He realized he felt so much adoration for her at that moment - it was like a huge tide of heat and emotion. It felt like a hurt in his chest to be so close to her and not attempt to take a step forward to hold her. 'I adore her and she doesn't even know who I am', he thought. He tried to control his thoughts and composure. He was certain she didn't remember anything from the other days... what days, anyway? It was a perpetual Friday. It was the same day all over again. Or it might have been just a dream... 'It might be just a dream right now'. The thought occurred to him, but he cast it aside immediately. It didn't matter if it was just a dream. He had the entire day ahead of him and there she was... He had enough time to spend with her, enough for an eternity, if he played it right.

He took that step and just stood by her side near the edge, pretending not to look at her, but watching the horizon with her. She seemed not to notice him. She was unaffected by his presence, while he was fighting to breathe steadily. When he finally calmed down after a few minutes that seemed like a lifetime, he turned and looked at her from one side.

"Good morning", he said.

He knew he had to take it nice and slow. One step at a time. He had to build some confidence in her attitude towards him.

She didn't answer instantly. But when she did, she smiled slightly and imperceptibly.

"Good morning."

"Have you noticed the sunrise?" he asked her.

"Yes. There's something interesting about it..."

He started to feel a rush of enthusiasm. She was speaking to him!

"It's as if it never rises from the same place", she continued. "Every day it moves a little away..."

"That's true, I saw it too! Why do you think that happens?" he wondered.

She kept thinking, as they were watching the sun swaying above the sea, with the ship splashing drops of waves in the air and on board. She didn't seem to mind the rocky ride, and neither did he. They seemed perfectly fine together. After a while, she spoke:

“I think it is because the Earth moves and tilts from one side to the other. As it spins and seasons change, the horizon line just never stays the same. So it has to be that sunrise happens each time in another place. Just as on the map, you know, on paper, you see the East and North in one way, but when you are in the field you see it differently. The North is no longer above, the East is not exactly to the right... you can get disoriented...”

He was listening to her, fascinated by her words and the sound of her voice. What she was saying had so much meaning, that it amazed his thoughts and charmed him even more. It was a far better conversation than the small talk at the lemonade table. He congratulated himself for getting on that ship that early in the morning. It seemed like the best day of his life. He didn't even dare interrupt her, as she said:

“It's interesting that you have one idea about something, depending on the points of reference. In your mind, it looks in a certain way. In life, you have to adapt your perspective differently, because the points of reference are differently arranged.”

“You are so right”, he said with admiration.

Her complex mind was surprisingly adding to her charm. He knew he was lost. He was doomed. He was fascinated by her completely. He would have done anything for her at that moment. He felt he could even save the world for her, if it was necessary.

“One shouldn't approach life from just a single point of view”, he added, merging his ideas with what she had said. “You have to have the whole horizon ahead of you. If you limit yourself, you limit your vision and understanding. Then, you will never really find the truth of life. And that truth is endless... that is why... we must be ready anytime to see infinity. Just as we are right now. Aren't we?...”

He smiled at her, waiting for her to agree and to make eye contact.

And she did, turning to look at him with an unexpected strength and intensity, a steady and deep stare, with a sudden attention that felt a lot like absolute love, sustaining his smile with her own. It was completely overwhelming, just like the morning sunlight, warm and exhilarating, fresh and uplifting. He thought he had never felt more alive.

“Yes, we are”, she answered, still smiling.

“And there it is...”

He extended his hand to the horizon.

“Infinity. Isn't it something like this?”

It was such a bright beautiful day; it felt like it couldn't get any better than that, ever.

She breathed the salty air, closing her eyes for a second, content and almost thrilled by the energy of the morning hour.



“Yes, it’s certainly something like this”.

She stretched her arms delightfully.

“This is the best day. I hope the whole year will be like this too.”

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“Let’s have breakfast”, she said, as they sat at one of the tables on the deck.

The ship was turning around beyond the lighthouse. He caught a glance of the two wooden boats, swaying silently with the waves. Something clouded his mind for a second. He remembered that the island had already gone underwater twice, he had witnessed it – and he knew the day would eventually lead to that. But he didn’t want to think of the earthquake and the ending time. He wanted to stay focused on the infinite happiness he had just found with her. He wanted to enjoy that day to its full extent, to make the most of each second he could spend with her. And who knew, they might even get away in the evening. He would have to plan it carefully. They could take one of the wooden boats. He would have to convince her first, to go with him... to trust him... to let him show her a way out. It would take more than just casual discussions. It would take more than the drifting attraction they felt for each other. It would take more than a smile and an enchanting conversation. She would have to believe him.

“Have you decided what you’re going to have for breakfast?” she asked him casually, while reading the menu.

He looked at the menu, but his thoughts were somewhere else. She stared at him attentively, as if she wanted to see through his head. He felt amused by it. So, she was curious, she wanted to understand... He closed the menu and smiled at her. His eyes caught a playful glimmer of mystery.

“What about you? What do you suggest?”

She hesitated, but then she seemed very determined, as if she had already tried everything on the menu.

“There’s the strawberry jelly pudding, there are chocolate pancakes, there’s the mango pie... yes, definitely the mango pie. You have to try that. It’s very good. I guarantee you’ll like it.”

“Okay, if you say so. Let’s get some mango pie.”

The waiter came with their order: mango pie on little porcelain plates. It looked a bit fragile and creamy, as yellow as the morning sunlight. He looked at her. She was watching

him, waiting to see his reaction. He started eating, in the beginning feeling unsure of what it was. Then, the soft refined taste of sweet subtle flavor filled his senses and made him lighten up. She had been right: it was a great pie. It felt uplifting and unusually fluffy, melting away. She smiled with satisfaction. He obviously liked it a lot.

“This was fantastic”, he said after he finished.

She kept smiling.

“I know.”

In a few minutes the ship anchored near a pier, on the other side of the island. The passengers prepared for a walk on the shore.

“There are some ancient secret halls beneath the rocks. We can visit them, but nobody really knows where they lead”, she explained.

They stepped on the beach and went with the group. There was a hidden entrance somewhere between two rocks. It looked like a narrow passage, naturally carved by water and time, but as they advanced, they noticed the walls were covered in marble and painted with images of chariots, spears, ivy leaves, horses, lightning bolts and sea waves.

“What could be the meaning of this? What do you think?” he asked her.

“I don’t know”, she said, as they were looking around.

It was like a tunnel that went underground, under the island, but it stopped at some closed gates. As they descended, the air was getting colder. The atmosphere became almost creepy. The sea waves were above them at that point. They stared at the shaded wall where the tunnel ended.

“Nobody could ever discover a way to open these gates,” the guide told them and Ramos recognized the voice.

He looked at the pale skin and scattered black locks of hair, glowing in the dark.

‘Mikalos?’ he thought, a bit surprised.

“This passage has been preserved since long before our ancestors. We don’t know what’s beyond. As far as we know, the ceiling might have crumbled on the other side, so the walls caved in and blocked the way. That is why we can’t get past it. There might be nothing to see on the other side – no one knows for sure. It might be a dead end. It might be filled with earth and rocks. Or it might hide a treasure – we really have no idea. We probably never will.”

Mikalos’ voice resonated in the cold shade of the tunnel, an echo against the walls.

Ramos felt Lisa’s hat touch his shoulder. He reached out his hand imperceptibly and took her hand. Her fingers locked around his, in silent acceptance. He felt a heating wave of happiness run through his veins.

“Let’s get out of here”, Lisa whispered to him.

They sneaked out, breaking away from the group.

They ran outside. The air was warmer and they breathed with relief in the friendly temperatures and the aroma of the orange trees and sea algae. It was almost noon.

“What do you say we do now?” he asked her.

She turned to face him. Then, unexpectedly, she leaned forward and kissed his cheek. The touch of her hair brushed his skin. He remained stunned, staring at her in amazement.

“Thank you”, she said, “for a wonderful morning. It’s been great.”

He was thrilled by the unexpected closeness and for a moment, he didn’t even think. He couldn’t think. His mind was on stand by. He knew he wanted to take it slow with her, but it seemed she moved faster. He wondered for a while if he should take it further. Maybe yes? Maybe not? He knew he wanted to just keep up with her pace and let her decide what would happen next between them. He needed her to have faith in him. And he sensed that she still didn’t trust him. He needed her to believe him, if they were ever to get out of that island together. He couldn’t risk trying anything more with her – not as long as he didn’t know what she really wanted. He would have to let her take the lead in that game. He was content with the unexpected gift he had just received and he left it at that, for the moment. It was way beyond what he had hoped for, when he started out that morning. It was like a dream that he didn’t want to end.

“Let’s see the water from up there”, she suddenly told him, with a sense of adventure.

He followed her happily. They climbed on a rock. She was enjoying the view. She kept her hat from flying off and turned around to see the horizon expand around them, around the island.

“Look! Seagulls!”

She was suddenly like a child, enjoying the miracle of life.

This is what eternity should be like, he thought. This is what happiness can make it become. It could be like this forever...

The group was going back to the ship.

Lisa laughed.

“Come on! If we stay here we might be stranded and they’ll leave without us. You’ll have to catch fish for me and I’ll have to cook for you...”

She jumped down from the rock. He followed her, still amused at her words.

“I wouldn’t catch fish. I would dive to bring you algae”, he joked.

“If you like algae soup, suit yourself. I’m going on that ship.”

She laughed and started to run. He ran after her. They arrived on board, happy like children that had accomplished something forbidden.

The ship continued its cruise around the island.

“Would that be so bad?” he asked her, thinking dreamily.

“What?”

“If we got stranded there and you would have to cook algae soup.”

“Are you serious?”

“Why not?”

His eyes sparkled with delight, as he was watching her. He couldn't get enough of it. He realized he was staring so mesmerized, to the point of making her feel uneasy, and he was careful not to look too much or too intensely. She still didn't trust him enough.

“I don't plan on getting stranded too soon”, she replied. “But someday, somewhere, who knows...”

She was becoming lost in thoughts that he couldn't guess. She kept looking away, absently.

When the ride ended and the ship returned to the bay, they got off together.

“Are you going that way?” he asked her, pointing to the terrace where he had seen her the previous two afternoons.

“I think so, yes.”

“I'm going that way too.”

He accompanied her and they sat at a table. Time was starting to run out. He was thinking deeply. The afternoon light was getting softer. Colors emerged across the sky, subtly but undoubtedly announcing the sunset. He felt a bit worried. She still didn't trust him. She was still not ready to go with him wherever he would go. And the evening was approaching inevitably. Any minute, Mikalos would come running from the other side of the bay.

Ramos looked at her. She had ordered a lemonade and was sipping it silently.

“I am from Arizona”, he said.

“Hmm”.

She didn't seem too interested to know his history or anything else at that moment.

“There's something important I need to tell you”, he tried again.

She wasn't looking at him. Light was turning blue. He decided he couldn't delay it any longer. He started to speak, as calmly as he could.

“There's going to be an earthquake. We should get away from here. We should take a boat and just get away, while we have time.”

She glanced at him in disbelief, uninterested and distant.

“How do you know there’s going to be an earthquake?” she asked, pushing the glass away.

“I can’t explain it to you now. I just know this for sure. It will happen. We must get away while we can.”

She looked to the distance, very calm and determined.

“Relax. There’s not going to be any earthquake. We’re perfectly safe here.”

And she smiled at him, but something from that connection had faded and had already disappeared. He didn’t feel close to her anymore. And she obviously didn’t believe any word he was saying. He wondered if he hadn’t said too much already. He frowned.

“Don’t you want to get away from here?” he asked her a bit helplessly.

He felt as if he was knocking on a wall of distance and distrust. Where was the girl who had smiled and laughed with him so naturally? Where was the girl who had taken his hand, enjoying the horizon by his side? Where was the girl who...

“Lisa”, he tried again. “We have no time. We should go now.”

He leaned forward to look in her eyes, but she leaned back in her chair, watching him undisturbed. At that moment, he heard Mikalos shout at him from the other side of the bay, running and waving his hands in the air. It was already too late.

“Ramos! Come quickly! I must tell you something!” Mikalos pleaded.

He got up from his chair, looking withdrawn and deeply sad.

“I’ll be gone for a while”, he said to Lisa and turned to meet Mikalos.

And then, it happened as he had expected. The island crumbled, the clouds darkened above the bay, the storm raged from the sea, breaking the rocks, shaking the ground, and everything went under water, becoming nothing.

\*

In the morning, the first thing he did when he woke up was go to the calendar.

It was Friday – again.

He felt a bit exasperated. He knew Lisa would not remember anything and would treat him like a stranger. He was more determined than ever to get her to believe him and go with him, but he knew one day was not enough. Besides, he still didn’t understand what was happening and why he kept waking up on Friday morning, only to go down with the island at

night. If it was a dream, it was exhausting. If it wasn't a dream, it was a sinister joke, an absurd game. What was the meaning of it anyway?

He shrugged, as he prepared to leave the house. He had to catch the cruise ship again. He had to connect with Lisa. Let her know him better. He was already certain that he loved her. But she would not know him. He would be a stranger to her. It was exasperating.

Ramos was however determined to get it done – to accomplish the task of becoming her friend, eventually... even if he knew he only had one day to do it.

He ran off toward the bay. He saw the ship from the top of the hill. He was late. He had paused too much to think. He hadn't moved fast enough. He panicked: he would miss the ship!

He ran as fast as he could.

“Hey! Wait for me! Wait up!”

The ship was already leaving the shore. When he got to the pier, he could only see it sliding away, at a distance. He felt a sort of despair and desolation overwhelming his mind. Lisa was lost – for that day. And maybe forever.

He turned back and climbed the hill, to the bench on top. He sat there, feeling helpless.

“What's with the frown?” he heard Frankie ask him.

Frankie had appeared out of nowhere, as usual, and was watching him seriously. He was wearing a black uniform with golden epaulets and shiny buttons.

“What's with the officer uniform today?” Ramos asked him, instead of answering.

“I like it. If I like it, I wear it. I'm the king of the island.”

“I thought you were the angel of time”.

Frankie winked at him.

“Well, I'm a lot of things. Now: tell me. What happened?”

“I think you already know”, Ramos spoke reluctantly. “The island is going down tonight. It will be gone.”

“Not exactly.”

“You don't believe me? I think you know it very well. I think you also know why. Why do I keep living just one day? Why can't I find love that lasts longer than today? Tell me!”

“Nobody is forever, bro. Time is not unlimited. It's not endless. Other things, though... see, take love for example. Do you think you need a lifetime of love with someone you like?”

Ramos stared at him like an angry child. Frankie nodded.

“You obviously think you do. But I'll tell you something. You don't need to love someone in time, like forever. You won't last that long anyway in this world. Instead, you can find infinite love in one minute. In one day. In one second. Eternity has other rules than what

we think we know. Infinity is not a linear stretch of time. It has nothing to do with time. If you want love to be infinity – fine, you can find it. You only need a minute of it. You won't need more. And there you are. “

“Nonsense”, Ramos protested. “I'll never get to know Lisa this way. She will never trust me. We'll never get away from this island. I'll never share with her anything but that stupid afternoon of chit chat. I don't have enough time. I don't stand a chance. One day is just not enough.”

“Well, look at it this way: you can always start again tomorrow.”

And Frankie smiled, whistling amused.

Ramos was looking down, getting even angrier at the whole situation. The more he talked about it, the more desperate things seemed to him.

“I can't start each morning with her not knowing anything about me and treating me like a stranger. And I can't lose her every night. I can't live like this either.”

Frankie shrugged. He didn't seem too surprised or disturbed by the truth. He seemed to already know it. Ramos looked at him. And then, an idea came to his mind, like a revelation.

“What if I am already dead? What if we're dead on this island?”

Frankie burst out laughing.

“Man, you're certainly funny! I don't think we are dead, none of us around here are anything but alive and kicking!”

He grinned, with his restless eyes sparkling brightly, amused.

“Do you see me as dead? Am I dead to you?”

And Frankie jumped around, shouting triumphantly to the distant sea, waving at the sky, screaming to the immensity of the horizon:

“We will live forever! We are the princes of this universe! Do you hear me? Forever! Yeah!”

Ramos watched him fascinated, for a while. It was distracting to see such a display of energy, like a fireworks show. Frankie was running around the bench, very convincingly, laughing and enjoying himself. Ramos concluded that they couldn't be dead and live so intensely at the same time. He knew he wouldn't have felt so much sorrow – or such exhilarating happiness, or so much adoration for Lisa, had he not been alive. It wouldn't have been so painful to lose her – or to be without her otherwise.

“I'm probably still alive”, he said to himself.

“Of course you are, kid”.

Frankie sat down again, encouraging him.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get her back. If not today, maybe tomorrow. “

“I don’t know how.”

“You’ll figure it out. The most important thing is not to lose your head too much. Be cool. Think. Plan ahead. That’s the best way.”

Ramos stood up.

“So what’s the meaning of this day repeating itself endlessly?”

“I don’t know. Nobody does. Nobody is forever, but while we’re still here, why not do our best and make the most of it? Be the best you can be. Do the best you can do. And don’t worry about the rest.”

Ramos needed to think about it by himself.

“I’m going for a walk”, he said.

“Just remember”, Frankie shouted after him,” if you want a glass of wine and a good time, you can find me and Mikalos in the restaurant by the bay tonight. There will be music too. Like a party. Make sure you come! We’ll save a seat for you.”

“Sure, I might come. Thanks!”

And Ramos went down the path.

The pain in his chest was so intense, that it felt like a knife tearing him apart. It was like a guitar chord screaming at its most intense key. He felt he was walking around with the weight of the raging storm and the dark clouds that sank the island every evening, carrying them in his soul. It was like a spinning engine he couldn’t stop and he couldn’t diminish. There was only desolation for realizing that he had no chance to be with Lisa, ever. That she was lost to him. Being aware of that was unbearable.

He walked on, as if trying to escape from his own sorrow and painful thoughts. A painful longing that he had no way to solve was haunting him with every breath. He was lost, with her or without her – for one day and forever. It was an impossible dream, to think that he could ever get away with her. The more he thought about her, the more distant she seemed to him.

He paused on the rocks and just sat there, looking to the horizon. The salty breeze had a bitter taste to it. The grass was somehow whispering to his mind. The island was almost alive, in itself. ‘Why won’t you let me have this? Why won’t you let me be with her?’ he asked that invisible force that seemed to watch over the shores and the endless sea. And of course, he received no answer.

He felt more tired than ever.



\*

When the afternoon came, he went down to the bay reluctantly. He knew he would find her on that terrace again – with the glass of lemonade.

He had spent the day alone. Not even the teenager Althea appeared in those lonely hours. He wouldn't have been in the mood to talk to her anyway. Even though her youthful enthusiasm might have diverted his sorrow, he didn't feel up to talk to anyone. He had to be by himself. He wasn't able to even speak. The pain was too devastating.

He dragged his feet towards the table where Lisa was sitting, silently. He knew he would look like a mess to her, with his hair ruffled, his eyes red from the endless hours of staring into the breeze, up on the rocks, with his unbuttoned shirt and sandy shoes, but he needed to be around her anyway. He knew she wouldn't recognize him, but it didn't matter. He wanted to be there with her, no matter how.

He sat down next to her, at her table, without even asking. She looked away, pretending not to see him, but she was obviously uneasy about it. He realized he was just a stranger to her. They hadn't exchanged a word that day. It was the first time that she saw him. And he loved her like a mad person. She probably had no idea that he was suffering because of her, that very moment. He looked at her with clouded eyes. He could hardly breathe, but her presence was already making him feel better.

“Do you know what time it is?” he asked her, just to say something and possibly make a connection.

She glanced at him cautiously and shook her head, without speaking.

Her attitude was cold and distant. She was even a bit scared and uncomfortable, but trying not to let it show. ‘I must look like a freak’, he thought. He needed to hold her. The thought of losing her again in just an hour, when they hardly even spoke that day, was too much to bear. He felt his mind drift away.

“Can I hold you for a while?” he asked her and looked at her with a helpless despair.

She was a bit revolted and perplexed by his question.

“I don't think that would be okay”, she answered firmly. “I don't know you and you're getting weird. Don't you have anything better to do?”

He got up and kicked the chair away, in anger. He was angry at the absurd situation, exhausted to try and be friends with her, exasperated by the thought that everything was hopeless and pointless and he would just lose her in the end. Life without her seemed unacceptable anymore, empty and meaningless. How would he go on without that bright light

of her radiant presence? He wanted to destroy the program, the destiny of the island, whatever it was that had been fixed against him, the distance between them, her silence... just do something, at least to change that cold indifferent attitude of hers - and he kicked the chair again. She seemed startled by his sudden rage and crossed her arms defensively. 'Maybe she thinks I am angry with her'. He realized she had every right to behave that way with him. He was a stranger that had approached her out of the blue. A weird stranger. He understood that was what he meant to her. Nothing more.

He turned and walked away, leaving her in peace.

On the pier he found Mikalos.

"I was looking for you. Me and Frankie, we've got a party going on at the restaurant right now. We were waiting for you to arrive. Come with me. Why are you upset?" Mikalos asked him, watching attentively with his big watery eyes.

"I blew it", Ramos grumbled. "I just messed up everything. She freaked out on me. And she just hates me. It's over now."

"Don't worry, there's always tomorrow."

Mikalos smiled at him innocently and they started walking to the restaurant. "What the heck", Ramos thought. "I might as well get drunk before the island sinks tonight."

And the island sank again, as predicted.

\*

In the morning, he woke up to find his mind a bit more peaceful, just like the clear blue sky above. Morning light was always a bright optimistic moment. If he could get his thoughts straight, morning was the time to achieve it.

He watched the line of the horizon from the small window. Maybe not everything was lost. Maybe there was something to learn from that situation.

He decided he would not search for Lisa that day. He would not look for her. She had her way, he had his. He had to plan, he had to think. He had to clear his head and let her be.

He dressed up and went to have breakfast. But instead of stopping by the clock tower, he took his coffee and orange jam sandwich to the bench on top of the hill. The morning air was cool and it smelled of oleanders. He sat down on the bench and started sipping from the paper cup, chewing the crunchy sandwich.

"Good morning!" he heard a voice.

The teenage wise scholar. He was glad to see her.

“Hi Althea. How are you today?”

She giggled.

“I’m perfectly fine. But how do you know my name?”

“I think I saw it in the library”, he joked and she smiled, sitting down next to him, with the book in her hands.

She was wearing a pink summer dress with colorful imprints, lots of flowers, hearts and umbrellas. She seemed cheerful and up to something.

“What’s up?” he asked her. “How’s the island of Atlantis?”

Having to talk to someone younger diverted his mind from his thoughts. He had to remain responsible and reliable, but he felt free to behave at her level of enthusiasm and it was a blessing for his soul that needed some peaceful relaxation and detachment from everything.

“The island is just fine”, she answered. “There’s a new path to it, but that’s not for anyone to know.”

“Really? Where did you hear that?”

Althea showed him the book. *Myths and Legends*. ‘Of course’, he thought.

“And what does it say there about it?”

“If you get beyond, you’ll never get behind again.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means you have to understand the clues. The chariot will only take you so far. You have to figure it out by yourself.”

Her words no longer seemed teenage talk.

“Did you read it there?”

“Yep. I did. And I know it anyway.”

She jumped to her feet.

“Well, I gotta go now. My family’s waiting for me. See you later. Enjoy your breakfast!”

He watched her run down the path. He finished his coffee and got up. He had to think. He had to plan.

He went to the lighthouse to untie the wooden boats. He tied them together and rowed with them along the shore, until he brought them to the corner of the bay. He tied the boats to the pier, then went uphill to watch the harbor. He lay on the grass, on his back, looking at the sky. He remembered the blissful moments with Lisa, when she had accepted his hand and then she had kissed his cheek. It seemed like a dream. It seemed like he had invented it too. It

had been too good to be real. Yet he could still feel the touch of her hair on his face. It had been a moment out of time.

And then he understood: it was supposed to be *a moment out of time*, because love had nothing to do with time. It didn't matter how many days he would wake up to tear the Friday page from the calendar. It didn't matter how many days or years he would spend with her – or without her. It didn't even matter if they could never share the same house, the same meals, the same hours or the same journey... it only mattered that there was love between them. There was that intense moment of infinity. A second... an eternal life... He realized that he already had what he had been searching for. It had already been given to him. It was just the love that mattered.

He just lay there, remembering images from their trip together. He could feel as good as he had felt then. He could see the rocks, the waves, the horizon... the painted marble walls with horses, ivy, lightning bolts and chariots... Chariots! He opened his eyes and got up. Althea had mentioned a chariot. "*The chariot will only take you so far*", she had said. Was the chariot the boat? Was it the ship? Or was it the mind? What was it? Love? Life? Time? What did the chariot mean?

'I must talk to Althea again', he thought. 'And I must read that book.'

\*

*If you get beyond, you'll never get behind again*, Althea had said.

He was still thinking of her words. He was convinced there was more meaning to that book than it appeared. It wasn't just a book about past mythology – it had to be a guiding light to get out of the island. Ramos kept thinking about the drawings he had seen on the marble walls inside the passage, on the other side of the island. The chariot was something meant to take them to a certain point. It could have been the ship... or something abstract, like the desire to know. Or the need for freedom. Or some other notion... He wasn't worried about the chariot. What else was on the walls? Waves... Those were not difficult to read. Then what? The horses? What were the horses? And the lightning bolts? The lightning bolts could have meant the storm. The spears could have meant the earthquake. What about the ivy? What was it? Connections? Connections to what? He frowned. It wasn't enough just to think about it. He needed more clues.

He had to discuss it with Frankie.

He went to the clock tower, looking for the other. The square was deserted.

“Frankie!” Ramos shouted.

He knew the restless man would appear out of nowhere. And he was right.

“What’s up, kid?”

The voice was coming from above, a mixture of amusement and playful tease. He looked up. Frankie was on the edge of the clock dial. He was hanging on one of the clock iron hands, dangling his feet over the height.

“How did you get there?”

Ramos was puzzled again. Then he just gave it up and shrugged.

“I shouldn’t ask”, he mumbled to himself. “There’s probably nothing you can’t do on this island.”

“Come up here!” Frankie shouted at him cheerfully. “The view is splendid! It’s priceless!”

“I’m sure it is”.

Ramos watched Frankie, wondering if he could actually get there too.

Frankie seemed determined to remain up on the ledge. He was wearing one of his extravagant colorful shirts and his teeth glistened in the sun, under the moustache, as he was glancing around exuberantly, genuinely enchanted.

“So, are you coming or not?” he asked Ramos after a while.

The minutes were passing by. Ramos was staring up, shading his eyes from the sun with one hand. ‘Why not’, he thought to himself.

“How did you climb there?”

“There’s a staircase inside the tower”, Frankie told him.

Ramos went around the tower, looking for a door. He found it slightly open. It was a small wooden door and inside, the corridor was dark and dusty. He started climbing the spiraling stairs. He arrived at a small window, from which he could see the narrow ledge of the clock screen, shining in the sun.

“Come on!” he heard Frankie outside, very near.

He stepped on the ledge carefully and grabbed the iron hand of the clock. He found himself at a dizzy height that made everything seem like a game of miniature toys, spreading far away beneath his feet. The vertigo of the height and the instinctive danger he felt tingling in his toes made him sit down next to Frankie, suspending his feet above the void.

Frankie’s eyes glistened to him joyfully.

“Isn’t it great? You don’t get to see this every day.”

Ramos laughed. Every day had already become an endless Friday.

“I’m not so sure we’re doing the right thing”, he said, a bit amused.

“Shut up, kid. You only live once. Enjoy it!”

Ramos felt like he used to when he was a child and he was attempting something dangerous and adventurous: the thrill of the discovery, the new perspective, the adrenaline of the risk and danger, the power of having done something hard to achieve, secret and daring. He felt like an explorer again. Life had that miraculous invincible structure of an ever expanding wonder, and it was shining before his eyes. He looked at Frankie like he had become an accomplice to something interesting that they were sharing.

“Do you realize that we’re stopping time now?” he said, ready to laugh.

“How?”

“We’re hanging on the iron hand of the clock. It won’t move and the clock won’t function anymore: we’ll confuse people about the time.”

“Don’t worry, time is inexistent anyway”, Frankie joked as if to himself.

Ramos looked around the island. He could see the shores and the lighthouse, the blue line where water met the sky, and the brisk waves, moving to a very distant horizon. It was a sense of freedom and precious knowledge to view everything from above... from that tower. The morning air was refreshing and inspiring. He felt revived in an unexpected way.

“You’re right”, he said. “What is time anyhow? And what are we? Just instants of a flash of light, passing by...”

Frankie grinned.

“Are you getting philosophical?”

Ramos adjusted his posture, feeling he could have sustained the sky on his powerful shoulders.

“Why not? This island is just a philosophical myth and we’re just a dream.”

Yet he felt a sting of hurt when he thought about Lisa. But he kept speaking:

“Don’t you see? This whole thing could be life itself. We’re dreaming and we’re sinking... and we’re awake again. It’s an endless day.”

Frankie shook his head.

“Time is not endless. You must realize that. We’re here to make the most of it, bro. You never know when everything will be gone for good.”

Frankie seemed serious. They looked at the distant shores around the island that appeared like a silver sparkling line around the water.

“What if you only have this day? Wouldn’t you live it to its greatest intensity? Wouldn’t you want to spend it reaching out for that infinite moment out of time? If I had to choose, I

know I would prefer to burn faster and be able to find infinity instead of dragging my days for centuries of dull and meaningless mediocrity. Safety is good, but quality is better... If you don't risk anything, you don't find anything... not anything worthwhile, anyway... you know what I mean? ”

Frankie looked at him, waiting for an answer. He seemed really serious at that moment.

“Yes, I think I do know what you mean”, Ramos replied, staring towards the horizon. “I believe the same thing. If I had to choose to be a one day comet or a stone for a hundred years, I would prefer the one day deal, if that would mean becoming the best I can ever be. Time does not matter. If it's not used right, it's simply wasted. What we are and what we do matters more. You can't sit around watching things forever. You have to go out there and do something... be something... burn your way across the sky. Life in its essence means finding infinity... for what it is. It doesn't make much sense otherwise.”

Frankie smiled.

“Your words nail it exactly. We understand each other, then. And maybe this is what this island has to tell you: this is what you're here to learn about – becoming a burning comet across the sky, as you said... “

They remained silent for a longer while. It seemed that everything that could be said had already been spoken. The silence had a deep meaning in itself. It was as if they had invented the island and the island belonged to them, entirely, as they watched it from above.

Letting his thoughts wander, Ramos was envisioning if he could ever become a comet for Lisa, if love could make them both a part of the infinite intensity of life, for just one second. Somehow, he had already felt it with her.

He wondered if that was the actual purpose of absolute love: to become as bright as light, together, and melt in it for eternity. To reach the truth, in its utmost intensity - to be a miracle. He wondered if they would ever get out of the island. He remembered the book of myths that the teenager had. The answers must have been there. He got up.

“I'm gonna go now. I've got something to do”.

He climbed down from the tower and went looking for Althea.

\*

‘If you get beyond, you'll never get behind again’, he thought as he was walking barefoot through the yellow grass, burned by the summer heat. Did it mean that once you got past a certain level of understanding you could never go back and be the same? Did it mean

evolution or knowledge? Did it mean that once you know the answer, you cannot unknow it? You become someone else entirely? Or did it mean that once you get somewhere different you cannot return to your initial departure point? Was it about a certain path? Was it like the sunrise that kept appearing each time in a different place in the sky? Never the same, never the same... What was the true meaning of it, the secret clue? What was the line that had to be crossed beyond? A sacred truth?... He kept walking, he kept thinking...

He found Althea by the oleanders. She was playing with a stray dog. She seemed unafraid and distracted. The book was resting on the bench, in the sun.

Ramos grabbed it and sat down on the bench. Althea noticed him, but she just smiled somehow content, and said nothing. She kept playing with the dog that was joyfully rolling in the dust, flinging its paws in the air and growling.

Ramos started browsing the pages.

*"The passage of time will not alter this tremendous truth of eternity, the ancient mystery that waits beyond the river"*, he read randomly from the pages.

River? What river? Was there a river in the hidden passage under the island?

He shuffled some more through the pages.

*"There is a legend of a river that must be crossed to the other side. You must pay the boatman in sacred gold coins. Any shadow getting beyond will never come back."*

He thought for a second.

"Styx! That's the Styx. The river that separates the other world from this one... it could mean the passage to another realm of understanding. And the boatman must be paid. I know the myth, but what does it mean exactly in this context? It must be that you have to give up something in order to get across. A sacrifice in gold coins. Something of value. To get something you must give up something else. To get off the island I must give up something. What?"

He raised his eyes, looking ahead, as if he was talking to himself and searching for an answer in his mind. Althea kept playing with the dog, saying nothing. Her sculpted profile was glowing in the sun.

He thought about what he valued most. He valued the idea of getting away from the island with Lisa. He valued getting to know her. Getting accepted and loved by her. Finding infinity together, becoming a comet, seizing the essence of life... He valued his dreams with her. What else? He valued his freedom. He probably had to give up one of them. He realized he would have to give up trying to connect with her. He had to give her some freedom, in his mind. He had to decide to let things unfold by themselves.



It would be hard, but there was no other way - he was aware of it. That was one way of seeing it. But was it really the right answer?

He browsed again through the book.

“What about the drawings on the walls? Horses. Doesn’t it say anything about horses? *There’s a two headed horse that is ready to go up the mountain. The horse is powerful enough to drag the mountain down if the master wants it*”.

Ramos frowned, concentrating.

“Two headed horse. Does that mean two sides of something? Like day and night. Good and bad. Black and white. The two sides of a driving force... the two sides of life?”

“Wow, you’re really finding lots of meanings to this book”, he heard Althea speak, a bit amused and fascinated.

“That’s because there really *are* lots of meanings to everything.”

She got up and dusted off her hands.

“Maybe you think in too abstract terms”, she said and sat down on the bench next to him. “What if there really is a two headed horse on the island that can tear a mountain down? “

“The earthquake! Maybe the earthquake is provoked by this mythological horse of night and day”, Ramos exclaimed.

Althea became interested in his words.

“What earthquake?”

He looked at her. He realized the teenager didn’t know anything about the island going down and she would leave with her family before that anyway. She didn’t need to know.

“I just want to decipher the myths of this island”, he told her.

“You seem very worried about something. Calm down and you’ll find the answers”, she suggested in a friendly manner.

It didn’t sound much like teenage logic - more like ancient knowledge. But she was wiser than her age anyway. He stared at the book on his lap.

“What does the horse mean?” he kept thinking to himself.

“There is a rock that looks like a horse, near the lighthouse”, Althea said. “Maybe that’s the true horse they are talking about in the book, and it turned to stone long ago.”

Ramos looked at her, deeply focused on thoughts running in his mind, analyzing many possible meanings in a blink of a second.

“You know what? You may be right! If the horse is the force of life, with its double aspect of day and night, of joy and pain, and if it got frozen and turned to stone - that explains

why time is running on a loop around this island. Everything ended, once the horse became rigid and motionless. The horse is turned to stone. It's a rock. We must bring it to life again!"

"How?"

Althea was visibly interested, as if it was a fantastic story, but nevertheless just a story, in the calm sunlight.

"Motion is the key. It's the answer. We must keep moving, making progress, changing, evolving..."

He looked ahead, to the distant sea. Then he took his head in his hands.

"You don't really have a clue", Althea laughed.

He smiled, halfway looking down.

"No, I really don't."

"Well, at least I know where the two headed horse is".

"The rock?..."

"Yes. I told you."

"By the lighthouse?"

"Yep."

He realized he was getting nowhere near the meaning that would enlighten him about how to find a way out of the island.

"Why do you need to solve this mystery anyhow?" Althea asked him, curiously.

"I can't tell you, it's a too long story."

"Will you tell me when I get back from the continent? I'll be back before the weekend is over. Will you tell me then?"

He glanced at her absently.

"Yeah. Sure".

And he handed her the book.

"You can take this now. Thanks."

"I'll see you next time! Bye", she said and ran off beyond the oleanders.

Ramos returned his thoughts to his plan with the wooden boats. He went to the bay to check on them. The two boats were still there, tied to the shore, swaying with the warm waves. It was a good plan. He could see some hope ahead. He could at least try. He glanced at the silent wooden boats, thinking deeply. Then, he went to the vineyards to look for Mikalos.

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He found Mikalos watering the roots of the thick vines.

“Come with me tonight on a ride across the bay”, Ramos said directly. “I must get something from the lighthouse and I need someone to row in the other boat with me. Can you come?”

Mikalos looked at him with his big innocent eyes.

“Of course I’ll come.”

“I’ll meet you on the pier in the afternoon.”

When they met on the pier, light was already getting dim. Ramos was anxiously checking the sky. He could already feel the clouds approaching from the distant horizon.

“Get in the boat quickly!” he told Mikalos. “We must row to the lighthouse, fast.”

He thought that if he could get to the rock shaped like a horse, it should have been a safer place from the earthquake and the sinking island. And he would take Lisa along.

They started rowing; the waves were becoming agitated, rising higher and splashing wildly against the wooden boats. The sky was getting darker. “Anytime now”, Ramos thought. “Any moment.” He felt a stirring panic that made him row faster, with a force he couldn’t believe he had inside him. His arms were aching, but he wasn’t attentive to the pain. It didn’t matter. He felt a sting of fear in his chest, a cutting burn that he tried to numb: it was the thought of not getting in time to Lisa. He looked at the terrace where she should have been. He noticed the yellow folds and the straw hat. She was there. She would not know him, but it didn’t matter. She would have no better choice, once the menacing storm was unleashed on the bay, no better escape than to get on his boat. He tried to row towards the edge of the terrace, approaching it with difficulty, against the currents that were throwing his boat out to sea, away from the shore. Rain started pouring in his eyes; he heard thunder and saw a lightning bolt cut across the sky. Mikalos was rowing behind. The boats were still tied together. Ramos doubled his efforts, trying to move the boat to the marble edge of the terrace. He could see Lisa was standing up, looking around disoriented and scared.

He finally grabbed the marble edge with one hand. The boat was shaking and swaying under his feet, as he was fighting to keep his balance.

“Lisa! Lisaaa!” he shouted against the rain.

She seemed to hear and turned to look at the stranger in the boat.

“Come on!” Ramos shouted at her. ”The island will sink!”

At that moment, the ground started to rumble and tremble. Lisa took hold of a table, but it slipped from her hands and went rolling away, crashing into the chairs. The land was sliding, cracking to pieces.

“Come on Lisa!” Ramos pleaded again, shouting with whatever power he had left.

He was desperately fighting to keep the boat near the terrace that was breaking apart. He saw Lisa decide to turn toward the edge. She stepped in his direction, stumbling on the chairs and the rolling glasses on the floor. Her hat flew off, lost in the storm. Her hair seemed like shivering candle flames, still bright, sunflower petals under the pouring rain. She had realized there was no other way. As she reached the edge, her hand found his arm. She leaned across the edge and he took hold of her, lifting her over the marble. Next thing he knew, she was in his arms, in the boat, and he held her tightly, ignoring their wet clothes and the raging storm around them. He sighed with relief, closing his eyes for a second, as he clutched his arms around her, unwilling to let go. He felt he would never want anything more.

“Ramos! There’s no time now! Let’s go!” he heard Mikalos shout at him.

The boat woke him up, shaking from side to side. He helped Lisa sit down and grabbed the rows. They were dragged away with the waves and the powerful currents. The shore was getting distant. They could see the earth crack open, the rocks crumble, and fountains of water appearing everywhere. The noise was deafening.

“Ramos, look behind!” Mikalos shouted again and as he turned his head, he saw a huge wall of water, a wave rising, foaming and speeding towards them from the horizon.

He didn’t have time to steer the boat. The wave crashed against the little wooden rows, capsized the boats and sank them into darkness.

\*

*“What would you do if you knew you only had one day? How would you spend it? Would you try to make the most of it? Would you ignore some things and focus on others? What would matter most to you? Imagine having just one day ahead... imagine knowing for certain that this is what it is and that’s it. Would you value your time better? What would you value? What would you do? Just be? Or do something? Something that could matter? Or you would just enjoy the seconds, the minutes, life around you, the sun?... Love?... “*

He paused. He was trying to write a letter to Lisa, hoping to reduce the time they needed to know each other. He was hoping he could convince her of the truth. He had opened his

eyes earlier that morning and had instantly realized that no matter how he planned it, the island was still about to go down at night and sink them along with it.

So he needed a different approach. He needed to write to her. To tell her in detail... to explain... to make her understand... and maybe then, they might have a chance.

He chewed a biscuit nervously. And then he looked at the Friday calendar page that he had just torn away from the wall. He had written on it directly. The Friday page... it had become a letter to Lisa.

‘What if she still doesn’t believe me? What if she thinks the letter is just pointless? What if she doesn’t agree with my ideas about life?’ He stared at the half covered page.

*“Dear Lisa. You won’t believe it, but this island is not what it seems. Every night, it sinks under water and every day is Friday again. I have met you many times, every morning, but I couldn’t find a way to save us yet. If you help me, we might find a way together...”*

He checked again what he had written. He had to take a chance with it. There was nothing more he could do. He finished the letter, and then read it again. It would have to be enough.

He looked up at the small window. He had already learned to tell the time of day by the intensity of the sun and its place in the sky. Since he had arrived on the island, being without a watch had had its benefits. It was still early. By the way the sun rays came across the window pane he guessed it must have been eight thirty. Usually, the ship left at nine. He still had time to catch it.

He folded the page and hid it in his pocket, then grabbed his shirt and went outside.

He hurried down to the docks and got on the ship just in time, before the sailors closed the barriers and untied the ropes. He was preoccupied, more by his plan than by his desire to meet Lisa. It wasn’t just about spending time with her ecstatically, and seizing the moment. It was about a bigger goal. He had to make her understand.

He passed through the crowd, until he found her, at the edge of the deck. She was staring in the distance.

“Hey”, he said softly, trying to smile at her in a friendly manner.

He could still remember how it had felt the other night, holding her tightly in the rain, the happiness mixed with wet clothes and imminent danger... He could also still remember how she had hurt him with her cold attitude a day before... He remembered a lot of things about her. Yet he was trying to erase them from his mind and just smile at her easily, calmly, so that she wouldn’t be scared. He let his mind clear of any thoughts and waited for her to say something. She wasn’t going to say anything. He realized it was just up to him.

“I’ve got a letter for you”, he told her, still smiling.

She looked at him somehow in disbelief.

“For me?...”

“Yes. Aren’t you Lisa?”

She stared at him, a bit surprised.

“I am Lisa indeed. But I really don’t have time to read any letters now...”

It seemed that he had come prepared for anything. He just smiled. He just wanted her to take it.

“It doesn’t matter”, he said, trying to hide the urgency of his anxious voice. “You can read it later.”

He knew she would be curious enough to read it, eventually or even sooner.

He took out the Friday page from his pocket and handed it to her. She took it hesitantly and unfolded it.

“Who is this letter from?”

“It’s from me.”

*She must think I’m completely crazy*, he thought a bit amused.

“What is this about?” she asked, as she was already reading.

“You’ll see.”

He leaned on the parapet and watched her, in silence. When she finished reading, she raised her eyes to him. There was a confused light in her glance, but something familiar too, as if she knew more about him – as if she had gathered some meaning from the letter.

“And I’m supposed to believe this because...?”

“Because it’s your life. And it’s the truth. “

He seemed very sure of himself. He looked like a man that had nothing to lose anymore, and was taking everything as it came. There was no loss he hadn’t already lived or witnessed. There were no hidden surprises ahead of him that day. He had seen it too well. He was ahead of things and he wasn’t even desperate anymore. He was just waiting for her to understand.

“Have you ever wondered”, he asked her casually, “What would you do if you knew you only have one day? Would you do things differently?”

She shook her head.

“I haven’t thought about it. But it seems I must think about it now... right?”

He smiled.

“Right. So?”

“Let me think. Give me a minute.”

The simple phrase seemed to have so many connotations at once. A minute had become way too precious already.

“Take your time”, he answered, still relaxed. “I’m not in a hurry.”

‘Why would I be in a hurry anyway?’ he thought, ironically. ‘I’ve seen this island sink five times already. One more time, why would it matter?...’

She was walking up and down the deck, in the sunlight, thinking deeply, somehow concentrated and worried. He knew she was hesitating whether to believe him or not. And if she believed him, what could they do? He kept watching her. She glowed in the morning light, as she was moving around, swiftly. He was lost in admiration again. He stared and stared... he could have forgotten about everything else, just standing there and watching her move across the deck. Finally, she came and stopped in front of him, taking off her hat. The brightness of her eyes surprised him again, even more, as she looked at him directly.

“Alright”, she said calmly. “I’ll help you. What do you think we should do?”

He felt alive again. He suddenly became very animated and started talking to her, explaining his plans.

“We should first get off this ship. We must take the boats from the lighthouse and bring them to the secret passage, before the visitors arrive there. We must find the rock that looks like a horse and by the time the storm hits the island, we should get on top of it. I believe we’ll know more when we get there.”

“Let’s go then”, she said.

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They asked the sailors to anchor the ship and let them off on the shore. The ship threw the anchor near the lighthouse and they got off near the white tower.

They stepped on the shore, then watched the cruise ship turn the corner and disappear in the distance.

“Now what?”

Lisa turned to him, inquiringly. Ramos untied one of the wooden boats. He seemed to have had it planned in his mind long before. She watched him move along the shore, handling the boat with expert gestures. He realized she had her eyes on him, and it gave him a warm feeling, but he was focused on the practical side of things, determined to get it done in time. He was aware of the fact that they had to hurry. Her eyes were watching him seriously and

attentively. He was the stranger that she trusted because she had to. Something had convinced her to cooperate: maybe the thought of the possible disaster that was coming in the evening.

He brought the boat around. The white lighthouse was standing above them, guarding them in silence. He looked up at her, as she waited for him to say what their next step would be.

“You should get on the boat”, he said and added, with a softer tone, trying to hide the tender nuance he was tempted to give to the words: “please”, he said.

She adjusted her hat.

“Listen - I don’t even know your name” she interrupted her sentence, making a helpless gesture.

“Ramos. I’m Ramos.”

“Listen Ramos, I haven’t had any breakfast yet and I bet you’re hungry too. While we’re here, would it be too much to get inside this lighthouse and find something to eat? “

He glanced at the silent lighthouse tower.

“I guess we can. But we should eat in the boat, to save time.”

“Come on, relax a little. We’ll get there.”

He wiped his forehead. She didn’t know. She hadn’t been through it like he had. But he went along with her anyway. He jumped on the shore, tied the rope of the boat securely and then tried the lighthouse door.

“Do you realize that we’re not authorized to be here?” he said casually.

She laughed.

“You don’t know that. Besides, it seems nobody’s been here for a long time.”

“Right. So what kind of breakfast do you think we’ll find inside?”

The door was closed with a chain. He forced the chain a little and it fell loose on the ground. He opened the door slowly. It squeaked and cracked. The joints were rusty and the wood was dried up by sunlight and salty air. Ramos glanced inside.

There was a small room, with a simple wooden table. There was a cupboard and a pile of boxes in a corner. He went ahead and Lisa followed him. He checked the cupboard. There was a first aid kit inside and some empty dusty plates. Lisa was checking the boxes.

“Hey, I found something” she said.

“What?”

He came closer.

“It’s a lunch box with two sandwiches and a pack of peanuts... and chocolate biscuits and mineral water!”



Lisa was surprised.

“How do you think it got here, since the door was closed and it looks like nobody’s been in this place for a long time?”

“I don’t know”, Ramos answered.

It was something he didn’t have any explanation for.

“Let’s just take the lunch box and go”, he said.

“Do you think someone will miss it?” she wondered.

He thought about the island going down under water in the evening. Who would miss the sandwiches? There was nobody around anyway. He grabbed the box and turned to the door.

“Now is not the time to think about this”, he said determined and went to the boat.

They left the lighthouse, chewing on the sandwiches. Ramos untied the boat and they hopped in. They felt lucky to have found some sort of breakfast. The sandwiches seemed freshly made, with lettuce leaf and goat cheese. Even the bread seemed fluffy.

“This is strange”, Lisa spoke as if to herself. “Who would leave this lunch box around in that deserted lighthouse?”

Ramos was rowing silently.

“Maybe some fisherman who dropped by for five minutes, just like us. Or maybe there’s someone taking care of the lighthouse anyway.”

Lisa was absently glancing away to the distance.

“Where are we going now?” she asked him.

“We must find the rock that looks like a horse. “

“And then?”

He shrugged.

“And then, we wait.”

She touched the waves with one hand, while he was still rowing.

“It doesn’t seem like a too elaborate plan to me”, she protested, somehow contesting his brilliant solution. “So you say we just sit on that rock until it gets dark? And you didn’t even think to bring food and water. We’ll die of thirst before the island sinks, so forget about the storm. We’ll dry up like scorched leaves... like sunburned stranded seashells.”

He couldn’t help but laugh. She was a bit revolted still.

“Really, Ramos. Why didn’t you think of bringing at least some water?”

He kept rowing, and he replied innocently:

“I don’t know. I just focused on catching the ship to find you. I didn’t think about food or supplies. I probably should have. But we’ve got that bottle in the box. And I’ll try to think of something, once we get there.”

She looked at him.

“Fine. Let’s focus on your plan then.”

He kept rowing among the big rocks that were rising from the water and dozing off lazily in the midday sun. He passed by them slowly. They examined each cliff, trying to see the one that would look like a horse. The afternoon was slowly approaching.

“There’s no rock that looks like a horse around here,” Lisa said eventually, a bit bothered by the long hours of staying in the boat. “I’ve had enough of this search”, she continued. “Are you sure there’s going to be an earthquake?”

“Absolutely. Nothing is certain in this life, but of one thing I’m sure, and that is the truth that there’s going to be an earthquake that will sink the island.”

Ramos stopped rowing and concentrated, glancing around.

“It must be here, somewhere...”

And then he saw it. It was further away into the sea, a bigger cliff, shaped like a running horse.

“There it is!” he exclaimed and started rowing faster.

When they got near, he took off his shirt and jumped in the water, diving to find a rock to tie the rope to. When he emerged outside, with water dripping from his hair, Lisa was eating the roasted peanuts casually. He climbed back in the boat.

“So, I see you’ve opened the pack of snacks in my absence. Those will make you thirsty.”

“Whatever”, she answered, looking away a bit bored and unconcerned.

Then she looked at him and averted her eyes again.

“I would ask you to put your shirt back on, but I guess it’s too late for that”.

He smiled. If looking at his bare shoulders made her feel uncomfortable, it meant it had an effect on her. ‘She likes me’, he thought. He was tempted to ask her to throw the vanilla dress away and jump in the water with him. He could see the yellow folds slipping off in slow motion... and then, he could envision sliding smoothly through the warm swishing waves, with her by his side... glowing in the sea... It already felt heavenly just to think about it for a moment. He shook the alluring vision out of his mind. It would have been the best thing, for sure. It would have been wonderful to go for a swim. And yet, he knew he couldn’t ask her.

She might have lost confidence in him. It was too early; they didn't know each other enough. He sighed. It was always too early for anything. Too early and too late.

“Are you going to share the snacks?” he asked.

She was still avoiding his glance. But then, suddenly, she stared directly in his eyes, smiled and extended the pack to him.

“Here. Help yourself.”

‘At least she’s showing some complicity’, he thought.

They waited by the rock until it started to get dark. The storm was approaching. Ramos could see Lisa’s eyes glimmering in the evening shade. He could hear the waves splashing on the boat, rocking it gently. He listened attentively. The rhythmic pace of the waves was changing. And then, the sky lit up in a threatening lightning bolt. It was already darkness. Thunder roared above. The waves started to shake the boat harder. Lisa grabbed the edge with both hands. Ramos stood up. Another lightning bolt seemed to expand above the rock that was shaped like a horse. For a second, it looked like a fireworks display. The whole surface of the agitated sea was lit up for a few seconds, in a flash. After that, Ramos noticed the boat had been set loose. He couldn’t distinguish clearly in the darkness, but there was no rock anymore near them. The next moment, he saw a pale shadow running along the shore, with the white shirt like huge wings and the hair like the mane of a horse.

“Mikalos!” Ramos shouted after him.

He heard a laughter that resonated like an amplified echo above water. It was Frankie laughing. Ramos looked around.

“Frankie! Where are you?”

The deserted shore was covered in darkness. Ramos didn’t understand anything anymore. And the next second, he saw the glowing figure of a big horse with two heads running above the water, like an indigo blue light ghost, galloping on the glowing waves, toward the horizon.

“Lisa, look! Did you see that?”

“Yes, I did!”

She was just as speechless as he felt. They stared at the horse disappearing in the distance, like a spectral vision, like a bright comet, while the boat was still rocking loose in the dark water. They didn’t have time to discuss or even think about what it was they had just witnessed. The island started to sink and a wall of water fell above them, splashing and capsizing the boat. Ramos didn’t have time to grab Lisa’s hand. He couldn’t grab anything. He just went under water.

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“Not again”, he thought as he opened his eyes in the little room with small windows.

“Not again! Not again!!...”

His thoughts were shouting in his mind, exasperated and angry.

He looked at the wall. The calendar was unmistakably waiting: Friday morning.

He thought of the wasted efforts from the previous day. It was the sixth time. He was counting. Maybe the seventh time would bring him more luck. Seven was a magic number in numerology and fairy tales. It was a powerful mystical number. It had to be a charm. He felt tired of it already, but he knew he had to try again. He knew he was getting closer to the truth, closer to finding the way out. He had to find the portal. He stood there thinking, with his head against the pillow. The morning light was dim. The sun had hardly appeared in the sky an hour ago. He realized he was waking up earlier each time. Maybe that was a good sign.

He recalled the last vision from the previous night: Mikalos running along the shore, Frankie laughing from an invisible place above the water, and then the lightning bolt that hit the rock shaped like a horse... and then the ghostly horse itself, the mythical two headed creature, running above the waves. He blinked. Of course! Mikalos had always seemed to have black hair like the mane of a horse. And Frankie had that restless nature about him, that overflowing energy... ‘The running of night and day ... it’s the two of them - Mikalos at night and Frankie during daytime. The two headed horse. They are it... Didn’t Frankie say he was the king of the island? Of course he is! He’s the myth and the mystery itself!’ Ramos stood up.

He wasn’t entirely sure if his conclusion was right, he wasn’t even sure of what it meant, but he knew he had to look for answers – and the two of them would provide that for him. Even if he would have to tear the words and the truth out of Mikalos and Frankie by persistence, he was determined to solve the mystery of the island for good. There was more than Mikalos and Frankie were telling him. But they would have to change that! Ramos thought it through for a moment and then went out of the house. He didn’t have anymore patience to sit around waiting.

As he was walking fast along the empty streets in that early morning hour, he passed by Althea that was going in the opposite direction. He noticed she had a lunch box under her arm.

He stopped.

“Althea! “ he said.

She turned around.

“Do you know me?” she asked.

“Quit pretending; we’ve talked before! I’m sure you remember.”

“No, I don’t recall it... should I?”

Ramos stared at the lunch box. It was identical with the one he and Lisa had found the day before, in the lighthouse.

“Is that your lunch box?”

“Yes, it is. Why?”

“Are you going to the lighthouse?”

“I might be going there... What’s it to you?”

He calmed down a bit. There were more answers in front of him than anywhere else, at that moment. He could sense it. He had to find a good reason, to get her to tell him more. He remembered Althea had mentioned Atlantis in one of their conversations on the bench; it must have been in her book *Myths and Legends*. He decided to go with the topic.

“I’ve been looking for the new way to Atlantis”, he said. “I need to know if there’s a path from here to there.”

Althea answered simply:

“There is a way, but only if you really want to get there. Once you get beyond, you can never go behind again”.

“Okay, fine. So tell me.”

Althea set the lunch box aside and took a stick, drawing in the dust.

‘Look: the lighthouse is here. You get inside, there is this room. The floor is made of wooden boards. You must find the spear behind the cupboard and knock on the floor until you find the secret passage. There is a passage under the lighthouse, in the basement. You just follow it and you’ll get where you’re supposed to go. But once you get there, you can never go back to where you started from.’

“No matter, I don’t want to go back”, he said. “Why didn’t you tell me this - about the path - before?”

Althea smiled.

“You didn’t ask”.

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‘It’s only when we know that time is limited, that we want to become unlimited’, Ramos thought. ‘It’s only when we know there’s an ending, that we strive to become unending... that we do our best and we make the decision to find infinity. It’s when we realize that we are not infinite that we want to reach it – and to make it happen. To make the most of it. Maybe that’s why we are not immortal... because it prompts us to do the impossible and become comets of light... and then, every moment is eternal.’

He was waiting for Frankie at the coffee shop in the square, near the clock tower. To his amazement, the clock was still functioning, even if the other day he had been hanging on its iron hands with Frankie, disturbing its implacable ticking. Yet now, there it was again, striking second after second, in calm perpetual motion, keeping track of the sands of time slipping by...

“A two headed horse??”

Frankie was more than amused when Ramos told him about his latest conclusions. Frankie had arrived and was having coffee with him, leaning casually on the chair, enjoying the peaceful morning light. He went beside himself laughing and his eyes were sparkling, restless and enchanted, when Ramos told him the story.

“Wow, this is a good tale! Man, I’m lots of things around here – who knew I was also a mythical two headed horse?... I like it, though! And Mikalos too? He’s a part of it??”

Frankie started laughing again.

Ramos was watching him attentively, from beyond the rim of the coffee cup, sipping and thinking, with his eyes shaded in distrust. He was certain Frankie would not admit to it. Frankie would keep the mystery. But Mikalos was easier to get to confess, he thought. He would have to make Mikalos reveal the truth.

“And what else have you been up to, kid?” Frankie asked him, ready to be entertained by another unusual idea. “Tell me. How did you spend your time yesterday?”

“Trying to find a way to Atlantis”, Ramos replied, grumpy and withdrawn.

He wasn’t about to tell Frankie too much, when the other was keeping the truth from him so stubbornly. ‘If you don’t play, I don’t play’, he thought silently.

“You don’t say!” Frankie exclaimed, somehow content and seeming interested. “And what is this island of Atlantis anyway? Did anyone ever know? What does it mean to you? What does it look like, in your mind?”

“I think it’s a sort of paradise. It’s an eternal timeless heaven, suspended somewhere in between spaces and centuries. If you get there, you can never go back.”

Ramos sipped his coffee, looking at Frankie with a fixed glance. Frankie stared at him, his eyes glimmering in wonder, not knowing what to believe.

“You’re not serious about this”, he attempted to say.

Ramos wasn’t backing down. He was determined to keep it going.

“But I am serious.”

“A paradise, you say?... But our island is a much better paradise than you can ever find, bro! Have you looked around recently? Why go searching for ancient legendary nonsense? You have everything you need right here, right now!”

Frankie was playing his own game. Ramos remained silent. He realized he wasn’t going to find out anything from that angel of time, or whatever the other might have been. He finished his coffee and got up.

“I must go to the bay”, he said. “I’ve got something important to take care of.”

“Knock yourself out! Let me know if you see that two headed horse again!” Frankie shouted after him, laughing.

Ramos went to the bay and left a note for Lisa. He instructed the sailors to give the note to her when the cruise ship would arrive. It was still early.

Then, he took the road that was going up to the vineyards.

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As he was climbing the hill, Ramos was missing Lisa a lot: he wanted to see her, talk to her, be around her so much... and yet, he knew he had to go on with the plan. He knew that he had no other choice - if they were ever to stand a chance to get out of there. He had to go with it the best way he knew how. A note to her was enough for that moment. He had it planned, in his mind. He had other things to do.

He was determined to talk to Mikalos in the meantime. And maybe find out the mysterious truth.

When he got to the vineyards, he saw Mikalos digging around the roots of the vines, refreshing and mixing the earth with some sort of sawdust.

“This is very good for the roots”, Mikalos spoke, without looking at him, as if he had been aware of his approach long before he arrived. “It’s very nourishing for them. They’ll grow beautifully. This summer we’ll have fantastic grapes.”

He was absorbed by his work, almost passionately arranging the soil around the roots. Ramos thought about the fantastic grapes Mikalos was looking forward to. Were they just great grapes, or did he mean *really fantastic* grapes? Like that two headed horse?

Ramos sat on the ground, next to Mikalos.

“I’ve got something to ask you about. Were you on the other shore last night?”

Mikalos raised his head and looked at him, as if he didn’t understand.

“No”, he replied simply. “At night I water the plants around here.”

Ramos was expecting some denial. He didn’t give up.

“But I thought I saw you there. I was on a boat.”

Mikalos continued his work.

“What day did you say it was?” he asked, casually.

Ramos looked at him attentively.

“It was just yesterday. Friday, of course.”

Mikalos smiled.

“*Today* is Friday, Ramos. *Today*.”

Ramos felt exasperated.

“Come on, man! Admit it! This island sinks every night and every day is the same day! And you and Frankie have got something to hide! Like the fact that you’re a two headed horse, running like a comet when the island goes under water! Why don’t you just tell me the truth? Why don’t you tell me what’s the mystery and the answer? I’m sure you know it! Both of you!”

Ramos picked up a pebble and threw it away, over the green leaves of the vines.

Mikalos seemed undisturbed by his words, as if Ramos hadn’t really said anything new or unexpected.

“And what truth would you like to know, Ramos?”

“The truth about the island! Why am I here? What is this place? Why is everything happening the way it is? Why can’t I get out of this endless game? You must know!”

Mikalos spoke peacefully:

“It’s not a game, actually. Even if I knew such a big important truth, do you think I would be allowed to tell you?...”

Ramos stared at him, his eyes fighting shadows of disbelief.

“You mean you know but you can’t tell me? Who’s keeping you from telling me?”

“I didn’t say that. I said... even if I knew and I could tell you... do you think you would be ready to find out?”



“What’s the big deal about it? Go ahead and tell me already!”

Ramos almost believed he was about to find out.

“It doesn’t work like that”, Mikalos explained. “Things are the way they are for a reason. I might not know the reason myself. But I am not here to tell you about it, and that is certain. Just have patience. You’ll understand, eventually.”

Mikalos finished mixing the earth and sat down for a while, next to Ramos. His attitude was somehow peaceful and comforting, even if he wasn’t saying anything. It was like a greater guarantee, that his benevolent intentions were spreading above the growing life on that island... it was an unusual safety and certainty that things were going to be just fine.

Ramos knew that he had to accept not receiving an answer. He had to leave it at that.

He changed his tone and became more preoccupied and thoughtful.

“Listen, Mikalos. I’m leaving the island tonight. I’m gonna try and find a way out of here. If you want to escape, you can come with me.”

Mikalos remained silent for a few moments, as they were both looking above the rows of vines, spreading on the side of the hill, their leaves whispering mysteriously and somehow content in the morning light.

“See those vines?” Mikalos contemplated the view. “They grow so fast. They spread out, like wild ivy. There’s nothing that can stand in their way. It’s the force of life... nothing can stop it. I respect that a lot.”

Ramos frowned.

“Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“I heard you. And I’m not going anywhere. I’m not leaving the island. I’m not coming with you, Ramos. I belong here -I’m happy here. But you should try to find a way – and if you ever get lost, just remember these vines: life always finds a way, life always goes on, its power is endless, limitless... just follow the ivy on the walls. You’ll get there.”

Ramos thought about it. And then he got up. Minutes were running by. Time was moving fast. He had to go.

“Well then”, he said, “I wish you a nice day... or a nice eternal day, if that’s what this island is”, he said to Mikalos.

He felt as if he was leaving an unknown friend.

“Don’t worry, everything will be fine”, Mikalos smiled at him.

Ramos left the vineyard and went back to the little house.

He had Lisa on his mind. He realized it wasn’t just the thought of saving her. It wasn’t just the thought of being with her for a day. He wanted her to have meaning for him. He

wanted her to equally share the journey, to be a true partner. He wanted to find with her a level of understanding where they could both mean the world to each other, learn from each other, advance forward like allies, like two sides of a dynamic force, helping each other find a way to that infinite burning light that would be the essence of life... He was hoping he could find that with her. He wasn't just looking for a yellow dress – he was looking for an equal, complementary miracle. He wanted her to be that unique someone who would match his energy. He was aware that she was probably not expecting anything of that sort from him, since she didn't even know or trust him enough. Maybe she didn't even want to have that much meaning to anyone – or such a deep connection. Maybe it was just his impression of her... but he wanted her to be more than a random insignificant acquaintance, more than a simple attraction. And he was convinced that she already was. It already meant a lot to him finding her and getting out of the island together – it meant everything. He knew he already loved her, beyond his own understanding.

‘But what if she doesn't love me?’ he wondered a bit anxiously. Then, he dismissed the question. Of course she didn't love him. She didn't know him yet. And what if she couldn't ever love him? What if she was incapable of understanding his vision? What if she didn't believe him and didn't want to be saved from the island? What if she didn't need him in her life?... He saw the possibility – or impossibility ahead of him, like a huge doubt, like an implacable tide. However, he was determined to take a chance against it.

‘It doesn't matter if she ever loves me or not’, he decided. ‘We're getting out of the island together. And afterwards, we'll just have to see what happens next.’

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He prepared a bag with some things he thought he would need. He packed a flashlight, a pocket knife, a roll of strings, a pack of biscuits and a small bottle of water. He smiled, as he added the supplies. Lisa would not reproach him he didn't think of everything. He also packed a summer jacket for her, a creamy waterproof jacket that he liked a lot and he was sure she would too.

He took from his luggage a pair of camouflage summer shorts and a similar vest with lots of pockets. Then, he headed out and closed the door, hoping he would not return to that little house too soon – or ever again.

As he was walking down the road, it suddenly appeared so clearly in his mind: *if you go beyond, you won't get behind again*. Althea had said that about the new way to Atlantis. He

suddenly understood that he had already been in a place from which he could not go back anymore. He had been stuck on the island for what it seemed like forever, unable to get out. 'Maybe I already took the road beyond and now I can't go back', he thought. There seemed to be no way back, from where he was. 'Is this Atlantis?' he wondered. Why did Althea speak of a new way? He realized that time on the island was inexistent – it was eternal. But time, in its own specific earthly manner, had a habit of going beyond and never going back. The way beyond could have been the way forward. 'If I can't go back, I should just go forward. Maybe there really is a way forward. Maybe that's the new way Althea was speaking about'. He continued to walk, thinking about the meaning of everything. Mikalos had told him not to worry. He wasn't worried – but he still needed to understand.

'If this island isn't Atlantis, it means Atlantis is something else? What is it? An unattainable ideal?'

He passed by the bench where he had met Althea many times. She wasn't there at that time of day. He stood there for a moment, taking in the view. He breathed deeply the aroma of orange trees and burned grass, oleanders and heated land, with dust from immemorial times. 'I'm gonna miss this', he thought. But there was no way back. He had to go forward. He looked over the shores of the island, across the bay, to the lighthouse. That was his direction. He started to go downhill, when he heard a voice:

"Hey! Are you going to Atlantis?"

He turned around, to see Althea holding her book, standing near the bench, like a sculpted figure, as if sustaining the sky on her frail shoulders. He wondered at the contrast of innocence and wisdom rising from her appearance. He smiled. Another friendly presence he would miss from that island.

"How did you know I'm going that way?"

"If you're going anywhere, that's the way you can go - the only way you can go from here", she replied, amused. "The only way is the new way - to Atlantis."

"So how come you aren't going there yourself?" he asked her.

She seemed very self assured.

"How do you know I'm not? I might get there ahead of you."

Teenagers. He smiled.

"Fine, then. I'll see you around?"

"Yeah. I'll see you. Good luck with your trip!"

She was saying it simply, as if it was just another walk to the bay, but at the same time, there was a deeper meaning to her words. And then, she ran off beyond the oleanders.

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Ramos descended on the steep path on the side of the hill.

“Are you going fishing?” he heard a teasing voice behind.

He turned to see Frankie on top of the hill, grinning and with his eyes glistening restlessly in the sun. He was wearing one of his ballet tights and a sparkling jacket, adorned with feathers and metal buttons, like a blazing fire.

Ramos shrugged.

“Everyone asks me where I’m going. Do I look like I’m going fishing?”

Frankie laughed.

“What’s with the camouflage costume then? What am I supposed to think?”

“I don’t know. Think what you like. You’re the king of the island, aren’t you?”

Ramos smiled, as Frankie was shining on top of the hill.

He wasn’t upset anymore that Frankie hadn’t answered his questions. He knew that was not the purpose of their encounter. Frankie was not there to answer questions. He was there to just be larger than life, brighter than time - and be a comet...

To Ramos, nothing mattered anymore at that moment. It only mattered that he had a plan. And he was determined to get to it.

“The man with a plan!” Frankie winked, as if he had guessed what Ramos was thinking.

“I’m going now. Take care of that clock tower.” Ramos said.

“Go free, Ramos! Go find your Atlantis!”

Frankie waved at him, from the distance.

Ramos saluted amused and continued his way.

He knew that somehow, things would keep going on that island as they were, forever; and Frankie would be there forever, jumping triumphantly on top of the rocks, running around, enjoying his games, climbing here and there, and laughing with his glistening, restless eyes that could see the splendor and the fire of life.

\*

Ramos arrived at the lighthouse.

It was still early: Lisa wasn’t there yet.

He went to the door, took off the chain and got in. Althea had mentioned a spear. He looked behind the cupboard. It was there, leaning against the wall. It was an ancient spear, long and silvery. He started walking across the room, knocking the boards with it, until he found a different sound. He started to dislocate a few wooden boards, until he saw a hidden passage at his feet. It went down to some sort of basement. He lit the flashlight and descended carefully. It was cold and dark. It looked like a cellar, but it continued under the ground, way down, deeper. It was a tunnel of stone. He started walking along. The air was getting humid and drops of water were falling from the ceiling. He walked on for what seemed like ten minutes, and the tunnel was still spreading ahead, in unknown darkness. He paused and listened. He heard something like voices. He stuck his ear on the wall. He could hear the waves of the sea and the voices of tourists, distantly mumbling beyond the wall. He realized that on the opposite side there were the secret vaults that the tourists were visiting.

An anxious thought ran through his mind. He turned around immediately and started running back through the tunnel. If the tourists were already there, Lisa had to be at the lighthouse. He had left her a note that morning, telling her to meet him there. If she came and didn't see him, she would probably leave. He felt the fear making him run faster, in panic. At some point, he dropped the flashlight and stopped to pick it up again. When he got to the entrance of the cellar, he saw that clouds were gathering outside. He ran out the door of the lighthouse.

The sky was darker.

Lisa wasn't there. He looked around, anxiously, frowning. The rain was coming. And the roaring sea was announcing a storm, most probably. 'It's too soon for that', he thought. 'The storm is supposed to start later, not now.' And Lisa was nowhere in sight. He bit his lip, nervously. What if she had already come and left? What if she was never going to come? It would just be in vain: he would have to leave the plan for another day. He knew he couldn't leave without her. He had trusted her to be there, and yet she wasn't. He felt he couldn't go on like that anymore: so much effort for nothing...

'Maybe I didn't write that note right. Lisa, Lisa... where are you?...'

His eyes scrutinized the horizon and the shore where agitated waves were splashing against the rocks and seagulls were screaming randomly. He waited. 'Come on, come on...' He was talking to her in his mind. 'Come on, Lisa. Just come on already!'

And then, he saw her. She appeared from behind the rocks, stepping carefully and adjusting her balance – and the hat on her head. He smiled with relief and ran up to help her climb down from a steep rock.

“I thought you wouldn’t come”, he said when he reached her.

She looked at him for a while.

“You’re Ramos, right? That’s how you signed the note. You wrote that note.”

“Yes I did”, he answered. “I’m Ramos. I’m glad you trusted me and came.”

“I must be out of my mind to be here”, she said, looking around.

The rain had already started.

“So you say there’s going to be an earthquake? And what’s your plan? We’re going where?”

She looked at him attentively. He took out the jacket from his bag and handed it to her.

“Here, take this. It’s going to be cold in the tunnel.”

She accepted the jacket and wrapped herself in it. He couldn’t help but stare at her blissfully: she was wearing his jacket! She noticed his dreamy eyes and was a bit surprised.

“So you take care of this lighthouse?” she asked him, just to make some conversation and divert the awkward moment from the realization that he had deeper feelings for her and they had just met.

He looked down, a bit shy. He didn’t want to make any mistakes this time. They wouldn’t have another chance, he felt it. It was that moment, or never.

“No”, he said and got busy arranging things in the bag.

He got up.

“We must go now. Let’s get inside the lighthouse. There’s a way underground.”

Lisa followed him in the basement. A roaring sound could be heard outside, dimmed by the thick walls of the tunnel.

“We have to hurry”, he said and pointed the flashlight forward.

They started running along the tunnel. The earthquake had already begun. ‘It’s too early’, he thought. And he felt as if the island wouldn’t let them go, as if the sea was trying to engulf them before they could get away. The ground was trembling and the water was raging above them. The walls of the tunnel seemed to threaten to cave in any moment, to crack open and fall on their heads. He kept running, hearing Lisa’s steps behind. At some point, he realized that she wasn’t keeping up with him anymore. He stopped and waited for her.

“Give me your hand!” he told her.

She looked at him in disbelief. But he had no hidden agenda – he just wanted to help, just wanted them both to escape. He stood there, in the darkness of the tunnel, with his hand extended to her, somehow still steady and calm in the urgency of the moment, as if he could see only her and nothing else mattered around – not the earthquake, not the darkness or the

endless tunnel. She looked in his eyes and something like a light of recognition passed through her mind. There was something about him that she knew – something that she trusted. There was something unexplained in the way he stood there, waiting, looking at her... there was an eternity of love that she had no idea about, consciously – but unconsciously, it was more powerful than her logical thoughts. It was a deeper instinct to go beyond her fears and just believe in him. And in a moment that seemed like forever, she took his hand fearlessly.

He didn't say anything, but he knew that it was the turning point of everything – her confidence to take his hand was the only thing that could have saved them. He didn't know how to explain it, but he knew that it was just like that. A deeper truth was hovering above them, deeper than the raging sea and the storm – it was the trust that would help them find the way out.

They kept running along the tunnel. Ramos felt more determined than ever, as Lisa's hand was locked around his, with undeniable certainty, like a warm reassurance that things would be just right, eventually – things were already just right for him.

After a long time of roaming in darkness, with only the flashlight pointing the way, they reached a cave where the tunnel was spreading in many other corridors, each going in a different direction.

“Now what?”

“I don't know.”

Ramos looked around. The ground was still shaking and the tunnels were trembling. He staggered to keep his feet firmly on the ground. He flashed the light across the wet stone walls.

“Which way should we go?” Lisa asked him

“I'm not sure. Wait a minute...”

Suddenly, he noticed branches of ivy growing on the walls. He was a bit perplexed to see that plant, so deeply underground, growing alive and spreading along the way... *Follow the ivy on the walls*, Mikalos had said.

Ramos looked in the direction where the ivy was going. The plant would know for sure where it could escape to.

“Let's go that way!” he said quickly. “Keep track of the ivy!”

They ran along the tunnel that the plant had chosen. By the length of distance they had covered, they had to be deep under the sea, Ramos thought. And yet, he trusted the ivy, the unmistakable expansion of the plant. It was going somewhere, outside – it knew the way better. ‘The force of life’, he thought, while running.

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When they saw the exit ahead, the earthquake had already subsided. The ground was still sending aftershock waves from one minute to the other, but most of its raging power had dissipated away. The exit was a narrow opening in the rock, through which they could see the night sky, the glowing moon and a few distant stars.

Ramos stepped out and helped Lisa climb next to him. They were standing on a rock. Around them, to the dark horizon, there was just water. There was no island in sight.

“The island went under water”, Ramos said and turned off the flashlight, looking at the expansion of the sea that was surrounding them. “It’s gone now”.

Lisa came closer to him, as if the perspective of being alone and lost at sea was more chilling than the night.

“Let’s hope the tide doesn’t rise any higher than this for the next hours”, he said, examining the rock under his feet.

He recognized its shape: it was the two headed horse.

He sat down, wondering what the morning would bring for them. Lisa sat next to him, holding his arm in silence. He smiled to himself. It was worth it being there, alone in the immensity of the sea, if it meant getting close to her, establishing a connection deeper than the casual acquaintance of strangers. They already shared more than people in ordinary circumstances would. He felt the storm had brought them closer together: facing the danger of escaping the island had built ties between them that couldn’t be diminished by time.

“So where are you from?” she asked him, glancing pensively at the moon that was glowing above the waves.

“I’m from Arizona.”

She turned her eyes to him. He saw a spark in her interested stare.

“Isn’t that a coincidence!” she said. “I’m going to be transferred there next season. The university in London where I’m studying has offered a scholarship to Arizona and I’ve decided to go because of the different climate. And they have a great research station there”, she added.

He was just as surprised by the discovery as she was. He realized life was bringing them together in an unexpected way – life had already planned for them to be together, long before they arrived on the island. It was more than he had ever hoped for. He could see they had something real ahead of them.

“What’s your major?” he asked her.



“Geology”, she said. “Actually, I came on this island to study the rocks around here. I was on vacation, but I was also doing some research...What about you? What’s your department?”

“Philosophy”, he answered.

He was so enchanted by the idea of them being colleagues someday, that he didn’t even notice the cold empty immensity of the night that weighed on the sea. The storm had passed, but the waves were still splashing with agitated menace against the rock.

They shared the biscuits and kept waiting – waiting for nothing, waiting for something... or just for time to go by and for morning to arrive. Ramos knew Lisa was tired and sleepy – he felt it deeper in his bones, like a need for rest. Yet he couldn’t close his eyes. He felt too restless – and her presence was keeping him alert.

Hours were passing by slowly, with no other sound but the waves. With an unexpected gesture, Lisa leaned her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes, cuddling in the jacket he had given her. She seemed to fall asleep, while he remained awake, with his thoughts wandering in the night. They just stood there, waiting...

He didn’t know how long they had spent on that rock, in the middle of nowhere – when suddenly, he heard something. It was a roaring of an engine.

“Lisa”, he whispered, not wanting to wake her up too abruptly. “Something’s coming now. Can you hear that?”

She opened her eyes and raised her head. It was an engine, getting closer.

Ramos stood up, looking around. He saw a light flashing above the waves, from a distance. And then, he waved his hands at it. It was a helicopter.

The helicopter found them. It was a coast guard aircraft. It hovered above them, spinning its propellers in a powerful current. The crew threw a rope ladder for them.

“You go first”, Ramos told Lisa.

She climbed the unstable ladder, swinging above the rock. When she got in the helicopter, he followed her and was soon safely inside the patrolling aircraft.

“We were looking for you”, the pilot told them. “Aren’t you the two students who got lost at sea two weeks ago? “

Ramos shook his head.

“No, we aren’t. We were just on this island that went under water...”

The pilot seemed to know another story.

“You’ve got it confused. You fit the description well; you must be the ones we’ve been looking for. We almost gave up hope. How did you survive after you went overboard?... How did you get this far out to sea? There’s nothing around for hundreds of miles. “

Ramos was staring at the pilot, still unwilling to accept the new version of the truth.

“I don’t remember going overboard. I was on that island – and Lisa was there too...”

“Lisa, right?” the pilot smiled. “From London. And you’re Ramos from Arizona –aren’t you?”

Ramos shrugged, bewildered.

“Of course you are”, the pilot continued. “We have been looking for you a lot! The search party gave up in a few days, but we, the fly guys, kept looking. I know some incredible survival stories from this area, so I kept my mind open and my hopes up, you know? People have an amazing capacity to overcome difficulties. I knew I would eventually find you.”

Lisa seemed more willing to let go of it – the island and everything that had happened.

“So where are you taking us now?” she asked the pilot.

“I’ll drop you off at a hotel on the continent, where the other tourists were accommodated. You should have been there days ago; your rooms were booked in advance for this trip. But you didn’t show up after that cruise boat was caught in a storm...”

So there had been a storm, anyway, Ramos thought. At least some part of the pilot’s truth coincided with their own. He didn’t try to explain to the pilot about the island. It would have been pointless. It was to remain a mystery – to him and to the rest of the world too.

They were silent for the entire duration of the trip. They felt cold and exhausted, but the exhilarating feeling of going to some safety made their eyes sparkle with hope and relief, as if a great weight had been lifted off their minds.

The helicopter landed on the roof of a little hotel, on the shore of a seaside resort town.

They went to their rooms, without discussing anything more about their adventure.

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Ramos slept for what it seemed like an eternity of absolute rest.

When he woke up, the sun was shining brightly from the window –a large window, swaying lazily in the morning fresh air.

He got up and looked around anxiously: he was in a hotel room, in a large bed with soft pillows. He smiled happily – he had arrived beyond. He wasn’t going back anymore.

An anxious thought went through his mind. He jumped and picked up the phone, dialing in a hurry the number to Lisa's room.

He heard her pick up the phone.

"Hello", he greeted her after a moment of silence.

"Hello..." she said sleepily.

He felt a wave of happiness heat his senses to enthusiasm. As long as Lisa was there, nothing else mattered. His forehead brightened.

"Hey Lisa", he said. "Did I wake you up?"

"Not exactly, but... yes, yes you did", she admitted, and laughed. "Never mind, I was sleeping too much already", she added.

She seemed in a good mood.

"So what's up, Ramos?"

There was only one more thing he wanted to know.

"Say, what day is today?" he asked her.

"How about Saturday?" she answered and he could almost see her smile.

"Is it Saturday? Are you sure?" he insisted.

"Yes, it's very much Saturday. Why?"

He glanced at the window, happily.

"No reason. I was just thinking... Are you coming down the hall to have breakfast in a minute or so?"

"I might, yes... just give me some time to get dressed."

Lisa yawned, like a spoiled girl, perfectly happy and aware of her right to feel loved. She knew he loved her. And she accepted it with an answering energy that made it an absolutely justified truth in their lives.

"I'll be there, I promise", she assured him, somehow enjoying the conversation. "In ten minutes."

"Okay", he said.

They hung up the phones. He felt he already trusted her - he already knew her enough to trust her. Yet he continued to be amazed by her - she was a marvelous person he couldn't get enough of. And he couldn't wait to meet her again.

Ramos got dressed and went out in the hall, to wait for her, feeling alive and exuberant.

As he was walking up and down the corridor, the receptionist called him.

"Hey mister... mister American guy... There's something for you."

Ramos went to the reception, a bit confused.

“There’s something I should give you”, the receptionist said. “You’re Ramos from Arizona, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. Why?”

“I must give you this. A teenager was here yesterday and left it for you. She said I should give it to you in the morning. Here it is.”

The receptionist handed him the package. It was a book. He took off the wrapping paper and looked at it. Then he smiled. Of course. *Myths and Legends*.

At that moment, he saw Lisa coming down the hall. She wasn’t wearing the vanilla dress anymore, but a pair of summer jeans and a t-shirt. Yet she looked just as fascinating to him as she had always seemed. She casually handed him the creamy jacket.

“Here, this is yours – from the other night.”

She looked fresh and stunningly dynamic, shining gracefully in the morning light. He stared at her, charmed by her presence. Somehow, he felt a sort of freedom in the way they interacted with each other. It was as if any barriers, doubts or fears had disappeared. It was as if they were already allies. And going forward together.

They went outside on the terrace in front of the hotel, but before they would choose a table, they stood there for a moment, watching the calm sea and the bright horizon.

“Isn’t it a beautiful morning?” she asked him, smiling to the view.

He agreed.

“Yes indeed... it is the best day. I hope the entire year will be like this.”

She turned to him, a bit surprised.

“I was going to say that!” she exclaimed.

He smiled, looking in her eyes.

“Yes - I know...”

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