

The light of freedom

Lightning shot across the sky, gradually growing more violent, more frequent and rhythmical, over the tiny village. The wind had died down. The drizzle was getting stronger. These were, undoubtedly, the last signals, the last warning to every living creature in the village, man and beast alike, to take precaution. To hurry and find shelter before the storm broke out full force and drowned everything in a deluge.

The villagers had indeed taken precautions and were quietly huddling next to the fireplace. The only exception was an axe, not far from the village, which with the aid of a small lamp, never once broke its monotone rhythm, unheeding the signs from heaven and the darkness around it. It defied them and continued its urgent and belated business, falling with remarkable precision, rhythmically and forcefully, on some tree trunk. Apart from the human inhabitants, a few hens were scuttling about nearby and fluttering their wings like crazy. They clucked incessantly, in sheer agony. As if they foresaw what was coming. As if their owners had forgotten them, helpless and unprotected, outside their house and they were in the grips of panic.

At that specific, sharp, point in time did twenty year old Adila and her brother, Aung, two years her junior, did she believe was the safest moment, to take the first, great step. The two were now on the river banks. Next to the border, ready to cross it over. Let the fear of a deluge carry on a few days; let it carry on. That's what Adila's thought. Let it carry on then, and keep the road open and their faring smooth.

They checked the final details. In a remote, well hidden corner, safe from any late glance of their fellow villagers. They threw the small raft Aung had made in the water. They pushed it into the

water, they tried it out. It was easy to haul. It didn't sink.

"Very well done, Aung", Adila smiled at him.

Then they loaded and secured their meager belongings and covered the whole thing with a sheet of plastic. To keep it as dry as possible. They were initially concerned about the river, but now it looked like the main bulk of water would most likely come from the heavens. Let the matches stay dry at least, so they could warm up and dry off once they reached the other side!

Meanwhile the light drizzle had gradually turned into proper rain. It guaranteed a great downpour. It resounded louder than the roar of the river, gradually covering its low voice. It broke and added some color to its flat drone. Back in the village the night wood cutter was now missing beats in his monotone rhythm. And the henhouse had finally worked it out and quieted down as well. Before them the river was rolling at the same, never changing, speed. Only now its surface was stippled by the rain. It was also constantly illuminated by flashes of lightning, quickly followed by loud claps, enhanced by the echo of the surrounding rocks. All this made the river very frightening. The ceaseless lightning bolts now gave the eerie, iron name of the passage, a fitting semblance.

Others would have definitely chickened out. Even in the peace of summer, as soon as night fell, as soon as the blue of the water faded and turned dark, the surrounding landscape immediately grew hostile. Now, though, it wasn't just the water that had grown dark, but the entire world as well. In the ineffable darkness and the tempest of the winter night, under a thick layer of clouds that trapped and prevented any moon ray from slipping through, all the pixies and the water nymphs came to life. They howled and raged in the soul of anyone who dared venture nearby. They sought to

frighten him, and drive him away. Rulers of the impenetrable darkness, they wouldn't allow even the darkness to offer refuge, a spot where the unwelcome passerby could hide. They ceaselessly broke even that with swift but continuous, blinding flashes of lightning. They wouldn't allow you forget a moment where you were.

But now was the best time. Now that, apart from elves and water nymphs, there was absolutely no one around to see them. On either bank. On this or the opposite side of the river. Now that men and beasts alike were huddled in their nests. That the rain wasn't raging yet, it wasn't possessed, completely and thoroughly, by the demon that dogged it.

They got ready for the great crossing. Carefully instructed by their uncle. Where to go in the water and how to swim. Where to get out. How to proceed, afterwards. They had to swim a hundred and fifty meters in the cold water, which, if they made any mistake, could become well over two hundred by the current. And the most important, the most difficult bit was the strong current somewhere halfway across. Their uncle had emphasized and explained this to them in every detail. Adila estimated it would take them about half an hour to swim across. If all went well. If the instructions were accurate; but mainly if they managed to follow them through successfully.

They went into the water.

Did this world have anything in common with the inexhaustible patience of their fellow villagers? Did it in any way resemble the hasty but indifferent chopping of the wood cutter? No; not in the slightest. It had nothing in common with the pointless agony of the henhouse. These two wanted to get out, not in. To travel, not hide. Therefore they felt the raging heavens, perhaps even God himself, somewhere beyond the sky, as more of a friend and an ally rather than something that

sought to harm them, something against which they ought to seek shelter.

Those who'd never heard of passion would doubtlessly call them damned. And if a sudden flash of lighting happened to reveal before their eyes the stormy gates of the river, those same people would also call them mad.

But apart from all these, apart from the many, there were also the others, the few. Mom and dad among them. They would emerge, one here, another there, from the pages of history and the trees of the forest, they'd come forth, gradually, those rare few. Seafarers, explorers, fighters and all sorts of bold travelers. And others. Confident in those two before them, perhaps even in tears. Stirred by the sight and the recollection of the great, the rare crossing they once had undertaken themselves.

Apart from the many, the others would be there, too. The few. The beloved.

The river grows deeper where the watercourse narrows. To hold the bulk of water flowing between its banks. That's what the river was like where Adila and Aung went in. It became seventy to eighty meters deep. A real abyss. And what you know is there but you can't see it, is easily exaggerated by imagination. That's what inspires fear the most.

It was this chaos then that now struck terror into their souls. The chaos below their feet, as they slowly swam across the river. And their original fear, their fear of the water, now they were in it, ceased to exist. Now that the water engulfed them, now that it lapped gently against their bodies, as they swam, now that they felt it all around them, it ceased, the water, to inspire fear in them. The proximity, the feel of the water, its low, playful, familiar sound, now seemed to somehow evoke

distant images, intimate images. The sound of the water was different now; its first, distant and deep, terrible roar was entirely covered and lost. And that's what made such a difference. The sound of the water was now almost a friendly, familiar sound. It was as if it talked to them, like it sang to them. Washing away, carrying away, their previous fear. And with all the gifts it brought them, it also helped them forget how cold it was.

And as its embrace and proximity now made the water a friend rather than a foe, as it broke free from the power of the nymphs, living inside and governing and holding sway over it, these flew now in a rage. And betrayed by the familiar, tranquil caress of the water, they now tried a different strategy. They commanded the imagination of the two trespassers to run wild. They commanded it to turn elsewhere, to a place where an unfailing, lasting fear is born, somewhere the nymphs' power and dominion is certain to prevail, where no other such promise is possible, like this soothing caress. They commanded it to turn to the abyss. To overwhelm their souls with awe, indissoluble awe. That was now the certain punishment for the two profane who dared, thus uninvited, intrude at such a sublime moment, a moment of worship. Who cropped up the most inopportune moment. Who interrupted, with their sacrilege, such an exalted rite.

"Beware, Aung!" Adila said.

"The water will soon grow swifter. Beware and do your best to get us past the current and not caught in its flow", she added softly.

A bolt of lightning shot across the sky and Aung caught a glimpse of his sister drenched from the union of the waters of the river and the sky. Drenched, but with no sign of apprehension or tension on her face.

They enter the current. The strong flow pushes increasingly harder against the small raft. The raft tilts and swivels to the left. They're now well into the current. Where they must push and swim against it with all their might. They are now also over the deepest point...

“Adila, can you imagine what an abyss lays right underneath us?” said Aung and swam harder, on the right side of the raft, against the flow. He pulled with all his strength while Adila pushed. They tried, as much as possible, to maintain a straight course.

“Don't think about it, Aung. Get it out of your head. We'll be on the other side soon, concentrate on that”, Adila replied. And immediately realized just how difficult following her suggestion was, how impossible she found it herself to turn her thoughts away from the bottomless, the invisible depth, underneath. It was as if some uncontrollable force had taken over the workings of her imagination.

They've now reached the heart of the current, where the water is at its swiftest. Perhaps even its deepest. Its voice becomes distant and hostile once more. It surges hastily past them, jostles indifferently against them. It blindly obeys its masters again. They've got it back under their control. They rejoice in vengeful glee and reverence. The nymphs and the elves. Aung, never ceasing to wrestle against them, is overwhelmed with angst. Adila feels the raft pushing hard against her. She's swept back and momentarily yields to the current. She calls to Aung to pull harder, her pushing alone is not enough.

Aung turns on his back and continues, as much as the panic that's taken hold of him permits; he continues, backstroke now, pulling the small raft. And sees the shimmering, sparse village lights from afar. He momentarily wonders if those lights can indeed be from their village.

And even before he has time to answer, those tiny lights have utterly dispelled his panic. He now

feels confident again, the raft stops swiveling and gains a steadier, a straighter course. Adila, seeing the raft slowing down, starts pushing again. To help the raft maintain a straight course. She's relieved from the great strain she felt for a moment there. When Aung froze.

“Well done, bro!” she says and keeps pushing. Gradually the raft passes out of the current. The waters grow quieter. The tiny village lights are now gone. The rain is at its strongest point. The nymphs have totally forgotten them. They are devoutly absorbed by a strange calling, they are in the middle of, they are engrossed, in the climax of their ritual.

A few more minutes, with the calm waters as an ally again, and despite the pitch darkness all around them, and they'll cross over.

“Aung, for a moment there I feared the water was going to beat us. Luckily it didn't last, though, and you soon regained your strength and pulled me clear across”, Adila said, after they'd lit a fire, inside the cave, under the huge rock their uncle had described, and inside which they were now recovering and drying.

“True. For a moment I panicked at the thought of the abyss under our feet. Until I saw the lights of our village and the panic subsided and I found my strength again”, Aung replied. His attitude was bitter and apologetic, for losing his nerve like that.

Adila looked at him in surprise and said.

“What lights could you ever see in such a storm, brother? And which village were those lights from? From our village, hidden behind the hill?”

Aung didn't reply. Nor did Adila ask him a second time. But a strange breeze did, that blew and

moved the leaves of the surrounding bushes, there, just a few paces from the rock.