

SYMBOLION AND CITY WITHOUT STARS

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„We Are All In The Gutter But Some Of Us Are Looking At The Stars ”

– OSCAR WILDE

One of the stories in the mysterious world called Symbolion

Kala was awoken by light jolts and cradling. She felt the warm wind in her hair. The air was saturated in salt and the ocean waves were roaring nearby. So close that the sea was right in her ears. She opened her eyes. She lay on the bottom of a wooden boat and watched the cloudless blue sky.

“Hi,” she heard a cheerful voice. She swiftly lifted her head and propped herself up on her elbows. A small boy was in the vessel with her.

“Adam, what are you doing here?!”

“I’m playing,” he looked sadly at her. “Will you make a sheep for me?”

“I will. As soon as we get home.”

“I am home.”

Kala looked around and saw the paddles. “Let’s paddle and see where it takes us.”

“Fine. But in which direction should we paddle?”

“I don’t know, Adam. We can’t stay here!”

She stood up carefully in the boat, shaded her eyes and looked out at the horizon. But she did not see any land. There was the calm sea all around.

She turned to the boy: “We must leave, but don’t worry! You aren’t afraid, are you?”

“I am afraid that you won’t make a new sheep for me.”

“I will.”

“Do you promise?”

I promise.”

“So I’m not afraid anymore.”

Kala sighed and grabbed the paddle. “I wish there was somebody who would also promise something to me.”

“And then you would stop fearing?”

“Maybe.”

“And what would you wish for?”

“To reach dry land.”

“I promise you that.”

Kala laughed. “So then I’m not afraid either.”

She had no idea for how long she had paddled. Her mouth was dry and she swallowed with difficulty. Disturbing thoughts kept going through her head. How long would she manage to paddle before she ran out of strength? It could take an eternity before somebody found them or before they reached land.

The boy in the bow turned to Kala cheerfully. "Can we play something?"

"We can't, Adam. There's no time for games now. We must get to shore."

"But I promised you that we'll get there. Perhaps you aren't paddling in the right direction."

"And in what direction should I paddle? We have no idea where we are!" she yelled at the boy, but immediately added: "I'm sorry. Perhaps I'm starting to be afraid."

"That's not fair. I promised you that we'll reach land and you promised not to worry."

"Shut up, Adam! Our lives are at stake now. No promises apply in such situations! We must get away from here quickly, before it's too late."

"But we made a promise to each other. Don't you believe me?"

"No."

"And when will you believe me?"

"When we see dry land."

"But it will be too late then. You must trust me now. Otherwise there is no game."

Kala went red in the face and angrily snapped back: "This is no game, Adam! This is life. Do you understand? This is a serious matter."

The boy began to weep. Kala stopped paddling. You stupid cow! she admonished herself. "Come here, honey. Forgive me, forgive me! I'll give you a sheep."

The boy huddled in her embrace. "I promise we'll find it. The land you seek."

"Good. I believe you."

"You don't believe me. You promised to give me a new sheep. But, do you believe it?"

"Yes, I do. It's gonna be the most beautiful sheep you've ever seen."

The boy did not reply. He breathed quietly in her arms and went to sleep. It surprised her how calm she suddenly was. The sea gently cradled them at nightfall. She watched the red circle of the sun gradually sinking into the ocean. She could not keep her eyelids open any longer and floated off into dreams. She dreamt about the sun dissolving in the salt water. The sea first became red and then evaporated entirely. Finally Adam and she were able to set foot on land. She dreamt about distant regions, sheep and the starry sky. However, she did not wake up during any of these dreams.

The sea was still calm and Kala tried to keep up the pace of paddling. When she thought what the meaning of it all was, she concluded that the more courage and faith she manifested, the more easily she would reach the goal. But that was easier said than done. Blisters began forming on her hands and her throat was so dry that it was causing her pain just to swallow.

"And do you know where we are headed?" the boy in the bow asked.

“I don’t know. I’m just paddling.”

“Aha.”

Kala passed her tongue over her chapped lips. But it seemed as if the boy did not mind the heat at all. He was as fresh as if he had just taken a shower.

“Adam, are you not thirsty?”

“No.”

She looked pensively at the boy. “What did you mean that you are at home here?”

“Well, I simply live here.”

“Where is here?”

“Here is everywhere.”

She looked at him sideways. “I see. And do you know if we are paddling in the right direction?”

“We’re paddling right. How could we paddle wrong?”

Kala sighed. “Hmm. And do you know where the land is?”

“Which land do you mean? There are many lands here.”

“Any. It doesn’t matter.”

“Aha. Then we won’t see land for a long time.”

She was exhausted and her strength was failing. All she wanted to do was to lie on the bottom of the boat and be cradled by the waves and feel the breeze in her hair. Instead, she wiped her forehead with the back of her hand and eased off to get some rest. But she did not stop paddling. She was afraid that if she stopped paddling for just a single moment, she would not again reach the tempo. “We must get to land now. Or we’ll die.”

The boy thought hard. “Well, then we’ll die.”

Then she stopped. What’s wrong with me? I told the little boy that we’ll die here. The sun is addling my brain.

“See, I’m still strong enough to paddle. It’s not all bad yet. How long have you been here?”

“I don’t know. I’ve always been here.”

“I suppose not here in the boat.”

The boy laughed. “Oh no. But you want to be here now.”

“Me?! Forget it. I definitely don’t want to be here!”

“Oh, you do. Otherwise we would not be here. We would be on the shore, making sheep.”

Kala shook her head. Rather about herself than the boy. She had discussed something with a little kid as if he were an adult. Up to that moment she had thought that she liked children, but this boy was beginning to get on her nerves.

“Do you believe that anyone will help us?” Adam asked after a while.

“You mean if a passing vessel will take us with them?”

“Maybe.”

“Not really. That would have to be a very chance event.”

“And if there were dolphins who took us to land, would you believe that?”

“I don’t know. They might swim around us. Maybe. But I don’t believe it really.”

“And if land appeared before us, would you believe it?”

“I try to believe this. Otherwise we are lost. Absolutely lost, believe me.”

“But it is the same with dolphins! Why do you believe that land could show up but not dolphins? I don’t understand it.”

“Land will not show up accidentally. It exists.”

“But boats and dolphins exist too. They are real. They are not accidental.”

“I don’t know.”

“Then we’ll probably die,” the boy concluded.

Kala did not answer. She had no time for this now. It was necessary to keep up the pace. But for what actually? She picked up the paddles and lay down on the bottom of the boat. A slight breeze was ruffling her hair. She did not want to think of land, paddling, or the boy now. She felt good like this. Now, when she allowed herself to rest, she realized how exhausted she was. This troubled her. She did not know how long she had been lying on the bottom of the boat. When she opened eyes, her heart constricted with joy. She saw a starry sky! “So there are stars in Symbolion,” she thought in amazement. With bated breath, she watched the sky, until the sea cradled her to sleep.

She slept well. She dreamt of flying between the stars and recognizing star constellations she’d had no idea about until then. The sea surface glistened below her and she swam amidst the constellations of dolphins and orcas. She was happy. So happy that she burst into tears. Adam gently wiped her cheeks. The tears were real. So was her dream.

* * *

Kala was woken by loud laughter. When she opened her eyes, the sun hung directly above her head. “Oh-oh, it must be noon already,” she sighed. But she did not feel any guilt. Still lying down, she stretched out her tired body and lifted her head to see the boy. He stood at the bow looking into the water.

When Adam saw that Kala was awake, he clapped his hands: “You summoned them!” he called out laughing.

“Who?” she asked sleepily.

“The dolphins!”

This woke her up. She jumped up and the boat rocked. Really! There were dolphins all around! They rose up from the sea and plowed the surface around the vessel. They produced sounds resembling cackles. Kala also laughed.

She flung out her arms: “I didn’t summon them! I did not, Adam!”

“It must have been you. Otherwise they would not be here. Land is over there!” he pointed to the left.

Kala focused her gaze and it really was land! They were sufficiently close to recognize the city towering above the beach. High-rise buildings and skyscrapers came into view and the horizon lit up the sky. Then she stopped herself. Was it real? The flare must have been seen miles away, as if luring to itself the passing sailors. After a long time, she realized again that she was actually in Symbolion. It was going to be tricky.

“I have a strange feeling about it,” she said uncertainly.

“But look! The dolphins want to go there too!”

“Dolphins are part of this game too.”

“What game?” the boy looked at her curiously. “You said that it was no game. That it was a serious matter.”

I did. But who knows what the one above thinks?”

“You mean God?”

“Yeah, that’s who I mean.”

“And do you believe in God?”

“I actually don’t know. There was a time when I sought God. But He never called back. Now I think it was rather fear. I was scared that we would dissolve and then there would be nothing.”

“Did you seek the light?” the boy asked.

Kala looked at him surprised. She recalled the inscription just before she had jumped: “Seek the light”. Was this the purpose of the whole game? To find God? She knew that the meaning of life was different for everyone. Why should God be the meaning of the game for her?

“And you saw Him?” she asked the boy cautiously.

“Who?”

“God.”

“I did not see Him, but He created all of this. So you don’t have to worry.”

“You mean that I won’t die? That is worse. If I die here, I’ll also die in reality.”

“In what reality? Here you are in reality. You are in reality all the time.”

Kala did not try to explain anything to him. Maybe he was not aware that he was part of the game. Well, he was not real either. Although she was not sure about it any longer.

“So I can’t die here?” she asked.

“I told you that you don’t have to be afraid, I was not speaking about non-death.”

He turned away from her and thus ended all conversation.

Kala took a deep breath. Fine! Let’s swim with the dolphins to the city. It is driving me crazy to be on this boat. She lifted the paddles and called to the boy: “So to the city, navigator! Full steam ahead!”

“Whoopee!” the boy in the bows cheered. “Land on the left. Sailor, pull! Direction: land!”

Kala shook her head and lifted her gaze to the sky, as if sending a message. “You see it.” Then she steered the boat to the left and paddled towards the shore.

As they approached the shore, her amazement receded. Now she already saw the houses on the beach. What seemed like *fata morgana* from afar, now she really recalled as her City. But this city was singing. She heard the cries of seagulls and the wind carried the music and hustle and bustle to her from the markets on the shore. In her thoughts she kept returning to the inscription from the Nest. “Seek the Light”. Was it possible that she would find it in this city? Did God dwell there? She had to laugh at herself. Silly. Such nonsense! But if He did, what would she ask Him? Or, would she have to answer some questions? She paddled increasingly faster. Suddenly all her weariness was gone. She did not even feel so thirsty, now that she knew she would soon be drinking.

When they got off the boat, the boy called out cheerfully: “I know it here! I’m at home here.”

Kala smiled. “Did you not claim that your home is everywhere?”

But the boy did not hear her. “Let’s go to the market. They have delicious things to eat there.”

“Well then. Let’s go to the market!” She took the boy’s hand and they headed towards the buildings.

He was right. There were many things on the marketplace. There were conjurers and acrobats performing their art. The aroma of spices blended with the salty smell of the sea brought by the wind and Kala felt light-headed. She did not remember when she had ever felt such calm before. She sat on a small stool next to the souvenir store, drinking tea. She wanted to sit there as long as possible. There was nowhere to rush off to. Everything was free of charge here. But she found out that she did not need anything, did not want anything. Just to sit and drink her tea.

She watched the boy running among the stalls, picking up silver-plated weapons, admiring the wrought-iron jewelry and smelling the flowers. A strange child, she thought. Perhaps all children are like that. She had never paid much attention to children. At times he got lost between the stalls, and then he ran out at the other side

of the market place and waved to her. She was not afraid that he might get lost. She knew that he knew the place much better than she did.

The boy ran up to her. "We must go!" he called from a distance. Kala nodded. She put down the teacup, took the boy's hand and they set out through a narrow street between the stalls. She spotted a small tent with a screen. The sign fixed above the entrance stated: "God lives here". The divider was rather perished, ripped in several spots and the holes were sewn up with rough thread.

"Wait for me here," she turned to the boy.

"I'll wait. I always wait," he replied.

"Fine," she smiled. "Stretch out your hand!" The boy opened the palm of his hand and Kala put a sheep carved in ebony in it.

"How beautiful it is!" the boy rejoiced. "All black. I don't have one like that yet!"

"You must wait here together," she looked at him encouragingly and parted the divider.

The interior was gloomy and it took Kala a while to find her bearings. The space was much larger than it seemed from the outside. She saw a small table in the corner, with tarot cards spread on it, as if the fortune teller had left them just a moment before. So she approached the table and sat down, to await the owner's return. As she looked around, she noticed the board hanging right beside the tent entrance.

What you will find, that you will give yourself.

What you have, that is outside of you.

What you separate, that connects.

What you do, that leads from you.

Before she managed to contemplate those words, she heard the creaking of a door. However, there was no door in the tent, and Kala could not find the source of the sound. Then she saw an old woman tottering towards her from a dark corner. She wore a dirty ecru smock and feebly walked towards Kala with her back bent. But Kala did not perceive any of this. She could not take her eyes off the long white hair that seemed to illuminate the entire space of the tent. The woman looked at Kala without much interest and laboriously sat down on the stool opposite her. Kala looked at the woman's wrinkled hands with long fingers extended by curved nails.

"Are you seeking God, girl?" the old woman asked in a rasping voice.

Kala looked up at her and encountered a pair of piercing blue eyes projecting from the puckered weathered face.

"I am," she replied and pointed at the table. "Can you read the cards for me?" she plucked up the courage.

“You want me to read the cards? And what can you offer me?”

“Offer?” Kala wondered. “I thought everything was free of charge here.”

The old woman started laughing. “You are not in the marketplace any longer, little girl. You don’t have to pay with money. Offer me something!”

“I have nothing to offer you,” Kala objected.

“Idiot! You aren’t even trying to bargain with me? And she is seeking God,” the fortune teller snorted.

“I am,” Kala smiled.

“The fox! She wants card reading without anything to pay for it,” the old woman growled. “Then you didn’t come for interpretation. Why do you demand card reading if you came to find something here?”

Kala nervously shifted slightly on the stool. “I saw them here.”

The old woman raised her eyes towards heaven. “My goodness. I’ve got many other things in here. Do you want to look?”

“Not anymore.”

“I see. But you might pay with something you don’t even know you have. Can somebody worry about something he doesn’t know he has?”

“The soul?” Kala asked carefully.

The old woman burst out laughing. “Girl, now you are amusing me. You really don’t know that you have a soul?” She looked at Kala carefully. “And what about pain? Would you be willing to give me your pain? You don’t even know the taste of it. What if I told you what path to take so that your life has no pain, blind alleys or groping in the dark.”

“I don’t want that. I’d rather pay with something.”

The old woman smiled. “Clever girl. Yet you still believe that God lives here?”

“Your sign outside says so.”

The old woman shrugged. “And where does He not live? People believe the weirdest things. They trust anything outside if you give them hope.” She sighed and began to shuffle the cards. Then she spread them out face down. “Pick one,” she challenged Kala.

Kala looked at her in surprise, but the old woman only nodded. “Don’t be afraid. You have this at no cost from me.”

Kala slowly drew a card. When she looked at it, she shivered. A skeleton was looking at her from the card. Number 13, the card of death.

The old woman, without looking at the card, leaned back in the chair and bowed her head. As if turned to stone. Kala already thought that the woman had fallen asleep. She did not know if she should leave, but did not dare to move.

The old woman raised her head after a while, her eyes flaming. “So I’ll show you what it’s like to feel pain!” She waved her hand against Kala’s forehead and cut her

skin with a sharp nail. At the same time, she stood up, grabbed Kala's shoulders and turned her towards a large mirror leaning against the other side of the tent. Kala tried to break free from her grip, but the old woman was so strong that resistance was futile.

"Look at yourself! Do you recognize yourself? This is how you will feel when you find God!"

Kala looked into the mirror. She saw a face twisted in pain, and a red wound across her entire forehead. Blood had begun to pour from it. She had forgotten what it was to feel pain. It seemed to her that she had not experienced anything worse in her life. She was scared to death and the mirror only reflected her fear. She had failed. Now she would most certainly die. Suddenly, light began to radiate from the open wound and Kala felt the pain beginning to recede.

"So this is what it's like! When I find God, He will alleviate the pain. He will illuminate me." She looked in the mirror attentively. No, it was no illusion! The image in the mirror began to lose focus. She looked at her body which slowly began to melt. The old woman smiled sadly. Kala watched her dissolving reflection in the mirror and felt calm. Then she realized that, although her image had dissolved, the light remained. She was the light! The light was inside her!

"God is within me," she said. She felt a gentle touch on her shoulder.

"God bless you," she heard the old woman's voice.

She turned around, but there was no one in the tent. She turned back and looked at her reflection in the mirror. The scar on her forehead had disappeared.

In a daze, she parted the divider and went outside. When the boy saw her, he laughed and clapped his hands: "What a ride, wasn't it?"

Kala hugged the boy and willingly or unwillingly had to laugh.

"It was." She turned to the tent for the last time, the board with the inscription was still hanging there, waiting for other pilgrims.

"Does God live there?" the boy asked.

"Where does He not live?" she replied, smiling.